

This is one of those hard teachings of Jesus.  
Well, hard if you're rich,  
if you are poor then it's one of his sayings of consolation.  
This parable is an expanded version  
of a more pithy statement in chapter 6 of Luke:  
Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ...  
But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation"

It's a challenge for us to hear such statements –  
And we can deal with them in a number of ways –  
we can spiritualise them –  
of course it means those who recognise their spiritual poverty  
that Jesus is talking about.

Or we can say, well it's all relative –  
yes I more money than most people in the world,  
but if I gave all my money away than I'd be the one  
in need of charity and the situation is not actually any better.

Or we can find other ways to simply ignore it,  
or to live with the feelings of uncomfortableness  
that such pieces of scripture give us.

Such a passage as this could just leave us  
feeling vaguely guilty,  
but I hope not  
and we shouldn't shy away from facing the challenge head on –  
allowing the passage to poke us a bit and see what happens.  
As well as poking it back a bit as we think about it  
for ourselves today.

First place where we can feel guilt instead of anything useful –  
we are the rich in this world – all of us.

There is a website called 'global rich list.com'  
you can type in your annual income  
and see where in the world you rank in terms of richness.

The UK average income is around 27K,  
depending on how you calculate it.  
if you earn 27k you are in the richest 1% of the world

If you earn 20k, you're in the richest 4%,  
12K and you're still in the top 10%,  
5K and you're still in the richest 13% in the world.

Such figures should give us pause for thought.  
But of course it's not that simple –  
certainly anyone whose income is 5K a year –  
in this country would be regarded as poor  
and would need to receive help.  
It costs more to live in this country than many others.  
If you cannot afford decent housing and food you are poor,  
no matter what country you are living in.  
And so whether you are actually rich or poor  
becomes more problematic.

Secondly – who are the poor at our gate –  
In Jesus time there was no shortage of the obviously poor –  
walk down any given street and they were there,  
right in front of you.

What about us? Who are we responsible for?  
Through our media we have a global gateway  
at which the poor are to be found –  
it is easy to feel overwhelmed and we give  
not out of compassion or generosity, but out of guilt –  
we give to make ourselves feel better for a little while

What disturbs me about this scripture is that Jesus seems to be saying – be nice to poor people or you'll go to hell – and I'm not sure that is a good way to motivate people to anything – Jesus seems to be appealing to our own self-interest – give for your own ultimate benefit not for the benefit of the person in front of you.

But else where Jesus appeals to us to remember how much we have received from God, and that is to be what motivates us to give in turn. that is it is grace and our remembrance of it that is to be our motivating force – a gift that is given out of guilt, or self-interest or to make ourselves feel better, - is no gift at all.

Talking about money and giving can be an easy way to make people feel uncomfortable, and Jesus certainly does it here. So what are we to do, in our day, now?

It is of course between us and God, and know one else – only God knows what lies behind our motivation for giving away or for holding on to our wealth. Only God knows the insecurity that makes us want to hang on to it, or the guilt that motivates us to give it away – and I'm pretty sure that neither of those are good motivations for any action.

There is no end to the needs that come in front of us day in and out, and there are two sides to dealing with it.

First – to remember what is good in our lives, that it is given to us freely and to celebrate that –

you might call it 'counting your blessings' -  
then there is the honest assessment of what you need  
to be able to live – and if possible to not be a burden on others –  
that is a scriptural principle too –  
and sometimes you will need to give less or not at all  
to the need in front of you –

that is fine, and if there is honesty between you and God  
then there won't be guilt or defensiveness with that decision –  
and if you do experience either of those emotions  
you need to check with yourself with God as to why.

Next time you feel pressured to give,  
or you feel bad because you can't give –  
and our world that kind of situation is so common –  
stop and think about where that feeling is coming from.  
Sometimes it will be the way in which the need is presented  
but most of the time it'll be something inside,  
an insecurity, or guilt perhaps – and take that to God –  
because God knows what goes on in you  
better than you do yourself.  
We know too much about guilt in our Christian lives –  
We need to get to grips more with grace  
and what that is all about.  
Because it is grace that will enable us to give  
with thankfulness and joy,  
and it is grace that will enable us to not feel bad or guilty  
when we can't give.

The feelings we have when we think about giving –  
be that of time or energy or money –  
will tell us a lot about what we think of ourselves and of God.

If you constantly tend to feel that you're not doing enough  
If you fill your life with activity –  
perhaps you need to stop and rest in God's  
unconditional love for you, as you.

If you feel like you've got nothing worth giving,  
perhaps you need to stop and get to grips with the fact  
that you are a child of God – made in the image of God.

If you tend to feel bad about not giving  
even though there are quite legitimate reasons for you not to,  
perhaps you need to stop and ponder that  
our life in faith is all about freedom and thankfulness.

It all comes down to grace and whether we can see ourselves  
simply as children of God, called to love one another.