

## It is More Blessed to Give Than to Receive

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Acts 20:32-35

Axioms Sermon Series

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We play a lot of games in the Dennison house. Board games, card games, you name it and we typically enjoy playing them. **(GAME SLIDE!)** At some point during Covid, I don't remember exactly when, I decided it would be fun to introduce the kids to monopoly. Brick was instantly sold as soon as he saw that it involved money. We could not set that board up fast enough! The girls aren't nearly as competitive as Brick and I, but they were also pretty excited to try it out. And it was really exciting in the beginning. It was like: hey look at me, I've got some money!! And I'm trying to explain to the kids you gotta invest that money into real estate and then you try and maximize the productivity of that real estate to make as much money as you can. At one point my sweet McKenna said: How much money do we each need to make until we all have enough?

And I was like Ummm, no honey, that's not how this works. You see the point of the game is to continue to aggressively and relentlessly pursue your wealth until you crush the dreams of others in the game. And as I'm explaining the game I was like "you know what I don't want to play this game any more! Let's play go fish."

That whole experience got me thinking about other games that we should maybe invest in instead of Monopoly. And I was reminded of a game I used to love to play growing up called Life. **(OLD LIFE GAME SLIDE!)** If you've never played Life, you get assigned a job at the beginning of the game based on a roll of the dice. So you get a job, and you get a family, and you might buy a house and you manage your money as you move along the board of life. And as you do so life happens to you. And most of the time in the game, Life was hard. You'd move along that board and you'd land on a space and it would be like "whoops you lost a kidney, pay \$50,000." Oh a car wreck, pay \$20,000. Oh no, your house was just hit by a tornado. Life was a hard place to survive! If you made it to the end with anything, you were doing pretty good.

So I was thinking you know that might be a better game to teach my kids so I got online to see if I could still purchase it and I realized they re-branded and made some changes to the game of Life. Take a look at the new and improved game of Life **(SLIDE!)**. **Notice how everyone is happy and everyone seems to have lots of money.** Now it appears that everyone is a winner, this person wins a Pulitzer prize, this person writes a best-selling novel, and everyone ends with millions of dollars. And I thought ok that's nicer than Monopoly, but I'm not sure I want to teach my kids that everyone just wins in Life. And then when I saw the synopsis of the game said "The winner of Life is the person who gets to the end with the most money wins at life." I thought, yea no, I definitely don't want to teach them this game either!

So why do I tell you these stories? Because today's sermon topic is generosity and just about everything in life, including our favorite board games is going to preach a message to us that is completely counter to generosity. We're in a sermon series in which we are looking at different

axioms. Today's axiom says **"It's more blessed to give than to receive,"** but you're not going to get that message anywhere in culture. Instead, the message we receive over and over is that we should relentlessly pursue wealth because those who win at life are the ones with the most money.

This idea that it's more blessed to give than to receive sounds like a quote from *It's a Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Carol*, but in reality, it's actually a quote from Jesus and we find it in Acts 20. Would you stand with me as we read Acts 20:32-35:

**<sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'**"

For some reason there's something about generosity that makes us nervous. In fact it may have made you nervous this morning coming here knowing that this was what we were talking about. I mean let's be honest if you ask the average church goer what they don't want to hear talked about from the pulpit the answer is usually money and generosity. And if you ask most preachers what they do NOT want to preach on, it's money and generosity. So thank you Pastor Tom...

Actually, the reason Tom asked me to preach today is because I LOVE to preach on money and generosity. It's one of my favorite sermon topics. And I love to preach on generosity because it's absolutely crazy what we get to be a part of when we are generous.

Our main text is Acts 20 where Jesus tells us it's more blessed to give than to receive, but I want us to look at Matthew 21 to help unpack this idea of it is better to give than to receive. So here we go:

The header in most of our Bibles is going to say "Jesus' Triumphal Entry." So Jesus is about to do something really amazing. Here's what we read:

**(SLIDE) Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethpage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me."**

Untie them and bring them to me. Untie the donkey and the little donkey and you bring them to me. It seems so simple, doesn't it? There's no exotic investments or finances involved, it's just a donkey and a colt. The text goes on...

**If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, "The Lord needs them and he will send them at once." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying "Say to the daughter of Zion, behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."**

There it is again. The donkey and the little donkey. Ok now hang with me I'm going to bring this all together for us. Let's keep reading: **The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest! And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city. THE WHOLE CITY, was stirred up, saying "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.**

I want you to think about this for a moment. In generosity, the God of the universe, is actually asking us for something. I mean have you ever thought about how crazy that is?

God could have said: My son is coming into town to do the most important thing in the history of humanity and the prophet said he's going to come on a donkey and a colt, so I need a donkey and a little donkey. BMMM! Donkey and little donkey. God didn't need the disciples. He could have just said to them "I've made a donkey and a colt, BMMM, there it is." And God could just make whatever else he needs.

If God wanted to build a development center in south Tulsa to house a bunch of ministries to serve this community he could have just said "Poof, development center!" **(Slide!)** And I suspect Kim Renkema and Jeff Polk and all of those who have served on the building committee and Trustees would be thrilled for God to have just given us a development center out of thin air. But that's not how the God of the universe works. This amazing development center that opens in a few short months required the generosity of each of you and the generous time of many others who are working hard behind the scenes. The fact that God comes to people he has made and asks to borrow things that he created is crazy. **The Psalmist said The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it is the Lord's.**

The fact that God comes to us to borrow something from us that belongs to him in the first place is amazing! He could have just said "Tell the guy, it's my donkey and my colt." No, instead he said: Tell him that the Lord needs them.

Now let me point something else out to you from this story. Jesus comes riding into town on the generosity of ordinary people. He could have come by any kind of means. He could have ridden in on a Boeing 777. I mean that would have blown their minds. But no, he said "I'm going to tell you how I will get into Jerusalem to do the greatest thing that's ever been done. I'm going to ride in on the generosity of a guy who has a donkey and a colt.

And let me tell you friends, that's how God is going to ride into Tulsa. On the generosity of ordinary people.

And I love that it says when he arrived the whole city was stirred. Did you catch that? A donkey owner set off a tidal wave in the city. And when Jesus came in on generosity's back, the whole city was stirred up. And this is what God is thinking about for this church and this city. God

wants the whole city of Tulsa to be stirred. He wants everyone to ask just like they did in this text, “Who is this?” And how’s it going to happen? It’s going to happen with our generosity! That’s how Jesus is going to enter Tulsa.

How is God going to end hunger and homelessness in Tulsa? Through our generosity! How is God going to provide homes for all of the kids living in foster care? It’s through our generosity! How is the Gospel going to be proclaimed and received all over Tulsa? It’s through the generosity of you and me. How is God going to build his kingdom in Estonia and Tanzania and Mexico and Azerbaijan and all of the other places that this church does ministry? Through the generosity of you and me.

So God doesn’t even need our generosity, but he graciously invites us to be a part of it. Why? So that he can stir up an entire city and world and draw people into a deeper abundant relationship with him. But check this out.

When we do that, when we give generously, God writes us into his story. Our greed writes us out of the story, but our generosity writes us into the story of God. Some guy who owned two donkeys and was generous, is written into the Gospel story. It’s those little acts of generosity in response to God’s prompting in our life that writes us into the story of God.

There was a woman with two mites who gave generously and she’s in the story. There was a boy who had 5 loaves and two fish and because of his generosity, we find him in the story. There are people all over God’s story who were written in because of their generosity.

This promise in v.5, **“Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey.”** This is a direct quote from Zechariah 9:9. (SLIDE) Do you know when this promise was made? In 500 BC! In 500 BC God said “this is what I’m going to do in this city on this day.” And all these years later one man’s generosity fulfills God’s destiny for a city. And I just wonder what God has promised to Asbury and to the city of Tulsa, to Estonia, to the Ukraine, to Grove Elementary....I just wonder what God has promised that we get to be a part of him fulfilling. It will be fulfilled and done because of OUR generosity.

So why don’t we do it? Why, according to Vanco, does the average American Christian only give \$17 per week? I think for most of us it’s a combination of fear and greed and perspective. What do I mean?

Well fear is pretty self-explanatory. Jesus speaks to this in Matthew 6 (SLIDE): <sup>25</sup> **“Therefore I tell you, 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?”** <sup>26</sup> **Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?**

Jesus is saying I know you’re going to worry about your needs: food, clothing, housing. These are normal things to worry about, but Jesus goes on to say: If God cares for the birds of the air, won’t he also care for our human needs? If we truly believe in God the Father Almighty as

maker of heaven and earth and that he sent his only son Jesus Christ to die for our sins. If we believe all of that, why should we be so fearful about not having enough money?

I also think we struggle with generosity because of greed. And let me just say I'm as guilty as anyone with greed. Mindy and I make a lot more money now than we did 5 years ago, and we have really struggled with scope creep. It's easy to justify all of the extra expenses we now have when you're making more money. And for some reason it's a lot harder to let our generosity grow at the same rate we let our expenses grow as we make more money. And that's the deceptiveness of greed. Money tricks us into thinking it will always provide for us, but it will leave us as fast as it comes to us. It's a good tool, but a bad god.

I heard one pastor say it this way: I have never in all my life had a man with a great wife, great kids, and a deep love for God, pull up at my house for counseling and weep because he drove a Ford. But I have had many men drive up to my house in a luxurious car and weep bitterly because of their bad marriage, their rebellious kids, and their empty heart. Because they believed the lie: I'll chase money and it'll provide for me. It won't. It'll take more from you. It's a good tool, use it to meet your needs, enjoy a meal, buy a house, but don't horde it because that's toxic to you. Greed is toxic, generosity is contagious.

The last reason I think we aren't more generous is because our perspective is distorted.

There's a scene in Superman, the one with Christopher Reeve in which he picks up Lois Lane and he takes her flying. **(SLIDE)** And at first, she's really nervous, because she's never flown in this way before. And they're flying along, and everything is great. But it gets to the point where she starts to feel more stable, and she thinks she has it all under control. And so, she thinks everything is good and she looks at Superman and gives him this little smirk and lets go. And begins to plummet to her death. Because she was struck by a moment of insanity where she thought we were flying. NO, we weren't flying, Superman was flying and he was holding you.

The problem with our distorted perspective is we begin to think that we did everything to earn and deserve our money and it's all because of our hard work. And I don't want to discount the fact that many of us in here do work very hard. But most of us were also born in the suburbs and had the benefit of growing up in a house that wasn't full of lead paint. You probably lived in a house where getting 3 meals a day was normal. Did we have anything to do with that? Just based on where you were born, you have like a 1,000% better chance of attaining more wealth than a kid born 30 minutes down the street in the inner city. You have like a million% better chance of attaining wealth than a kid born in Nepal. Did you have anything to do with that? Did you contribute at all to the fact that you have a heart that keeps beating and keeps you alive? We don't do any of that, it's all a gift.

See when our perspective is "hey look at me, look how hard I've worked to earn all of this." When that's our perspective of course we're going to be less generous because we feel like our wealth is all our own doing. But when we have a perspective that says: I may have worked hard, but all of this is God's and it is only by his grace and mercy that I have attained this, when that's our perspective, it's so much easier to be generous.

So what am I asking of you this morning? Just give more money to the church, right? Yes, actually that is part of what I'm asking you to do. I think MOST, not all, but MOST of us fall into one of two camps: We either give a woeful amount. So maybe we're like the average Christian who gives away less than 3% of our money to the church OR we give generously, maybe we're even tithing, but it's not making us uncomfortable in the least. Rather than tell you what % of your money you need to give, let me put it to you this way: I think God calls us to give to the point that it makes us uncomfortable.

If you're giving 10% of your money away, but you don't ever have to think about your expenses, I would tell you that you're not giving enough. When you hear the term tithes and offerings, our offerings are that which we give above and beyond our tithe. That could go to a specific cause like Better Together or it could go to one of the many wonderful Christian nonprofits in this community. Give generously of your tithe to this church but give generously of your offerings to other ministries as well.

So #1 I am challenging you to raise your financial commitment to Asbury Church. We are giving away more money to local and global missions than we ever have. I can tell you that our Asbury Kids and Asbury student teams are doing more to reach out into our local schools and engage kids and students outside of our walls than they have in the four years I have been here. I can tell you that Betty Logan and the senior adult leadership team are doing more to reach out to senior adults than we have in my four years here. I can tell you that our staff parish relations committee is having difficult conversations about how we're going to care for our staff during astronomical inflation. And I can tell you that our finance staff and our finance and stewardship committee are doing more than ever to make sure that your gifts are stewarded in the best possible way. I can't think of a better time than now to give more generously to our church.

Secondly, I want to challenge you to give more of your time to the church. For our church to be most effective at helping others follow Jesus we need more of you to serve the church in some capacity. Did you know it takes 450 volunteers every Sunday morning for us to have great worship, wonderful hospitality, and stellar kids and student programming. It's not too late for you to sign up to volunteer in AsburyKids or Students. We still need 70 more volunteers. I hope you will go by the table outside of Asbury Kids on the south side of our building this morning.

And finally, and this might be the most fun of all. I want to challenge you to be extraordinarily generous in your giving to other people. The men and women working in the service industry are some of the hardest working and yet most underpaid individuals. If \$10 was a generous tip based on your tab, just think how generous \$20 would feel? For most of us, not all, but most of us that extra \$10 means very little to us. But it means a whole lot to the person making \$10 an hour. Give generously to the person who helps take care of your yard or cleans your house or drives your uber. I want to see Instagram blowing up later today because generous Christians from Asbury were leaving \$100 tips at their lunch.

So, I don't know where you land on all of this. I suspect most of you in here would say you want to be a generous person in life, let me tell you how that happens. You make the tree good, and the fruit is good. So, where you need to start is not with your wallet, it's with your heart. Before you give God anything, you need to understand what he has done for you. That while we were

sinner Christ died for us. That before you were born, Jesus saw that you would make a mess of your life and so he came running for you. So that as soon as you started to fall, as you were stumbling, he is stepping in. The grace of God is free today for anyone who is willing to say: I am in need of the grace of God to be at work in my life. If you've never given your life to Jesus Christ, today is the perfect day.

I promise you when you embrace a God who gave all for you, you're going to want to be a part of his call to give generously. You're going to want to join God in what he's doing and that's going to create joy and meaning in your life. I believe that starts this morning at the table of Holy Communion. Through this sacrament we are reminded of God's extravagant generosity for us and in turn our hearts are moved to be generous to others.