

Mark 12:38-44

TOTAL GIVING

A few weeks ago I used an illustration from the classic western movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, and that movie came to my mind again when I read our reading for this week. At the beginning of the movie, the poor Mexican village scrapes together all the money and valuables everyone has, and they send three men north into the U.S. to hire help to defeat the bandits who are terrorising them. They meet gunslinger Chris, played by Yul Brunner, and when they pour out onto the table what they are able to pay him to defend their village, he says, ‘That’s not very much, I normally do a job like this for a lot more than that.’ The men reply, ‘But Senor, this is everything our village has.’ ‘Wow’, says Chris, ‘I’ve been paid a lot to do a job before, but never everything’.

What may be not much to one person, can be everything to someone else.

That’s exactly the feeling we get out of this Gospel reading today. Accounts like this one about the widow’s giving, and Jesus calling the children to come to Him, we could probably call ‘Where’s Wally?’ readings; they are gems which are hidden away. In the midst of all Jesus’ great miracles of raising the dead and healing the sick, stilling storms and defeating demons, as well as teachings like the parables which amaze us by both their simplicity and their complexity, in the middle of those readings we have accounts like this, where Jesus makes a very powerful teaching point based simply on a widow coming to give her offering to God at the Temple. To make the point even more strongly, He contrasts not so much what she gives, but how she gives it, both with those who like to flaunt their service to God and the rich who can afford to give much more in a purely monetary sense. What may be not much to one person, can be everything to someone else, and that applies to all parts of our lives of discipleship.

It’s a story you may know well, a favourite for many because we love it when Jesus lifts up the humble and brings down those who love to flaunt their religious superiority. We very likely associate this account with the giving of money, and to remember it as lesson of we each give what we can, that will be different for each of us, and God knows that and that’s ok. But while we can apply it to our monetary giving, it is about much

more than that. Like the readings from Mark we've been looking at over the last three weeks, taking out Reformation Day, it is a teaching about discipleship; about living our whole lives as followers of Jesus. If we look at the comparisons Jesus makes here, with the Pharisees and rich people on one side, and the poor widow on the other, we can see Jesus teaching us that it's not about either how much we give, or what we do, but about the attitude we have in living our lives in God's love. It's about not judging by our earthly standards; what may be not much to one person, can be everything to someone else. It's about, in all parts of our lives, total giving.

As short and as simple as it seems to be, there is a lot in this reading, and today I want to take out three points which both come out here and also fit in well with what we've been looking at over the last few weeks; in no particular order and they don't sum up everything. The first is that in having an attitude of total giving, which leads to that discipleship Jesus calls us to, we are called to totally rely on God. If you think back to the widow's offering, what did she give? Two coins. What is significant about that detail? We're told that in giving those two coins, as small as they were, she gave everything. But because she gave two coins, she could have easily halved her offering, so that instead giving everything she only gave half of everything. It's a big difference, isn't it?

Total reliance on God. This is a hard balance for us, isn't it, in all areas of life. What does that mean for us? I believe that as good stewards we are called to save, to invest and prepare for the future, and also to use what we have right now to provide and enjoy for ourselves and our family. But we can say, in looking at the material things we have in our lives, that it is about the attitude we have towards them. Do we allow these things to get in the way of our relationship with God, and with others? Do we trust our own efforts more instead of relying on God's love and grace for us; 'consider the lilies of the fields and birds of the air'? What do we trust most, what comes first for us, what is our greatest concern, where do we find our meaning in life: in God's love for us and all His blessings, or in what we accumulate for ourselves?

But it goes beyond material things to how we treat people, how we act towards them. Do we trust that when we do as God calls us to and both forgive others and ask for forgiveness, that that will restore relationships and make everything ok, or do we prefer our own methods of dealing with people, like seeking revenge or

freezing them out? If we feel God calling us to do something, do we trust that He will work it all out, or do we evaluate it from our human perspective, thinking, ‘there’s no way I can do that, I just don’t have the time, or the skills, or the energy’? In living Total Giving, in our whole lives, do we always show full and complete reliance on God, or is our temptation to keep back one of those two coins, just in case? (it is a tricky balance, and one we probably each struggle with all the time)

The second point to consider today from this story of living giving, is that it is about responding to God’s love. ‘The Lord loves a cheerful giver’, is a phrase we often hear from the Bible, and unlike some other popular ‘Bible’ sayings, it is actually in there in 2 Corinthians 9:7. We can relate to that, can’t we? Do we want to receive a gift, or be served by someone in some way, when the gift or service is given grudgingly, or when it is done willingly? In our service, in all ways, we are called to willingly give in response to God’s love for us. From a money point of view, Christians sometimes place a big onus on tithing, giving ten percent of what you get. While this can be a good indicator, for some people, it’s very flawed; some have other obligations so they can’t give that much, while others are able to give more. All it does is put guilt on people, and cause them to give from obligation, which isn’t what God is calling for.

And that comes into all our living and giving; whether it’s our time, our skills and abilities, giving up our pride or our hurt, being willing to put ourselves and our views and preferences aside for the sake of others. How much do I need to forgive that person? How much does God forgive you. How much love do I show in accepting others? How much love does God show to you? It goes back to our theme last week of Love Without Limits; it’s what we live in, it’s what we are called to share. Living discipleship is not starting with the attitude of, ‘how much do I have to do or give?’, but, ‘how much do I receive from God in His love each day?’

And the third point to consider from this reading today, is that Total Giving is acknowledging that all we have comes from God. It is in His love and blessings that we have all the things we both need and enjoy in our lives. Jesus contrasts the widow’s offering with the Pharisees who say, ‘yes God, I will serve you, but I want everyone to know about it and honour me for it’, and the rich people who practice surplus not sacrificial giving, just giving what they have left over. In acknowledging that all that we are, all we have, our very life

itself, come from God and are sustained by Him, we are then able to rely on Him and respond to His love as we live our lives for Him.

It is easy to say, but not so easy to do, isn't it? It is something we will each work through and try to balance every day. We may well never get it perfect, and that's ok; what we are called to do is to be always thinking, always balancing, always working through these things as we try to walk the path of discipleship we are called to walk. And to do that not in a 'ooooh, if I don't get it right I'm in big trouble with God' kind of way, but instead thinking, 'I know God loves me. I know Jesus died for me. I know all the blessings He gives to me. How can I now live in response to that here and now?'

Another important point from this reading is that we can't judge others. If we look at what others are giving, or what they are doing, or how they are serving, or even the lives we believe they lead, we don't know their background, or their life situation, how they are feeling, or what they might be doing or giving in service to God in other ways or settings. The lesson for us here is to apply what Jesus is teaching to ourselves, to think about what it means for us in living as His disciples today.

Total Giving – it's what we receive from God, it's how we are now called to live as His disciples. It comes from our attitude of relying on God, wanting to respond to His love, and gladly acknowledging that all we have comes from God. God has given us everything in our life, both life itself and all we need, and He went even further to send His Son to die and rise again so that we can remain in His love and forgiveness when we don't get these things right, which we know is very often. Giving ourselves wholly to God enables us to find the richness of the peace, hope, and joy we can't find anywhere else. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What lesson do you normally take from the story of the widow's mite? How does it comfort you? How does it challenge you?
- Think about what it means to live a life of Total Giving: relying on God, doing what you do in response to God's love, acknowledging that all you have comes from God. Are there any parts of your life in which you struggle to always do one or more of these? If you can, take the time to stop and think about these, and ask for God's help to reflect these attitudes in those areas of your life.
- Total Giving is what God gives to us, at all times, in all ways. Consider all the blessings you have in your life; life, people, the country we live in, material blessings. Thank God for these, and ask God to help you to use His gifts to you in His service.

Pray: thank God for the generosity He shows to us in so many ways. Ask Him to help us to live as His disciples in living lives of Total Giving.

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