

The Different Reasons for Giving Mark 12.41-44

Hopefully today you have all brought something for the food bank. It's a great thing to do, so well done for doing it.

But I want to explore the different reasons why people give to others. I want to tell you about some research that has been done on how the reasons people act the way they do and believe the things they do change throughout their lives.

One of the original researchers into the way people's morality – their beliefs about what is right and wrong - changes over the course of their life, was a man called Lawrence Kohlberg. He found that people went through definite stages in the way they thought about right and wrong as they grew from children into adults.

There has been a lot of research in recent years into the stages human beings go through as they mature and develop. The important thing to know about these stages is that they are all correct.

Each stage is built around an important truth about life. In saying that, when people are at a particular stage they usually are critical of other stages. For stages they have already been through, they can see the limitations of those earlier stages. But when it comes to stages they haven't been through, they will think that those stages are just wrong in some way.

While each stage is good and highlights an important truth, the later stages are able to see a bigger picture, and hold more complex truths about the world in one worldview.

Rev Ben Arcus

So I am going to talk you through some of these stages today to help you understand the various motivations people might have for giving food to a food bank.

There are lots of early stages that most of you will have already passed through and left behind, but most of you by now will at least be at the stage of Order and Duty.

At this stage, a good person is one who follows the rules. For these people there is a clear sense of right and wrong, and a belief that those who sacrifice to do what is right now, will be rewarded later. This is probably the kind of morality that we most often teach in school. A person at this stage will give to the foodbank because they see it as a moral obligation – a rule that has been passed down from a higher authority, like God or "Society".

The next stage is the Achievement stage. At this stage, people realise that while rules have a place, people should be free to achieve the kind of life they want and not be limited by tradition. At this stage, the good person is the one who is able to make something of themselves, to become a success. They might give to the food bank because they see it as a way to build their success; it might increase their public image, or maintain a stable society so that they can continue to flourish and pursue success. If they can get a tax rebate for donating to charity – even better; that's a win-win for them.

The stage that follows that is the Social Justice stage. People at this stage know that

their own achievement and success has been met already, and that they can only truly thrive if everyone is thriving. At this stage, a good person is one who cares about the needs of those on the margins. These people are the ones most likely to organise a food bank and to be reminding others of their obligation to be part of making society more equitable. They are likely to not only volunteer at a food bank, but also to protest or push for change in government policies to intervene in social inequalities. I see many young adults in our society at this stage.

The next two stages are very rare. At the next stage, you begin to understand that all of the stages are important and have a place in the system. You know that it is important that there are rules, but that these shouldn't prevent people from being free to achieve as much success as possible, but that the success of everyone is the ultimate goal. And you are aware that we are all part of a system, where each person and each perspective has a place. You focus more on what works as a solution for the whole, on how things can work better. You would give to the food bank as part of meeting the most urgent needs, while perhaps considering how we can live more efficiently so that there is less waste and perhaps more ability for people to grow their own food.

The last stage that researchers are aware of is the Holistic stage, where you understand, but more than that, you know and feel that we are all interconnected, and all of life is interconnected. What matters to you is that all beings live in harmony, and you seek to live in harmony too, with the give and take of the whole planetary system.

To this person, everyone is good, and everyone is a part of each other. You give food to a food bank because you feel that those who are hungry are part of you and you are part of them. You are not doing a good deed; in helping the others, you help the whole and also then help yourself. It is estimated that less than 0.1% of the population will have reached this stage.

As I began by saying; each of these stages is built around an important truth – they are all important, and all correct. But as we wrestle with the big questions of our existence and society, the questions of equity and personal success, of freedom and social responsibility, we can often come to perspectives which include more of the picture and can hold the seemingly conflicting viewpoints together.

For whatever reason you have engaged in giving to the foodbank today, can I encourage you never to turn away from the suffering and brokenness in our society. When we cut ourselves off, and say: that's not my problem, that's not part of my life, we harden and we get stuck, and live a smaller life as a result. As we keep ourselves open to the whole, we grow and become part of something bigger, and we become bigger people too.