

Living Generously Part Three

We've been looking at God's invitation for us to live generously - not out of guilt or obligation not because we feel like we need to or ought to, but because living generously leads to a bigger, richer, happier life. If we want our lives to enlarge, that doesn't happen by getting more, it happens by giving more. As Winston Churchill once said, *we make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give*. Jesus promises us that it is happier to give than it is to receive.

With that in mind, last week we began to look at some principles for how we can be wise stewards of the resources that God has entrusted to us. The Bible tells us that we don't own anything we have, even our lives don't belong to us, we have been bought with a price, we belong to God, and everything we have belongs to God and we are stewards. A steward is someone who is entrusted to manage someone else's property for them with the owner's best interests, goals, and priorities in mind.

Living generously isn't just about money, it's about being generous with everything that God has given us: our time, our energy, our talents, our hearts, and yes, our money. Next week we will finish up by looking at how we steward our energies and talents for the work of the kingdom. But this morning we are going to be talking about money and some ways that God's word directs our financial generosity.

Before we get into specific principles about giving, there are two important things we need to know about money. First, money is a really important subject to God, but not for the reasons that it is an important subject to some people - God isn't greedy and He's not hurting for money. In that sense He really doesn't care about money - it has no appeal to God. But God knows the unique grip money can have on our hearts and how easily it can become a false god to us if we're not careful. Don't think that money is an unspiritual topic - it's a very spiritual topic. Jesus spoke more about money than about heaven and hell combined. There is a direct artery running from our wallets to our hearts. When God asks, "what's in your wallet?" He's really asking, "what's in your heart?" It is a very spiritual issue and it's important to God.

But it is also one of the most mishandled and manipulated subjects in the church. That's why I started off last week's message with the point that being a good steward requires discernment not to be manipulated into giving. God never manipulates us to give, and Christian ministries never should either. A lot of people look at the church as being all about money, and unfortunately a lot of that is the churches fault. Two weeks ago I signed up for a pastor's 3 hour webinar, and there were some good things shared, but every couple minutes it seemed they had another sales pitch for signing up for their \$90 month year long program. It really turned me off and I signed off after an hour or so. The church should not become all about money - our message isn't money, it's Christ and if we focus on money we run a very real danger of diminishing Christ.

I think that's why the apostle Paul makes this rather shocking declaration in 2 Cor.8:21: *For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man*. It's shocking because Paul usually couldn't give two rips what people think. He says about his ministry that if he were trying to please men he wouldn't be a servant of Christ. He describes the other apostles like Peter as "those who seem to be something - what they are makes no difference to me, God doesn't play favorites..." Paul really doesn't care what people think, only what God thinks. But in the area of finances Paul flips it and it suddenly becomes very important what people think - not out of the fear of man, but because if it appears that money is being mishandled it can damage the reputation of the church and our

ability to preach Christ effectively. Scandal and God's reputation are tarnished when the church mishandles - or even appears to mishandle - money.

My goal this morning is to shoot straight with you about what the Bible says about our financial giving. God promises to bless us if we obey Him with our finances so we need to know what the Bible teaches about money. But there are no sales pitches and no pressure this morning. Let God's word speak to you and then do what God puts in your heart to do.

Prov. 3:5-10

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.*

*Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

God's word often gives us a call to obey and then a promise that God will bless us if we do. So in verse 5 God calls us to trust in Him with all our heart, and then in verse 6 He promises that He will make our paths straight - which means our lives will go right, not get lost and turned around and led down bad paths. In verse 7 God calls us not to think of ourselves as wise but to walk in the fear of the Lord, turning away from evil, and verse 8 He promises us that it will be health and refreshment to our bodies.

In verse 9 God calls us to honor Him with our wealth and the firstfruits of our produce - we are to honor God with our money and our increase. Then in verse 10 is a wonderful promise that God will bless us if we do: *then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

What does it mean to honor the Lord with our wealth? God's word gives us two principles that have to do with "when" and "how". First of all the "when".

1. Give God the firstfruits of our produce

To honor is to esteem, to think highly of. Our actions speak louder than our words when it comes to honoring. Years ago I knew a couple where the guy never made any effort for his wife on special occasions. That year for her birthday he had stopped at a card shop on the way home and didn't see any "to my wife" birthday cards so he grabbed a "to my sister" birthday card. He thought it was funny. She didn't. She felt dishonored because his actions said she didn't matter all that much.

Order is important when it comes to how we spend our money. Imagine if someone showed you their budget and it looked like this: the first thing that comes out of their paycheck is entertainment, pleasure, and buying any new toy they want. Then, if there's anything left over, they'll buy food for the family and pay the mortgage. You'd probably say their priorities are out of whack and they've got the order wrong. Taking care of our family and responsibilities as a priority is an important way of saying that they are important to us, we esteem them, we prioritize them.

That's true with God, but it goes even further. Giving to God the firstfruits of our produce (our income) not only says God is important to us, it is a way of acknowledging that everything we have and everything we

receive comes from His hand. Giving to God the first and not the last is a way that we honor God. The other principle is "how" - there are three primary categories for giving found in the Bible.

2. *Giving to the Lord*

a. *The tithe*

The word tithe means 10% and it was instituted in the OT as the first means of honoring God with our wealth. In the OT the tithe was to be brought into the storehouse - the temple where the person was spiritually fed, and in the NT with the doing away of the temple's role in the believer's life, the church became the recipient of the believer's tithe. Basically it's a call to support the local work of God from which the believer receives spiritual benefit.

There might be some here for whom the concept of the tithe is unfamiliar. I had no idea or conviction about the tithe until I got married -and I had been a Christian for over a decade at that point. Janice did have a conviction about tithing and so we immediately made that a priority in our marriage and finances and we have tithed faithfully for the past 28 years. Let me highlight two major blessings that come from tithing.

The first is that God promises to bless us when we honor Him with the tithe.

Malachi 3:10-11 ESV

Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts.

God doesn't usually want us to put Him to the test, but here He invites us to put Him to the test and see if He doesn't bless us and take care of our needs. Conversely, I've met believers who have gotten away from the tithe and watched their finances get really messed up. There are devourers that can eat up that extra money and more! I had one strong Christian guy share with me that he had once been a faithful tither but decided to try and get ahead by not tithing for a while. When he talked to me he hadn't tithed in years, but rather than getting ahead by keeping the extra 10%, his finances had gotten really messed up and he was in significant debt. He loved the Lord, but as he put it, there was this one artery of his faith that was clogged up and he knew that to get it right he had to put God first.

This isn't about giving \$10 and getting \$100. This isn't a formula or about the prosperity teaching. It's really about trusting and acknowledging that God is ultimately our source, not our abilities or talents or job. It's about seeing God provide our daily bread. Janice and I have seen God's blessing and provision over the years in so many ways but I want to share just one example. We had been married for about 6 years and after renting for those years we prayed and asked God to help us purchase our own home. Someone told us about a home for sale by owner, and we loved the home and it was a good price, so the owner told us to take a month and look into what financing we could get and then after that month we'd meet and let her know what we could do.

A month later we met with Joan (the owner) and she asked, what can you do? We said absolutely nothing. My salary was small, we had no money saved and no bank was willing to finance a mortgage for us. I figured that would be the end of it, but Joan said "well I think you're supposed to have this house...". We had found favor in her eyes, and in particular she really liked Jennifer who was about 2 years old at the time, and she then set out incredible lease with option to buy terms that not only included a very affordable rental price that would enable us to save money each month, but she then said she'd take 25% of that rental price and put it in a savings towards our down payment. With her help we were able to buy the home within a year.

I tell that story - and there are many others - only because it is an example of how we've seen God's blessing in the form of generous provision in our lives. It's not always easy writing out that tithe check. I remember once writing out a check to a previous church, and being so tempted to rip it up and not tithe that week. Not because I wanted to buy something selfish, but because things were so tight we could really have used that money. But faith rose in my heart. See, if there is no God, then giving 10% of our income - especially if things are tight - doesn't really make much financial sense. But if there is a God who calls us and invites us to test Him to see if He really will be faithful to us when we honor Him with our finances, then the wisest thing we can do is to believe God and obey. Faith is a big part of it.

Tithing also gives us the opportunity to invest in God's local work where we are spiritually fed and built up. Someone might ask, why should I give my tithe to my local church? Why not split it up to other ministries or give it to the poor? I see the local church as a spiritual hub where God births ministries in many different directions. God says in Malachi 3 that we are to bring it into the storehouse, meaning the local temple (the local house of God) so that that ministry will not suffer want but will be able to minister. That's true of local churches. We see in the NT that God's plan A is the church (there is no plan B). Jesus said he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The book of Acts recounts the planting of local churches as the Holy Spirit empowered plan of advancing the Great Commission around the world. God has raised up wonderful parachurch ministries and we're thankful for them - but they can never take the place of the church. They aren't meant to, they are meant to supplement the work of the church. The church is the spiritual hub of all that God has ordained to do in the world. But the practical reality is that a local church can't be a spiritual hub of ministry if its members aren't investing in it financially.

Here at GCC, because of the faithful tithing of so many, over the years we've seen people get saved, people who have strayed come back to Christ, hurting people healed, hearts that were bound by legalism set free, families strengthened, missionaries sent out, a church plant sent out, and more. Having said that, I believe that we've barely scratched the surface of what God is going to do. When I look at the amazing church family God is building, I can't help but be excited and full of faith about our future and the ministry God has for us - all of us - to be a part of! Tithing is our way of investing in that work.

When believers give to a church or ministry, that is a sacred trust and the leaders here at GCC are committed to use those resources wisely, carefully, and with integrity. We will be getting out a financial report from 2015 soon, and are ready to answer any questions you might have. We want to be careful to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but in the eyes of man too.

The tithe is the first principle in giving, but the Bible also speaks of at least two other types of giving.

b. *Alms*

This is giving to the poor. Proverbs 19:17 says, *Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.* God cares about the truly needy and hurting. There are very real challenges in giving to charity and needs today. There are genuinely needy people, but once again, to be good stewards we need to be discerning because giving money to someone isn't always the best way to help them and sometimes it can actually hurt them. But compassion and dignified help for the poor - especially when it can be in ways that require able bodied people to work for income rather than just giving hand outs - is a reflection of the heart of God. And there are people - orphans and widows and disabled - who can't provide for themselves and need our love and help.

The great 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon and his wife had some chickens and while they would sell the eggs their chickens laid, they refused to give the eggs away - even to close family. Some people resented this and accused them of being greedy and cheap but they quietly accepted the criticism and never defended themselves. It was only after Mrs. Spurgeon died that the rest of the story came out. All the profits from the sale of eggs went to support two elderly widows. They had built generosity into their lives but refused to take any credit for it or let people know.

If you want to read some good books on the subject of helping the poor, a couple I recommend are *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert and *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Richard Stearns. We need to and want to be discerning, but at the same time, our hearts and our wallets should be open to caring for and helping the poor as the Lord leads.

c. *Special offerings*

These can include offerings to emergency funds, building funds, other churches or ministries that are experiencing need, and so forth.

Living generously invites us to invest our money in the kingdom of God and the advance of the gospel. I want to close by stressing that honoring God with our wealth isn't about rules followed out of guilt and it certainly isn't about pressure and manipulation. It's an opportunity to trust God by honoring Him with the wealth He has blessed us with, believing that He will pour out even greater blessings on us. Those greater blessings might not be financial blessings - there are so many things that are much more precious than money.

Ask these questions of your heart: Am I trusting in the Lord? Or do I trust in my paycheck or savings account? Does God have my heart, or does money have my heart? Am I living generously or am I living selfishly? Let's let God's word have the final word over our lives in this matter.

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