

Act Normal

2. Open your hand

March 5, 2023

Recently I was in Dallas teaching church planters, and I called for a Lyft to take me to the airport. I was surprised when this popped up on my screen. Yes, Jesus came to pick me up! You notice that Jesus is arriving in 2 minutes! At the top it says “Be ready outside, Jesus is arriving soon in a gray Mazda CX-5.” (I was expecting more of a white horse, but I’m sure the Mazda has a lot of horsepower.)

Of course, it was “Hey-zus”, not Jesus. And Jesus got lost and the trip took twice as long as it was supposed to take. At one point while we were wandering, the app texted me: “Just checking in. It looks like you’re not heading towards your destination. Tap the link if you need help.” I didn’t need to tap the link but it was good to know that they would notice if I was being kidnapped!

Later, I thought, “I need that kind of notification for my relationship with God, someone looking over my life and texting me, “It looks like you are getting further from your destination of knowing and becoming like Jesus ...”

I am so glad that the Holy Spirit does that – He provides that alert! Left to ourselves, we can drift spiritually without even knowing it. Without Him, we’d find ourselves way off course. When we start drifting off the Lord’s path, the Spirit uses a variety of means to prompt us, “It looks like you are getting further from your destination.” And he prompts us to do a course correction if we let him. In the book of Acts we see God doing course corrections for his people.

We tend to idealize the early church, because God was doing such amazing things through the first disciples. But even though the disciples were filled with the Spirit, they still weren’t perfect. They drifted at times.

There’s a pattern in Acts: God works in the lives of the believers, and they start out strong. But then they drift, and the Lord does a course correction to bring them back to his original intent. For example, last week Pastor Christy pointed out that the disciples started out filled with the Spirit, but later some tried to live on their own power instead.

In Acts 1 Jesus says, “Wait for the Holy Spirit before starting on the mission to make disciples.” In Acts 2, the Spirit fell on each one of the believers so that everyone noticed; then they spoke about Jesus and people were converted. But by Acts 19, some believers in Ephesus said, “We never even heard there was a Holy Spirit.” That’s drift! So, Paul prays for the Ephesians and they receive the Spirit. The Lord did a course correction.

Today we’re going to see that that same pattern in the area of generosity.

Knowing Jesus makes us generous. One night during last month's Asbury Awakening, a student from Brazil came to the stage to share his testimony. He had recently graduated. He mentioned how much Jesus had been working in his life. And he shared how lost he felt now that he was done with school; he was alone—no family and now out of college, and he had not been able to find a job. He spoke of how discouraged he had been and then the Awakening happened, and he had been drawn to return to campus. He shared how Jesus was meeting him there. His talk was vulnerable and riveting, even though it was unspectacular and humble. He then led a heartfelt prayer for Brazil in Portuguese.

As he was finishing someone from the balcony shouted to get his attention and tossed something on the stage. It was money. Suddenly others started to bring and throw money onto the stage. This video shows what happened: [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFSwPoDHm-wj\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFSwPoDHm-wj)

No one prompted that. The young man didn't ask for money. People just gave spontaneously as the Holy Spirit moved them. That's because generosity is a natural response to Spirit's infilling. The same thing happened on a bigger scale when the Holy Spirit fell on the first disciples. Acts 2:45 says,

They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Later, it was still happening. Acts 4:32-34 says,

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ 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 ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them.

The Early Church was an open-handed community; they were marked by generosity. But by Acts 5, they started to drift from the spirit of true generosity. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira saw others being praised for their generous giving and they wanted to be praised, too. But they didn't want to give at the same level others gave, so they decide to fake generosity. No one told them they had to give all their property away, but they decided to pretend to do it. Acts 5:1-6 says,

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. ³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." ⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell

down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

Later, the same thing happens to Sapphira. That's what you call a major course correction. We might say, "Wow, that is an extreme penalty for lying about what they gave!" But remember the environment in which that happened. There was such a powerful work of the Holy Spirit and unity among the disciples that it was as though a bit of heaven was touching earth, and there is no sin in heaven. Willful sin can't coexist with the holy presence of God. The Bible doesn't say that God struck them dead; it was more of a result of the incompatibility of spiritual forces. By lying and being self-serving Ananias stepped on the third rail of the kingdom of God. But the church continued to live with an open hand.

Living generously changes us and our relationship with God in a number of ways. Generosity sets us free. A generous person is a freer person than someone who cannot part with money.

John Jayso was an outfielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates. At the end of the 2017 season his two-year, \$8 million deal was over. He told reporters he would not sign a new contract and would retire instead. "I have a sailboat," he said, "so I just want to sail away." People told him that wasn't wise, because he was leaving millions of dollars on the table. He told them "I already made millions of dollars, why do we always have to have more, more, more?"

Jayso had a lot of money, but he was free to walk away from a lot of money because he was willing to say "enough." That's not common because there is something in the human heart that says "more."

Generosity frees us from the grip of greed. One definition of greed is the "insatiable desire for more than we need." Living for the pursuit of money and possessions is a dead end. If we can't give money away, then we don't own it, it owns us. We become its slaves. When we give money away, we declare that there is something more important to us than money.

Sometimes it is not greed that binds us financially, it is perspective and the need for practical tools. That's why Crossroads is offering a new ministry designed to help reduce financial stress. We want to help. For more information on FREED UP, visit the website: www.xr.church/Freedup.com or go to the Crossroads app.

Finances are stressful, no matter where you are in life or how much (or little) money you have. The good news is that you can escape the bondage of financial stress and experience the true freedom that God has for you. FreedUp is proven to help you find real financial freedom and spiritual growth. Individuals and couples from Crossroads can participate in FreedUp at a discounted rate.

I encourage you to check this out – no matter your financial situation. I know one couple where the woman said, “We’re not getting married until we take a Christ-centered financial class” – it made a huge difference! We start sessions next week at West, South, and online. Just go the app or online.

When we give to God, we strengthen our connection with him and to his Kingdom. I don’t bet, but I know that when people bet on a football game, they suddenly become emotionally invested in the outcome of that game. Before the bet they might not have cared at all about the teams. But once their money was connected to the team’s success, now they’re all in.

Jesus told us in Matthew 6:21,

*For where **your** treasure is, there **your** heart will be also.*

Giving to God reflects and strengthens our love for him. No one gives away significant amounts of money for the heck of it. When we give to God, He becomes the reason.

How do we grow in our generosity? There are stages of generosity. The first stage is the resistant giver. That is, the first response is not to give... and generally they don’t. If asked, “why give?” They’d respond, “Why should I?”

The next stage is the impulsive giver. Like an impulse purchase at the grocery store line; it’s unplanned and when the mood strikes. When asked, “why give?” The impulsive giver will say, “Because I felt like it.”

The next stage is the obedient giver. Here we make the conscious choice to give. If asked, “why give?” The obedient giver says, “Because God says so.” This is foundational; we give to God.

The next stage is the motivated giver, who gives for a cause that he cares about. When asked, “why give?” They’d say, “Because this matters to God and to me.”

The last stage is the joyful giver. In 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, we read,

*Remember this: **Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***

When asked, “why give?” They’d respond, “Because I love to!” We saw some of that joy earlier of giving in the video of the Asbury Awakening. Most of us have a blend of all of these at some point.

Generosity builds our trust in God. A way to increase our trust and peace is to follow God’s direction to give. It can seem counterintuitive to talk about being generous when

we are worried that we won't have enough. But God promises that when we follow his directive to give, he takes care of us.

When we give and see in our bank account that God is caring for us, then we discover that Jesus, not money, is our security for the future. God knows our anxiety about money, though, and he makes us a unique offer in Malachi 3:10.

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

A tithe equals 10% of our income. If that sounds like a lot, remember that all we have belongs to him anyway! God is saying, "Try me! Test this out!" This is the only place God says, "test me." God says If you give him the tithe of what he has given you, He will pour out so much blessing you can't hold it! This is God's promise.

Linda and I have found this promise to be true. Years ago, we didn't have a lot of money and our kids were heading for college. We tithed our 10% and gave above that to the building fund. It just so happened that when our kids were in college and we needed more money, Linda's piano studio grew to the maximum number of students she ever had. We didn't have all we wanted, but we had what we needed. In recent years we didn't have that same need and the number of students decreased. We've experienced God's care in concrete ways.

We're not talking about some prosperity gospel deal where you give X amount and God then has to give you back X times 10. No, the blessing may or may not be financial, but it is always real and joyful to receive. It helps us live the life we were created to live.

What will give me greater security? Keeping that 10% or God's blessing on my life? I'd like the blessing – and Jesus says "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

If you haven't been tithing or haven't grown up in a tithing family, it can feel scary to take that step. So, we want to help you with overcoming that fear. God promises to bless us when we tithe, and even says "*Test me in this.*"

So, we are extending the Tithing Challenge. If you tithe for three months and at the end of that time if you do not feel that God has blessed you, then we will give you your tithe money back, no questions asked. All you need to do is to complete this card and put it in the offering or you can also sign up on our website. God promises to bless us, and we want to help you get started.

Generosity partners us with God's purposes. When we give to God it is an act of worship. And then the church uses those gifts to accomplish his purposes in the world. So, by giving, we get to be part of what God is doing in the world.

Ananias and Sapphira brought their gift to the church. Sometimes people say, “I’d rather give directly to people than to the church.” But remember, when we give to the church we are giving to people. For example, Crossroads Church ministers to the body, soul, and spirit of people in our region and beyond.

We minister to physical and spiritual needs:

- Feed the hungry: we purchased and packed 100,000 meals and during pandemic we distributed over 300,000lbs. of food. We also support the local food pantry.
- The Angel tree provided gifts for under-resourced kids at Christmas.
- We are building a medical clinic in Mozambique where there is none.
- Our adult mission and our student mission trips give practical assistance to people who can’t afford it.
- The FOCUS weekend assists those in our own community.
- 100,000+ people died of drug overdoses in US died last year. We host AA, NA, and started Freedom Alive, a Christ-centered recovery ministry.
- We offer an inner healing ministry to care for people’s needs.
- We develop for people of all ages:
 - Our iLead ministry involves 290 students in leadership development in the West Allegheny schools.
 - Our highly-regarded day-time preschool for 2-4 year olds reaches people in North Fayette, and starting this fall, at our South location.
 - We equip every Crossroader to live into their potential to go into the world with love and power through Encounter Retreat, Movement Makers, and LifeGroups.
 - We are planting churches to bring hope to the world. We catalyzed a church planting training center in Panama, training 150 planters in last five months.

You are impacting thousands of lives through your giving.

The Holy Spirit makes people generous and empowers us to live open handed lives. A generous life is a blessed life. Let’s keep stepping into that blessing.