

Message: Defined by Generosity

Are you living generously? What does that mean? I invite you to consider these words from 1 Timothy 6:17-19, *“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so they may take hold of the life that really is life.”*

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” When people think of you or remember you, how do you want to be known? Do you want to be known as a person who was generous with their life? When we live life from a place of abundance and generosity, we live openly and willingly. 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 bound by fear.

Living a generous life spans all aspects of our relationship with God. We can be generous with our prayers, presence, giving, service and witness. In other words, when we live generous lives, we are 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 are 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 to God and to others. That’s the foundation God gives us. Proverbs 22:9 tells us, *“Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”* Generosity is part of our makeup. We actually have the need to be generous built into us by God. 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 that voice, we’re living from scarcity, rather than abundance.

There’s good news! We can defeat the voices. When we give our lives to Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing 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 voices from time to time, but we’re able to silence them more easily and effectively as we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth. It’s an integral part of spiritual wisdom and contentment.

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

There are biblical guidelines for generosity. From the early days of the Old Testament, 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 flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth. Moses was the one who formalized it in the Old Testament law.

In Genesis 28:20-22, Jacob reaffirms the practice with a vow saying, *“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.”* Our investment goes to the church, God’s house, for the work of the Lord. And that work is developing people. It’s about helping people find the path to eternal life, not programs, budgets or buildings.

So why do we talk about tithing? As Christians who live under the new covenant, we aren’t bound by the Law of Moses. We look to it as a guide. Many Christians believe the tithe is a good practice to follow. It’s pleasing to God. Though tithing can be a struggle, it’s possible at virtually every income level. If you aren’t giving a portion of your income, you can take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can start at 1% or 2%. Or maybe you’re ready to add 1% to what you’re currently giving. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more generous.

It’s important to realize tithing is a floor, not a ceiling. God calls us to grow beyond the tithe. Solomon’s wisdom in Proverbs 11:24-25 says, *“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.”* There are people giving 20%, 30%, even 90% of their income. God blesses some people with the spiritual gift of giving. I encourage you to pray and explore this gift in all of the aspects of your life: your prayers, presence, giving, service and witness.

Let’s also be clear about the nature of gifts. Gifts are not offerings. Gifts are over and above what we give to the church. When we set aside an additional portion of our income for things important to us, like mission projects, schools, church building funds, and other nonprofit organizations, those are gifts. We give our offering to the ministry of our church first. We give gifts to the work of other parts of God’s kingdom, charities and other organizations next. That means going over and above our offering, not splitting our offering. That’s what the practice of living generously means.

I want to say a special word to those who are having a difficult time or struggling with hardship. Please don't let your inability to give keep you from worship. We aren't judging or holding up giving as a condition for being a member. Giving is only one area where we live generously. We're setting an expectation of what God calls us to when we follow Jesus. God honors your faithfulness. Your acceptance in our church is not based on your capacity to give. Please let me know if you are struggling so I can pray for you and offer support. We also offer coaching and access to advisors, if needed. We care about you!

If you're not struggling with hardship, that's a different matter. If you say “I give my time” but don't give to the church and you can afford to do so, that's something to pray about. I repeat what I have said during earlier weeks, we aren't trying to shame or guilt you into generosity. The Lord (& we) want cheerful, willing people. We want people who are willing to invest in the ministry of our church and in the future. If the Lord is speaking to your heart and you feel it's time to make a change, then we want to celebrate that step with you.

What does our generosity mean to God? In ancient times, the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one's labors upon it to God. They'd burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God. It wasn't that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain, you know, Jewish barbecue. Rather, God saw people being generous in ways that expressed their love, faith, and desire to please and honor God. That moves God's heart. When given with a generous spirit, what we give of ourselves blesses the Lord.

What is God's response to our giving? Luke 6:37-38 records Jesus' words, “*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.*” 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. It changes us. When we live generously, our hearts are changed. When we’re generous to God and to our families, 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 your opportunities to share of your time. When you give of your time, don’t be surprised to find God giving you opportunities to share in other ways.

There is one great benefit to living generously. When we live generously, we find God blessing 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 to freely, 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 that if you give, then God will give more back to you – that’s the “prosperity Gospel.” But that’s not how it works. We don’t give to God so that we can get something in return. The amazing thing is that when we give to God and to others, the blessings just seem to come back to us. Of course, there’s no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you. Nevertheless, when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

Last week, we included an estimate of giving card in the bulletin. We mailed a letter, estimate of giving card and a giving guide last week. I hope you all prayed about it. This is a request for every member of this congregation and all who seek to follow Jesus. If you are of confirmation age or older, I invite you to fill it out and use it as a measure of your commitment to live generously this year.

If you forgot to bring yours this morning, please let the ushers know so you can get one. Let's take a few minutes to pray and reflect silently as we fill it out. During our time of Celebration, the ushers will pass the plate. Please place your estimate of giving form in it. If you need more time to pray, you may return the card to the church office this week.

Habakkuk the prophet wrote, *“Hold fast and do not give up on your faith, even in the face of the bloody trials that you are going through, for the righteous will live by their faith. You know that 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 in the end, it leads us to ask **“are we investing adequately in our faith?”**

Investing in your faith is something you do every time you attend a worship service where you sing praises to God, experience God's presence and listen for God's voice. But an hour a week isn't enough. Investing in your faith is also what you do when you spend time in prayer, talking to and coming to know God. It's what you do when you connect with other Christians, describing and discussing your faith so that it comes alive for you in those moments. Investing in your faith is what you do when you open your Bible and listen to God speak in the scriptures. It's 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 and you find joy.

That kind of intertwining of faith and life is what led Martin Luther to say “faith is to the soul what breath is to the body.” So let me ask: **are you adequately investing in the one thing that matters most – your faith and your walk with God?**

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 that same 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 time, abilities and money. 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.*

Luke 14:7-14 (NRSV)

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Acts 20:35 (NRSV)

In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

Luke 12:48b (NRSV)

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

2 Corinthians 9:7 (NRSV)

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.