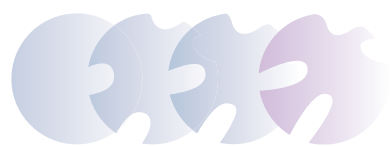


# First to the Lord: the bible and giving

Giving in Grace understands giving as being caught up in the overflow of God's love, grace and generosity. This paper explores a little of what the bible has to say about giving and why generosity is a matter of personal discipleship and a core value of congregational life.



The bible is well aware that our giving meets real needs. The Old Testament *tithe* helped to look after the priest, the widow, the orphan (Dt. 14:22-29). A rich ruler is told to give his wealth to the poor (Mark 10:17-29) and Jesus tells us to do the same (Luke 12:33). Part of Paul's apostolic ministry was an offering for the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-27). If, then, 'money meets needs' why does Paul praise the church in Macedonia for giving themselves, *first to the Lord* (2 Cor. 8:5) rather than celebrating the difference their gifts made in Jerusalem?

### Giving to a need or needing to give?

Christians don't just give to a need, *we need to give*. Why? Because our giving is the overflow of God's gift to us in Jesus. 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). Paul is so certain of this that in two chapters about making a financial gift not once does he use the normal Greek word for 'money'. Instead Paul uses combinations of 15 words, the most frequent of which is *charis*, grace (NA Dahl: *Studies in Paul*). Paul doesn't tell us about how much money Macedonia gave to Jerusalem but about the grace that was given to the Macedonians. That's the heart of giving for Christians.

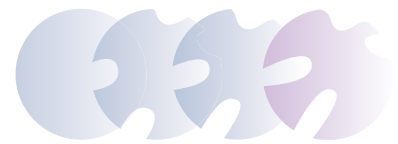
### The challenge to church leaders

So, here's the thing. If we see stewardship as simply getting in the money, then giving is about methods, novel and familiar, of parting reluctant or willing givers from 'their' money. Mercifully, leadership and discipleship in the body of Christ is richer than that. Giving is not a *tip* we offer to God for spiritual services rendered. Giving is not a *tax* on church life; as one person memorably put it, 'pay as you pray'. It is not even about the *tithe*. To give generously is to be caught up in the overflow of God's grace. When we give generously we reflect the nature of God himself. For church leaders stewardship is about obtaining the gift but nurturing the giver. We'll keep coming back to this. What else does the bible say about giving?

### Of your own do we give you

Let's start with an important story in Deuteronomy 26:1-15. A farmer brings the first fruits of the soil to the place of worship and the priest to set before the altar. The land that produces crops and feeds the herds is given by God (verses 1, 4, 9 and 11). It is owned by God (Psalm 24:1; Lev. 25:23, Hag. 2:8). But it is *promised and gifted* to God's people. The Hebrew verb, *natan* which means to give is used 3 times in v1-3 and 3 times in v9-11.

That's why each Sunday, as we give our gifts, we say, 'all things come from you and of your own do we give you' (1 Chron. 29:14). It is a rich land, flowing with milk and honey and our farmer is to 'rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given...' (Dt. 26:11; Psalm 104). And that's why Paul says God has given stuff for us to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17).



## Remembrance

Giving is such a fundamental part of Christian discipleship because it is a key way we remember the God who gives us all we have. It all belongs to God and is entrusted to our care. Stewardship.

Now part of that remembering is the practice of gratitude. As a lovely French proverb says, gratitude is the heart's memory. Each time we give generously and gratefully *we remember all we have is a gift* from God. The first fruits and the tithe remind us of the Owner and Giver of all things.

Now giving that helps us remember the Giver must be serious, generous and meaningful. We can't give to God that which costs us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24). There's no place for casual, small-gift giving. It must be a *priority* as Paul shows indicates by '*on the first day of the week*' (1 Cor 16:2). But the rest of the verse is vital. Our gift is only and always in *proportion* to God's gift to us (Dt.16:17; 2 Cor. 8:7).

## Release

We work hard to remember that God is both owner and giver because it is all too easy to forget. Money is a good servant but a terrible master; like salt water it can't satisfy thirst, leaves us wanting more. Deuteronomy 8:17 warns Israel against forgetting God and being proud of heart when they become prosperous. Paul warns against greed and the love of money (Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:3 1 Tim. 6:10). Jesus says bluntly, 'you cannot serve both God and money' (Matt 6:24). Well-known parables such as the rich fool and his barns (Luke 12:13-21) show how easy and how dangerous it is to be wedded to wealth.

'For where you treasure is there your heart will be also' (Matt. 6:21). What we do with our money *reveals* our hearts but generous giving can also *release our hearts* from the gravitational pull of wealth. Giving builds resistance to the relentless creep of consumerism whilst enjoying God's gifts with contentment and gratitude. Generous discipleship refuses to put money at the centre of our lives.

## Responsibility

The gift of God creates an obligation to act justly around wealth. Scarcity and poverty are an offence to our God of abundance (Prov. 14:31,17:5; Amos 2:6-8; Mal. 3:4-5). So Deuteronomy commands debt cancellation (15:1-11) and the release of economic slaves (15:12-18). It forbids interest (23:19-20) and sets limits on security for loans (24:10-14). The law commands Sabbath rest and Jubilee.

Each third year the annual tithe is shared with priest and refugee, the poor and the defenceless. For their part, the prophets thunder against injustice to the poor because these laws were intended to redeem and restore God's gift of land to all God's people, not just the wealthy few. We often miss this but generous discipleship is not just about personal piety but about prophetic challenge in an unjust world. To be generous is to march to the beat of a different drum, to speak of God's concern for the poor.



## Giving is worship

Finally, back in Deuteronomy 26, our farmer's gift is earned in the fields and offered in worship. Giving is more than a personal response to God. Giving is a shared act of worship with all God's people. What begins as a personal act of thanks quickly becomes confessional as the farmer recites the shared faith of Israel, how God led them from slavery to freedom, how he, 'brought us to this place and gave us this land' (Dt 26:9).

Our giving is confessional. My giving reflects the grace and gift of God to me, but it's not all about me. Unhelpfully the pandemic severed an ancient, liturgical connection between our shared worship and the grateful giving of our gifts. We give in different ways but our giving is caught up in our shared worship we celebrate the saving grace of our God.

## Stewards of all

Martin Luther is said to have believed in three conversions: heart, head and wallet. The last tests the reality of the first two. More than meeting needs, generous giving is the hallmark, the litmus test, of the faithfulness and accountability to which each steward is called. (2 Cor. 4:2; Luke 16:1-15).