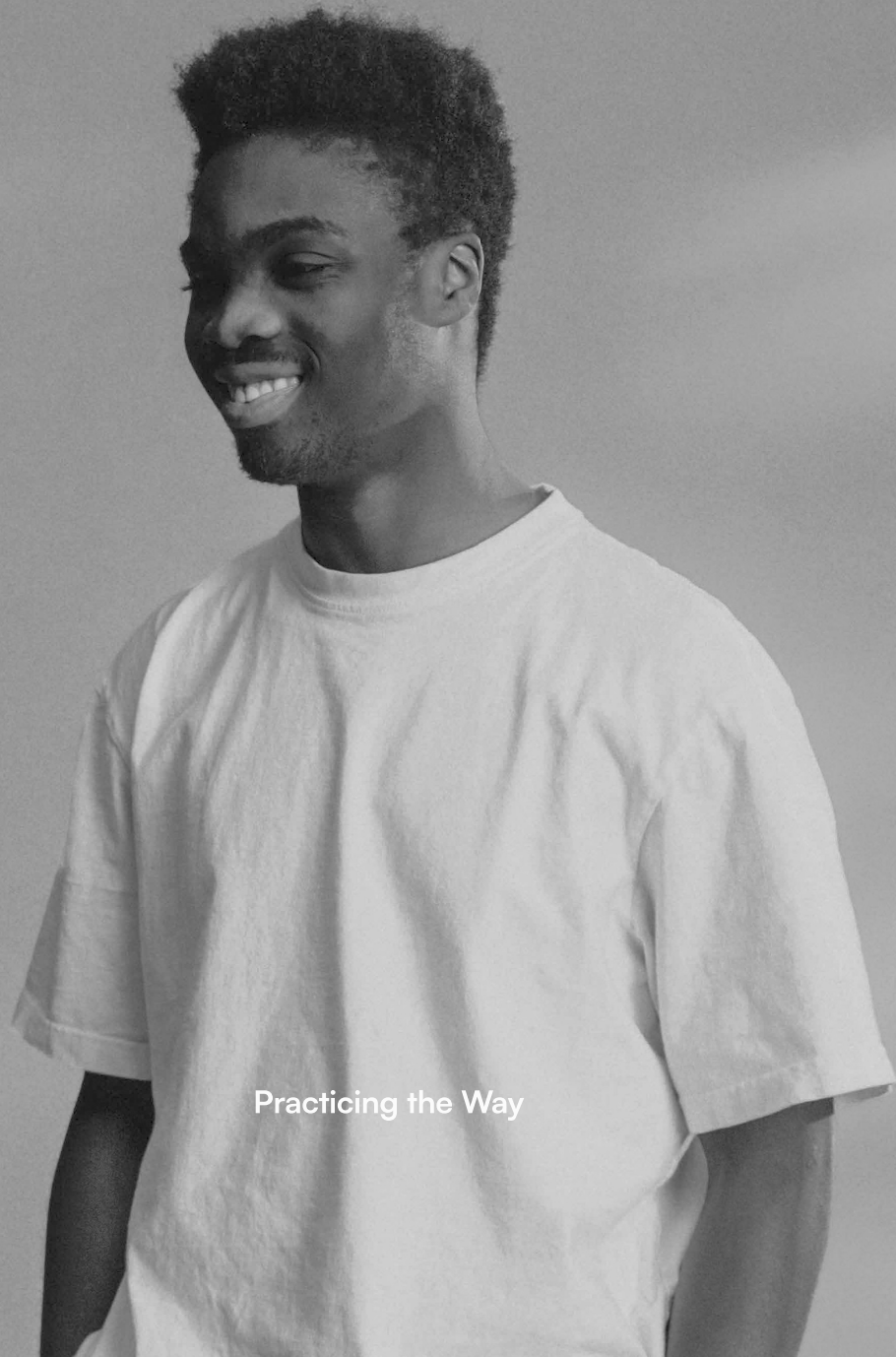


Generosity

Teaching Notes



Practicing the Way

Generosity Teaching 01:

There Is More Joy in Giving Than Receiving

Intro hook:

- We *all* want to be happy.
- Every person you know is chasing after their vision of a happy life.
- As Americans, we live in a nation that was founded on three ideals: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- And yet, we are one of the unhappiest nations in the world.
- It turns out that many of the things that we think will make us happy, do not.
- And “the good life” we’re all searching for is often found in the places we least expect.
- Which is why Jesus regularly made bold claims that turn our vision of the good life on its head.
- He said things like:
 - “The last will be first and the first will be last.”¹
 - “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”²
 - “Bless those who curse you.”³
- But one of *the most* counterintuitive of *all* Jesus’ teachings — that goes against everything we hear, and even the intuition of our own heart — is his teaching on money and generosity:
- Listen to this:
 - In Acts 20v35, Jesus says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
- The word translated to “blessed” is μακάριος (*makarios*) in Greek, and it means happy,

fortunate, or well-off.⁴

- It can also be translated:
 - “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.” (GNT)
 - Or: “You’re far happier giving than getting.” (The Message)
- I know what you’re thinking right now - “Really?”
- Some of you may just not agree with Jesus on this one.
- It’s easy to think that Jesus’ teachings on money are “right,” but not very good — certainly not the path to true happiness.
- But that could not be more wrong:
- All sorts of research from the social sciences has shown that — *You ready?* — Jesus was exactly right.
- Generous people:
 - Are happier
 - Healthier
 - Have lower levels of depression and anxiety
 - Are more interested in personal growth
 - Have better relationships
 - Have a higher life expectancy
 - And, according to one study, literally laugh more!⁵
- And this is true across every demographic, no matter someone’s socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, personality, etc.
- One study called the link between generosity and happiness a, “universal feature of human psychology.”⁶
- The sociologists Hilary Davidson and Christian Smith in their book, *The Paradox of Generosity*, conclude: “People rightly say that money cannot buy happiness. But money and happiness are still related in a curious way. Happiness can be the result, not of spending more money on oneself, but rather of giving money away to others ... the data examined here show this to be not simply a nice idea, but a social-scientific fact.”

- If you take an objective look at the empirical evidence, it's clear that the Western formula of "more money = more happiness" is simply not true.
- Rather, it's the Jesus formula of "more generosity = more happiness" that is the pathway to a happy life.
- The Quaker Richard Foster writes this: "The unreasoned boast abounds that the good life is found in accumulation, that "more is better." Indeed, we often accept this notion without question, with the result that the lust for affluence in contemporary society has become psychotic: it has completely lost touch with reality."⁷

Seam: *It comes as no surprise that Jesus said so much about both the danger of money and the possibility of generosity.*

- A key task of our apprenticeship to Jesus is discovering the joy of living a generous life.

Disclaimer:

- Now, there are all sorts of expressions of generosity — generosity of money, of time, of relationship, of gifting, of power and influence.
- And the main thing you have to give in this season of your life may not be money, it may be something else.
- But this Practice will focus on generosity of money, in part because of the limitations of time, but also because while generosity is far more than the giving of money or resources, it's not less.

Turn: Over the next four sessions, we'll look at Jesus' central teachings on money. To begin, turn to Matthew 6 ...

- Listen to Jesus' teaching:

Matthew 6v19-24

- 19-20: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

- Personal Example:
 - I've always been an avid reader, and all throughout my childhood, I collected vintage Hardy Boys books.
 - When my wife and I bought our first home, I put them in the garage for a year or so while we were working on the house. When I finally went out to unpack the books, I picked up the box, and the entire bottom fell out and *all* the books disintegrated into a pile of dust! Literally eaten by vermin.
 - A vivid picture of Jesus' wisdom.
 - Jesus is naming this deep impulse in the human heart to "store up treasures."
 - The fascinating thing is, he doesn't rebuke that impulse.
 - For Jesus, the problem isn't that we want to store up treasure; it's that we store it up in the wrong place — on earth, rather than in heaven (which here does not mean "the place you go when you die;" "in heaven" was a first century Hebrew way of saying, "In *God* and what he is doing on earth.")
 - Then Jesus says:
 - 21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
 - Notice that, for Jesus, money is ultimately about our hearts.
 - One of his central insights is that our *heart follows our money*.
 - We often think it's the opposite; our money follows our heart. Meaning, we spend money on what we love and care about.
 - But Jesus is saying that it works both ways. We also come to love, worry about, and obsess over what we spend our money on.
 - When we store up treasures on earth, our hearts are racked by fear because we know we can lose it all in a moment — or by greed, because we never feel like we have "enough."
 - But Jesus has an alternative way ...
- 22-23: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"
 - This sounds cryptic to our modern ears, but it's not.

- A “healthy” eye was a figure of speech in Jesus’ day.
 - If you have the NIV, there’s a footnote after the word “healthy” — “The Greek for healthy here implies generous.” And another one for “unhealthy” — “The Greek for unhealthy here implies stingy.”
- It was a way of saying there are two different ways of looking at the world that have come to be called an “abundance mindset” and a “scarcity mindset.”

Abundance mindset:

- If you have an abundance mindset, you look out at the world and you see a world of abundance. You see God as your father and provider; yourself as his child; and all of life as a gift. This is our Father’s world, and it’s teeming with more than enough for everyone. You look around and say with Jesus, “Look at the birds!”
- And as a result, you live with gratitude toward God and generosity toward your neighbor. You *receive*, and you *give* — both with joy.
- A first-century Hebrew would say, “You have ‘a healthy eye’ — a healthy view of the world.”

Scarcity mindset:

- But if you have a scarcity mindset, you look out at the world and you see a world of lack.
- There’s no Father-provider; you’re on your own. The world is a dangerous place. Human civilization is a fierce battle over scarce resources. Wealth is a zero-sum game. You need to look out for number one, because it’s dog-eat-dog out there.
- Your *vision* is focused on what you have but are scared you may lose; or what you don’t have, and you want.
- Your heart is consumed by *fear* and *greed*.
- If this is you, Jesus would say, “You have ‘an unhealthy eye’ — a distorted view of the world.”

Abundance and Scarcity

- Two very different ways of “seeing” life in general, and money in particular.
- Two people can have the exact same income, cost of living, and economic responsibility, but see the world in radically different ways. Especially if someone grew up in poverty or in an

unsafe home or unstable family.

- How do you see the world?
- If you had absolute assurance that God would provide *enough* for you, how would that change your relationship to money and generosity?
- You see, if we come to trust Jesus' vision of abundance, and God as our Father-Provider, then his teachings on money start to make sense!
 - "Don't worry!"
 - "Seek first the kingdom!"
 - "Give and it will be given to you."
- And we're *free* to be generous with what we have.
- But if we don't believe, we read Jesus' teachings and he sounds unhinged.
- Generosity sounds not only foolish, but dangerous.
- And we are enslaved by fear and greed.
- Which is why Jesus goes on to say ...
 - 24: No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.
 - Some translations have "you cannot serve God and mammon," which is an Aramaic word.
 - The Gospels were written in Greek, because it was the *lingua franca* of the ancient world; but Jesus likely spoke Aramaic.
 - Matthew left this particular word untranslated; scholars think it was because the word *mammon* was the name for the ancient Syrian god of wealth.
 - It was Jesus' way of saying that money is like a rival god.
 - We want so badly to believe that money is neutral; not good or bad, it's just about the heart; but for Jesus, wealth is *powerful*, and the sway it has over our hearts is often a demonically animated force at work in our soul and society.
 - Entire sectors of our economy are run by the worship of mammon. The god of mammon is behind so much evil and injustice — war, racism, ecological devastation, and more.

- Hence, “You cannot serve both God and mammon.”
- Not you should not. Not, hey, you should rethink, but *no, you cannot*.
- It’s not that it’s bad; it’s that it’s *impossible*.
- Mammon *will take over your heart* unless you resist its gravitational pull.
- How? According to Jesus, through generosity!

Hinge: *Now, Jesus is a brilliant teacher. And I want you to see that he’s teaching on at least three levels here. People who study how we learn tell us there’s a progression from the head to the heart to the hands; or from ideas, to feelings, to behavior. Jesus is teaching on all three levels.*

1. First, Jesus is teaching his apprentices about how to see God and our life in God’s world.
 - About what kind of universe we find ourselves in. Where the good life is to be found. And ultimately, who God himself is.
 - A biblical theology of generosity does not start with tithing or even with Jesus’ command to “be generous to the poor.”
 - It starts, before time and space, with (#1) who God is.
 - God is “our Father.”
 - My kids don’t worry about rent or groceries or medical bills because they have a father and mother who provide for them.
 - Jesus said, we don’t have to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear, because God is our Father.
 - Not only is God Father, but he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!
 - He is a family of self-giving, others-centered, joyful, sacrificial, generous love.
 - Generosity is grounded in the triune nature of God.
 - (#2) Generosity is woven through the library of Scripture.
 - From page one in Genesis 1v29, God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant ... for food.”
 - From the beginning, he is giving, blessing, and loving, all the way up to Jesus!
 - (#3) Generosity is at the heart of the Gospel itself!

- The Father gave the Son:
 - John 3v16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...”
- The Son gave his life:
 - 2 Corinthians 8v9 says, “For you know the grace [that can be translated as ‘generosity’] 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.”
- The Father and Son gave the Holy Spirit:
 - Luke 11v13: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”
- Forgiving is an expression of giving
- Is this how you see the gospel? How you see God himself? As the most generous being in all reality. And how you see your life in God’s world?

2. Second, Jesus is teaching his apprentices about the architecture of our hearts.

- Billy Graham once said, “If a person gets his attitude toward money straight, it will help straighten out almost every other area in his life.”
- That’s right in line with Jesus’ teaching from Matthew 6. Get your relationship with money right, and it will set your heart free.
- If we apprentice under Jesus, it should change our relationship to money, because it should change our heart.
- That’s why generosity is way more than just tithing, or even acts of “radical generosity,” where we give large portions of our resources away; it’s about buying your friend coffee, or welcoming people to your dinner table, or being quick to forgive when you are hurt.
- Because generosity isn’t just about our behavior; it’s about our inner nature — it’s about the heart.

3. That said, thirdly, Jesus is teaching his apprentices about the practice of generosity.

- All the research on generosity says the same thing: that for generosity to make you happier and healthier, it can’t be a one-time event or even a random act of kindness. It has to be a practice.

- And in the same way that practicing gratitude will make you a more thankful, content person, practicing generosity will make you a more generous, free person.
- I can't flip a switch and remove all fear and greed from my heart; but I can sponsor a child; I can buy someone lunch this week; I can give a portion of my income away every month with special attention to the church, the gospel, and the poor ... and as I practice generosity and make space for God to move in my heart, he can change my whole life from the inside out.

Sticky line: *Generosity is a practice by which we index our hearts from a scarcity mentality to the abundance mentality of Jesus.*

- From fear of lack to trust in our Father-provider.
- From worry over our future to peace with whatever comes.
- From the endless desire for more to the enjoyment of what we have.
- From grasping to gratitude.
- And from misery to joy.
- The practice of generosity can do all this and more in our hearts.

Ending:

- To end: think for a moment of the most generous person you know. They may not be wealthy, but they are generous. Draw them to mind.
- Are they joyful?
- I bet you're smiling right now, because the answer is likely, Yes. They are.
- I have yet to meet an unhappy, generous person.
- That's likely why I have also yet to meet a former giver.
- I'm sure they exist, but all the people I know who have discovered the joy of generosity never turned back.
- Instead, they became increasingly radicalized to the Way of Jesus and deeply happy.
- I could not be more excited to practice generosity with you over the next few weeks.

- My prayer for you is to begin to tap into the joy at the heart of the Father and Son and Spirit.
- It will cost you — literally — to put Jesus' teachings into practice.
- But you will get back far more than you give away.
- Because, "There is more joy in giving than receiving."

NOTES

1. Matthew 20v16
2. Matthew 23v12
3. Luke 6v28
4. makarios. Strong's greek: 3107. μακάριος (Makarios) -- blessed, happy. (n.d.). <https://biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm>
5. Araki, S. (2023). The societal determinates of happiness and unhappiness: Evidence from 152 countries over 15 years. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 1-13.
6. Aknin, L. B., Barrington-Leigh, C. P., Dunn, E. W., Helliwell, J. F., Burns, J., Biswas-Diener, R., Kemeza, I., Nyende, P., Ashton-James, C. E., & Norton, M. I. (2013). Prosocial spending and well-being: Cross-cultural evidence for a psychological universal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(4), 635
7. Foster, R. J. (2005). *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*. HarperCollins.