

Giving: A Training Exercise for the Heart

There is no doubt that we live in a society where the word 'more' is of huge importance. These four letters constitute one of the most powerful words in the English language. Advertisers work hard to convince us that we are (or ought to be) discontent, and that we would experience true satisfaction if we just had *more*. All day long, particularly if you watch day-time television, we are bombarded by the prophets of *more*. Use me, buy me, drive me, wear me, try me, put me in your hair. *More* is an insatiable desire, but serving the 'more monster' can never satisfy our souls. Yet in the short run, saying no to 'more' can be difficult, even frightening.

It's because, as a society, that we can't say no to 'more' that borrowing on loans, credit cards, overdrafts and second mortgages has rocketed in the UK. Making matters worse, many households have doubled up on their debts by getting into arrears on their monthly bills, especially council tax. More than a third of all unsecured debt in 2018 was run up due to credit card balances, with the average unsecured debt reaching nearly £29,000.

No-one sets out to be a greedy person, but it happens all the time – even in the church. In Jesus' day, material wealth was important to the people of Israel since it was often seen as a sign of God's blessing and the reward for obedience to him. But accumulating wealth for its own sake is deceptive, because you can find a false sense of security in material treasure – remember the parable of the man who built bigger barns and died before he had time to eat, drink and be merry on its contents? Equally, if you saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing, you could form an inaccurate assessment of your spirituality, thinking you were closer to God than you actually were. Remember the rich young man who went away sad because Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, before eternal life could be his? Sad because he knew the huge sacrifice it would take to follow Jesus when his wealth was so important to him.

Jesus clearly saw wealth becoming an issue so made this sobering statement: *'No-one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth'* (Matt 6:24). Jesus didn't say this to be harsh. He was just stating things the way they are. Rather than collecting material valuables in this life,

Jesus says, *'store up for yourself treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'*

What does it take to tame the monster of more? What does it take to transform a heart from always wanting more to a heart of generosity? For most of us, it will not come simply by acquiring more knowledge, applying more willpower, or even by studying more Scripture, as important as those things are. We need a tangible and routine way to say, *'Sorry, money, you are not in control. You will not be the God of my life today.'* The answer appears to be another four-letter word which appears a lot in the Bible – the word 'give'. If the word 'believed' is used 272 times, the word 'pray' 371 times, 'love' 714 times, the word 'give' is used 2162 times, such is its importance. Its importance to Jesus.

Whether he was talking about a widow giving an offering at the temple, a rich young man giving up his wealth, or his followers who gave a cup of cold water to someone in need, Jesus' repeatedly reminds us that giving to others is a way to honour God. In Matthew 5 he says, *'When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him.'* In Matthew 12, he commends the poor widow who, in her giving of two small copper coins, put more in the Temple Treasury than all the rich men dropping in lots of money. Why? Because where they gave out of their surplus, she gave all she had to live on.

And the reward for our giving? In the verses that follow our gospel reading today, Jesus says, *'Give to others, and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands—all that you can hold. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you.'*

So why do we find the concept of giving difficult?

For many of my church-going years, I didn't think that seriously about giving to my local church. I loved going. I really enjoyed the services. The children enjoyed their groups, and we took part in holiday club, home groups, social events, and the like. The church was always warm and well maintained and I don't ever recall there being requests for money. So, for many years, I didn't give very much at all. I guess, looking back, I was still growing in faith and, as a 'young' disciple, giving wasn't high up on my agenda. I didn't plan in advance what I would give, so the amount I placed on the plate depended solely on

what was in my purse on a Sunday morning. If I'm honest, it was always much less than I knew I could afford, if I'd ever really thought about it, which I didn't. Sometimes it was a few pounds; sometimes just a few smaller coins. But the fact was, I didn't think about it. I had no idea about how much a parish church cost to run. And I didn't really know that giving was a discipleship activity that I needed to take seriously. So, what *does* motivate us as Christians to give?

The starting point for Christian giving has to be grace. We give in response to the grace of God. And that's what ultimately made the difference for me. In 2004, I went off to Spring Harvest and I heard some wonderful talks on grace that transformed by faith. It was like a voice saying, *'You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you ... do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.'* We can't of course talk about grace without directing our attention to the cross, where grace finds its highest expression, as grace pays the highest price, and where grace wins the ultimate victory in the willing sacrifice of Christ. But grace isn't cheap. On the contrary, God's attitude of grace cost him everything, even the death of his Son. And I realised, there and then, that my response to this great cost, reflected in my Christian giving, was woefully inadequate. How could I carry on thoughtlessly throwing in my loose change whilst receiving all the benefits of God's grace? How was that fair? How was that right? So, what changed? I began to prioritise my giving. We weren't that well off. I worked part-time and we had a mortgage and young children at home. But by deciding what I would give at the start of the week and putting it aside for Sunday, my giving became purposeful and part of my discipleship journey. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter, I gave what I had *'decided in my heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion'*. And it felt very different to before. And as our circumstances changed over the years, so our giving changed, both in method - Standing Orders and now the Parish Giving Scheme - and in amount.

A second motivation for giving is that of vision or vocation – where we sense and discern what God is wanting from us in the particular situation we face. Moved by John and Gillian Robinson's stories of the plight of slum children in Bangkok, it's the reason why I travelled to Thailand in 2015 to see for myself the work they were doing, to contribute to it with my time for a few weeks, and to continue to support them financially on my return. It's the reason why, in the Stewardship Booklet you were given last week, I set out what we want

to achieve as a church going forwards, particularly in relation to reaching out to children and young people, and to invite you to join in the vision.

A third element in the motivation for Christian service and giving is that of belonging. We are all in this together. This sense of belonging is not only about being cared for, but having the opportunity to contribute, not just financially, but also in the gifts, skills, enthusiasm and time you bring. Every one of us is part of the body of Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, *'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.'* As the body – as family – we each are invited to share, in accordance with our means, in building God's kingdom here in Cottenham. That's the prayer you hear me say each week as I receive the collection: *'Help us to use these gifts to build your kingdom in this place.'*

So, why do we give? We give in response to the grace of God – the riches we enjoy at God's expense. The grace that says to each of us: *'You are accepted. You are special. You are mine.'* We give because we want to join in the vision of a church wanting to grow in number, in faith and in our service to others. And we give because we belong together, as Christ's body on earth.

How do we guard against the prophets of 'more'? By giving. By deciding in your heart what to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but cheerfully, knowing that if you give to others, God will give to you. A full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands.

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for all you have given to us – so many blessings we cannot begin to count. Lord, we pray that you would develop in us hearts that glorify you – cheerful hearts that desire to give back to you a small measure of the over-abundance that you have poured into our laps. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.