

December: Give Freely / Christmas

Introduction

A complete stranger once came up to me on the street and asked, "Do you have any money? I just need \$5 to catch a train." On that rare occasion I knew that I did have \$5 in my wallet that I could spare, and that simple fact instantly sent me spiralling into a major philosophical quandary. What should I do? The thing that instantly came to mind for me was the advice I'd heard from many people before: "Never give stranger money. You don't know what they'll do with it. They might spend it on alcohol or drugs or cigarettes. It's better to go and buy them the food they need, or their train ticket, or whatever it is they're after. That way you know exactly where the money is going." Sounds like wisdom, right? Does the Bible have anything to say about these things?

Actually yes it does, but not a lot of people know about it because it's hidden in the book of Leviticus - which is not exactly easy reading. It's not the kind of book you'd display on your coffee table anyway. But if you're willing to dig a little you can find some real gems in there. Leviticus contains a lot of guidelines for the ancient Israelites, which can give us a great idea of how God wants us to live. It's the only place in the Old Testament where you'll find the command to love your neighbour, for example. So what does it say on the topic of giving? Have a look in Leviticus 19:9-10. In this text farmers are told not to reap the corners of their fields or to pick up grapes that may have fallen from the vine; instead they are to leave these for the poor and for foreigners who may be passing by and may need some food.

There are two reasons that this law is impressive. First, it challenges our greed. So much of what we are taught, particularly in Christianity, is that we must be good stewards of everything we have, and often this implies DON'T WASTE ANYTHING. Maybe your parents told you to "Eat everything on your plate." Some people feel like they must always be doing something valuable with their time, or they're just wasting it. Maybe you feel the need to save every spare penny, or spend them all on your home loan, because it's vitally important to make sure every little bit is going to something important. Don't waste money! Stop wasting time! Don't waste your energy doing things that might not work. Make every little bit count.

So we become protective of what we have, even the bits left over after we've used what we need. We don't like the extra bits - the "corners" - of our pay cheques to disappear just because someone might need some help. In fact, it's even worse than that. Most of us, through the use of our credit cards, are using not just every last cent, but actually a bit more than that too. We don't have any corners left, and we have actually borrowed from the neighbour's corner through the bank to live at the level we enjoy. This Leviticus passage challenges that kind of greed. It's a call to contentment: be happy with what you've got, and be generous with the bits you don't really need.

The second interesting thing about Leviticus 19:9 - 10 is that there is no control over who gets the food. Anyone could come through and harvest the corners of the fields, and anyone could pick up those extra grapes. Not only that, but there's no acknowledgement to the farmer for his or her generosity either. In other words, there is no payback, not even through a sense of satisfaction on the part of the farmer who now knows that someone else was helped by their generosity. There are no strings attached. If a rich foreigner takes the remaining harvest, the farmer has no right to question him. Even if a dodgy neighbour comes through and takes it away. Even if some kids come through and take all the grapes to throw at each other. It is giving without determining how the gift is used. It is generosity without controlling who gets it or how they use it.

Jesus said something similar when He told his followers to invite people to dinner who cannot repay you by inviting you back. This is a really significant point coming up to Christmas. There is nothing wrong with giving presents as an act of kindness or even grace. However, our Christmas celebrations have become more of an exchange of wealth between family and friends. Often we worry, "What if I spend this much, but then my friend spends a lot more on a present for me?" Or sometimes we can feel a little bit offended if we got someone a gift but they didn't get one for us. And we can feel even more awkward if someone gives us a gift but we didn't get one for them.

I think if Jesus were here today, He would say, give gifts this Christmas to those who cannot repay you with a gift. Give to people who are in need, not just your friends. Live generously with no strings attached, with no expectation of anything in return. If people don't give you a gift back, who cares! If people don't invite you back to their place or their party, no worries! Make this Christmas season different both from your past and from the experience of those around you. Take the opportunity, ever so quietly and without fanfare, to make a statement that you want to live like Jesus when you celebrate His birth, and find ways to give the corners of your salary to anyone or everyone who needs help. For some of us, that might mean we have to reduce some of our spending on our friends so that we have some extra to give to others.

There are always plenty of opportunities to give to people in need at Christmas. Enjoy the season of generosity and festivity, and have a wonderful Christmas!



Challenges

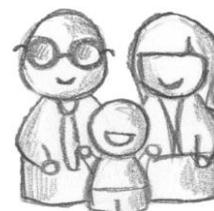
For this final month, which coincides with the Christmas season, there are only three challenges which fit with each version of a Big Year. We encourage you to tackle each of these challenges to help enlighten and enrich during this busy time.



ADULTS



YOUTH



FAMILIES



MONK

- Advent is the season in the Christian calendar where we celebrate the days in anticipation of Christmas. This advent, we encourage you to make an intentional effort to focus on and celebrate the coming of Jesus. Here are some ideas to help with this: Follow an [Advent Calendar](#) which has daily readings & activities, Make a [Jesse Tree](#), which traces the coming of Jesus throughout the scripture.



CHEERLEADER

- It was said that when Jesus came into the world he would bring 'peace on earth'. You can join with Jesus in this by doing your best to bring 'peace on earth' this month. When you get together with your family and friends this Christmas make a rule that you will only say good things about other people.



ACTIVIST

- Give generously and thoughtfully this Christmas. There are a number of useful links on the website and app to help you in compiling your Christmas shopping list.

