

Truly life: why preaching matters

Money talk from the pulpit must be done and done well. Money is close to us and there is an implicit challenge to lifestyle so it is not an easy subject. But connections must be made between Scripture, spirituality, discipleship and our money. This paper reflects on the stewardship preacher's task



Just as the keystone holds the arch in place, so preaching is a core element in stewardship. Without preaching we have the building blocks of a decent local fundraising effort but nothing to structure it as Christian stewardship. Or, to change the analogy, we lose the heart, the DNA, of stewardship. Paul advised his young friend Timothy to, 'Command the rich ... to be rich in good deeds, generous and willing to share...' (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Our preaching should teach and challenge Christians to live well and faithfully with money if we are to 'lay hold of the life that is truly life'.

An uphill task

A quote from the 2011 *Giving Insight* research is illustrative: 'I don't honestly remember hearing a sermon on financial giving.' In the research, fewer than one in five church members (18%) wanted more teaching on giving, nearly half opposed the idea and a third did not know what to think.ⁱ Preaching money is not an easy ask of clergy or lay preachers.ⁱⁱ Yet, despite the challenges, Robert Wuthnow's American research found that preaching made a difference. Regular churchgoers who had heard a stewardship sermon in the last year gave roughly double that of those who had not. He also found that, among those who heard a sermon, people who saw giving as part of worship gave three times more than those who don't think that way. The point, of course, is not that sermons bring in the cash! It is that preaching has a key role to play in building a biblical and spiritual framework for people to think about their giving and it creates a culture in which other stewardship tasks can flourish. So what is the preacher's task around stewardship?

Preaching, not fundraising

Put simply, our letters, brochures and response forms ask our people for financial support, and rightly so. But our preaching speaks of the grace of God in Jesus. It speaks of who we are in Christ before it challenges to live and give as Christian people. The preacher's task is to connect our discipleship with our money. We are stewards, entrusted with much for our enjoyment (1 Tim. 6), called to be accountable and faithful in our use of it and, as we have seen, commanded to be generous in our sharing.

But if money is an affair of the heart, how can Timothy 'command the rich'? In the same way that Israel was told 'you must tithe' (Deut. 14:22) and Paul tells us to, 'excel in this grace of giving' (2 Cor. 8:7). The land Israel enjoyed was a gift from God; so too is grace God's gift to us. Christians *must* give because grace is freely given to us and grace creates the obligation to give generously.

Practically speaking, this means first that preaching about money should have the content and the character of the grace from which giving is born. It starts by speaking of what God has done and there can be no place for crude appeals, to not paying bills or church closures or castigating people's greed. It also means that there should be no inconsistency between what we say about money and giving from the pulpit and our



actual church practice in a giving programme or in how we address money 365 days a year. Second, we should be confident in our preaching. If we feel we are pleading with reluctant givers to spare a little more, our preaching must be hobbled. We will turn, consciously or unconsciously, to other ways of raising money and generate a fundraising culture in the church. The preacher's task is not to plead or cajole but to invite God's people to be caught up in the grace of giving. We can certainly hold out a vision to people of what growth in giving can achieve in ministry but our preaching aims for more than a balanced budget or a fruitful church ministry. We want to grow generous givers, disciplined in a generous Christian community.

A year-round task

Our consumer culture is a key battleground for spiritual formation and discipleship. An annual money sermon to support an ailing budget won't cut it; nor can it give hope to those struggling to cope financially.

Unless preaching is a year-round task, we are in dangerous territory. First, when we do preach on money, we risk overloading or distorting our bible text by making it say everything we need to say. Second, we limit the scope of stewardship to meeting the needs of the church and so diminish the discipleship challenge. Third, and perhaps most dangerous, we create the wrong culture in the church. As Pastor Andy Stanley says, 'when it comes to stewardship and generosity do your people know what you want for them regarding their finances, or do they just know what you want *from* them?'

Preaching during Giving in Grace cannot be reluctantly undertaken in the hope and mistaken belief that it is job done for the next few years! Instead we can lay a foundation for year-round teaching and preaching that can be disengaged from the immediate concerns of the church budget. There is more to stewardship than giving. Preaching must address our borrowing and our budgets, our saving and our spending. If such a breadth of preaching is not modelled from the pulpit, it will likely not happen in the home group, the finance committee or the life of the individual disciple.

The lectionary is our friend

For such year-round preaching the *Revised Common Lectionary* is friend, not foe. It insists we do not ignore those troublesome money passages, making it harder to limbo deftly underneath their challenge. It is well known that there are over 2,000 bible verses on wealth and possessions but those verses do not all

say the same thing. The bible teaching on money is as varied as our experiences of money. Like a diamond, the richness of the bible's money teaching lies in its many faces: the observational wisdom of Proverbs, the prophetic challenge to social justice, the world-weary reflections of Ecclesiastes, the life-affirming laws of Deuteronomy, the discipleship teaching of Jesus and the gospel-soaked challenge of Paul to godly living. We cannot capture that richness in a single sermon from our favourite passages.

When it comes to stewardship and generosity, do your people know what you want **for them regarding their finances, or do they just know what you want **from** them?**

Pastor Andy Stanley

Sharing stories on the road

It is not far from the truth to say that most churchgoers think as consumers first and Christians second; hardly surprising given the pressures in society. These are things that every preacher knows and experiences. The preacher's task is a tough one. He or she must challenge the easy assumptions of a consumer lifestyle while avoiding an angry, moralistic or wholly negative tone. This is not easy; there are no experts here. Humour, honesty and humility are at a premium when preaching on money. Indeed, such self-awareness is essential to keeping pastoral antennae alert to the reality of indebtedness and money anxiety in the congregation.

Generosity and blessing

The idea that we give in order to be financially blessed in return is, of course, a consumerist distortion of the gospel. But the preacher should be confident to speak of the blessings that generous giving brings. He or she should encourage expectant givers, encourage people to find freedom and joy in giving, the promise of renewed faith, deepened spirituality and an enhanced parish ministry that accompany generosity. Certainly this is where Paul ended his advice to the church at Corinth. He spoke of always having enough to be generous, of spiritual blessings and the outpouring of thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor. 9:11ff).

Notes and Resources

- i* Download from www.parishresources.org.uk/giving.
- ii* On this see, The people rejoiced: *why leadership matters* under Key Principles at the Leadership tab