

## Created for Generosity

Luke 18, 19, 21

As you've probably noticed, *the Bible is about God*. The Bible describes and discusses many things, but it's primarily about God. It tells us what God is like and what God is doing in this world. Knowledge of God is the most important and the most practical knowledge a person can have. If you know what God is like and what God is doing, you'll then know how you should order your life. Quite often we are explicitly told to pattern our lives after something we're told about God. "You shall be holy for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). ". . .accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). What we learn about God has implications for how we should order our lives.

One of the things that the Bible tells us about God is that He is generous. God is not stingy or tight-fisted with His people. The ultimate expression of God's generosity is Jesus Christ. God sent His very Son to die for our sins. You can't get more generous than that. Paul wrote that through Christ God lavished His grace upon us (Ephesians 1:7-8). God freely gives us everything we need to thrive in Christ (Romans 8:32). God gives wisdom generously to everyone who asks for it (James 1:5). The Bible teaches that God is generous.

And since God has been so generous to us, we shouldn't be surprised that His people are supposed to be generous also. A stingy Christian is a contradiction in terms. Like our heavenly Father, we are supposed to be generous in every way: generous in the way we speak (instead of being harsh and demanding), generous in the way we serve (instead of feeling like it's an imposition), generous in the way we forgive ("forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"), etc. And we are supposed to be generous in the way we give financially. Since everything we have has been given to us by God, we are supposed to be "generous and ready to share" with others who have needs (1 Timothy 6:18).

This week and next we are going to think about generosity in giving – not as an add-on to the Christian life, but as something inherent in our calling. Today we are going to consider a cluster of passages in the gospel of Luke in which Jesus noticed people's generosity in giving (or the lack thereof). Taken together, these accounts can give us a vision for our lives when it comes to money and generosity. We'll begin today by exploring a basic principle about discipleship as it relates to money.

### ***A Basic Truth about Discipleship: God (not money) should have first place in our lives.***

(Luke 18:18-27) We could substitute almost anything for "money" in the parentheses. If you are apprenticed to Jesus, God should have first place in your life – not your career, marriage, children, sports, ministry, reputation, etc. But in this account the issue is money. Luke 18 records Jesus' conversation with "the rich young ruler." He's called this because Luke tells us that he was a ruler and wealthy; Matthew mentions that he was young. The man leads with an honest question:

18 A ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

In His reply Jesus picks up on the fact that the ruler called Him "**Good** Teacher."

19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.

Jesus is challenging this man to accept His authority. If he believed that Jesus was "good" and if he acknowledged that only God is good, then he would have to conclude that Jesus was from God and should be respected in what He said. In verse 20 Jesus addresses the man's question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

20 "You know the commandments, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'"

By mentioning five out of the Ten Commandments Jesus wasn't implying that you *earn* eternal life by keeping the Ten Commandments; eternal life is a gift from God that is received by faith. But obedience was (and is) evidence that you have believed and that you will inherit eternal life. We have every indication that this man was being honest with Jesus when he said:

21 And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

This man was just like the Apostle Paul before his conversion to Christ. Paul was able to say that he was "blameless" when it came to the righteousness which is in the Law (Philippians 3:6). You might think that at this point in the conversation Jesus would say a few encouraging words to this man who was so obedient. But Jesus knew that there was a deeper issue in this man's life: his money.

22 When Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Notice what Jesus is doing here: He is calling this man to discipleship. In response to this man's question about eternal life, Jesus ultimately says, "Follow Me." Only those who are apprenticed to Jesus in the Kingdom inherit eternal life. And for this man, the main thing that kept him from following Jesus was his money. This man's problem wasn't sleeping around, killing people, stealing, lying, or disrespecting his parents. The thing that rivaled God in his life was his money.

Jesus wasn't being mean or harsh when he told him, "Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor." He was being compassionate because He knew that *this* man couldn't keep his money *and* be a disciple. Jesus didn't want this man to gain the whole world and lose his soul. And so Jesus said, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Of course Jesus didn't demand this of everyone who followed Him. Luke 8 even records that there was a group of women who supported the disciples financially "out of their private means" (Luke 8:1-3). Selling everything and giving to the poor wasn't demanded of everyone, but it was demanded of this man. Giving away everything he owned was apparently the only way he could put God first in his life. He couldn't be wealthy and follow Jesus. Other people had other issues (see Luke 9:57-62), but his issue was money. Notice his reaction in verse 23:

23 But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.  
24 And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! 25 "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

We have to wrestle with Jesus' teaching here because the vast majority of us in this room today are wealthy by biblical standards. Biblically speaking, everything above and beyond having our basic needs is wealth (see 1 Timothy 6:6-10). It is incredibly difficult to have money and not put it above God. Money is a powerful influence in our lives. Figuring out how to earn it and how to keep it can consume our lives. But since "you cannot serve both God and money," Jesus claimed that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (a sewing needle) than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. When the disciples heard this, they asked the obvious question:

26 They who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" 27 But He said, "The things that are impossible with people are possible with God."

Through the transforming power of God, people with money can enter the kingdom of God. God can change the human heart so that a person can have money and not serve it. God gives people the ability to honor Him through their money – whether they have a little or a lot. Just like we use our minds and our bodies to honor God, it is possible by His grace for ***God (and not money) to have first place in our lives.***

Our next account illustrates this point in a fascinating way. Luke 19:1-10 illustrates that ***Generosity is a natural expression of God having first place in our lives.*** (Luke 19:1-10) Jesus' encounter with Zaccheus illustrates that when people are apprenticed to Jesus they not only don't put money first; they become generous with their money.

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich.

Tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews because they collected taxes for the Romans. As a ***chief*** tax collector, Zaccheus would have been especially despised because he was something like a regional manager for tax collectors in that area. But, Zaccheus had spiritual interest/curiosity:

3 Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. 4 So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way.

Knowing the route Jesus would take, Zaccheus positions himself up in a tree in order to see Jesus. Significantly, Jesus wanted to see Zaccheus also.

5 When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house."

This is an example of what scholars call "a divine necessity": Jesus said, "I must stay at your house." Jesus had a divine appointment with Zaccheus in his house. This thrilled Zaccheus; he wasn't used to be wanted by anybody desirable.

6 And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. 7 When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

This was the common reaction of religious people to Jesus. They thought that godly people kept their distance from "sinners" (and tax collectors were definitely sinners). Jesus had a very different mindset. He befriended people who had everything wrong with them because he viewed Himself as a physician who had come to heal sick people, as a redeemer who came to seek and save the lost. Verse 8 records how Zaccheus responded to Jesus.

8 Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."

I would love to know what the conversation had been up to this point. We're basically told Zaccheus' final destination of faith; we're not told how he got there. Zaccheus is describing what his repentance would look like. Since he had sinned against people financially by collecting more taxes than people owed, his repentance would involve making things right financially. But Zaccheus does far more than he was required to do by OT law. He would give half of what he owned to the poor and give back four times as much as he had defrauded from people. His voluntary repentance (Jesus didn't push this on him) involved this amazing generosity.

Significantly, before Jesus' public ministry, when people came to John the Baptist at the Jordan River to be baptized and asked him what repentance looked like, he brought up money and generosity. He told the common people to share food and clothing with others; he told tax collectors to collect no more than they've been ordered to collect; and he told soldiers not to take people's money by force, not to accuse people falsely, and to be content with their wages (Luke 3:10-14). Putting God first often involved a change of habits in relation to money.

Notice Jesus' comment after Zaccheus announced what his repentance would involve:

9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Jesus saw Zaccheus' generosity as evidence that "today salvation has come to [Zaccheus'] house"! Jesus saw Zaccheus' new attitude toward money as tangible evidence that he had experienced salvation. This is one of the many transformations that takes place when Jesus "seeks and saves" people. Zaccheus had spent his entire career defrauding people; he could care less whether he was stealing people blind. All he cared about was getting more money. But when his eyes were opened to the life that's available in the kingdom, a transformation took place. Now he was eager to give more than he was required to give. Whereas the rich young ruler went away sad, Zaccheus was exuberant and joyful about giving.

Zaccheus isn't the rare exception. Generosity in giving is one of the most tangible evidences that a person has been thoroughly converted and now puts God first in his/her life. Generosity comes more naturally to some than others, but it's really a natural expression of putting God first. I have seen this over and over in the body of Christ.

When Brenda and I were moving from Mississippi to the north shore of Chicago to attend seminary, some friends helped us out financially. We had a friend, David McNair, who had just gotten a job at a VA hospital as a physical therapist. We were blown away when he told us that he was giving his first tithe to his local church (tithe simply means 10%) and that he had decided to give "a second tithe" to help us out. This guy was giving away the first 20% of his income right out of school. And nobody was twisting his arm. He didn't give because he *had* to; he gave generously because he *wanted* to. That's a common expression of having God first in your life. You want to honor God with everything you have – and that includes your money.

We have seen this here at Faith over the years too. Many of you have given generously and joyfully because you believe in what God is doing in and through this church. You've given to missionaries that are serving God around the world. You've given to fund special projects such as Haiti relief. On occasion somebody in the church or in the community has a financial need; I can think of times when individuals or groups of people have willingly said, "Here's \$300 to help out." That type of generosity is a natural expression of putting God first in your lives.

The first two accounts we've considered involved rich people; the last account involves a very poor woman. We see in Luke 21:1-4 that ***Generosity is for every believer (not only for those with "surplus")***. (Luke 21:1-4) Jesus and his disciples are at the temple. At the temple (in the court of the women – open to both men and women) there was a treasury which consisted of boxes where people brought their financial offerings to God.

1 And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. 2 And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins.

These coins (*lepta*) were the smallest coins in circulation in Palestine. The parallel passage in Mark 12 mentions that they were worth "a cent." On an absolute scale, what the widow gave was worth only a tiny fraction of what others were putting into the treasury. But notice Jesus' comment to His disciples.

3 And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; 4 for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on."

Others gave out of their surplus; they could give a lot and not even notice it. There's nothing wrong with surplus giving. It's even encouraged in places (Luke 3:11). If you have something that somebody else can use, give it to them. But she didn't have surplus. If she were going to give, it would have to be from the money she used to meet daily needs. That's exactly what she did. She gave out of her poverty. She "put in all that she had to live on." Even though she couldn't "afford" to give, she gave anyway. Actually, she wouldn't be denied the blessing of giving.

It's significant that Jesus didn't run up to the woman and say, "That's a very generous thing you're doing. But you need this money more than the temple does. Keep your money and let those who have a surplus fund the temple." No, Jesus didn't deny her the blessing of giving generously and sacrificially. He commended her for her generosity. Giving is important for what the money can accomplish. But giving is also important for the giver. It's important that every believer put God first the way the widow did.

I'm sure that some of you can relate to the widow a lot more than you can relate to the rich young ruler or to Zaccheus. Quite honestly, if you are going to give it won't really be out of surplus. It will be out of what you have to live on. The consistent teaching in both the old and new testaments is that such generous giving is for every believer (not only those who have a surplus). Like the widow, when you do the math it may not make any sense whatsoever for you to give any of your money away.

You might even think, "I only make \$100 a week. Even if I gave 10% that's not enough to make much of a difference." Jesus' comment about the widow's offering suggests that that's not the right way to think about it. In Jesus' mind, the widow gave more than all the rest. What matters isn't so much the absolute amount; what matters is that you express through your generosity that God is first in your life. As we'll talk about next week, it's supposed to be a voluntary, joyful thing.

For today I'd like us all to consider, "Do I even want to be a generous person?" Is it your ambition to be a generous giver like Zaccheus or like the widow? Or does the whole idea of generous giving make you anxious and fearful? My encouragement to you today is simply to be honest before God and invite Him to do whatever needs to be done in your life to make you a generous giver.

I'm not asking you to figure out *how* you might become a generous giver (if you're not already). That's very secondary. I'm asking about your desire/ambition. As a church we want to be generous in every way: generous in the way we speak, the way we serve, the way we forgive, the way we show hospitality, and in the way we give.