

Giving and Generosity

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[0 : 00] Well, as you know, we are studying the great topic of the gifts of the Spirit in our evening services at the moment, which is a wonderful topic to look at because it's talking all about how we can serve and how we can contribute to the great work of the Gospel through the Holy Spirit working in and through us. As I said today is our Giving Sunday, so tonight we're going to be looking at the spiritual gift of giving and generosity. And that's a really important topic to look at. And it's interesting because quite often it's a topic that doesn't get spoken about enough.

And that's maybe true in our own context. As Derek said this morning, it's not a topic that any of us are really that comfortable talking about. And so, like typical Scottish people, we don't talk about stuff we're uncomfortable about. So it tends to get left to one side.

But of course in other parts of the church, it can be something that gets spoken about too much. And it is true that there are some parts of the Christian church that distort the Gospel so that it becomes all about giving and all about enriching the church and enriching the individuals in the church. That's something that's happened throughout all of history.

And it still happens today. People take the whole topic of giving and abuse it for their own benefit, which is a horrible, horrible misuse of the Gospel message.

So we want to talk about giving in a God-honoring and an appropriate way. And it is one of the gifts of the Spirit. And as we are looking at these topics, there's four things that we want to keep in mind. And in many ways we start every service in this series looking at this because these are the four key things that we want you to write in your hearts.

[1 : 54] That the gifts of the Spirit are given by God, therefore His glory, and there are many and diverse. There are many, many different gifts. Therefore, the building up of the church as we all work together. And we're going to say a little bit more about that later on.

Number three, the gifts have common elements for all believers, but unique aspects for some. And by saying that, we're highlighting the fact that all of the gifts of the Spirit reflect imperatives, commandments, that we should all seek to obey. But yet there are some gifts that are uniquely found in certain people.

I think when it comes to the gift of giving and generosity, the common element of that is particularly important because giving is something that we can all do and that we should all do.

But as number four tells us, we must never forget that the gifts of the Spirit are worthless and useless without love. Now, instead of looking at giving in a kind of general sense tonight, I want us to actually look at a real life example of the kind of giving that God is looking for.

And that real life example was read to us by Ivor in Exodus chapter 35. And that's what I want us to turn back to and study together tonight. We'll look at really the whole chapter, but I'll just read a couple of verses again to remind us of a key principle being said before us.

[3 : 20] They came, everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him and brought the Lord's contribution to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garment. So they came, both men and women, all who were of a willing heart, brought broaches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the Lord.

Now, the whole book of Exodus records a key moment in the history of God's people, because that's the narrative of how God redeems his people out of slavery.

You'll remember that back in Genesis, God made a covenant with one man, with Abraham, and made a promise that Abraham and his descendants would have a special role in God's work among humanity.

So that promise came to Abraham and to his descendants, and as time went on, those descendants grew and grew and grew so that his family was a whole nation. That family nation of Israel ended up as slaves in Egypt, where they were oppressed and exploited.

But now, God is delivering them out of slavery and bringing them into the promised land. And Exodus tells us all about that. The book divides into two neat parts.

[4 : 39] The first part, chapter 1 to 19, talks about the people coming out of slavery. And then the second part, chapter 20 to chapter 40, is about getting ready to go in to the land of promise.

And in order to be God's people in God's land, which is what the nation of Israel was meant to be in the Old Testament, they're going to need two things. First of all, they need God's instructions.

In other words, they need God's law. And in Exodus, that's a key theme where Moses gives the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel. That's one thing they're going to need, so they'll know how to live as God's people.

But the second thing that they need is God's presence. And in order to have God's presence with them as a nation, they're going to need a tabernacle.

And a command is given in Exodus 25 where God says, Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst, exactly as I show you, concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

[5 : 48] Now, the tabernacle was a really important part of the life of the people of Israel. It was basically a big tent that they could move about as they traveled through the wilderness.

And the purpose of that tent was to be the place where God himself dwelt among the people. And it was the central point of their spiritual life and of their worship.

It was a forerunner to the temple which was going to be built in Jerusalem. So whenever you're reading in the Bible, when you see the word tabernacle or temple, it's exactly the same principle that lies behind both.

They're basically the same thing. The only difference is the tabernacle is movable. The temple was stuck where it was. It was the focal point of all Testament worship and the sacrificial system centered on this location.

It was going to be at the center of the camp. Everything else was based around this. And this was the point where the Ten Commandments were kept in the ark of the covenant.

[6 : 50] It was the place where God himself would dwell in the midst of his people. So it was really important. It was absolutely essential.

If Israel were going to be the people of God who worshiped him, they needed this tabernacle. If God is going to be among his people, they need this tabernacle.

And so this construction of this tabernacle is a massively important thing, which is why pretty much a huge chunk of Exodus is taken up describing the process in which this tabernacle was built.

I want you to notice something really important in verse 8 there of chapter 25 of Exodus. We've got this incredibly important building, hugely significant.

God is going to dwell close to his people in a way that he has never done before since the Garden of Eden. And he commands Moses for this to be built, but the task is given to the people.

[8 : 02] He says, let them, let all of the people make me a sanctuary. And from that moment, the people of Israel have got a great building project that they have to do.

And Exodus 35 tells us how they did it. And that's what I want us to look at together. And we're going to just briefly go through it and notice three key things that are highlighted in the narrative that I've read to us.

First thing, the people were generous with their resources. So as we were reading through the verses there, we see that God gave Moses a great list of materials that are going to be needed for various parts of the tabernacle.

There's yarn and wood and spices and stones, oil, all sorts of other things. There's things that are needed for the frames, for the coverings, for the hooks, for the pillars, for the lampstands. There's all these different things that are going to be needed for the tabernacle.

And in verses 21 to 24, we read this brilliant response. All of this stuff is needed. And everyone came. The people came, those whose spirits moved them, those who are willing heart, brought brooches, earrings, signet rings, armaments, all sorts of gold objects.

[9 : 19] Every man dedicating an offering of gold to the Lord. Now, there's two really important things to notice there. First of all, God wanted the people to give what they could.

And that's a really important principle around biblical giving. God wanted them to give what they could. So some gave gold because they had gold.

But some only gave bronze, some just gave goats hair, some gave a piece of wood.

And God never expected the people to give what they couldn't. So whether it was beautiful gold from a wealthy family or simply a bundle of goats hair from an ordinary Easter light, it was all needed.

And they gave what they could. And secondly, God wanted the people to give willingly. You see that wonderful phrase, all who were of a willing heart.

[10:16] There on the middle of the screen in verse 22, God had no desire to bully the Israelites into giving. He wanted their offerings to be a voluntary, free will offering.

And so that's reminding us of a really, really important principle that when it comes to this tabernacle and all this stuff that God needs, the gathering of resources was not an act of taxation. It was an act of devotion that people gave willingly in order to help God's great building project. So they were generous with their resources.

They were also generous with their time and their energy as they worked together. And so the command to build the tabernacle was given to Moses, but the actual task was given to the people. And at one level, there were some key gifted individuals who held a position of responsibility. So we read about Bezalel, who was gifted with skill, intelligence, knowledge, with all craftsmanship.

[11:20] And alongside of him, there was Aholiab, who equally had remarkable skills. So yeah, these two great men, but they didn't work on their own. They had other craftsmen with them.

We just have to jump into chapter 36 to see that. Bezalel and Aholiab and every craftsman in whom the Lord had put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall come, shall work in accordance with all that the Lord has commanded.

So they all, not just Bezalel and Aholiab, but others with them joined in. Alongside that, the women played a key role. The skillful women spun with their hands and all brought what they had spun.

Blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twindling and all the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goats here. And the key point that all of this is reminding us of is that God's great building project was not for the select few.

It wasn't for the elite. It was something that everybody could get involved in. People who were from all sorts of different circumstances helped.

[12:34] The qualification was what? It was a willing heart. People were generous with their time and energy as they worked together. And then the third thing that we see, the third great principle exemplified in Exodus 35, is that the people were generous with their knowledge and their skills as they learned from one another.

As we were just saying, there was two key workers in this whole project, Bezalel and Aholiab. And I must say, we often say, you know, which Bible characters would you like to meet?

So people will ask that question. Who would you love to meet from the Bible? As a former engineer, I think I would love to meet Bezalel and Aholiab.

I just think it must have been amazing what these men would have been able to do. It's something amazing about seeing a skilled tradesman at work.

I don't know if you ever get to go into a building site or something. When you see a tradesman who just makes a difficult task look so easy. It's amazing. Even at a simple level, I remember a few years ago doing a wee bit of bricklaying at my house.

[13:49] I wasn't very good at it. So I had to mix the cement. The cement was too soft. You put the cement, the line of cement, and I put the block down and it all spludges out the side.

I picked it up and my hands are filthy and I'm trying to do it all. The whole thing squinted and you put another one on and it all goes squint. It's terrible. A couple of weeks later, I was watching a bricklayer. He had the block and he took the tile and he scooped up the cement and he went...

Then he picked up the block and he went... That was it. That was it. Perfect. He made it look so easy. I knew from two weeks ago that was really hard. But yet the skill he showed was amazing.

Always remember, never ever forget that being skilled at a trade is greatly honouring to God. The joiners and the sparkies and the tradesmen in here, your work is something that God values and it's something that we can do in a way that really honours our Creator.

So you have these two great men, Bezalel and Aholiab, two heroes of craftsmanship. They were immensely gifted and immensely important, but it says something really interesting in verse 44.

[14 : 59] It says, he's inspired him to teach both him and Aholiab. Now isn't that amazing? Not only did God give Bezalel and Aholiab these outstanding gifts, they inspired them to teach others.

And so in other words, the gifts that they had were not just for them. They were to be shared with others so that other people would gain the knowledge and the abilities that they had as well.

And even if the people weren't as gifted as Bezalel and Aholiab, they could learn from them and thus gain some of the skills that they had. People were generous with the skills that they had.

They learned from one another and they were able to work together. So in God's great building project of a tabernacle, the people were generous with their resources, the people were generous with their time and energy as they worked together.

The people were generous with their knowledge and skills. And the end result was a great success. The end of Exodus, you have this wonderful, wonderful conclusion.

[16 : 10] According to all that the Lord had commanded Moses, so the people of Israel had done all the work. And God and Moses saw all the work and behold, they'd done it. As the Lord had commanded, so had they done it, then Moses blessed them.

Now, it's really interesting to note that because if you look through the Old Testament, and if you were able to read through the Old Testament in a one-out or read through the history of Israel really, really quickly, you would see a recurring theme arising again and again and again.

And that would be the theme of failure. Because most of the time the Israelites mucked up. But the Tabernacle is a great exception.

They did a brilliant job, and the whole thing was a resounding success. The people made the Tabernacle, and God himself came to dwell there.

Now, you might all be asking yourselves, well, that's great Thomas, and really interesting, but what on earth has that got to do with any of us here in 2018? Well, I want to say that it's incredibly relevant to all of us because God has got a new building project, and that great project has the same purpose.

[17 : 22] It's to build a place where God himself will dwell. Back in Exodus 35, that project was to build a Tabernacle. Today, God's great building project is to build His church.

And the church, of course, serves exactly the same purpose as the Tabernacle, because it's the place where God dwells. It's the focal point of the worship and service of God.

But there's one big difference, and that is that the church is not a physical building like the Tabernacle was. The church is you, the people of God who are trusting in Jesus and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

That was what we read at the very beginning. You are fellow citizens of the saints, members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In Him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. You could paraphrase verse 22 and say, you are being built together as a Tabernacle, as the Tabernacle, the place where God dwells.

[18 : 38] So God is building His dwelling place, His church, and we are all part of that project. You are all part of that project. And so we need to ask ourselves the question, how can we help?

And the answer is that the lessons from Exodus 35 are utterly relevant to us all today. And so that means that to help build the church, we need to be generous with our resources.

In order to build that Tabernacle, the people gave what they could. Some could give a lot, some could only give a little, but they gave what they could, and each contribution was essential.

And exactly, exactly the same is true of the church. God wants us to give in order to supply the church with the resources that it needs.

It's clear, even common sense tells you that without giving, the church can't survive. The church will struggle, building will slow down, and in some places it stops altogether.

[19 : 47] And in terms of giving, we have to remember the two great principles that this chapter highlights for us. Firstly, that people are to give what they can. Never forget, that's all that God asks of you, to give what you can.

And that's why tithing, the biblical principle of giving a tenth, is such a wise, wise principle to follow, because it's entirely based on our means.

So people with few resources will only give a small tithe. People with great resources will give a great one. But each is just as valuable, because in each case you are giving what you can. And the whole principle of giving what you can, guards us against two extremes. Guards us against the extreme of selfishness, because sometimes people don't give what they could, what they really could give.

And that's an unhealthy mindset, and it's dishonouring to God. But sometimes you get the other problem where people give more than is perhaps appropriate or sensible.

[20 : 58] Sometimes people feel so guilty that they just think, I must give more and more and more and more, and it leads to a level of complete unsustainability. God doesn't ask us to do that either.

God says, give what you can. And it's a great reminder that God's expectations are never unfair. And if you have given what you can, then whatever it is, great or small, is precious to God.

And so the people gave what they could. The second great principle in regard to giving from Exodus 35 was the fact that people gave willingly. And that's a fundamental biblical principle of giving.

God does not want a gift that's offered grudgingly, or even one that's offered simply out of guilt. And if we're honest, often giving is maybe motivated by guilt more than anything. Certainly for me, you think of it as a duty. But God doesn't ask for that.

[22 : 12] God wants a willing heart. He wants a joyful contribution. The New Testament echoes that. Each one must give as he's decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

And the best way to nourish that willingness is just to remember who you're giving it to. Giving it to God.

It's an act of devotion, of thanksgiving and worship. You only need to spend 10 seconds thinking about how kind God has been to you to realize that giving back to God is just an amazing privilege. It's an amazing privilege for us. There's a really important point I want to mention here. We are sharing our resources in order to help God's building project.

But we must remember that that is not about maintaining our church building. It's about maintaining the building of the church.

[23 : 33] What I mean by that is that our priority is not the stuff all around us here. That's not saying that's not important, but I'm saying that's not the priority. The priority is the building of the church.

That's why if you go to the Book of Acts and you see the model of the New Testament church, you'll see that regularly contributions were made. But these contributions were not used to build up buildings.

They were used to build up people. And that's why people shared for those who were in need. That's why they distributed daily to the widows.

The New Testament church shared their resources to support the apostles in their missionary work. And congregations gave to help their brothers and sisters in different areas who were struggling and who were particularly poor.

The priority is not the church building. The priority is building the church. The priority is building up people. And that's why when we give our contribution to the church, when we see at our annual general meeting that a big chunk of that goes to central funds, you must not think that that's some bureaucratic black hole.

[24 : 42] Because central funds is actually a means whereby we plant new churches, whereby we help struggling ones who can't afford to survive without our support, where we support the work of ETS, where we help missionaries who are serving in Scotland or overseas.

In other words, you are funding the extension of God's great building project. And that's our great goal, to help build up the people of God.

And that's something that we want to do locally as well. We want to build up the people in their faith. And that's actually where our church building comes in. That's where this great building comes in. Because it is important, but we must always remember, the people are not here to build up the building. The building is here to build up the people. In other words, the church building is not the project.

The church building is part of the toolkit. It's the place where we come together. It's the place where we worship. It's the place where we serve. It's the place where we spend time together.

[25 : 52] And the investment that we make in our building, or that any other congregation makes in their building, is in order to build up you as the people of God, and to reach out into the community.

So, for example, at the moment, we are working on our kitchen, as you all know. And the reason we're working on our kitchen is because we want to solve some problems. And at one level, there are problems that need to be solved.

We want to have something that complies with health and safety. We want to have something that meets food hygiene standards. We want to have something that's got good energy efficiency.

We want something that's reliable. We want a kitchen that doesn't have a rotten floor. But, you know, none of those things are the real problems that we want to address with our kitchen.

Because the problem that we really want to address with our kitchen is loneliness. We want to have a place where people can come together and eat.

[26 : 50] We want to have a place where we can spend time together, with tea and coffee or food or lunch or whatever it may be. We want to have a resource that other bodies can come, if they're going to provide for people who are homeless or people who are in need.

We want to be able to put on events, cater for events, for the building up of the church, like the church planting conference, at the end of the month. That's the stuff we really care about.

Not that we don't care at all about food hygiene. We do care about food hygiene a little bit. But all of that's secondary. And it's just an example.

It's part of the toolkit so that we can build up the church. So we want to give our resources to help with these great things. To build up the church up, we also need to be generous with our energy and our skills as we work together.

Exodus 35 is a model for how our church should be. It really is a model for how our church should function. Everyone is serving. Everyone is involved and God is using everyone.

[27 : 56] Because the building up of the church of Jesus Christ is not for the select few. It's not for the elite. It's not for the outstandingly gifted. It's for everyone. That's the whole point, the whole point of the gifts of the Spirit.

That we are all gifted. We've all got different gifts. There's a great list of them there in Romans 12. But we are all to use these for the building up of the church.

That's the great emphasis that the New Testament makes. With these gifts strive to excel in building up the church. The same thing is echoed in Ephesians chapter 4.

Nobody has all the gifts. No one has every gift, but nobody has no gift. And in God's great building project, we are all needed. That's what the great image of the body tells us there.

The hand can't say to the foot, I don't need you. None of you can say, or none of you can be told, we don't need you as a church.

[29 : 00] That's a theological impossibility. You are all, all so needed and so important, and everyone contributes.

Some things that we're good at, some things that we're not too good at, but we want to use our gifts to the glory of God. And that's where we must remember that we must be generous with our giftedness.

And I hope that makes sense what I'm saying there. You all have gifts, but it's easy to kind of, maybe you want to hold that back or to think, oh, well, I'd better not.

We are to be generous, not just without our money or resources, but with our giftedness, generous with our skills, generous what we can contribute. So whatever you're good at, throw yourself into the life of the church and be generous with that skill for the serving of your brothers and sisters and for the building of the church.

Every single one of us has a contribution that we can make. We must be generous with our skills. But another thing that we're shown in Exodus 35 that's really important is that an awful lot of this work is hidden.

[30 : 23] And an awful lot of it goes unnoticed. And often we can fall into the trap of thinking that unless we're making a big name for ourselves, then we're not really contributing much to the building up of God's church.

That is not true, because our work is not done to impress others. It's not done to be well known. It is done in the sight of God. And even if no one else sees it, that doesn't matter, because God does.

And we do it all for Him. If you go back to Exodus 35, you will read the description of the gathering of the materials for the most important piece of fabric ever made.

So the most important piece of fabric ever made was the curtain in the tabernacle. It hung at the center of that tabernacle and it marked the entrance into the most holy place where God himself dwelt.

It was the most important piece of fabric ever made. Who spun the thread for that fabric?

[31 : 32] Who did it? Who was the person who spun the most important piece of thread for the most important piece of material ever made? Who did that job?

We have no idea. Absolutely no idea whatsoever. It was an ordinary lady in the Israelite camp. And that's the amazing thing about serving God. Never ever think that your efforts are futile. Whatever you're doing is contributing to that work.

And then last of all, and very, very briefly, to help build the church, we need to be generous with our knowledge and our skill as we learn from one another. As we said, Bezalel and Aholiab had this amazing gift, not just to work, but also to teach.

And that raises a really important point because it's very easy to be selfish and un-generous with our knowledge and our skills and our status.

[32 : 38] Sometimes we get a real sense of importance from the fact that we can do something that no one else does, that we have a position that nobody else does. So you might find that at work, you might go to work and you might try to do something or you might try to get involved in something and you're pushed away because your colleague wants to guard that for themselves.

And they don't want to be threatened and they don't want someone else to take the status that they have. Because having that status, that ability, that role, it makes us feel special and it makes us feel important.

But it's a very un-God-like way of behaving. Because if you think about God, He doesn't need anyone.

He can do whatever He needs to do, and yet He is amazingly unselfish about all His capabilities because He allows us and empowers us to share in that work.

So the rest of the world might be a place where knowledge is protected, where people are defensive, where position is maintained. The Church of Jesus Christ is not like that. The Church of Jesus Christ is where we share what we know and we help each other become even better than we are at what we do.

[33 : 56] And that leads into the second important point, not just that we mustn't be un-generous with our knowledge, but the fact that we are to learn from each other. That's the key basic definition of a disciple.

A disciple is a learner, and God wants us to learn. So sometimes we have skills as a gift.

Sometimes people are naturally gifted at stuff.

Other times people have skills through learning and teaching. And so never think that just because you don't naturally have that ability that you cannot learn.

You may very well be very gifted in an area and you just need a bit of learning and a bit of teaching. That's why it's so important to spend time together, where we learn from one another, where we're encouraged by each other, where we're helped by one another.

It's reminding us that the Church should always, always, always be a safe place to learn.

[34 : 57] Church should be a safe place to learn, not just about theology, but safe place to learn about technology, safe place to learn about how to pray, a safe place to learn about how to support people who are ill or who are grieving.

The Church is a safe place to learn because God loves it when we learn from one another. In verse 34 when it talks about Bethel, it says that God put it on his heart to teach.

I'm not sure if I put that on the screen, maybe I did. That inspired him to teach, it says there. But that literally says, the literal translation of that is that it put it on his heart to teach.

And it's a great reminder that in God's eyes teaching is a matter of the heart. It's something that we do out of love for one another. And so in all of this we are being given great guidance, great encouragement, and also in many ways a great challenge because God is showing us how we want to be, how He wants us to be as a church.

He wants us to be generous with our resources. He wants to be generous with our energy and time. He wants us to be generous with our knowledge and our skill. And all of this reminds us of a really basic point, but I think it's a really amazing point.

[36 : 31] God allows us to do stuff for Him. And I know that that sounds really basic, but it's actually unbelievably extraordinary because in Exodus you had the God of heaven and earth, the mighty sovereign holy God wanting a dwelling place.

And He got ordinary people to do it for Him. And now the mighty sovereign holy God of heaven and earth, of all eternity and of all the universe is building a dwelling place in His church and He is doing it through ordinary people like you.

He's not doing it through elite people, He's doing it through people just like you. You are His workforce, you are His team, you are not just His building, you are also His builders.

And together we are working on His great building project. And I just want to close by saying that if you are not yet a Christian, then you may be sitting here thinking, well, that was all great, but it's got nothing to do with me.

But the truth is, it's actually all about you. Because the great purpose of this building project is to tell you that Jesus loves you and that He died for you and that He wants you on His team as well.

[38 : 16] So God's got a great building project, let's go for it. Amen. Father, we thank you for the work that you're doing and we thank you for the extraordinary privilege of being part of that work.

Please give us the generosity of heart that we need to share of our resources, to share of our time and energy, and to share of our knowledge and skills so that we can pull together as a brilliant God-honoring team for everyone serves and where we go on together as a joyful and as an efficient building force reaching out to the world around us.

And we pray, oh God, that any who are maybe yet to put their faith in you, that they would see that there's a gap in this team that we're waiting for them to fill.

We pray that you be at work in your midst. Amen.