

Covenant and Kingdom (6)

Giving

2 Cor 8:1-16, Luke 6:37-38

CCK /27/11/2009

We have been looking these past few weeks at this theme of Covenant and Kingdom. Something which runs throughout the Scriptures – it is like the two pedals of a bicycle that follows one after the other on almost every page of the Bible.

We looked at Abraham where we have the account of the first Covenant being established. God draws Abram into relationship with him.

In the story of Joseph we saw how God entrust his authority and power to him and uses him to express his rule in the world. How the position of authority he has and the power he has to interpret dreams puts him in a place where God can use him to save many lives.

Last week as we looked at Moses we saw how in this one man God invests incredible authority and the power to back it up as he takes on the super power of the world which was in the grip of darkness. Moses confronts Pharaoh and does battle with the whole pantheon of the Egyptian gods and defeats them and leads the people of Israel to freedom so that they can worship God.

But before he can be used, like Joseph before him, he has got to learn that his identity is in the Covenant making Father who is also the King of the Universe. He has to learn the hard lesson of submission and that what he does for God does not define him but that it is God's Covenant love reaching out and embracing him and drawing him into relationship with him that defines him. From that place of being he can be commissioned to express God's rulership, God's saving of many, God's liberation of those in slavery, God's deliverance from all that poisons and assaults them.

And last week I put up this simple diagram which I find helps me hold this big picture in mind.

Covenant – our relationship with God as ...

Father

Which confirms our ...

Identity

And is evidenced through our ...

Obedience

Kingdom – our relationship with God as ...

King

Which affirms our ...

Authority

And is evidenced through the exercise of

Power

But if we try and run the arrows the wrong way ...

To gain authority through power – **exploitation**

To gain identity through obedience - **religion**

To use our identity to control God – **manipulation**

To use our authority to control God – **rebellion**

Now what I want to do is to look at one area of our life with God against this backdrop. Look at the practical implications of being a follower of Jesus through this lens.

I want to look at **giving, giving our money** to the work of the Lord.

We are taught to give, we are instructed in Scripture to give, we have appeals to give.

Now let me up front about the application of this sermon. It is not that you will take a Planned Giving card and fill it in. It is not that you will increase what you give to Christ Church the warehouse or whatever. That may happen, but my aim is that this lens will throw light for you as you come before God with this aspect of your life as a follower of Jesus.

As I was reflecting on this subject and thinking about people giving I realise that for most (myself included) the actual moment of giving, the moment of decision, release, the moment of release – that holy moment of release – is a probably one that happens in private at your computer as you do an EFT or as you write out a cheque. No doubt there are other moments when we give to someone at the traffic light or you put something into the bag during the offering. But for the most these would be lesser amounts – significant but smaller parts of our giving.

I want to speak into that private holy moment as you sit before the Lord in front of your computer, or as you sit at your desk and write a cheque. It is a precious moment and I pray that it be filled with God.

I did a bit of a survey and asked a number of people the question,

“Why do you give?”

Here are some of their responses. These may resonate with you.

(1) I want to belong

I want to be a part of what is doing. It is a privilege to be included.

My giving expresses something of who I am and how I am connected. It expresses my identity – I am part of this church, I am part of what God is doing through the Warehouse, Scripture Union, ...

Paul picks up that word “privilege” in his instructions to the Corinthians church as he speaks about the example of the Macedonian Christians.

2 Cor 4ff

They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. ⁵And they went beyond our expectations; having given themselves first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us.

It is lot about belonging and community, isn’t it?

“Sharing in this service” ... “giving themselves to the Lord” ... “giving themselves to us” ... “giving to the Lord’s people”.

It all stems from a common identity as Covenant people drawn into relationship with the Father and so with each other.

Maimonides – a rabbi in Spain in the 11th century and one of the greatest Torah scholars of the Middle Ages spoke of there are eight levels of *tzedaka*, (giving) each greater than the next. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer to beg.

So pray into that moment – “I belong, I am part of what God is doing, I am linked to the wider people of God both here and further afield, I am privileged to be part of this and to be able to play my part”.

(2) To bless others

I give to the Lord because I like blessing people.

In essence he is saying I want to do what God does. God blesses people, he has blessed me. I want to be like God. I want to copy him. I want to imitate God.

Paul uses this line of thinking as he writes to the Corinthians. He says in verse 9.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

In other words = Be like Jesus. Is that not our earnest desire – to be like Jesus?

Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us—he became poor and we became rich. (Message)

The blessing he gave us did not come without cost. It cost him his life. So as we give because we want to bless, we say to ourselves. This is going to cost me.

I think this would be in that eight category of giving that Maimonides taught.

So pray into that moment – *Thank you Jesus for the blessings I have received from you and for your willingness to pay that cost. I want to be like you. I want to strengthen a brother or a sister.*

It is about covenant but it mostly about kingdom. I want to express his rulership. Lord I take authority over what you have given me. As I give release your power.

“May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven...”

(3) I am thankful

I am very grateful to God for what he has given to me and this is one way in which I can give back to him.

This is about relationship isn't it? It is about me loving God. All I have is from God. I give back to him to say thank you.

It was this attitude that Paul points to in the Macedonia Christians. He mentions their overflowing joy welling up.

²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Their giving was an expression of their joy.

So pray into that moment – *Thank you Lord for all that you have given me.*

You can itemise things, name them before the Lord, and as you do so let joy well up in you.

Mokolotwane = joyous giving. Dance around the room before you hit the pay button!

(4) I am able to

I give to the Lord because the Lord has given to me abundantly and I am able to give.

This is similar, but there is another aspect here that we must not miss.

“I am able to ...” could be construed negatively. “I give because I have got a lot but others (and maybe me in a due course) won't be able to give because they don't / I won't ... have much – so in that case they are / I will be excused from giving.

But that is not what I hear being said hear. I sense a deeper reason for giving which comes out so clearly in the lesson read earlier when Paul writes to the Corinthians.

Look at 2 Cor 8:13ff

¹³Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

That last verse is a quotation from **Exodus 16:18**. And the context is God's provision of manna in the desert.

¹³That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer (1.4 kgs) for each person you have in your tent.' "

¹⁷The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Each one had gathered just as much as they needed.

Two principles:

(1) It all comes from God.

(2) Don't take more than you need. Everyone will have sufficient.

One could equally say –

... If you don't take more than you need everyone will have sufficient.

Paul quoting this to the Corinthians links this to equality in the body. There is enough to go round. At the moment you have in abundance and the church in Jerusalem is in need. The tables could well turn. You who have now can take pressure off those who don't.

So "I am able to give ..." is a good reason for giving.

It is saying I have received abundantly. I can take pressure off those who are hard pressed right now, because we belong together. The Covenant that God established is with us – not me alone. We are in this together. I can be a channel of God's blessing and relief to others.

So pray into that moment – *Lord you have entrusted me with an abundance. I release it now so that it can take pressure off those who need it more than I do.*

(5) I am behind the vision

I give because I am committed to supporting a vision, or to supporting an individual who is following a vision.

Why did the Macedonian Christian give? One reason was that they wanted to share in what Paul calls in verse 4

“... this service to the Lord’s people”.

They were giving to relieve the pressure on the Church in Jerusalem. They were behind the vision. It excited them. They bought into it literally. That is one reason why they gave.

It is often said the money follows vision.

It is not the only reason we give. But we do give because we are inspired by and want to get behind an inspiring vision.

So pray into that moment – allow the vision to grip you. Pray it!

Growing maturing disciples who are growing maturing disciples.

Serving the church in its response to poverty and injustice.

Youth evangelism and Bible reading.

Investing in the spiritual rebirth of Jewish people.

(6) Loving obedience

I give because God commands us to give, and sometimes I might not want to and sometimes I might want to, but either way I have to. And because I love God I want to do what he asks me to do.

Look at this response. It is right there on that bottom bar of the Covenant triangle. It is a command. I do it not as whim. It is not just about how I feel at the time. It is a deliberate choice. It is an act of the will.

Paul speaks about this as he addresses the Corinthians. He says to them ...

Verse 6

⁶So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

And again in verse 11.

¹¹Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

But that act – that choice to obey – that decision to complete and follow through, comes from a place of knowing I am loved and I want to respond. It flows out of the understanding that I am in Covenant relationship with the Father who has given me everything ... *a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, poured into your lap...*

So pray into that moment – Lord I choose to obey you. I am bringing to completion what I promised to do. Receive this act of obedience as an expression of my love.

(7) It makes me feel good

I give because I feel good when I give.

Now while this is true it is not just self-indulgent. We do not simply do it for ourselves. No the truth that underlies this is that we were made to give. It is part of our design. So when we do what we were designed to do we should feel good.

So we give because that completes us.

When we give we are, as we saw earlier, being like God. His image is being reflected in us. We are bearing his likeness.

Eric Liddell the Olympic 400m champion in 1924 who went on to become a missionary in China is famously quoted as saying ...

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.

God has made us for a purpose – to be like him, and when we give like him we can feel his pleasure.

So pray into that moment – Lord you have made me to give. I feel your pleasure at this moment. In this private moment that no one knows about. This intimate place of connection between me and you, I know your pleasure.

Back to **Maimonides**. The second highest level of giving is the one who gives offerings to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives, nor does the recipient know his benefactor.

So there is no kudos and chance of control or manipulation. It is an intimate moment between the giver and God alone.

(8) Breaks money's power

I give because I want to break the stronghold of money in my life.

Many times Jesus speaks about the power and danger of money taking a grip on us. He says ...

"You cannot serve God and mammon." Matt 6:24

"I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Matt 19:24

"But woe to you who are rich". Luke 6:24

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." Matt 6:19

And in Luke 14:25ff Jesus concludes his teaching on money with such disturbing words that we find it hard to believe he could possibly mean what he says.

"In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples" (vs. 33).

Jesus is saying that money is an idol we must be converted *from* in order to be follow him.

Money has power and we need to recognise its power and be on our guard not to let it control us. One way to break the power money can have on us is to give it away.

So yes, "I give because I want to break the stronghold of money on my life".

So pray into that moment –*I renounce the power of money and it attempt to control me. Lord I declare that you are my Lord.*

You can pray the baptism prayer that follows the renunciation in the baptism service.

God of mercy look on me.

Put to death my sinful desires.

Give me the life of your spirit.

Enable me to overcome the evil one.

*Give me every Christian virtue.
Bring me with your saints to everlasting glory.
Almighty God deliver me from the powers of darkness
and lead me into the light and obedience of Christ.*

So there we have it. Some examples from our community. Some lessons from the rabbis. And of course the determinative living Word of God.

My aim? To encourage you to invite God into that sacred private moment when you give. To feel know yourself drawn into a place of intimacy in Covenant Relationship with your Father, and to know too his authority and power released in you and through you as you express his rule and are a channel of his blessing on the world.