

“Thank You—Part 1”

Be honest now. How many of us were afraid of the dark as a kid? How many of us are afraid of the dark now? We don't really fear the dark, we fear what might be lurking in the dark, right? I overcame my fear of the dark at church camp one year. You see, as a kid, my imagination was so vivid and I could create this horde of monsters that were always right there in the dark ready to tear me apart. I had always thought that the monsters that were out there lurking in the dark to get me, could not get me through the blankets on my bed. My blankets had some magical power to protect me. But I believed that I couldn't let any part of my body be exposed outside that all-powerful blanket-shield. So I would always sleep completely under the covers, not even with a little hole to breathe through and that worked fine at home.

But that year at church camp the temperatures were well above 100 degrees every day and the cabins were not air conditioned and at night they were still sweltering. I had a sleeping bag and that first night I zipped up in it and huddled inside for protection just like I would at home. But I realized pretty quickly that if I did that I was going to die from the heat! I was sweating buckets and I could not breathe! I couldn't take it. I remember so clearly. For the first time I poked my head out, stuck my arms out, and focused on a little tiny light I could see out the window and prayed for God to protect me and fell asleep. From that point on I wasn't afraid of the dark any more.

But as I grew up, there was a different kind of darkness that I began to fear. The darkness that can get inside of you. The darkness that ruins life and relationships. Jesus warned about this in Matthew 6:22-23. Take a look: **“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23).**

The idea here is to think of your eyes as windows that let light into your body. It's a simple concept that Jesus is talking about. Think about a window in room. The condition of that window determines what light gets into that room. If the window is clean and clear and not distorted, the light comes flooding in. If the glass is distorted, or dirty, or covered with something, the room won't be lit up. The light that gets into a room depends on the state of the window it goes through. Jesus is saying that the light that gets into a person's heart and life depends on the state of their eyes. And if your eyes are distorted that affects your life.

Let's talk about some of the distortions that are pretty common to us. The first one, a big one, is **prejudice**. I'm not talking specifically about racial prejudice here. I'm talking about when we have certain ideas about anything that keep us from seeing the facts because we've got preconceived notions that we don't want to change. I was talking to our District Superintendent last week and she told me that there are several churches in the district that may have to close this year or next. So often the case there is that they were unwilling to change to try new things to share the amazing message of Jesus. A church, a business, an organization is in danger of dying if starts saying, “We've always done it this way” or, “We've never done it that way before.” What happens to churches and businesses can also happen to individuals.

Yes, there are times to stand on our principles, but we also have to be willing to do a gut check and see if we're just victims of our prejudices. The way we get around our prejudices is through fearless self-examination. It's through opening ourselves to being held accountable by a handful of others that we trust. The alternative is to live in darkness.

Another distortion that keeps us from seeing the truth around us, is **jealousy**. A long time ago a good friend of both Janet and mine fell in love and got married. As a couple they were really good friends of ours. But it wasn't long until her husband started showing some really strange behavior. She was absolutely devoted to him, but he was so jealous of her. He would take any little comment she said about anybody, any casual conversation she had with another man, any contact whatsoever she had with any other man, and he would freak out! She had never done anything to break his trust, so it's not like he had any reason from the past to distrust her. But his jealousy blinded him to the facts and it killed their marriage.

Jealousy of a coworker can kill your joy at work. Jealousy in a friendship can ruin that friendship. Jealousy distorts everything and can be very destructive. It brings in darkness.

Another distortion is **conceit**. None of us like to be around somebody who is conceited, full of themselves, thinks more highly of themselves than they ought to. We really don't like conceited people, but almost all of us has pockets of conceit in us. Paul put it this way in the Bible, **"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:3)**. Conceit keeps you from seeing yourself as you really are, and it keeps you from seeing others as they really are. Having a low self-esteem has the same effect, actually. Both are distortions that darken our lives.

Those are some of the things that distort the truth of what's around us, so what clarifies, what helps us to see what's really going on around us. Jesus said, **"If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness."** The word in Greek that Paul uses here for "healthy" is the word *haplous*. It's the same word that's used for "generous." The word he uses for "unhealthy" is *poneros*. It's the same word that's used in Greek for "grudgingly or stingy." Jesus is saying here, "There's nothing like generosity for giving you a clear and undistorted view of life and people. And there is nothing like being stingy for distorting your view of life and people."

You see, when God designed humankind, he wanted us to be generous. Willing to give to God, willing to give to others. But I find in my life a couple of voices that have the potential to drown out that impulse to be generous. Before I really started on my faith journey, following Jesus, I didn't really care about being generous to people. But when I became a Christian I really started hearing that prompting to give, to share, to be generous. So I'm growing up, I want to please God, but two other voices speak very loudly to me.

One is the voice of fear. That voice can be really loud and it says, "If you give, there may not be enough left over for you." That's a powerful voice, that voice of fear. I mean, what if I don't have enough. I remember hearing that voice a lot in college. I worked all through college for my spending money. During the summer I would do all kinds of things to make money. I worked painting houses. I was a lifeguard. I worked at my home church. I worked at a camp. I taught swim lessons. I cleaned swimming pools. I coached a swim team.

During the school year I worked in the school cafeteria and at a movie theater. I worked pretty hard. So for me that money was hard to come by. So if I gave some of it away, would I have enough to put gas in my car? I didn't have a lot of needs but I did have a girlfriend and she had needs! Would I be able to take care of that if I gave it away? Fear often kept me from generosity toward God and other people that I saw in need.

The other voice was the voice of pleasure. It would say, "Don't give that money away! Buy the stuff that will make you happy! Do the things that will give you pleasure. Your life consists in the abundance of your possessions. If I give to God there won't be enough left for me."

I still wrestle with those voices, but the more I grew in Christ, the less influence they had. The more I grew in Christ a couple of things happened. One was that I realized that my life belonged to Jesus Christ. My life is not my own. If Jesus calls me to go somewhere, I'm going to go. If he asks me to do this, I'm going to do it. Because I chose a long time ago to be his servant. I'm not my own. That definitely started to change me.

Then I began to realize that my security wasn't in my money anyway. I slowly began to realize that life is risky and dangerous, but I don't have to be afraid. My security isn't really in my retirement account, or my savings account. It's good to have those things, but they're not my security. I may not live to take advantage of any of that money anyway. None of us really knows. My security is not in my money, it's in God.

And as the Holy Spirit has continued to work in my life he's been shaping me and helping me think a little bit less about myself and think a little bit more about other people and how I can help them. And to

look at the work of the church and say, "If that's going to happen, it's going to happen through people like me being willing to say yes."

As those changes started to take place in my life part of what I found is a lot of joy. There is more joy in doing things for other people and God, than there ever was in doing things for myself. That's what Jesus meant when he said that it's more blessed to give than to receive. Somehow in the act of losing your life, you find life, Jesus said.

Those are the kinds of changes that have happened in me. I came to understand that everything in the Earth belongs to God. You didn't bring anything without when you came into this world, and you won't take anything with you when you leave. It all ultimately belongs to God.

The Psalmist says it that way, "**The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it...**" (Psalm 24:1). The stuff we have, it's all God's anyway. We don't really own it, we manage it for God. Our goal is to try to figure out what God wants us to do with the resources we have.

Obviously a big part of our resources go to take care of us. God expects us to eat, and have shelter, take care of families. So a big part of our resources go for those things. And God wants us to enjoy things in life. But he clearly expects us to do more than just focus on ourselves. The Bible teaches us that we are to help the poor and when you help the poor you're blessed. And we're to give to people in need. And that's part of what God's expecting of us. We take care of our own family AND people in the community around us. And we give to God for God's work and through the church we accomplish a big part of God's work.

This is where we have to ask the question, "Well if I'm supposed to give toward the work of God, how much is that?" God spells it out in the Old Testament. "A tenth of what you receive from your work belongs to me." Leviticus 27:30 says, "**A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD**" (Leviticus 27:30). The first tenth, from the field, or the flock, it belongs to God. God's given us the idea of the tenth, the tithe.

As Christians, we believe that that tenth actually belongs to God. That bringing that tenth to God through the local church helps us to order our personal world, it puts first things first, and in the process we find that we can actually live better on 90% of our incomes than on 100%, because we have perspective and we're thoughtfully choosing how we spend our money. We bring that to the church and the church is then responsible for discerning and praying and putting it into mission. You have amazing leaders who strive to use what you give to live out our purpose of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ and helping people with the basics needed for life.

When it comes to the idea of tithing it's a challenging idea for most of us. It's a stretch. Especially when you first become a Christian and you have those impulses to be generous and those voices of fear and pleasure that are so loud. "Give a tenth, you've got to be kidding!" Our generous impulses get drowned out by voices that say, "You better put that into your retirement account instead, or you didn't plan so well so you're going to need that tenth to buy Christmas presents, or it sure would be nice to get that new couch, God won't mind, or I sure would like to take that trip." And pretty soon that tenth that belongs to God is gone and those impulses of generosity don't have anything to give. We're not bad people. It just happens a little bit at a time.

And, listen, God understands where we are. But I think he says, "You know, my way works. Your life will make more sense if you make this a priority. You'll find a lot more joy along the way. You'll bless so many others and heart will grow and grow. It would bless me so much if you just recognized that part of this is mine. And not because somebody guilted you into it. But just because you love me."

If you're a member of Saint Paul's you committed to giving in proportion to your income and working toward the tithe. Are you still working toward that? We never meet goals we don't set. If you can't get there this year, you take a step in that direction, you start to be deliberate. You say, "I'm going to start rearranging things, and I'm going to get there one day."

As always I want to make it clear that when you're generous it doesn't make God love you. He loves you whether you're generous or not. But in the Bible we see that when we're generous it brings God joy. And then our generosity changes us. We were created to be generous and when you're not generous you have a problem. I've said before that the problem you have when you're not generous is that you get spiritually constipated. You keep taking in but you're not giving out. And after a while it causes pain!

You keep taking in and wonder, "Why is this not making me happy? Why is this not satisfying me?" It's not satisfying because you're not made to take in, and take in, and take in, and never give anything back. Now I realize that the constipation metaphor breaks down right about now, but my point is that you were made for generosity and you're only going find the joy your possessions can bring in life when you get unstuck. You get relief when you learn how to give, when you make room for generosity.

Now, I'm not bashing us here, because we are one of the most generous churches around. We give to help so many people and organizations. But here in Joplin, since the tornado, we've been the recipients of the amazing generosity of our entire country. I was moved to tears on the first day of school. We took Abby into her kindergarten classroom at Cecil Floyd and on every desk was a backpack, and every backpack had all the supplies that each kid needed for the year. A group of people from Texas had come up, brought all the supplies and packed hundreds of backpacks and put them in the classrooms. There was a little tag on the backpack that Abby got that said something like, "We know what you've been through, and we just want you to know we care."

I ran into a woman a couple of months ago outside of Spokes and Spandex, the bike. She had lost everything in the tornado. We got to talking and she was telling me her story. I told her that I was the pastor here and she got this expression on her face. She turned and pointed at her car and said, "Your church gave me my car." All she had was liability insurance on her car and no way replace it. Prior to that someone had called here saying that they had a good used car to give away, and we were able to put them together with her. She was so grateful, she was gushing! Someone found a way to be generous with what they had.

At the church we've been given about \$200,000 to help rebuild our facilities to cover the stuff that our insurance won't cover—that came from people all over the country who are practicing generosity. We've been given another \$150,000 to help families recover and we've given about \$75,000 of that away already.

Jesus said, **"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38, NIV).**

Listen, we don't give in order to get back. That's not how it works. But the amazing thing is that when we give to God and we give to others, the blessings seem to come back. The blessings seem to flow back to us somehow, some way when we become generous.

I want us to continually face the challenge, the call, the command, for us as followers of Jesus, to be the most generous people on the planet. It's what we're made for, it brings joy to God, it brings joy to us, it changes the world. And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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