
Giving with your Head, your Hand, and your Heart

2 Corinthians 8.7-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 28, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Twenty years ago I took a 37-hour train ride from Senegal and visited Mali. Mali is the poorest country in West Africa, and one of the poorest in the world. I recall walking around the streets of the capital, Bamako. My first reaction was “Wow, it’s hot.” (You have to understand that was before I’d ever spent a summer in North Carolina.) But then I felt completely confused. Should I give to the beggars?

I’d grown up with an elaborate protection system for my conscience. If I met a beggar at home I could rely on understanding the welfare system and then go into a conversation in my head about how best to give food and whether cash would be counterproductive if it was bound to go on drugs. As for poverty overseas – that was what aid agencies and government programs were for. I was aware of mutterings and cynicism about whether the money really got through to the people in need, but there wasn’t a whole lot I could do about that.

But now there was. I found myself face to face the poorest people in the poorest place in the world. And suddenly I was desperately scratching around for a hundred new reasons why I shouldn’t give them anything. “They’re probably controlled by pimps. They wouldn’t use the money wisely. If I give to one I’ll be besieged by others...” My self-protecting logic went into overdrive. “It’s probably best to give to the agencies after all,” I decided, and dove into the covered market.

I wonder how you react when you’re asked for money. I wonder if you go into the same convulsions of panic, guilt, and self-justifying logic that I went through that hot dusty day in Bamako. I want today to think about how our giving can move from paralysis to joy, from secrecy to transparency, from private embarrassment to shared pleasure.

In our New Testament reading we heard how Paul asks the Christians in Corinth to support the poor in Jerusalem. It’s not clear whether the poor in Jerusalem means the struggling mother church in Jerusalem or the poor who the church in Jerusalem is trying to serve. I’m going to assume it’s both. I want to suggest today that giving is always about assisting the poor, building up the church and deepening our own discipleship. Paul uses three kinds of arguments to persuade the Corinthians.

1. He starts by appealing to their *pride*. He tries to get them into a competition to give more than the Macedonians. He calls upon their sense of prudent financial management, to complete a commitment they initiated a year earlier, and only to give a realistic sum.
2. Next he holds up a mirror to their *faith* and *holiness*. He says Jesus was rich, but became poor to make us rich. Almost goading the Corinthians, Paul says, “Why wouldn’t you want to be like that?”
3. Finally Paul subtly nudges their *self-interest*. Bring your present abundance to *their* need, he says, and they might be around to bring their future abundance to *your* need, should you find yourselves hard up one day.

Think about it. Pride, faith, self-interest. It’s an ambiguous list of reasons for giving money. When I left college at the age of 22 I sense a call to be ordained and I wanted to live with the poor and I set about finding out if it was possible to do both at the same time. So I moved to the poorest part of the poorest city in England. But deep down I knew this wasn’t entirely for noble reasons. I knew whatever love and faithfulness I had was mixed up with anger and pride. I had all sorts of heartsearchings about what I was doing and why I was doing it. I knew T.S. Eliot’s line that the worst treason was to do the right thing for the wrong reason. After a few months I spoke with a wise monk who said to me, “Everything we do, we do for a dozen or more reasons. If you waited for every one of those reasons to be good you’d never do anything. If *one* of those reasons is good, God can work with that, don’t you worry.” It remains some of the best and most liberating advice I’ve ever been given.

Paul isn't all that worried about mixed motives. I'm not sure we should be a whole lot more worried than Paul was. In a world where there are tax incentives for charitable giving and naming opportunities for institutional donors, it's a fantasy that we'll ever get to a place where the left hand is totally unaware of what the right hand is doing. Our conscience may never be completely clear and our intentions seldom entirely noble. But we can still try to be faithful disciples in the financial part of our lives. So how do we work out what, where and how to give? I want now to suggest three dimensions to giving.

(A) The first is, *give with your head*. Giving with your head is about sticking to the three Rs of financial giving.

1. R number one is *routine*. By all means investigate causes of the social ills non-profits seek to address. By all means investigate the organizations you're considering giving money to, for their purpose, probity, plans, and personnel. But in the end giving is about regular habits not grand gestures. Paul says, "As you excel in everything, excel in generosity." It's often said that time is money. But it's less often realized that money is time. Managing money takes enormous amounts of time and in the end most people get others to do it for them. Giving is the same. Find the right organizations and leave the details to them. If at all possible, don't save all the checks till December. Become the kind of donor organizations rely on. Give monthly as a matter of routine.
2. R number two is *realism*. Take an honest assessment of what you can give and try to stick to it. Paul says "if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has." The reason poorer people tend to give more than richer people is that richer people are usually more careful with their money. That's why they're rich, after all. Realism means you might sometimes have to say no. But that no is because you've said yes elsewhere. Realism also means anticipating that crises and disasters will occur for you and for others and keeping something back for such moments. But realism isn't just for people on tight budgets. I heard one well-off person say recently that in these tight financial times it was for those who could still give generously to make up for those who currently couldn't. That's what I call eager realism.
3. R number three is *relationships*. There are things money can't do, and things money makes worse. We've probably all had a friendship that's gone wrong somehow over the giving or lending of money. While giving money should become routine and be realistic, we should always remember that money is for making relationships, and relationships are never for making money. Paul's plea to the Corinthians is not to their wallets but to their common baptism with the Jerusalem Christians. He's saying, "It's time to show what being one body means." Our fundamental need for relationship is more profound than our need for money. In the face of another's distress we're best not leading with the checkbook and saying "This is what I'd like to do for you" – but asking the gentle question "How do you need me to be with you?"

Those are the three Rs of giving with your head.

(B) And now to *giving with your hand*. Paul says "Finish doing what you began." It's all very well sorting out all the rights and wrongs in your head but it doesn't amount to much if you don't get round to writing and sending the check. Giving with your hand means recognizing there'll always be something untidy about giving but that's not a reason not to do it. But giving with your hand also means combining money with action. You can't entirely sub-contract kindness and generosity. At some stage there needs to be face to face encounter, genuine human warmth and touch and interaction.

That's one of the biggest reasons we're involved in so many mission trips from the Chapel. Yes, they often do useful work erecting homes and dispensing medications and clearing flood debris. But a lot of what they're about is being the human face of the checkbook. It's saying to people "We know you're facing hardship, we want to be helpful, we're used to avoiding your gaze and just sending money, but this week we want to see, touch, and embrace you in your humanity and ours, to look you in the eye even if you or we find it hard not to look away in shame or embarrassment, to hear your anger, listen to your despair and affirm your hope."

Giving with your hand means seeing for yourself what money can do and what money can't do. It means coming home from the mission trip or the night shelter with a deeper understanding of what it feels like to be

the recipient of charity, what it feels like to know when you're not meeting people's deepest needs, and what it can mean to be a small part of a person finding their own way to get on their feet again. Giving with your hand informs the way you spend your money and transforms the way you pray.

(C) And then finally there's *giving with your heart*. More than once St Paul says this is about turning your eagerness into tangible contributions. A lot of us are very protective when it comes to giving with our heart. We're cynical about emotional appeals featuring wide-eyed infants looking doleful, and hungry. We're wary of the sentimentality that assumes the world's problems would evaporate if we just wrote that check. And we're frightened of entering upon financial commitments where we could be taken advantage of or personal relationships where we could find ourselves out of our depth.

But we all know Paul's most famous words from 1 Corinthians 13. "If I give away all my possessions, if I hand over my entire body, but have not love, I gain nothing." You can't entirely sub-contract generosity. You can't entirely sub-contract the emotional side of giving, either. We think God wants us to give to others because God could use a little help from us in changing their lives. But the real reason God wants us to give to others is that God's in the business of changing *our* lives. Fundamentally that's the difference between giving with your head and hand and giving with your heart. Giving with your head and hand changes others. Giving with your heart changes you. There's a hundred reasons why you may not want to do it. But allowing yourself to be changed by a relationship is in the end what giving really means.

Probably none of us are equally adept at giving with our head, hand and heart. That's one of the many reasons why we need one another. If you look across your lifetime, it could be that as an elderly person you feel it's harder to give with your hand than once it was. As a parent of young children trying to hold down a demanding job it may be harder to give with your heart. As a young teenager it might be harder to give with your head. We're all different in personality and in our season of life.

And that's why giving isn't fundamentally a private matter. That's why giving corporately as a church is so important. Churches aren't oceans of peace and tranquility – they're more often places of sustained argument. And one of the best arguments you can have in a church is what to give money to, because it's only when we get into that kind of argument that we work out whether the gospel is fundamentally about head, hand or heart. Of course it's about all of these things. But it's only when we're forced to make decisions together about things we all think matter – like our money – that we discover the full implications of the gospel. Left to ourselves we'd fall back into whichever comes easiest – head, hand, or heart. But thrown together as one body we discover that the gospel means all three. We need the church because it's just not possible for any of us to grasp the whole gospel on our own.

And that's why the most beautiful and most challenging of St Paul's words are these. "You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." In other words, the way Jesus makes room for *us* in *his* life is by emptying himself of everything else. When we enter his life we become rich beyond measure. And so the way *we* make room for Jesus in *our* life is by emptying ourselves of what is there. The more we give, the more room we make for Jesus. Thus the poorer we become, the more we are open to being filled by the riches of the Holy Spirit.

So the question for us becomes not, "How much shall we give, and to whom, and how often, and how can we be sure they'll spend it wisely?" The question finally becomes, "How much room in our lives have we made to be filled with Jesus?" After all, he has emptied his life to be filled with us.

In the end, our heads, our hands and our hearts are given to us for one reason above all: that we may open them out to others, in such a way that they may be filled with Jesus Christ.