

**Message: Defined by Generosity**

(Adapted from Adam Hamilton’s Enough)

**What does it mean to live generously?**

“‘As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life’ (1Timothy 6:17-19). That’s a pretty good description of living generously.

**The challenge of living generously is this:** we are created to be generous, but we are tempted to hoard. God created us with the willingness to give to God and to others. That’s the foundation God gives us. Proverbs 22:9 tells us, “*Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.*” This design is part of our makeup. We actually have the need to be generous built into us by God. But there are two voices that “war” against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep what we have, rather than sharing it.

**The first voice is the voice of fear.** Fear keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have. The voice of fear whispers in our ear, “you know, something bad might happen to you so you better keep that for yourself.” The voice of fear gives us a misplaced idea about the true source of our security. The truth is hoarding offers us no real security in this world. Only God can give security and hope.

**The second voice is the voice of self-gratification.** Our culture tells us our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and pleasurable experiences. You know the slogans, “Just do it” or “You deserve it.” We find ourselves thinking, “if I give, there won’t be enough left for me.” When we listen to that voice, we’re living from scarcity, rather than the abundance God provides.

**There’s good news! We can defeat the voices.** When we give our lives to Christ, truly invite him to be Lord, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin

changing us from the inside out, we find our fears begin to dissipate and our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and caring for others. Although we still may wrestle with the voices from time to time, we’re able to silence them more readily and effectively the more we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

*“Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;  
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.*

*A generous person will be enriched,  
and one who gives water will get water” (Proverbs 11:24-25).*

**The Bible gives us several reasons to give to God and others.**

First, in the Old Testament, Leviticus 25:23 says, *“Life is a gift, and everything belongs to God.”* Jesus said, *“In the very act of losing our lives, we find life”* in Matthew 16:25 and Luke wrote in Acts 20:35, *“We find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things for ourselves.”* Some of you are nodding; you know this to be true. It isn’t a question about whether we’re outgoing and extroverted or not. People who are introspective live just as generously, just more quietly.

**There are biblical guidelines for giving.** From the early days of the Old Testament, God’s people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God. A gift offered to God was called the first fruits or the tithe, and it equaled one-tenth of your flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth.

In Genesis 28:20-22, Jacob reaffirms the practice with a vow, saying, *“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”* Our tithe goes to the church, God’s house, for the work of the Lord.

**Why do we ask you to give a tithe?** As Christians who live under the new covenant, we aren’t bound by the Law of Moses. We look to it as a

guide. Yet most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives, and one that is pleasing to God. Though tithing can be a struggle, it is possible at virtually every income level. If you cannot tithe right away, take a step in that direction. Perhaps you can give 2% or 5% or 7%. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous.

I also want to let you know that tithing is a floor, not a ceiling. God calls us to grow beyond the tithe, to give 11%, 12% or even 15%, 20% or more. There are people who give 90% of their income to the work of the Lord! We should strive to set aside an additional percentage of our income as offerings for other things that are important to us, such as mission projects, schools, church building funds, and other nonprofit organizations. We tithe to the church and give additional gifts to the work of the church, charities and other organizations over and above our tithe. That’s what the practice of living generously with our money means.

I want to speak a special word to those who are having a difficult time or struggling with a hardship. Please don’t let your inability to give keep you from worship. We aren’t making a judgment or holding up giving as a condition for being a member. We are setting an expectation of what God calls us to as we are transformed when we follow Jesus. Remember, God honors your faithfulness and your acceptance at church is not based on your capacity to give. Please let me know so you can receive prayer and support during any difficulty. We offer coaching and access to advisors, if needed. We care about you!

If you’re not struggling with hardship, that’s a different matter. I invite you to consider the following:

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**What does our giving mean to God?** In ancient times, the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one’s labors upon it to God. They would burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God. It wasn’t that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain. Rather,

God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith, and the desire to please and honor God; and this moved God’s heart. When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord.

**What is God’s response to our giving?** Luke 6:37-38 records Jesus’ words, *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* When we generously share our lives with others, we’ll receive blessings in return. If you only share a little of your life with others, you’ll only receive a small amount in return. If you share a generous portion of your life with others, you’ll receive a generous response in return. What’s the greatest way this will be poured out? In love.

**Our generosity affects us.** When we live generously, our hearts are changed. When we’re generous to God and to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are in need, our hearts are filled with joy. They’re enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously of ourselves in one area of our lives, we become more generous in all aspects of our lives. If you give generously of your money, you may soon find God giving you opportunities to share your other abilities. If you give generously of your gifts and talents, you may find God giving you opportunities to share of your time. If you give of your time, you may find God giving you opportunities to share in other ways.

**There is one great benefit to living generously.** When we live generously, we find the blessings of God. God challenges us through the prophet Malachi, *“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing”* (Malachi 3:10). When we choose to live generously, and freely, willingly and joyfully share our time, abilities and, yes, even our money, with others, we will receive blessing upon blessing.

**Many Christians have it wrong.** They say that if you give, then God will give more back to you – you’ll get a great parking space, or

something like that. That’s the “prosperity Gospel.” But that’s not how it works. We don’t give to God so that we can get something in return. The amazing thing is that when we give to God and to others, the blessings just seem to come back to us. Of course, there is no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you. Nevertheless, when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Last week, we handed out a Personal Goals and Commitment card in the bulletin. This isn’t a family exercise. It’s a personal exercise, for every member of this congregation and all who seek to follow Jesus. If you are of confirmation age or older, I invite you to take one home, fill it out and use it as a measure of your commitment to live generously this year.

This week we mailed out a letter, an estimate of giving form and a giving guide. If you forgot to bring yours this morning, we will have the ushers hand them out. Let’s take a few minutes to pray and reflect silently while the music plays. After a couple of minutes, I will ask the ushers to pass a plate. If you are ready, please place your estimate of giving form in the plate. If you need more time to pray, you may return the form to the church office. We will celebrate and consecrate our gifts on Sunday, Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>.

Let us pray...

*Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn’t be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may serve others with that same love. Lord, you are the source of true satisfaction and contentment. Guide us and help us to make wise decisions as we live our lives for you. Change us so we don’t hoard or waste what you give, but we share it with you and others. Bless us when we give, freely, generously and willingly, of our time, abilities and money. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up everything for us so we might be saved. In Jesus’ name, amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity program workbook*, Abingdon Press, 2009

**Luke 14:7-14 (NRSV)**

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”