

50:50 GIVE GENEROUSLY

50:50 So Far

Over these last few weeks we've been looking at ways we can help the poor. We've considered:

- **Listen Carefully:** How we can listen carefully so that we can have an understanding of the needs of the poor;
- **Consume Ethically:** How we can consume more ethically so that we not only care more for the environment but free up the resources God has given us so that we are able to give more;
- **Speak Boldly:** Speaking boldly, to advocate, on behalf of those who find it very difficult or are not able to speak for themselves.

Today we're looking at the whole idea of **giving generously** because there are so many poor who are in desperate need. The problem is pretty big.

Some World Facts

- More than one billion people in the world live on less than one dollar a day (extreme poverty). Another 2.7 billion struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day.
- More than 800 million go hungry each day. 300 million of these are children. Declining soil fertility, land degradation, and the AIDS pandemic have led to a 23 per cent decrease in food production per capita in the last 25 years even though population has increased dramatically.
- The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the poorest 48 nations (i.e. a quarter of the world's countries) is less than the wealth of the world's three richest people combined.
- 20% of the population in the developed nations consume 86% of the world's goods.
- A few hundred millionaires now own as much wealth as the world's poorest 2.5 billion people.
- The 48 poorest countries account for less than 0.4 per cent of global exports.
- In 2000, rich nations agreed to the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which include lifting international aid to 0.7% of GDP by 2015.
- The 2005 increase in Australia's aid budget from around \$2.5 billion now to \$4 billion in 2010 would only increase Australia's share of aid from the current level of 0.28 per cent of gross national income (GNI) to 0.36 per cent of GNI. This would still leave Australia languishing in 18th place out of the 22 OECD donors in 2010.

A Struggle to Survive

I went to Indonesia at the start of 2006 and we stayed in a house on an ordinary street in the city of Bandung. What that meant was that we got to see what life was like for the average person in that city. We hadn't been there too many days before it became blindingly obvious that these people were very hard workers, working extremely long hours – just to survive.

- The street vendors would still be walking the streets at 11 o'clock at night.
- After working all day, the males of another family would then go scouring the streets looking for anything that could be sold for recycling.
- We needed a fridge repaired. The repairman turned up at 10 pm. Unprecedented in Australia.
- And that's to say nothing of the beggars on the streets.

None of that was for extra cash or luxuries; it was just to survive. And that's how it is for many of the world's poor: life is a struggle just to survive, nothing else.

Most of us here would see ourselves as average Aussies and not rich by Australian standards. But in terms of how life is for many people in the world, we are fabulously wealthy and well resourced. And yet listen to the outcry when some government decision is made that will have an impact on our financial bottom line! There would be many people in other countries (and in our own!) who would dream to have our problems. Billions of people have no hope of getting out of their poverty.

The difficulty I have is that the problem seems so vast I feel as though it's impossible to make a difference. We're not going to be able to solve the problems of world poverty, but we are able to make a difference – no matter how small – through our use of the resources God has given us. I'm also aware that there's that within me that wonders, Do I really want to do what's needed to help make a difference?

I listened to a song on You Tube called The Guilt Song sung by the comedian Tim Minchin who I think really got to the nub of the issue:

*I give money to folk that just don't have enough
to try to justify the future purchases of stuff
that I don't need.*

*I know that one less vodka cranberry tonight
could feed some foreign family for a fortnight.....
but I might just have one more.*

But the poor, what is all this hoo ha for?

*It's the force that drove Theresa and the school that Oprah built,
I'll give you 50 bucks to take away my guilt.*

*I'm more interested in footy than seeing the Solomon's rebuilt,
but I'll give you 50 bucks to take away my guilt.*

In the end, this comes down to an issue of the heart.

THE FOUNDATION OF GENEROSITY

2 Cor 8:1-7 – Mairi to read

I am constantly challenged by the Macedonians. Paul was taking up a regional offering for the distressed believers in the Jerusalem church. The Macedonians were also finding it hard, probably because they were under persecution. They had nothing. But they knew abundant joy because of the grace of God and that joy flowed over into generosity for the Jerusalem church. They had been touched by and experienced God's grace toward them and so they took great delight in being generous toward others. Their abundance of joy and generosity didn't flow out of their life being sweet and smooth, neither did it flow out of an abundance of money. It came from within extreme poverty and persecution. Just what we wouldn't normally expect.

Touched By God's Grace

Nothing will have greater impact on us than being touched by the grace of God. We've seen and heard His grace in action today as we've shared together in James' & Hannah's baptisms. Once we've been touched by his grace, all those things to which we previously gave our devotion will suddenly not seem anywhere near as important. Instead of wanting to hold things close to ourselves we'll be free and willing to give generously. Just as it did for the Macedonians, it will flow from an overflowing joy in the grace of God.

Wealth and Generosity

It may or may not surprise you to know that there is no correlation between becoming rich and becoming generous. In fact, if there is any correlation at all, it is the opposite – the more rich a person becomes the more likely it is that they will be less generous. Quoting John Piper from a recent sermon in Boston, the state of Mississippi has the lowest per capita income of any of the US states, but it is the highest per capita in giving. On the other hand, the state of Massachusetts has the highest per capita income of all the states, and yet it is only 7th of the states in per capita giving.

How often do we think something like this: All I need to do is get over this financial hump and then I'll be able to give more. We won't! There will always be something happening. Generosity starts right now. I'm not suggesting that we go out and sell everything and give it to the poor. That would then mean we would be poor and people would have to be giving to us! Not much point in that. But we know where our hearts are at; we know whether we are grasping or generous. There will be times when we flow from one to the other (I say that because I think that describes me).

Let me share with you some things I also heard last week in a sermon from John Piper. If we're faced with something we really don't want to do but know we should e.g. giving to the poor, the general thought is that doing it is the important thing, even if only out of duty or obligation. According to Piper, that's not the first step. The first step is to repent of our hard-heartedness, lack of joy and generosity. Then ask the Spirit to do an inner work to change us, to shape us more like Jesus and his generous heart.

It's part of the character of the consumerist Australia in which we swim that we are caught up with ourselves and everyone else comes second (sometimes a poor second). Even though the problem of the poor seems so vast, with our own resources we are able to make a difference. May God give us the heart to always be able to do that with a joyful expression of generosity. Here's an example of how a small amount made a huge difference.

Sulemon's Story

Sulemon's is a story of rags to sustenance. She and her husband live in Bangladesh and struggled to get by on his meager earnings as a rickshaw puller. The family couldn't afford enough food, medical expenses or to send their two children to school.

Sulemon was determined things would change. She dreamed of starting her own business, but with no savings she couldn't afford the start-up costs; with no collateral she couldn't get a loan from a bank; and with no education she couldn't perform simple calculations, let alone administer financial records.

In 2001, Sulemon's life changed when she joined a savings group coordinated by one of Baptist World Aid Australia's partners. Each week, members of the group met together to deposit a few cents into a savings pool. As the savings grew members could take loans for income generation activities. The group also organized education classes for its members covering basic reading and writing skills, hygiene, health care, nutrition and small business administration.

The pieces of the puzzle started to fall together for Sulemon. Armed with her new-found literacy and business skills, Sulemon borrowed 500 Taka (AU\$9) to buy some ducks and chickens. By breeding these she was able to earn a profit of 300 Taka per month. She quickly repaid her loan and borrowed again, this time adding goats to her livestock breeding business.

Sulemon's profits allowed the family to eat better, but weren't enough to send the children to school. This weighed heavily on Sulemon's heart. Having attended education classes and run a successful livestock business she felt confident to explore a bigger business idea: a tea stall in the park by the river. It was a great idea. The park was a popular picnic area and Sulemon's tea was soon in high demand. The business grew and Sulemon's husband now works with her in the stall. They earn over 3000 Taka (AU\$65) per month, plus their income from the livestock breeding business.

This has made all the difference. The family have enough to support themselves and to send the children to school. Sulemon's life was turned around by the support of the savings group and her own hard work. It was also made possible by the giving of people in Australia, without whose generosity the savings group would not have existed and Sulemon would not have received the training she needed to get on her feet.

Source: Baptist World Aid Australia