

## Defined By Generosity

*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. (1 Timothy 6: 17 – 19)*

*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)*

One of the best known of all Scriptures is probably John 3:16. Even many people who have never been to a church can quote this verse – having read it on billboards, on signs that people hold up in the end zone of football games, and other places. Did you ever think about this: John 3:16 not only tells us about what God has done for us in Jesus (he sent his Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life)... but it also provides a glimpse of the very *nature* of God.

This scripture tells us that God loves so much... that he *gave*. Love and giving always seem to go together, don't they? In fact, having been created in the Image of God, we have been created with the willingness to give, we share this characteristic with our Creator – we are created to give to God and to give to others. It's part of our makeup. You could say that we actually have the *need* to be generous. When we're not, when we hoard, when we clutch our 'stuff', something happens within our spirit... we shrink. We diminish.

We've been looking for the past two weeks about Adam Hamilton's little book "Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity", as he shares a different way of relating to possessions and money, different than what our culture teaches. And he writes that even though we have this designed 'need to give', there are two voices that are constantly fighting against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.

The first is the voice of fear. *If we give there might not be enough left over for us*. We're afraid. We think, "What if we don't have enough to fill the gas tank or buy groceries, or pay the bills? Fear of what might happen to us, along with a misunderstanding about the true source of our

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security can lead us to hoard what we have and not be generous. We feel that we need to hang on to everything – lest we lose it. (The truth is that hoarding doesn't offer *any* real security in this world.)

The second voice is the voice of self-gratification, which tell us, "*If we give we won't have enough money to buy the stuff we need make us happy.*" We've been talking about this for the past two weeks – our culture tells us that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions, and experiences that we consider pleasurable. Our happiness is based on our physical pleasure and our well being. So we find ourselves thinking, "*If I give there won't be enough left for me.*"

We think about tithing, and realize that 10 percent of our income can buy a new car or a bigger house, or whatever else we have our mind set on. I said a couple of weeks ago that much too often we accept the teachings of our culture unexamined. We assume that what we've always heard, and seen from TV, films, music, friends and everyone else is right: that 'success' is defined by advancement in recognition and an accumulation of stuff, and measurable things. We *assume* that these things will make us happy but we seldom stop to really examine that premise. If we did, we would realize that it *is wrong*.

A friend of mine shared a song with me last week, by a secular artist Delbert McClinton. The song is called "Too Much Stuff", and it is pretty funny, but it is also very true. The Bridge goes like this:

*Well it's a way too much  
You're never gonna' get enough.  
You can pile it high,  
But you'll never be satisfied.  
Too much stuff... we got too much stuff.*

He's right – I don't know if he realizes it or not, but he agrees with Jesus! We will *never* be satisfied by *stuff*.

Now, these voices are defeated the moment we put our faith in Jesus Christ. When we give our

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lives to Christ, invite him to be our Lord, and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out, we find that our fears begin to melt away, and the purpose of our lives shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and caring for others. So, we may still wrestle with those voices from time to time, but the more we grow in Christ the easier we find it is to silence them. And the more we grow in Christ, the more we realize that our lives belong to *God*, the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

### Biblical Reasons to Give to God and Others

I've included in your bulletins this week "7 Reasons to Give" that comes from something that Bill Hybels wrote out at Willow Creek. Let me share a couple more with you...

- We find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever will in doing things for ourselves. Jesus himself said that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive'. Or you can translate another way, with the literal meaning of the word 'blessed' – i.e., "people who give are happier than those who [only] receive". Have you found that to be true?
- Life itself is a gift, and *everything* in it belongs to God. [Psalm 24:1 – "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." We are holding all our possessions in trust... our time is on loan. And *everything* is temporary.

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 one's flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first to give a tithe or tenth.

In Genesis 14:20 we read this mysterious account of Abraham (then still Abram) meeting up with "Melchizedek king of Salem." Salem means "Peace" in Hebrew. Melchizedek comes bringing "bread and wine" and is called a 'priest of the most high God' – he is what theologians refer to as a 'theophany'. A pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, the Word.

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Abram meets Melchizedek, and worships him - giving him *a tenth* of everything he had.

In Genesis 28: 18 – 22, after his dream that we sing about in the song “Jacob’s Ladder”, Jacob makes this vow to God: “...*of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.*” It was a statement of his intention to follow and worship Yahweh.

In Leviticus (27: 30 – 33), we read of the tithe becoming part of the ancient Hebrew Law:

**30** “*One tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord and must be set apart to him as holy. 31 If you want to buy back the Lord’s tenth of the grain or fruit, you must pay its value, plus 20 percent. 32 Count off every tenth animal from your herds and flocks and set them apart for the Lord as holy. 33 You may not pick and choose between good and bad animals, and you may not substitute one for another.*”

Now, as Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses; but when appropriate, we look to it as a guide. And most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives too, and one that is pleasing to God. Some of you know the passage in Matthew where Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for warping the real meaning of the Law by making it a burden, but neglecting the spirit of it.

Jesus says an interesting thing in that regard:

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. So, Jesus says, “You tithe down to the very leaves of the spices in your garden... but you’re missing the real point.”*

But then Jesus makes this distinction: “*You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.*” The clearest reading of this is, “Keep tithing, but *also* pay attention to the things that that discipline points to – justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

Tithing can be a struggle for many – especially in the beginning. Some people find that it is very

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difficult and they have to ease into it, others just ‘jump in’. Pretty near everyone I’ve ever talked to who tithes, though, finds that after an adjustment period, we simply don’t miss what is not rightfully ours. I shared with you a few years ago that Dianna and I began to tithe my first year of Seminary, which is proof that it is possible to tithe at virtually every income level.

At that time Dianna was working with a temp agency, and I had a part time minimum wage job at a Department store in Lexington, KY, while taking a full load of classes. We didn’t know how we were going to pay for my last two years of Seminary. We lived from paycheck to paycheck.

Now, Dianna worked for about two years before we married, and saved most of what she earned – which was going to pay for my first year of school, and hers when she went back after I graduated. When we decided that we were going to start tithing, I pointed out that none of this money that she had saved was ‘tithed’; some of it didn’t belong to us. She agreed, and we took 10% of that savings –and wrote a check for a van that the church we were attending was trying to buy for their youth group. It may have been the most important check we ever wrote. I look back now and realize that that check was liberating. It was the most money that we had ever spent on *anything*. The rest became easier. Our tithe – 10% of our income to the church – since then has been the first check we write each month.

[DVD: ten apples]

As our income grew over the years, I guess it would have been easy for Dianna and I to look at our tithe and think, “That’s a lot of money now, two incomes... does God really mean 10 percent of all *that*? I came across a story told by Peter Marshall, who was chaplain of the US Senate for many years. There was a man he knew who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. The man said to Marshall, “I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly some years ago, but ...but now... I am earning \$500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give about \$50,000.

So Marshall reflected on this man’s dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said, “I can certainly see your problem. Let’s pray about it.” The man agreed. So Marshall bowed his head and prayed this prayer, “*Heavenly Father, I pray that you would reduce this man’s salary back to the place*

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*that he an afford to tithe.”*

I want to share with you a video clip of two wonderful folks from our church. I truly appreciate their willingness to share their stories with us, with such honesty and openness. And I think you'll see that this is a journey of faithfulness... and we're all at different places on it. The important thing is to keep moving...

[show clip]

If you cannot tithe right away, try to take a step in that direction. Maybe you can give 2 percent, or 5 or 7 percent; God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous. Whatever our income is, the question is the same: how many apples are enough? As nine apples grow to twenty, to forty apples and more, we still have a very basic choice: do we store them in storehouses, or do we share them with others? And which decision will *enrich* our souls?

I've been sharing my [and Dianna's] story with you here today not because I'm trying to parade my little righteousness before you. I think it might be important for you to realize that this is something that we don't just talk about, we practice, and it is very important to us.

But we have learned that as we simplify, and learned to give, it becomes not only easier, but it becomes a motivating joy in our lives. Like many of you (although not to the extent of some of you) we look at a tithe as a starting point in our giving. We truly consider it a great joy to be able to give beyond a tithe, and include to charities like the American Epilepsy Society, to our "Embrace the Future" mortgage fund... we have sponsored two children through Compassion International for a number of years, and special things like that.

These are the 'offerings' that we refer to when we worship God thought the giving of our 'tithes and offerings'. These are tangible signs of our desire to live wholly for God. They are an expression of our gratitude, worship, and praise. Anyone who does this is demonstrating that we are trying to put God first in our lives. These gifts – tithes and offerings – are our investment in

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God's work through the church. And I have no doubt that they are pleasing to God.

Generosity changes us. It fills us with joy and fills our lives with blessings – not necessarily material blessings. I think it is a misunderstanding of the Scripture when we think that giving is a means to 'more stuff'. Blessings are not likely material things. But they are all the more valuable. And what's more, as our generosity blesses others, they are changed, too.

Hamilton in his book shares the story of a young man by the name, Jeff Hanson.<sup>1</sup> A 15 year old student at the Kansas School for the Blind. He is visually impaired as the result of an optic nerve tumor caused by a genetic condition called neurofibromatosis. But thanks to many various treatments, he is doing well, he can even see the big "E" on the top of the eye chart.

Jeff is a gifted young man. He bakes and paints, sells his work, and donates the money to the Children's Tumor Foundation. So far, he has given over \$15,000 to this foundation. And he also gives his time to bless others in service.

In the fall of 2005, when he was receiving chemotherapy, Jeff was granted a wish by the Make a Wish Foundation. He wish was to meet Elton John. When Elton announced that he was coming to town for a concert, Make a Wish contacted Jeff to say that he would get to meet Elton backstage before the concert.

The day arrived, and Elton met Jeff backstage before the show. Elton was gracious and generous with with his time. Jeff told him his story and gave him a package of note cards with his paintings on the fronts. Then, before saying good-bye, Jeff reached in his pocket and pulled out a check for \$1,000 for the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Jeff Hanson, twelve years old at the time, gave a thousand dollar check to Elton John. [Surely] Elton was virtually speechless. Elton had wanted to bless Jeff, but now he was the one who was

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Enough: Finding Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity, Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 90 – 91.

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being blessed... He asked the photographer to capture the moment with a picture. A week later the Children's Tumor Foundation called Jeff to tell him they had just received a \$5,000 check in the mail from Elton John in honor of Jeff.

But that's not all to the story... Before their visit was over that day, Elton asked Jeff if he had ever been to Dubai. And he invited to fly Jeff and his parents to Dubai for an all-expenses paid stay while he was in concert there. He explained that he wanted to hear more about Jeff's work.

Here's the point: even at 12 years old, Jeff Hanson understands what life is really about. He could feel sorry for himself, but instead he has chosen to focus his attention on helping others. In the process, others have been changed. Other people have become more generous as well. Jeff's generosity has returned to be a blessing to him.

Maybe that's what Jesus was referring to when he said, "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" (Luke 6:38). Or that Scripture that Betsy referred to: (Malachi 3:10) "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house; test me in this, says the Lord of hosts – see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you and overflowing blessing."

When we give to God and to others, the blessings seem to come back to us. That doesn't mean that there will be a guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you. But when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

Let's take God at his word. As we choose to live for others and give generously out of what God has given to us, we will both bless others and experience the abundant blessings that come from living for God.