

Secrets of Generous Living

A Sermon Offered by
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The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work... 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. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.

2 Corinthians 9:6-11, excerpts

Note: The sermon began with a brief skit, entitled “Buy One, Get One Free,” written by Donna Lagerquist (*Sunday Morning Live, Vol. 8, Zondervan*). In it, 45 year old Karen comes home from the grocery store loaded down with bags of groceries. “Buy one, get one free,” she explains to her husband, Rob. She’s actually planning to give away half of the groceries to her sister’s family who has had a spell of bad luck. Just then she receives a phone call, saying she has won a minivan in a local contest. As she and Rob get excited, she realizes the people who really need it are her sister and her family. Rob picks up the phone to call Kris to tell her about their good fortune, but surprises Karen by telling Kris she is getting the car. Karen is moved by Rob’s unselfishness and glad he wanted to do the very thing she did.

Wouldn’t it be great to have a sister and brother-in-law like that? Wouldn’t it be even better to *be* a sister or a brother-in-law like that – one who recognizes the true value of “stuff.” One who knows the meaning of

family. One who isn't worried that blessings from God will stop flowing if we give them away. People like that know that it really is more fun, more satisfying, and "more blessed to give than to receive." What if we were all like that? We're not, are we? But we can be. If we can learn three simple secrets of generous living:

1. It's all God's stuff.
2. We're all in this together.
3. God can make more.

Becoming generous people begins with understanding that everything – *everything* – is God's. "The *earth* is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," is the way the Bible puts it. [Ps 24:1] The dirt is God's, the trees are God's, the roads are God's, the animals are God's, the fleas on the animals are God's, and we are God's. If we have anything – clothes, food, mini-vans, a pulse – it's because God gave it to us. There's nothing on earth, including you and me, that is self-made. God *created* it. God *owns* it. God *wants it back*. If we possess anything at all it's because God is kind enough to let us use it and enjoy it for a time. It's not ours to keep.

That's easy to say, but hard to remember. Put yourself in that couple's place. They work hard. They scrimp and save. And finally their efforts have been rewarded; they hit the jackpot. If we were them we might think, "Finally, God's giving us a break." Or, "Finally, we're getting our fair share." Or "Finally, we can get ahead." When good things happen to us – when we catch a break, when we get a promotion or a raise, when we win a prize – even one that we barely did anything to earn – it's easy to think that these are our just desserts and we did it on our own. All the prayers we prayed for the promotion or the raise or the prize are quickly forgotten. It happens everywhere.

Jerusalem, like many big cities has terrible traffic and no parking. A man was late for an important meeting and looking for a parking place and couldn't find one. Finally he turns toward Heaven and says, "God, if you find me a parking place, I promise that I'll eat only Kosher, respect the Sabbath, and tithe 10% to the poor. No sooner does he say, "Amen," then a parking place opens up just in front of him. He turns his face up to heaven and says, "Never mind, God. I just found one on my own." Sometimes we forget where gifts came from. Even our earning power – the talents, energies, and abilities that allow us to make a living – is a gift from God.

When we look in our basements or bank statements we need to remind ourselves that God gave it to us and that it's still God's stuff. When my parents sent me off to Boy Scout camp as a kid they labeled everything with my name. My canteen. My knife. My underwear. It was embarrassing, but effective. They wanted to be sure it all came home when the week was over. God could make generosity a bit easier if he just put his name on everything to remind us who really owns it. Perhaps that's why every dollar bill says, "In God we trust." It's a little reminder of where that money came from.

The question, then, isn't "how much of *my* money do I want to share with others, but how much of *God's* money do I want to keep for myself?" The cool thing is that God lets us keep a lot of it. Check this out: we get to use and enjoy *all* of creation. And we get to keep *90%* of all the blessings that come our way. The other 10%? God says, "Share that with others. That's my plan for taking care of them." *We get 90% of the reward and none of the risk.* What money manager wouldn't take that deal?

But most of us try to cut a better deal. We want to keep even more of it. The average Christian in America shares only a few percent of their income when it's clear that God intends for us to share more, much more. Why is that?

A big part of it is our confusion about wants and needs. We have very few material needs in life: shelter, clothing, food, heat, and medicine. But our list of wants is pretty long. By the time we're done buying our wants there's not much left to share with others in need. Think of the things our grandparents did without: dishwashers, dryers, air-conditioning, microwaves, television, internet; few us can imagine living without these things. We think of them as necessities.

When I was little my mom used to take me to church rummage sales, like the Presbyterian Women's Whale of a Sale. When she was ready to check out she'd ask me, "Did you find anything you can't live without?" There was always something, of course. Some book or tool or gizmo that was fascinating to a 7 year-old boy, something that I didn't know I needed before I came in but now I just *had to have*. But aren't the mounds of things at the Whale of a Sale evidence that even adults are pretty good at convincing themselves that a want is really a need? And then a few years later those things end up as rummage – for someone else's basement.

It's easy to get caught up in the quest for more. In pursuit of some crazy wants – a second home, a nicer car, a college with a better reputation, we not only embarrass ourselves, we cut into God's 10%. We give others less than what God intended for them. You know what it's called when money managers start dipping into their client's money? Embezzlement. It's an ugly word but not as bad as the one God used to describe it when his people cut corners on their generosity in the Old Testament. When they started holding back from sharing, God put it plainly—"Why are you robbing me?" he asks. [Mal 3:8] Sharing isn't optional; God takes it pretty seriously. As one pastor put it, "Just because God puts His money in our hands doesn't mean He intends for us to keep it" for ourselves. (Randy Alcorn) God blesses *us* to bless others *and* ourselves. Sharing God's gifts is proof that we understand God's plan.

The couple in our story knows another secret of generous living: we're all in this together. There's no way that that couple could have kept that mini-van for themselves alone, not when they had someone in their own family in need. They knew pretty quickly that they had been blessed to be a blessing. When we are "in Christ" we no longer live for ourselves alone, or even our immediate family, we are part of a much larger Christian community, and we rise and fall together. Consider how we understand that tragedy, even if it strikes just one person, affects a the whole community. Think of all the people affected when a teen dies in a car accident – how it shakes a whole community of friends, neighbors, classmates, and relatives. It can be the same way with blessing. Blessings come to individuals, but God intends the whole community to be impacted by those blessings. The apostle Peter put it this way: As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another." [I Peter 4:10]

I don't know why some people have more of God's gifts than others. But I do know what God wants us to do about this difference. Share. When people asked John the Baptist how they should live, he said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." [Lk 3:11] This isn't rocket science; we're supposed to learn this in pre-school. Sharing is God's plan for making sure all his children have enough. Enough food. Enough medical care. Enough hope. None of us should waste a second feeling guilty about the gifts we have – our time, our talents, and our treasure; we didn't create them and we can't control their flow to us. Our responsibility comes with what we do with those gifts.

Sharing is something we can control. When bonuses or bequests or mini-vans come our way like manna from Heaven we need to ask, “Lord, what do you want me to do with this?” Generous people understand that our giving decisions are private, but they are not personal: they impact everybody in our family, including our extended family in Christ.

A last secret to generous living is knowing that the God who gave us all this stuff can give us more: more Mini-vans, more manna, more money. We are tempted to think that every blessing is the last one we’re going to get – so we cling to them. Did you ever think that this might be a self-fulfilling prophecy? Perhaps God doesn’t continue to bless us when He sees that we kept the last blessing for ourselves alone. We tend to think that there are only so many blessings to go around, that life is a pie of limited size; more for you is less for me. We forget that God can grow the pie; God can make more pies; God can send cake and pastries and Twinkies, too.

In the end, sharing is a faith issue isn’t it? Do we believe that the same God who provided for us today can provide for us tomorrow? Can we see *today’s* blessings as God’s down payment on *tomorrow*? Sharing generously with others shows that we have faith that God provides *always*. Don’t get me wrong. Tithing—sharing 10% of our income—is not *our* obligation to prove ourselves faithful—we don’t give to prove ourselves to God. Tithing is *God’s* opportunity to prove that *He* is faithful. And when you discover for yourself that He is, life changes.

There are some people in our congregation going through pretty tough times right now. You may be one of them. You may not have a brand new mini-van to give away. You may not even have a job today. You may feel like you have very little to share. But we all have more than we know – in our garages, in our safe deposit boxes and retirement accounts, or in our hearts. We all have something that someone else really *needs*. Something that could do huge good for them. Sharing it will require us to believe that the God who made the sun and the stars and you and me – can make a little more manna when we need it. Sharing it may be exactly your next step toward a truly abundant life. Amen.

Would you pray with me? Generous Lord, we know that all good gifts come from you and we thank you today for trusting us with your blessings. Help us to sort out the differences between our needs and our wants. Help us to remember the people of Honduras and Lithuania, and all people in need.

Free us from our obsession with *more*, with *new*, with *better*. Help us to live not just for ourselves. Help us to see how every giving decision we make affects others. Help us to see around us all kinds of opportunities for generosity, opportunities to share that can change lives – not least of all our own lives. When we are feeling sorry for ourselves. When we are wishing we had more. When we worry about tomorrow. When there is more month than money. Help us to trust you, Lord. Help us to trust you enough that we will keep our promises to you by sharing with others. And if we have more than enough today. Help us find ways to share in extravagant ways. Teach us the secrets of generous living. Give us glad and generous hearts, O Lord, hearts that give like yours. Amen.

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