

Sermon 25 August 2024 Giving

2 Corinthians 9:6-9 Luke 6:37-38

Winston Churchill said, *'We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.'* Never was a truer word spoken.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus makes the point that what you give, you will get back. *'Give, and it will be given to you. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'* He was speaking of something he knew a bit about. His whole ministry was one of generosity, giving all he'd got to give to everyone who needed it.

As with forgiveness, which Jesus touches on in this passage (*'Forgive, and you will be forgiven'*), it is a topic that crops up quite a bit throughout the New Testament. Paul, as we heard in our first reading, expands this theme, literally, by making the point that the more we give, the more we receive. He uses the analogy of sowing seed: *'The point is this; the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.'* 2 Corinthians 9:6. I get the feeling he is tapping into Jesus's habit of using images that are familiar with his listeners, or in this case, his readers. His analogy has an echo of the parable of the sower as told by Jesus.

Now, obviously, if we sow sparingly, the resulting crop will be sparse. Conversely, seed sown generously will result in a bountiful crop. And it is just the same when it comes to giving. It is a maxim of life. The more you give, the more you receive. And the beauty of it all is that we never really know how our giving will be returned. Invariably, the return will be something quite unexpected, something which takes us by surprise.

I remind you of the amazing story that came out of the 2001 tsunami in Thailand, supposedly a true story. Every morning this man would go to the edge of a lagoon connected to the ocean and feed fish with a loaf of bread. One morning, a large crocodile appeared. Unperturbed, the kind man threw a few slices of bread to the crocodile. The croc snapped them up and swam away. From that day on, the crocodile would come every morning for his breakfast of sliced bread and then swim peacefully away.

The man was feeding the fish the morning the tsunami came. Being close to the water's edge, he was swept up in the strong current and carried out to sea. At first, he tried holding on to a wooden chair, but the force of the current was so strong that the chair was torn from his grasp. Then he grabbed on to a piece of floating wood, and that too was pulled away from his grasp. Close to drowning, he grabbed on to a large log that was floating past him. He managed to hold on to that and suck in some air.

Coming back to his senses, he noticed something very odd. Whereas every object was being dragged by the current out to sea, his log was moving in the opposite direction back to shore. When he was close enough to dry land, the man jumped off the log and scrambled up the bank to safety. Only then did he notice that his 'log' had a tail. It was the crocodile! You just never know how you are going to get repaid.

This brings us to the question of giving to our church, or as practised by some, tithing. A tithe means a tenth part of something paid as a voluntary contribution. It is good to tithe, it is good give to our church. The bottom line is that we depend on your generosity to survive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it costs money to run a church. We are not a huge or very wealthy congregation and so it is something of a struggle to keep our heads above water. We do ok but we hover between being in the black and being in the red.

The great Billy Graham made an interesting observation on tithing which links back to what we were saying that 'the more we give, the more we receive.' He said, *'We have found in our home that God's blessing upon the nine-tenths when we tithe, helps it to go farther than the ten-tenths without his blessing.'*

However, it is important to practise tithing in conjunction with other forms of giving. Jesus makes this point in one of his quite regular charges against the Pharisees: *'Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law – justice, mercy and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things.'* Matthew 23:23.

The point is this, we have focussed on giving in monetary terms but as we all know, we can give in a myriad of ways – our time, care, kindness, our love – but the principle is still the same. We can give in a myriad of ways but we can expect to receive in a myriad of ways. A bit like the man and the crocodile story.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus makes the point that if we show mercy, we will receive mercy in return: *'God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy in return.'* Matthew 5:7. This verse, of course, is part of what we know as the Beatitudes. Once again, we have this idea, this concept of giving leading to receiving. It is difficult to get away from this notion.

In the end, our relationship with God is dependent, amongst other things, on what we give. And I repeat, that giving can be in a variety of forms. But if we just continue to focus for a moment on the material aspect of giving, in Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tells the story of the rich fool who stored up the produce from extensive crops in barns, building bigger barns because the existing barns were overflowing. God said to him, *'You fool! You will die tonight. Then who will get it all?'* Jesus went on to comment, *'Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.'*

So, we need to be careful that we are not like the rich fool who kept everything for himself and gave nothing away. He died receiving no reward at all.

I want to make a small observation. I have never seen an unhappy generous person, nor have I seen a happy ungenerous person.

American author, Jackson Brown Jnr, wrote, *'Remember that the happiest people are not those getting more, but those giving more.'*

Billy Graham said, *'If a person gets his attitude towards money straight, it will help straighten out almost every other area of his life.'*

I finish with an anecdote. R.G. LeTourneau, who died about 50 years ago, was a Christian industrialist, who dedicated his life to 'being a businessman for God.' He was hugely successful, designing and developing his own line of earth-moving equipment. LeTourneau was the maker of nearly 300 inventions and had hundreds of patents in his time. As he succeeded financially, he increased his giving to the point where he was giving 90% of his income to the Lord's work. He said, *'I shovel out the money, and God shovels it back, but God has a bigger shovel.'*

You might be thinking, 'I could give 90% too if I was a multi-millionaire.' Maybe so, but Le Tourneau didn't start out wealthy.

