

To Give

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Mark 12⁴¹⁻⁴⁴ / James 3¹⁻⁵

A few years ago while on our first trip overseas a friend who we'd only meet a year or so earlier contacted us and told us that when we hit mainland USA he would pick us up from the airport and take us back to his place to stay for a few days. Little did I know that his house was over an hour from the airport and that he was doing this during a busy week at his work. I was struck by his generosity. He also drove us back to the airport when we left.

We were the recipients of incredible generosity throughout the whole trip from England where we stayed with an old friend in her small flat in Huddersfield to living with a missionary couple in Tanzania for a week or so. I was incredibly humbled by these acts of kindness but perhaps the one that comes to mind more than anything else occurred last year when Fran and I went north to do a wedding in Wellington. We'd had a busy time leading up to the trip and we'd decided to drive up. We stayed overnight at my sister's place in Rangiora and then got up early to catch the Ferry from Picton in the early afternoon. When we got to Picton we had a frustrating time finding the right place to queue from but we eventually got there after a few false starts. We finally rolled up to the ticket checking office and a very cheerful Maori brother popped his head out of the window and said 'Got a ticket or a number sir?' I

was well prepared and gave him my booking reference number. He disappeared for what seemed an eternity and then came back and said 'You don't have a copy of your ticket do you?' I was prepared for this and found a copy I'd printed. He looked briefly at it and then with a big smile said 'This was for yesterday sir and I think that boat has gone now!'

Now of course I knew that Fran had made a big mistake not checking our ticket but I want you to know I said nothing to her! And since she's out of the room I refuse to place any blame on anyone but I'd have to say the only experience I'd had recently with travel agents was with the airlines and so my heart sunk because if you miss a flight in this country there is generally no forgiveness and no generosity. So my heart just sank and I could see us being very late for the wedding and since I was the marriage celebrant I began to imagine things getting very bad very quickly. So in all honesty I just said the guy 'Is there anything I can do about this?'

To my surprise he didn't say 'Buy another ticket for a later sailing' which is the answer I would have gotten from Air New Zealand frankly. No, he said 'Just a moment sir' and he disappeared into his little office.

While he was gone I began to wonder, just briefly mind you, whether he could be bribed. What did I have that he might want? How could I offer him something without making it sound too... obvious? Would this make matters worse? Time passed. A brief look in the rear vision mirror confirmed that the family in the car behind us was falling apart. I prayed the parents wouldn't recognise me. Others were

getting out of their cars stretching their cramped limbs trying to be patient but various knowing looks were directed towards Fran... and I. Finally the ticket officer came back to the window and looked down at me still with this smile on his face. I registered slight annoyance at this. If he was going to tell me to go and buy an expensive last minute ticket from some place in town and wait overnight for an early sailing in the morning and still smile... well that was just a bit unfair. We were dying in this car. Fran wasn't feeling bad for me at all. I could tell. After 35 years of marriage I could read her like a book. That look said – 'You absolute twit – you booked a day early, you had months to check it, you told me over and over again it was all sorted, you reassured me it was going to be fine, you even went through it last night and **still you got it wrong**. How on earth did you ever graduate from primary school let alone get three degrees.

Isn't it amazing how fast non-verbal communication is? I mean she said that all in a split second with one very piercing look.

[demonstrate]

The man handed a few pieces of paper to me – still smiling. Here we are sir he said. I responded. Can I buy another ticket somewhere for this sailing? Then the bombshell flowed out of his mouth...

"It's all done sir. I found another place for you... just follow the next car onto the boat and don't worry about a thing!!!!!"

I have never been closer to kissing a strange man whom I had never met before and if Fran hadn't given me another look which said "Do exactly as the man has said and if you deviate one inch from the

instructions just given very bad things will happen... to you!" – I might well have jumped out of the car and done it.

You have no idea of the relief which swept over the two of us and especially me. I felt like I'd been saved from a fate worse than death and Fran was able to let it all go a few months later. We boarded with joy in our hearts and we enjoyed the trip across as if we were escaping from some sort of prison. It was probably the best thing that happened to us all holidays to be honest.

One act of extraordinary generosity just made our world right. It made everything around us work. It changed things completely.

Three things witness to the nature of God more effectively, I believe, than anything else. They are generosity, service, and gentleness. Today I want to highlight generosity because it is perhaps the hardest one to develop.

The account of the widow's mite, as it is called, is usually well known and it is a simple story anyway. So let's cut to the chase - what is Jesus highlighting here?

1. The nature of generosity – that it is not about how much we give but about how much we have to give.

Generosity has to be measured by our means simply because if we give what costs us little we are not being generous. David once refused to accept a piece of land as a gift because he was giving it towards the temple and as he said, "No; I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing." ²⁵ So David paid

Ornan six hundred shekels of gold by weight for the site.” (1 Chron 21)

2. That it is about the character of our heart. True generosity begins with the heart because what we give we must be prepared to say goodbye to forever and when whenever do this we will grieve. Grief is a process of the heart more than anything else.
3. Finally because of this we need to teach our hearts over and over again to give because our default position, generally speaking, is to hold on to whatever we get for as long as possible.

So how do we do this? The best way to do it is to keep giving. To make giving a habit and to allow giving to become part of your family culture.

This is why I want to show you this interesting video.

Churches in India Practice Radical Generosity

Churches in the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram have a beautiful phrase to express the way they give to God—“Buhfai Tham.” It means “one handful of rice at a time.” Here's how it works: Families in the church set aside a portion of rice at every meal for God. When they collect enough rice, they donate it to their local church. The church turns around and sells the rice to generate income.

In 1914 they used the sale of rice to raise \$1.50 (in U.S. money). Today these Christians collect \$1.5 million as they support 1,800 missionaries, in addition to local ministry. People have also started giving in more creative ways, as vegetables, firewood, and other resources flow into the church's outreach for the kingdom.

One church leader said,

There are many ways of serving the Lord. Some people do great things. Some people are great preachers. Some people contribute lots and lots of money. But when we talk about this 'Handful of Rice,' it is very humble. The service is done in the corner of the kitchen where nobody sees, but God knows and he blesses it.

Another church member said, "It is not our richness or our poverty that make us serve the Lord, but our willingness. So we Mizo people say, 'As long as we have something to eat every day, we have something to give to God every day.'"

[Play Video]

How is it that such a poor people can raise enough money to support not only the ministry of the Church but to support 1800 missionaries? How is it that this people who live barely better than a hand to mouth existence can be so generous? How is it that this church thrives in a culture where Christianity is so young?

Let us for a moment just work through the principles of giving that we see both in this people and in the story of the widows' mite.

Firstly, let us see that the giving is rightly related to the income of the person. No one suggests that these people should give a certain dollar amount or even a certain percentage of their income. They give according to what they consume. When they eat, they give. You might say "Well doesn't that make it easier for wealthy people to give since this would constitute a smaller proportion of their income and yes that may be the case but what we saw in the video was that the handful of rice was really only the lowest mark. Many others gave other things all according to what they had.

God doesn't insist on a certain figure in general but God does insist on giving.

Secondly, their generosity relates not to a specific act of giving but to the very heart of life. They give as they have received indeed, they give because they have received and they give as a response of thankfulness for the life they have.

But this begs the question where does this thankfulness come from. Where does this basic response which drives the generosity in the first place derive its energy?

It's not hard to trace. Thankfulness always has a subject though many would question this today but when we analyse thankfulness there will always be someone **to whom we are referring**. The very definition of thanks demands it. The Oxford dictionary defines thanks as "An expression of gratitude:" and the Cambridge dictionary is even more specific defining it as "appreciation and pleasure because of something that has been done for you:" Each of these demand a subject, a doer who has done the thing and in our case that doer is God. Thankfulness, then, is a matter of faith; of faith that God has been at work in our lives in so many ways. Generosity as a response of thankfulness is a matter of faith since God is the presumption of faith.

Are we thankful for God's work in our lives? We will show it by our generosity. And this is perhaps one of the deepest and most profound expressions of thanksgiving in our life because it requires us to give over something that could otherwise be used to feed the very opposite of generosity – our selfishness.

And there is nothing more powerfully evangelical than a person or indeed a community which has become deeply generous to those around it. Those **who give** express not just generosity but witness

deeply to the One who has inspired their generosity. God has given His all for us on the Cross – what has that generosity inspired amongst us? Alexander the Great once inspired his whole army by an amazing act of generosity.

Before setting out on a conquest of Asia, Alexander the Great enquired about the finances of his followers. So that they wouldn't be concerned about the care of their dependants, Alexander distributed virtually all the wealth and estates from the treasury. After he had passed out most of the royal treasury, General Perdiccas asked what he had held back for himself. "Hope," the king answered. "In that case," Perdiccas responded, "we who share in your labours will also take part in your hopes." Then he and several other officials refused the estates given to them.

Thirdly, their giving and their generosity is something they've raised to a level of consciousness which makes it relevant by tying it to their eating. This is important because generosity isn't so much about our level of giving or even about how often we give as it is about **who we are**. If I give to church every week generously and then forget about being generous for the rest of the week my generosity is, frankly, a fraud. As with the widow the key to her giving was who she was. She was a person committed to giving back to God; committed to generosity; committed to thankfulness. This couldn't be either simply a duty to be fulfilled or an act of outright publicity seeking – it was too sacrificial for either. Rather it exposed who she was.

Our generosity as Christians needs to come from a changed heart though let me immediately say that giving because it is the right thing to do is a great way of changing our hearts. And isn't this what

also came across in that video. The Church began 100 years ago to give in this fashion simply to set a good example of giving and now it's grown to support 1800 missionaries. Imagine if we could support 5. How good would that be? How great would it be to be giving to needs far greater than ours?

This Christmas I call upon us all to consider our giving. I don't call on us just to give to the church but the church does need a certain level of giving if it is to maintain the ministries it has. Rather let us examine both how we give and what we give so that God may speak to us again about generosity. AMEN.