

Living Generously Part Two

Last we kicked off a 3 part series called *Living Generously* by looking at Jesus' counterintuitive promise in Acts 20:35 that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The word translated blessed means "happy" so Jesus is actually saying that it is happier to give than to receive. Happiness has gotten a bum rap in the church lately, with a lot of people teaching that God cares a lot about us being holy, but not so much about us being happy. That sounds spiritual, but it's actually not biblical. God created us with a deep longing to be happy, and He wants us to be happy. When the Bible speaks of happiness it doesn't mean pasting a silly grin on our face all the time, or not experiencing sorrow or loss or suffering or hard times. The Bible views happiness in a broader and bigger sense in which a happy life means a full life, a thriving life, a meaningful life; that there is a way that we can, through the tears and heartaches and losses and trials and suffering, be happy and live a happy life! God wants us to live bigger, not smaller lives; richer, not poorer lives.

So we looked at four reasons why a generous life is a happier life.

- 1. *Living generously helps us live a richer life***
- 2. *Living generously helps us connect with people***
- 3. *Living generously helps us invest in things that really matter***
- 4. *Living generously helps grow our faith and trust in God***

Those who give generously of their time, money, energy, talents, and of themselves to others and to the work of God will find that, rather than being depleted, their lives will be enlarged. *A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. Prov. 11:25 (NIV).*

But the bottom line is that all of us only have so much resources to be generous with. We are limited in what we have to give, be it money or time or energy or friendship or service or whatever. How do we balance giving with other things like saving and dealing with debt and making sure that what we give is going to be well invested for the kingdom of Christ and the true good of others and not just be wasted or actually do more harm than good? To answer that question, let me tell you a story:

It was 1979 and some friends and I went to a faith preacher's large church on Long Island. We were there to check it out and we didn't like what we saw. Everything about the service was incredibly showy and the preacher spent a lot of time just bragging about his expensive suit and the diamond rings he wore on his hand. Lavish prosperity was his measurement of God's blessing. And then he began to take the offering...and take it and take it and take it. After spending a lot of time talking about money and how we needed to give so that God could keep doing great things through this church and taking a normal offering, he then went on and on about how God told him that so many people were going to give \$1000 and so many people were supposed to give \$500 and an even larger number of people were supposed to give \$100 and we waited until each of those numbers of people got up and walked forward with their donation. It went on for over a half hour. I felt sick watching this unfold. But then I noticed my friend Chris sitting next to me take out his wallet, open it, and get a look of surprise on his face. He told me he was going to give \$100 and so he got up and walked forward with his \$100.

On the way home I asked him later why he gave when he didn't like what he saw any more than I did. He told me that as the offering was being taken, he told the Lord, "If when I look in my wallet there's a \$100 there, I will give it." He didn't think he had that much cash in his wallet which is why when he saw that he

did he looked surprised. His point was that he had to obey God in faith and trust God by giving the money. My point was that it wasn't about the \$100, it was about where it was going, and to prove to him (and to me) that I wasn't just trying to be stingy, I committed to giving \$100 (which was a lot of money to us back then) to some ministry or need that I felt was worthy of \$100, which I did.

Now listen, Chris was a very sincere and committed Christian and I respected his walk with the Lord very much. But when we talk about having faith in God to live generously it will rarely be a faith that is disconnected from our brains. It will rarely be a "if it's in my wallet God must want me to give it" kind of faith. Certainly God can and might surprise us at times by calling us to give in an unexpected direction but the guiding biblical principle as we open our wallets, and our calendars, and our hearts, in order to decide what to give our time, money, energy, and heart to, is that we apply wisdom and discernment to our faith. There is a view of faith that in essence teaches that faith and thinking are at odds with each other. That applying wisdom and discernment to our generosity somehow makes our generosity unspiritual. In fact God *expects* us to apply wisdom and discernment and biblical truth to our generosity because God calls us to be good stewards of what He has given us.

We aren't owners, we are stewards

This may come as a surprise, but the Bible teaches that we actually don't own anything. That \$100 or \$20 or \$2 in your wallet doesn't belong to you. It belongs to God. Everything we have is owned by God. Not just what we have, but even our very lives are not our own but belong to God! 1 Cor. 6:19 says *do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20](#)for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

God is the owner of everything and we are His stewards. A steward is someone who is

entrusted with property that belongs to another, and he or she is expected to manage that property in a way that reflects the goals and priorities of the owner. It's not important to God how much or how little we have, what matters to God is how faithful we are with what He's given us. If we're faithful with a little, God knows we can be trusted with more. If we're unfaithful with little, God knows we can't be trusted with more. So while I admire my wallet-opening friend's desire to be obedient to God, being a good steward requires us to do more than open the wallet and give. It requires us to think carefully about where we should invest the resources God has entrusted to us.

Now when we talk about wisdom and discernment, we need to realize that wisdom begins with faith in God not with what seems practical. If you are an uber-practical person, God will stretch your safety zones of practicality. If God calls us to do something, it is wise to obey and unwise to disobey, no matter how practical or unpractical it might seem. It was impractical for Moses to lead the Israelites to the Red Sea, but it was wise. It was impractical for Gideon to pare down his army to 300 men, but it was wise. It was impractical for the widow to take from what little food she had as she and her son were starving and give it to Elijah but it was wise. It was impractical for the disciples to attempt to feed five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes at Jesus' command, but it was wise. So God does call us to step out in faith that can, at times, seem impractical. But there are biblical guidelines that help us live generously, wisely and live wisely, generously. Let's look at a couple of those guidelines this week and finish up with a couple next week

1. Living generously requires the discernment not to be manipulated into giving!

Normally this wouldn't be where I would start but unfortunately there have been far too many people who have used manipulative methods to separate believers from their money and so being a good steward calls for the discernment not to be manipulated.

There are preachers, pastors, ministries, and charities that use various forms of pressure to get people to give more. It might be guilt: if you don't give so much today, this ministry (and all the good it does) will cease to exist. One famous preacher said that God told him He would kill him if he didn't raise 8 million dollars to build a hospital. I'd have liked to see if God would actually take him out if no one paid the ransom but the ransom money came in, the hospital was built, and it was a complete failure, going out of business a few years after it was built.

Others manipulate by saying if you give \$100, God will give you \$1000. A newspaper revealed that a televangelist had written to an elderly widow in a nursing home asking for \$200 seed money even if she had to borrow it, promising that God would repay her ten-fold. When confronted about it, the preacher said that God told him to write the letter. What the preacher didn't know, and presumably God didn't realize, was that the widow had been dead for 3 months. God's name is being invoked but these tactics have nothing to do with God. It reminds me of when Jesus publically rebuked the religious leaders of his day for how they exploited the vulnerable:

45 *And in the hearing of all the people (so this wasn't a private conversation) he said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*
Mark 12:45-47

Discernment will send up red flags when people (especially the vulnerable) are being manipulated or exploited in any way. The faith and prosperity church where my friend gave \$100 was manipulating people big time to give, which should be enough to convince us not to give to them. Ministries do have financial needs, and it's fine and appropriate to ask for financial support. But ministries with integrity lay out the need without manipulation or pressure, ask believers to prayerfully consider contributing, and then trust God with the results. If the money doesn't come in at that point, then maybe God is pruning the ministry or possibly even closing it down. God never manipulates us to give. Living generously wisely requires the discernment not to be manipulated into giving.

2. Living generously is evidence of God's grace in our lives

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 2 Cor. 8:1-2

The church in Macedonia was a very poor church, but God's grace in their lives overflowed with abundant joy and a wealth of generosity. When we come to Christ, he does more than just save us from hell and for heaven. He saves our lives from the bondage of selfish, small living. Grace is never meant to be hoarded, it's meant to overflow into a life lived generously. Later in the same discussion about giving and generosity Paul says this:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully^[d] will also reap bountifully.⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency^[e] in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.⁹ As it is written,

*“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”*

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 2 Cor. 9:6-12

Paul uses an agricultural metaphor to point out that it's the farmer who sows a lot of seed who can expect a large harvest. If a farmer only sows a dozen seeds of wheat, he isn't going to end up with 10 acres of wheat. The same thing is true spiritually: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. Whoever sows a lot reaps a lot. We reap what we sow and we reap in proportion to how much we sow.

Paul's teaching the Corinthians a spiritual law but he's not trying to guilt them into giving. In verse 7 he insists that each person should give as they have determined in their heart - not because they feel they have to or because they're pressured to, but for a much bigger and better reason: because they want to! Because they believe this spiritual law and want to live a bigger life. Bigger in happiness. Bigger in joy. Bigger in impact.

And ultimately, bigger in what they have to give because verse 10 carries a very important principle: God supplies seed to the sower. What's that mean? It means when someone is faithful to sow what God has given them to sow, God supplies more for them to sow. There are two things we can do with seed: we can eat it or we can sow it. Our selfish tendency (and I speak from experience) is to live the life of an eater – the seed I get, I eat. The shrink wrap of selfishness wants to consume it all on ourselves. God wants to free us from the bondage of a small life lived for small, selfish goals so that we can live the life of a sower, scattering seed to bless others and glorify God.

The more seed we scatter, the more seed God will supply. Now God expects us to eat the bread of our harvest - verse 10 says God supplies seed for the sower and bread for food. It's not wrong to have a lot. It's not wrong to enjoy life. It's not wrong to have nice things, or take nice vacations, or drive nice cars. God's goal for us isn't austerity, it's generosity. The problem is when we become a Dead Sea kind of person - where blessings flow into our lives, but never flow out - we eventually stagnate and God pulls back on the blessings He can entrust to us because we're not channels we hoarders.

So one of the questions we can ask is, how do we balance living generously with other things like saving, and retirement, and paying off debt? The answer is there's a place for all these things in our lives and there should be a place for all these things in our budget. It's not a matter of either we give, or we save. God's word instructs us to do both!

*Go to the ant, O sluggard;
consider her ways, and be wise.*

⁷ *Without having any chief,
officer, or ruler,*

⁸ *she prepares her bread in summer
and gathers her food in harvest. Prov. 6:6-8*

And

20 *There is precious treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise,
But a foolish man swallows it up. Prov. 21:20*

The Bible tells us it is wise to save for the future, to learn from the ant and gather in the season when we can gather so that we have provision stored for seasons when we can't gather. The wise puts some treasure away, the foolish swallows up everything right away.

The debt question

Paying off debt is a good goal, and should be a priority in our lives. But debt almost always reflects a deeper root issue and if we don't deal with that deeper root issue than we're probably not going to make much headway in our debt and we shrink our lives to being consumers (all I have goes towards paying for all my debt, which all had to do with my desires and purchases). Debt is often the product of a life of eating up what we want right away (even if we can't afford it) or bad planning or out of order priorities - or all three!

So if we wait until we pay off our credit card to begin sowing seed we could be waiting a long time. And our financial priorities are still out of order because we're not honoring God with the wealth that He gives us (we'll talk more about that next week). Dave Ramsey, Larry Burkett, Howard Dayton, any Christian financial advisor you listen to will encourage you to get your finances in order, and that means putting God first, not last.

I know this can be challenging, and different people have different challenges to deal with. Mike Rawleigh will be starting another Financial Peace University class in March, so if this is an area where you are having challenges getting it all worked out, Dave Ramsey's teaching will really help you. God isn't trying to mess up your life, He wants to put it in order. And He wants to help us overflow with grace and good works so that others are enriched by our lives.

Today is my step-mother's 70th birthday and her husband wanted to surprise her with some statements from family and friends about the blessing her life has been. The first memory that came to my mind is when I was 14, she was new in my life, my dad and her hadn't married yet, and we went to a church service and afterwards when there was an altar call I went up to receive Christ as my Savior. When I looked back, there she was coming up with me with tears in her eyes to stand and support me as I gave my life to Christ. She had been praying for me.

When we get older, we won't remember or care about this thing or that thing we bought. What we will cherish will be memories of how our lives overflowed to touch other lives, that then overflow in thanksgiving to God. And on that day, we will see what Jesus meant when he said, it is happier to give than to receive. God wants to help us get there and live there.

Living Generously
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Let's pray.