

“Simplicity, Generosity and Joy—Defined by Generosity”

When I'm called to do a funeral for someone, one of the first things I do is schedule a time to meet with the family and friends of the person who died. Sometimes that's just a few people, sometimes it's 10 or 15. We'll gather in the living room in their home or another family member's home and I bring a notebook. We sit down together and we start with prayer and then I ask them to tell me about their family member or friend. I may have known them really well, but I still want to see them through the eyes of the people closest to them. I ask all kinds of questions to really get a glimpse of their lives: Tell me about how they grew up. What did they do for a living? What brought them the most joy? What were challenges and obstacles they faced in life? I ask lots of questions but the most important question I ask is this: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of them? I'm really asking: What defined your wife? Your husband? What would people who worked with them say was that defining characteristic? What would neighbors say? Or friends? What would they themselves say they wanted to be remembered for?

These are important questions for all of us to think about because someday someone is going to sit in your living room and mine with our family and friends and they're going to ask those same questions. What will the answers be?

Every once in a while it's a good thing to say, "How do I want to be remembered? And what are the defining characteristics that I hope to cultivate in my life?" Those things might not be there yet, but you want to develop them. I want to encourage you, challenge you, to make one of those defining characteristics of your life, generosity. I would hope that people would say about you, "You know, she was generous. When there was a need, she helped. He was faithful in his giving to God. And he made a difference in the world. She made sacrifices so that other people could have. She was that kind of person. He was that kind of man." Generosity.

Today we're taking another look at Simplicity, Generosity and Joy. We're looking at the Christian's relationship to possessions. How we make money, how we spend it, how we deal with debt, how we deal with our desires. How we live a life of gratitude no matter what we have.

Today we're going to focus on this idea of generosity. Because when it comes to our possessions, our possessions will never really be something that gives us joy and life the way they could until we learn the gift of generosity.

Winston Churchill said, **“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”** 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, "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 your possessions. If I give to God there won't 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, NIV). 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, NIV). 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, if we look at the Old Testament as a guide, and we believe that that's what God still asks of us. 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!"

Here's a graphic way of representing this. God sees your resources like these 10 apples here. God says, "Nine of these are yours. Use them to take care of your family, to clothe yourselves, to feed yourselves and provide a home. Set some of it aside for retirement, and give some away to the poor, to your neighbors and friends. Some of it's for recreation and pleasure." God says, "Nine of those apples are for you to use, but one of them is mine, and it's meant for you to show your thanks, your obedience, that you take seriously your relationship with me. But then I'm going to use it to accomplish my work in the world."

But here's what we do a lot of the time. Because society is pulling us in so many different directions we begin to think that 9 apples aren't enough anymore. I mean, how can we do all the fun stuff we want to do, and have the cool stuff we want to have, and pay the bills and everything on just 9 apples? God won't mind if we just take a little bit. "There's this trip I've been wanting to take. I'll just take a little bit of God's apple, he'll understand." And then it's Christmas time and we didn't really save anything for all those Christmas presents. It's kind of giving—not to God but other people, so God will understand." We take a little more of God apple.

We start thinking about retirement. "It's coming up sooner than I think. I need to be setting aside more for retirement but I can't stop spending from these other 9 apples. God won't mind." Then there's medical

emergencies, because we didn't set anything aside for that. Car repairs. That big screen right before the Super Bowl. That new boat, or set of golf clubs, or lake house. And pretty soon, there's not much left from the Lord's apple. Then we say, God, this is your part (the core).

We're not bad people! It's just one little bite at a time. And by the time it's all said and done, we give God the apple core. And even that we take one last bite before we give to God. And 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." The interesting part is that if you give that part first, you're never tempted to eat it. And you figure out how to make the other 9 apples work.

I know it's a challenge to tithe and for some of you it would be impossible to do that this year. What you do is take step in that direction. And know that God understands when you're struggling. For others of you, you could easily go beyond the tithe to fill in that gap. My hope for you as a congregation is that you would take that next step toward tithing. 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."

I find it interesting that there are people of all income levels who tithe and at both extremes there are challenges. When Janet and I first got married, we had less than nothing. We had student loans and car payments. I was starting off as a pastor, she was starting off as a school teacher—we were both on the lowest rung financially in our fields. But we tithed. Sometimes it was tight, but the bills got paid, and nothing was ever repossessed. It was hard. But it can be even harder when you make a lot of money. Because when you look and see what 10% actually is you can think, "There's no way I'm giving that amount!"

Peter Marshall was the chaplain of the Senate and he tells the story of a man coming to him and saying, "Pastor I've got a problem. I've always been a tither. Even when I had next to nothing. When I made just \$20,000 a year I gave \$2,000, I could do that. But last year I made \$500,000 and I can't afford to give \$50,000 to God." Marshall said, "I understand. You've got a serious problem. How about if we pray about that?" The guy said, "Yes, let's do that." Marshall put his arm around the man and prayed, "Lord, you know this man has a serious problem. I pray that you would help him with that. I pray that you would take his income back down to the level where he could afford to tithe." That's a pretty drastic measure.

It's challenging to tithe whether you make next to nothing or you make a lot. For those of you who make a lot I would say this. There comes a certain point when you have to ask, "How many apples can a human being possibly consume?" Can you really eat 150,000 apples or does there come a point when you say, "In the nine apples I have for myself, I have way more than I need. I don't think I need nine. I think I can do just fine with 8. I'm going to give this apple to the poor. Or maybe I can live just fine on 7 and I'm going to give this apple to various organizations that are changing the world." Jesus said, "To those whom much is given, much is expected."

For Janet and me we realized a number of years ago as our family income began to increase that the tithe was the floor, not the ceiling of our giving. So we've given away an increasing amount of our income. Last year we gave away around 15% of our income. We may not always be able to do that, but we love to give! It blesses us, and it stretches us. It makes us look carefully at our priorities. It makes us think before we spend money on things we don't need. We still do (I'm still going to get a new TV at some point!) but we're careful because we want to stretch ourselves. We have been given much and we realize that much is expected of us.

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. What I'm about to say about my mom would call "uncouth." But the spiritual, emotional, financial problem you have when you're not generous is that you are spiritually and financially 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.

And then generosity inspires more generosity. We find that our generosity changes the world. We find that our generosity changes other people. And somewhere down the line we find joy.

Generosity is closely, closely tied to joy. The last two weeks I've been talking to one of our own here from church, Mark Struwe. Mark owns his own business as an exterminator. He's not rich, but he makes a good living. I remember the first time I met him, probably 12 years ago. His wife and kids had come to church and that was when after church every Sunday, Janet and I would go out to every first-time visitor and drop off a coffee mug and thank people for coming to church and invite them to come back. Mark's wife and kids came and so Janet and I went to drop off a mug at their house. When we got there Mark was sitting on the front porch with his shirt off, drinking the biggest can of beer I'd ever seen. He starts giving me a hard time in a good-natured sort of way. He tells me how church might be for some people but not him. He gets his religion in some other ways. We joked around for a few minutes.

Janet and I dropped off the mug invited them to come back. Mark just chuckled when I asked him to come. Well, a lot happened in his life between then and now. Now, Mark almost never misses church. He's on one of our hospitality teams. His faith is growing, and growing. He invites people church. He loves Jesus. He serves the world.

He's keeping me posted about something he's been working on for a few weeks now. He made an acquaintance with a man who recently became homeless and was living in his car. Mark took the time to find out his story, and decided that this man was really ready to break the cycle. Mark got involved. He helped the man find a place to stay. It was pretty rough. Mark's in the process of making it habitable. It's an old mobile home that needed a lot of work. Mark started working on it with this man. Cleaning out the place. Repairing it. Getting the plumbing fixed. Fixing the floor. Helping the man with some past bills so they can get the utilities turned on. Getting the church connected so we can help too. Mark's been working to get the trailer a furnace before it starts to get really cold out. Mark got him connected to Watered Gardens so he has a refrigerator. Got him connected to Economic Securities to find ways to get him ready for a job and life-skills.

The thing about Mark is that this is not the first time he's done this. And if you ask Mark why, he'll tell, it's just the right thing to do. He'll tell you, he's been given so much, he wants to give back. He'll tell, it feels so good, to do good, to give away.

Now, Mark's not perfect, none of us is, but he gets the generosity thing. I truly admire him. I have a feeling that Mark is now in a life-long habit of finding ways to give, finding ways to help, and in the process there are other people who will be changed. And maybe as you hear his story you'll be changed.

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).**

And through the prophet Malachi God was talking to people who were eating God's apple. He said, **"'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it'" (Malachi 3:10, 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 blessing seem to flow back to us somehow, some way when we become generous.

So when I show up at your house, meeting with your family and closest friends and I ask, "What was the defining characteristic of this person?" What will they say about you? My hope is that one of those defining characteristics is generosity. And for today, that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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