

The Lord's Message: Deny Self, Take Up Your Cross, and Follow Jesus - Generosity

Date: March 12, 2023

Where: Tilghman UMC

Scripture Reference: 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

We are continuing our Lenten sermon series, "Deny Self, Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus". This week the spiritual discipline that we are going to be learning about is generosity.

Let us pray.

How many of you remember that story of Jesus feeding the 5000 people? Do you remember what food and the amount of food that Jesus used to feed the 5000 people? Two fish and five barley loaves of bread – a small boy's lunch. We are not told what the reaction of the little boy was to Jesus taking his food. What would your reaction have been? Proud, happy, overwhelmed by the miracle. And on that same vein, how about the reaction to the woman that gave all she had, two very small coins, into the temple treasury. Jesus says in **Luke 21:3-4**. Maybe, she did not even know what Jesus had said, but the disciples heard it and I just read it to you. In both of these events, Jesus is trying to show what it means to be generous. A disciple of Jesus should be a generous person, because God is so generous to send His only Son to us. Jesus is so generous to teach us about God and then to give His life for us on the cross, the greatest sign of generosity.

If you would like to follow the message this morning, please open your Bibles to **2 Corinthians 9:6**. Paul says that our generosity reflects our results. In other words, the more we give the more we gain. When I am talking about gaining, I am not talking about God increasing your bank account. I am not talking about God increasing your 401k. I am not talking about God giving you a new diamond necklace or a shiny red sports car. I am talking about God increasing your spiritual gain or your heart. The Bible outlines four gains that one receives by their generosity.

The first gain is contentment. In **1 Timothy 6:6**, Paul says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain. Paul earlier is instructing Timothy and all the believers in Jesus that money is not the source to happiness. Listen as I read **1 Timothy 6:3-10**. "Godliness with contentment is great gain." All the money in the world will not buy your happiness. All the possessions that money can buy will not buy you happiness. As a matter of fact, the more possessions that we have, the more the we have to take time to care for those possessions. The more that we give, the more contentment that we have, because we know that others will have a shelter, food, water, and clothing. The necessities of life to survive. The early church's response to

generosity was to sell what they have, so that others would have their needs met, **Acts 2:44-45**. Everyone benefits from a church made up of generous and contented people.

The second gain is an increase of love for the Kingdom of God. Jesus said in **Matthew 6:19-21**, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Your heart, your soul, the very essence of who you are that is eternal. This is the only part of you that goes to be with God, if you believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. If our focus is on earthly matters and not on heavenly matters, then our treasure will be meaningless. If our focus is on heavenly matters and not earthly matters, then our treasure will be eternal. Let me simplify this. Is it more important for a person to be saved or for your sports team to win the championship?

This brings me to the third gain, which is purpose for your life. Jesus could see that a rich person was lacking in generosity. This person’s life did not have Godly direction or purpose. The only purpose was to get richer and obtain more possessions, **Matthew 19:16, 21-24**. A generous person has a purpose for their life. Their life matters. Their life makes a difference. Their life has meaning, purpose and direction. Some might be thinking, Pastor, I would like to give a lot of money to people, but I do not have that much. Generosity is not about money. Generosity is about being generous with what you do have. Do you have time? Volunteer to help with a ministry here at the church, or some civic organization, or just visit or call a neighbor. Use your talents. Cook a meal for a neighbor. Are you able to help? Clean up the yard or go shopping for an elderly neighbor. Generosity draws people closer to Jesus and that should be our purpose in life.

The final gain is that generosity increases your heart. Do you remember what was wrong with the Grinch’s heart? It was too small. It was clamped down. Being generous grows the heart, which in turn produces a happier heart. **Psalms 119:36** says, “Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain.” By being generous, we avoid becoming selfish.

Now, these are just some of the gains that we receive from being generous. I am sure that you can think of others. Most of us think that God wants us to be generous because He wants our gifts. The opposite is true. God wants to gift us, not receive gifts from us. Look at **2 Corinthians 9:8**.

So how generous should I be? You need to decide that. I will not decide it for you and neither will God, **verse 7**.

"I was at the corner grocery store buying some early potatoes. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas.

I paid for my potatoes, but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes. Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller (the store owner) and the ragged boy next to me.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?"

"Hello, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Just admiring them peas. They sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Fine. Gittin' stronger all the time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, Sir. Just admirin' them peas." "Would you like to take some home?" asked Mr. Miller.

"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for them with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it" said Miller.

"Here 'tis. She's a dandy."

"I can see that. Hmmmmm, only thing is, this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?" the store owner asked.

"Not exactly but almost."

"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way, let me look at that red marble", Mr. Miller told the boy.

"Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile said, "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, when they come on their next trip to the store."

I left the store smiling to myself, impressed with this man.

A short time later I moved to Colorado , but I never forgot the story of this man, the boys, and their bartering for marbles.

Several years went by, each more rapid than the previous one. Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there I learned that Mr. Miller had died. They were having his visitation that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them.

Upon arrival at the mortuary we fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer what ever words of comfort we could.

Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts... all very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing composed and smiling by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket.

Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket.

Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and reminded her of the story from those many years ago and what she had told me about her husband's bartering for marbles.

With her eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket.

"Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim 'traded' them."

"Now, at last, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size... they came to pay their debt."

"We've never had a great deal of the wealth of this world," she confided, "but right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho".

With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three exquisitely shiny red marbles.

The Moral of this story: We will not be remembered by our *words*, but by our *kind deeds*. Life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath.”

In closing, as generous Christians, we should not be worrying about what we have to give up. Instead, we should be worried about not being generous, what we are going to lose. Blessings from God come through our acts of generosity. Generosity is one of the spiritual tools for us to deny self, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Amen.

