

“God Loves A Cheerful Giver but Will Still Tolerate A Grumpy One”

Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Lesson: Luke 6:37-38 (The Message)

³⁷⁻³⁸Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

Second Scripture Lesson: 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 (The Message)

⁶⁻⁷Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.

⁸⁻¹¹God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,

He throws caution to the winds,
giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
His right-living, right-giving ways
never run out, never wear out.

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.



Sermon: *God Loves A Cheerful Giver but Will Still Tolerate A Grumpy One*

In our second scripture reading, Paul tells the Corinthians that God has been generous with them and that they should in turn be generous with God and one another. We read from *The Message* because Paul is easier to understand in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, but one of the lines in this passage might have been one of the memory verses of your childhood, or a bumper sticker you've seen on the highway, or maybe even perhaps a stewardship theme in years past: “God loves a cheerful giver.” Though I have found that God will tolerate a grumpy one, too.

Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to be generous in the same way that God is generous. Which got me thinking that we just talked about this not that long ago. Now, if you remember, in August we spent three weeks during worship talking about the “Fruits of the Spirit” found in Galatians 5. And hopefully you'll remember that the Apostle Paul says people have a tendency to do that which is counter to the will of God. He calls this “walking in the flesh” and teaches that it is better for the Galatian Christians to walk in the Spirit. That means living lives dedicated to doing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities Paul calls the “fruit of the spirit.”

When we try to live by these fruits of the Spirit, God can take our efforts and multiply them, spreading the fruits of God's Holy Spirit everywhere.

Among those fruits of the spirit is generosity. We said that to be generous is to readily give what we have, specifically our time, talent, and treasure. It's an interesting quirk of human nature that we tend to see ourselves as not having a lot of these to share. There's never enough time to do what we think we ought to do. There's always somebody else who is better suited to do what needs to be done. And we don't have enough money to make a significant impact.

But the fact of the matter is that God doesn't ask of us more than we can do. And God always gives us more than we think we have. God provides, and we are called upon to use what God gives us wisely. Part of the life of faith is trusting that God has provided us with what we need for the situations to which God has called us.

That's the story of the feeding of the 5000 when the disciples didn't have enough food,¹ and the story of the Widow of Zarephath where her flour jar was almost empty, and she could not feed herself and her son, much less the prophet Elijah, sent to her by God.² In those stories people with very little were called to make use of what they had, and by the power and grace of God, what they had was enough.

In a similar way, Moses was called by God to go back to Egypt, a place where he was wanted for murder, and tell Pharaoh, the most powerful man in that part of the world, to let his group of prized Jewish slaves just up and walk out of the country. Moses complained to God that he was not talented enough to pull something like that off. God provided him a spokesman (his brother, Aaron) and him sent him off anyway.³

It's natural to see what we have as inadequate. Sure, if you had more time, talent, and/or treasure, you could certainly be *more* effective. But God does not call us to wish for what we *don't* have, God calls us to use what we *do* have. And what we do have is enough for the work to which God calls us. We just need to be more generous with it.

Christian Miller is an author and philosophy professor at Wake Forest University who has some very definite ideas about what generosity looks like. He has written that generosity has three main characteristics.⁴

First of all, he writes, "When acting generously, a person gives something of value ..., something that [s/he] cares about, even if only to a small degree."

In other words, generosity is giving not necessarily from our abundance, but from what is important. In the gospel according to Luke, we find the story of the Widow's Mite.⁵ Jesus watches as lots of rich people come in and put their offerings, many of them substantial, in the temple treasury. But then Luke tells us that a poor widow comes in and makes her offering. Being poor was bad enough, but she was also a widow and, at that time, being without a husband meant she probably had very little means to provide for herself. When Luke says she was poor, he meant it.

But she drops her two small copper coins into the plate and walks away. And Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.*"⁶

You see, it is easy to share when you know there's more where that came from. True generosity involves sharing what we have because someone else needs it, not because we can spare it. It means giving away things that are important; things that have real value, because they will have more value to the people who receive them. Generosity means that we give from what we have; not from what we have *left*.

Secondly Miller writes that "... a generous person's motives in donating have to be primarily *altruistic* or concerned with the wellbeing of those who would be helped, regardless of whether the donor will benefit in the process."⁷

This is the Christian notion of sacrifice one's self for the sake of others. Jesus told his disciples "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"⁸ And that was how Jesus lived and it was why He died.

Volunteering so you can get your name in the newsletter or a free t-shirt is not what generosity is about. The time is certainly welcome but giving it to make yourself look good isn't generosity. Working on a mission project just so you can get the service hours you need for school is not what generosity is about. The effort is definitely needed, but serving for credit, isn't generosity. And donating money to charity just to get the tax write-off is not what generosity is about either. The contributions can always be put to good use, but philanthropy that is primarily about your own financial benefits, is not what generosity is about.

Now, this is also a place where things get a little muddy. Because it is difficult to do things for others that don't have at least some benefit for yourself. Because volunteering will get you noticed sometimes. And mission work will get you credit for school. And cash donations will get you a tax break sometimes. But you should still do those things, even though there may be a benefit, however indirect, to you personally. The point is that our primary motivation is altruism.

One wonders if it is even possible to be completely selfless.

There's an episode of the sitcom *Friends*⁹ where Phoebe tries to perform a truly selfless good deed. But everything she does winds-up either inadvertently benefiting her or accidentally hurting the person she was trying to help. Finally, in the quest for a truly selfless good deed, she decides that a sacrifice is necessary. So, she lets a bee sting her because as she explains, "It makes the bee look tough in front of his bee friends. The bee's happy and I am definitely not." But then her friend Joey reminds her that the bee probably died after it stung her so ... no ... not so much.

Being generous probably *will* make us feel good and it might also bring us some tangible benefit. The difference is that true generosity is always *motivated* by the need or desire to help someone else. Here is something really interesting I found this week: Being selfless can benefit us anyway, whether we intend it to or not. Research shows that when we are trying to be altruistic; when we are truly trying to help someone else, we are happier people.

It is an old trope that money can't buy happiness. But Michael Norton (Harvard Business School Professor) says it can ... if you spend that money the right way. He points to a study he led which people were asked about their level of happiness, then they were given a small amount of cash (\$5 - \$20) and instructions on what to do with it. Half the people were told to spend the money on themselves. The other half were instructed to spend it on someone else. Later that day, those people were contacted and asked again about their happiness.

They found two very interesting things. Miller writes:

What did we find when we called at the end of the day? People who spent money on others got happier; people who spent it on themselves, nothing happened. It didn't make them less happy, it just didn't do much for them.

“The other thing we saw is the amount of money doesn't matter much. People thought \$20 would be way better than \$5. In fact, it doesn't matter how much money you spent. What really matters is that you spent it on somebody else rather than on yourself.”¹⁰

Whether it was a cup of coffee for a stranger, or a gift for a relative, or an act of charity, people who spent their money on someone else seemed to be happier than those who spent it on themselves. And they found that this held true across cultures and nationalities. It was just as true for people in Uganda as it was for people in Canada. Money *can* buy happiness. You just have to spend it on other people.

Now, the point of generosity is not to make yourself happy. But what Norton and his colleagues found was that being selfless; giving of what we have to others, tends to have as a side benefit, making happier people. And that is consistent with the upside down, inverted world-view of Jesus. Those who lose their life will find it. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn. Keeping it all for yourself won't make you any less happy, but it won't make you any more happy, either. Giving it away; spending it on others though, will.

Finally, Miller says that “Generous acts are gifts. And gifts are never required. They are freely given, and never blameworthy if withheld.”¹¹

When I was a kid, my dad would give me money on Sunday mornings to put in the offering plate. I loved getting money, but when the plate came around, I wasn't too excited about giving it away. But I did, because that's what I was told to do. I was obligated to do it. So, while I was learning about giving to the church, I wasn't at that point in my life, being particularly generous.

What we are called to do is give because it is the right thing to do, not because it is expected of us or required of us. Giving out of expectation and requirement are still giving. But what God wants of us is an attitude of helping simply because there is need; an attitude of giving to others because God has so graciously given to us.

According to legend, Mohandis K. Gandhi once dropped a shoe, while hurrying to board a train that was already beginning to pull out of the station. Since the train had already begun to move, and he couldn't really jump down to retrieve it, he took off his other shoe and tossed it down so that it lay close the first one. When one of his companions asked him why he did that, Gandhi replied: “The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use.”¹²

Generosity thinks of the other. It gives freely, not out of requirement or obligation.

Paul's message to the church in Corinth is simply this: God has been incredibly generous with us and we are called to respond to that by being generous with one another. Everything we have and everything we are can be traced back to God's bountiful gifts. And we are called to be *not* the receptacles of God's gifts, receiving them, hoarding them and keeping them for ourselves, *but* conduits; passing them along; seeing

that they get to where they are needed. That's what it means to be a steward: to care for something and make sure it is used properly.

When your mom gives you a plate of cupcakes for the class Christmas party, you're not a "cupcake mogul" and you're not supposed to go around boasting that you are now "cupcake rich!" (Er... um... not that that ever happened) You're supposed to share them with your classmates. That's why she gave them to you. And it's the same with God's gifts to us.

As we meditate on our lives, we should be able to see God's goodness everywhere: in the health of our children, the food on our tables, our shelter from the cold, friends and family who walk beside us and enrich our lives. If we look with open eyes, we will see that God has filled our lives to overflowing with good things. All that we are called to do in response, is to be generous in sharing those good gifts with the world.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:12-17, NRSV

² 1 Kings 17:7-16, NRSV

³ Exodus 4:10-16, NRSV

⁴ Miller, Christian B. "The Three Requirements of True Generosity." *Quartz.com*, Quartz, 8 May 2018, qz.com/quartz/1272502/the-three-requirements-of-true-generosity/.

⁵ Luke 21:1-4, NRSV

⁶ Luke 21:3-4, NRSV

⁷ Miller, Christian B. "The Three Requirements of True Generosity."

⁸ John 15:13, NRSV

⁹ Curtis, Michael. "The One Where Phoebe Hates PBS." *Friends*, performance by Jennifer Anniston, et al., season 5, episode 4, NBC, 18 Oct. 1998.

¹⁰ "Michael Norton: How To Buy Happiness." Performance by Michael Norton, *TED Ideas Worth Spreading*, TED, www.ted.com/talks/michael_norton_how_to_buy_happiness?

¹¹ Miller, Christian B. "The Three Requirements of True Generosity."

¹² Fadiman, Clifton, editor. *Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*. Little, Brown, 1991, pg. 231