The Wisdom of Generosity
Various proverbs

Well, the latest news from Jasmine’s mother’s group is that many mothers are sending their babies to swimming lessons. Not children, babies. Apparently a baby needs to only be 4 months of age before he or she can start taking formal lessons with an accredited swim teacher. And if you do it the right way—and the experts do emphasize that there is a right way and a wrong way—if you do it the right way you can dunk your baby under the water! I’ve had a number of conversations with people in our church about this. George Barrett (and Garfield) were speaking with me about this last week, in our evening congregation we have some swim school operators, the Whitelaws run a swim school in Turramurra that caters for babies.

I couldn’t think of anything more terrifying than taking your small child and pushing/dragging/pulling—whatever it is you do—scooping—your baby through the water when on dry land they can barely sit up, and when at bath time you’re still afraid to fill the bath higher than their thigh. In fact, I remember Verity Whitelaw saying that one of the most frightening things she’s ever done was to dunk her children under for the very first time. “But” she said, “provided you’re shown how to do it properly, it works!” It seems so counterintuitive, doesn’t it? To take a baby who is so vulnerable, who is in need of so much help, who is only just learning to control their hands and their mouth, and then to fully submerge them underwater; it just seems so risky! Understandably, I’m nervous about such an action, and both Jasmine and I are finding it hard to be convinced.

Today we are continuing in our series looking at what the OT book of Proverbs says about money. And today’s lesson is one that feels incredibly counterintuitive. The book of Proverbs encourages us to be generous. Not just with our time, not simply with our words, but to be generous in giving away significant portions of our income. And for many of us, this feels as scary as taking a young infant and dunking it underwater. We think “Is that really a wise thing to do? Perhaps there is great risk in handing over large chunks of our income, maybe we’ll do irreparable damage by acting so carelessly” But the book of Proverbs wants to challenge those assumptions. The book of Proverbs wants to show us the wisdom of generosity. Just like there is real wisdom in having a child who can swim, there is also real wisdom in developing a heart that seeks to be generous. Some of the more significant proverbs regarding generosity have been collected there for you, and there is a sermon outline as well. And we begin by looking at the rewards that generosity brings to the giver.

The first reward is that there is a relational benefit to being generous: those who give freely are held in honour within the community. 11:16 paints a contrast for us: A kindhearted woman gains honor, but ruthless men gain only wealth. A similar point is made a few verses later in 11:26. People curse the one who hoards grain, but they pray God’s blessing on the one who is willing to sell. The idea here is of someone holding on to a storehouse of
People love someone who is generous. I’ve seen this in my own social circle; those with plenty of friends—those who are held in honour—are the ones who are generous towards others. This can be generosity in terms of time spent in friendship in terms of their willingness to pray for others in terms of pastoral concern, in terms of hospitality. Many of these examples are ways of being generous without involving dollars, but some of them do involve a financial cost. Hospitality is something that costs money, but there is a return in that you gain a positive relational benefit. Pursue generosity and you will find yourself being held in high regard.

There is another benefit that comes from being generous which is, perhaps, a little more difficult to wrap our minds around, and that’s what we see written in ch 11:25. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. A similar idea is there again at 22:9 The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. The Bible does speak about what you might call a boomerang effect; our willingness to be generous will generate some kind of return. And the return spoken of is not simply payment-in-kind, not simply in the warm fuzzy feelings of knowing that you’ve done good, not simply the relational benefit that we spoke of before. The Bible does speak of a material response to our generosity. Again in 28:27 Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses.

The idea of a giver receiving a blessing in return is difficult to understand and accept. One reason is because in recent years many churches throughout the world have promoted a false way of thinking known as the ‘Prosperity Gospel’. Here’s an example for you. This is a quote from an American Tele-evangelist named Gloria Copeland. In her book, which is named, God’s Will is Prosperity, she says this:

*When you are obedient to the word of God, nothing can stop wealth and riches from being in your house – except you. If you will not accept prosperity, God will not perform beyond what you are willing to receive. But if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land!*  

What she is saying is that God wants you to be rich. The will of God is to not only have your needs met but to be rolling in cash.

There are so many problems with this teaching it’s hard to know where to begin! First of all, the Biblical expectation, both in the Old Testament and the New, is that there will always be both rich and poor within the people of God. There is a time when there will be prosperity across the board, but that won’t be until when Jesus returns. This prosperity doctrine is very selective in its use of the Bible, and so it creates a false expectation of riches for everyone. Secondly, the emphasis in this teaching falls on the creation of personal wealth. The message appeals to what people can earn for themselves, whereas the Bible’s emphasis falls on what your wealth can do for others. So the prosperity gospel is a dangerous teaching, but like every heresy, it does contain a grain of truth. The truth is that God is responsive to our acts of generosity,
One place we see this in the New Testament is in 2 Corinthians 9. Paul is encouraging the church in Corinth to give to an appeal for another church that has fallen on hard times and part of his argument is to say, in ch 9:6 that those who sow generously will also reap generously. Generous giving will boomerang back, there will be a return. Now, make no mistake, Paul is no Gloria Copeland; there is an important distinction. Paul’s aim isn’t personal riches and the satisfaction of material desires, Paul’s aim is to see people gaining more in order to give more away. Chapter 9:11 You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. So here’s an important corrective to the prosperity doctrine. The Prosperity teaching says “God wants you to be rich”. The Bible says “God wants you to be generous, and he will enable you to be”

In my own life I’ve put this to the test a number of times. I particularly remember when I was a student with limited income, there were a number of occasions when I was tempted to stop my regular giving to church. If I fell behind I was tempted to not make up the amount with a bulk payment. There were times when I wrote cheques for other students who were in a worse situation than me. Each time I asked myself “Is this generosity really necessary?” Each time I decided to trust the Bible’s point of view. Each time I decided to err on the side of generosity. And each time I managed to get by just fine! I’d love to be able to say that each time a mysterious cheque arrived in the mail for double the amount that I donated, but that would be a lie! But God did enable me to keep going and to keep on giving. I think the best way to apply verses like these in the Bible is not to take them as a scheme to get rich but as an encouragement to not give in to the fear which can stifle generosity. Proverbs wants to give us some courage: those give will lack nothing. God loves a cheerful giver, and so he will enable you to give.

Proverbs has a few other things to say to us on the topic of generosity, we’ll look at these quickly, including three more foolish ways of thinking. It is possible to be too generous, to be generous towards those who will waste your money. The first section of Proverbs that we read this morning speaks about this. 6:1 My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger, you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth. The image here is of a young man pledging security for a bad debt. You can imagine him thinking that he’s doing the right thing. “My neighbor has this idea and he wants to borrow money to buy a ute to start a lawn mowing business, he’s never been reliable and he doesn’t have a history of hard work. But it’s the right thing to do. The Bible tells me to be generous!” Well, the Bible does tell us to be generous, but it doesn’t tell us to be gullible! Money is a precious resource, you can’t lend it to people who will waste it.

I used to work in an inner city church and we’d have lots of people come to ask for money. I remember one very aggressive young woman, she turned up half way through the service and I went out to speak with her in the car park, and she asked for money for food, and I said “I’m happy to buy you groceries, but I’m not handing you cash”. She had the scars on the face that you usually associate with users of the
drug ice, and she started to get a bit insistent. “No!” she said, “I don’t want groceries, I want the cash.” I said “We don’t do that, we’ll buy you what you need but we don’t hand out money” She said. “Why don’t you come with me to my flat, and I’ll introduce you to my friend, and he’ll vouch for me.” I said “I’m not going any where with you!” I went back inside, she ended up wandering off. Sometimes you need to make a judgment call and help people in other ways.

How else might we get our thinking wrong? At a number of points Proverbs speaks about stinginess, or tightfistendness. Holding on to what you have and not letting go of it, let alone giving it away. This might seem like a good strategy, but Proverbs says that it’s misguided. 11:24 One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. Or again in 28:22 The stingy are eager to get rich and are unaware that poverty awaits them. Why is it the case that holding on to money leads you to poverty? Maybe it’s the same wisdom that we find in the saying “You need to spend money to make money”; money that’s just warehoused without being put to work looses value.

Jesus shows that he is aware of this wisdom when speaks about the Master who gives bags of gold to his servant to invest. Two of them gain a return on the capital while the third buries it under soil. The master isn’t happy with that third servant. It’s a parable about what we are doing with the treasure of the gospel, but the logic is that same: whether we are speaking about the treasure of the Gospel or the treasure of financial resources, what we have is meant to be used and put to work.

Or maybe the foolishness of stinginess is tied up with what we were talking about earlier: how generosity leads to a good standing in the community. From a business perspective, it’s hard to make money if you have a bad reputation born out of stinginess. This week we saw that the CEO of the Commonwealth Bank was hauled in front of a senate inquiry where he was grilled about the CBAs stinginess towards its customers: things like failing to pay up on insurance claims for terminally ill patients, asking questions as to “how sick these people really are”. Sitting next to the CEO was the bank’s Risk Manager. I thought that was telling; they know that being seen to be stingy is a risk for their business. The book of Proverbs would agree, stinginess is a financial method that doesn’t work.

Another mistake is to think that financial success is something to brag about and that poverty is something to despise. 17:5 Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished. Mocking the poor is something we’re trained to do by watching PrimeTime TV. How many times has A Current Affair lead with a story about Neighbours from Hell, or Unbelievable Horders. Usually these people are from lower-income areas, maybe they live in public housing—housing commission homes—and we are encouraged to think “what a freak show!” Well, Proverbs would have us remember that these people are made in God’s image. In that sense they are no different to you and me, and yet it is so easy to feel superior and to harden our hearts against them. Proverbs 14:21 calls this
attitude sin. What’s much better is to harvest a heart of generosity towards these people, people loved by God, People for whom Jesus died.

And it’s that example of dying on the cross that’s really at the heart of all we have to say about generosity. We are generous because God was generous first of all to us. Did Christ ever flinch at the opportunity to be generous? Did he ever doubt the wisdom of offering himself as a sacrifice for sin? I think he probably did in the Garden of Gethsemane. If you remember, he had that moment when he wondered whether or not he really needed to be that generous. It’s a moment we each encounter in a small way when we see a need in front of us. We’ve heard a need today with Ben and Penny, and we’ll hear more needs next week at Celebration Sunday, and when we hear of these needs we will wonder whether it might actually be foolish to risk that much generosity. God doesn’t want us to be foolish, he wants us to be wise, and he want us to realize that being generous is actually a very wise move. A Christ-like move, a move that God is not in the business of forgetting.