

Message: Defined by Generosity

Are you living generously? Consider Peter’s words, *“Tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage - to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life.”* (1Timothy 6:17-19, MSG).

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Do you want to be known as a person who is generous with their life? When we live life from a place of abundance and generosity, we live openly and freely. Our spirit is free. The opposite of generous living is living from a place of scarcity. When scarcity dominates, our lives are limited and bound. We’re living half a life in fear.

Living a generous life spans all aspects of our relationship with God. When we live generous lives, we’re living life with an attitude of gratitude. We don’t hold anything back from God. We’re willing to share our time, energy, abilities, stuff and money with others because we truly care for them. We’re blessed by God as we bless others.

The challenge of living generously is this: we’re created to be generous, but we’re tempted to hoard. God created us with the willingness to give; this is our foundation. Proverbs 22:9 says, *“Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”* The desire to be generous is built into us by God. It’s part of our Christian DNA. But there are two voices at war against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep what we have, rather than sharing it.

The first voice is the voice of fear. Fear keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have. The voice of fear whispers in our ear, “you know, something bad might happen to you so you better keep that for yourself.” The voice of fear gives us a misplaced idea about the true source of our security. The truth is hoarding offers us no real security in this world. Only God can give us security and hope.

The second voice is the voice of self-gratification. Our culture tells us we find the good life by what we own and the pleasure we experience. Culture tells us “you deserve it.” So we find ourselves thinking, “if I give, there won’t be enough left for me.” When we listen to this voice, we’re living from scarcity, rather than abundance.

There’s good news! We can defeat the negative voices and listen to the positive voice of our Shepherd, Jesus. When we give our lives to Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to change and lead us, we find our fears beginning to dissipate. Our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and caring for others. We may wrestle with the negative voices from time to time, but we’re able to recognize and ignore them more easily and effectively. The more we grow in Christ, realizing our lives belong to him, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of the spirit. It’s an integral part of spiritual wisdom and contentment.

God reveals reasons to be generous throughout scripture.

Moses wrote, *“Life is a gift, and everything belongs to God.”* (Leviticus 25:23). Jesus said, *“In the very act of losing our lives, we find life”* (Matthew 16:25). Luke wrote, *“We find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things for ourselves”* (Acts 20:35). Some of you are nodding. You know the lessons are true. Generosity is a product of a fruitful spirit, of salvation.

Jacob wrestled with his conscience and God and then made a vow, *“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ... and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you”* (Genesis 28:20-22). From the early days, God’s people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God.

A gift offered to God was called the first fruits or the tithe, and it equaled one-tenth of your flock, crops or income. Our investment goes to the church, God’s house, for the work of the Lord. And the work is developing people. It’s about helping people find the path to eternal life, not budgets or buildings. We are part of the solution to the challenges of this world. There is much to do, so we need to be generous.

Why do we talk about tithing? After all, as Christians who live under the new covenant, we aren't bound by the Law of Moses. We look to it as a guide. It's about giving proportionally in grateful response to God's blessing and love. We are returning God's love by passing it on to people. We can increase our giving over time. This is a sign of our maturing spiritual life. God knows each of us. And God will help us make the adjustments necessary for us to become more generous with our lives.

God blesses us when we use the spiritual gift of giving. Solomon noted, "*Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water*" (Proverbs 11:24-25). There are people giving 20%, 30%, even 90% of their income. I encourage you to pray and explore this gift in all aspects of your life: your prayers, presence, giving, service and witness.

What is God's response to our giving? Jesus tells us, "*A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back*" (Luke 6:37-38). When we generously share our lives with others, we'll be blessed in some way in return. If you only share a little of your life with others, you'll only receive a few blessings. If you share a generous portion of your life with others, you'll receive a generous response in return. What's the greatest way blessings are poured out? In love.

Our generosity affects us. When we live generously, our hearts are changed. When we're generous to God and to our family, friends, neighbors and others who are in need, our hearts are filled with joy. They're enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously of ourselves in one area of our lives, we become more generous in all aspects of our lives. When you give generously of your money, don't be surprised to find God giving you opportunities to share your other abilities. When you give generously of your spiritual gifts and abilities, don't be surprised to find God giving you opportunities to share your time. When you give your time, don't be surprised to find God giving you opportunities to share your faith. These are blessings.

There is one great benefit to living generously. God blesses us. God challenges us through the prophet Malachi, *"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing"* (Malachi 3:10).

When we choose to live generously and freely, when we willingly and joyfully share our time, abilities and, yes, even our money, with others, we will receive blessings upon blessings.

Many Christians have odd view on giving. They say if you give, then God will give more back to you. That's the "prosperity Gospel." But that's not how grace works. We don't give to God so we can get something in return. That makes grace cheap. We give freely, without strings, expecting nothing in return because we love God and want to show our love. The amazing thing is this: when we give to God and others, the blessings just seem to come back to us. There's no guarantee you will never have bad things happen to you. When we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives. We feel more content and peaceful. Our lives have purpose and meaning.

The prophet Habakkuk wrote, *"Hold fast and do not give up on your faith, even in the face of the bloody trials you are going through, for the righteous will live by their faith. You know God walks with you and even if you die God will be with you on the other side"* (2:3-4). If we believe faith sustains us even at the end of life, it leads us to ask **"are we investing adequately in our faith?"**

Investing in your faith is something you do every time you sing praises to God, experience God's presence and listen for God's voice. Investing in your faith is what you do when you spend time in prayer, talking to and getting to know God. Investing in your faith is what you do when you connect with other people, describing and discussing your faith so that it comes alive in those moments. Investing in your faith is what you do when you open your Bible and listen to God speak through the scriptures. Investing in your faith is what you do when you go out into the world in mission and service. And, as you use your gifts to be a blessing to others, you finally realize, **"this is what I was made for."**

Your faith comes alive, your life is whole, and you find a deep, persistent and powerful joy.

This intertwining of faith and life is what led Martin Luther to say “faith is to the soul what breath is to the body.” As we conclude this series, I invite you to examine your life and practice. Are you investing in the one thing which matters most, your faith and walk with God? **Let us live generously by faith.**

Let us pray...

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Help me to be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may serve others with this love. Change us so we don't hoard or waste what you give, but we share it with you and others. Bless us when we give, freely, generously and willingly, of our prayers, presence, service, giving and witness. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up everything so we might be saved. Amen.

1Timothy 6:17-19 (CEB)

Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.

Isaiah 55:10-11 (CEB)

Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky
and don't return there without watering the earth,
making it conceive and yield plants
and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater,
so is my word that comes from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty.
Instead, it does what I want,
and accomplishes what I intend.