

Generosity Teaching 04:

Be Generous to the Poor

Intro hook:

Personal Example:

- I have a friend who works in finance and when he graduated from college, his life goal was to be the richest person on earth.
- Immediately he started to make a lot of money.
- He was a nominal Christian and he gave a little away, but he was mostly focused on his career.
- But his life changed when he was invited to a conference run by a small nonprofit that brings together high-net-worth Christians (or put bluntly, rich Christians) to inspire them to what they call “radical generosity.”
- He gets there, and a businessperson gets up and tells a story about how they reverse tithe; they live on 10% of their income, and give away 90%.
- Then another person gets up and tells a story about how they run a business worth hundreds of millions of dollars, but they set a modest salary to live on and give away all the profits.
- My friend did not even have a category for this level of “radical generosity.”
- It was a before/after moment. Coming away, he changed his relationship to money and that in turn changed the trajectory of his entire life.
- Today, many years later, he and his family live on 20% of their income and give 80% of it away. They give generously to their church community and they started a foundation to give to what they call “whole person care for people on the margins,” which has brought their family into genuine relationships with people from other walks of life.
- And they are some of the most joyful people I know.
- For the vast majority of us, living on 20% of our income is not realistic. We’re just trying to make rent and pay the bills.

- I get it.

Seam: *I tell you that story because it is a great example of someone refusing to live a “normal life,” and daring to put Jesus’ teachings on money and generosity into practice.*

Recap:

- We are coming to the end of our Generosity Practice.
- There is no possible way to distill all Jesus’ teachings on money and generosity down to four themes, but our best attempt was this summary of what we believe Jesus has to say on this subject:
 1. There’s more joy in giving than in receiving.
 2. Watch out for greed!
 3. All we have belongs to God.
- And up on the docket for session 04 is our final theme: Jesus’ call, not just to be generous, but more specifically, to share our resources with the poor.

Set up:

- All through the library of Scripture (before and after Jesus) we read again and again of what Pope Francis called “the preferential option for the poor.”¹
- There are roughly 500 verses in the Bible on faith and another 500 on prayer, but over 2,000 on God’s heart for the poor.
- And we see this heart on display in Jesus’ teachings.

Turn: *Turn in your Bibles to Luke 12, and let’s look at one example:*

Luke 12v13-34

- 13-14: “Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?’”

- Two siblings are fighting over the family inheritance and Jesus refuses to get sucked in.
- 14: “Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.’”
 - Notice again: Jesus has a very different vision of the good life.
- 16-19: “And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”
 - That line can be translated:
 - “Live it up! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.” (CEV)
 - Or: “You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!” (The Message)
 - This line was a saying from the Epicureans; it’s the life philosophy of pagans, not the people of God
- 20-21: “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

Explanation:

- Now, this sounds a bit harsh to our modern ears.
- But a little backstory:
 - Most people in Jesus’ day were poor tenant farmers and a very small number were wealthy landowners. There was a merchant class — in fact, a few of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen — but the middle class was very small.
 - It was also an agrarian economy.
 - Which is unlike our modern economic system that has generated more wealth than any other era in human history, and where wealth is more of a social construct. I’m paid in numbers on a bank account, not sheep and asparagus, so wealth today is less of a zero-sum game because it’s based on an arbitrary social valuation. But in an agrarian economy, wealth was more limited because it was based on physical commodities such as sheep and grain.

- This man is a wealthy landowner, but instead of sharing his excess with the poor all around him, he builds bigger barns.
- And Jesus calls him a “fool.”
- The irony is, this guy is living the American dream! Literally!
- Two Harvard Business School graduates wrote a great book where they re-write Jesus’ parable for the modern world:²
 - “The stock options belonging to a manager vested after a major run-up in share price, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I already have enough saved to send my kids to college, my house is paid off, and I already max out my 401k every year?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will open an investment account and create a passive income portfolio, and I’ll exercise my options and put the money there. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have a big enough portfolio to be financially independent; retire early, plan some vacations, play golf.”’
- There are so many people whose life goal is exactly this! Make a ton of money, retire early, and live it up.
- The villain in Jesus’ story is our culture’s hero.
- Yet, to Jesus, he is a fool.

Seam: *Then look down at verse 32. Jesus says this:*

Luke 12 continued:

- 32: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”
 - It’s interesting, we tend to assume that the motivation behind wealth accumulation is greed, but for a lot of people (especially those that grew up in scarcity), it’s fear.
 - Fear of not having enough. Fear of being poor like our parents. Fear of looming disaster.
 - We’re back to Jesus’ abundance mindset: God is our Father-provider; his heart is to give to us, not take. We don’t have to be afraid.
 - Instead, we can do this:

- 33: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”
 - Do you see how Jesus ties his call to be generous to the poor to his view of the age to come?
 - Jesus’ teachings on generosity will never make sense unless you view your financial decisions not in light of a human lifespan, but of eternity.
 - In light of eternity, giving is not loss, it’s gain! It’s an investment.
 - As Randy Alcorn put it, “... We store up eternal treasure in the coming age by giving away temporary treasures in the present age.”³
 - Think about when you put some money into an investment. There’s often a little feeling of pain as you might have loved to use that money to buy something else. But you don’t lose that money. you put it where it can accrue interest over time, because of the longer-term dreams in your heart.
 - In the same way, giving is investing in the Kingdom of God; it’s putting your money where it can grow over time, in the one place where it can last forever.
 - In the upside-down kingdom, what we give away we actually keep.
 - And what we keep, we lose.
 - So, give it away, Jesus says.
- 34: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
 - We covered this sacred law of the universe in our first session: Our heart follows our money.
 - And when we spend our money on things that do not last, our hearts are racked by fear and greed.
- But Jesus has a solution: Give your money away to the poor.
- Interestingly, this is actually the second time Jesus has said this in Luke’s Gospel.
- Which is key because ancient writings were hand-copied. Every word was expensive, so if an author wanted to really emphasize a point, he would repeat it.
- Just one chapter before this, Jesus says this to the Pharisees:
 - “... Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the

outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”⁴

- Meaning if there is a silver bullet for greed, a practice to clean our hearts out and set our hearts free, it’s this: Be generous to the poor.

Seam: *It comes as no surprise that Jesus’ first apprentices did exactly that.*

The Early Church:

- In Acts 2, the first story we have of the early church, we read this famous passage:
 - “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”⁵
- Luke and Acts were both written by the same author like a two-volume story.
- Did you see Luke repeat Jesus’ line in there?
 - Luke 12: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor.”⁶
 - Acts 2: “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”⁷
- They did it!
- And in a following passage, we read this:
 - “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own [See the stewardship language there?], but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”⁸
- The early Church was wildly generous to the poor!
- Tim Keller called it “financial promiscuity.” He said:
 - “The early church was strikingly different from the culture around it in this way — the pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. A pagan gave nobody their money and practically gave everybody their body. And the Christians came along and gave practically nobody their body and they gave practically everybody their money.”⁹

- In fact, one of the main criticisms from pagan Romans was that the Church's generosity put the Roman world to shame.
- In a letter, the fourth-century emperor Julian the Apostate wrote, "It is disgraceful that ... the impious Galileans [or followers of Jesus] support not only their own poor, but ours as well. All men see our people lack aid from us."
- It's hard for us to imagine now because of the impact of Jesus on the world, but there was no moral value in the Roman world for the rich to share with the poor. None. Nor were there any social services from the government or tax-based wealth redistribution.
- Almost all that work was done by the Church.
- Early on, churches and monasteries became sprawling centers of social justice.
 - Saint Basil, the bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century, founded what was arguably the first hospital, which grew into a small town called the Basiliad. It had a hotel for travelers, hospice care for the dying, a leper colony, daily feeding program, and fixed-hour prayer. Soon this model spread all over the world.
- Here's Saint Basil himself: "The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit."
 - He's voicing an idea that was prevalent in the early Church; that wealth kept for yourself beyond a certain level was actually stolen from the poor.
 - And again, it was agrarian economy and all that, but still — they took Jesus' teachings really seriously.
- One of the central practices of early Christians was "almsgiving," which was basically generosity to the poor, but they would often give not only money, but time and relationship as well.
- The Didache, one of the earliest Christian writings we have outside of the New Testament, says this: "Let your alms sweat in your hands, until you know to whom you should give."¹⁰
- In the early Church, people would regularly bring offerings of money and extra food to the weekly church meal for those who were in need to take home.
- The Lord's Supper itself was an act of social justice.
- But because so much of this work has since been taken on by our governments, it's easy for

us to forget that this is a core part of our calling as followers of Jesus.

Seam: *Now, this raises all sorts of questions about how to practice almsgiving today.*

- The poor are often invisible to those of us who are middle-class and up because of the hurry of life, lifestyle enclaves, and because most of us live in zip codes with people in the same tax bracket.
- And it's hard to know what to do with the scale of the modern nation-state, the cost of living in our cities, and how it's all tied to taxation.
- But don't let paralysis stop your heart!
- Surely you can do something.
- You can make a small donation to your church or a nonprofit that is serving the poor. Or you can volunteer. Our church community cooks dinner every Thursday night at the Salvation Army and sits with guests for a weekly meal. You can do that.
- Or, even better: You can just see who in your circle is in need.
- Did you see in the text that a synonym for the "poor," is "anyone who had need"?
- Often we think of the poor as those in abject poverty in another country or those living on the streets, which raises all sorts of questions about addiction and mental illness, but who do you know who has a "need"?
- The need could be a roof over their head, or it could just be to pay medical bills, send a kid to youth camp, or find transportation.
- Who do you know? In your church? In your community? In your life?
- And what do you have to give? Even if it's small. Even if it's twenty bucks or an extra plate for dinner.
- No matter how small, a sacred law of the Kingdom is that God can do a lot with a little. Our five bread loaves go far beyond what we could ever dream.
- So give what you have, not what you don't have.
- And remember, those in need are not the objects of your pity, but your brothers and sisters, your kin in Jesus.

- Our goal isn't just to give our resources to those in need, but to create a new kind of family. To blur the lines between giver and receiver.
- You may have extra resources to give them, but they have far more to give you.
- Our goal is to create a community where it could be said, "There was no needy person among them."¹¹
- Follow the leading of the Spirit in your heart.

Sticky line: *Don't build bigger barns! Be generous to the poor.*

As we close our time...

- This raises all sorts of questions. How much do we give away? And to whom? And what's the best way to do it?
- And this will look wildly different for a single parent working two jobs and barely scraping by than it will for an aristocrat in England stewarding generational wealth.
- To that end, we created a bonus episode that looks at questions like:
 - Where do we give?
 - How much do we give?
 - And all sorts of best practices for generosity.
- It also comes with a final exercise designed to help you make a plan for generosity going forward.
- You can do this together as a group or access it on your own.
- But for now, just do the next right thing.
- Generosity is one of the first steps we take into Kingdom living.
- In the Gospels, when people hear the Gospel of the Kingdom for the first time from John the Baptizer, they ask, "What shall we do?"
- John gives three practices:
 1. "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."¹²

2. Then to the tax collectors: 2. “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.”¹³

3. Then to the soldiers: 3. “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”¹⁴

- Notice: All three have to do with money.
- Changing our relationship to money is one of the first and most important steps we take into Kingdom living.
- What’s the next step for you?
- Just take it in faith and watch your heart grow.

To end...

- Martin Luther said every disciple of Jesus must go through three conversions.
 - A conversion of the heart.
 - A conversion of the mind.
 - And a conversion of the purse.
- I’m praying this Practice is a third conversion for you.
- And remember: This is about joy. “It is happier to give than to receive.”¹⁵
- And all of this is motivated by love. We give our money away because Jesus gave his life for us. We give our wealth to the poor because Jesus gave up the wealth of heaven for the poverty of the human condition. And we do all this joyfully, because our true happiness is not in a practice, but in the person of Jesus, who “ ... loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”¹⁵

Notes

1. Pope Francis. (2020, August 19). General Audience. The Holy See.
2. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200819_udienza-generale.html
3. Baumer, G., & Cortines, J. (2016). God and Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School by Gregory Baumer and John Cortines. Rose Publishing.
4. Alcorn, R. (2019). Giving is the Good Life: The Unexpected Path to Purpose and Joy. Tyndale