

Stewardship Sunday
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Nothing and Everything: Gratitude to Generosity

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Good morning and thank you for letting me come and talk to you today. I'm Peter Kelly and I serve on the PCC and head up the Giving Committee. Today is our annual giving Sunday and I am here to talk to you about the health of our giving. I can feel the anticipation in the air as I say that, but let me assure you: Today's talk is not about guilt, it is about joy. It isn't about admonition, it's about invitation. And -- I don't plan to talk to you about living in moderation to give a little more. I want to talk to you about living in exaltation so as to live a richer and more fulfilling life. But you may be wondering about the inevitable request that may be coming from a talk like this, so to get that out of the way, let me tell you. Here is the answer right now if you are wondering how much the church needs you to give. The answer is "nothing." However, if you are wondering how much you should give, the answer is "Everything. In fact even everything is not enough." How can that paradox be true? How can nothing be needed but giving everything is not enough? Well, let's talk about that.

First, we will start with the easy part. The Need. I think we would all acknowledge that this is God's church and we are His people. So let's ask ourselves this: Does the immortal omnipotent, invincible God of the universe need anything from us. Obviously, he needs nothing. If He want's lights in this church, he has many options including your giving and our paying the electric company. And alternatively, he uttering the command "Let there be light." It is a mystery for certain, but God clearly has no needs and no lack of giving on our part could frustrate His purposes. "But wait," you say, "God may not technically need my resources, but His full blessing in my life is a result of my sacrifice for Him!" To that I would ask, where did you get that idea? That is not a biblical concept. God's love is unconditional. So part 1 is easy. God needs nothing. Why give anything then?

To answer that, let's look at today's gospel for insights into this mystery and in particular let's focus on one verse. Jesus tells us the parable of the vineyard tenants who refuse to give the owner his share of the crops. The tenants' greed is so severe that they stone and kill the servants and eventually kill the son of the vineyard owner. There is clear greed and evil at work here. It is not the obvious sinful greed and hoarding that I want to focus on. Today, I want to focus on the verse after the parable. Speaking to the Pharisees Jesus says in verse 43 "Therefore I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

Now first, let me ask you, how do you feel when you see, hear, and read that verse? If you are like most people, you feel challenged or possibly guilty as you sense that Jesus is warning you that what you have will be taken away unless you are being good, and in this case being generous. Or you may feel sadness or regret sensing that you have squandered resources in your life and missed out on chances to do good things for God. But I have good news for you. In this verse we see the

kingdom is taken from the Old Testament people burdened by law and given to the New Testament people saved by grace. We need not and really should not identify with the people who are having the kingdom taken away. In this verse, we are the people to whom the kingdom is given, the people in whom the fruits of the kingdom are being produced.

So let me ask you this: Are you a fruit-producing person and how is giving a part of that answer? Well, like the tenants in the field of today's gospel, every single one of us knows that we have more than we could consume, and giving part of that to God's purposes would further the kingdom. It may be time, property, or money, but everyone has something they can and should give. But there is something inside us that doesn't want to trust God with giving Him His share. Rather than rejoicing with the vineyard owner and praising his generosity, we fear even interacting with Him. Why do we fear Him and fear even the topic of generosity? It isn't because we have any legitimate fear that we will go without. It is because we haven't learned to give for the right reason – and that clouds our relationship with Him and with others.

Here is the reason to give: not to meet any need, because we know God can do that without you. Rather, as Proverbs 3 tells us, we give as a means to honour God and participate in the process of producing fruit, and we do so, as Colossians 3:16 tells us with joyful hearts of gratitude. Now the Church of England gives us a numerical guide for our giving, which is 10% of our income composed of 5% to the church and 5% to other organisations and I fully support that – and the best way to get started is with planned giving and legacy giving which we will share information about after the service today. But the 10% guideline notwithstanding, I want to give you another spiritual guide, one which is more frequently mentioned in scripture. It is fine to give in proportion to your income, but I propose that you give in proportion to your gratitude. That is what our bible teaches us and how the first century Christians reacted when hearing that theirs was the kingdom. They gave freely and joyfully, in response to the grace they had received. People gave not to achieve an outcome, not to pay a bill, not to follow a rule. They simply laid all they had at the apostles' feet, and did so joyfully. And during that time, the church grew faster than any other time in history.

My last question to you is this: What do you have to be grateful for? Do you know that Christ has died for you and you have eternal life; or can you look at your loved ones and know God has comforted you in your pain or blessed you in your joy with more than you could possibly deserve; or are you aware that the creator's hand was at work when you were knit together and given the abilities to be happy and productive in this world? If so, then I encourage you to (1) acknowledge God for these blessings and be grateful to Him; and (2) then give in proportion to your gratitude. So how would it take to convey what we owe to God for his blessings? How much should we give him to show him our grateful we are for having a life in the vineyard of prosperity, love, joy, peace, and security? Obviously, if we give in proportion to what we have been given, everything we have would still fall short of conveying our gratitude for His blessings.

And there you have it. While God needs nothing, there is something inside of you that will never rest until you fulfil your destiny as a fruit-producing person. We give so that we can experience the productivity of the vineyard. We give in proportion to

our gratitude. God needs nothing, yet we should give Him everything... Because generosity is not a gift that just some people have. It is for everyone. We know that it is God's desire that none should perish and it is also God's desire that all should have the experience of living a joyful, fruitful life. Wherever you are on that journey towards more generosity, I encourage you to take that next step. In the wonderful economy of God, we give as a means to thank Him and He then produces fruit with our gifts, giving us more reasons to thank him for. Like manna, it never runs out, so there is no need to give reservedly or with timidity. Please consider doing something new and becoming a more fruit-producing person. Sign up for planned giving, or consider updating the amount, or look at your legacy plans for assets in your will. Whatever it is, God will be delighted to see you in the vineyard and you won't believe the harvest that results from your gifts. Amen.