

FAITH, FINANCES, AND PEACE OF MIND
(3) GOD’S PLAN FOR A GENEROUS LIFE

1 Timothy 6:17-19; Proverbs 11:24-25; 22:9

Jeffrey S. Carlson

(Including material from Adam Hamilton’s “Enough” stewardship program
and used by permission)

November 13, 2011

PROLOGUE

Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

SCRIPTURE

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. {18} They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, {19} thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life (1 Timothy 6:17-19 NRSV).

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. {25} A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water...{22:9} Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor (Proverbs 11:24-25; 22:9 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

A father gave his little boy two quarters—one for the boy to spend as he wished and one for the offering at church. On his way there, one of them slipped from his fingers and rolled down a grating. “Oh, Lord,” he said, “There goes your quarter.”

The truth is, all of life is a gift and everything in it belongs to God (Ps 24:1). We do not really own anything. Rather, we are managers of God’s resources. Our goal in life needs to be to find out what God wants us to do with the resources at our disposal.

Obviously, many of our resources go to take care of our needs. Certainly God expects us to have shelter and to eat and to take care of our children. So a large portion of what we have is to be used for those things. God also wants us to enjoy our lives, not to live in poverty. Nevertheless, God expects us to do more than focus only on ourselves. So the Scriptures teach us that we are to help the poor and give to those in need; and when we

do, we are blessed. The Scriptures also teach us that we are to return a portion of our livelihood to God. It is God's plan we live a generous life.

1. WHY A GENEROUS LIFE

God created us with the willingness to give—to God and to others. This design is part of our makeup; we actually have the *need* to be generous. Yet there are two voices that "war" against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.

There is the voice of fear. Fear, of what might happen to us, along with a misplaced idea about the true source of our security, keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have. The truth is that hoarding offers us no real security in this world.

There is the voice of self-gratification. Our culture tells us that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and pleasurable experiences. So we find ourselves thinking, "If I give, there won't be enough left for me."

How do we defeat these voices? When we give our lives to Christ, invite him to be our Lord, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out, we find that our fears begin to dissipate and our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and caring for others. Although we still may wrestle with the voices from time to time, we are able to silence them more readily and effectively the more we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

As the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives, we begin to think less about ourselves and more about others. We begin to see the needs of others and wonder, "If I don't do something, who will?" As this change takes place within us, we experience real joy. We discover that we find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things for ourselves. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

From the early days of the Old Testament, God's people have observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had back to God. A gift offered to God was called the *first fruits* or the *tithe*, and it equaled one-tenth of one's flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth. He did it for the glory of God and through a priest-king called Melchizedek. In the New Testament book known as Hebrews, Melchizedek is portrayed as a precursor to Jesus Christ (chapters 5-7). The fact that Abraham gave his tithe through Melchizedek points to the superiority of Melchizedek's order and subsequently affirms the claim of Christ to be the eternal Son of

God. The implication for Christians is that tithing not only continues a biblical and time-honored practice, it is also a concrete way of expressing the belief that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe.

As Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses for our salvation. Salvation is a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But we do look to the Law of Moses as a guide for living and for knowledge of how to please God. Most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives, and one that is pleasing to God.

Still, tithing can be a challenging idea for many of us. It can be a stretch, especially for those who are wrestling with the voices of fear and self-gratification. David Slagle, pastor of Veritas Church in Decatur, Georgia, uses apples to illustrate this struggle. He invites us to imagine that God has given us ten apples, which represent our wealth or income. God tells us that nine of these apples are ours to enjoy. We are to use some to care for ourselves and for our families, some to save for retirement, and some to give away to others. But the tenth apple is holy to God. Giving this apple to God first, before we consume the other nine apples, is a way for us to express praise, love, obedience, faithfulness, worship, and devotion to God. This also serves to supply the resources for God's purposes to be accomplished in the world through God's church.

Slagle then notes that our lifestyles are such that, for many of us, nine apples are not enough anymore. We think, "How can I pay the bills and have all the stuff I want with just nine apples?" So we decide the Lord will not mind if we take just a little bit of his apple. After all, there's that trip we want to take, and it's really important. So we take a bite out of God's apple—the one that is holy to God and meant to be used for God's purposes. The Lord will understand we think. Then Christmas comes and we don't have enough money for all the presents we want to buy so we take another bite out of God's apple. One day a medical emergency catches us by surprise. Because we didn't set aside money in an emergency fund, we must take another bite from God's apple. Buying a new car, eating out, spending on this or that—each expense takes a bite out of the apple that belongs to God. Soon all that is left is the core. So we give the core to God and say, "Here's your portion, Lord." God receives not our first fruits or our best gifts, but our leftovers.

I wonder if God must think, "You would really bless me if you recognized that this apple is mine and gave it to me freely—not because someone made you feel guilty, but just because you love me." You know, a strange thing happens when we give the first apple to God. We are not tempted to eat it, because it's not there! And with God's help, we somehow find a way to make the other nine apples meet our needs.

I realize that it is challenging to tithe. It simply might not be possible for you to begin giving 10 percent to God right away. But I encourage you to take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2 percent or 5 percent or 7 percent. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous.

Jesus saw a widow who gave her last two copper coins, and he said, "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43-44). The Lord understands your situation and is pleased when you give freely with a grateful heart. The Lord also is ready to help you make the changes in your lifestyle that will enable you to tithe.

2. WHAT A GENEROUS LIFE MEANS TO GOD

From the earliest biblical times, the primary way people worshiped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one's labors upon it to God. They would burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God. It wasn't that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain. Rather, God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith, and the desire to please and honor God; and this moved God's heart. When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord.

Many Christians have it wrong. They say that if you give, then God will give more back to you. But that is not how it works. We do not give to God so that we can get something in return.

God does not look at our offerings like they are financial transactions or business deals. Our offerings are a way of saying, "God, I'm returning to you a portion of what I have and what I've earned to say thank you and I love you. I hope you'll use this somehow to make a difference in the world."

3. HOW A GENEROUS LIFE AFFECTS US

Our generosity to God and others not only touches God and other people, it also changes us. As human beings, we were created with the need to be generous. When we are not generous in giving of what we have, we have not only a financial problem but also a spiritual problem. To use a somewhat graphic yet extremely effective analogy, it is as if we have become financially and spiritually constipated. We keep taking in, but we're not giving out. After a while, it becomes uncomfortable and causes us pain. Sometimes we may not even realize what is happening. We're taking in, but it is not satisfying us because we were not made to take in and never give anything back. We were created for

generosity. Over time we become self-absorbed, money-consumed, joyless people. This is what a lifetime of financial and spiritual constipation looks like: joylessness.

The only way to find relief is to learn to give. When we are generous—to God and to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are in need—our hearts are filled with joy. They are enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously, we become more generous. That is how generosity works.

In the beginning, we may be hesitantly generous. We may be reluctant. But something happens to us in the midst of our giving, and we find ourselves becoming more generous. In this respect, generosity is similar to love and gratitude. Sometimes we may not feel love, but when we choose to act in loving ways, loving feelings begin to flow. Sometimes we may not feel like giving thanks, but the best way to cultivate a heart of gratitude is to give thanks in all circumstances. Likewise, the more we give, the more generous our hearts become.

CONCLUSION

Let us take God at his word. As we choose to live for others and to give generously of what God has given us, we will both bless others and experience the abundant blessings that come from living for God.

Like last week, I would like to invite you to put your hands on your lap, and extend your hands palm upright in preparation for prayer. And I would invite you to say this prayer with me, just quietly under your breath, and then we will close with the Disciples' Prayer:

Reshape us, good Lord, in generosity and faith, in expectation and hope, knowing that in Christ, the best is yet to come.

Through Jesus who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.