

A JOURNEY TOWARD GENEROSITY

Sterling UMC
October 10, 2010
2 Corinthians 9:6-8, Malachi 3:10

This morning we are launching our annual stewardship campaign as we move toward commitment Sunday in two weeks on October 24th. So this morning I want to begin a series of messages that I am calling “Money Matters”.

Now when we talk about money everybody gets squeamish. It's not just people inside the church, it's people outside the church when it comes to talk about money. Did you know that in America the top five fears that Americans have, money is one of the top five. It goes five, Death – the fifth greatest fear; fourth, Being poor – money, that you'll lose your money or have a financial loss; three, Insects; second, Heights; and the number one fear in America – Anyone want to guess? The number one fear is public speaking. Think about this, people would rather be dead than deliver a eulogy. Think about how I must be feeling right now. Public speaking number one and, four, poor, talking about money!

But our theme this fall has been “Getting Out of the Boat” so that is what I'm going to for the next couple of weeks, get out of my comfort zone and talk about money. Let me begin by asking you a question. What is it about money that makes money such a powerful force? Why is it that business partners split up over money? Why is it that divorces happen because of money? Why is it that typically honest people will cheat to get a little more money? What is it about money that nations go to war over it? Or that TV contestants will jump in a vat of tarantulas to get a little bit more of it? Why do we think about money? Why do we worry about it? Why do we obsess over it? Why do we dream about it?

I believe the answer to that question is because there is a universal perception about money. The perception is this, that if I have money that money promises security and freedom and peace. And who doesn't want that – security and freedom and peace.

But as millions of broken lives will tell you, and many of them who are here today, the promises of money don't always deliver. Money usually oversells itself. The truth is, money brings about a lot of life's problems.

The Bible's not down on money. A lot of people misquote the scriptures and say money is the root of all evil. That's not what the Bible says. 1 Timothy 6 says “*The love of money...*” It's the love of money that causes all kinds of trouble. Some people want money so much that they have given up their faith and caused themselves a lot of pain. More than anything else I can think of money is that one thing that can tempt us away from God. It can isolate us from God. It can make us feel like we don't need God. Yet

ironically God is the one source in the whole universe that can give us something that money can't buy. That is a true and a lasting sense of freedom and peace and security.

Where money turns sinister is when you and I find ourselves trusting the world's way to manage the money, which is very different from God's money management. The world says, "Here's how you manage your money. You earn it, then you enjoy it, then because we typically enjoy it too much we go into debt to pay what we enjoy. Then we save a little. Then if there's anything leftover, go ahead and give it. But rarely is there anything leftover."

What I'm going to do today is I'm going to take you on a journey, one that I've been on most of my life. A journey that I would call a Journey Toward Generosity. What does it look like when you go on that journey? What does it look like when God becomes your God and money doesn't become your God?

On this path what you learn what God has to say. You learn that God cares about your life and He cares about your money and you learn that He cares what you do with your life, and your money matters.

Let's take look at what Jesus said about money. Matthew 6 *"Don't store up treasures here on earth where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty and where thieves break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is there your heart and thoughts will be also."* Jesus is saying in this passage, your stuff is vulnerable. It's going to wear out. So if you build your life around stuff, if you build your life around treasure, you're building your life on the wrong foundation. God says if you want to make the most of what you've got, if you want to live life to its fullest, then you store up your treasure in heaven, in eternity, where you're going to spend all of eternity.

How do you do that? He says, you give away your treasure here and that stores it up for you in eternity. God gives a very specific way to do that. There's no mystery to it. He tells us how to give. Malachi 3:10 *"Bring your full tithe to the temple treasure so there will be ample provision in My temple."*

The word "tithe" in the original means "a tenth." A tithe means a tenth. This is a reminder for some of you who have been around church for a while. For many of you who are new, maybe you don't know this. But the standard for giving money in the Bible is called a tithe. A tithe means ten-percent.

You might ask why ten-percent? I have no idea. It's just what God says several times in the scripture.

But here's what I do know about God. What God wants is to be first place in your life. He wants your heart. And He knows that when He's got your treasure He's going to have your heart so He says, Here's where you start – ten-percent. Bring a tithe of everything you earn to your church home.

A lot of times I imagine at Sterling, I think to myself, what if 100% of our members gave ten-percent of their income? What if? If you think we're doing great things now... what if? Just imagine the explosion of ministry that could happen. The life chance that could take place. The opportunities for reaching our community and the world. It's just amazing!

But obviously that is not the reality. You see a lot of us look at this and we say I know what God wants from me. He wants me to tithe. Because He knows that when He gets my tithe He gets my heart. You're kind of ready but then you go, What if I don't have enough money to tithe? What if I add up all my bills and all my bills equal more than how much money I make? What if I lost my income? What if? What if? What if?

A lot of people say that the reason most Christians don't give is because they're greedy. That's what a lot of pastors and radio preachers that I hear and books that I read, everybody talks about greed. Honestly, I disagree with that. I don't think that's the reason Christians don't give. I think the reason Christians don't give is they're afraid. They're really afraid. They're afraid their money is going to run out. They're afraid that if they give to God off the top that they're going to get half way through the money and they're going to be out of money. They're afraid.

The reason I know this is because I've walked this path. My fear kicked in and I had to really think and study and ask myself, "Do I really believe that God is who He said He is. And do I really believe that He'll do what He says He'll do."

I've learned in my life, over and over and over, the enemy of spiritual growth is fear. Really when it comes to giving it's nothing more than the fear of I don't believe that God is who He says He is and He'll do what He's promised to do. The more that I follow God's ways and the more that I learn from His Word, the more that I realize that I shouldn't be afraid of giving too much. What I should really fear is giving too little. I should fear that there will be some day that I stand before God trying to explain to Him why I wanted to live the Christian life but I didn't want to obey Him. That's what I should really fear.

Jesus said something really interesting. It's in Luke 12 *"Much is required of those to whom much is given. For their responsibility is greater"* The translation I memorized it in as a kid is *"To whom much is given much is expected."* Friends, we have been given so much. Jesus said, much is expected.

This is when you get to the point in your journey that you say I will give. You fight through your fear and you say, "God, I'm going to tithe." I'm going to give not because it's easy. I tithe because I want to be obedient to what God wants me to do. I tithe because I want to follow His ways. I want to be faithful to Him.

And here is the best part. Malachi 3:10 says, *"I am the Lord All-Powerful and I challenge you to put Me to the test. Bring the entire ten-percent. Then I will open the windows of heaven and flood you with blessing after blessing."* He says if you obey Me

I'm going to open up heaven and I am going to flood you with blessing. You're going to be rewarded. The Bible repeatedly promises that your constant contribution to the church, to God's work will set in motion a series of divine blessings, that when you tithe, when you give, it's like this promise of this supernatural activity in your life.

Don't walk out of here misunderstanding what I'm saying. I'm not saying that if you tithe, you'll become rich. But you might. And you might not. God hasn't promised you wealth but He has promised that He'll take care of every one of your needs. While I won't guarantee wealth I would guarantee a life of richness. Rich relationships. Rich, meaningful life of work and in ministry and experiences. It's a promise. The reason I can guarantee it is I believe God is who He says He is and He says, "*Put Me to the test.*"

"I want you to hear what one family had to say when asked to share a testimony on the power of tithing in their life..."

We have been tithing for probably a little over a year (I am not really sure how long now) but we started right after the sermon when we were all challenged to tithe just one week, and we've done it ever since. That sermon reminded me of a book my Dad gave me by John Hagee re: Debt Free Living and we read the sections on Tithing and decided to keep going. Our finances are a bit of a mess, and we have had a few financial bumps in the last few months, but we are committed to keep tithing even when we are out of town we send a check in. And even with our financial burdens and those bumps ALL of our needs are ALWAYS met. Just when we wonder how we'll get through the bump, something happens so that it gets resolved. And in the midst of these bumps we've even been able to help out a few other people when we didn't think we would be able to. God put solutions there for us to help.

We still have a LONG way to go to get to debt free living, but we believe that we must continue to tithe, and that everything else will work itself out when (and if) God wants it to.

Now let me say something that may shock you. As the pastor of this church, I don't care whether you tithe.... For the sake of this church, I don't care. Because that is not what it is all about. It's not about raising money or funding the church budget. God is going to take care of His church.

If you leave here today and you think, Sterling church is just all about money, then you didn't hear me. Or you heard what you wanted to hear. Because let me say it again: I don't care whether you tithe. I don't care whether you tithe for the sake of this church. I care whether you tithe for *you*. That you make God your God and not money your God. Those are the paths toward generosity.

You see this really isn't a message about money as it is a message about spiritual growth. You trust in God's promises and you see how He blesses you. I don't care

whether you tithe for the sake of this church. But I look at peoples' lives and go how can you afford as a Christian, not to. How can you afford not to?

So how can you start to put this into practice? Let me give you what I consider some real practical actions that you might consider for your life, as you move forward towards being a person of generosity.

1. You've got to start by designing a plan.

You need a plan for your finances. You don't simply drift into generosity and all of a sudden wake up one day with this feeling of peace and go, all my bills are paid, I have a savings account and I generously give to the Lord. No, you've got to have a plan.

The Bible teaches that there's a plan for earning, there's a plan for saving, and there's a plan for giving. It says in Proverbs 21 *"Plan carefully and you'll have plenty. If you act too quickly you will never have enough."* What I've experienced, and I'll bet you have too, is that without a plan it's so easy to give in to your emotions.

I suggest you get a plan. One that is taught all over the world by Christian financial planners. It's called the 10-10-80 plan. There are different variations of it but it goes like this. That your first ten-percent you give directly to God. You give it to God as your tithe and say, "God, You want my heart, where my treasures are, where my heart is, I'm going to give it to You and say you're number one in my life." The first ten-percent goes to God. The second ten-percent goes to your savings. That you begin to save. Then you align your life so that you can live off the eighty percent.

You design a plan, you work a plan. When you design a plan and you work the plan here's the result – win, win, win, win! Think about the wins. When you design a plan and work a plan, who wins?

Win number one: God is honored. That's a win.

Win number two: Your anxiety is reduced because your bills are paid.

Win number three: Your savings begin to grow.

Win number four: If you have children you have just tutored them in godly, financial principles.

Win number five: The work of God in the church is consistently and generously supported.

Win number six: God opens up the windows of heaven and pours out His favor and His blessing on your life.

We don't give to help out God. Is God poor? Does God have to depend on my tithing to make it? He's on welfare or something that we have to subsidize Him, help Him out, pay the rent on heaven? God doesn't need our giving. We give for our own benefit. It's a reminder that God's the one who blesses and if it wasn't for Him, we wouldn't have anything. The purpose of tithing is to put God first.

I'd summarized the whole thing but just saying this. Generous giving leads to blessed living. You want to make the most of your life? You give God from the first, not the leftovers. Then you watch what He does. He said, "*Put Me to the test.*"