

GOOD WORKS

SMALL BUSINESS. BIG CHANGE.

Biblical Reflections & Preaching Points

INTRODUCTION

Numerous biblical verses encourage sincere and generous giving, especially to people who are in need or poverty. It was one of the marks of being God's chosen people, a light to the world, and reflective of an authentic faith in Christ.

Like trees deeply planted by life-giving water, the Psalmist tells us that faithful people yield fruit that can be seen and benefit those in need. Jesus may well have had that image in mind when he taught that a true faith results in good works, just as a tree is known by its fruit. The apostle James was more blunt – in his words, faith without works is dead.

The ability and invitation to help people in need can take many creative forms. When Israel was establishing rules for its new society, God commanded open-handed lending to the poor in the land (Deuteronomy 15:8). Hundreds of years later, Jesus warned of the evils of not forgiving unrealistic debt loads (Matthew 18:21-35), and the need to give without seeking credit in return (Luke 6:31-34). Over time, Christians have followed these directives while assisting those in need in numerous ways, both publically and privately. These have included serving meals, designating offerings, fundraising initiatives, and anonymous gifts.

The early churches also began to follow basic principles of global and local giving. Paul invited the Corinthians to help the people of Jerusalem deal with the ravages of famine so that “those who have much would not have too much, and those who have little would not have too little” (2 Corinthians 8:15). One modern day way to continue this biblical practice of global-local support is through microcredit loans. These gifts serve as start-up resources to enable industrious and hardworking people to support themselves and others through difficult circumstances.

JESUS, A SMALL BOY, AND A BIG CHANGE

The spiritual principles underlying microcredit loans can be illustrated in one of Jesus' most famous miracles, the feeding of the five thousand recorded in John 6:1-15.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world. When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Beyond the obvious miracle and heart-warming details of this story, the passage is full with deeper meaning. The occasion was Passover, the Jewish equivalent of the American 4th of July, signifying Independence Day. Remembering the miraculous deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the crowds surrounding Jesus were keenly hoping for a Messiah or new Moses to lead them out of their present oppression.

The event describes Jesus offering the people food for both the soul and body. After teaching them, he shows compassion for the hungry by miraculously feeding what some estimate to be as many as 20,000 people (once women and children were included). The twelve baskets of “leftovers” can signify the 12 tribes of Israel, illustrating that Christ will always take care of his faithful people.

The large truths present in this passage do not obscure a simple human action that sits at the centre of the story and upon which the miracle pivots – the small boy making his loaves and fishes available to Jesus. This action was more than a quaint or charming detail; it speaks to the simple and sincere act of offering what we are able to help those in need, and what God is then able to accomplish.

SUGGESTED PREACHING POINTS

1. In verses 5 and 7, Jesus “tests” Philip by asking him to solve the glaring problem of hunger. Philip applies a one-dimensional financial solution using the logic of the marketplace. After doing some quick mental math he concludes that the situation is hopeless. We read in verse 9 that Andrew, not unlike Philip, is preoccupied with quantity and limited by a lack of faith. He locates the little boy with five barley loaves (loaves of barley were an inexpensive bread usually eaten by the lower classes) and two fish (probably small pickled fish). Andrew quickly assesses that this is ludicrously inadequate. It is easy for narrow rational and economic thinking to conclude that the hunger and poverty in our world cannot be solved.
2. Jesus decides to use the small lunch from the little boy as the starting point for meeting the larger need. Notice that Jesus is not embarrassed to receive. He could have produced food in many ways, even by turning stones to bread, but he chooses to take and incorporate the little boy’s meal. What lesson would Philip and Andrew learn from this?
3. The little boy offers the food without fanfare or the need to draw attention to himself, to the extent that we are tempted to ignore him. It is an attitude that illustrates the teaching of Jesus in Luke 6:31-34, which speaks to an attitude that does not seek credit for self. Though the amount he gives is puny next to the profound need, the little boy has given all that he has to give. He has sacrificed. This represents the trusting and unseen faith of a child that can easily be dismissed or overlooked.
4. We need the faith of a child to offer our financial support to help people who face large needs. We need the eyes of faith to see that we are giving to the invisible Lord who clearly identifies himself with those in need (Matthew 25). We do so trusting that Christ will enable industrious people to transform our offerings into resources that will serve themselves and many others. The logic of our world will tell us that a microcredit loan is given by the “strong” to help the “weak,” but this miracle allows us to see that we are all weak, and what we give is offered to the one who is stronger and wiser than us. The miracle follows, with Jesus revealing the power of giving and receiving.
5. In the hands of Christ, this small “donation” is sufficient. Everyone was satisfied (v 12); the people did not indulge or overeat. Then the leftovers are gathered up (v 13). Though it was standard for Jewish people to not discard leftovers, Jesus himself models social responsibility and stewardship. Nothing is wasted.
6. Imagine the little boy looking up, watching Jesus take the food and begin to divide it up. What was going through his mind, and what was the look on his face? Do you think the little boy was given back some bread and fish to eat? Now imagine him going home and describing what happened to a friend or family member who had not been with him. Finally, how do you think this story impacted him as he grew up and established his own values around money and food, and investing in the needs of others? If the little boy, now an adult, was alive today and visiting your church, how would he explain the spiritual logic of a microcredit loan?