

Have you ever wondered why some people give? Have you ever analysed why you give? Sometimes it is because we have extra, and it seems like the right thing to do. Sometimes it is because we have been moved - because something has touched an emotion deep within us - and even if we can't really afford it, we give anyway. Sometimes we give, simply because giving is the most articulate way we know of saying, "Thank you." It's a form of gratitude, really; giving is a natural response to having received something. The truth is, we can never celebrate what we give until we first celebrate what we have. That is a scriptural principle: we can never celebrate what we give until we celebrate what we have.

Jesus and his disciples were sitting one day across the street from the temple treasury, as people were giving their gifts. In front of the synagogue there were large receptacles into which they placed their tithes and offerings. But they were not mere collection boxes with coin slots; rather, they were horn-shaped cylinders made of copper, similar to a tuba in a marching band. And there was Jesus, watching the wealthy and the proud, tossing in their temple tithes. They were wealthy and proud, for when their offering rattled down the tubas, it made a wonderfully loud clattering sound. Everyone in the neighbourhood heard what they gave, and this made them very proud, indeed. Their giving was notable and noted.

Then a widowed woman approached the temple treasury. Carefully, she reaches into her satchel and she pulls out two copper coins. They are so small and so insignificant that nobody even notices the noise they made as they are dropped into the tubas. Nobody notices except Jesus. Before she slips away into the crowd, Jesus points her out to his disciples. "Do you see that woman over there? She has put more in that offering box than all the rest combined," and the disciples look at one another and scratch their heads. Jesus surely had the arithmetic all wrong. The woman only gave a couple of denarii, a couple of pennies; the others gave thousands of dollars in silver. But Jesus said, "It's not about arithmetic, it's about attitude. All the others gave from their excess; it was their overflow, their discretionary income, pocket change to them. But this woman was poor, and yet she gave everything she had."

I told you earlier that there was a scriptural principle when it came to giving: We cannot celebrate what we give until we celebrate what we have. But how does that principle work when a woman gives away everything she has? It doesn't work, unless we're not seeing the same blessings that she sees. Maybe her blessings can't be quantified in dollars, or denarii, or real estate. Maybe they are intangible. What is she celebrating that we cannot see?

First, she seems to be a woman of faith; perhaps she is celebrating that. God has chosen her as a daughter, and promised that though she was a widow, she has a special place in the kingdom, a place that will last forever. Perhaps she has a circle of friends who have committed to care for her, to meet her needs, and to make certain that she would never be in want. Maybe she just believed that God would provide. Wherever those two denarii came from ... more would come tomorrow; a twist on "the manna in the wilderness" story. Whatever the woman's circumstance, she defied the perception that only wealthy people can give. She seemed to be celebrating something far more valuable than silver or gold.

So I'm wondering today what we celebrate? I mean, if that scriptural principle is true, that we cannot celebrate what we give, until we celebrate what we have, what do you and I have that is worth celebrating, besides silver and gold, that is?

Celebrate this: If we trust Jesus Christ as Saviour, then the most significant thing we celebrate is our salvation. We don't have to wonder where we will spend eternity. We don't have to strive to please God with our perfect lives because our sins will not be held against us. God has promised to forgive all who truly repent, the mistakes, all the disobedience, and all the hurtful things we have done or said in this life, and he has marked us as daughters and sons.

Celebrate this: We enjoy freedom, and live in one of the most prosperous nations in the history of the world. Think about it; whether you came here by birth or by boat, your life is blessed by the world's standards. We have the best health care, free education for our children, and the privilege of worshipping in whatever manner we choose.

Celebrate this: In this Church, you are part of a family of faith that cares deeply for one another. We commit to nurturing your children and grandchildren. When you rejoice, countless others rejoice with you. When you weep, you never weep alone. When you are in need, there will be someone there with a hug, or laughter, or a prayer, or an encouraging word.

Jesus taught that real giving must come from a heart full of gratitude. God does not want gifts with strings attached. A gift that is given with a grudge, conditions or for display loses most of its value. But a gift unconditionally given out of love, with a spirit of generosity and sacrifice, is invaluable. The amount or size of the gift doesn't matter as much as the cost to the giver. The poor widow could have kept one of her coins, but instead she recklessly gave away all she had! Jesus praised someone who gave barely a penny - how insignificant a sum - because it was everything she had, her whole living. What we have to offer may look very small and not worth much, but if we put all we have at the Lord's disposal, no matter how insignificant it may seem, then God can do with it and with us, what is beyond our reckoning.

When you consider what portion of your financial blessings you will share with your church in the coming year, you must first look in the other hand and celebrate the blessings you find there. So I ask you to do this: pray about it. Look at all that God has given to you, and then ask God what your response might be. Whatever you arrive at, trust that God will take your gift and multiply it 1,000 times. In this way, you will celebrate the gifts you have been given. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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