

## ***“FRUITFUL: Extravagant Generosity”***

*Exodus 35:4-29 • 2 Corinthians 9:6-15*

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Over the last few weeks we've been talking about these five practices of fruitful congregations. We looked at Radical Hospitality, the practice of welcoming people into our lives and into our church and moving them from strangers to guests to family. Then we talked about the practice of Intentional Faith Development, being intentional about helping people to grow in their knowledge of the Bible and in their faith. The third practice we looked at was Passionate Worship, gathering to show our love for Jesus. Last week we discussed the fourth practice of fruitful congregations, risk-taking mission and service. That doesn't mean we have to be engaged in dangerous, life-threatening mission. Instead, we have to be willing to risk failure and rejection in order to carry out the mission of the church which is to make disciples of Jesus. The biggest risk we face when we are really engaged in this mission is the risk of being changed by God. That leads us this morning to the fifth practice of fruitful congregations: Extravagant Generosity.

We should begin by defining what we mean by generosity. In 1912, Henry Ford and his family visited England and Ireland for the first time, visiting the places where their parents had come from. While they were in Ireland, in his father's hometown, some of the leaders of the city came to see him and said, "We're trying to build a hospital here and were wondering if you'd like to make a contribution, perhaps in honor of your father." Ford said, "I'll contribute \$5,000," and he wrote them a check. The next day the newspaper ran a story about it with the headline, "Henry Ford donates \$50,000 to Hospital." As you can imagine, Henry Ford was a little upset by this. The men who had solicited the donation returned and apologized. They said they would have the newspaper run a correction the next day: "Henry Ford Reduces Donation by \$45,000." Ford, who had become quite skilled in marketing, decided he didn't want that kind of

publicity and so he agreed to give them the full \$50,000 under one condition. Over the entrance to the hospital he wanted an inscription that read, "I came among you and you took me in."

Henry Ford felt like he had been taken in. He ended up giving the full \$50,000 but it wasn't out of generosity. In a way it was coerced. So what IS generosity? The definition I like is "Unselfishness. Giving or sharing abundantly." A few years ago when we as a congregation decided on our core values, those things that you felt like make our church what it is, you said that one of our core values is generosity. We say, "We believe that we honor God by offering ourselves fully to Him. We recognize that everything we have – our money, time, and abilities – is a gift from God, entrusted to us to use generously for His glory. By giving and serving generously we are 'storing up treasures in heaven.'" The question is, does that describe you?

The Bible has a lot to say about generosity and today we're looking at just a couple of those passages. Jesus talked about money more than he talked about any other subject. Of Jesus' thirty eight parables, twelve deal with the right or wrong use of money. One out of every six verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is on the subject of money. All throughout the Bible we find instructions from God on how we are to handle money in a way that glorifies Him.

There are basically two ways of looking at giving and serving. The first way could be called the world's way. This way says that money is simply math. I can count how much I earn and how much I spend and as long as I spend less than I earn then I have some left over to save or to give away. If I look at my money this way, then giving means I have less. If I have ten dollars and I give away one, that leaves me with nine dollars. If I have a hundred dollars and I give away ten, then that leaves me with ninety dollars. If I have a thousand dollars and I give away a hundred dollars, I'm left with nine hundred. But now a

hundred dollars is a lot of money. I start to think of all the things I could do with a hundred dollars. Maybe I shouldn't give away this money. Maybe I can't afford to give away this money. If I give it away I might not have enough. So I grasp it tighter. Fear and anxiety begin to creep into my thoughts. The same thing applies to your time.

But there's another way of looking at your giving. Jesus said, "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." In today's passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul says, "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." What if we realized that the money we have is not the real resource but it's merely the seeds and giving to God is like planting seeds?

If you look at what the Bible says about money, you will discover that your money and your resources actually belong to God. This begins with creation. God created the whole universe and so He owns everything in it. Verse 10 of our Corinthians passage is clear about this. "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food *will* supply and multiply your seed for sowing." God has entrusted some of His resources to you with a purpose. So what is his purpose in blessing you with resources? This passage shows us two purposes. The first is in verse 10, to "increase the harvest of your righteousness." To put it another way, you will grow to be more like Christ. One of God's purposes with money is to give you an opportunity to grow in faith, to trust Him. Money is not really about money, it's about trust. Who are you going to trust to provide—yourself or God?

The second reason God blesses you with resources is for you to bless others. In verse 8 Paul says, "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." When you are faithful with your money,

God promises to provide everything you need. Notice it doesn't say you will get everything you *want*. But you will get what you need with enough to be able to help others. Verse 11 says it this way: "You will be *enriched* in every way to be *generous* in every way." That's a bold claim. Somebody should do some research to see if it's true.

Actually, somebody has. Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, has done extensive research on the science of generosity. He studied 2,000 people to see how generosity affected other areas of life and he published the results in a book called, *The Paradox of Generosity*. What he found is that people who are generous with their money and time and relationships (any of that sound familiar?) are happier, healthier, and more resilient than their less generous counterparts. The people in the study who were generous were significantly less likely to experience depression or anxiety.

Not only that, but he discovered that people who were generous ended up better off financially. "By grasping onto what we currently have," Smith writes, "we lose out on better goods that we might have gained. In holding onto what we possess, we diminish its long-term value to us. By always protecting ourselves against future uncertainties and misfortunes, we are affected in ways that make us more anxious about uncertainties and vulnerable to future misfortunes. In short, by failing to care for others, we do not properly take care of ourselves."

Why is that? Smith says, "Practicing generosity requires and reinforces the perception of living in a world of abundance and blessing, which itself also increases happiness and health." It turns out that the reality of the universe is that whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Give and it will be given to you. God is serious about your giving. When you think about giving money or serving are you thinking about what it will cost you or are you

thinking about how to faithfully manage what God has entrusted to you?

Here's the thing. Generosity doesn't come naturally for any of us. Our instinct is to protect what we have. So extravagant generosity is a sign of God working in your life. It's a sign that you trust God to provide. It's a tangible expression of your faith. So how can we learn to be generous? Practice. You will learn to be more generous by being generous, by giving. Because when you give you will experience the blessing of giving. A great way to do that is to practice proportional giving – giving a percent of your income. Actually, the best way to learn to be generous is to tithe, to give the first ten percent of your income back to God as a way of saying thank you. On top of your tithe, look for additional ways to give, like our First Impressions Building fund but also great ministries like Young Life and the Pregnancy Center. Because as you see your giving making a difference in the lives of other people you will want to be more generous. That's how life in God's Kingdom works.

Let me leave you with this thought. R.C. Sproul said, "I've never met anyone who ever regretted tithing." So I want to challenge each of you to try it. Malachi 3 is the only place where God says, "test me." What does he want you to test him about? Tithing. God says, "Bring the full tithe 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." So test Him. You will probably have to rearrange your spending habits to make it happen, but that's kind of the point. Obviously don't go into debt in order to tithe, but if you are able, try it for six months and see if God doesn't provide for all your needs. Most of all, watch how your relationship with Jesus changes.

*Amen.*