

Message: Generous People
By Pasto Daniel Dennison
Acts 4:32-37
The Power of Generosity Sermon Series
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³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This is the 3rd week in our annual stewardship sermon series called “The Power of Generosity.” Next week Tom will close us out on commitment Sunday, and you are encouraged to bring your pledge card to worship or be prepared to submit it digitally while watching us online. In week one of the series we looked at the generosity of Jesus, last week we looked at what a generous church is, and today we are looking at what it means for us to be generous people. And I know, I know as soon as I say generosity or money most of you immediately have your tensions rise and you go on the defensive. You’re just like: here we go again the pastor is going to talk about money, let’s all get ready to feel guilty.

Let me just start by saying: My goal is not to make anybody feel guilty. My goal is not to make anyone feel shame. I don’t know why the money sermons make so many people uncomfortable, but if I had to guess it’s for 2 reasons. I think too often we have seen pastors on tv and in other places talk about money while they are driving 6 figure cars, wearing \$10,000 suits, and living in mansions. It was not too long ago that a pretty famous televangelist was trying to convince his congregation that he needs a

private jet! That's not going to be me today, I promise. I drive a 2012 Hyundai Tucson with 100,000 miles and lots of scratches and stains and chip crumbs from my kids!

So that's one extreme, there are pastors who are living lavish lives and asking their congregations to fund that and of course those are the people the media likes to highlight. But on the other end of the spectrum you have many pastors and churches preaching on money out of desperation. Please just please give a little more so we can keep the lights on, so we can actually hire a staff person, or fix this leaky roof. And that's really just a Gospel of desperation rather than a Gospel of hope and generosity. So, I don't plan to do that today either. Plus, we don't pass offering plates anymore so you're not going to have to worry about me ending this sermon and holding you hostage until you put enough money into the plates.

There's kind of 4 places I want to go with today's topic and the first is to look at how the early church viewed money, next I want to look at our current world as it is when it comes to money. And then I want to look at what it could be. And then I want to close by looking at how do we get from where we are to where we could and probably should be.

Our scripture this morning is one of the most radical texts in the Bible. I mean the early church as we read in Acts was clearly very different than everyone else in their attitudes toward money. I mean the very first verse tells us (**SLIDE**), **No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they held everything in common.** This is telling us that one of the main ways the ancient world understood that Christians were different was in their economic mindset. The early church was an economic sub culture that was radically different than the economic culture around them.

Whenever we read about the early church, we read about drastic generosity. You might even say it was a generosity of unreasonable proportions. But it was that generosity that had a tremendous cycle of impact on the community around it. We read all throughout Acts that the church was growing exponentially. Why? Because the message they were preaching was backed up by the lives of the people. And the lives of the

people were characterized by a level of radical generosity. And it wasn't just the 1st century church.

In the year 252 AD there was a massive plague in the city of Carthage. During this plague people were leaving the city in droves if they were still healthy. And in the midst of that panic the great early Christian Father Cyprian gathered together all of the Christians in the center of the town. And Cyprian said if we're going to do what Jesus did, then I call each of us to fan out across this town and give out personal and financial aid to all. The early Christian church would not abandon the city, the very city that was persecuting them, because of their generosity toward others.

100 years later we get this quote from Julian, a Roman emperor who was famous for his brutal persecution of Christians. And here's what he said in a letter to a friend (**SLIDE**): **Their success lies in their charity to all. They take care of not only their own poor, but ours as well.** One of the main things that differentiated early Christians from everyone else was how they handled their money. And it was one of the main things that gave them success and drastic growth.

So, it makes me wonder and ask the question: How are we doing on that? How is the Christian church in 2020 doing when it comes to this kind of generosity that we are called to?

I want to take a closer look at that, but I want to start by sharing some more general statistics with you about wealth in our world. According to Credit Suisse of the 7.8 billion people on earth, the richest 1% of the world own about 45% of the world's global wealth. The bottom 50% own LESS THAN 2% of the world's total wealth. (**SLIDE**) That means the remaining 49% of the world's population own about 53% of the world's wealth.

Of course, the natural question for many of you is: well where am I on this graph? If we were to cash you out today. That is if we were to settle up all your debts, sell all your possessions, cash out your bank accounts and retirement accounts. If after doing all of that you had \$10,000 to your name, you would be in the top 45% of wealthiest people in the world. So basically, just about every one of us in this room today is in the top 45% of

wealthiest people in the world. **(SLIDE)** If you had \$100,000 to your name, I'm talking retirement accounts, equity in your homes, savings accounts, then you would be in the top 10% of wealthiest people in the world. Now my point in sharing this is simply to say that we are much richer than we think.

Unfortunately, we also tend to be a lot less generous than we should be. According to the Charity Aid Foundation 27% of people in the world gave away SOME amount of money last year. So just over 25% of the world when asked if they gave money last year, said yes. The U.S. ranks much higher, 68% of Americans said they gave some amount of money in the past year. And that's not just because America is wealthy, because the wealthiest countries tend to be the stingiest.

In the G20, which includes 20 of some of the largest economies in the world, only 5 land in the top 20 of most generous nations. One trend they have seen over the last 5 years is that the number of people who donate money has actually gone down every year for the last 5. Bottom line is that we are a lot richer than we think and a lot less generous than we probably should be.

Now every number I have given you so far is just the world's population, regardless of religion. If we were to look at the Christian church in America, most statistics say that about 5% of American Christians tithe. The tithe is a Biblical benchmark that has historically been used by churches for centuries which literally means to give 10% of what you make. Christians in America on average give away 2.5% of their income. And maybe you say, hey Daniel, times are tough. Well for point of reference during the Great Depression that number was 3.3%.

So, everything I just said is the world as it is. But now I want to talk for just a few minutes about the world as it could be. According to Relevant Magazine if all self-proclaiming Christians just in America actually gave away 10% of their income, there would be an additional \$170 billion to do good with. That's ONLY if Christians in America tithed, an extra \$170 billion. And so naturally we ask the question well what could we do with \$170 billion? Well... a lot!

Last year Americans spent just over \$1 billion on fireworks. We spent \$17 billion on youth sports, we spent \$72 billion on our pets, \$74 billion on coffee, and \$116 billion on gambling! Let me give you just a few examples of what \$170 billion could do...

Between the United Nations and several other studies, I saw estimates that it would take somewhere between \$100-\$250 billion per year to affectively end hunger across the globe. The world bank institution estimates that \$150 billion a year would bring clean drinking water to the entire world. In case you're wondering why that's important, about 5 million people die every year because of a lack of clean drinking water. **(SLIDE)**The international literacy association estimates \$12 billion a year for 5 years would affectively end illiteracy across the globe. The Wilberforce institute estimates it would take \$13 billion to end slavery and human trafficking across the globe.

Now I'll admit it's probably a little naïve to think that any amount of money could completely do away with things like hunger and human trafficking. But I think we could all agree that we could at least make a significant impact on world hunger, providing clean drinking water, ending illiteracy, ending human trafficking, and so much more if Christians actually tithed. And those are just the physical, tangible benefits, we haven't even talked about what it would mean for the spread of the Gospel if Christians were more generous.

And here's the thing, not only would the world be a better place, we would be a lot happier. Christian Smith wrote a book called the Paradox of Generosity **(SLIDE)**. And in this book, he studies people, not just Christians, but anybody who gives away at least 10% of their income. And in his research, he found that generosity actually created more well-being in people's lives. The title of his book is perfect because the paradox is that we always think we can't give away money or we won't be able to afford all of the things that make us happy and keep us safe.

But what he found was that generous people have better numbers as it relates to happiness, bodily health, avoidance of depression, a sense of purpose in living, and personal growth. He said at every internal and external factor generous people performed better in life. So much so that they found generous older Americans over a 7-year period were 30% less likely to die. Generosity is as much of a predictor in death as what medicine people take. Your life would be extended, your quality of life would go up, the world would be a significantly better place, and the Gospel would be proclaimed and received by millions more people if we were more generous with our money.

So how do we get back to the kinds of generosity we see in the book of Acts? How do we get to a world where the Gospel is spreading, poverty is declining, human trafficking is being eliminated, and children aren't going hungry? Let me start by saying it will be the church that helps get us there, not the government. The early church depended on other Christians to help take care of them, not the Roman authorities. Lest you think the text we read earlier or the text from Acts 2 that we studied last week was some form of socialism, it was the exact opposite: There was no coercion, it was people giving out of generosity and love. And throughout history it has been Christians who have taken responsibility for building hospitals, soup kitchens, schools, and other forms of relief agencies. So if the church is going to take responsibility how do we carry it out?

Let me share 3 thoughts with you as we close. I think first and foremost **We've got to examine our hearts.** Jesus speaks to this in Matthew 6.

(SLIDE) He says:

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust^[e] destroy and where thieves break in and steal,²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And verse 21 really gets right to the core of the issue. Why do we need to examine our hearts? **(SLIDE)** Because our lack of generosity is not a lack of information, it's not a lack of strategy, it's not a lack of money, it's a heart

problem. What Jesus is saying in v.21 is your heart's affections are going to determine your money's direction. How do we get from here to there? It's not with more strategy, it's not with a higher paying job, or better investment techniques, it's by looking at our hearts and changing their affections that we can get from where we are to where the world could be. Your heart's desires will determine your life's direction. SO, where you start a conversation like this is not how do I save more, how do I make more, no you start by asking: what does my heart want? That's how Jesus starts the conversation.

Jesus is saying that whatever your heart most treasures, is where your money will go most effortlessly. In other words, you will always most joyfully spend money on that which your heart most treasures and it won't even feel like you are spending money.

Let me give you an example: My sophomore year of college I spent \$100 to buy a ticket to watch OU play in the national championship. When I look at current playoff ticket prices, I realize how blessed I was to only pay \$100, but at the time that was A LOT of money for me. I also spent several hundred dollars on gas to drive to Miami. I gave up 4 days of my time just to travel to and from Miami. I spent money on hotels. I spent money on food. That was an expensive trip for a sophomore in college. And you know what? I didn't even blink an eye at the money I shelled out. Why? Because I LOVE OU! When my daughters turn 40 and are old enough to get married, I probably won't think twice about the money I spend on their wedding because I love those little girls! They have my heart's affections.

When you are spending money on something you LOVE, it doesn't even feel like you're spending money! Whatever your heart most rests in, you actually have to be careful not to spend too much! Some of you will probably spend way more than you should on golf or travel or technology because you love those things. Our money follows our passions!

And so, if we know that to be true, I just gotta ask this question: If you love the Lord and you are passionate about the Lord, does your pattern of giving and generosity back that up? If you love Jesus, if God has changed your life, if God's grace is continually transforming your life, then we should have no

problem giving our money to the church so that we can do Kingdom work, we should have no problem writing a check to send young people on mission trips, we should have no problem writing a check to support the building of a new student ministry building and a development center, we should be giddy when we are given the opportunity to support ministries that are fighting hunger and poverty and addiction. Giving sacrificially and giving to the point that it changes the way we live ought to be a joy if our hearts truly rest in the Lord.

So #1 we need to examine our hearts, **(SLIDE)** but #2 we need to commit to a mission. Why? Because money always follows mission. If your mission in life is to find the greatest cheeseburger and fries, you will spend lots of money eating out and trying different cheeseburgers and fries. If your mission in life is to be a scratch golfer, you will spend lots of money on equipment and lessons and greens fees. If your mission is to help others follow Jesus, then you're going to give a lot of money to your church and other Kingdom minded missions. Because your mission in life will determine where your money goes.

Think about engagement rings. I saw this all the time working in college ministry. When a dude figures out that he met the one. That's a big moment. To look around at all the women in the world. And to say I choose you over all of them. Not that he could get all of them, but he thinks that way. He's like I'm sorry ladies, but she's the one. When he meets that one, I'll tell you what he does next. He gets online and he starts looking at diamonds and he's like "Son of a...." Because he sees how much they are and so he starts moving further down the list thinking "ok, maybe it doesn't need to be flawless, maybe I don't need a full caret." Let me tell you what you will never see: you will never see a guy learn how expensive a ring is and then tell the girl: Sorry, I changed my mind, you should go marry someone else.

No, he fixes on a number and that number is more than likely a lot more money than he has. And so, what does he do? He's not gonna say: Oh well times are tight, you lose. No!! He's gonna start selling plasma, mowing lawns, selling steak knives, whatever it takes. Because when I've got the mission set, nothing is gonna stop me. What is your life's mission? Do you

want to help others follow Jesus? Do you want to see poverty and hunger and addiction and illiteracy rates decline? If so, then our money should be flowing to those things.

Once we have re-aligned our heart's affections and committed to a mission, the last thing we need to do is **(SLIDE) cast off all our anxiety**. And you say, wait, what does that have to do with generosity? Read the entire book of Acts and nowhere in there will you see any of the early Christians stressing out about money. Why? Because they knew that their Father in heaven would provide for them. Here's what's really interesting about Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6. Jesus is going on about money and possessions. And what's so fascinating is the very next verse, v.25, he says: **(SLIDE)**

“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? And then skipping to v.31 he says Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

We tend to break Jesus' teachings into 2 sermons: there's his money sermon and then there's his anxiety sermon. What's interesting about Jesus is he's giving a sermon on money and he says you're either going to serve God or you're going to serve money. And if you serve God, you're going to be generous. You're going to leverage yourself and your resources for God's purposes.

And Jesus anticipates while he's talking about it that the people will get nervous. The people in the crowd are starting to think: how are we going to eat, how are we going to live if we have the kind of generosity that you're talking about? Jesus says we're going to leverage our money and give it away to the poor, now let's talk about anxiety. I don't want you to worry about what you're going to eat or about your clothes, what you're going to wear. Other people worry about that, but your father in heaven knows

what you need. So, seek first his Kingdom and he will add these things to you. He says: you pursue my Kingdom, that is you set your mission to be about him, and he will take the responsibility to provide for you. Isn't that great? You pursue my Kingdom and I will provide for you!

I see this all the time in my kids. My kids continually amaze me at how generous they are! They made pledges to the Better Together campaign. They get upset on Sunday if we're driving to church and they realize they forgot to bring offering. And you know what? My kids NEVER stress about money! They're never like: Daddy, where will our next meal come from? Am I going to have clothes to wear next week? No, because they have faith that their parents will provide for them and take care of their needs. And that comfort and peace frees them up to be generous people.

Church, the same should be true for us. Our Father in heaven promises to provide for all of our needs. I pray that this week as we all prayerfully consider what our pledge to the 2021 operating budget of this church will be, that we might have the kind of faith our children have and the kind of faith the early church in Acts had. A faith that is radically generous, a heart whose affections are aimed wholeheartedly at the mission of the Gospel, and a life that is void of anxiety and fear.