Giving All
Luke 20:45-21:4

This is the second in our series on the Generous Life. Now as I said last week, as a church, as we look to the future, we face some financial challenges. But again, as we saw last week, what you and I do with our financial resources is not about the church's financial challenges, is it? It's about our hearts. And we saw in Malachi the Lord calling his people back to him, back to reflecting his generous character in their character.

And in Malachi the Lord calls his people back to tithing, to giving one tenth of their income to the teaching of God's word and for the poor. But as we're going to see today, when you get to the New Testament, you realise that whilst giving a tenth might be a good place to start, it may not be the place to end.

Luke 20:45-21:4

A Generous Heart
Now, because we're often in such a rush, we rarely just sit down and observe life do we? But here, in the temple at Jerusalem, we see Jesus doing exactly that. And just look what he sees.

The first group he watches are the scribes – the religious leaders and teachers, and listen to what he says about them: v46, 'Beware of the scribes.' In other words, don't be like these guys, don't reflect in your life or your heart what's going on in theirs. Verse 46-7 again, they 'like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings… and the best seats… and the places of honour… who devour… and for a pretence make long prayers.' So, can you see what Jesus sees, and sees through? It's that for them religion is about them. It's focused on them. For them, religion was about them being the centre of attention. And more than them being comfortable, it was about them getting more and being prosperous, empowered, and feeling good about themselves. It was about their personal advancement. And isn't it tragic that a huge amount of religious activity today, is exactly that: focused on me, and what I can get out of it. It's the religion of the scribes.

But then Jesus sees a second group. It's the rich. And he watches them putting their gifts into the offering. And notice that he doesn't say to his disciples 'Beware of the rich', instead, he contrasts them with an elderly woman who probably no-one else saw.

Verse 2, 'And he saw a poor widow.' A woman, probably invisible to everyone else, a nobody, who was not comfortable, or prosperous, or empowered or the centre of anyone else's attention. Except Jesus. Because he sees her. And the words Luke uses magnify her poverty. She was a widow, and a widow in that culture had very few chances of making money. But she wasn't just a widow. Luke describes her as a *poor* widow. She was the poor of the poor. She has next to nothing, and next to no chance of making any more. But just look what she does with what she does have: she put in to the offering 'two small copper coins'.

And those coins were the smallest currency available. They were worth about $1/100^{th}$ of an average day's wage. So she has just put in less than peanuts. And think of the bills the temple authorities faced – think of the salaries they had to pay, think of the maintenance costs. Think of the financial challenges they faced.

Those two tiny copper coins are useless aren't they? They are going nowhere to meet the needs of the temple.

Except Jesus sees things differently, doesn't he. He says, v3, 'Truly, I tell you…' Now, whenever Jesus says that, you know that to our earth-bound and self-centred ears what's coming next is going to be unbelievable. Unbelievable and life-changing. 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them.' One, singular, poor widow, has just put in more than all of these rich people, combined.

Don't you think it's interesting what Jesus sees? And what he sees in our giving? Because he clearly isn't looking at the amount, is he? Jesus sees our giving and it's not the amount he sees. Because if it *was* the amount, it would be the rich who would catch his eye. But it's not the amount. It's the heart. And when it comes to our giving, or our not giving, as one commentator (Bock) says, 'God does not count, he weighs.' And it's our hearts that are in his balance.

Look at v4, 'For they [the rich] all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.' Now, just like us, those rich people had an abundence. And they gave. And some of them probably gave a lot. But this woman so grabs Jesus' attention because she gave her *all*. When she gave those almost worthless coins, she was putting her *life* on the line; she was putting *herself* in the offering box.

So what Jesus sees is sacrifice, and self-denial. He sees a love for God and the work of God, and a love for others, that is greater than a love for self. And please don't miss the irony of this poor widow, who has nothing, giving to care for the poor! He sees a desire to care as much as she is able, that isn't convenient, it's costly. He sees a whole-hearted devotion. He sees a heart that is the opposite of the religion of the scribes. Because this woman's giving had nothing to do with her being at the centre, did it? This was not going to make her life comfortable or prosperous. She was not going to gain from this or be empowered by this in any sense in which we normally think of those terms. And her giving went further even than the rich, which really didn't cost them.

So what catches Jesus' eye is that she has a heart of sacrificial generosity. That gives even when it costs. That gives above and beyond what you'd ever expect. So no wonder he says, 'truly I say to you…' Because it is unbelievable, and it is life-changing.

And it is to that heart of generosity that the Lord calls all of us. And just to be clear, this is about much more than simply money, isn't it? I mean, in your household, you may not earn the money, or have control over it, or be in a position at the moment to even give away a tenth. But none of that stops us having a heart of joy-filled, sacrificial generosity, does it? Because money is just one of the things the Lord gives us to steward. There's our time, our energy, our abilities, our gifts. And we can give generously and sacrificially to the Lord and to others, even when there is little to give financially.

And so this call to generosity is much more than giving 10%, isn't it? It's 100%. The whole of our life: every frank, every dollar, every hour, every day, every inclination of our heart, being given to God. It's the heart attitude that says, 'everything I have is his, and out of love for him, and out of love for my neighbour, I'm going to put all my resources at his disposal, and give my life, and live my life, for his glory and others' good.'

But whilst that might be easy to say, it's not so easy to do is it? Frank sent me a news announcement this week that I thought I'd share with you: '**New hymnal announced**. Leaders of the Evangelical Laodicean Church last week announced the publication of a new hymnal. "This collection of hymns really captures the essence of our tradition," said Presiding Bishop Luke Warm. "People in today's society get uncomfortable with too much talk about commitment and dedication" he continued. Here is a listing of some of the selections found in this hymnal: "I Surrender Some," "My Hope is Built on Nothing Much," "O For a Couple of Tongues to Sing," "Onward Christian Reservists," "Take My Life and Let Me Be," "Where He Leads Me, I will Consider Following," and "Be Thou My Hobby."

It's hard to have a view of life that says everything I have is his. And it's especially hard when it comes to money and cultivating financial generosity. Now, why is that? What is it about money that can have such a hold on us?

A Divided Heart

Jesus talked a lot about money. And one of the most challenging things he said comes in a parable that, on the face of it, has nothing to do with money. In the parable of the sower Jesus gives some reasons why God's word, sown into our hearts like seed sown into soil, doesn't bear as much fruit as it could. And the reason he gives is that the word gets choked by thorns. Matthew 13:22: 'as for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.'

So, far from the American Dream, according to Jesus, being rich and successful can be a spiritual nightmare. Riches, pleasure, and comfort can stop you being as fruitful in your life as you could be. You hear the word of God, you read the word of God, but it doesn't produce life change, because of material wealth. Now why?

Well, look what Jesus says. He says in v22 that 'the *deceitfulness* of riches choke the word.' So, material prosperity, or financial comfort, are deceptive. And they are deceptive because they promise you something they can never deliver. They promise you that if you have them you'll be safe, you'll be secure, you'll be satisfied. Proverbs 18:11 says, 'A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall *in his imagination*.' We imagine that if we can earn enough, or save enough, and have enough, we'll be ok. If we can have the next thing, we'll be happy. Money promises us that just like air conditioning, we'll be able to control the climate of our lives.

And it's all a deceit, isn't it? As Proverbs says, it's imaginary. Because whilst wealth can be a huge help, ultimately only God can give you the inner security and satisfaction in life you're looking for.

But it's because it offers you what only God can give you, that it can begin to act as an idol, a god-substitute in your life. It's why more than once the apostle Paul describes covetousness – that continual desire for more - as idolatry.

I mean think about why something can take on the status of an idol, a godlike thing, in your life. It's when you love this thing more than you should, because having it gives you significance. It gives you a sense of worth. Take it away and you feel like you're diminished. It's when you put your trust in this thing – you feel secure when you have it. But when you don't, you don't, and anxiety rises. And thirdly, you obey it: it begins to control you.

And whether you are a spender or a saver money can be a god for you, can't it? The person who spends thinks that by having more he'll feel good about himself, he'll look good. Possessions, stuff, clothing, give him significance. But the saver, she can be just as much in the power of the idol of money, because if she can only save enough and be frugal enough, she'll be safe, protected by her god. And it's not just those who have money for whom money can be an idol, those who don't can also be in it's grip. Jesus said the cares of this world can also strangle our fruitfulness – when we think we don't have enough.

So, far from wealth being a refuge, having it, or just desiring it, can become our spiritual ruin, as it slowly strangles the life out of our hearts.

Which is why Jesus said, 'No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.' (Matt 6:24). You see, you start off thinking that money will serve you, that it will give you what you want. But it ends up with you serving it, as it takes control of your life. It promises you power and control over your circumstances, but it ends up controlling you, as idols always do. It's why Jesus calls money Mammon. He personifies it – he gives it legs and teeth and claws. And it's either mammon or God that you can serve with your life. It's either mammon that will destroy you, or God who loves you, that you can give your heart to. But not both. You can't give whole-hearted devotion to two masters at the same time. Jesus says you just can't do it.

But so often, we try to, don't we? Thinking money and wealth will serve us, we try and do what Jesus says is impossible. We want to have a foot in both camps, the best of both worlds. We want to serve God with this percentage of my life, but with this percentage, I'm looking elsewhere for my security or my significance. But you just can't do it. And when you try, it makes you miserable. JC Ryle said that the end result of that kind of living is that you have too much religion to be happy in the world, and too much of the world to be happy in your religion. A divided heart will never be a happy heart.

I mean, imagine a man in love with two women. There comes a time when he has to choose, doesn't he? Which will he give his heart to? And the reason we can

find whole-hearted devotion, and generous, sacrificial giving modeled by this poor widow, hard is because we're trying to serve two masters, and mammon has us in its grip. And then, rather than financial resources being a blessing in our lives, to be used for God's glory and others' good – they can become a poison to our soul. And we find ourselves under the slave master, on the treadmill of wealth – always running after the next thing, always working, but never arriving, always getting, but never satisfied. As Ecclesiastes 5:10 says, 'he who loves money will not be satisfied with money.'

So how can you and I cultivate the kind of generosity that flows out of an undivided heart? How can we escape the grip of money and instead find joy in serving God with our whole lives?

Well, just beginning to be generous is one very tangible way to choose God over money, isn't it? But in his gospel, Luke tells the story of a man who went from having money as his idol, to having God as his God, and in the process his money went from something he served, to something he used to serve others.

A Heart Transformed by Grace

In Luke 18 a rich man comes to Jesus and asks him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.' (Luke 18:18). And Jesus says, 'well, you need to obey all the commandments.' And the guy says, 'I've done all that.' So Jesus goes for his heart – and he exposes the thing this man loves more than God: Luke 18:22, "One thing you still lack. Sell all you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me." And Luke tells us that when '[the rich man] heard these things he became very sad, for he was extremely rich' (18:23). His idol, what gave him significance, what gave him security, had been challenged, and he couldn't face parting with it. And in response Jesus said something that should make everyone of us think: "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (18:24-5).

Now, if you only see wealth as a sign of God's blessing, as a sign that you are favoured by God, and not as a potential idol, then you'll find what Jesus said as unsettling as his disciples did. But think: why is it so hard for rich people like us to enter the kingdom? Because we put our trust in riches, or status, and not in God. We become proud. We think we're worth more than others, that God should be glad to have us. We grow in our love for the world and for stuff, instead of for God. And other people tell rich people how great they, because they want to get from them, and their ego swells. And it becomes a snare.

But just when you can lose hope, Jesus says, "what is impossible with man is possible with God" (18:27).

And in the very next chapter we see the impossible happening. We see a rich man entering the kingdom. Luke 19:1-2 '[Jesus] entered Jericho... And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.' Now, you and I don't especially like the tax-man, but back then they weren't just disliked, they were hated. They were Roman collaborators. They were

extortioners. And Zacchaeus isn't just a tax collector, he's a *chief* tax collector. Literally, the *arch* tax collector. This man profits from others' misery. And as a result he is probably the most hated, despised and excluded man in the city. Which is why, when he wants to see Jesus, this small man has to go through the indignity of climbing a tree, because no one would let him through the crowd. Now why does he accept all the hate, all the rejection? Because money is his god, he started off thinking he would have power and prestige and friends if he could just have money.

And then the unimaginable happens. Jesus looks up in to the tree and singles him out and says 'I'm coming to your house Zacchaeus.' Jesus singles out the most loathed, the most greedy, the most covetous man, the man most enslaved to money and says, ' Zacchaeus, I've come for you.'

And what's the result in this man's life? Verse 6, 'He hurried and came down and received him joyfully.' Joy is the first result. Then, v8, 'Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."' Now, how did Jesus know salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house? Because there was a total transformation in the way Zacchaeus sees money. It wasn't that Zacchaeus bought salvation by being just about generous enough. It was that salvation comes and generosity starts flowing. Why? Because now the Lord is his lord, not money.

And he doesn't just give away 10% does he? Not Zacchaeus! In his joy he gives away 50%. And by law, as we saw in Leviticus, he was required to restore what he had defrauded, plus 20% interest. But what does he do? He gives back 4x what he had taken. That's not 20% interest. That's 300%.

Now what has brought about this transformation? What has so taken hold of this grasper, this getter, and made him generous? And the answer is: grace. Jesus goes for the least deserving man in the town, and Zacchaeus knows it. Of everybody there, he was the one least deserving of Jesus' generosity and yet Jesus chose him. And now, he gives gave away way more than the law required, because he wasn't under law, he was under grace.

And the camel goes through the eye of the needle.

And when you know that Christ has come for you, when you know that you are on the receiving end of his generosity, when you don't deserve it, it does something to your heart. When you know that in his coming for you and in his dying for you on the cross, Jesus did not just give 10%, he gave his all, then you will begin to give your all. And the thorns and the thistles of care and riches start to wither, and you'll find grace freeing you. Because you'll know that whatever you and I give, whether that is finances, or time, or energy or effort, it all pales in comparison to what God has given to us in Jesus.