

“Defined by Generosity”

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¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ 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*

²⁴ Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.

²⁵ A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water. *Proverbs 11:23-25*

⁹ Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor. *Proverbs 22:9*

When I meet with a family following a death, I ask them to tell me about their loved one. “What were their defining characteristics? What made them special?” As family members share stories, I jot down words. I ask them, “What would they want to be remembered for?” and write this down too. The notes help me when I'm putting their service together later.

A question for us today is, what will family or friends say about us someday when they're asked those questions? What will they say made you special? Your laughter? Will your wisdom be remembered? Your caring? Generosity? Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

God makes us to be generous, with a willingness – maybe even a need – to be generous. You see it in children all the time. Why, then, are so few of us defined by generosity? I agree with Adam Hamilton, author of the book *Enough*, that there are two reasons. The first is fear. Fear tells us, “If I give there might not be enough for me.” Fear keeps us in a scarcity mentality. It keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have.

Years ago, a man gave a large sum of money to found a university. Years later, he lost almost everything. Someone ask if he regretted giving so much to the school. “Regret it? ... that school is the only lasting thing I've done with my money. Had I not given for the school, I would have lost that money too, and there would be nothing to show for it.”

The second voice that gets in the way of generosity is self-gratification. This is the voice that tells us, “We need to make sure there's enough to have a really good life. To do all the things we want to do.”

How do we deal with these voices?

In all honesty, we may be wrestling with them from time to time for the rest of our lives. But a change begins the moment we put our faith in Christ. When we allow God as Spirit to begin working in us, we find that our fears begin to dissolve. Our goals shift from seeking pleasure to

pleasing God and caring for others. As we grow in Christ, we accept that our lives belong to God and we become more generous.

After the sermon, we'll pray the Wesley Covenant prayer together. As I've gradually been following Christ closer, I've found this prayer helpful. It reminds me... us that our lives are not our own. We discover that we're willing to risk giving more generously. We do things that require sacrifice because we accept that our security is in God.

As God continues to work in our lives, we think less about ourselves and more about others. We know true joy. We discover that we find more joy in doing for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things just for ourselves.

These realizations bring us to a central truth... that life, all life, is a gift and everything belongs to God. We didn't bring anything into the world, and we won't take anything with us when we leave. We don't really own anything.

In the Book of Leviticus we read, "The land is mine. You are but aliens and tenants." Let's think about that minute. We are tenants on God's property. We're the managers of God's resources, stewards of the blessings of God. Our task is to find out what God wants us to do with the resources we have at our disposal.

What shall we do with these resources we hold in trust for God? Many of them go to taking care of our needs and the needs of our families – shelter, food, education... We have responsibilities for these things. God also wants us to enjoy our lives – which costs money, but doesn't have to cost a lot. Bigger, fancier, more expensive toys, pets, and vacations do not increase enjoyment.

So enjoy yourselves, just not exclusively... Because God expects us to do more than focus on ourselves. Scripture teaches that we're to help the poor, the oppressed, the outsider. And that when we do so, we're blessed. Scripture also teach us that we are to return a portion of our livelihood to God.

God instructs Abraham to give the first fruits of his labor. From the earliest biblical record, God's people observe the practice of giving a portion of the best they have to God, a tithe, the top ten percent. In fact, this is what worship was initially. Before there was scripture to read or liturgy to follow, people gave their first fruits to God – as worship. At first it was burnt offerings. Later, people would bring their offerings to the temple, to the priests.

As Christians living under the new covenant, we're not bound by Mosaic Law. Still, the tithe is a good guideline for our lives. We give our tithes and offerings to the church to accomplish the work of God's kin-dom through the body of Christ.

This is the first time I've preached on the tithe. If I sound tentative, it's not because I don't believe in it. I started tithing with my first teaching job, in New Mexico. It felt right. After my former husband and I separated, I began tithing again. And again, it felt right.

In honesty, I don't know if we could have managed tithing during our most difficult times – between jobs and moving from state to state. There are situations in which tithing may seem to be impossible. Yet for most of us, it's more of a challenge as we wrestle with our fear and self-gratification.

A Pastor David Slagle came up with a really neat illustration. I've seen it on YouTube; maybe you have too. Imagine that God gives us 10 apples for us to enjoy as we will. The first one, we give to God, right off the top. The other nine are for us to use in living our lives. We need a

couple for our homes, more for food. Then there are the utilities, the phone bill, Netflix. Transportation, insurance and medical bills. Another goes to retirements or college funds. For some of us, there are kids activities. Entertainment. It's not hard to use up those nine apples.

Then if we haven't already given God that first apple, we struggle with the voices of scarcity and wanting more. We start to feel hungry and we reach for God's apple. After all, Christmas is coming. We're hungry. Surely God will understand. Oh shoot, I forgot about self-employment taxes. The cat needs to go to the vet. By the time we're done, there's nothing but a core left that we sheepishly offer to God.

Tithing can be challenging, still I encourage you to take steps in that direction. God knows where you are and what your life is like. And if you want to be that generous person, God will help you make the changes for it to happen. Tithing is a floor, not a ceiling. If it seems impossible for you today, start with what will stretch you just a bit – maybe 2 percent, maybe 5, but start. Figure out what percentage you're giving now and step up by one percent. You may surprise yourself with how generous you are.

If you're already tithing, God calls us to grow beyond the tithe by working to set aside an additional portion of our income as offerings for other things that are important to us, such as mission projects, schools, church parking lot, public television or medical research. Besides giving to public radio, each year I look at all the ways to give on the UMCOR website and select a few.

Many Christians have it wrong. They say that if you give, God will give back more. It doesn't work that way. We don't give to God so we can get something in return. An amazing thing happens when we give to God and to others: the blessings just seem to come back to us. Of course, there's no guarantee that if you tithe bad things will never happen to you. Yet, when we give generously, God's blessings unmistakably flow into our lives.

God doesn't want us to live in fear. God doesn't want us to live in a place of scarcity. God wants us to offer all that we are and all that we have, so that God can do abundant things. God knows that our generosity changes us. Our generosity changes others. Our generosity is part of transforming the world.

We're going to take a few minutes now for silent meditation and prayer. I invite everyone to take your bulletin insert and fill in answers to the questions there at this time.

This sermon is based on chapter 4 of Adam Hamilton's book *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*.