

“THE MASTER’S GARDENERS (#4): GENEROUS GARDENERS”

(Proverbs 11:24-25; 2 Corinthians 8:1-7)

[**PROPS NEEDED:** (1) “GENERIS” Video Clip; (2) “John Wesley Story” Video]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 4-27-08]

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1. Read Texts (**NRSV at all services**): Proverbs 11:24-25; 2 Corinthians 8:1-7 and Pray.
2. [WATCH VIDEO: “*GENERIS*” (Closed Fist Syndrome) (Time: 1:24) from Sermonspice.com]

A–Today we conclude our series The Master’s Gardeners (on the biblical relationship between faith and possessions) by focusing on the importance of learning how to grow and cultivate a life of generosity in the “garden” we call our lives.

B–I mentioned last week that I interviewed a church member who is a Master Gardener, and one thing she told me is that one of the requirements for being a Master Gardener is that you give at least 25 hours of community service every year. ¹

C–So, if being generous with others is a prerequisite for Master Gardeners (who cultivate *earthly* gardens), then how much more so should generosity apply to those of us who are “gardeners” of our life and possessions on behalf of our *heavenly* Master (God)?

3. And yet, many of us (including people of faith) have either not yet learned the *value* of generosity, or don’t know how to *practice* it.

A–Consider, for example, that American Christians contribute approximately \$2 billion every year towards world mission. Now, that sounds like a lot, until we learn that that’s about the *same* amount that Americans spend annually on chewing gum! ²

B–Now, let’s be honest: most of us *want* to be generous – we don’t go about intentionally *trying* to be stingy or selfish people.

C–But as our video humourous pointed out, our problem is that too often we’re swayed by inner voices of fear and selfishness that tell us that if we give generously, we might not have enough left to afford the things *we* want – like that new car, dress, or house. ³

D–And so, we’re paralyzed by what the video called CFS (“*Closed Fist Syndrome*”).

4. Well, I believe that today’s two scriptures can teach us something not only of the *value/benefits of generosity*, but also *how can we* overcome CFS by *cultivating and practicing generosity* in our lives (*Invitation to follow along in bulletin “Sermon Notes”*).

--II--

5. First, let’s talk about **THE BENEFITS OF GENEROSITY**. What does it *do* for us? Of what *value* is it in life? ⁴ Well, I want to suggest at least two things:

6. First of all, through it we find *Freedom From Bondage to “Things”* – that was the whole point of today’s video, wasn’t it?

A–You know, it may be uncouth to talk about in church, but one pastor described the lack of generosity in our culture today as the equivalent of being spiritually “constipated.”

1–I.E., we take in & take in, & never give back out. And eventually it “backs up,” causing pain & discomfort, & we wonder why all our “stuff” doesn’t satisfy us.

2–Well, it’s because like our bodies, you and I were *not* made to continuously hoard possessions and never give back out. No. We were created for *generosity*.

3–And we’re only going to find peace and freedom from our bondage/discomfort when we get “unstuck” by being generous with our money and possessions.⁵

B–One of our members gave me an article from Reuters that affirmed this with research – the title was “*Money Can Buy Happiness... IF You Spend [It] On Someone Else.*”⁶

C–Think about how Verse 24 of the Proverbs passage put it: “*Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.*”

7. A 2nd benefit is that through generosity we discover the *Joy/Blessings of Life from God*.

A–Verse 25 of the Proverbs passage says that “*A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water*” – in other words, our generosity with God and others will result in joy and blessings coming back to us in ways that surprise us.⁷

B–And these blessings aren’t always tangible or material. Remember the Macedonian Christians in today’s 2 Corinthians text?

1–In Vs. 2 Paul says that “*During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and... extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.*”

2–In other words, even though these Christians were “poor” by worldly standards, they were nevertheless “*wealthy/rich*” in God *because of* their great generosity.

C–Winston Churchill once said that “*We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give*”⁸

D–Friends, if you and I want to experience more of the joy and blessings of the depths of God’s love, then we need to learn to be generous...with our time, our talents, our money and our possessions.⁹

8. So, *HOW* can we do this, then? How do we learn to cultivate and grow the practice of generosity in our lives? It doesn’t just happen on it’s own.

-III-

9. So, let me suggest **THREE STEPS TO DEVELOPING A GENEROUS HEART** that we find in today's scriptures: ¹⁰

10. First of all, we need to ***Remember the Generosity of God*** as the foundation of all giving.

A–In Verse 1 of the 2 Corinthians passage, Paul begins by saying “*We want you to know... about the grace (I.E., the ‘generosity’) of God...*”

1–In other words, *before* he talks about the generous example of the *Macedonian* Christians, he begins by referencing the generous example of *God himself*. ¹¹

2–Theologian John Stott says that “*Christian generosity is fundamentally an outflow of the generosity of God.*” ¹²

B–And he’s right: ...If you want to learn to be more generous, start by learning and studying about how God is generous (through Jesus), and then imitate that.

11. A second step to developing a generous heart is to decide to ***Give Purposefully, Beginning With God’s Community (the Church)***.

A–It’s been said that “*God is calling us to be conduits of His grace, not cul-de-sacs” – in other words, to *pass on* the generosity of God to others through *our* generosity. ¹³*

B–Verse 5 of 2 Corinthians 8 puts it this way, “*They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.*” Now, notice the *intentionality* and *sequence* here:

1–They didn’t just give haphazardly, or when it’s convenient, or whenever we finish paying the other bills, or only if we like preacher (like *we* sometimes do).

2–Instead, their giving was *Purposeful* and *Planned*, with God’s community (the Church) being the *Priority* (that was the “*us*” that Paul speaks about).

C–Let me ask, are you intentional about putting God first in your giving through His Church?

1–Do you set a *percentage* to give (not just an *amount*)? You know, the tithe (10%, that we talked about last week) is a good place to start, but if you’re not there, then start with where you are and gradually increase your % each year until you reach it. ¹⁴

2–That’s really why we have stewardship campaigns every year – not just to “raise a budget,” but to give all of us a tool where we can learn the joy of *purposeful, disciplined* giving that puts God *first* through our giving to His Church.

12. Finally, if we want to develop a generous heart, we eventually need to get to a place where we decide to ***Give Bountifully (“sacrificially”), Stretching Our Faith and Trust in God.***

A–Verses 3-4 of the 2 Corinthians scripture says that the Macedonian Christians “*Voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.*”

1–You know, the tithe is a good starting point, but as Randy Alcorn says, “*The tithe is not a ceiling for generous giving, but merely the floor.*”¹⁵

2–The Macedonian Christians understood this, and that’s why they considered it a “*privilege*” to give sacrificially – “*beyond their means*” – beyond the tithe.

B–Now, this has certainly been the case for my wife & I. We give our first 10% (our tithe) to the general ministry fund of our church. But beyond that, we give an *additional* 8-9% each year to other worthy ministries and causes, both in our own church and elsewhere.

1–And we’ve found that in this *extra*, “sacrificial” giving (that our church sometimes calls “*Designated Gifts*”) that we find the greatest joy and reward, ...not as a *substitute* for our tithe, but *in addition to it*¹⁶ – ...

2–...Because, you see, like a gardener who sows seed back into the ground for future crops, when you & I learn to give bountifully/sacrificially (over & above our tithe) it stretches our faith and enables us to grow and mature in our trust for God.¹⁷

–IV–

13. I think that Verse 7 of today’s 2 Corinthians passage summarizes Paul’s challenge both to the Christians of his day and to us, as well: “*As you excel in everything... so we want you to excel also in [generosity]....*”

A–He’s wanting them (and us) to know that the more we grow in generosity, the weaker the voices of fear and selfishness become in our lives.

B–As we close, let’s watch the story of one man from history who learned both the *value* and *practice* of generosity in his life...

[WATCH VIDEO: “**John Wesley Story**” from “Generous Church Toolkit” (Time: 3:02)]

C–When you die, will it be able to be said of you, “*He/She lived the generous life. They were... a ‘Generous Gardener’*”? My prayer is that the answer would be “**YES!**”

14. [PRAYER]

15. [INVITATION: During closing song, invite congregants to come forward to bring canned or dried fruits, vegetables or money to wheelbarrows at altar to share with needy...]

16. [CLOSING MUSIC: #389, Freely, Freely OR song Give It Away]

ENDNOTES:

1. They meet these requirements by participating in projects like “Plant a Row for the Hungry”, sharing plant/gardening information at flower shows and gardening stores, sharing their crops with food banks, and others.

2. Though these amounts are from 2004 data, the figures for today cannot be that far off. As another example, it’s been estimated that the average American gives 1.7% of their income annually to charitable causes, and far from the 10% (tithing) that God asks, church folks give an average of only 3% each year. What’s even more interesting is the fact that those making \$20,000 annual income or less gave an average of 3% of their annual income, those in middle income levels gave 2%, and those in the top income levels gave only 1%. Obviously, the higher the income, the lower the percentage of charitable giving, proving the point that the more money we have, the more stingy we tend to be [Cited in H. Dale Burke’s sermon “*Generosity*,” preached November 7, 2004 as Part 6 of his series Money: The Heart of the Matter (copyright 2004), Tape 1670A].

Perhaps you know the story about the man who once came to Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, with a concern about tithing. He said: “*I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year.*” Dr. Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: “*Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?*” The man agreed, so Dr. Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. “Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe.” (Cited in Kevin G. Harney, Seismic Shifts (Zondervan, 2005), p. 200).

3. Pastor Adam Hamilton (The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas) described these two voices in his sermon “*Defined by Generosity*” (preached November 4, 2007 cited from www.cor.org) as: (#1) the **Voice of Fear**, which says “*If I give, I may not have enough left over to take care of me and my needs*”; and (#2) the **Voice of Pleasure/Selfishness**, which says that “*If I give, I may not have enough left over to take care of me and my wants; I won't have enough left over to get the stuff that will make me happy.*”

4. Several of these come generally from Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), pp. 32-34.

5. Author Randy Alcorn explains it this way, “*It's a matter of basic physics. The greater the mass, the greater the hold that mass exerts. The more things we own – the greater their total mass – the more they grip us, setting us in orbit around them. Finally, like a black hole, they suck us in. [But generous] giving changes all that. It breaks us out of orbit around our possessions. We escape their gravity, entering a new orbit around our treasures in heaven*” [Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 34.

Two other authors express similar ideas in these ways: “*All you are unable to give possesses you*” [André Gide, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #10724]; and “*We are rich only through what we give: and poor only through what we refuse and keep*” [Russian-French writer Anne Swetchine (1782-1857), cited in www.GenerousGiving.org/quotations]. The point of all of these is that when we’re generous, we’re no longer possessed by our possessions – we’re free from our bondage to money and possessions.

6. Writer Maggie Fox, Reuters, March 20, 2008, cited from www.reuters.com/article/domesticNews.

7. This doesn’t mean that just because we give or tithe nothing bad is going to happen. It doesn’t guarantee that we’ll earn some great inheritance or win the lottery. It simply means that the blessings of God flow to meet our needs in life when we learn to be generous with God and generous with others.

8. Churchill, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry 10740. “*As we give, we live*” [Sidney Greenber, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #10725].

9. Randy Alcorn says that “*We’re most like God when we’re giving. Gaze upon Christ long enough and you’ll become more of a giver. Give long enough, and you’ll become more like Christ*” [Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 31].

Along these same lines, 2 Timothy 6:18-19 says that we as Christians “*...Are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for [our]selves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that [we] may take hold of the life that really is life.*” The point in both of these is that generosity infuses life with energy, purpose, and joy. We “feel God’s pleasure” when we learn to truly become people of generosity.

10. These steps are taken generally from H. Dale Burke’s sermon “Generosity” preached November 7, 2004 as Part 6 of his series Money: The Heart of the Matter (copyright 2004), Tape 1670A.

11. 1 Timothy 6:7, 17-19 carries a sense of this, as well, especially in Verse 17: “*7 For we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ...17As 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. 18They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19thus 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.*”

12. John Stott, from Sample Sermon 6, “*Ten Principles of Christian Giving*,” page 1, found in The Generous Church Toolkit, 2004 (Generous Giving, Inc.), at www.generousgiving.org.

13. John Piper, from Sample Sermon 4, “*Carnal Cash Into Kingdom Currency*,” page 3, found in The Generous Church Toolkit, 2004 (Generous Giving, Inc.), at www.generousgiving.org.

14. For a Christian, our church should *never* merely be one charitable recipient out of many, but instead be the recipient of the *first* fruits of our income (Read Leviticus 27:30).

In the end, God really isn’t interested in the *amount* we give, but instead in our willingness to *trust and be obedient to Him*, and percentage-based giving models this much more easily than amount-based giving. When my daughter went on a school trip to Washington D.C. one of the places they visited was Mt. Veron, VA, home of George Washington. And while they there, she spent her own well-earned money to buy *me* an expensive book about his life, that I will always treasure. It was her way of saying “I love you” to me as her dad. I believe that this is precisely the way God looks at our tithes and offerings. They are not a financial transaction, or a business deal with God. They are simply a way of saying, “*God of what I have and what I’ve made, I return a portion of it to you to say thank you and that I love you, and that I hope you’ll use this somehow to make a difference in the world.*”

15. Randy Alcorn, cited in H. Dale Burke’s sermon “*Generosity*” preached November 7, 2004 as Part 6 of his series Money: The Heart of the Matter (copyright 2004), Tape 1670A. Remember that the tithe was the standard of giving expected of people of faith in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, Jesus raised the bar even higher: instead of talking merely about the giving of the tithe to God, he talked about sacrificial/bountiful giving – giving *all we can!*

For example, in Mark 12:41-44, Jesus says that “*Out of her poverty [the widow in the Temple] has put in everything she had, all she had to live on*” – in other words, not just 10%, but 100%! I don’t think he was suggesting that everyone needs to do this, but simply that generosity should not be defined merely by the tithe, but by giving as much as possible to God’s work. The point here is to stay flexible, even adjusting your giving *up* in percentage as God blesses you and increases your income (Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

16. C.S. Lewis once wrote, *“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures excludes them”* (C.S. Lewis, cited in www.GenerousGiving.org/quotations).

Missionary and Christian martyr Jim Elliott once put it this way, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose”* [Elliott, cited in Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 6.

17. Read 2 Corinthians 9:9-10.