

St Luke's Modbury, 29/6/25: Giving as a spiritual discipline

Today brings us to the second sermon in our series on Christian Giving. Last week Jo emphasised that this series isn't intended as a pre-cursor to one of those high-pressure stewardship campaigns that churches used to hold - we won't be having one of those! We do need to recognise though, that Jesus spoke and taught quite a lot about the attitudes his followers ought to have regarding money and possessions. In fact, roughly 15% percent of his sayings and 11 out of 39 parables feature teaching on the right use, and the dangers, of money or possessions. If Jesus gives such emphasis to those aspects of discipleship, then probably we need to pay some attention to them too!

Last Sunday Jo spoke to us about 'Giving as a response to God's abundant generosity', and she began by observing that *a quiet but powerful shift in our thinking occurs when we move from saying 'I earned this' to saying 'This is a gift.'* That shift, she went on to say, *can change the whole way we live.*

Today, in speaking about 'Giving as a Spiritual Discipline,' I want to talk about another quiet but powerful shift in our thinking: it's the shift that occurs when we move from thinking of Christian giving as a duty, to instead understanding it as a spiritual discipline. This shift also can change the way we live, and can bring a new joy into our lives. And let me say that I'm preaching this sermon as much to myself as to you. There are things here I need to learn – or perhaps re-learn!

So, I want to suggest to you today that we need to think of Christian giving not as a duty but as a spiritual discipline, and that this shift in our thinking can transform our Christian lives.

Duty – is duty. We all know about the need, in various roles and situations, to perform the duties assigned to us. Duties are obligations – we may perform them willingly or we may resent them; we may get some fulfilment out of performing them or they may be devoid of any fulfilment or joy. It doesn't matter, even if resented, duty must be done, it's an obligation.

A spiritual discipline, on the other hand, is a practice undertaken intentionally and regularly, over a period of time, which aims to help us to grow in faith and joy and to become more like Jesus. (Rpt)

St Luke's Modbury, 29/6/25: Giving as a spiritual discipline

In popular thought, the word 'discipline' is often associated with punishment, so for some it may have unpleasant associations. Actually, in the true sense of the word, a discipline is something that provides learning. Typically, a discipline involves learning through gaining knowledge and also learning gained by putting that knowledge into practice. Musicians engage in music disciplines all the time – first they learn the theory and the technicalities of their instrument, and then they practise, and practise, and practise. This combination of knowledge and practise brings a new expertise and with it a freedom and joy in their music. We do need to note though, that the practice of this discipline involves sacrifice – in the case of musicians it's a sacrifice of time and energy and probably money, all given in order to gain the proficiency that brings the fulfilment they desire. In a similar way, as Christians, the practice of a spiritual discipline can bring us a new freedom and joy in our Christian lives and can bring blessing to others. And, like the disciplines of music, it will involve some sacrifice.

I said earlier that a spiritual discipline is a practice undertaken intentionally and regularly, over a period of time, which aims to help us to grow in faith and joy and to become more like Jesus.

What I want to say to you today is that Christian giving, if undertaken as a spiritual discipline, can bring growth and joy to the giver and extend God's blessing to others.

Understood as a spiritual discipline, Christian giving is not an obligation but an opportunity – a God-given opportunity to experience, with joy, God's faithfulness, and to bring God's blessing to others.

The thing is, this shift in our understanding has to be learned by putting our knowledge of God into practice. You see, it's only as we take God at his word that we will experience God's faithfulness toward us, and it's only as we experience God's faithfulness that we will grow in our own faith and know the joy of Christian giving.

God's word abounds in promises that assure us of God's gracious and abundant provision when, in obedience to his command, we give faithfully and, thereby, share God's blessing with others.

St Luke's Modbury, 29/6/25: Giving as a spiritual discipline

In our reading today from Isaiah, God's word comes to people who, for all their display of pious worship, were failing to meet the needs of the poor amongst them. The probable cause of this failure was that these were difficult times for Israel, and people were holding on to what money or goods they had because they were worried about the future. In the early part of the passage these people complain that, despite their prayer and fasting, God seems far away from them, they're not enjoying God's presence in their lives. God responds to their complaint by saying:

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom shall be like the noon day, the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your needs . . . and you will be like a watered garden, like spring whose waters never fail.' (Isa 58.10-11)

This is both a rebuke and a promise. The only way the promise can be enjoyed is for these people to trust God and put their faith into action by faithful giving – in this case to meet the needs of the poor.

In the first part of our reading from Luke, Jesus is emphasising the generosity of spirit he expects of his disciples. He moves seamlessly from generosity in refraining from judging others, to generosity in forgiving others, to generosity in giving – and it's giving in general, Jesus doesn't restrict the scope of this giving - but he does add a promise that brings the faithfulness of God into the picture:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

This is a magnificent promise but again, the followers of Jesus, then and now, must act on the command to give generously if they are to know the joy that the promise holds.

Last week Jo highlighted for us that wonderful passage from Matthew 6 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, after reassuring his disciples of God's provision for them, tells them:

St Luke's Modbury, 29/6/25: Giving as a spiritual discipline

Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the pagans who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Mtt 6.31-33)

Some of you may have heard this story before, but it's worth telling here, I think. Many years ago, a couple of months before we were due to go to theological college, I was deeply anxious about how we would live for 3 – 4 years without an income. No Austudy in those days! This wasn't an unreasonable anxiety especially since Elizabeth would be a full time Mum looking after our new baby. I was working shift work at the time and could get to church only once a month. On my one Sunday, as I rolled up to church, the Minister grabbed me and told me that one of the readers hadn't turned up and could I do a Bible reading. The passage set down to be read was that reading from Matt 6 – 'Do not be anxious about what you will eat or what you will wear. . . for your heavenly Father knows you need them, but seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be yours as well.' I was astounded, one Sunday in four I'm at church, then the reader doesn't turn up, then the minister grabs me and I, an anxious mess, have to read those words to the whole church. Long story short, we went to college, and God did supply all our needs, sometimes quite miraculously. We didn't have everything we desired, but we had everything we needed. God is faithful to his promises but we have to act in faith before we can experience the joy the promise holds out to us.

Let me try to bring all this back to Christian giving as a spiritual discipline. We know that God's word abounds in promises that assure us of God's gracious and abundant provision as, in obedience to God's commands, we give faithfully to share God's blessing with others. We can know this in theory – but if we are to know the blessings and the joy of God's promise, we have to put it into practice in our lives. The trouble is that all of us, me included, are constantly distracted by the pressures, cares and temptations of the world and it's all too easy to drift into thinking of Christian giving simply as a kind of weekly obligation or duty. This is where giving as a spiritual discipline comes in.

St Luke's Modbury, 29/6/25: Giving as a spiritual discipline

Giving as a spiritual discipline is intentional. It is, if you like, a covenant entered into with God. It is a thought-through, prayerful commitment to give – and to give regularly and sacrificially in obedience to God's command. It is this covenant commitment that enables us to stay the course and to remain faithful in giving even when distracted by cares or temptation. It's only over time, you see, that the benefits of spiritual disciplines emerge and can be recognised and enjoyed.

Giving as a spiritual discipline is necessarily sacrificial. The discipline recognises that Christian giving is an act of worship - it's founded on and reflects the grace that we have come to know in the Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for us.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, (St Paul writes to the Corinthians) that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor 8.9)

We cannot honour his sacrifice by giving that which costs us nothing.

Of course, what is sacrificial for one person may not be for another and what is sacrificial for you may vary with time and circumstances, but for all of us, giving which is sacrificial will cost us something.

We have heard today how God promises to honour sacrificial giving by providing for the needs of his faithful people. As God meets our needs and as, over time we reflect on this provision, we recognise that God is indeed active in our lives, that God is present with us, and this recognition brings life and joy to our faith.

Understood as a spiritual discipline, Christian giving is not an obligation but an opportunity – an opportunity to grow in faith and joy and to become more like Jesus.