

## Defined by Generosity

Sterling UMC

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Proverbs 11:24-25, 1 Timothy 6:17-19

When a pastor is called to do a funeral service, as I have many times, one of the first things I do is schedule an appointment to meet with the family and friends of the deceased. There are usually several people there sometimes even 6 to 10 there. And we will gather in my office or in the living room of the deceased and I always bring a notepad like this with me. And as we sit down together, we always begin with prayer, and then I ask the folks to tell me about their loved one. And I may know them pretty well, but there is still so much I don't know about them, and I ask them to tell me where they grew up, and their life story. When we finally get to the current times, I always ask them this question, "Tell me, what defined your husband? What was the defining characteristic of your wife? What is it that people would say about them who knew them from the neighborhood, from the workplace, or friends? What were those defining characteristics?" And I write those things down. And then I ask, "If I were to talk to your love one before they passed away and asked them, What do you want to be remembered for? What would they say? I write those things down.

Now someday, someone's going to come and sit in your living room with your family and your friends, and they are going to ask those same questions. What would the answers be? Every once in a while I find it helpful to sit down and ask myself those same questions. How do I want to be remembered? What are the defining characteristics that I want to cultivate in my life? And I may not be there, but this is what I'd like to become. And I'd like to encourage you today that one of those defining characteristics I'd hope for you and me would be generosity.

I would hope that people would say about you, "You know what, she was generous. When there was a need she helped out. She was faithful in her giving to God. She made a difference in the world. She sacrificed so that other people might have. She was that kind of person. He was that kind of man." Generosity.

Today we conclude our stewardship series leading us up to our commitment Sunday. And last week we looked at the root of Christian stewardship and we learned that it all begins with God's extravagant love. God has so abundantly, extravagantly, generously given us all that we have and all that we know. It is a gift from his gracious hand. That's God's part. And today we look at our part. We bring this series to a close by looking at this concept of generosity. Because when it comes to our possessions, our possessions will never be the things that bring us joy and life the way they could, until we learn the gift of generosity.

My hope is that today we would all learn and to live by what Winston Churchill once said: "We make a living by what we get. But we make a life by what we give."

Now God's design for us, when he designed humankind, it was God's will for us to be generous. It was just wired into us, willing to give to God, willing to give to others. Generosity is an essential need that we have. But I find in my own life that there are two other voices that war against that impulse toward generosity. You see I learned from a young age being brought up in the church that as a Christian I am called to be generous. I learned that you should bring your offerings, that you should tithe, and give unto God and to the work of the church. And as I grew and got out on my own, and I had a job, and was earning my own money, I'd said to myself, "I want to do that. I want to do what pleases God." But at the same time there were these two other voices.

One of them was the voice of fear. And the voice of fear was telling me, "If you give, there may not be enough left for you." And that worried me. That's right. I mean what if I don't have enough money to fill my gas tank? Back then I didn't have a whole lot of money or a whole lot of needs, but at least I needed money to put gas in my car to get to and from school and work. I had to pay rent and for my insurance and a number of other bills. And I thought I wouldn't have enough to pay for those things if I give to God. So that was an impulse that was keeping me from generosity toward God and to other people.

The other voice that I would hear was the voice that was saying, "If you give, you are not going to have enough to get the stuff that is really going to make you happy." Because the world around tells us that the value of our lives consists of the abundance of our possessions. And I believed that. I thought, "Yeah that's right, if I give to God I won't have the money to buy all the cool stuff I want to buy. I won't be able to go hang out with my friends. I won't be able to do all the stuff I want to do. If I give to God then there's not going to be enough left for me."

And those two voices, I think continue to compete with our impulse toward generosity our entire lives. We grow up and we start looking at tithing on our income and we think, "Man if I give 10% of what I make now. I mean that would help me buy a new car. That would buy a bigger house. And inside of us there's something saying you need those things to make you happy. Don't. You just can't. You're going to miss out on something. You need those things to make you happy." And when you start to think about all your giving and you think about all the stuff you could have bought for yourself with that money. And there's a little voice that says, "Don't do it!"

Well I found that that voice of fear and pleasure was defeated, though I still wrestle with it, it began to be more defeated the more I grew in Christ. The more I grew in Christ a couple of things happened. One is I realized my life belonged to Jesus Christ. And as I began to pray on a regular basis I said, "You know that's right. If he calls me to go there, I'm going to go. If he asks me to do this, I'm going to do that. Because I'm not really my own anyway. I'm his servant. I want to do what he wants me to do." So that began to change me.

Then I realized that my security wasn't in my money anyway. My security is not in my savings account or my 401K. I may not even live long enough to take advantage of any

of that. I know that if I go somewhere and something happens to me, my life belongs to Christ and I'm in his hands. And I'm going to meet him face to face and I hope to hear him say, "Well done. You did ok. Welcome home." And so my security is not in money, but it's in God.

And then I found this impulse toward generosity begin to develop, as the Holy Spirit continued to work in my life. He's been helping me, and he's still working on me in big ways in this area, but he's helping me think a little less about myself and a little more about other people. To see people and to see their needs and think, "Well if I don't do something, then who is going to do something? And to look at the things that God wants to do through the work of the church and to say, "well if that's going to happen, it's going to happen through people like me being willing to say yes and to taking the focus off of myself and my own pleasure and putting the focus on him and doing his work." And as that change began to happen in my life part of what I found was I found joy, there was more joy in doing things for other people and for God than there was ever in doing stuff for myself. Which is of course what Jesus meant when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Somehow in the very act of losing your life you find life, Jesus said. And so those changes began to happen and they are still happening.

I came to understand something, a theological foundation for generosity is this, that everything in the earth belongs to God. You didn't bring any of with you when you came into this world. And you won't take any of it with you when you leave. Life is a gift and it all ultimately belongs to God. Even your capacity to make wealth is a gift from God. Your life is a gift from God. So you brought nothing with you and in the end, as Christian author John Ortberg puts it, "It all goes back in the box." And that is what happens in the end. It all goes back in a box about 6 ½ feet long and 2 feet wide and you're not taking it with you.

So what does it mean to own anything? We don't own it. God owns it. The Psalmist says it that way. He says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." And God says it this way in the Book of Leviticus, He says, "The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants." Isn't that interesting, that you are a tenant on God's land, that you are a manager, a steward of God's resources, both the natural resources of our planet and the things that you have." So we are stewards of the blessings of God. And our goal is to try to figure out what God wants us to do with the resources we have at our disposal.

Now obviously a large portion of our resources go to take care of us. I mean God expects us to eat and he hopes that we will have shelter and he hopes that we will take care of our children. And so a large portion of what we have is for those things. And God wants us to enjoy things in life. He doesn't want us to live in poverty. He wants us to enjoy our lives. But he also expects us to do more than just focus on ourselves. So the scriptures teach us that we are to help the poor, and when you help the poor you're blessed. And we are to give to those who are in need and that's a part of what God is expecting us. We are to take care of our family members and the members of the community around us. And we give to the work of God. We give directly to God and

through the church we accomplish God's work. And this is what we find in the scriptures.

And when you ask the question, "Well how much does God really want?" And that's a good question to ask. We should all ask that. "This is my income and what is God asking me to give, in particular through the ministry of the church?" And so we try to find that in the scriptures, and so if you go all the way back to the Old Testament we find that people were always giving their first fruits, or the best of what they had they would give some portion as an offering. To begin with they burn these things up. They would burn the animals up completely. They wouldn't eat any part of it. It was just a way saying, "God I give this to you, and it's yours."

Later on those things were given for the work of the temple and the priesthood. Now Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth. And then we find Jacob, his grandson, and Jacob promises to give God a tenth or a tithe of whatever God has given to him. And then we come to the time of Moses where it is codified in the law. And God says, "This is what I am expecting. That a tenth of what you have is mine to use however I choose to use it." And in the New Testament while we know that we are not bound to the Law of Moses, so we take it as a guide and most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives today. And so that tenth would go to God to accomplish God's purposes through the church. And the church is then responsible for praying and discerning, and the people who are in charge of our finances here are asking, "What does God want to do through us in the next year, through the resources that are his, that you've committed to him?"

Now when it comes to this idea of tithing it's quite frankly a challenging idea for many of us. I mean, it's a stretch, especially when we have those voices of fear and self gratification talking to us, pulling at us. Especially given our current economy. Did God really mean we are to give a tenth? You've got to be kidding!

David Slagle, who's a pastor in Atlanta, had a wonderful graphic way to illustrate how God sees this. And so I wanted to share that with you today. I want you to imagine that God has given us these ten apples here which represent our income or our wealth. And God says nine of these are yours to enjoy. Use them to take care of yourself and your family, use them for food and for shelter and set some of them aside for retirement and give some away to others.

But the tenth apple. This one is holy to God and God says "this apple is for me" And it's meant to be used, first of all, as a way for you to express your praise and your love for me—your obedience and devotion. But then I'm also going to use it to accomplish my purpose in the world." Actually rather than being the 10th apple, I would like you to make it the first apple and give it to me first, and then use the other nine.

But here's what happens with many of us. Many of us find—because the society is pulling us in so many directions- that nine apples aren't enough anymore. I mean, they really aren't. How can we do all the fun stuff and the cool stuff and the stuff we need to

do and pay the bills and everything on just nine apples? And so we think, "Well the Lord's not going to mind if we just take a little bit. You know, there's a trip that we've been wanting to take. And it's really important and it's a special trip. And we've just going to take a little bit of the Lord's apple. God will understand. And then it's Christmastime and we didn't set anything asked for all these Christmas presents. And besides, it's kind of giving isn't it? It's not to God, but it is to other people. It's to our children and others and so God will understand. And we take a little more of God's apple—the one that is holy and that is intended to be used for God's purposes.

And then we start thinking about retirement. It's coming up sooner than you think. And you know, I need to be setting aside more in retirement. But I can't stop spending from these apples here. I've got to take that from somewhere else. And I need some for medical emergencies because we didn't set aside emergency funds in our savings account. And it's time to get a new car. And there's that big screen right before the Super Bowl we've been thinking about getting. And the new house. You know our old house just doesn't seem to satisfy us anymore. And pretty soon there's not much left—I mean from the Lord's apple. And then we say, "Well Lord, this is your part. I'm going to give this to you."

So often I think that's what happens to us, and by the time we get around to God, there is not much left. And I think God must be thinking—boy, if you just gave me that one apple, it would really bless me if you recognized that part of this is mine and you would be amazed what I could do with it. And especially if you gave it to me freely, not because somebody guilted you into it, but just because you love me.

You know a strange thing happens when we give this first apple to God. We are not tempted to eat it, because it is not there! And with God's help we somehow you find a way to make the other nine apples work.

Now I know it's a challenge to tithe. And for some of you it would be virtually impossible for you to do that this year. So what you do is you take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2 percent or 5 percent or 7 percent. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous. But I want to encourage you all to become tithers.

It reminds me of a story about Peter Marshall who was the chaplain of the United States Senate for many years. He tells the story about a man who came to him and said that he was struggling to tithe even though he had a large income. The man said to Marshall, "I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly some years ago, but... but now. Well I use to tithe when I made \$20,000 a year and I gave \$2000 and I could do that. But last year I made \$500,000 and there is just no way I can afford to give about \$50,000.

And Marshall thought for a moment and he said, "You have a serious problem. How about we pray about that." And the guy said, "That would be great. " And so Marshall wrapped his arm around him and bowed his head and prayed, "Lord you know this man

has a serious problem right now. And I pray that you would help him with that. I pray that you would take his income back down to the level that he can afford to tithe.”

The truth is that we are called to tithe—to give God that first apple. And I’d like to see you become tithers and be characterized by that.

And what does our giving really do for God? And how does our giving do for us? Because both of those are outcomes of our giving. Now when it comes to God, I think it’s not hard to understand how our giving affects God. From the earliest biblical times, the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one’s labors upon it to God. They would burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God. Did God enjoy the smell of charred meat? No. Rather, God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith, and the desire to please and honor God; and this moved God’s heart. When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord. And God responds to our giving by blessing us and others in more ways than we can think or imagine. This is not a financial transaction. It’s not a business deal. It’s a way to simply say thank you, and I love you, and I hope you will use a portion of this somehow to make a difference in the world. That’s how I think God looks at our offerings. This is what our giving means to God.

And what does our giving mean for us? Well they change us. Generosity changes you. When we are generous—to God and to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are in need—our hearts are filled with joy. They are enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously, we become more generous and we become more joyful and joy-filled. Generosity changes us, filling us with joy and filling our lives with blessings. When we are generous with what we have we find that unexpected blessings flow back into our lives, catching us by surprise. Somewhere along the way, as we see our acts of generosity helping others and perhaps even changing the world, we say in wonder and amazement, “Wow look what happened” and we find ourselves blessed. Blessings flow in our lives when we are generous to God and generous to others.

So when I or someone else shows up at your house, meeting with your family or your closest friends, and I say, “What was the defining characteristic of this person?” What will they say about you? And my hope is that one of those defining characteristics is generosity.

Let us pray: O God we thank you for the gift of life. That you sustain us by the power of your Holy Spirit and that you gave Jesus Christ as an offering for us and for our sins. We thank you for the abundance we have in our lives. And we pray that you would help us. Help us to honor you with our tithes. Help us to care for the poor and those who are in need. Help us to recognize that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We offer ourselves to you. Guide us now as we prepare to fill out and present our commitment cards. Help us O Lord to do your will. Lead us we pray. In your Holy Name. Amen.