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THE SPIRITUAL HABIT OF GIVING Michael B. Beaugh
Luke 21:1-4 November 2, 2008
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Today and in our Growth Groups this week we are going to talk about giving as a spiritual habit of the heart. We are going to do this in spite of what some people think about churches, that all we want is your money.

It shocked me the first time I heard this from someone I was trying to evangelize. I was in college, but one summer I worked as a student missionary in Michigan. Part of my job was to help organize and teach Vacation Bible Schools, and then follow up with families to talk to them about their faith. I actually got invited into a home. My adrenalin was pumping because I thought God was getting ready to do a great thing with this family. But, boy, was I in for a surprise! The real reason they invited me in was to let me have it. They vented. Their wrath was unlike anything I had ever seen or heard. They had never belonged to a church, but somehow they knew that all the church was interested in was getting people's money. They weren't about to have anything to do with this religious business.

The more they talked, the angrier I became, not exactly a good evangelism strategy. The last thing I remember saying was something about where they might end up in the hereafter, and then I was out of there.

But you know what? They were right about one thing. Churches do talk a lot about giving, especially if they are Biblically based. If there is one thing God wants to do with us, it is to turn us into givers instead of takers. Giving is for our own good. Our lives depend on it. Our relationships depend on it. Our health depends on it.

You see, it wasn't church boards or television evangelists or Pastor Mike who invented the idea of giving your hard earned income for the work of God's kingdom on earth. God invented it. Jesus confirmed it. Paul insisted on it.

In Malachi 3:10, God says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test." Why would we do that? God continues, "See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

Jesus is the one who warned us about riches. In Matthew 19:24, he told his disciples, "I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

In I Timothy 6:17-19, the Apostle Paul gives a solution. He tells Timothy to command the rich to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay a firm foundation for their lives.

Giving is for our own good, but here is something I have learned over the years. ***We will never welcome God's call to become givers until we fall in love with God.*** Giving will always seem an imposition until we experience in our own hearts and lives the saving and transforming grace of the Living God. Once we come to know the total sacrificial giving of God through Jesus Christ, and once we experience the power of that giving in our hearts, we will not be able not to give. It is just how it is. We joyfully and gladly give to those whom we love. We prove our love by giving.

I believe that is why Jesus commended the poor widow in Luke 21. Jesus is with his disciples when he looks up and notices rich people dropping their gifts into the temple treasury. This is the magnificent temple built in Jerusalem by Herod the Great around 20 BCE. There were thirteen horn-shaped receptacles for receiving offerings. You could walk by any time and drop in your donation.

Jesus then notices a poor widow dropping two of the smallest coins in existence into the temple treasury. These coins are lepta. A day's wage for a laborer was about 128 lepta, the equivalent of a denarius. The little clinks of her coins make a sharp contrast to the thuds of the big coins from the rich. "Look at that," Jesus says to his disciples. (I think he was smiling when he said it.) "She has put in more than all the others. She has put in all she has."

Now, I don't believe he is condemning the rich or their gifts. It is just that they do the expected thing. There is nothing extraordinary in their gifts. It is hard to tell if they are giving out of love. They need to give. The church needs their gifts. But the widow is something else. She exemplifies the kind of extreme love, the all or nothing attitude, of a disciple of Jesus. It is the kind of all or nothing that parents give to a child who becomes ill or is in danger. Or the all or nothing of two people who fall in love and spend extravagantly to show their love.

Love unlocks the habit of giving, and God wants to unlock our hearts because giving saves our lives, and it is the thing that builds God's kingdom on earth.

I am thankful that I serve in a congregation that understands this. We always wish we had more money, and we always need more money to keep going. Our reach usually exceeds our resources. I am not sure how we are going to meet our ministry costs next year, but I know that God will provide. Like God did for this year. I wasn't sure how we would make it this year. Then someone came along and gave us a ridiculous amount of money for the right to the gas under our property. And just in time. I believe God wants us to keep going. God has plans for us.

But what strengthens my faith is seeing how this congregation has responded to our financial needs time after time. There is lots of love here

for this church and for God and for one another. There's a big commitment to missions. There is lots of giving going on. Many of you are giving sacrificially. Some of us are giving well above the 10% tithe that the Bible says is a standard for giving. I think all of us were floored by the outcome of our recent Capital Campaign. We exceeded the expectations of the experts.

Someone compared our giving to the giving of a huge church in Chicago that conducted a Capital Campaign two years ago. They raised \$26 million, but here's what's so interesting. Our giving per family is the same as theirs. If we had their membership, we too would have raised \$26 million.

If you were to ask anyone who is giving to our ministry here if their lives are impoverished by their giving, I think I know what you would hear. "I wish I could give more." Love does strange things to us.

Having said all that, I started out my Bible study with Mike Benedict at Starbucks last Tuesday by saying this is a tough time to be talking about giving. I asked if he thought we should slow down our building project, wait for a better economy. Mike works for an investment firm, so he knows what people are thinking. He's getting a lot of phone calls from his clients. Plus, I know that Mike and Mary give generously to this church and have a deep love for it. I am not sure what I thought Mike might say, but one thing that stuck with me was his comment that **"God's mission moves on."**

If I can put in my own words what we went on to talk about, the gist was that God does not want us to jeopardize the welfare of our families. We need to make good, smart decisions about what we do with our money. But we can't stop giving to God's work. Giving is still an essential practice even in tough times for those who are in love with God. In fact, it is well known that giving to churches during the Great Depression of last century actually went up. We might be forced to make some adjustments in our spending habits and put off some plans. We might even have to spread out our giving over a longer period of time. We might not be able to give as much as before simply because we don't have as much to give. But "God's mission moves on."

This is a tough time to be talking about giving. But it would be wrong on my part not to tell you the truth. God wants to turn us into givers instead of takers. God wants to free us from the fear that money creates in us so that we can be free to make a greater impact for the purposes of God. This path to generosity is the path for every person who loves God and seeks to follow Jesus Christ.

Two years ago, we studied a book by John Ed Mathison called *Treasures of the Transformed Life*. He tells a story about a granddaddy who gave his grandson ten one dollar bills for Christmas. He watched intently as the boy took them out. The granddaddy said, "What are you going to do with that?"

The little boy responded, "Well, the first one, that's my tithe. That goes to Jesus." The granddaddy was impressed and pleased. The boy went on and described the things he wanted to do with the other dollars. When he got to the last one, he said, "This one goes to Jesus, too."

The granddaddy said, "But you've already given Jesus the tenth."

His grandson responded, "Yes, sir, that's my tithe. But this is my present because I love him."

I wish we were all like that little boy. Not just because he gave to Jesus. But because he loved the Lord, and he knew the joy of giving to his Lord. I pray for each of you that you will come to know that joy, if you do not know it already. If it seems impossible to you, remember that God is the One who empowers us to do what we cannot do on our own. I urge you to pray for the spiritual gift of giving. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you every step of the way in the journey of the generous life.