

Money and Possessions

Luke records a number of occasions when Jesus told people to give away what they had. In a story, he warned people to beware of greed of every kind; full barns would do them no good in the end (12:15-21). Rather, the little flock of followers were to sell their possessions and give to the poor (12:32-33). Jesus once told large crowds, who were travelling with him, that any of them who did not give up everything that he had could not be his disciple (14:33). He told a story that the rich man who ignored a poor man at his gate would end up in torment (16:19-31). On another occasion, a rich ruler, who was eager to follow Jesus, was told to give away everything to the poor. He became very sad (18:22). From other gospels we learn that he went away in sorrow, but Jesus did not reduce his demand, or call him back, as we might have been tempted to do. The demand was clearly not negotiable.

These incidents add up to a strong message which runs counter to the values of our society. Readers who own houses and cars, and have an income and a certain standard of living that they are used to, may be feeling uncomfortable at this point. We want to ask questions. Is this sort of command only for a few, or is Jesus calling all his followers today to this kind of action?

One man who thought so was Inigo, now known as Ignatius Loyala. He left everything behind, and set off on foot on a journey of hundreds of miles to Jerusalem, choosing a pauper's clothing. When someone gave him some money, seven crowns, he gave them away next day one by one to beggars he met (Ignatius, I. St. Lawrence, St. Paul Publications, Middlegreen, 1990, p36 & 43-44). He went on to found an order of which poverty was an important feature.

From another century, we have the account of the cricketer C.T. Studd. An outstanding England batsman from a wealthy background, he left behind up all his prospects, and gave away a fortune, when he went as a missionary to China. Even his wife was not to come before Jesus. When they married, they agreed that they would not make each other into idols. If the Lord allowed them to live together, well and good, but if he wanted them to live apart, they would do so. So it was that having passed the age of 50, C.T. heard the call of God to go to central Africa. He ended up spreading the gospel there, while his wife stayed in England administering the mission. This continued until his death, thirteen years later. During that period, C.T. and his wife only had one fortnight together. It could truly be stated that he had given up everything. (C.T. Studd, Norman Grubb, Lutterworth Press, London, 1970, ch7, p85 & p166).

We may not agree with everything that these men did. However, Jesus once said that there was no greater love than for a person to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). This is what we see in the attitude of these two men. They left everything behind for the sake of what lay ahead (Phil 3:13-14, Heb 11:13). It has also been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. If we understand martyrdom not so much as a death, but rather as a life laid down, then these two men can be seen as martyrs up to a point (Romans 12:1). We may note that several centuries later, Ignatius now has some 25,000 followers round the world, known as Jesuits. Some idea of their dedication to the Lord can be gained from the film *The Mission*, now available on home video. As a result of the World Evangelisation Crusade that C.T. Studd founded, Africa and other nations, notably South America, have been profoundly influenced for Christ. Today, followers of Jesus there are multiplying at a great rate.

When confronted by the statements in Luke that we quoted, it is tempting to soften the words of Jesus in some way, to make them more comfortable for those who hear. However, our attitude in this book has been that Jesus meant what he said, and we are to take him at his word. We ought not to attempt to dodge the more uncomfortable parts of his message. So our aim here will be to ask how we may go about carrying out these commands, rather than whether to do so.

We may notice too that the first disciples "left everything" and followed Jesus (Luke 5:11). In the same spirit, the little flock of followers were later called upon to sell their possessions (Luke 12:33). But they were also assured a moment before that God would look after them, in the same way as the birds of the air are fed, and the lilies of the field flourish (v22-31). They were not to worry.

Perhaps we can start with three pieces of advice that Paul gave on the matter. He wrote, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously (2 Cor 9:6)." We have already noted the reaping achieved in the generations following Ignatius and C.T. Studd. This followed their generous sowing.

Now we can add the observation that the wealthy nations in the West have on the whole hardly responded to Jesus' teaching on giving. Christian giving here has often resembled the practice of tipping, giving a small sum that will not be missed. The result of little being sowed has tended towards a small harvest. We have not seen anything like the progress of the gospel in our culture that has taken place in the so-called third world.

If we are honest, we have often been proud of our materialism. We call ourselves the first world, and less wealthy nations the third world. But if we were to accord status to parts of the globe on the basis of lively growing churches, then the developing nations would be the first world, and we the third world. It is true that they may not have had any choice over their material poverty, but despite that, material lack seems to have done them a lot of good spiritually. So maybe we can start altering our thinking about the current economic difficulties in the UK. Perhaps Christians can begin to see our financial problems as a prelude to receiving blessing from God. Perhaps he is helping us in the whole matter of dismantling our standards of living. We might detect God saying to us, "Alright, if you won't give it away, I'll take it away." He is, after all, a God who loves justice, which means fair play (Isa 61:8).

We should note that harvest does not come straight away. There is a delay between sowing and reaping. It is easy to be deceived about this, as time passes, and to believe that the harvest will not come, but it will in the end, if we are patient (Gal 6:7). Paul went on, "Each man should give what he has decided to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (v7)." It seems that screwing up our courage and emptying our bank accounts with a heavy heart is not the way forward. Rather we can take our lead from the prodigal son. In the prosperous west, we have tended to join him in wasting our substance in riotous living; as believers, it would be better if we could start wasting our substance in riotous giving. Let us scatter our wealth around, like the seed in the parable of the sower, which fell everywhere. We can be cheerful about it, because although it may feel like waste as we do it, it will yield a harvest in the end.

Thirdly, Paul continued, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: 'He has scattered his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever (v8-9).'"

Here at last we find some comfort. It seems that as we open our hands towards God, he opens his hand towards us. As we empty our coffers towards the poor, and so become poor ourselves, so he will respond by giving good gifts to us.

There are many passages we could quote to encourage us in this resolve. In an earlier chapter, we noted that he who gives to the poor, recovers from sickness (Ps 41:1-3). Proverbs teaches us that "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done (Prov 19:17, cf 21:13)." Malachi reported God's word that if God's people gave the tenth they were obliged to give under the covenant, and did not skimp it, God would open the floodgates of heaven and pour down so much blessing that they would not have room for it (Mal 3:10). Jesus taught that if his followers seek God's kingdom and righteousness first, then all their needs of food and clothing will be provided (Matt 6:25-34). When Peter obeyed the Lord and let down the nets in deep water, he and his fisherman friends experienced something like this; no wonder they had the faith to leave everything and follow him (Luke 5:4-11). (See also Matt 5:42-6:4 & Luke 6:38).

In fact, we can perceive that our response in the area of giving is an indication of the depth of faith that we have. Will God keep his promises, or will he let us down? If we do not really trust him, then we will find it hard to take this command on board. Perhaps a way forward is for us to face this squarely, and confess that we are nervous of giving our possessions away, because part of us is afraid that God might leave us in the lurch.

God seems to appreciate honest talk of this kind. In it we express our deepest thoughts, from somewhere way down inside us. He tends to respond to people who pray like that in a way they cannot ignore.

We may note that the two main occasions when God met with Jacob were both times when he was under great stress, and could not get out of it by trickery, as he usually did. On the first, when he was running away from Esau to save his life, God spoke to him in a dream, and the result was that Jacob promised to give God a tenth of everything he received (Gen 28:10-22). This is the background to the passage in Malachi we quoted.

Later, when he was escaping from his Father-in-law, he found Esau coming towards him with four hundred men, and in this crisis, God met him as he wrestled with an angel all night long. That encounter led to Jacob's insistence that God bless him, in which matter he overcame God; the new name Israel which he received indicated that he had struggled with God and won (Gen 32:28). It may be significant that just before, Jacob had divided up his family and possessions, and that when God met him, he was on his own (v22-24). It seems that if we really want to see God at work in our lives, to wrestle with God as it were, and receive his blessing, then everything else has to go. As Jesus said, you cannot serve God and money (Matt 6:24).

One practical suggestion. We are called to be disciples, which we understood to mean learners. One way of learning to swim is to be thrown in the deep end. Some times this is forced upon people in the area of money and possessions. Perhaps the rich man in Luke 18 was one such person. But for most of us, learning to swim is a matter of gradually gaining confidence. Perhaps the Lord will allow us to give as far as faith permits in the first instance. Then as we discover that God is good, we can proceed further into the deep end of giving (Psalm 34:8).

This suggestion is not made to let us off the hook, but rather with the thought that it is better to start slowly and then increase our giving than to shy away in fear and not to start at all. We can begin with what we feel comfortable about.

One way of doing this is to earmark a percentage of income to go to the Lord's work. This is to follow on the principle of tithing from Old Testament times.

Bill and Mary used to give a tenth of their income after tax. Then Bill went forward to train at Theological College for the ordained ministry. When they arrived, and discovered just how small their grant would be, they realised that they would soon be living off money given by other Christians. So it turned out. Then they wondered whether to continue to tithe, since the money they were receiving had all been given to them by Christian people, and to tithe it would only increase the amount that had to be found.

When they talked this over with a friend, he drew their attention to Numbers 18:26. Here it says that the priests, who received the tithed income, were themselves to give a tithe. So they continued to tithe, out of their reduced funds, and God blessed them so that they were never in want. Later, the expected grant money dried up altogether, but God continued to provide, even though for two years they had no guaranteed income, and they never ceased tithing.

This is not unlike Elijah's experience. When the rain failed for three years, God provided one source of food and drink, but when that failed, he arranged another (1 Kings 17:7-9). He can be trusted to meet our needs.

Finally, a practical hint. I have found that Wallington Missionary Auctions live up to their claims of achieving good prices for what comes under the hammer. Two pieces of jewellery came my way which I did not want. They were thought to be worth around 85 pounds; the sum raised at auction was 770 pounds. On another occasion, an old piece of pottery, worthless to me, raised over a thousand pounds. The money went to the Bible Society to provide Bibles overseas. The organisation will collect nationwide, and can be contacted at 20 Dalmeny Road, Carshalton, Surrey, SM5 4PP.

Note that I gave away what we would not miss. This contrasts with King David. There was once a major crisis due to his greed - he had taken a census of the population, even though he knew it was not right (1 Chron ch 21). He realised that the plague which swept through Jerusalem was the

result of his action. To stop it, he had to offer a sacrifice at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. When Araunah tried to give him the floor free of charge, David insisted on paying for it, replying that he would not give the Lord what cost him nothing (v24). This new attitude showed the depth of his change of heart.

Later on, the temple came to be built on this site (22:1). We may learn from this fact that pure religion is not grasping, nor one which costs us nothing. Rather, as James put it, it consists of looking after orphans and widows in their distress, as well as keeping oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).

Much of this chapter has aimed to get us into this gently. Perhaps that was a mistake. Maybe it is better to plunge in at the deep end, like Ignatius and C.T. Studd. Each reader must decide for himself.