

SERMON – 7/10/18

Preface to the reading

The background to our reading this morning is that there is famine in Jerusalem and across Judea. The young churches in Greece have been moved to send aid to their brothers and sisters in Christ there and Paul is writing here about the practicalities of delivering that aid, which takes the form of a collection, from the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea in Macedonia in the north and the church of Corinth in the south where the idea had first come from. Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians literally to put their money where their mouth is and also to be ready when the messengers come from the north to pick up the collection and take it to Jerusalem.

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

“Many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the Gospel of Christ which you profess, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else.” (2 Cor.9:13)

Last Sunday morning we looked at the grace of giving and we spoke about what it is that *motivates* us to give – namely the example of Christ and the example of other Christians; we spoke about the *manner* of our giving – again, after the example of Christ and following the teaching of the Scriptures where believers are exhorted to give in proportion to what we have received; and we spoke about the *aims* of our giving – to ensure that those who have much do not have too much and that those who have little do not have too little.

It was providential that last week also gave us the practical opportunity to focus on the work of Christians against Poverty through our harvest offering (which I'm humbled to say realised more than £2,000) and through the television documentary about CAP that some of you saw on television on Friday evening. Although CAP works to help people become debt free, they also help people to find spiritual freedom in Christ and it is important to acknowledge that the spiritual and the material are completely intertwined.

This week I have entitled the sermon 'The Grace of Sharing' in order to emphasise the point that Christian giving has to be about more than just

offering money. Like the Corinthians, we are called not only to have that motivation to give and not only to put our hands into our pockets and give money but also to follow that through in the way we live our lives. And the question is will people praise God in the way that Paul praised the Corinthians Christians when they see the kind of life *we* lead as a result of our profession of the Gospel of Christ?

Of course, if we are looking for an example of sharing to follow, it must first be the generous example of Jesus Himself. When He came to Jerusalem at the culmination of His ministry, to live out the love of God for the world of which He had spoken and taught, Jesus' actions reflected His own words perfectly. He gave Himself totally to God and to the world – no wonder Paul writes, 'Let us thank God for His priceless gift!' On the other hand, the crowd that greeted His arrival in Jerusalem did not follow up their words with their actions. When it came to the crunch, even His disciples, Peter included, could not back up their declarations of dedication with action. They were full of praise for Him at first, and to begin with their actions reflected that: they cut palm branches and laid their cloaks before Him in welcome; they flocked to listen to Him teach in the Temple courts, but when they realised that He wasn't going to be their kind of king, and that as well as offering a great deal *to* them He was also going ask an awful lot *of* them, they gradually turned against Him until at the end of the week they were yelling for Him to be crucified. By comparison, when Paul was writing to the church at Corinth, he obviously saw that the Christians there were not just paying lip-service to Jesus – they weren't just cheering Him when things were easy for them; they were going the whole way with Him. As Paul says to them in the words of this morning's text, 'Many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the Gospel of Christ which you profess.' So let's consider this morning what that loyalty actually involved and what the grace of sharing actually looks like in practice.

Firstly, Paul says, 'Remember that the person who sows few seeds will have a small crop; the one who sows many seeds will have a large crop.' (v.6) So how do we sow? We have celebrated the harvest but just as a balance needs to be found between how much of that harvest is simply eaten and how much is re-invested in the future as seed so we need to find the right balance between enjoying the fruit of the Spirit, the harvest of what God gives us as His people, and investing in the growth of the Kingdom through the sowing of the seed of the Gospel in our time.

The Corinthians realised that if they put their everything into the work of the Gospel they would see great things happening and they would know blessings that would more than compensate for anything they gave up, whereas if they gave themselves only half-heartedly to Christ the spiritual harvest in their own lives and the fruit of what they did for others would only be a fraction of what it could be.

How do you think *we* are sowing the seed of the Gospel in our time? Few seeds or many seeds? We are probably more content to sow the seed in familiar places than to break new ground. How many times has the seed of God's Word been sown in the same few hearts? Yes, of course there has been fruit and we praise God for it, but how much of the seed that has been sown has been snatched away, or trampled down, or choked out. No farmer would go on sowing seed fruitlessly in the same infertile field year after year without taking some action. In the harvest-field of the world and of our country and our community there are many people who have never received the seed of God's Word. Perhaps it's little wonder that we are reaping so sparingly in our time. If we want to see a harvest of souls we're going to have to be ready to sow seeds and a lot of it, to spread the word, to extend an invitation to others to come and see. You only reap what you sow, for better or for worse.

Secondly, Paul writes, 'Each one should give as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty, for God loves the one who gives gladly.' You see, whether we are talking about gifts of service or gifts of money, it's not just *what* we give that is important, it's the *way* that we give – consciously, thoughtfully and cheerfully. Jesus had given a lifetime of thought to what He was to give to the world. I've no doubt that during the 30 years He spent growing up and then probably working with His earthly father as a carpenter, Jesus must have given a great deal of consideration to the mission that His heavenly Father was asking Him to fulfil and He must have spent many long hours agonising in prayer about it. But when He embarked on His ministry, there were no doubts left – He had decided in His heart, and He was going to do it of His own free will, without compulsion. On the other hand, I think that many in the Palm Sunday crowds were just carried along unthinkingly in the excitement of the moment, and while they gave themselves in praise with their voices, when they stopped to consider what Jesus was actually asking of them, they were reluctant to follow all the way. God doesn't want reluctant followers, but

those who after careful thought and prayer can follow Him of their own accord, gladly, cheerfully. I think the hymn-writer gets it right when he pens the following words about Jesus accepting what God is asking of Him – ‘A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay, yet *cheerful* He to suffering goes, That He His foes from thence might free.’

How do *we* measure up to the example of Jesus? In our Christian service do we just go with the flow, pressing on when we are full of enthusiasm and hanging back or calling a halt when the going is tough, or do we sit down and give prayerful consideration to the role we should be playing in the work of the Kingdom, not reluctantly yielding to someone’s plea for a volunteer, or under compulsion to fill a gap that has arisen in some area of the church’s work, but cheerfully giving ourselves in considered response to the call of God? Of course there is a place for the spontaneity of the Spirit and sometimes we need to rise up and go at a moment’s notice depending on the circumstances, but don’t let’s forget that our God is a God of order and more often than not it is more fruitful to act after due consideration and prayer.

Then finally and briefly, Paul writes, ‘This service that you perform not only meets the *needs* of God’s people, but also produces an *outpouring* of gratitude to God.’ The Corinthians had not just done what they *had* to do – the bare minimum – their giving had *overflowed* in response to the priceless gift of God in Jesus Christ. They were so committed to Him that they couldn’t help themselves from giving, just as Jesus was so completely dedicated to saving the world from its separation from God that He could do no less than lay down His life for us, so that we could be reconciled to God and enter into His living presence. His was not a grudging contribution, a token gesture towards the salvation of the world – He gave nothing less than everything in order to win the victory, so that praise and thanks might be poured out to God.

So how about us? Do *our* actions live up to our words? How much of our Christianity is just talk, and how much is genuine self-giving? What can we each do today and during the rest of this week to share what we have so generously been given? The material gifts of the harvest, the monetary income and the circle of friends and family with which we are blessed, the Good News of Jesus Christ – these things are all for sharing.

If we are willing to sow really generously as individuals and as a church, we *will* reap a rich harvest and we and many others will be blessed in the process. If we are prepared to give time really to think through our response to what Christ has so wonderfully done for us we will give ourselves to the work with genuine gladness and without any reluctance and we and many others will be blessed in the process. And if we are truly committed, we will not just want to do the minimum, but to overflow with thanks to God as we offer practical service, and we and many others will be blessed in the process. Can it be said of us that people will praise God for the loyalty and the generous sharing that accompanies our confession of the Gospel of Christ? May it be so, for His Name's sake and may we and many others be blessed in the process.