

## ***“Bling-onomic\$--They Mystery of Giving and Receiving”***

Today we wrap up this short series called Bling-onomics. This is about training in how we handle our bling—our stuff, our money, our possessions. And I need to make full disclosure to you at the front end today, and that is that I am dealing with subject matter that I can't fully grasp, comprehend, or even begin to understand.

Aren't you glad you came? I mean, you're saying right now, "We got in the car, interrupted our lives, drove all this way, and this guy doesn't even know what he's talking about." That's absolutely kind of true. Because we're looking at a mystifying passage today in Luke 6:38. Jesus says, **“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 8:68).**

Now I think most of us would agree that the BLING-onomic\$ principles that we've talked about so far make good economic sense. For instance, the Bible warns about the dangers of debt and how the borrower is servant to the lender. If you've ever been under crushing consumer debt, had budget-busting kind of debt, if you've ever been unable to pay off your credit cards when they come, if you've ever filed for bankruptcy, you understand why the BLING-onomics teaching in the Bible would warn against debt.

The Bible also talks about the importance of savings. Proverbs 6:6-8 talks about the little ant that gathers food at harvest and saves food in the summer, so that it will have something to eat in the winter. It's saving for a rainy day. And whether you are personally a saver or not, I'll bet you say that makes logical sense; everybody should do that. It makes economic sense to save.

But Jesus comes along in this passage that we're looking at today, and he teaches something that's absolutely counter-intuitive: *Give and it will be given to you.* This goes against our natural inclination. Why, because we're natural-born takers. There is a selfishness side to all of us. Just look at us when we're babies. It's all about us. We're born self-absorbed! "Feed me, hold me, change me! I don't care what you want, take care of me!" What's the favorite word of every English-speaking 2 year old on the planet? "Mine. Mine." I know, I have one in my house.

And this selfishness is in all of our hearts. It's in my heart included. Let's say Janet and I pull up to a drive-thru. The speaker goes, "Welcome to McDonald's. Can I help you?" And I go, "Yeah, I'd like a Quarter Pounder with Cheese, fries, and a Diet Coke." Then I turn to Janet and say, "Honey, what would you like?" And Janet says, "I don't want anything. I'll just eat some of yours."

And I'm thinking, "Doesn't she understand: mine is mine?" But I try to nicely say, "Honey, if you want something, I'll be glad to order something." "No, no, I'm not really hungry," she says. And at that point, I know my French fries are as good as gone.

My point is that we're all selfish. It's not natural for us to give away. We're dealing with probably the most challenging question in the entire scope of our BLING-onomics: In my heart of hearts, deep in my soul, do I really trust God that if I give something away, he is capable of giving back and resupplying my needs?

Jesus said, ... *with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* And so let me ask you: when it comes to your generosity, what will be measured to you? **Looking at the Bible there are three primary kinds of giving away that God calls Christ-followers toward.**

**The first one that we talked about last week is the tithe.** It's where we give the first 10 percent of our earnings back to God to honor him, to show him that we know that everything we have comes from him and we're grateful for that.

Maybe last week was the first time some of you heard about the concept of tithing. Tithing means 10 percent. The Bible teaches in Malachi 3:10 and many other places that when we honor God first with our tithes, he will open the floodgates of heaven and will bless our lives with so much that we won't even be able to handle it. When we honor him that way, he'll see that we're cared for. It's the mystery of giving and receiving.

Listen to this letter that was sent to me. "Aaron, I would like to thank you, your staff, and the members of St. Paul's who have been praying for [me and the kids]. On Easter Sunday I put in a specific request for prayers for us, we have been having serious financial difficulties. [My husband and I] are still going through a divorce [and I've been left] completely responsible for all debts and expenses...I am down to working one full

time job because [the kids] need me at home. I'm sure you can image the stress finances have put on me, especially because I simply can't go back to working 4 jobs 70-90 hours a week. So...I put in this prayer request on Sunday, and on Tuesday, I sold [the] truck...the very first person who called me about it bought it, and at the price I needed! Also, on Friday, I received my federal income tax return (which I did not expect to because [my husband] had already claimed both kids and got a big return). It was \$2,500!! So on Saturday...I could pay up the kids' medical bills (some of which were about to go to collections), and catch up on many of our other bills. Plus, I still had money left to buy groceries!!

"Through all of this, I have faithfully paid my tithe (even when I knew I wasn't going to have enough left over for my other expenses) and God has ALWAYS provided for us. If you figure my income and expenses, there is NO WAY we should be able to make it financially. However, each time I really need money for something, I get a check in the mail for something I didn't expect, don't owe as much for something as I thought I did, etc. About a month ago, I was holding my check for my tithe, thinking I would send it later, when I had more money. I knew that by the end of the week, the check wouldn't clear the bank. On faith, I mailed my tithe Thursday morning. After the mail came on Thursday afternoon, I got an unexpected check in the mail for more than the amount I had just mailed...not a coincidence, I think!

"Basically, this e-mail is a thank you, and I wanted you and everyone to know what your prayers have done for us...specifically." She goes on to ask for prayer for her and the kids and says, "We are struggling through it, but things continue to get better and better!!! Feel free to share this letter with your staff and anyone else. I am so very thankful and want everyone to know what God has done for us, and this is only one small example!!"

Here's something I've noticed without exception: every tither that I've ever met says, "God has blessed me so much;" and every non-tither I've ever met says, "I can't afford to tithe." Now just think about that for a minute. This person who tithes says God has blessed him so much and the other person says he cannot afford to tithe. You see, this is where Christ-followers are called to start their giving because it's a matter of obedience to God and trusting him.

Now I want to be clear about something. God's return blessing into your life—it can come in a lot of different ways. He might protect your health. He might give you extra income. He might give you a new car. He might sustain that old car to run another 50,000 miles and keep it from needing costly repairs.

One way or the other, it's like the guy who had a sign outside of his office that said: "Dr. John Smith, Veterinarian / Taxidermist. Either way you get your dog back." One way or another God gives back to those who honor him first with the tithe.

I've included some common question and answers about tithing in your study guide, so check those out this week. They may hit some question you have. But our giving begins with the tithe.

Now there's a **second kind of giving in the Bible** that God calls followers of Jesus to; and it's what we might just call '**freewill giving.**' This is a kind of giving where you're already tithing, but God just kind of nudges you and you sense a desire to do something more that you're excited about or passionate about.

Now Janet and I give our tithe to Saint Paul's because this is our home church, this is where our needs are met, and this is where we see the results of our spiritual investment week after week. But there are other projects that we feel led to support from time to time. We support a high school student in Nicaragua, we give to our colleges and universities, we support Christian radio and National Public Radio, we give yearly to Salvation Army, we give monthly to Watered Gardens, we gave to the African Children's Choir last week, and we give regularly to the Joplin Schools. Those are freewill offerings where we feel God has led us to do over and above our tithe. And we just obeyed his leading on that. Living by the 10-10-80 plans allows us to be able to do those sorts of things. That's freewill giving.

**A third kind of giving that God sometimes leads people to falls into the category of extravagant giving. Or you might call it sacrificial giving.** There will probably be a few times over the course of your life that God will ask you to make a huge, high-risk sacrificial kind of gift that just scares the bejeepers out of you

when you do it because of the size of the gift, or because you don't know where all the finances are going to come from.

Once in a while God says for reasons you don't fully understand, "I want you to take a huge risk, and take a big chunk and give it away." It's been my experience in watching people who have done this over the years and having done it a couple of times in my own life over the years that almost always God eventually re-supplies those resources and beyond. And you start growing in ways that you wouldn't have grown in otherwise, all because you obeyed.

Some of you've heard me tell this story before, but this kind of nudge came to Janet and me not long after we came to Saint Paul's. Back then we were DINKs—dual income, no kids. We didn't make a lot but we lived within our means. And so we were able to tithe and save quite a bit of money. We had the chance to buy a small place on the Lake of the Ozarks and so we took our savings thinking that we could invest it in a home, have a little get away, and have an appreciating asset that we could use down the road for retirement. So we bought this place—actually half a duplex (we called it The Love Shack).

We had owned it and enjoyed it for about 3 years and it was about that time that the church started to grow and the leaders began to realize that if we were going to be prepared for the future we had to pay off debt and get ready to build. Saint Paul's launched into our first 3 year capital campaign. The whole church was called to look at making sacrificial gifts--doing without something, giving something up, in order to fuel the fire of the mission here. Janet and I prayed about what we might do and independently we felt that God was asking us to sell that place and give the proceeds to the church. We both knew it. It was huge to us, but it really didn't take much discussion.

We sold it fairly quickly and gave what we had in it, \$25,000, to the church. We have some wonderful memories of that place. But we don't miss it. Do you know why, because we've seen what God's done here. People connecting to the God who made them, children taught, youth given a counter-cultural way to live. We don't miss that place because we see adults discovering their purpose, people being set free from the slavery of addiction, and hopelessness, and depression, and poverty. We don't miss it because we've seen hundreds of you go out and serve in real-life mission, at Turnaround Ranch, and the Community Clinic, and Habitat for Humanity and Hearts and Hammers, and Nicaragua, and Souls Harbor, and Homebound Services, and Ronald McDonald House, so many other places. And that's when the church is at its best. This church is able to do so much, to be a catalyst for change, for hope, and our giving is the fuel for that fire. Janet and I are so glad to have something to give like that because we see what a church on fire can do. And I'm sure that that won't be the last time God calls us to give like that.

That's a lot of money to us, and at the time it seemed like a sacrifice. But you know what, it really wasn't a sacrifice. Because we got so many blessings back. But we didn't give to get anything back. This is not about giving to God in an attempt to double your net worth. Even if there was never any return from God, I would hope that I would want to give for the sheer joy of giving and its positive effect. But at the same time, I cannot deny the mystery of giving and receiving I've experienced in my life. Everything we've ever given away, has come back to us. Everything. And what we thought were sacrifices at the time, we ended up not missing at all. The mystery of giving and receiving.

Now you may be sitting there saying, "Aaron, you lucky dog, you've had it to give away." Maybe—but Janet and I would tell you we believe with all of our hearts that it's the mystery of giving and receiving. 2 Corinthians 9:6 says, **"Remember this: 'Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.' You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion (2 Corinthians 2:9, 11).**

That's been our experience. The more we've sown, the more we've reaped, the more God has enabled us to be even more generous, and then the more he blesses. And I just feel like the most blessed guy on the face of the earth.

Now I have to take a minute and say this. The mystery of giving and receiving presents a special challenge for those of us who are most affluent; for those with mega-bling. You've worked hard, made large

amounts of money; managed it carefully—and that’s wonderful. But studies show that Christ-followers with the most wealth proportionately give the least, much less than those with moderate and lower income levels.

It’s like the affluent guy who became a follower of Jesus, and he found out about tithing. He said to a friend, “I made \$500,000 last year. That means giving \$50,000. I can’t afford to do that. Would you pray about this for me?” His friend prayed, “Heavenly Father, I pray that you would lower my friend’s income to the point that he can afford to give.”

Jesus said, **“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” [Luke 12:48].** That’s saying that if God’s given you a measure of wealth, you’ve got a tremendous responsibility on your hands, an even greater responsibility than everyone else. You can’t just live out your wildest dreams and hoard it all. You can’t just be goofy with it. You’d better get strategic with the much that God has entrusted you. And there’s huge joy in that.

And if you’re in that place of wealth, I want to challenge you: Now is the time to step up. When people struggle economically, one of the first places they turn is here, for hope, for help. I want us to be ready. And our church continues to grow at a rapid pace as people find a spiritual home here, but many people will be in a place of needing to receive far more than they can give. I want us to be ready so that we don’t have any hiccups, any shortfalls, helping people in need, in being able to teach our kids and, provide classes, courses, opportunities for our adults, and send as many people out to help in all kinds of missions and ministries as we can. Those of you with wealth can truly help to fuel this fire. We’re not playing church. This is the real deal.

This church has become an amazing connecting point. There are many ministries around that look to us for support and connection to people, I want us to do both. To resource Watered Gardens, to resource ASCENT Recovery Residences. I want us to be able to be a conduit so we can channel tens of thousands of dollars, ultimately millions of dollars into worthy ministries right here and around the world. If you are a person of wealth, step up, change the world. Resource this place now as well as in your bequests so that we send out armies of people to volunteer in the schools—tutoring kids that are struggling, working one on one with kids with special needs. Resource this place so that we send out armies of people to serve at the Community Clinic, and Souls Harbor, and Salvation Army, and Crosslines. Ministries on the front lines of human need. To those whom much is given much is expected and the joy is more than you can imagine. Let’s do this!

Let’s begin with the tithe, let’s be sensitive for the nudge to give freewill gifts, let’s prepare for extravagant giving. 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.”** It’s the mystery of giving and receiving. And for today that’s the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We going to close with a song. As it’s sung, that’s the time to bring up your Commitment Card....

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