

Secrets of Generosity

Acts 20:32-35

I have been privileged to be with you as your pastor since last August and this is my first message on money. Many pastors and churches wear people out by haranguing about money. We are not going to do that here. There is no need to do that. You see, God doesn't need us to bless Him with our money. But on the contrary, we all need God's blessing on us. And a part of that blessing comes in how we use the money that God entrusts to us.

And so from time to time through the year we are going to discuss biblical principles of stewardship as we look at how to care for money. Again, our motivation for doing this is not so much for the financial needs of the church as much as it is a desire to see our Deer Flat family living in the blessing that God desires for each of us. How many of us wouldn't like to have a better handle on our budget and expenses and finish the month with more money than we are spending? How many of us wouldn't like to know that we are planning for a more secure future and retirement? How many of us wouldn't like to know the blessing of sharing generously with others? And how many of us wouldn't like to know that we are living in God's blessing on our lives and family and even our finances?

Let me begin with this as an example – one of the church words that we use when we discuss money is “stewardship”. As you hear and see, it comes from the root word “steward”. The Greek word used in the Bible literally means a “manager”. A steward is someone who is entrusted to manage what belongs to another. Let's say that you own a farm, but circumstances dictate that you must live elsewhere. So you find someone that you can trust and you entrust the managing of that farm to this person. They do not own it, they are simply managing it for you. One of the words used to describe this person is to say that he or she is a steward as they are managing what belongs to you.

Now, why do we refer to good biblical principles related to money as stewardship? In what ways are we stewards (remember our definition – taking care of what belongs to someone else) if we work to earn our own living and pay our own rent or mortgage, etc?

Very quickly, let me ask again – why would the Bible say that we are stewards, or managers, of what is rightfully ours? The Bible teaches that everything in heaven and on earth belongs to God. This includes everything from wealth and honor and people and animals and much more. In Psalm 50:10 the Bible says that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

To quickly summarize, God owns everything. It all belongs to Him. Life is like a monopoly game. God owns the monopoly game. And when we “go out of the game” or when the game is over all that we have worked so hard to accumulate goes back to the bank. When the monopoly game is over we walk away from the table and we return to a world where all of the monopoly money that we once enjoyed is now worthless. People would laugh if we went into the grocery store to buy food with monopoly money.

This is the way of life. One day our life will be over and all that we have worked to accumulate will be gone. If we have been faithful, we will be welcomed into God’s presence. The angels of heaven would laugh at us if we tried to enter heaven’s gates with our money and bank accounts. As much value as it may have in this world, our money is as worthless in heaven as monopoly money is at a grocery store.

You see, our jobs and our land and our homes and our cars and our toys – the Bible teaches us that it all belongs to God. And the ability to work for a living is in itself a gift from God. So God looks at us as His managers. In Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 God gave us instructions on how to care for His world and all that He was now entrusting to our management.

This morning I want to specifically look at “Secrets of Generosity”, using a story from Acts 20:32-35 (READ). I hope week after week as you listen to my messages you are seeing a pattern that to best understand what is happening in our story we must take time to ask what is happening in the bigger story. What is the context of our story?

The Apostle Paul is nearing the end of his ministry journey. He is returning to Jerusalem for the final time. In Vs 22 we see that Paul understands that he may be arrested if he returns to Jerusalem, but he resolutely presses on. He is compelled by the Holy Spirit to go. In Vs 23 we see that this same Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – is warning Paul that prison and hardships await him. As he arrives, he is arrested. The Bible says that Paul could have been released due

to insufficient evidence, but he instead appealed to be sent to Rome. Why did Paul appeal to go to Rome? It was not so much out of his concern for justice but out of his desire to use the situation for the advance of the gospel. Paul saw an opportunity to bring the good news of Jesus to Rome.

And so as we return to our story we see in Acts 20:13 and following, Paul is saying good-bye to the church and the believers from the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was once a part of ancient Greece. Its ruins are located in present day Turkey on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Ephesus is one of the seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Ephesus was a strategic center for the growth of the early church. Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus and it is in our Bible – the book of Ephesians.

The temple of Artemis was in Ephesus – a temple in honor of the goddess Artemis. This temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The ancient Greeks had many gods (small “g”) or idols. Artemis was one of their oldest gods.

In Acts 19 we see that there was a riot in the city of Ephesus while Paul was visiting. The riot was related to the temple of Artemis and their worship of this idol. Let’s look together at Vs 23-29 (READ). Worship of this idol had grown into more than a cottage industry. Some had become wealthy and many found employment by exploiting worship of this lifeless idol. Now their wealth and livelihood was being threatened. People all across the city of Ephesus were believing in Jesus and destroying their idols to the goddess Artemis. Their business was drying up. And in order to protect their selfish financial interests, they stirred the city into an uproar and a riot breaks out.

Paul is now offering his last words to this church and to these believers. He is speaking to people who may have lost wealth and employment because they chose to believe in Jesus. In Acts 20:36-37 we see that after Paul stops speaking they kneel down and begin to pray. The Bible says they wept together as they embraced and kissed Paul. Why? Not because of what he said but because they realized they would never see Paul’s face again. They walked with Paul to his ship.

Paul's final words come in the form of a blessing. In Vs 32 Paul is committing the church and his friends to God and to His grace. In Vs 33-34 Paul reminds them of the example of his life. And in Vs 35 Paul quotes from Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". This phrase is in red letters in our Bibles indicating that these are the very words of Jesus. Interestingly though, if you study the four Gospels that tell the story of Jesus life and ministry and record his words, you will not find this phrase in any of them. This is the only place in the Bible where we find this saying of Jesus – "It is better to give than to receive".

Did Paul hear Jesus say this? No, I think not. I think it is more likely that Paul heard one of the Twelve Disciples repeating this as a teaching of Jesus for his followers. In John 21:25 the Bible says, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written". However it was that Paul heard this, the church has for centuries believed Paul as he quoted these as the very words of Jesus. "It is better to give than to receive".

Just before we get into the biblical secrets of generosity, I want us to notice that this is stated as a part of a blessing. Paul wanted to leave the church in Ephesus with a blessing. These were among his very last words to them. I simply want to make the point that Paul seems to be saying that both what we give and how we give can be a blessing. This is a blessing for those who give and for those who receive.

The second thought I want us to notice is that Paul wants us to realize that he has lived out this blessing as an example for others. It is not merely a philosophy about life. It is a practical way of expressing our faith, hope and love. Jesus said that the most important thing we can do is to love God and to love our neighbor. We can almost hear this echoing in the background as we hear Paul quoting Jesus, "It is better to give than to receive".

With all of that as our foundation, I want us to quickly consider three biblical secrets of generosity.

First, God blesses those who give generously. Pretty simple isn't it? In 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 the Bible says, "Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to

give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: 'He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever' (Psalm 112:9). Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God”.

What did we just read? When we are generous, God says that we will have all that we need so that we can be even more generous.

Now, does this mean that I give so that I can get something in return? No, not at all. That would be like me giving Ellen a gift because I am expecting something back from her in return. No, a gift is a gift because it is given out of love and it expects nothing in return. It is not truly a gift if it is given with an ulterior motive. We give generously because it is an act of love. It flows out of our desire to be more like Jesus.

But the Bible says that when we give generously and when we give out of a cheerful heart and when we give as an expression of our love for God and our neighbor, that God will bless our generosity. Notice that the verses we have just considered tell us that God may increase both our “store of seed” as well as our “harvest of righteousness”.

A second secret of generosity is that generous giving supplies the needs of God’s people. Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 9:12-15, “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Last Sunday we considered daring faith. In Romans 10:17 the Bible says that “... Faith comes from hearing the message, and that message is heard through the word of Christ.” Each week we try to remember to thank you for your generosity as you leave an offering in the box as you are

leaving this family room where we worship together. It is not that we are desperate for your money. All that you give is focused on the Heart of our Deer Flat family – to be like Jesus and help others be like Jesus. And one of the priorities in how we use the funds you entrust to us in behalf of the Lord, is to help share God’s message of faith, hope and love. Faith comes from hearing the message, and that message is heard through the word of Christ. And we are constantly looking for creative ways to share the message of faith.

Julie Walker is extraordinarily creative in the different ways she meaningfully shares the gospel with biblical truth and cultural relevance to our children and families. Right now Julie and her team are guiding our children through a series on “The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian”.

Pastor Jeff and his team are sharing the message in such a way that growing numbers of teens want to hear more about Jesus. When our teens worship each Sunday morning they rise out of their seats and they come forward and stand in the front. Many lift their hands, some with tears of grateful joy as they worship. Their worship is not the same sound as ours but it reverberates from their heart. It is real and authentic worship that contagiously draws their friends in.

This afternoon we have invited biker friends to come by and join us for a lunch ride. Last month Chris and Becky Smith and Patty and Scott Syme and Matt and Deb Walker helped us organize a “Rules for Life” Ride. We had over 40 bikers participate.

Our pastoral team has hearts and minds full of creative ideas to share the good news of the message of Jesus. I am so proud of each of them as they lead us in opportunities to help us and others be like Jesus through inspiring worship, transformational groups, and compassionate service.

Each week we celebrate as we are able to light the candles indicating that someone has either committed or recommitted their life to Jesus in the past week. This morning we celebrate the lighting of these candles recognizing someone that gave their heart to Jesus as Pastor José was praying with them during a jail visit!

Our generous giving supplies the needs of God’s people. And the greatest need is to share the good news of the gospel that others might join us on the journey to be like Jesus.

Our third and final secret of generosity for this morning is that generous giving leads others to praise God. Let's stay with 2 Corinthians 9:12-15. Vs 13 says, "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else". This verse implies that if we give in a way that is pleasing to God, others will in turn see that God is truly the One supplying their need. And that realization will lead them not to praise us, but God Himself. If God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and if we are only the managers or stewards of all that God entrusts to us in this life, then what we give and how we give should be done in a way that causes others to give thanks to God who alone is worthy of praise.

Our world and many in the church have developed a culture of crisis generosity. When there is a compelling crisis that strikes at the chords of our hearts, we give generously. And in times of great need, we should give in great ways. But the secrets of generosity that God teaches us in His Word – the Bible – call us not simply to a culture of crisis giving. God is calling us to a lifestyle of generosity. The problem with crisis generosity is that when the crisis is over we fall back into a lifestyle that is less than generous. It is a lifestyle that is focused more on us than on God and his Kingdom. It is a lifestyle that robs us and others of the blessing that God longs to pour into our lives. Deer Flat has a wonderful history of giving in great ways when there is great need. We give thanks to God for this and as your Lead Pastor I give thanks to you for your generosity in times of great need. But there is a greater blessing that God wants to pour into our hearts and homes and even into our Deer Flat family. It is a blessing that comes when we rise above a culture of crisis generosity and develop a lifestyle of generosity.

Thank you for what you give each week as you come in and out of this Family Room where we worship together. But please remember, God owns not only what you give but what you keep. It all belongs to Him. And God has a blessing for you and for our Deer Flat family as we give generously. We can never out give the Lord.

This morning Pastor José will prepare us to come to the Lord's Table and receive the bread and the cup in holy communion. God loves us so very much that He sent His one and only Son that

whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus demonstrated His love for us that He died for us while we were still sinners undeserving of such love and grace.

How do we respond to such generosity so lavishly poured out on us? Remember – God blesses those who give generously, generous giving supplies the needs of God’s people, and generous giving should lead others to give praise to God Himself. Let’s prepare our hearts as Pastor José comes now to lead us to the Lord’s Table.