

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES - GIVING

(Deuteronomy 15.1-11 and Matthew 6.1-4)

A solicitor died and went to heaven. After a day or two he noticed that he was considerably younger than nearly everyone else. This began to bother him and he wondered if his death had been a mistake. He found St. Peter and asked him about this. St. Peter said he would look into his case and see what he could find out. The next day Peter came back and explained to the solicitor, 'Yes, after looking at your file, I realised that a mistake has been made in your case. We had worked out your age by the number of hours you had billed.'

This solicitor has long retired and billing by hours worked has long since gone, so let's look together at giving as a spiritual exercise. Here are seven little stories.

Look at this. A vicar was trying to persuade a millionaire to support the Church Steeple Fund. He took him inside the tower and pointed to the cracks in the walls. Just then a piece of masonry dislodged itself and struck the man a glancing blow. 'Good grief' he said, rubbing his head, 'I see what you mean. Here's a cheque for £100'. 'Go on Lord' shouted the vicar, 'Hit him again!'



Last week I had a letter from Barclay's Bank. I have banked with them since I was 17. The letter said: Dear Mr. Wake, I am pleased to tell you that your overdraft of £1,000.00, which you have had since August 2012, has been remitted – you no longer owe us £1,000.00.

A few weeks ago, our Terry (Terry Reed) in our prayer time told us how she was in London and came across a man sitting in a doorway

with a cap in front of him. She got into conversation with him and found he was by way of being a poet and Godly. One of her daughters who was with her was heard to say 'Look at mother talking to a down and out. I bet she is giving him all the money she has with her.'

Bill and his wife Millicent, being good Christians, had decided to tithe – to give away a tenth of their yearly income to good causes. But they had a disagreement. Should it be a tenth of their income before tax or should it be a tenth after tax?

Garry had a clear-out of his overflowing bookshelves and took the surplus to his local Oxfam shop. 'O, thank you very much,' said the lady behind the desk, 'Do you feel able to gift-aid it?'

A quote from a recent pew sheet: 'Moses Project: Our monthly collection tin will be on the font this Sunday if you would like to contribute towards the outstanding work done by Brian Jones and his team. We really do help to make a difference.'

On 28th September our church will be full of people helping to raise money for charity by giving up their time, giving items for sale, providing refreshments. Last year, the equivalent event raised over £780.

You will have noticed that all those stories (some of which are made up and some of which are true) are about giving in various ways.

Story No.1: The vicar with the crumbling church fabric is about the need to maintain the House of God so that it can properly fulfil its purpose as a special place of worship and a symbol of God's presence in its town or village. The giving was in response to a specific appeal. You will find a similar story in Nehemiah chapter 7 where people contributed to the rebuilding of the temple

Story No.2: The letter from Barclays - made up of course - is a direct example of what we heard in the first part of our Deuteronomy reading – forgiving debt at the end of 7 years.

Story No.3 The story about Terry is true and she has allowed me to tell it. I don't know if she gave the man any money but what her daughter said illustrates in her an attitude of mind which is impulsively open to a need of money on the part of someone else.

Do you remember the story in two of the Gospels about the woman bursting into a dinner party and pouring perfume on Jesus? We are not told whether this was done on impulse but it sounds very like it.

Story No.4: The story about Bill and Millicent refers back to the chapter of Deuteronomy before the one read to us this morning – about tithing – giving one tenth of your income.

Story No.5: Garry's clear out is not just about giving by recycling rather than using the dustbin. It is about taking advantage of legitimate means of increasing the value of a gift. Gift Aid was not part of government in the Bible but it is now.

Story No. 6: In supporting the Moses Project we give in kind to a Christian charity which we have, in a sense, adopted. In chapter 3 of Luke's gospel we find John the Baptist urging the crowd 'The man with two tunics should share with him that has none, and the one that has food should do the same.'

Story No.7: This is about a social way of using both time and money for the benefit of those who need money to carry on their works of love. In the book of Numbers and various other parts of the Old Testament we read of the offering to God of the products of people's work - the best of the grain harvest, the choicest of the beasts they had nurtured.

Those little stories all illustrate different ways and objects of giving and we have seen how they nearly all have examples in the Bible. But this talk is in the series on Spiritual Discipline so let's now look at why we Christians are required to use our money in a Godly way.

If we look at the Old Testament, we will see that there was a deal between God and the people of Israel. It's there in our Deuteronomy reading. After the instructions about giving and forgiving debt we get this:

He will richly bless you if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

And you will find similar statements throughout the Old Testament. That was the deal which we call the old covenant – the old contract which God's people had with him.

But Jesus changed all that. In chapter 2 of his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul says of Jesus: *He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.*

That death, with all its humiliation, pain and suffering, was so that human beings – you and I - who are always prone to do things which do not measure up to God's standards could still be right with God. Our only response to that must surely be to be generous in our thanks, our praise, our love of and care for other people - and our money.

I have quoted the tennis player, Martina Navratilova before but she makes the point vividly:

I was asked if I was still involved in tennis. I replied 'I've never been involved in tennis. I'm committed to tennis. It's the difference between

the hen and the pig in eggs and bacon. The hen is involved; the pig is committed'.

So, we know the motivation. Let's look at the practicality. How should we give?

Privately

That's what our second reading said. *So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets....so as to be honoured by others.* We are not to boast about our giving, whatever form it takes.

Generously

Remember Jesus, in chapter 12 of St. Mark's Gospel, giving the example of the poor widow and the rich folk. What was it he said? The Message Bible puts it like this: *The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they would not miss. She gave extravagantly what she could not afford – she gave her all.*

Happily

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. That's from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians in Chapter 9.

Caringly

Did you spot that bit in our first reading? *If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted towards your poor brother.*

I have already referred briefly to Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth. I want to end by reading to you the Message Bible's version of some verses from Chapter 8 because I think they sum up very well the whole business of giving as a spiritual exercise. Paul's purpose in writing it was to teach and encourage the Christians in Corinth. This what he says:

Now friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches of the Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colours. They were incredibly happy though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could – far more than they could afford- pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians. This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us.

And a few verses later:

I am not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians' enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you. You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us – in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.

I started this talk telling a tale about a lawyer. I will finish it by something a court lawyer might say. You have heard the evidence from the witness Paul of Tarsus. I rest my case!