

A man was sitting in a restaurant, relaxing, eating his steak and chips, sipping his glass of wine. In walks a man with a dog, and he sits down next to the man. The dog looks up at the man, and then sees his trilby, his hat on the back of his chair. Well the dog must be hungry as well, because he suddenly snatches the hat in his teeth and starts eating it. Of course the man isn't very happy at this and shouts at the dog's owner, "Oi! Your dog's eating my hat!" The dog's owner doesn't seem bothered, and smiles: "Keep your hair on – you can buy another." The hat owner is angry at this and says, "How dare you? I don't think I like your attitude!" The dog's owner replies, "It's not my hat he chewed, it's your hat he chewed!"

I want us this evening to think about our attitude – our attitude to God, to each other, and to the world around us. What our attitudes are, and what they should be.

I trust you all had a wonderful Christmas time. Also perhaps you were able to spend precious uninterrupted time with your family or close friends; perhaps you've been able to give each other **quality** time, you've given your time to pleasing those dear to you. We all make the effort, don't we, to give our loved ones a bit of enjoyment and pleasure at Christmas? That's what Christmas is all about isn't it?

There's something inside us, isn't there, that makes us warm inside when we give presents to others, we feel good when we give, and it puts a smile on someone's face. I think that's in all of us – we like giving, it feels right and good. When we give to charity, it feels good, when we do something for someone – offer them food, or drink, we feel good.

In the Bible Jesus is recorded as saying, '*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*' (Acts 20:35) And **we** often say that, don't we? 'It's better to give than to receive.'

Sir Winston Churchill once said, 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.'

'It's better to give than to receive.' Do we **really** think that?

I want us to look at this one theme, and from it look – as I said earlier - at our attitudes to God, each other and the world around us.

Let's read from Mark's gospel, chapter 12, starting at verse 38. (Blue P. ...)

Before we start, isn't it amazing that Jesus sees this poor widow, and isn't it wonderful that her little story is recorded both here and in Luke's gospel for all time. How many millions of people have read about this seemingly insignificant lady, down through the ages? It reminds us that God sees **everything and everyone**, and whenever a person does anything that is good in God's eyes, it brings him pleasure, it is recorded, and he remembers it. So those things you do that nobody sees or even knows about, for God, for the church, God's people or for others, never think they go unnoticed by God. He sees, he knows, and he is pleased.

In this passage we can see totally different attitudes in the people talked about – the teachers of the law, who were very religious Jews who enforced God's laws in a meticulous way, and then the poor widow, a complete contrast.

These **teachers of the law** got no pay, and so depended on the hospitality of the religious Jews. They took advantage of any who could afford it, but they also cheated the poor out of all they had – verse 40 shows that they had no qualms about robbing the poor – '*They devour widows' houses ...*'. There's something sinister and cruel about their self-seeking actions. Unlike Robin Hood they robbed the rich **and** the poor to help themselves.

They love showing off. **Outwardly** they seem to do all the right things. They act spiritual, they swan around in their magnificent robes, they mix with all the celebrities of the time, they sit in the respectable high seats in the synagogues, even when they pray, their prayers are full and long, they know all the right words to say to impress **people**.

If you get a torch, it's good because it casts a bright light and you can see everything around you. But if you shine the light straight at someone, they see the same brilliant light, but they can see nothing behind it. What these men do is like that – good on the face of it, but they don't want you to see what's behind their actions.

The whole problem with them is that they're trying to impress **man**, they are **not** pleasing God. They're all show. Outwardly they are rich, but **inwardly** they are morally bankrupt – '*they devour widows' houses*'. They are hypocrites, they seem to be upstanding citizens, but this hides what they're really like.

Jesus of course sees straight through their exterior and sees what's on the **inside** and although they seem to prosper, Jesus assures his listeners of the severe punishment waiting for these teachers of the law; '*Such men will be punished most severely.*' (verse 40)

There is severe condemnation and punishment waiting for those who pretend to have faith, but in fact they're only serving themselves. Their eyes are firmly fixed on the **world** and not on God. Their attitude is that impressing **men** is more important than pleasing God. **Jesus** sees what's in the heart and he says this attitude is wrong.

Christianity isn't about showiness, we don't live to make good impressions, to get noticed by others – we live for Christ, even when no-one is looking.

At the end of the day, we can't deceive God, and at the end of the day God will have the final word, whether we are **his** for eternity, or **lost** for eternity. Don't be like these teachers of the law. Don't live to please men.

As Jesus was talking he could see how the people were giving to God's work as they walked by. He watches as the rich walk by and throw their offerings into the boxes; and then he sees **a poor widow** come and place her two coins in.

The rich probably gave a lot of money – something to be admired, surely. Celebrities today give to charity, probably thousands of pounds, their money does a lot of good, helps a lot of people – something to be admired, surely. But the **rich** aren't the ones that Jesus commends here. He commends the poor **widow** who put in a measly two coins – we're told 2 lepta, about the wages for 10 minutes' work – that won't go very far! She doesn't give very much at all, in fact was it worth her giving at all?

She is the one Jesus commends. **We** see the outside – we're more impressed with the amount given – but Jesus sees what's going on inside, what is motivating that person. He also sees the ability to give. These rich people were putting good amounts into the boxes, but **they** could put large amounts in without even **missing** it – it wasn't any hardship to them.

The widow's **attitude** was different - she gave everything she had to live on, sacrifice, that's giving that hurts. Why is she prepared to give like this? Because she is devoted to God.

She has faith in God, she has total trust in God and his provision. God will provide for her. That is what Jesus sees in this widow, he doesn't see it in the rich people. **She** is the one Jesus commends.

Jesus is saying here that the value of a gift isn't measured by its amount, but by the spirit in which it's given. So a gift loses its value when it's given begrudgingly.

It's like when a mother is trying to teach her son to share his sweets with his sister, you know; it takes some convincing and even pressure before he agrees, but even then he doesn't really **want** to, and sometimes the parent has to physically take the sweet out of his bag and give it to the daughter. Perhaps we don't really want to give, but we feel we should, and we're only going to give what we can afford without missing it anyway. That's **not** the way to give.

This story is saying that gifts of **any** size are pleasing to God when given out of gratitude and in a spirit of generosity. The rich people had thought a lot about what they could **afford** to give, they gave out of their wealth; the widow gave generously and sacrificially, out of devotion. **This** is what Jesus sees. **This** is what our attitude to God should be – we should be grateful to God, and trust him to provide all we need. This is the motivation for our actions.

So our attitude to God should be one of gratitude and generosity– but grateful for what? And why should we be generous?

Turn with me, please to 2 Corinthians, chapter 8, (Blue P. ...) where Paul writes about the example of the **church in Macedonia**. [Read vv. 1-7]

What an amazing church, don't you think? Wouldn't you like to be a member of a church like that? Well you **can** – and it starts with **you**, it starts with me! Christians today are followers of the same God, so it **can** be the same for us?

Look at **their** attitude – verse 2, although they were going through great trials, they were overflowing with **joy** but in extreme poverty, it says, they became rich in generosity. Verse 3, they gave even **beyond** their ability. They didn't give begrudgingly. They didn't give the bare minimum. In fact, they didn't wait to be asked to give, they actually **pleaded** with Paul for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints (verse 4). 4

They pleaded for the privilege of giving generously and even beyond their ability to give.

Christians can be overflowing with joy, and verse 5 says, we should be giving ourselves firstly to the Lord, and then to God's work. This is what made the poor widow so different from the rich people and also from the teachers of the law – she was devoted to her God and to his work. This was what motivated her giving. She was commended by the Lord.

How is it with you? How is it with me? I've got to search my heart, and ask God to show me if there is any weakness here – am I still ruled by the influences of the world around me? Do I have the same attitudes as the world around me – out for what I can get, only living to please myself and make a good impression? Or do I see that there is a higher power, God who we should aim to please through the motivations in our hearts? Am I a giving person, or am I taking person?

Those Christians in Macedonia were giving people – can we be like them? Well, Paul as wrote that letter, obviously thought we can. So how can we be people with an attitude that pleases God?

In John's gospel we read this: *'Yet to all who received him, to all who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ... born of God.'* (John 1:12,13) The Bible tells us that we can become children of God, **we can become God's children**, we can be born again, it says. We need to realise that we have to **start again** – we have to see that the way we have been going is wrong, not God's way – in fact we've totally disregarded him.

We need to turn from that old way and turn to **God's** way – we can only lay hold of that higher power, if we go **God's** way. Jesus said, *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father [God] except through me.'* (John 14:6) We have to come to God through **Jesus**. We have to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on a cross. But this wasn't any ordinary death: as Jesus the Son of God died there on that cross, he was taking upon himself the punishment for what **we've** done wrong. So whatever we've done wrong, we can be **forgiven** – isn't that what we all want? To know that our past wrongs can be forgiven and forgotten? They **can** be – that's why Jesus died. Believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour is the only way of salvation, the Bible says that doing **this** gives us the right to be born of God, to become **children** of God

We become children of God. Are you a child of God? You **can** be.

When a child is born, the first things people look for are their similarities to their parents – the nose, the mouth, those ears, even their behaviour. We inherit the appearance and characteristics of our parents, don't we – the good as well as bad, we can't help it, it happens.

Christians are born again, the Bible says, we become children of God, we become **like** our heavenly Father, we inherit his characteristics, but with God everything we inherit is **good**. Look through the Bible and you will find that giving is one of God's characteristics – God gives:

-Right at the beginning, when God created all things recorded in Genesis chapter 1, he **gave** the plants in the Garden of Eden to man for fruit (1:29)

- When God rescued his people from captivity in Egypt in Exodus, as they wandered through the desert for years, he **gave** them manna from heaven – food from heaven, when they were thirsty he **gave** them water from a rock (Exodus 16, 17)

- After their time in the desert, God **gave** them victory over their enemies and brought them into the promised land: until that time God's people didn't have a country to call their own – now God **gave** them a land flowing with milk and honey. The God of the Old Testament is a giving God.

We've just been celebrating Christmas, haven't we, when Jesus the Son of God came to earth. John's gospel tells us that God **gave** his only Son that all who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. He **gave** the most precious thing he had, his only Son, because he loved us so much. God gave. '*God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*' (1 John 5:11)

On the day of Pentecost, as Jesus' disciples were waiting in Jerusalem, God **gave** the Holy Spirit in a violent wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2). Along with the Holy Spirit came gifts, gifts of wisdom, faith and knowledge (1Corinthians 12). Along with the Spirit he **gave** fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5) Need I go on?

Look through the New Testament, God gives all the time. He gives life itself, true life, and all you need for life.

Philippians 4:19 reminds us, *'my God will supply all your needs according to his great riches in Christ Jesus.'* God has a treasure trove in his Son Jesus, **riches** he is willing to give to **everyone** who believes in him. He's given us his Son, he's done everything to **save** us, surely he's willing to give us everything to **keep** us.

This is **the heart of God** – a heart of love and generosity. God is a giving God. And because Christians are **children** of God, our hearts can and should take on the characteristics of our God, this same loving, giving heart. We're new creations, born again, with the heart of God within us. We love because he **first** loved us, we give because he **first** gave to us.

We can be like this – we can be a loving, giving generous people – we can be pleasing to God – Christians, isn't it be great to know this heart of God within us? If you're not quite there yet, wouldn't it be great to know this heart of God within you? We can, but only if we come to God through Jesus, and become his child.

But there's another aspect to being a giving people that we need to look at quickly.

In 1 Timothy 6:18,19 we read this: *'Command them [speaking about the rich] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.'*

Two things here: Firstly that **giving is part of the way of life** we should be leading as Christians. Paul commands that we should do good, be rich in good deeds, be generous and willing to share. We're to be generous in giving and sharing, full stop. Generous with our time, generous with our energies, generous with our talents. Giving doesn't only mean money.

How do **we** give these things? Are we sacrificial in the use of our time, energy and talents? Do we use them first and foremost for God? Or do we just give him the leftovers? As someone once asked, are we giving what's right, or what's left? How much time and energy do we give to considering God and things which last for ever? Pray to God, ask him how you can give to his work – do it tonight.

But secondly, we're told that when we give wisely and generously, the Lord says we're **laying up treasure in heaven**, that **no-one** can take away. Paul says we will *'lay up treasure for [our]selves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that [we] may take hold of the life that is truly life.'*

We have a **heavenly account** that gains interest every time we are generous in our giving. That's a wonderful picture, isn't it? An account in heaven that will continue to grow – no recession will make it lose value, heaven will never go bankrupt! Give your money, your time, energy, abilities to please **God**, and your account in heaven will grow, and you will find riches forever.

Doesn't this encourage us to get our attitude to life right? To want to please God? Not to be self-seeking or out to impress those around us. Not just to give God the leftovers of our time and energy. But to be a loving and generous people? Let's search our hearts – can we give more? We can – but only if we are right with God. Jesus said *'You must be born again.'* (John 3)

Jesus sees the heart. Jesus sees your heart. Where are you at this evening?

The widow gave all she had to live on; the church in Macedonia gave more than their ability to give; why? Because they knew Jesus as Saviour and Lord, they knew Jesus who freely gave himself for them on the cross. Do we know him who gave so much for **us**? Let's want to know him more, and as that passage said let's take hold of the life that is **truly** life, for eternity.

God gave **all** for you – Jesus **loved** you, and gave himself for **you** - what are you willing to give to him?