
Week 1: 1 October 2017

The spirituality of giving - Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter

Our attitudes towards, money, possessions is a spiritual issue

Exodus 20:1-6 (no other gods)
Psalm 8
1 Timothy 6:6-10 (love of money is root of evil)
Matthew 19:16-24 (Rich young ruler)

Introduction

The story of the toddler who put everything in his mouth. One day he got hold of his mother's purse and started sucking money. It wasn't long before he swallowed a R5 coin.

Mother: "Quick, call the doctor"

Father: "No- call the priest"

Mother: "Why – he's not dying..?"

Father: "I know, but the priest can get money out of anyone!"

Today begins our month of "Stewardship and Dedication", as we focus on different aspects of giving. Today we begin with – **The Spirituality of Giving** (other topics to follow: 'Learning to give generously and cheerfully'; 'The blessings of giving', 'Dedicating our whole lives to God'; Patronal Festival with thanksgiving and testimonies).

Maybe some of you are inwardly groaning or feel uneasy. 'All the church ever wants from us is our money!'

Maybe you feel quite defensive:

- My pension is small
- I am the breadwinner in a family where others are unemployed
- Food, medicines are expensive
- I barely manage to make ends meet, let alone have any spare cash to give away
- I have a family to educate
- I just get a small monthly allowance/pocket money

Perhaps you feel somewhat annoyed – "Don't talk to me about giving, I give a huge amount already so don't expect any more. Speak to the others who aren't giving...."

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge ALL in this parish who have given faithfully and sacrificially over the years in terms of their finances, time, and talents. Thank you for your invaluable contribution to the building up of the Cathedral parish into a vibrant community of faith, witness and service. Without your generosity, the ministry in this place would not be able to continue.

Why is it, I wonder, that so many of us feel uncomfortable about talking about money? Many marital arguments relate to how the respective spouses spend their money (some don't even reveal the amount of their pay cheques to their spouses!).

- It's a very private matter
- None of your business how much I earn or what I choose to do with my money

Money seems to touch a very deep chord within us – it is so much a part of us that when we talk of giving it away, it is almost as if we are being asked to give away something of ourselves! Money matters seem to evoke very deep and powerful emotions.

Our attitude to money and what we do with it is A SPIRITUAL ISSUE

I believe one of the reasons for this (disease in talking of money matters), is that our attitude to money and giving is fundamentally a **spiritual issue**.

Did you know that Jesus spoke more about *money* than any other subject - other than the Kingdom of Heaven/God? In the Gospels, there are no fewer than 22 references where Jesus talks about our attitudes and action with reference to money (mammon). That should tell us something about how important an issue it is in the life of a believer!

This is clearly illustrated in our Gospel reading today (Matthew 19:16-24). A Rich Young Ruler came to Jesus with a question:

“What can I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus told him to keep the commandments – which he claimed to have done. Then Jesus added that in order to inherit eternal life there was one more thing needed – he should sell his possessions and give away the money to the poor.

Perhaps we react by asking: “Jesus, were you CRAZY?! Why were you so hard on him? He (and we) need money in order to live! What’s the point of giving it all away?”

Did you notice that the Rich Young Ruler asked a *spiritual question* (What must I do to inherit eternal life?), so Jesus responded with a *spiritual answer* (*obey the commandments and sell your possessions and give the money away*). In other words, put God first. Don't let money dominate your life. Let it go, give it away, break it's hold over you – and use it to be a blessing to others in need.

There are many warnings in scripture about the *dark side* of money. In our NT lesson today, we read: “*The LOVE of money is the root of all evil*” (1Timothy 6:10). Notice it is not money per se that is evil – but rather an unhealthy attitude towards it. **Loving** money presents the problem. Why? Money can be dangerous. It has a way of seducing us, seeking to dominate us, gain power over us. Ironically the more we have, the more we want. Need is overtaken by greed.

We know that people will do just about anything to get hold of money. It can become an obsession. People spend their hard earned cash on lottery tickets in the hope of winning the jackpot. The casinos with their multiple machines feed people's gambling addictions. People will steal, attack and even kill for money. Even those who have plenty fall prey to temptation to acquire more hence the high incidence of fraud and corruption that we hear about on a daily basis.

The love of money is indeed the root of all evil. This can threaten our relationship with God (and others).

In our OT lesson today (Exodus 20:1-6) we were reminded of the commandments: “*You shall have no other gods before me*”, “*You shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God...*” In other words, God must be our first, our number one priority.

Money has a way of setting itself up as a rival god. It tries to trick us, to lure us into a false dependency on it. “Come to me, trust in me, depend on me. I will give you security, happiness, power, status and friends. If you have lots of me your future will be safe and you will have no more worries”. It all sounds most appealing - until you find yourself unemployed, illness strikes, the stock markets crash...Then you discover the empty promises money has made. It can let you down badly. It can no longer save you.

In the case of the Rich Young Ruler, it is clear that his money meant more to him than anything else. It was his number one priority. Money had become his god, his master. He trusted it, depended on it, relied on it and found in it his security. It held the man in its clutches. Money ruled his life and he simply couldn't face letting it go. He had indeed obeyed several of the commandments, but his attitude to his money showed that he fell short of the first and most important commandments - to have no other gods, or worship any idol (Ex 19:3-4)

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus says “*No-one can serve two masters, either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money*”. The Rich Young Ruler was given a choice – which master would he serve? We read that he went away sad, implying that money won the day.

Martin Luther said: “*There are three conversions needed: a conversion of the heart, of the mind, and of the purse. The conversion of the purse is by far the most difficult*”.

Brothers and Sisters there can be no doubt that **money** and **what we do with it** is a **spiritual issue**.

What then should our attitude be to our money?

Money is not to be our master, but our servant.

The scriptures tell us that everything we have comes from God in the first place. “*Yours Lord is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you*” (1 Chron 29:11; AAPB pg 116 par 48). In other words our possessions, our time, our talents indeed our very lives are not our own – they have been given to us by God. They have been entrusted to us. We are called to be good stewards of these gifts and use them wisely for the benefit of others and for the praise and glory of God.

The question we need to ask ourselves regularly is this: “Lord, what do you want me to do with **your** money?” (the same applies to my talents, my time etc)

Reasons to give

There are many reasons why we as Christians are to be people who give away our money – I want to highlight just four:

1) *Give to show your love for God*

We all know John 3: 16 “*God so loved the world that he GAVE his one and only Son....*” Love gives. When a member of our family or a special friend has a birthday, we show our love by giving a gift. At the birth of Jesus, the shepherds brought gifts of sheep and lambs whereas the wise men brought their wealth to the Christ Child - gold, frankincense and myrrh (as my father would always remind us, ‘It’s not the monetary value of the gift that matters but rather it is the thought that counts). They gave as an act of love; an act of worship.

We give as an act of love and worship to God. This is why Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler to obey the commandments (the first ones emphasise loving God and putting Him first in your life) and then sell his possessions and give his money away – a sign of total love and commitment to God. Making God, not money, our first priority.

Someone wrote, “Giving money is an effective way of showing our love for God because it is so much a part of us. When we give it away, we are giving something of ourselves”.

2) *Give as an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving to God*

Has God ever blessed you in any way?

- Do you have food to eat, a roof over your head, clothes to wear? Do you have a job, a regular income, a pension or grant?
- Have you ever had an answer to prayer?
- Have you received a word of encouragement when you were down, or a sense of God guiding you in your decisions, or experienced God’s love and comfort when you needed it most?
- Have you ever felt that God was somehow watching over you and your family or protecting you?
- Have you seen God at work in the lives of others, have you noticed His intervention in what seemed like an impossible situation in our country...
- The list is endless. God is always at work in our lives individually, in the life of our church and in the bigger issues and situations in our country and world...

Our God is a generous God. His mercies are new every morning. As the old song says, “*Count your blessings, name them one by one...and it will surprise you what the Lord has done!*”

We give as a response of gratitude for all that God has done.

3) *Give in order to bless God and others*

God has given so much to us, so let us in turn share his blessings by giving to others with a generous and willing spirit. St Paul writes about the spiritual benefits of being a

cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:7-8), as well as noting the practical benefits for others when our giving 'supplies the needs of God's people' (2 Cor 9:12).

When for example you give to the Cathedral Grocery Basket, this helps feed a family who struggles to put food on their table. When you give to a Charity, others are blessed. When you see someone has a practical need and you give an anonymous gift to them, you build up their faith. When you offer to sponsor a child's education, you are investing in their life and future. What a privilege it is to be able to use our money (the money God has given us) to bring joy and blessings to God's beloved children!

4) *Give to provide the needed resources for ministry and mission*

We as a Cathedral parish have a vision:

"We believe we are called to be a vibrant, attractive, diverse, welcoming, all age community of people who seek to follow Christ.

The Cathedral's ministry seeks at all times to be obedient to the call of God through Jesus Christ."

This vision needs financial resources in order to be implemented. We gather to worship in a beautiful Cathedral as our place of worship –which needs money to maintain. People (clergy, admin staff, laity) are needed to implement the vision: this requires financial resources. Our choristers who lead us to the throne of God's grace through their music and worship receive bursaries towards their school education – this requires money. Students from Rhodes find here a welcoming spiritual home and gather for worship and fellowship during the week and on Sunday evenings, enjoy an annual camp, come for prayer and counselling – people and financial resources are needed! Our Pew leaflets, Dean's letters, orders of service are all necessary and important in our communication so everyone can know what is happening and feel included; receive scripture readings for the weekly devotions; alert us to people in need of special prayer. Good administration is vital in the life of the church to facilitate good ministry. It costs money. In obedience to God we are called to care for the sick, the elderly; the poor (grocery baskets)...All these things require our financial resources.

There is a paradox – God owns everything, yet He will have nothing unless His people give what they have back to Him. There are practical costs involved to advance the message, mission and ministry of God's church. All God's money is sitting in our pockets – He asks us to be wise stewards of what we have been given and release financial resources so His will can be done on earth. We all know the saying, "God has no hands but your hands" perhaps we can add "God has no money but your money".

Let us give in order to provide the needed resources for ministry and mission.

Conclusion

Your attitude to money and what you do with it is a **spiritual issue**.

Like the Rich Young Ruler, if you want to inherit eternal life, you need to be willing to give your money away and not let it become a rival god. Our money must not become our master, but rather be our servant.

Are you willing to hold it in an open hand, not clutching it tightly, and be ready to give it away - as a sign of love for God; as an act of gratitude and thanksgiving for all that God has done; in order to bless others and to provide the necessary resources for ministry and mission?

As I close I leave you with two further questions for reflection and prayer:

- 1) In the way you live your life, which Master do you serve, trust and depend upon - God or Money? (Would others who observe you reach the same conclusion?)
- 2) How does your currently handling of money make it clear that God is of utmost importance to you and your number one priority?

Amen.