

## Matthew 6: 24-34 – Sermon for 10am – Giving Sunday

Today we are talking about money. There's no getting away from it and there's no point dancing around it. At least once a year we will talk about giving at St John's and that must include financial giving or else I'm simply editing it out to save my "Britishness" of not talking about money. So we're going to take a deep breath, swallow any awkwardness, and tackle the subject head on.

We could have picked on any number of readings from the Bible for a sermon about giving. Today's gospel begins totally bluntly and therefore I picked it since it stops us dancing around the topic. When you get home, you might want to look at the beginning of the chapter (Matthew 6) as this talks about giving to others and how the details should be kept between you and God. This isn't about absolute secrecy, but it's about not seeking our own glory by showing off how generous we are. The chapter says the same thing about prayer and fasting before rounding upon wealth again in verses 19-21 "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It then moves on through another pithy saying from Jesus until you get to our reading –

"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."

This is what we are going to spend some time on today. Let me start by reading you a bit from a book which talks about this passage:

"Our materialistic civilisation ought to be well aware of the bewitching power of money and possessions, but acquisitiveness has become so much a part of the air we breathe that we lack the distance necessary for a proper critique. We piously affirm that we have chosen to serve God, not money, but in our daily life it is money that sets our priorities and determines our choices. We would like to show a more bountiful eye toward the poor, but we cannot, because we need so much for ourselves. We plan to be more charitable in the future, but at the moment there are too many things we have to buy. We work overtime or at a second job rather than spend time with our children, because there is so much that we want to get for them... To God belongs one hour on Sunday, money gets the rest!"

The writer is blunt, but you get the picture, and if I'm really honest deep, deep down inside myself, I think he's right. There's a completely different mindset in serving God than in serving money. It's an entirely different economy and one which leads on to the rest of our reading about not worrying but trusting God.

So what are these two economies of God and money? Let me lay them both out for us.

Firstly, there's the economy of money and possessions. From this we start thinking about lots of different concepts. There's the concept of enough – when is enough, enough? How much money is enough? How do I measure when I have enough and what do I do with my surplus?

Then there's saving – Maybe my surplus is saving for a rainy day, for an uncertain future, for a child or grandchild – again, how much is enough? When is saving complete? Who am I saving for and what are they going to do with it? How am I saving?

Then there's reward – lots of people here will have worked hard for their money – what reward is due us for that? How comfortable should our work make out lifestyles? Should we enjoy all the fruit of our labours? What about those who didn't work or don't work? What about the spongers and the layabouts if they exist?

Then there's scarcity – What difference can I make when there's so much need? Why should I be the one to go without when others have plenty? How much should my standard of living decrease as I give? Should I only give painlessly or should it really affect my life?

Finally, there's ownership – Whose money is it anyway? Maybe I inherited it and wonder what Granny would have wanted me to do with it? Maybe I don't work for money but I keep the home and so the money doesn't feel like mine?

These are all big concepts relating to money. Some are really important. On a big picture, they relate to government, aid, benefits, tax havens and all the other thorny issues which are nationally important to us. Personally, it's no different, just the numbers are smaller. The problem with the money economy is that God comes into it late in the game. If God gets anything, it's the leftovers that we don't need in order to keep our existing lives just the way we want them. We give, if we give, out of an idealistic sense of "putting something back" or "helping those less fortunate than we are". And this is good as far as it goes, because we want to be "good stewards" of our money and use it wisely rather than throwing it away. We don't want to be reckless. We want to plan for the future and to ensure we have enough.

But this way of thinking, as sensible and good as it is, can only lead us to consider categories of scarcity and enough again. These categories make us count the cost to ourselves before we give, and in doing so we place ourselves and our own wellbeing first in the queue, way ahead of God.

I'm being totally unfair, I know. I can't imagine a life where this isn't the way we do it either. As the writer said earlier, we just can't escape our context enough to imagine a picture of a different way. Let me just pull out God's economy for a second though – what it might look like to serve God, not money.

With God we don't think about scarcity, but we think about generosity – God doesn't have a finite amount to lavish upon his creation. He doesn't worry about running out and therefore he doesn't need to make the hard decisions about whether he has retained enough for himself; although my suspicion is that even if he did think he'd have to go without, he'd give away anyway. I wonder what that means for us?

With God there's no worry about ownership – we've said it hundreds of times before here: all things come from God and are his really. Ownership isn't mine, or my granny's, or my wife's – fundamentally it is God's wealth to serve God's purpose. How does recognising that change how I view my financial planning?

God doesn't save for a rainy day – sure, he doesn't need to since he doesn't have rainy days we might say! But for us, we have verses 25-34 in our passage where we think about how God provides for his followers. I know it is hard to trust God's provision, and there are big questions on this; like if that being the case why doesn't God stop people starving or why does he leave people in poverty? These are tough questions, which we don't have time for today, but there are principles at stake in looking at God's economy which are still valid for us to consider. What does trusting God do to our need for our own security?

With God we can't think of "enough" – it becomes a crazy concept since the wealth isn't ours! How can we even begin to weigh up whether we have control of enough of God's possessions and blessings and therefore we can afford to share them with others???

God's economy is completely different than the one we are used to operating within. It's full of practical questions and objections since we can't imagine what life might look like to put God at the

head of the queue of competing concerns on our financial lives. We have gotten so used to trusting in our savings and our financial systems to solve life's problems that we can't imagine what it would be like if we trusted God for everything; in fact, the very thought seems completely reckless and irresponsible.

Let me say that I agree with the reading. We can't serve God and money. But I think it's almost impossible to serve anything other than money in today's climate. It would be a completely different way of living. I'm not talking politics because whether we are conservative, labour, liberal democrat; socialist, communist, capitalist – it doesn't really matter because all just serve money in different ways, slicing up the economic pie differently and arguing about its size. I'm talking about something I can't even tell you what it looks like, which is perhaps even impossible this side of heaven, but which we can imagine, dream of and make baby steps towards. What would it look like to make God our absolutely first consideration, as reckless and crazy as that sounds?

My guess is that it would still include stewardship, it would include saving and it would include giving, but in a completely different context and to a completely different extent. Our stewardship would be completely coloured by all things being God's and his alone. Our saving would be for his glory and for a future where he is served more – perhaps by enabling my child to go to university, promoting his Good News locally, or perhaps by enabling the building of a medical centre in Africa – all these things might be within this scheme as long as God is first.

I bet our giving would change though. As we begin to think of God as first in the queue and bring our wealth firstly to him, like the people did with their wealth on the Old Testament; as we love him with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and then to our neighbour as ourselves; and if these considerations replaced our worries about our own standards of living, and concepts of "enough", then we might be closer to where serving God instead of money puts us.

How might we do that? It's hard. And it's even harder to stand here and be prescriptive. It's a huge subject where we'd need to work through the entire bible. Clearly giving is a Christian discipline – it's threaded all through the whole Bible.

Particularly in the Old Testament, the wealth offered to God is first fruits – the firstborn of a sheep family, the first pickings of the harvest, and so on. It isn't the case that the Israelites worked out how much they could spare and then gave some – they gave their first 10% and then made do with the rest. They brought their best to God, not the things they could easily live without.

The Good Samaritan gave in an unlimited way, putting the needs of a stranger ahead of his own issues of enough and scarcity – he promised to come back and pay the difference in costs of care without setting a limit.

Jesus gave his whole life and his security for us. His disciples all left their security to follow him, and when people want to join Jesus, he tells them to count the cost, including the rich man who was told to give money away.

I can't tell you what to do with your money and I certainly don't have all the answers. I can't stand here without being a hypocrite and tell you about God's economy. I certainly don't want to pressure anyone, but I do want to ask us all to go home and work out whether really we are serving God or money, and what it might look like for each of us to put God at the head of the queue in thinking about our finance, possessions and security. Where treasure is, there our hearts are also. Let us give our hearts to God in the most difficult of ways for us in our modern culture and in the uncertain times we live in. Amen.