

## Living Generously Part Four

This morning we'll be wrapping up a series called Living Generously and just to give you a sense of where we're going, next week we'll be studying the book of Esther together in a series I'm calling *For Such A Time As This*. I've never really studied Esther or heard many messages from the book, so I'm excited about what we'll discover as we go through it.

Let's turn together to the gospel of Matthew. God invites us to live bigger by living generously, to grow our lives by spending our lives for the sake of the kingdom. In Matt. 25 Jesus tells a parable that lays out the importance of living our lives with kingdom priorities in view. **Read Matt. 25:14-30**

The big point of this parable is that all of us will one day answer for how we lived our lives and what we did with what we were given. I want to share three simple points from this parable that encourage us to live our lives generously.

### 1. Living generously begins with recognizing that God has been generous to us

Jesus says there was a man who just before leaving on a journey gave his servants talents. Today the word talents means natural gifts and abilities, something someone is good at: she has a talent for playing the piano, he has a talent for getting in trouble. But talent was a currency of money in those days. A lot of money! One talent was worth approximately 20 years salary for a worker in Jesus' day. So the master gave one servant 100 years worth of salary, to another he gave 40 years worth of salary, and to another he gave 20 years worth of salary. The master was very generous to these servants!

God has also been very generous to us. Jesus uses a monetary currency to represent all that God has given us, beginning with life itself and then extending to all that we are and have. Our personalities, abilities, skills, energy, money, possessions, interests, love, friendship, compassion. Everything we are and have. You might not think that you have much, especially if you are tempted to compare yourself to others who might seem to have more. But this parable reveals that, whether we've been given 20 talents or 1 talent, we've all been given a lot - God has been very generous to us.

Living generously isn't something that happens because we feel guilty or obligated, we don't become generous because we're pressured or manipulated into it. Living generously is the overflow of God's goodness to us through us. People who recognize how good God has been to them naturally want to overflow that goodness to others. I love the graphic that Alan made for this series: generosity comes from a heart on fire with the love and goodness and grace of God, a heart that burns to share that goodness with others. But for that to happen, we need to be aware of how good and generous God has been to us.

Christians are rich with God's grace. *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 2 Cor. 8:9 (NIV)* None of us can claim poverty when it comes to living generously. None of us should think, "I don't have anything to give". According to the word of God you are rich in Christ - Jesus has entrusted you with his riches.

One of the greatest treasures God has given us in Christ is His forgiveness. This week I found myself tempted to be offended at someone. Not with anyone in the church, just so you're not wondering. But we

all have those moments when something someone does offends us and we can be very tempted to close our hearts and be stingy when it comes to giving forgiveness. But how can we be stingy with forgiveness when Jesus, just before leaving for his journey to heaven, gave us the riches of his forgiveness.

*In him (in Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. Eph. 1:7* We are rich in forgiveness! Living generously means overflowing with that forgiveness to those who hurt or offend us. Col. 3:13 says, *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* God has been generous towards us with forgiveness, and we are to live generously in forgiving others. Out of the riches of God's grace to us, with hearts burning with that grace, we are to generously give to others.

Never think you don't have much to offer in the service of the Lord. Never think that your life is insignificant to God or to the kingdom of God, because it isn't true. God has entrusted a lot to you - time, love, energy, abilities, money, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, service. On and on it goes. Living generously begins with recognizing that God has been generous to us, and He expects us to be faithful with all that He has entrusted to us, but what does it mean to be faithful? God's definition of faithfulness might surprise us a little.

## **2. Living generously is being faithful to invest what God has given us in the work of the kingdom**

The first two servants are commended by Jesus for being "good and faithful servants". But the third servant, when he gave back what the master had given him, was rebuked as a wicked and lazy servant. Think about what that means. The third servant didn't steal or lose the master's money. He kept it safe and returned it exactly as he received it. By some definitions that would be considered being faithful. But the master expected more than just getting back what he gave, he expected the servant to invest his talent in order to get a return on his money.

Faithfulness isn't keeping our heads down and our noses clean and just trying to get through life without messing up big time. We are warned from this parable not to fall into the thinking that if, at the end of our lives we're able to give them back to God exactly as we found them, having walked through the world without leaving any footprints or making any impact, that God will see that as our being faithful. That's not God's definition of being a faithful steward. Faithfulness is taking what God has entrusted to us and investing it in the work of the kingdom in order that the ministry of Christ might be advanced and that the currency of the kingdom might be increased.

Faithfulness isn't hoarding our lives, it's spending our lives, giving our lives to something much bigger and greater than ourselves. Faithfulness calls us out of the shrink-wrap of selfishness into a life lived generously.

Some of you may know about the very unusual life of Hetty Green. Born in 1834 to a wealthy whaling family, Hetty Green inherited over 5 million dollars (equivalent to over \$78 million today) from her parents when they passed away. Known as the richest woman in America, she was also probably the stingiest woman in America. To save money she never turned on the heat or used hot water, she wore one old black dress and instructed her laundress to only wash the dirty hems to save money on soap. When her son Ned broke his leg as a child, she tried to have him admitted to a free clinic for the poor. When they

recognized who she was she was forced to take him to other doctors, but because of the delay his leg had to be amputated,. She died with a net worth that today would be equivalent to 3 billion dollars, but in another, deeper way, she died a very poor woman indeed. Money had a strange grip on her. She loved it, cherished it, hoarded it, but she never used it. It makes me wonder what value she saw in money since she never wanted to spend it? What value does money have if it's just accumulating in a bank account untouched? That same question hangs over our lives: God has been so generous to each of us. You have been given so much. I have been given so much. But the value of His generosity to us isn't found in hoarding it, it's in spending it. What will we do with what we've been given? Living generously invites us to open the bank accounts and give away all that God has given us in the service of His kingdom.

I think this is one of the biggest struggles in many of our hearts. Something inside of us wants to live generously, to give ourselves to something that will make a difference, that will count for eternity. But there is this other voice that is afraid of taking the risk, afraid of what we might lose if we do. What if we mess up? What if God asks so much of our lives that nothing is left for us? And there is a part of us that, like Hetty Green, just wants to hoard what we have and keep it to ourselves. This is really where a lot of believers struggle (I know I do), and yet I also believe it's where the greatest potential for joy and adventure and experiencing of God's grace and power abides. Even as I worked on this series, God has been stirring in me a desire to make 2016 a year of living more generously than I have ever lived before. But if living generously is being faithful to invest our lives in the work of the kingdom, how do we do that? What does a kingdom investment portfolio look like? I mean, that's a great concept but how do we step out and do that? Share three thoughts to help direct us in being faithful stewards:

a. ***The currency of the kingdom of God isn't money - it's people.***

This parable uses money to convey a truth but money isn't the currency of the kingdom of heaven. People are. Jesus didn't come to make money, he came to make disciples.

When I was in my 30's and relatively new at pastoring, we used to go to Virginia Beach once a year for a pastor's conference. And most years we'd take an afternoon to go by the CBN campus, the ministry that Pat Robertson - who was one of the most famous TV Christians at the time - founded. And I'll be honest, as I looked at these huge brick buildings, and walked in the studio where the 700 Club was filmed, I was a little bit envious. It seemed like the height of ministry success.

As I've gotten older, I see it a little differently. Don't get me wrong, buildings, even beautiful buildings, can be effective tools for ministry. But I see a little more clearly that the kingdom of Christ isn't about big buildings and satellite signals and massive amounts of money. These things can certainly be useful to the kingdom - but only to the degree that they influence people towards Christ. And all of us can make a difference in other people's lives for Christ. God uses flawed but real Christians to make an eternal difference in the lives of other people. God uses ordinary people just like you and me. Maybe you don't feel like you have this huge spiritual gift or you don't feel like you're very eloquent about sharing the gospel, or whatever - you just don't feel like you have much to offer. In the eyes of God that's not true. But the size of what we have to invest isn't what matters to God - it's our faithfulness and faith to invest it.

- *"Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."  
Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Irish statesman, author, orator, political theorist and philosopher.*

Has Jesus left you with love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, encouragement, truth combined with love, and hope? Invest those things in the lives of others, build friendships, reach out to people you meet, give people good when they deserve bad, and God will increase the kingdom of God through your life.

**b. The local church is a great place to invest**

I want to give a plug for investing in the local church as a great place to invest. The reality is that few, if any, of us are going to be spiritual statesmen or stateswomen - transforming the lives of large numbers of people by the sheer force of our personality and spiritual power. When I look back and think about who has had the greatest impact and influence on my life and faith in Christ, there are people who stand out but no one stands alone as being the sole figure rising above all other people. And oddly, everyone I think of has fairly obvious flaws.

- Grandmother who prayed for me
- There was my Dad who was an example of a life turned around by Jesus Christ - I remember him being so excited about sharing Jesus with students at the college he taught at.
- There were regular people in my first church, Diego, Tom Terry, Errol and Fred, Jerry, Sherry, Dave and Connie, and others.
- Friends at Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle
- My wife, Janice has had a tremendous influence on my life
- Dave Harvey, CJ Mahaney, Aron Osborne, Warren Boettcher
- There are many such names right here in this church but I won't begin to name names cause I wouldn't want to leave anyone out.

But so much of it isn't big, lightning bolt events. It's small moments, imperceptible, just real life intersecting with real grace and it leaves an impression of Christ. There is an accumulative effect as we do life together in the church. Find a ministry and invest. Start a ministry and invest.

Listen, let's not just get involved. Let's make 2016 a year where we give our hearts and energy and skills to make the assignment that God calls us to the best and the most effective it can be. Let's give it our all. The local church is a great place to invest to see true and lasting spiritual impact because we're better together! Let's see ministry multiply this year. Many of you are deeply invested already - in fact you really shouldn't give any more. You'd be shortchanging your family if you did. But others, you know you have more to give than you are. Take a look at what you might be hiding and bring it out!!

And let me say one other thing - getting involved and investing gives us the right and responsibility to invest our wisdom and input when we see ways that might improve ministry. But if we're not in the game we really don't have a right to criticize those who are. One of my favorite quotes by Teddy Roosevelt:

*"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring*

*greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat." ~Teddy Roosevelt in a speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910*

Let's dare and dare greatly. Let's invest and invest greatly. Let's not fear the critic who may criticize our attempts or our failures. And let's not fear that God is sitting on the bleachers ready to criticize and condemn us for daring and then failing. This parable also teaches us the importance of seeing God's character accurately.

### **c. Be confident in the goodness of God's character**

One way that fear can paralyze us from living generously is by distorting our view of God. We can have a misguided belief that God is hard and demanding and wants nothing more than to land on anyone who messes up. The wicked and lazy servant buried what he was given because he was afraid to risk losing the talent he had. And he was afraid because of his distorted view of the master: *Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours. Vv. 24-25*

He "knew" his master to be a hard man, someone who was always looking to get where he hadn't sown or scattered. Someone who demanded payback where he didn't give in the first place. Someone who would condemn failure or mistakes on the part of his servants. He knew all this about his master. But sadly this servant didn't know his master at all. The master was a generous man, giving far, far more than these servants deserved, and generous in his encouragement to those who did increase his investment. In fact in his response to this wicked servant, the master once again shows himself to be a very reasonable and gracious man. He repeats the servant's slander of his character and then says, if that's how you viewed me, you should have at least put the talent in a bank so that it would collect interest. That would be a minimal effort and yet the master would have been content with even that small attempt to be faithful.

God isn't a "hard man". He isn't that parent sitting on the bleachers yelling and criticizing his kid every time he or she makes a mistake in the game. When our daughter was about 11 years old she played on a community basketball team and in one team they played there was this dad who yelled and insulted his daughter mercilessly every time she made the slightest mistake. And the more he yelled, the more fearful his daughter got over making more mistakes. God isn't that dad. He is gracious, generous with encouragement, and when He brings correction, it's with the loving warmth that builds us up rather than tears us down. Let's never forget that God doesn't demand all in order for us be saved, He gave all in order for us to be saved. He is ready to help and empower and encourage our attempts to be faithful.

### **3. Living generously leads to greater opportunities to live generously**

The two faithful servants experienced firsthand more of their master's generosity and good-heartedness because they invested in his priorities. They were faithful with a few things (from the master's perspective), now they are given the opportunity to rule over much, much more. Notice the nature of God's reward. He doesn't give them more to hoard, he gives them more to invest. He gives them greater opportunities to live generously and invest for the kingdom.

Verse 29 always seemed to be a strange verse to me: *For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.* But it's really the principle we've already looked at:

*A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. Prov. 11:25*

Jesus isn't saying that someone who hoards or accumulates a lot will be given more, while those who don't have much will find what they have stripped away from them. He's saying that those who invest God's generous grace to them will find more grace coming back to them. As they refresh others they find they are refreshed. And those who live with their drapes drawn, just hoarding everything to themselves and not risking anything with what God has entrusted to them, will find that they have seriously missed what life is about and what they hoarded has no value precisely because it was hoarded.

As we take what He has given us and invest it in His purposes, we will experience more and more of His goodness. Sometimes Christians complain that they're not seeing God do more in their lives but we need to ask, am I faithfully using what He's already given me? God's "more" comes when we spend what we have. Living generously is God's way for us to live a bigger, richer, happier life. An abundant life. An overflowing life. Let's go for it by living more generously in 2016 than we have ever lived before!

**Closing song: Not To Us**