

Wow Generosity
Generous Series Week 4
November 13, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week 4 of our Generous Series, we're talking about the very real fact that Generous people change lives and generous people change the world

And when we looked at the Biblical story a couple of weeks ago we saw that the heart of God is that he's a Generous Giver

And we saw that we're made in God's image to also be generous people

And so we're here to worship this Generous God and in so doing to become generous people so that we might be as generous as we can be to as many as we can be so that all people might come to know and worship this generous God

And let me say in the aftermath of the election this past week and all the acrimony and ugliness there is nothing that our neighbors need more this week, today, right now, than generous-hearted people and a generous-hearted community that figures out how we might love and serve one another

I had a very schizophrenic week this week as I met with people

One day this week I had a series of meetings with people who all just happened to be people who were pro-Trump—I heard them share frustrations about how things are and how it's affected them and their businesses and their sense of where we're headed as a country

And then the very NEXT day I already had a series of meetings scheduled with people who all just happened to be devastated by the election and very, very fearful, anxious, upset, mad

One non-white family I met with is seriously talking about leaving the country out of fear for themselves and their kids

Two days with two very different conversations.

I heard pain and frustration and anger on both sides and the most natural thing is to say my pain and anger are real and legit and understandable while yours is stupid.

But that's not what a generous hearted person does.

Going to listen. Create by the power of the gospel and the power of the cross and the power of the spirit a community that is generous hearted in a fractured and angry world.

Being generous-hearted people means that we're willing to be a community of people who listen to the other—even the other we disagree strongly with

Being generous-hearted people means that we care for people who are crying out that they are neglected, overlooked, or who are mourning or angry or upset

Whether they are on the left side of the political spectrum or the right!

Clinton, Obama and trump all gave the their best speeches of the election this past week.

Even if you want to be cynical and say it's all just a big show. Still their best 3 of this election.

Why? Because they were finally being generous to one another.

We're going to fight to be generous hearted.

AND and and and--being generous hearted towards someone who's different from us doesn't mean that we'll endorse anything and everything

For Christians, we trust in Jesus, we know that God's on the throne, but that's not supposed to be a pacifier but rather an animator—

knowing that God is on the throne makes us more engaged with people and situations around us, not less

And there will be times when earnest listening and understanding of someone's position or ideology leads to the conclusion that you will have to take a strong stand AGAINST what they're saying or doing

And then if and when it becomes clear that there is something clearly wrong, it goes bad, we will do what Jesus did and the scriptures call us to do:

serve our neighbor and speak out against injustice.

But my friends, what we saw this week is a bitterly divided country and a whole lot of pain and anger expressed on a national stage

Can we, together, commit to being on this journey of becoming generous-hearted people and a place where we do the hard work of listening and honoring and reconciling

even towards the neighbor who voted differently than you did?

This is the test, isn't it? Can we be generous and generous hearted towards even people who we might fiercely disagree with?

Can we be generous hearted when we feel anxious or threatened or upset or ambitious? That's the challenge

In fact, I want to propose to you that the biggest obstacles to you and me becoming generous people

Are NOT external and not situational but almost always from within our own hearts by our passions, appetites, or anxieties

On the surface most of us run on this assumption: ***If I had more resources, I would be more generous***

But the reality is that there are people who have far less money than me and far less time than me and far less resources than me

who are far more generous-hearted with their time and with their money and with their other resources than I am.

And as we're going to see in a bit, as resources increase it can be HARDER to be generous rather than easier

God designed the universe to run on the joy of generosity, but we struggle to be generous people in large part because we've got these voices and passions and concerns and appetites and worries on the inside that keep us from being generous

But there are people around me, including some of you, who have found a way to work through those internal obstacles

And today we're going to see a couple of sets of people who are going to do battle with those internal voices and appetites.

And the challenge is going to be that we embrace the deeper, more substantive heart-work of dealing with those internal obstacles that keep us from operating the way that God designed us to operate

So that you and I might be free to know the joy of the generosity

If you've got a Bible you can turn with me to Luke 20, if you're new to the Bible, 4 biographies of Jesus and Luke is one of those

and at the end of Luke chapter 20 we've got Jesus teaching in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, and he's got a large crowd of folks surrounding him, INCLUDING the religious leaders of the day

And at this point in the story the religious leaders of Jesus's day are very suspicious of Jesus and very eager to discredit him

There's this growing tension back and forth, trick questions, trap questions--it's like a feisty presidential debate!

And after Jesus has fielded these barbed and trick questions in front of this big crowd of people, here's what he says to his disciples

in front of this big crowd of people with all these religious leaders who have just been trying to discredit him still standing there in the crowd:

⁴⁵ While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁶ "Beware of the teachers of the law.

Wait, you mean those guys right there? YES! Those guys right over there, especially THAT guy right there in blue!

Look out for those teachers of the law who have just been trying to trap me and trick me, NOT because of their trick and combative questions, here's why:

They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

When I was a kid, I grew up in the church and my dad was in the Navy so we moved a good bit and every time we moved the first thing we did was go looking for a church

And I remember one church we visited for a while had a really dynamic pastor who was a really, really big personality

But when they met with the pastor to talk more about the church and about how things were it became very clear that this guy's big personality included being very, very controlling.

And the more they talked with this guy, they realized that this church was really about him and his rules.

He liked control, he liked to be in control, and so he created a church context that was all about control and it was a little creepy, so we left

How many of you have ever been in a religious context that was unhealthy in part because the leaders of it were unhealthy? Too ambitious, too selfish, it felt like it was all about them?

Jesus here is decrying these religious leaders who are behaving in just this way

Okay, so we're going to start this morning with a little personal confession of mine that I feel compelled to make because it's been an important part of this series for me and I want to share it with you

The confession is this: I've been avoiding this series. Specifically, I've been avoiding talking about money.

Because so many religious people have talked about it so poorly.

Because religious people have done horrible stuff like Jesus is talking about here—devouring widow's houses for their own gain

That's just short-hand for the fact that these religious leaders were scamming widows out of their houses or pressuring them to sell their houses in order to give to the temple and their whole agenda

Because I didn't want YOU to put ME in that category I've been ducking this whole conversation

And because some of us have baggage around church's talking about money, and I don't want to stir anything up, pick at any scars or trigger any church PTSD experiences!

But as we've made our way into this series, and here we are, week 4, I wanted to say a couple of things:

First, thank you. All of the conversations that this has sparked and the emails that I'm getting are NOT loaded up with accusation and frustration, they are engaged, encouraging and thoughtful.

Secondly, some of you have talked with me about WANTING to be generous in some way and be on board with what's happening, but you're not in a position situationally to do what you would like to do

In-between jobs, struggling with any number of demands on your time and energies

I want you to hear that you're welcome here; this isn't about shame and guilt but about an invitation from a Generous God to know his great and generous love and to be generous with what we do have and be at peace with what we can and can't do!

And lastly, I ask for your forgiveness for ducking this.

If we really are made in God's image to live generous lives, if we don't talk about that here then I'm not serving you faithfully and I'm not serving the Lord as I should—which doesn't mean that we'll be talking about money all the time, I promise!

And I ask for your prayers, that I wouldn't let fear drive the decisions that I make about what we talk about on Sunday mornings and how we talk about them

Jesus here calls out ambitious, proud, aggressive religious leaders who are leveraging their place in society to feed their own appetites

Rather than serving the people around them generously as God had called them to do.

These people have been given a place of authority and influence, they have the potential to use that influence to EITHER generously serve other people OR to feed their own ambitions

They have all sorts of resources: time, treasures, talents, titles, influence, all kinds of resources

And what have they chosen to do with those resources? Feed their own ambitions and appetites

See, we think that the obstacles to our generosity are all external: if I had more time or money or more skills or more influence or more whatever, then I'd be more generous

And in one sense that's true—we can't be generous with what we don't have.

But what we see here and what we know from our own experiences with people all around us is that **generosity is not resource-proportionate**.

More resources do not naturally equal more generous—here, to some of the most resourced people in his community, Jesus speaks some of the harshest words of the New Testament

Because they have done what we all would do most naturally: they've **assumed that all the resources that are available to them are to be leveraged and used for their own consumption, to feed their own appetites**

And my appetites and your appetites are the good things that God's given to us BUT if we let them drive the bus on the types of decisions we make
they will keep us from being the generous people that God designed us to be

This is so difficult and it's so counter-intuitive—because you've got this **mix of appetites, needs, desires, longings, fears, anxieties**

And then over here, you've got **this pool of resources available to you: time, money, talents, relationships, influence, all of them**

And the most natural assumption is that this pool of resources over here is at my disposal to do whatever I need to do to help quiet and feed these appetites

But I came across this insight recently and it's really helpful

Do you know what happens when you feed an appetite? It grows. It's like a plant. You feed an appetite for power, influence, ambition, position, prestige, and stuff, that appetite doesn't go away, it grows

In the passage we're looking at, Jesus calls out the religious leaders for devouring widow's homes

what do you think happened to these religious leaders after they devoured one widow's house, got the money, and got away with it? Do you think they were satiated and stopped right there?

Cool! We're done!

No! If they can devour one widow's house, get the money and get away with it, let's keep on doing it! There's more widows out there to exploit!

They gave one big lengthy show-off-y prayer and people were impressed. Did that satisfy their need for people's approval? Was that enough, they were done, impressive prayer tour over?

NO! The next week, maybe the next day, they're back out on the street corner showing everyone how awesome they were!

If we assume all our resources are given to us to feed all of our own appetites then we will be stuck in the never-ending cycle

We have appetites that are BOTTOMLESS and resources that are LIMITED and we can get stuck in trying to meet bottomless appetites with limited resources

But what if we've been given resources NOT SIMPLY to meet our appetites? Obviously God knows we have basic needs like food, we talked about that last week and God knows that we need that stuff and yes, please, for all of us do wear clothes!

But what if one of the main reasons that we've been given resources so that we might have something to give away?

What if God really has wired up the universe so that it runs on the joy of generosity and he's given you a few key resources like time, talents, and treasure so that you might figure out and find ways to behave generously with it?

This is exactly what we get with the very next story in Luke, and the contrast with the religious leaders Jesus just called out is so stark, let's keep reading:

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

After Jesus tears into the religious leaders for being obsessed with their own honor, their own name, their own financial gain, he looks up and sees rich people giving their money in the temple treasury

It was probably a box of some sort that people just dropped off as they passed through the temple, because remember the temple really was a highly trafficked place all during the week

And if I had been there with Jesus as one of the disciples, true confessions, the gifts that I likely would have noticed would have been the wealthy gifts!

"Wow, Jesus, that gift there was very large! You could do a LOT with that gift! That big gift, that's IMPRESSIVE!"

Because my most natural tendency is to think about *raw numbers* and *downstream impact* as I think about giving.

But Luke uses some very obscure and seldom used words to describe this poor widow, she's EXTREMELY poor, and her very small gift, which is EXTREMELY SMALL

And who is Jesus impressed with? The widow. Jesus is impressed and wow'd and moved by the widow and her gift

Which is not to say that the gifts given by the wealthy don't matter, they do matter and Luke seems to imply that some of them were very generous

It's just this: ***most of us get wow'd by raw numbers [how much was given] and downstream impact [what that money could do]: buildings! Feed hungry kids!***

while Jesus is wow'd by percentages [how much of what you have was given] and what the gift tells us about the upstream condition of the heart [what kind of faith and character is on display with the gift]

Most of us get wow'd by zeroes behind a number that's been given, Jesus is wow'd by the percentage you've got left over AFTER you've given

This affects how we think about OTHER people's giving and it affects how we think about our own giving as well.

This past week, Steve Tamayo was doing some research for the Connect Devotional, if you're not getting our 5-day-a-week devotional yet, fill out your Connection Card and tell us you'd like to be added, we'll get you on there

And he came across a web site called philanthropy.com. And on this web site, you could find out giving information for all of the United States, for each state in the U.S. AND for each COUNTY in the U.S.

Here are the giving patterns that **philanthropy.com reported for Chatham County in 2012 as reported on their tax returns:**

For people making up to **\$25,000/year, their average giving ratio was 10.18%**--very generous in terms of percentage,

Now here's where it gets interesting: for people making from **\$25,000-50,000/year, you know what their giving ratio was 5.40%**! Almost cut totally in half!

What's happened?!?

It keeps going: **\$50,000-75,000 the giving ratio: 3.84%**

\$75,000-100,000: 3.5%

\$100,000-200,00: 3.01%

\$200,000 or more: 2.79%

What's happening here? As resources increase, is generosity increasing? No!

Because generosity has very little to do with our resources and everything to do with how we handle or manage our appetites and the internal obstacles to being generous

AND because what happens to us as human beings is that we fall in love with raw numbers when God looks at percentages.

So let's fill in another piece of data from the tax records, here's how much in terms of pure money was given in each category:

Altogether, all the people who made \$25,000 or less gave a total of **\$1,545,000**

All the people who made between \$25,000-50,000 gave a total of **\$3,792,000**

All the people who made between \$50,000-75,000 gave a total of **\$4,818,000**

\$75,000-100,000 gave a total of **\$5,809,000**

\$100,000-200,00 was **\$15,764,000**

\$200,000+ was **\$21,445,000**

Are the wealthier people giving more money? YES! Absolutely. And the world is a better place because of those all of these gifts and if you're up here on this board, wherever you are, thank you!

But here's what I think is happening: because we're impressed with raw numbers more than percentages, *as we make more money, we give bigger checks but we make smaller sacrifices*
And so we settle for being less generous

From Jesus's perspective, who's making the wow gift: the person who's making \$25,000 who gives \$2,500 away

Or the person making \$250,000 who gives about \$7,000?

Who's making the bigger sacrifice and the bigger gift?

No guilt, no shame, we're not going to demand that everyone release their taxes for us to all look at!

But what we do want to do is take a look at these numbers, look this poor widow, and ask the question of what are we doing with the resources God has given to us—how are we thinking about these resources?

Are they given to us so that we might feed as many of our appetites as possible—that's the most natural way that we tend to think of our resources

Or are these resources given to us that we might be taken care of, for sure, but also in order that we might find ways to give them away, that you and I might have something to participate in the wonder of the universe—a universe that God designed to run on the joy of generosity?

A couple of years ago I was taking an ethics class, and I was reading a book that was talking about Jesus's ethic around money

And the author, without boasting or being obnoxious, talked about his own journey with taking Jesus's call seriously to be as generous as they could be with the resources God gave them

He and his wife decided in grad school to make decisions for the rest of their lives that as they got raises, they were going to increase the *percentage*, not just their amount, of their giving

I believe they started in grad school at giving away 5%. That was what they could do. Then the first job and they inched it up a little bit: 10%, 12%, 15%.

Then more raises and promotions and eventually he was a full professor and a tenured faculty member

And by the time he wrote the book as a 50-something empty nester, he and his wife were giving away 30% of their income every single month. 30%.

That's a great example of how increased resources led to increased generosity BECAUSE they decided that was the purpose of their resources—their whole goal was to give away as much as they possibly could

but it only happened because they made deliberate, disciplined decisions to practice, practice, practice generosity as a priority at every financial turn

They didn't just wake up one morning and decide to give 30% of their money away, no one could just up and do that

What they did was they charted a course, a lifetime-long path down the joy of generosity whereby they were going to manage their life and their finances in such a way that they could give ever-increasing percentages away

And this morning, I want to invite us together to chart our own journey down that same path. This morning, whatever you make, whatever you have or haven't given in the past

Jesus is inviting us into the joy of generosity. To LIVE generously, and to make deliberate decisions to walk down that path so that we might be more free to do so

This morning, two **Take-W.I.T.H.'s**—two wildly important take-homes for you to consider, pray about, and act on:

1. *Is my assumption that the resources I have are to feed the appetites I have OR that I've been given resources so I might have something to be generous with?*

Am I essentially thinking of my resources as something primarily for ME
or am I essentially thinking of my resources as an invitation to take care of me for sure,
yes, that matters
but bigger than that, am I given resources in order that I might participate in the larger
generous dance of the God of the cosmos who made me in his image that I might be generous
along with him?

This is the upstream heart work that the widow had done in order to be free to give away what
little she had

This is the core internal world question you've got to settle once and for all—and then for some
of us we have to re-decide it over and over and over again at key points in our lives

If I understand that these limited resources are there primarily to meet my bottomless
appetites
then it's going to be very, very hard for me to live the kind of generous life that Jesus
celebrates and teaches about over and over and over again

And for the most part our giving is going to be grudging and reluctant or very haphazard and
random—we see a hurricane hit and we text in \$5 in response to something spontaneously,
which is fine
we've all been there before, I've battled with that from time to time, that's totally
normal

But if I've only got limited resources to meet bottomless appetites then I'm going to operate on
a scarcity mentality and anything given away only makes my problems worse
Any thoughts about giving money away is seen as a greater threat to appetites that
aren't being met to begin with.

But if you and I are here to be generous—if that's why God's put us here on this planet

And if we can embrace this larger vision of my resources loaned out to me from God that I
might have something to offer the people around me
If I can think about my paycheck, the hours of my day, my retirement goals, my free-
time activities, my skillset and abilities

All as resources that might create the privilege of serving someone else, if these are resources
that might be leveraged for the joy of bringing redemption and healing and grace to a broken
and weary world

Then we're freed to be the generous people that God designed us to be in the first place

And then we're free to ask the second question:

2. *How can I more intentionally walk down the path of a more generous life?*

We've talked about what impresses Jesus: percentages, not raw numbers.

What if you took your first step or your next step down this path of a more generous life by picking a good next percentage for you and following through on that no matter what.

If you've never given consistently before, what if you started at 5%? If you did that, you'd be almost doubling-up all the people in the \$200k and up tax bracket!

If already give a set amount each month, what would it take for you to take another step?
Some churches talk about 10% as the goal and then you're done
but really if you look at the Old Testament and start adding up all the various offerings,
it can get to upwards of 30%

What if 10% wasn't the goal but simply a mile-marker along the way?

What if you committed yourself to pressing further up and further in over the course of your life so that you were more and more free to participate in the wonderful, generous work of a good and Generous God over all the universe?

This morning, I want to invite you to look at your resources as an opportunity to be leveraged for the sake of a greater good.

In the midst of a broken and weary world, we are here as a church to worship and declare the good news of a generous God.

And as we worship this God and know this God, we become more and more generous-hearted ourselves

So that we might be as generous as we can be to one another and to our greater community

So that all peoples everywhere might come to know and to worship alongside with us here, this good and generous God.