

Ep 4 Tim Farron - Active Generosity podcast

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Ruth, hello and welcome to the latest episode of active generosity, a podcast with stewardship. We help Christian donors, workers, charities and churches to steward their resources generously for God's kingdom. I'm your host, Ruth Jackson, and together, we'll be discovering this world of faithful Christian stewardship. Each month, I chat to a stewardship donor, partner or colleague about their journey of generosity, exploring why and how they give the joys and challenges they've experienced along the way, and what a difference generosity makes to their lives

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Today, I'm delighted to be joined by Tim Farron, MP and host of a Mucky Business, a podcast that explores the world of politics through a Christian lens. Tim was leader of the Liberal Democrats from 2015 to 2017

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and now is the party's spokesperson for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He has also been MP for Westmoreland and Lonsdale since 2005.

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Tim started a Mucky Business in 2021

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each week. He unpacks the murky world of politics and encourages believers around the UK to engage prayerfully. Tim, welcome. It's such an honour to have you on the show today, and I've been really enjoying listening to Mucky Business and how you share your faith perspective on what's current in global and UK politics. And I have to say, I found it really encouraging as well to see someone with your public profile sharing your faith so boldly.

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Tell us more about a Mucky Business. How did the idea come about? What's been the response from both your peers and the public since you launched? So when I became a Christian when I was 18, I could go into more detail than that if you want. At some point, I went off to university in Newcastle, much of weeks after that, and I was at a Christian Union. In fact, it wasn't Christian uni. Was a Navigators event close to my hall of residence in my first year. I joined the liberal party when I was 16, and got involved in student politics pretty much straight away. So a chap who I was in Navigators with young Christian guy probably a little bit more mature in the faith than I was, just in a very gentle, nice, brotherly way, challenged me at this kind of coffee morning and said, Tim, why are you involved in politics? You're a Christian. It's such a mucky business. And that was a phrase he used, and I don't

think I had any answer that was at all sensible at that point to him. In more recent years, particularly since I stopped being leader, I really thought about what it is about politics that turns Christians off or makes them scared, makes them think, I suppose, on the one hand, it is just that mucky business riddled with compromise and sin, and we should keep away from it. Or, on the other hand, maybe, if this is all temporary and the eternal is what matters in this all totally pointless and, and, and that can lead to both of those things can lead to Christians being we talk about, you know, religious illiteracy in our community, our society? Absolutely, there's tonnes of it, but I would kind of slightly flippantly say that's society's problem. Our problem is being culturally and politically illiterate, and we should care about politics. We shouldn't panic about it. It's not ultimate, but it is really important, and it affects people's lives, and we're meant to care for people in the here and now. So I guess the aim of

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monkey business and other things that I do through my organisation Faith in Public, is to try to equip Christians to think wisely about politics, not to go and vote one way or the other, and not even necessarily to get involved in politics, but to recognise it matters, so they can pray about it in a way which is informed. So yeah, I'd love to hear how it's been received over the last four years, since you started it from the public but also from your peers. I'm kind of curious about that, because I imagine a lot of your peers, they might say they're Christian in the cultural nominal sense, which is fine, but they perhaps don't have an engaged act of faith like you know, we would say we do so, and then, of course, many won't have one at all, or might be atheists. So it's quite you know, given it's what you're doing is quite bold. I'd love to hear more about what the reactions being. We have a good, strong listenership around the country and overseas as well. I do it in partnership with Premier Christian radio. So the show goes out on a Tuesday drive time. On the radio show. We almost always record it kind of before breakfast on a Tuesday morning. So I'm not pinching work time. Don't worry constituents, and I do it for free. And the the way we do it is I draw in people nearly always.

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Christians, or they're not always, but nearly always Christians, generally, who are serving politicians. Or this week, we had a political geographer professor from Newcastle University talking about some of the big issues that we're facing in the world, with Ukraine, Canada, America, and tariffs, and just generally, how Christians should approach times of conflict. How do we pray for peace. What should we pray for? And so we try to unpack the issues of the day with a Christian guest, nearly always a Christian guest, very often from a serving politician, but not always. Now, my colleagues, parliamentary colleagues, when they find out we do this, are generally bemused, and a lot of the Christian ones listen already, and that's great. And it was been quite humbling, really. Is that the new Christian MPs in which there are several, since July of last year, the general election for all parties, many of them already listened to the show before they got elected, and are more pleased than I expect them to be to be invited onto it. Oh, brilliant. Well, that sounds very encouraging best that i i mercilessly, shamelessly exploit my parliamentary Bible study group for guests.

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Well, you're just, you know, doing what everyone does, and thinking about who you know in your network. You might make a good guess. So that's completely fair enough. Yeah, bemused. Well, that's honest and kind of what I would expect, actually, yeah. So not necessarily hostile, but just a bit

confused about the whole thing in a slightly humorous way. So just more generally, then, taking a step back from the podcast for a moment, I'd love to hear just how challenging, if it is challenging for you to navigate your faith in your world. So what sort of challenges do you face? If, if any, and how, how does your faith help you overcome those? Well, that's a great question, and let's, let's see if I can answer them reasonably concisely. I think the the first thing I would say, and a thing that I try to do with my organisation, faith in public, is to try to contend in a gentle way for the right of Christians to bring their worldview into the public square, because we should. It's a nonsense. And I heard, particularly over the for example, the debate about assisted dying, which is ongoing at the moment, there'll be some people saying, Oh, you Christians, you need to declare an interest because your God tells you how to vote, kind of thing.

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And I think the thing to understand is that every human being, everybody every politician,

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comes into the room, so to speak, with a worldview. And Christianity is a worldview. I think it's the truth. I think it is the objective, ultimate truth.

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But it's a it is, it is a truth plane, and it is a worldview just like any other. And the idea that Christians have to kind of park their worldview at the door

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whilst, you know, free marketeers, market Marxists, anarchists, everybody else could just come in and introduce their worldview into the debate. It's nonsense. And so there is no such thing as neutrality. Secularism is not neutral. It's a it's a partial viewpoint. And so it can be a challenge, but so a lot of what I would do will be to graciously push back against that and to try to fight for the right in a gentle way, for Christians to be Christians in the public square and to take their worldview with them. Obviously, there are things that Christians believe that are really jarring with our current culture, and they'll often be around stuff like sex and identity, but sometimes they'll be to do with, you know, how we treat asylum seekers, how we treat the poor, how we

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essentially, how we offer forgiveness to people who really, seriously don't deserve it, which obviously includes ourselves. So these things are really radical, and the idea in a lot of the debate about assisted dying is around this kind of very false belief, I think, that we have an ultimate right to autonomy, whereas actually we believe this radical, utterly counter cultural thing, which is that we owe everything to a God who made us and who loves us. I have called you by name. You are mine. You're not yours. So these things are radical and they are jarring, and we are to be offensive in the way we present it. We've to try to be winsome and gentle, but we also have to back away from the things which are deeply counter

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cultural. So really, you're championing the Christian viewpoint as a valid World Viewpoint in the public sphere now, um, you've already mentioned a couple of big topics. You've mentioned assisted dying, you mentioned homelessness. There's another one that I'd really like to focus on for a minute that's very, very topical and having a huge impact on the international aid sector. I was listening to your fairly recent podcast interview with Patrick Walt, CEO of questionnaire.

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Right? And you were talking about the state of flux we're in internationally, and how that's driving a need for aid that's sadly never been greater. And yet, of course, we've recently seen these big cuts to foreign aid, first by the US government, and then, more recently, by our government here in the UK. And Patrick, he described the impact of the US freeze as seismic, and said it will only add to the sum of human suffering. Now you also in somewhere, I think in one of your podcasts, I loved the way you put it. You talked about rightly so I thought as well, the responsibilities of service and stewardship that come with politicians positions of influence. So I guess really, you know, we're looking here at a live example of mucky politics and action. And I guess the big question is, How do you square the circle when you're engaging with these kinds of knotty problems? Yes, I was talking in a debate on a not unrelated issue in the last Parliament about how we treat refugees, basically. And I was not just disagreeing with the then government position, but frankly, I felt I could see the motives that underpinned it, that I thought were even worse than the the outworkings of it, and on the other side of the house was a Christian conservative MP who is a brother in Christ and a friend of mine. And it was a really before I opened my mouth, it was a rebuke to what was going on in my heart. Because, on the one hand, it's right to be angry about stuff. I don't think our attempt to be gracious and gentle. Our calling to be gracious and gentle means that we have to be soppy and neutral about stuff which is just wrong.

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The Bible tells us in our anger, do not sin. It doesn't tell us not to be angry. Tell us about how we would how we should conduct that anger. Should we say, in a way which is gracious and which is faithful and but seeing my friend on the other side of the chamber Did, did help me to in a in a way which I should have done anyway, speak graciously when I might not have done if he'd not been there. I will confess to you and

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we think about politics, yes, it's a mucky business, but the decisions that get, I mean, Ken living once said that if politics changed, if elections changed anything, they'd abolish it, but they'd abolish them. Say, Okay, elections change anything, they'd abolish them. I don't think that that's true. I think the election in the United States has really changed things. And so what Patrick was telling us about Christian Aid and the impact of cuts in the aid budget coming from the UK, because we're going to pay for some of our military increased spending via cutting overseas aid, but America has already slashed US aid. So I do very few, very, very, very few overseas visits, and when I do them, they are nearly always related to refugee issues. And so I went with a handful of parliamentarians, as four of us in total, to Cairo for a couple of days about a month ago, where we were with the United Nations

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High Commission on Refugees, and meeting a whole bunch of refugees, principally from Sudan, but also from Eritrea and other places that were seriously blighted and who were in Cairo waiting to be supported, maybe hoping to go somewhere else. They prefer to go back home, particularly those from Sudan, but just simply weren't able to do so. And you saw on the ground that the aid agencies providing health care for those people, protecting young women from sexual violence and supporting those who had been victims of social sexual violence and were now very young mothers, in many cases, those organisations doing that, frankly, vital work, losing about 40% of their staff

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as heartbreaking, but it's a reminder, Politics isn't just some thing that people stroke their chins over and jabber about, and it's stuff that's in the newspapers and online and doesn't affect People. It really, really affects people. And yes, we know, as Christians that politics is not ultimate, and that, you know, without wanting to be flippant, we I've read to the end of revelations, it ends really well. It ends so well. But in the now, we have people living in the most appalling of circumstances, and through politics, you can make a difference to people's lives. We saw how Jesus related to people. Tim Keller says Jesus's miracles were not sky writing. They were not magic tricks just to show off his deity. They were all about meeting people's needs, even arguably the most frivolous, dare I say, of the of the miracles, which was the water into wine that was saving a family from disgrace at a wedding. You know, it's all about relationship. It's all about meeting people's needs. It gives you a clue as to what the kingdom is about, and it's about people's physical and real needs being met eternally by a God who loves them. And so yes, in our totally imperfect way, in the places we've been put, I.

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We to seek to do the same.

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You talk about making a difference, and I'm conscious that people listening

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might well be very concerned about these cuts in aid and indeed, other big issues, but thinking, What can I do? You know, what difference can I make? Now, obviously, if you're a donor,

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you might want to consider increasing your giving if you can, if you can. And obviously, the caveat with that as well is it's not necessarily just about money. It can be, you know, you give of your time, you volunteer. But I'm conscious that there is another way, which is to lobby, and that the world of lobbying government can seem a bit opaque, unless that's something that you already know quite a bit about. So do you have any advice to people about, how do they go about, you know, lobbying their their local MP if they've got concerns about issues like this, I don't want to talk Peter the entire political lobbying and Public Affairs and Public Relations. Well, you can just go and see your MP. Oh, really.

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So as a Christian, I really want to encourage you to introduce yourself to your MP and go and talk to them about an issue, whatever it might be. So it might be the fact there's not enough affordable housing

in your community. It might be that there's not enough Special Educational Needs provision. It might be about some very important environmental matter. It might be that you want to see the UK supporting refugees in a different and a better way, or that you want international aid to be restored, or whatever it might be. There might be particular bill going through Parliament you might be concerned about how we support young people's mental health, for instance, go and build a relationship with your MP, or indeed, with your local councillors as well. Great if they're Christians, make sure you know that you that you are, that they know you're a Christian, and seek to pray for them and be a support to them. Don't be just like another lobbying organisation, just wagging your finger. Build relationship. But how exciting, if your MP is not a Christian, and how you can build a relationship with them and potentially win the opportunity to share the gospel with them and to partner with them on issues where they might agree with you, but to challenge them graciously but firmly on issues where they don't. So you do not need to control contract the lobbying firm. You just you know, unless your MP is really bad at their job, they'll do they'll do surgeries. Go and see them. Be clear about what it is you want to go and talk to them about book an appointment and go and see them. They're real people,

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so go and say hello and build a relationship. Good advice. Wonderful. Now, Tim, we've talked a lot inevitably about politics, and you've been weaving your faith through that, in your in your responses. I'd love now to just reflect for a moment on your faith, the faith itself. And I'd love to hear a bit more about your journey there. Have you always been a Christian, and how has your faith influenced your views on generous stewardship of what you have.

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So, I mean, have I always been a Christian? So I would always have said

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I've got two conversion stories, and I think they're both true. One was at 18 and one was at nine.

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And so basically, it cut an awful long story short, my mum was a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. It was then Preston Polytechnic, and she got seconded to go be a part of a big team of people to teach at this college in Singapore. And I went out to Singapore when I was 18 in that summer gap between a levels and university. I wasn't posh enough to have a gap year, but I had a but I had a summer off and went with their mum and sister and other friends and my mum's colleagues to Singapore. We were placed in a house the south end of the island that belonged to the college. Previous tenants had been lecturers as well. They were Christians. They left their books behind. It rained a lot, monsoons and all the rest of it. I didn't have that much money to go out partying, and I ended up bored silly. Really not my first option, my first choice. I read the books, and because, a long story short, I thought flipping, it's true. I didn't go there expecting to become a Christian. The first book I read was about sexual ethics, and I thought up yours, I'm not having any of that in my life.

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And then, over a matter, I was there five weeks or so, over a matter of weeks, I ended up reading the other stuff, apologetics, prophecy, stuff that made me realise, well, yeah, flipping it is true. But also

Christianity is dynamic. It's, it's, we're on a journey. The God of the Bible has fulfilled prophecies and promises in the person of Jesus Christ, seen in the New Testament. Why on earth would I think he's not going to fulfil the prophecies that are yet to come? This is dynamic. We're on a journey, and I've to put it bluntly, I have to decide which side I'm on, and so I put my trust in Jesus there. Now that's.

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True all of that, and I've given my testimony and given it much more lengthily, if that's a word, with much more detail, and talked about the apologetics and became the case that I was convinced by. And the danger of that testimony true though it is, that I can, in my pride, make that sound like Christianity is a very clever thing that terribly clever Tim cleverly discovered that's not how it is. It is by God's grace. And so something else is equally true. My mum had a lovely friend, Yvonne, who was a bit of a hippie, who was into all sorts of kind of wacky stuff, Nostradamus, astrology, anything vaguely spiritual. She was a kind of child with a new age, and we lived in a very small terrace house, where if the cat broke wind in the cellar, you could hear it in the attic. And we I was in bed one night, and Yvonne had brought round a friend, and I could hear my mum and Yvonne and this friend, who's a guy who was a Christian, and this guy implored my mum and Yvette, Yvonne, to ask Jesus into his heart, into their hearts. And I don't know what they did, but I heard that in my bed upstairs, and I thought, that's really that sounds really important and urgent. I'm going to do that. And I did, and I didn't go to church afterwards. I was nine, but we what we know about God is He doesn't despise the simple faith of a nine year old, or someone with outsiders, or somebody with a learning difficulty, or whatever it might be, the part of the kingdom is so low, it's about simple trust in the Lord Jesus. So I kind of think, I kind of think the Lord out me at nine. Well, we don't, we know, and I don't know he had me before creation. As I read Ephesians. Of course, I love those stories. You know, we know God can work in wonderful and mysterious ways. I mean, you couldn't really make it up, you know that you went to Singapore. And then there were those books that, you know, other Christians left behind. And then that earlier story about you just happening to eavesdrop on a significant conversation, and that clearly sowing something very fundamental in your heart that then really came to life when you were a little bit older, amazing. So that was the starting point. How would you describe your journey of kind of faith, with generosity, and that wider understanding of really just that everything we have comes from God, and that a natural response to that, really, almost like a form of worship, is making sure that you're faithfully stewarding what you have and doing that really generously. Yeah, and it's a challenge, isn't it, because we like to cling on to what we've got. I was not brought up

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at all in a wealth family or environment, but look, looking back, I saw my mom, who became a Christian right at the end of her life, praise God, but wasn't at this point, nevertheless, somebody who didn't have very much and was generous with it when I was when I was about nine or 10, my we had a little two up, two down terrace with a terror, with a with a cellar, and she invited it was all very exciting, a

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another single mum and her daughters to live with us for about an eight or nine month period, because this woman had escaped an abusive relationship and had literally would have been in hostile accommodation, or worse, With her daughters, if my mom hadn't stepped in. Now, I didn't realise at the time. I just thought, this is fun, more children, more people in the house. How exciting

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and but what, what it was actually about was my mum giving up her privacy and her space and her home, and indeed, at some personal cost that she didn't have to really meet to people who were in greater need. And I, and I was really moved by that. When the penny dropped many years later, that was what she was up to. It is a struggle, because, of course, you know, the things we have, we kind of hang on to them. We we feel insecure. But I guess the you know, the Bible verses that really, I guess, jump out at me, aren't you? Matthew six, you don't throw talk, don't store treasure on Earth. It's treasure in heaven that count a reminder that everything we have is a gift of God, and we are told to enjoy it in the here and now, not in a hedonistic way, but to be grateful for it, but to recognise that it whatever we've got. The greatest riches we have now are a, a gift of God and B, nothing compared to what we have in eternity. And so we should be overjoyed at the opportunity to give it, to be giving of what we've got. And that doesn't just include but it does include one's financial resources, but it includes your time and it includes your emotions. I mean, you look at how Jesus, obviously, he paid the ultimate price, and he had everything he had to save us, but you look about how

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I was always so moved by.

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The raising of Lazarus, and how Jesus, you know, approaches the tomb. And Tim Keller, again, who obviously knew New Testament Greek quite a bit better than I do, would talk about that Jesus wept and Jesus was moved, and Jesus once more, was moved, that these are quite weak translations, and that the original New Testament, Greek or Aramaic, whichever it it was, was visceral that he Jesus was approaching the tomb with his heart broken, bawling like a wild animal. Oh, so he didn't just give he gave his emotions. He invested himself and and one of the things, one of the things that hold us back, I think, as people, is that we don't want to get too involved, because we might get our heart broken. Jesus says, get your heart broken, so invest yourself as well as your time and your money. And I struggle with that like we all do about house. Maybe I struggle with it more than than some to cling on to what I've got and to be scared of what might come tomorrow, but I'm just going to trust that God will provide everything I have, time, abilities, emotions, finances. They are God given. He gives he takes away. Let's use them to His glory in the time that we've got. And is there time that you can remember Tim, when perhaps you were generous to someone else, and you were particularly touched by the impact that your generosity had. Well, it is a struggle, isn't it, because you are told to not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing, or the other way around. And I think so one wants to be generous and not get anything from it, even a thank you, really, in some ways, but recently, I was blessed with the opportunity to help a brother and sister in Christ with their moving costs. I didn't get a lot of money. I got the loveliest reply, and it was, it clearly made a huge difference to them at a time which was just troubling for them, because to meet that expense was, you know, a thing that was weighed heavily upon them. So yeah, that was just an encouragement. But I do, I do wrestle with that, because I always think the besetting sin of most politicians is vanity.

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And so the danger is that,

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you know, you might make a speech and want to be praised, or do some good work and want to be praised for it. And the danger is that that might be what happened with your giving as well. So our motives are never pure, and God knows that, and he died for that as well as everything else. But yeah, obviously, when you when you see the thing that you do or the thing that you give, making someone's life noticeably better, then that's an enormous that's an enormous blessing and an encouragement. And giving is meant to cost you. It's meant to be sacrificial, and it gives us a clue as to what the kingdom might be like. That giving is something that that does cost us, but it doesn't make it painful. It's it's still joyful. That's especially joyful because I was going to say, like, you give, and that giving can be painful, but it comes with joy, and yeah, joy which eclipses totally. It's not, oh, it's a bit painful, but you feel good about it. And it's not that. It's the joy of being generous with your time, with your money and all those things. If you're doing it in the Spirit you are, it just obliterates the pain. That point actually about the joy that comes with giving was one of the key findings in our generosity report for 2025

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which I did want to touch on briefly. I don't know whether you had a chance to look at the findings. I'd love to hear from you, which finding surprised you the most, and why? Well, I suppose I spend half my time looking at statistics, and that makes an interesting point that I can make it. You know, Rural Affairs questions or health questions or primitive questions. So about to be I love them to stat, but

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the statistics that showed the percentage of giving for committed Christians, compared to those who we might call nominal or cultural Christians, was just mind blowing. So the naught point eight, 4%

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of the incomes of nominal Christians, cultural Christians, if we can call them, that was given so they would give naught point eight, 4% on average, of their income away to

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good works of one kind or another, church, or more likely, charitable giving of other sorts. And people who are committed Christians, 11.6%

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of their incomes on average, was being given away. And I suppose that goes back to what we're saying earlier on. You know, if Christianity is just cultural, or any kind of faith is just cultural. What impact does it really have on society? But because Christianity actually totally shapes, or should shape, your worldview, it's going to impact on what you do with your your money, and on everything else as well. So in many ways.

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It wasn't surprising. It was exhilarating. It's encouraging to see that people who are seeking to follow Jesus in every corner of their lives

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make sure that their finances are one of those corners of their lives that they've let Jesus into. Mm, thank you for that reflection. Well, I feel like we could carry on chatting for quite a bit longer. Tim, before we close, I'd love to hear how we can be praying for you. Is there anything in particular that we can ask our listeners to pray for? For you? Well, always that I would be a really good dad and a good husband faithful and point those members of my family who are yet to put their trust in Jesus to do so that's always my first first prayer morning and night. But generally in terms of generosity, I guess, you know, I kind of give, as Christians do, and should the thing that I have, which is probably most valuable for the want of a far better word is my time, and so it's about making sure I make good use of it, that I don't treat God as an add on, that he is the centre of everything, and that the things that I allow into my diary are things that just serve Him the best and the most, and that and that that obviously includes prayer time, Fellowship Bible reading, but it also includes making sure that I am spending time supporting those who are the most needy and making use of the you know, the time that my my small team with faith in public, have got to bring glory to God. So, yeah, pray that I use my diary and my time as a resource that brings glory to God, and I am, in a very gentle, very lovely way, really ruthless with my time, because so many time sinks in a place like parliament, where you end up doing stuff which is all kind of worthwhile, but it's perhaps not What you should be doing

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well, we shall certainly add those prayer points to the show notes. Tim and thank you. It's been such a joy to chat to you. We really, really appreciate you taking your precious time, case in point, coming onto the show and sharing some of your perspectives. And thank you everyone for listening, for further information about some of the things we've discussed, and to sign up to our podcast emails, please check out those links in our show notes. I look forward to you joining us all next month. Goodbye for now. Bye, bye. Tim,

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you've been listening to active generosity, a podcast with stewardship. If you enjoyed this month's episode, you can subscribe via the show notes, where you'll also find information on how we support our donors and the many charities, churches and Christian workers who are our partners. Positive reviews and shares to your network are all very welcome. See you next month. You.