

Preaching on Generous Giving

Five sermon ideas and when to use them



DIOCESE of OXFORD

A Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world

Introduction

In this document are five ideas for sermons on financial giving, within the wider context of living a generous Christian life.

Each sermon will focus on a particular scripture reading and draws out themes from each passage that are relevant to generosity and giving. I have not provided exhaustive explanations of each passage but ideas for places to start when planning your sermon. The text is not intended to be a scholarly investigation of scripture but an honest attempt to consider what each passage might say to the modern reader about the subject of giving and generosity.

A sound vision for a generous church will include teaching on financial giving and generosity at least once a year. If you are planning to run a regular giving campaign you may want to focus your preaching on the subject of giving for several weeks. You could perhaps run a short sermon series; in which case you may find it helpful to use more than one passage from this document. The Bible is full of teaching on generosity; I have selected key readings to help you plan and craft your sermons.

Each reading is given in full in the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised) and is followed by:

Summary

I discuss the meaning of the reading as it applies to generosity and giving. The summaries are my own interpretations of the readings, and I hope they provide some context and fresh ideas. You may find that the reading says something different to you, and I would encourage you to talk about each passage in the way that seems most appropriate to you.

Key themes

In this section I draw out some of the individual themes within the reading that have relevance for generosity and regular giving.

Sermon points to consider

In this section I provide some ideas for sermons. Often these are in the form of questions for you to consider. These are to help you focus on how the passage might speak to giving and generosity in your own church's

context. You may have other points you wish to make, and I encourage you to preach on the message that feels most appropriate for your congregation. However, the questions are designed to help you clarify the message each reading might have for a twenty-first century congregation.

Further reading

These are other Bible passages which have a similar theme to the primary reading. You may wish to include these in your service plan or simply read them for more inspiration. Many of these readings apply to more than one of the primary passages. A full list of readings can be found on page 23, with the lectionary locations for the primary readings.

Joshua Townson

Generous Giving Adviser

A harvest of thanksgiving: 2 Corinthians 9

Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints,² for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them.³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be;⁴ otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking.⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.⁹ As it is written,

‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever.’

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Summary

In this passage Paul is describing the financial gift collected by the Corinthians for the churches in need. The gift was previously mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 and here Paul relates it to the generosity of the Macedonians which he has discussed in the preceding chapter (8:1–15). He begins by expressing how proud he is of the eagerness of the Corinthians to help the other churches but mentions that he is sending Titus and another of the brothers early to make sure that they do indeed have the gift ready when he arrives with the Macedonians. This suggests some doubt in the mind of Paul that, even though the Corinthians may be eager, they perhaps haven’t actually arranged to get the money together. This contrasts with the Macedonians, whom Paul has already described as having begged for the privilege to give (8:3–4). With this doubt expressed Paul then pivots into a traditional stewardship sermon. He talks about the theological justification for generosity, he encourages each person to give as they are called by God and he describes how giving is a sign of thanksgiving.

The story here may be familiar to us in our modern context. Often members of the congregation care about and are keen to support the church but need encouragement to actually

begin giving regularly. Paul is calling these people to respond to grace in a way that brings glory to God.

Key themes

A Giving is an eager response to God

In the next passage (from Exodus) we will see that giving is generated by a stirring of the heart; here Paul describes giving as a response of thanksgiving. Interestingly, not only is the giving itself an expression of thanksgiving but it also produces thanksgiving from those who receive the gift (verse 11). This message is reinforced in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 35:14–40; Luke 19:11–27) where Christ tells the disciples about a master who gives his servants talents (money) to look after while he is away. The good servants invest and grow the value of their money but the bad servant hides his talent and fails to bear fruit with it. In the same way giving is not only a personal response but something which can bear fruit in the hearts of those who receive the gift.

B Giving is about discipleship

Paul’s language is strongly reminiscent of Matthew 13 with the imagery of sowing. In Matthew Jesus speaks several times of how faith can grow from a small seed to a bountiful yield. Here Paul says that not only is giving about thanksgiving, it can also lead to an increase in personal

faith and a deepening of one's own relationship to God through a commitment to the gospel message of supporting the church in need.

Sermon points to consider

A What are people thankful for? You may be in a church where most members are financially well-off or you may be in a church where material wealth is not widespread. The question is, what are we each personally thankful for? Money? Perhaps yes, but also family, friends, the church community, the food bank, the youth club, Messy Church, a beautiful building? No matter our wealth we are called to respond with thanksgiving, remembering 2 Corinthians 8:12: 'if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have'.

B What is your vision as a church community? How is it that you bring glory to God? How can people support this by their giving? Is your vision clear to your congregation? If not, how can you make it clear and relate it to opportunities for giving?

C Do people think of giving as part of discipleship? Paul tells us giving is not something which comes from compulsion, but we often do give to church because we feel obliged to cover the costs. Encouraging people to think of their giving as a commitment of everyday faith and a spiritual exercise can give an entirely new perspective on its importance. This could be a good opportunity to link in with Personal Discipleship Plans and the Gifts for Everyday Faith exercise, both of which aim to help us focus on intentional discipleship.

An example of a time where you have had your faith deepened through generosity may be interesting too. Another option is to encourage people to consider their own spending and reflect on what it might say about their financial priorities. This, of course, should not be used to make people feel guilty but, for some, it may be a positive spiritual exercise.

Further reading

Deuteronomy 15:1–11
Matthew 7:15–20

A willing spirit: Exodus 35:4–29

⁴ Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that the Lord has commanded: ⁵ Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; ⁶ blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen; goats' hair, ⁷ tanned rams' skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, ⁸ oil for the light, spices for the anointing-oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁹ and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece.

¹⁰ All who are skilful among you shall come and make all that the Lord has commanded: the tabernacle, ¹¹ its tent and its covering, its clasps and its frames, its bars, its pillars, and its bases; ¹² the ark with its poles, the mercy-seat, and the curtain for the screen; ¹³ the table with its poles and all its utensils, and the bread of the Presence; ¹⁴ the lampstand also for the light, with its utensils and its lamps, and the oil for the light; ¹⁵ and the altar of incense, with its poles, and the anointing-oil and the fragrant incense, and the screen for the entrance, the entrance of the tabernacle; ¹⁶ the altar of burnt-offering, with its grating of bronze, its poles, and all its utensils, the basin with its stand; ¹⁷ the hangings of the court, its pillars and its bases, and the screen for the gate of the court; ¹⁸ the pegs of the tabernacle and the pegs of the court, and their cords; ¹⁹ the finely worked vestments for ministering in the holy place, the holy vestments for the priest Aaron, and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests.

²⁰ Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. ²¹ And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. ²² So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. ²³ And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather, brought them. ²⁴ Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. ²⁵ All the skilful

women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; ²⁶ all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. ²⁷ And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece, ²⁸ and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing-oil, and for the fragrant incense. ²⁹ All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill-offering to the Lord.

Summary

This passage comes immediately after the renewing of the covenant between God and the people of Israel where the Lord promises to give them a homeland so long as they do not turn aside and worship other gods. With this in mind, Moses now leads the people to create the tabernacle, also called the Tent of the Congregation, the Tent of Meeting and the Tent of the Presence, which gives God a dwelling place amongst the people as they journey to their new home. Following God's orders Moses tells all the people to bring gifts from their valuable possessions to help create the tabernacle. Those with skills in manual labour are also called to help in building the structure itself. The people bring their gifts with joy and each person contributes to the creation of the place of worship and of the physical presence of God amongst the people.

Key themes

A Moses asks the people to give

Often we can feel embarrassed about asking people to give money. Here Moses shows us that by asking he is actually giving the people the opportunity to contribute to the building of the tabernacle itself. The same is true of giving to church; when we ask people to give we are providing the opportunity to contribute to the physical and spiritual fabric of our community.

B Giving can contribute towards a relationship with God

When all the people whose hearts are willing give of their valuables and their skills in this passage, they are doing more than simply meeting an immediate need. They are, in their own personal ways, facilitating the presence and worship of God within their community. This, too, is true of giving to church; ultimately it is not about meeting an immediate need, it is about a commitment to an incarnational Christian presence in our local community.



Painting: Tim Steward

Artistic skill brings life and joy to a congregation

C Giving comes from the heart

One of the most striking themes in this passage is that the people did not give because they were ordered to but because their hearts were stirred and their spirits were willing. This is still true for giving to church. While we all have to meet the costs of running our churches, people are motivated to give because they love God, their community and their special place of gathering.

Sermon points to consider

A What about your church will stir the heart? What is your special ministry? Perhaps you gather in a heritage building where Christians have worshipped for centuries. It is important to help people to understand the impact their giving makes on the work and life of your church community as this is what will move them to want to give. In other words, the reading tells us that giving comes from the heart, not the head,

so we really need to ask, what is it that will change people's hearts?

B You may like to draw comparisons between the tabernacle and your own church's building. Just like the Israelites, the people who give to your church are helping to maintain it as a place of encountering and meeting God.

C Valuables and skills are both important types of giving. In modern terms we often talk about time and talents, as well as money. This passage is clear that all three are of equal value and that none of them preclude the others. We are all called to give of all three, as we are each personally able.

D Giving is part of discipleship. In the passage each person, within the wider people of Israel, makes their own unique offering towards the building of the tabernacle. This gave them each a personal connection with the worship and generated a response in their hearts. Giving is an opportunity to respond to God in faith and to be an outward expression of commitment to the church community. It is a generous response in thanksgiving for the gifts of faith and community which we have received.

Further reading

Luke 12:13–34

1 Chronicles 29:1–18

Luke 14:25–end

A humble sacrifice

Matthew 19:16–end

¹⁶ Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' ¹⁷ And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' ¹⁸ He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹ Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ²⁰ The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' ²¹ Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' ²⁸ Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Summary

This passage is one of the most commonly cited teachings about money. It is also found in Mark 10:17–31 and Luke 18:18–30. We hear a young man ask Jesus how to inherit

eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, and the young man replies that he has kept them his whole life. I always wonder, reading this passage, how earnest the young man is really being. His response



Photo: Shutterstock

The popularity of shopping in our own diocese.

perhaps suggests that his real goal was simply to boast about how righteous he is.

Jesus then, maybe aware of the young man's pride, presents him with the shocking command to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. The hypocrisy is uncovered and visible to all those present. The young man perceived himself to be righteous but when challenged to give up his own personal wealth is absolutely gutted. In Luke this story appears close to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) where two men go up to the temple to pray. The pharisee thanks God that he is so much more righteous than everyone else while

the tax collector is humbled before God and simply cries "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

So, could this story of the young man be about pride? The young man is proud of his righteousness without having really allowed the gospel to personally challenge him. When presented with the opportunity to be truly humble and give away his wealth he reveals that, in reality, he values his money more than the good news. This is why, I think, the passage is summarised with the line 'many who are first will be last, and the last will be first' and reminds us that "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" (Matthew 6:24).

This is a striking message because sometimes we can feel trapped in a world obsessed with money. The story can feel like a bit of a guilt trip, but I would argue that this was not Jesus' intention. Jesus goes on to reassure us that even though it may seem impossible to meet his high standards, for God all things are possible. I think Christ is presenting the opportunity to consider where our own priorities lie. We should humbly acknowledge that even if we fall God is able to raise us up again. This is why St Peter says "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:5–7).

Key themes

A The distinction between pride and humility

The young man is proud of his righteousness but humbled when truly challenged by the gospel. Jesus explains the importance of humbling oneself, and some ancient commentators believed the young man actually went away, reflected on what Jesus had said, and eventually

became the apostle Barnabas whom we discuss in the next passage. Whether or not it is true, it shows how people can change if given the opportunity.

B Sacrifice for the gospel

This passage mentions sacrifice several times – the young man needing to sacrifice his money, the disciples who have given up everything, and the description by Jesus of anyone who has left something behind in order to follow him. The specific connection with financial sacrifice and all other types of sacrifice shows the place of the former within wider Christian discipleship. We are called to offer all of our life in service to Christ. Sacrifice can be a difficult subject for some people, and must be handled sensitively, but it is nonetheless an important aspect of this story.

C Salvation

Jesus assures us that even though we may each fall short in our service to the gospel, God is still there for us and will not abandon us.

Sermon points to consider

A Not holding back money from service. I think we have to be careful not simply to use this passage to make people feel guilty about financial giving. Nevertheless, there is a clear message that financial

giving is an important part of commitment to the gospel and, as church leaders, we have a duty to explain this as part of discipleship. As with the first passage (2 Corinthians 9), you may want to encourage people to consider their own spending and reflect on what it might say about their financial priorities. This may be a positive spiritual exercise for some. Encourage people to consider their donations of time, talents, and money within the wider sphere of their lives and how they are sharing their gifts for the sake of God's world.

B Sacrifice. The wider theme of sacrifice prompts us to acknowledge ways that our congregations are already being sacrificial in their service to the church, whether financially or in terms of time and talents given, or indeed in some other way. It is a great opportunity to thank people and remind them that all sacrifice, no matter how small they may think it is, is an important contribution to the gospel.

Further reading

1 John 2:1–17
Romans 7:14–8:5
Matthew 16:24–end

A commitment to the community: Acts 4:32–5:10

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

¹ But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?' ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' ⁹ Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Summary

This is another passage commonly used for sermons on giving. It has a cheerful message about sharing your property with the church and with those in need, and commends the practice of giving to church to support both preaching and charitable action. Chapter 5:1–10 is less commonly read, and only appears in the Common Worship lectionary on the Thursday of Trinity 10. In the passage Ananias and Sapphira have colluded to keep some of the income from the sale of their land for themselves. St Peter shockingly tells Ananias that his conspiracy is a direct lie to the Holy Spirit and both Ananias and Sapphira die because of their blasphemy. Peter's words call to mind Jesus' statement that "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (Luke 12:10) and it's not surprising that the whole church is gripped with fear.

However, as with Matthew 19 (the rich young man), this passage is not simply an imperative to give all your money to the church (on pain of death), but is again about humility and about God's ability to discern the truth in our hearts. We first hear about Barnabas, a great hero and saint of the early church, who is elsewhere described as 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' (Acts 11:24). Unprompted he brings

the proceeds from the sale of his field to the apostles, laying it at their feet. We then hear about Ananias and Sapphira who have sold their own field but are filled with deceit. Their relationship with their church is sullied with lying and the Holy Spirit reveals to Peter their hypocrisy.

Key themes

A Giving to the church

In this passage Luke, the author of Acts, clearly argues for the importance of financial giving to the church. Regardless of the virtue of humility, he demonstrates the benefits of financial giving both in terms of caring for the poor and for facilitating the apostles' preaching.

B Wholehearted commitment to the church

Nowadays, of course, our churches wouldn't ask their members to hand over all their money. As we've established, though, that isn't really the message Luke wants us to take here. Ananias and Sapphira die because they lied and secretly kept some of the money. They pretended to have given their all to the church. This still has relevance today as we are each called to commit ourselves to God and allow that commitment to affect all aspects of our lives. Think too of the Widow's Mite (Mark 12:41–44 and Luke 21:1–4). The widow is praised by Jesus for

People in our churches care about those in need in our communities. For example, homeless people have benefited from winter night shelters in our churches.



Photo: Jonathan Rados/Unsplash

giving everything that she had, unlike the rich who gave out of their abundance. In the reading from Matthew 19 we saw that we are called to let the gospel impact every part of our lives and the same is true here. We are being offered the opportunity not to hold back but to be wholehearted in our commitment to the church.

Sermon points to consider

Of course, this passage shouldn't be used to scare people into giving to church. On the other hand, the fact that the story is quite shocking might tempt us to not talk about it at all. I would argue, though, that to skip

over it would be to ignore a critical teaching about giving from the early church, one which Luke clearly thought important to include.

A We are all called to give to the church in good conscience. We should all consider our giving and be honest with ourselves about what we feel to be a fair amount, without seeking to keep any aspect of our lives back from God. The Church of England suggests giving 5% of take-home pay to the local church and 5% to other charities. Not everyone will be able to afford this, and it may not work for all church communities, but for many it can act as a good target to aim for.

B What impact does mission have on the ministry of your church? St Luke tells us that the giving in this passage funded the testimony of the apostles and the care of those in need. In your own church this is probably still the case, as well as other missional work, such as caring for the historic building, running a lunch club, etc. It is important to remind people of these, as it can refresh their understanding of the impact their own giving can make. Our diocesan vision is to be contemplative, compassionate and courageous – to be more Christ-like for the sake of God’s world. How does your congregation’s giving help embody this within the local church?

C You may also like to talk about the collective effort of giving. We learn at the start of this passage that giving is a common activity of the church members. It is something we can each do individually but which we also have in common. One idea to explore this in practical ways helps people to actively embody financial generosity and develop the collective generosity of the community. You take 10% of the donations you have received in the previous month and, during the sermon, give the cash value to the

congregation with a commission to find a cause they care about to support. The next Sunday you can then ask people to whom they gave their allocated money, and why. This helps people to see the importance of generosity to the church and to their own personal faith. It also helps them to visualise the value of donations that the church receives. Do remember that, to comply with charity regulation, churches can only donate to other charities which align with their charitable aims. To meet this requirement you could encourage people to prayerfully consider what cause God is calling them to support. It would also be a good idea to run this by the PCC before trying it out, in order to gain their support for sharing the church’s income in this way.

If you feel that this would not work in your church, an alternative is to ask people to suggest and vote on charities for the church to support over the coming year and to tithe the church’s income, that is, give a percentage of the church’s income to those charities each month.

Further reading

Isaiah 57:14–19

Love and contentment: 1 Timothy 6:6–19

⁶ Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹ But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

¹¹ But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴ to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶ It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Summary

This passage explicitly places financial giving within the wider theme of generosity as lived discipleship. It contrasts two types of people, those whose trust is found in financial wealth and those whose

trust is in the kingdom. Those who seek after riches easily fall away from the faith as the temptations of the world overtake them. On the other hand, there are those who dedicate their lives to righteousness and godliness with faith, love, endurance

and gentleness. These people are content with what they have because their hope is not in the acquisition of possessions now but in the coming manifestation of Christ. This type of faith is shown to be demonstrated by active humility through a generous faith.

This passage provides an intense call to the modern reader to consider which of these two we personify in our own lives. The point is not to generate feelings of guilt or despair! In fact, most of us are likely to be a bit of both; we strive to be active in faith but are still sometimes distracted by the material needs and desires of our lives. The point, then, is rather to help each person understand the calling to active faith and to encourage the members of our congregations as they each run their own unique race (2 Timothy 4:7–8; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Galatians 5:6–8). In the reading from Matthew Jesus told us that even if we fail at righteousness God is there to lift us up again. Here Paul is giving us the opportunity to refocus our lives. If we find ourselves tempted to trust in worldly possessions Paul says to us “you have a choice” and in the words of Christ: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

Generosity, therefore, is a tool for the deepening of faith. It is an

outward expression of repentance and of choosing to place one’s hope in Christ, rather than in worldly possessions. Financial giving is part of this expression but this passage tells us that all acts of loving generosity are spiritual exercises that help us refocus our hope onto Christ.

Key themes

A Contentment

Paul presents contentment as the opposite of greedy desire. These days we live in a society that constantly tells us we don’t have enough. This passage asks us to be grateful for the things that we do have and to assess whether we are seeking gain because we need it or because we are coveting it.

B Active love

The faith presented here, despite being based on contentment, is certainly not passive. It is a fight, a struggle to choose righteousness and to live that choice. It is fulfilled with expressions of generosity and humility.

Sermon points to consider

A What are people in your congregation grateful for? You may be in a church where most members are financially well-off or you may be in a church where material wealth is not widespread. The question is

The everyday struggle between contentment and over-consumption.



again, what are we each thankful for? Money? Perhaps yes, but also family, friends, the church community, the food bank, the youth club, Messy Church, a beautiful building? We are called in this passage to consider contentment and to contemplate the gifts with which we have been blessed. This approach is displayed by Paul himself; at the start of many of his letters he gives thanks simply for the faith of those to whom he is writing (Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:3–6; Colossians 1:3–4; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:3; Philemon 1:4–5).

B In what ways does your church community express active love? This could be the community as a whole,

i.e. church-led charitable activity, or you could focus on each person. The former is good way to encourage financial giving as it highlights the impact giving money to the church can have on the local community. If you are focusing on individual generosity it is a great opportunity to promote it as a spiritual exercise aiding discipleship. You might want to highlight some saints who have exemplified generous lives, for example St Martin of Tours or St Thomas Becket. You could perhaps also ask people to share stories of where they have seen members of the church community, or even people outside the church, express generosity. You may also want

to look at the Gifts for Everyday Faith resource which helps people understand the gifts they personally bring to the community without being limited to finance.

It is also another opportunity to use the suggestion found in the previous passage, allowing the congregation to allocate 10% of the donations the church has received in the previous month to charities they prayerfully select.

Further reading

Romans 12
Jonah 3
Matthew 6:24–end

List of readings

Primary readings

Exodus 35:4–29
Not found in the Common Worship lectionary

Matthew 19:16–end
St Matthew’s Day (second service);
Wednesday of Advent 4; Friday
of fourth week before Advent
(additional weekday lectionary).
Mark’s version is the primary reading
on the Sunday between 9 and 15
October (Year B)

Acts 4:32–5:10
[4:32–35 only] Second Sunday
of Easter (Year B); [4:32–37 only]
St Barnabas’ Day (third service);
[4:32–end only] Tuesday of Easter 2;
Thursday of Trinity 10

2 Corinthians 9
Harvest (Year A); Sunday between
21 and 27 August (Year C, second
service); Thursday [vv. 9–5] and Friday
[vv. 6–end] of Trinity 6; Wednesday
of Trinity 11 (additional weekday
lectionary)

1 Timothy 6:6–19
Sunday between 25 September and
1 October (Year C); Christ the King
(evening prayer); Harvest (Year B) [to
v. 10]; Monday [vv. 6–10] and Tuesday
[vv. 11–19] of the third week before
Lent; Monday [vv. 6–10] and Tuesday

[vv. 11–19] of Trinity 21; Saturday of
Trinity 8 [to v16] (additional weekday
lectionary)

Secondary readings

Deuteronomy 15:1–11
1 Chronicles 29:1–18
Isaiah 57:14–19
Jonah 3
Matthew 6:24–end
Matthew 7:15–20
Matthew 16:24–end
Luke 12:13–34
Luke 14:25–end
Romans 7:14–8:5
Romans 12
1 John 2:1–17

The Personal Discipleship Plans and Gifts for Everyday Faith resources can be found on the Diocese of Oxford discipleship webpages:

oxford.anglican.org/everyday-faith