

Generosity

(preached 12/18/22)

NOT GENEROUS. Today's sermon is about generosity and let me start by saying: I'm not a generous person by nature. As the youngest of 4, I was served and sacrificed for whereas my older siblings were the ones called upon to serve and sacrifice—usually for me. My parents were more tolerant and mellow by the time I came along plus, as my mother tells it, I was born with a terrible case of jaundice. As a newborn I had to spend several days in an incubator where she couldn't even hold me. To this day she talks about how sorry she felt for me, so no doubt this experience softened mom's heart to give me some preferential treatment.

Elder siblings, especially the oldest, are often called upon to be surrogate parents. From changing diapers, feeding, watching over, and babysitting they're trained to serve, anticipate needs, protect, rebuke, remember rules & enforce, and represent their parents. They often make sacrifices to the same giving up a portion of food, time they would spend doing something else, and more.

The **youngest sibling** often just sits back and receives! And is served! I was no exception. It isn't that my parents didn't call upon me to serve or make sacrifices...they did. But I refused. My one job living with mom was to take the garbage out on Mondays and occasionally get her supplies at Webb's on my bike. I fought her tooth and nail on both, trying to pass off these responsibilities to my older siblings.

WEAKNESS. Therefore I grew up and became a Christian in the late 90's with very little propensity to be generous. Even after getting Saved and realizing the great sacrifice that Jesus made for all of us including me, it's an area of great weakness in my life to this day.

I don't "feel good" when I perform generous acts for other people. No really...I don't. Not to this day. Oftentimes I see it as an obligation that I must perform to please God and appease other people, but my heart isn't into it. Whenever I'm called upon to make a sacrifice on behalf of someone else, all too often I groan on the inside. I may do it anyway, but my old nature says "do I hafta?"

Years ago I memorized Galatians 5:22-23 which is the Fruit of the Spirit and one of them is generosity also called "goodness":

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, **goodness**, faithfulness,
²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

DIED TO SELF. In other words, a Christian who has died to him or herself is generous because of the Holy Spirit. Being God, of course He's generous...so if He's inside us and our will is aligned with His, generosity will flow forth from our bellies like rivers of living water. If we're not being generous then chances are we're operating in the flesh.

Elsewhere in the Bible Paul calls upon the Corinthian Church that giving (when done through God) is supposed to be a cheerful act and not some weighty obligation.

2 Corinthians 9:6-9 (ESV)

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows **bountifully** will also reap **bountifully**.

⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, **not reluctantly or under compulsion**, for God loves a **cheerful giver**.

⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

⁹ As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

So if I'm saying "do I hafta?" then I'm doing it in the flesh and not the Spirit.

TITHING. Sometimes these verses are used by us pastors and applied toward tithing...especially of said pastor is biting his nails wondering how to keep the electric on or figuring out how to pay for the desperately needed new roof.

Truth is it doesn't just apply to tithing but giving money wherever the Holy Spirit compels us.

It goes further than that to giving of our time, possessions, labor, and skills.

ATTITUDE. The attitude the Lord desires for us is verse 7 and is the basis of today's message and the Lord's "testing" of yours truly: it's not just a matter of reluctant obedience, but where **our heart matches His.**

FROM GOD ALONE. Before I go any further, we do need to pause and hear this one more time: generosity is from God. You may very well have been trained by your parents to serve, sacrifice, or give but let me tell you one advantage I have since I wasn't—***I have to rely upon the Holy Spirit to command and inspire this through me or it doesn't happen.*** I can't pat myself on the back which you all know I love to do! I can't call upon training my parents gave me, nor life experiences where I was in the position of having to serve and sacrifice for others.

OLD SELF REACTIONS. Do I sometimes react to God's commands to give like I did as a kid? Asking "do I hafta?" or trying to slough it off onto someone else? Yes. Is that my old self reacting? Yes.

DIDN'T COME FROM ME. Yet I can say the idea didn't come from me. I can't claim any goodness or righteousness whatsoever if the idea to give appears in my mind. I may be rebelling against the Lord or doing it with an attitude, but it's His idea...and for that I'm grateful. I don't need to be patting myself on the back for one more thing....

SO LET'S ALL PAUSE RIGHT NOW AND ACKNOWLEDGE THAT GODLY GENEROSITY COMING THROUGH US IS FROM GOD AND NOT BECAUSE WE'RE GREAT PEOPLE.

#2: GODLY GENEROSITY IS WHEN WE GIVE AND SACRIFICE FROM OURSELVES AND NOT FROM ANY OTHER SOURCE.

If I offer you someone else's money, time, or resources that not generosity. If I compel the same, that's government!

God's generosity looks like Jesus.

JESUS CAME DOWN HERE. Jesus was God the King and Lord, sitting on a throne in Heaven, high and lifted up. When He saw the plight of humanity and that we'd dug ourselves into a pit we couldn't escape from, He gave of Himself. Consider this: He temporarily gave up being an all powerful entity to become human. I simply cannot imagine. Not just human in a regular human body, but One Who would be hated, rejected, despised, betrayed, falsely accused, beaten, and then crucified for sins He never committed.

WHILE WE WERE ENEMIES. What's more is that He did this for us while we were still His enemies and while we still hated Him. He did this for us while we were sinners and not saints.

He didn't deserve what He got and, as a result, we got what we didn't deserve. We got everything HE deserved!

- Jesus didn't call upon the Roman Government to save us.
- He didn't call upon some powerful politician.
- He didn't call upon the angels. He sacrificed His own status, power, and authority.
- ***He gave completely of Himself and no one else.***

That is generosity.

TESTIMONY. Now let me tell you a true and recent story. I'm still in the midst of Christmas Tree season which is my busiest time of the year. What's more is that Gateway has more activities in December than in any other month, so that adds greatly to my load. At the beginning of tree season, in November, ***God told me one day He was going to test my generosity.*** He indicated the test wasn't going to be a "one and done" either, but rather a series of events that were all leading somewhere.

GROAN!!! My reaction? I groaned. In Barry's sermon last week he had Steve sitting off to the side representing the old self and he warned us not to identify with that self...because it's crucified and died. It's been separated from us by the Lord.

"DO I HAFTA?" Well...I failed that test right off. When God said He was going to teach me about generosity, my reaction was to groan, complain, and say "do I hafta?" and "why now, Lord? Couldn't you have done this in Oct when things weren't so busy for me?"

OUT OF ORDER. It's hard to put this in chronological order, so you're going to need to bear with me and maybe even listen to this more than once.

LOCAL FELLOW. God "started" by sending a local fellow whose come to me several times in the past looking for money. It's the same story every time: he's out of job, his car is broke down, his ex is taking him for everything he's got, his electric is about to be shut off, you name it. He tells me how desperate he is, has nowhere else to turn, and can I please help him out. I've helped him out in the past and again: I'm never happy about it. I'm not a cheerful giver. I'm the youngest sibling who makes the nasty face whenever his parents are forcing him to give!

CYNICAL VOICE. While this fellow is standing before me pleading his case, a cynical voice is speaking inside me: he's going to use any money I give him for beer, cigs, or drugs. Things are never any different; he's always desperate & always needy. The same voice said "tell him no." I was about when the Holy Spirit spoke and said "help him."

QUOTING VERSES! He started quoting verses from the Bible like “it is better to give than to receive” and “freely you have received, now freely give.” Don’t forget this one, one of my “favorites” as someone with a “youngest sibling” mentality: “to whom is given, much is required.” Sounds like something the oldest sibling would say!!!

IT WAS GOD. I knew it was the Holy Spirit. How? Because I’m not a generous person and rejected all attempts by my parents to be one. Yet despite knowing that the King of kings was commanding me to help, I pushed back.

FLOODED WITH MEMORIES. I was immediately flooded with memories—recent ones—of God being generous to me and my family through others including you folk at Gateway. He overwhelmed me with example after example and then began to quote the Scriptures until I said “fine! I’ll do it.”

GENEROUS TREE CUSTOMER. So a Christmas tree customer shows up, a family, and they’re all in a really good mood. Lots of Christmas Spirit. They buy a tree and hand me too much cash. I try and give it back to them and they respond: “no...that’s for you.” It was a \$20 tip. I’m old school so a \$5 tip to me is generous. By today’s standards of inflation it probably isn’t, but when someone gives me a fiver for loading a tree on their car my response is still “wow!” Therefore a ten is extravagant in my opinion but a \$20 is outlandish. They were insistent.

ANOTHER NEED, SAME REACTION. Then someone else showed up, around the same time, asking for the same...and the same thing happened. ***The Lord said to me “have I not been generous with you? Far moreso than what these people are asking for? Have you not received more than ten times the amount that you’re being asked to sacrifice right now?”*** The answer to all these things were and are “yes” so I gave...but I still wasn’t happy about it and didn’t want to. I was still believing the cynical voice inside that said the money would be misused so I was grumpy and not cheerful.

ANOTHER GENEROUS CUSTOMER! Then another tree customer comes in and hands me too much cash for their purchase...way too much. I hand it back and they say “no that’s for you—Merry Christmas!” It was \$40. Inflation is terrible right now, with prices on everything to the point where eggs are \$6 for a dozen and gas around \$4 a gallon.

WHO can AFFORD a CHRISTMAS TREE MUCH LESS GIVING TIPS ON THE SCALE OF \$20 and \$40?

God can afford it.

NO WORRIES. When His Spirit comes upon someone it produces the fruit of generosity and does so without worrying about how its going to hit us, what it's taking from us, or what we're going to have to sacrifice. When His Spirit chooses us as His vessel of giving miracles happen.

CONVICTION! I didn't receive these tips with joy but with conviction. ***I said to the Lord "what do you think You're doing?!"***

MANIPULATE HIM? It was then that He brought up some old thinking of mine...a way that I used to try and manipulate Him into giving me more. You know the verses where Jesus said "give and it will be given to you"?

Luke 6:38 (ESV)

³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

INVESTMENT! Back in the day I used to read those verses and then clung to teachings that said if I gave more, I would get more. Not just getting back what I'd given but 30, 60 or a hundredfold what I'd given because I applied the same to the parable of the Sower.,

MANIPULATE LIKE A PARENT. Well...it is...but not when you try to manipulate Jesus like we would a parent. Jesus won't be manipulated and I say again: you and I need to thank Him every day for that. ***He's not like Adam or Abraham and will obey God His Father instead of His wife. We are His wife.***

MAMMON. In the past I would purposefully give x and treat it like an investment—of I give \$100 I should get \$200 or maybe \$1000 back. None of this was motivated by the Holy Spirit, but rather the spirit of Mammon who was the god of greed.

When God commands us to give meaning its his idea and motivation, and we give despite it being a sacrifice that will hit us in some way, that's a different story. The old church moniker of "you can't outgive God" comes into play.

WHAT REAL SACRIFICE WAS I MAKING?! So when customer after customer are handing me \$10, \$20, and \$40 tips the Holy Spirit was reminding me that I have a generous Father in heaven, and my conscience was being convicted of my stinginess. The Holy Spirit was asking me what sort of REAL sacrifice was I making when He was giving back to me—and had previously given to me—way more than what I was giving out? "None" was the answer!

NOT DONE. As my mind is reeling from all this, He says "I'm not done with you yet. I'm going to up the ante." I got scared. For real. What did that mean?

ANOTHER NEED—GREATER! He sent another person down with a greater financial need than the ones before and again: my cynical voice spoke and said “don’t do it.” The Holy Spirit said “help them” and I did. Had my attitude changed? Was I now giving full of faith and cheer? Nope. ***I gave but with no joy.***

BUYS 40 RETAIL TREES. Then I get a phone call—a fellow wants 40 trees. Quite common this time of year—someone looking to buy wholesale so he can resell them at his place. “I’m sorry” I told him, “I have no wholesale trees left.” “What about the ones on your tree lot?” He asked. “Those are at retail prices,” I responded and he said he would be right down. I didn’t believe he would show—no one in their right mind buys 40 trees for the retail price. No one. I’d been in this business for over 40 years.

BOUGHT THEM AT RETAIL \$! He showed up, selected 40 trees off the lot, and paid retail price. As I was bailing and loading his trees I could hear the Holy Spirit chuckling...it’s the best way I can put it. “What are you doing?” I asked Him. “What are you up to? This is part of your test thing, isn’t it?”

BUYING FOR CHURCHES. When we were done loading his trees and he was getting ready to pay, I asked him why he was buying the trees and you’ll never believe his answer. He identified himself as a born-again Christian whose ministry was to provide trees for all the local churches in his area free. His normal supplier had run dry and ***he felt the Lord prompted him to call me.***

SENT ME A CHRISTIAN WHOSE GIVING CHEERFULLY!!! I was shocked. While he’s staring at me waiting for a response, I’m in convo with the Lord. “For real?” I said to Him. “You send me a Christian who is paying the retail price for all these trees whose going to give them away for free? For real?!”

I was not happy even though I wanted to be. Here’s why: ***his single purchase would mean I would have the most prosperous retail season I’ve ever had in the history of the farm.*** In other words: God’s generosity to me and my family! God was blessing my socks off as we like to say! I should have been rejoicing.

CONSCIENCE KILLING ME. Yet my conscience is saying to me “God is responding to your bad attitude about giving by being super nice to you! You should feel badly about this and beg Him for forgiveness! He’s treating you really good despite you!”

GUY WAS MAKING REAL SACRIFICE. So at the same time I received a check for a purchase which will outshine all previous years, and I know it’s from God, I’m feeling convicted. This guy was making the REAL sacrifice: he was taking a big financial hit just to make sure all the churches in his area had trees while I was grouching about having to give away a few hundred dollars!

“I told you I would up the ante” the Lord said. “Now how are you going to respond?”

WANTS PERSONAL PAINTED TREE. “Hey” the fellow says to me, “I really like your painted trees out there. Let me go grab one for my personal tree, my kids will love it.” I groaned. “Just take it sir” I begged him “and take a wreath too...on me.” He looked flabberghasted and continued to get out money. “Oh no I’m going to pay for it. I’m not looking for a freebie.” “No you’re not!” I insisted.

TALKED ABOUT 2ND COMING. Thank God he didn’t fight me anymore, but reluctantly received. We went on to talk about the Second Coming of Jesus and that the Lord was likely to return soon. After he left, the Lord said to me: “I’m going to bless that man (whose name was Paul BTW), abundantly for obeying me.” I look forward to seeing that guy again next year and hearing his testimony.

PHONE RINGS! After this I thought it was over. It wasn’t. In the middle of writing this sermon, literally as I’m typing, my phone rings. A fellow is coming all the way from Elmira to buy a tree and wreath for a needy family who couldn’t afford any. While he didn’t say “the Lord sent me” remember what I said earlier: where does generosity come from? Whose idea is it? Whether it comes to you, who was trained by parents or whomever to sacrifice and give? Or whether it comes to me, who has lived as someone being served?

Generosity comes completely from God. If someone is inspired to take a personal hit in their money, time, labor, skills, or possessions for the sake of someone else then the Holy Spirit is motivating it.

50-50? So the fellow asks me over the phone if I will go in 50-50 with him—he’ll pay half the price and was wondering if I would do the other half. The Lord spoke inside me: “so how are you going to respond?” I told the guy to come and that “I would work with him.” He shows up and asks me again if I’ll do 50%, and I respond: “the tree and wreath are on me.”

CHEERFUL? One thing was still missing: I still wasn’t cheerful about it, but I wasn’t taking an attitude like before. The Lord provided the inspiration through the fellow, who gave me this stunned look and began to dance around. “Are you serious?!” he said. “You’re really going to donate this? I can’t believe this!” His smile lit up the whole tree lot, he pumped my hand enthusiastically, and was full of joy and energy.

He was a cheerful giver and receiver.

The Lord said to me “are you paying attention? This is My heart!”

SEND CUSTOMERS MY WAY. The fellow picked his tree and wreath grinning and thanking me the entire time. Then he said “I know a lot of people and I’m going to tell them all to come here for their tree! I’m coming here from now on! I’ll send a lot of customers your way for what you’ve done!!!”

And I’ll be: **I actually started to feel some of that joy.**

HARD TIMES. It's Christmas and I know lots of hard things have happened to many of us. Health issues, deaths of family and friends, controversies, and health issues.

Yet I say that even during these hard times the Lord is still alive and active in our lives and those of others.

- What opportunities is He giving you to be generous right now?
- We should always obey God. If He commands us to give, let us give.
- He also wants our hearts to match with His:
- To have the faith that our giving won’t bankrupt us
- To have the joy and Christmas cheer of giving to someone He’s brought to us.