

The Joy of Generosity

Take moment to look around you... quilts... food... shoeboxes. As you came in there were barrels of frozen poultry. All to be given away. What richness. What generosity. What joy.

Today is one of my favorite days of the year – not Christmas, not even Thanksgiving. No, it's "just" Thank-Offering Sunday. The day when we give with abandon; when we give without any expectation of return. When we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others, imagining the faces of those on the receiving end – how they will just light up, perhaps thinking: *Oh! I'm not forgotten. Not alone. Someone does care – maybe even God cares.* On the giving end, you have to ask yourself, does it get any better than this?

Over the past couple of weeks you have heard about stewardship, about giving. You have already heard about how to manage your life, your finances – some very good advice that comes straight from Scripture. You have already heard about gratitude and how that shapes you; how it turns your attention to the Giver. Today I want to talk to you about generosity. They're all related; of course they are. But there is real joy in generosity and that's what I want to share with you today.

All of our Bible lessons today refer to that joy. In our Old Testament lesson, David was making plans to build the Temple. He began by giving out of his own pocket, offering huge gifts. Today we read about the gifts given by the people – and in case the words "talent" and "daric" don't mean a lot to you, check out your footnotes. You'll find that the people literally gave tons of gold and silver. And this was no tax. The people just gave willingly, as much as they could, and were happy to do so. The Bible says, "They gave freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord."

Do you get what is going on here? Instead of thinking, "How little can I give and get away with?" it was more like, "Can I give more? What else can I give?" You know, it's a lot like our Fall Festival last Sunday. There were lines of people filling shoe boxes. You could just see everyone thinking, "How much can I fit into this box? Can I cram in one more thing?" It was almost a competition in generosity. So fun!

In our second lesson, we read of the fruits of the Spirit. Now obviously that's not fruit as in apples and oranges. It's the results of the Holy Spirit at work in your life. The fruit; not the root. The roots of your life in Christ is what Jesus has already done for you on the cross. It is his free gift of life to you. That's where your life as a Christian starts, and then it grows and begins to develop. Like a tree, it takes time to produce fruits – fruits like love, joy, peace, patience and all the rest.

So where are you in that development? Are you just noticing your gifts? Thankful to God the Giver? Grateful to the point of generosity? Because one leads to the next. Someone is kind to you in your moment of need; your desire is to give back. Gifts to gratitude to generosity. Generosity gives you joy. It's a fruit of the Spirit. This is what the Holy Spirit sets out to produce in your life when you follow Jesus.

In our Gospel reading, Luke tells us God gives generously. The lilies of the field, the birds of the air – is anything more beautiful? Think not only of the beauty, but also of the bounty of creation, its diversity and fullness. How many seeds does it take to plant a tree? Just one. And yet every tree produces hundreds of seeds. God has created a bountiful world! Our job is to distribute it more evenly. In a small way, that's what we are doing today. Even this small effort will make a difference.

Our Gospel lesson goes on: God is not only generous; he cares. Now I know that, today, some of you may be struggling. But Jesus says, "Don't worry about your life. Worry gets you nothing. It just spends your down

your energy. God knows what you need.” Others here are doing well. You have what you need for this life. Many here have more than you need. Be grateful! Don’t take it for granted. Give away your excess; give, rather than grasp. Let’s face it, most of us could live more simply and maybe that’s a good thing. Wherever you land on this spectrum, you are challenged to a life of generosity – because generosity leads you to trust God. (Right?) And trust is the core of faith.

Jesus says: Not to worry. Not to hoard. His point: your real treasure cannot be kept in a storage container. Your real treasure is not the stuff of this life. You are given a much more lasting treasure. Jesus says, “The Father is delighted to give you his Kingdom. Treasure the things that are lasting. And don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Now, don’t get me wrong. Your gifts here today count. Your generosity surely pleases the Father. But I want to challenge you today to carry your generosity to the next level: not just a one day event but a lifestyle of giving. Because generosity is a tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit to develop trust in God. It’s also a vehicle that delivers God’s bounty to those who need it most. So what would your life be like, if every day looked more like Thank-Offering Sunday? Here's what I see:

First, a generous lifestyle gets your attention off yourself. When you are thinking about what *you* need, what *you* want, what makes *you* happy – your list will never end. You'll never have enough. You'll never be satisfied. But the Bible says, "Be content with what you have." Here's what it says in Hebrews 13:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'

I have a friend who places almost no value on her material possessions. If someone else needs a jacket, she rips off her own. She never gives it a second thought. There is great freedom in being content with what you have and putting your attention on others.

Second, a generous lifestyle makes you realize how much you do have. I was reminded, the other night, about how much these shoe boxes will mean to many of the children in the developing world. When we first arrived in Tanzania, back in the mid-80s, there was very little that you could buy. There weren't any shopping malls or department stores. Just these little shops. You'd go into a store and the shelves were bare. Maybe there had been a shipment of twine that week. So you could buy twine. Or maybe some cooking oil had been delivered, and people would line up to buy that. Other than fresh food, there wasn't much you could buy. So we as missionaries, brought everything we would need for 3 years – and with 3 growing children, that was quite an assignment. All the clothes, shoes, school supplies, deodorant, shampoo – you name it, we brought it all with us. That also meant Christmas and birthday presents for three years. So we didn't have much extra room for gifts for all those unknown birthday parties we would attend. If you gave a pencil, that was a good gift. The children who receive these boxes will be blown away by a whole shoebox full of stuff. Now – think of what will be under your tree this year. We are so very, very rich. When you start to give, you begin to realize just how much you have.

Third, a lifestyle of generosity shapes you into a person who puts a higher value on things that *last*. Not material possessions that (as Jesus pointed out) will either rust or wear out or lose value. Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these other things will be yours as well." What, exactly, is the Kingdom? Well, it's where the King rules. It's wherever God's will is done. Whatever you do in the name of Jesus is where you find his Kingdom. It's wherever the fruits of the Spirit are on display. When forgiveness, kindness, service – when these things take a higher priority in your life than material goods, you will begin to change. You will become a person who rearranges his priorities, putting things that won't wear out or get lost or stolen at the top of your list. Things like worship; relationships; helping others. Lasting things.

God will use a lifestyle of generosity to make you into a different person: one who is banking, not on the stuff of this life, but on the stuff of the next. Now, this is a life-long process and it isn't an easy one. C. S. Lewis said it's kind of like building a house. He said,

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. You see, he intends to come and live in it himself.

When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life, you will find that you are becoming different from what you were before.

Of course, it doesn't happen automatically; it doesn't happen all at once. It's a process. Every day you need to battle with Self; every day you need to ask God to help you to reset your priorities. And practice makes perfect. Practice generosity with your time, your money, your home, even with your family. Who are you inviting over for Thanksgiving this week? Someone with whom you can share the gift of family? These are questions you begin to ask as God bumps out a new room here and there. The process can actually be painful. But what joy will result!

So here's the big picture. Your life on this earth will last maybe 80, 90 years. But Jesus will come again, and that life will last forever. That's what you are preparing for now, even in this life. Because the impact of your generosity, on another life, may have eternal consequences. It might begin with an act of kindness, but in the hands of the Spirit, it eventually produces a new believer. You forgive a brother; it creates a chink in his armor; he finds Christ. A co-worker notices that you are different; material possessions mean less to you and conversations about God mean more. He asks you to show him the way. You will find, as you go along, more joy in lasting things -- like worship, serving others, making connections in Christ and for Christ. Using the stuff of this life to further God's Kingdom of love. *That's* what's going to make your day.

Look around you again. Does it get any better than this? Oh yes. A better moment will be the delight in the Father's eyes when he opens his arms wide to welcome you into his Kingdom. Let that picture, that image, change the way you see things even today. What you see here is tangible joy, not because you get to keep these things but because you get to give them away. And in this life, as well as in the next, God wants for you what he already has: the joy of generosity. It's yours if you want it. All you have to do... is give it away. Amen.