

Living Generous Lives

November 19, 2023

Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church

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This is the last week of our series called *Parables and Possessions*. For the last few weeks, we have been focusing on this thing that Jesus decided that He wanted to talk about on His last trip to Jerusalem. He is going to Jerusalem to go to the cross and on Easter morning be raised from the dead. And what does He want to talk about? He wants to talk about one of the things that serves as one of the main obstacles to getting in our way of seeing Jesus clearly.

So let's get into this just a little bit. Today, we are talking about *Living Generous Lives*. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God" (2 Cor. 9:11). Do you see the movement through that? Do you see how that works? God has given us and blessed us with everything that we have, we are stewards of those things, and then we are called to be generous.

How are we called to be generous? In what ways? In every way. That seems like a lot. You would be right. We are called to be generous in every way, in the way that we have been enriched, and what is that going to do? Is that going to help other people see us and see how good of a family, a person we are? Or, is it going to produce thanksgiving to God?

When we get this movement right, when it comes to our possessions, the way that we give of our time, talents, and treasures, we start to see that again it is not about us at all. It is about *helping the kingdom of God grow* in this place, at this time, so that people will see Him and not us. "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God."

Let us talk about some of the things that get in our way of this. When we think about our stuff and what God has enriched us with, one of the main

obstacles that gets in our way of seeing God's hand in all of that is the way we compare ourselves to others. As soon as we see others with that thing that we want, the bigger house, the nicer car, the different relationship, the happier family, the "whatever it is", we start to compare ourselves to others.

I heard a preacher say this once, and I love it—*comparison is the thief of joy*. I take no credit for this one. Comparison is the thief of joy. As soon as we get into that mode of comparing ourselves to others, whether it is about our stuff, that is envy and jealousy. And you get into relationships, "Why is my marriage not as good as theirs?" "Why am I not as beautiful or as handsome as that person that I see?" "Why do not I have the job that that person has?" "Why did they get into this school and I didn't?" When we start comparing ourselves to others, the joy of the Lord that works through us and in us gets blocked. It gets stolen.

We can choose to compare ourselves to others, or we can choose to have a tranquil heart. In Proverbs 14, the Lord says this, "A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot" (v. 30). That is a visceral image too about envy and jealousy in comparison—"makes your bones rot". You are going to rot from the inside out. In other words, everything is going to look okay on the outside, but inside it is rotting away until finally, at some point, everything breaks. A tranquil heart, one that is content, one that sees God's hand in everything, one that sees that God is the one who blesses—God who's the one who gives, everything we have is simply His—it will give life to the flesh.

I see that as the core mission of being somebody who follows Jesus. Jesus has given me life. That is what I know Easter is all about. That is what I know my baptism is all about. And so, my goal, my purpose in life, is to see ways that I can help others experience that as well. To give them life too. To help them see that Jesus is the one who brings them true life.

And in order to have that tranquility, this contentment is really key. He puts it in another way, about generosity. He links the two. "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the

needy honors him” (v. 31). You see, it is about this state of our heart. It is not about the amount of time or money that is given. It is about the state of our hearts. Can we see others as people who are worth spending our time, our talents, and treasures on? Can we see other people as our neighbors? Whom God loves, whom God so desperately wants to bring back to Him, that He would send us into their midst to show them Jesus.

This is what it means to be generous. It is not about getting more stuff. It is about enlarging the kingdom. Helping people see Jesus more clearly. Generosity is the thing that gives life to the people around us.

Who is our neighbor? Everybody. That includes the people that you do not like. Do you realize that? It includes people who do not look like you, and that do not live in the same zip code as you. It includes people all across the world. And that may give you some pause to think. *How can I be generous to people all across the world?*

How can I be generous to everyone? Because everyone is my neighbor. Well, this is where we get back to having a bigger perspective. It is not about you. It is about what God is doing, and He is using you, and He is using people at churches all across the world to bring His goodness to people in their own communities. We can help however we can. It does not mean we have to help every single person in the whole world. That is what we have our brothers and sisters in Christ for across the world. We join together in God’s mission, not our own. So do not let this idea of having to be generous to everybody overwhelm you. Instead, remember what God has blessed you with, right where you are, right at this time, is how he calls you to be generous to the people around you.

In our parable today, Jesus says this to the people about the end times: look, this king has separated some on the left and some on the right. And the ones that are on the right are the ones who are going to inherit the kingdom of God. Now this is end time language. What is going to happen at the end time? We have talked about this a bit last couple of weeks because we keep the end in mind. This is where our hope is. In the end. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

That is our creed. It means that Jesus is going to return. And when He returns, He is going to make all things new. No more suffering, no more pain, no more sin itself. It is going to be gone, and everything that is not right is going to be made new. True justice, true life. We are going to see that. We are going to have that.

And those who are going to have that are those who are going to inherit the kingdom, the ones who have been called in the name of Jesus. So, he says to these, the ones who are already loved by Jesus, you are going to I have prepared you just for this time, just for this place. I have prepared you in all these ways to be incredibly generous to those around you.

Now, this comes from our identity. Remember, this is not about us. This is not about how good we are or how many buildings we can get our names on. This is truly about Jesus.

Today, we celebrated the baptism of Sadie, and she was ready to go. She did not cry. She was happy. She was excited about the water. The water was warm. At that moment, heaven and earth broke in together. She was made new by Jesus Himself, and the Spirit of God is now living in her as it lives in you. Through that Spirit, we are called to be generous, to see the people around us as people worthy of being generous toward.

Now the king surprises them and says, “There were times when I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, you gave me a drink.” Now, this sounds really strange, because this is the king talking. When does the king ever go hungry? When does the king ever need us to give him food? When does the king ever need us to give him drink? That is not normal. It is very strange. It is very odd. When do we need to visit a king in prison? Maybe there’s more to that, but this is a very strange thing for the king to be saying, and so the righteous people reply, “When did we ever see you doing this? That makes no sense.” That is a valid question.

It is one when we are looking out into our communities, serving the people around us. It kind of comes to us in this way. Do we only choose to be generous to those whom we can see, whom we know? Are we only generous in ways in which we can see the fruit of that generosity, the result

of it? Are we only being generous with our time, talents, and treasures in ways in which we know they are going to be effective, according to us? You see, this is a little bit narrow-minded. Because, in this parable, Jesus is reminding the people, just like you, that when you are generous, even to people that you do not know, in ways that you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you are being generous to the Lord Himself.

Did you catch that? Do you see that? This need of needing to see the result of our generosity is really this issue of being in control, which we talked about in the last sermon series. It is about wanting to know that what I am doing is going to make a difference in my way, the way I want it to. Instead, the Lord calls you to something bigger, something greater, something in which you are going to make an impact that is bigger than you can ever imagine by allowing Him to be in control of that.

It is hard to be generous when you cannot see the results of your generosity. So, the king answers them and surprises them. He says, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (v. 40b). This past week, you all collected all kinds of food that we put in those Thanksgiving bags that we are sent off to people in this community, to people we may never meet. And there were no names attached to it. You all simply gave to support the needs of people in our community. That is exactly what this is talking about. You were generous to those whom you may never meet, who can never give you credit for it.

Instead, through your generosity, they will know that it is God who cares for them, who shows up for them, who loves them, who thinks that they are worth loving. This is the core of what it means to be generous. And the king twists it all around for them and gives them real encouragement. And to us today. As we do to the least of these around us, you do it to the Lord.

Generosity is about a joyful response to God’s grace for you, that God loved you and saved you as a gift is a gift that we can share with others. The way we give to others freely is a response directly to that gift. Paul puts it this way that we heard in our epistle lesson, “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows

bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6). And by this point, I hope you know, this is not about gathering a fortune for yourself. This “sowing and reaping” is about the kingdom. It is about helping people see Jesus more clearly, believe in Him, trust in Him, and know that He brings them new life. When we go out and sow bountifully, not knowing what is going to grow out of it, but the Lord will reap bountifully.

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7). See, that first part talks more about our time and our talents, going out and helping others. That one hour a day that you spent mentoring that student in middle school will pay dividends over the long run. When that student learns that they are worth the time of somebody, this adult that they can trust, who shows up for them, reminds them how much they are worth spending time with, that they can actually be loved, that person is going to take that into their life and care for others in that way. The second part is more about the treasures aspect of “time, talent, and treasures.” Each one must give as they have decided in their heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

I heard a story once when I was at a church in Minnesota. This was a long, long time ago when I had hair and no kids. That was a long time ago. At this church, some of the long-time members of the church told me the story that they pointed to a bulletin board in the Narthex, just like we have out there. And they said, it used to be on this bulletin board, the pastor and the church leaders would post the names of all the households in the church, and in December, they would put how much that household had given to the church throughout the year. Some of you are already tightening up here. This is not a typical way that churches do things.

Let’s put the best construction on it. Let’s say the church leaders just wanted everybody to know that we are part of a family, that we are all taking care of the Lord’s house and the Lord’s servants and all the ministries that happen together. However, as an unintended consequence, it leads to the opposite of what Paul says. It leads to a culture of guilt and of maybe even shame going around giving the compulsion to give instead

of how we are called to give cheerfully out of great joy, intentionally. Notice that as he has decided in his heart. These are all of the ways that we give to support the Lord's work. Whatever experience you have had before, if it is negative, if it is based on guilt, or shame, or duty, I hope you can let that go. And see again, that God is calling to you with great joy, with cheerfulness, with intentionality. This is how He calls us to be generous.

And these three P's help me remember how to give: *Priority, Proportional, Progressive*. Priority means be intentional, make this a priority in your life. There are so many other things calling on you. Giving back to the Lord in your time, towns, and treasures should be a priority. The second one is Proportional: We give according to our gifts and the way He has enriched us. We dedicate a portion to Him. The last one is Progressive. And today this is what we talk about just for a moment.

This is about the need to grow in this area over the course of your life. This is part of our spiritual growth. Growing and trusting in the Lord that He will take care of all of our needs. And trusting that as we give, as we are generous, it does not go empty for His kingdom. He makes things happen as part of His kingdom as we give together.

So, have you challenged yourself to take the next step in increasing the portion of your time, talents, and treasures that you have returned to the Lord? Let me make this a little bit personal here as well. We have been here for like four months now. I was a little nervous to do a stewardship series right off the bat, but I think you guys have handled it really well. Because in the end, I hope you realize that it is not about the stuff. The stuff is usually an obstacle. It is about our hearts. It is about our perspective. It is about working together to do what God has called us to do as our mission together right here in this place. I hope that we have made it easy for you to do these things as well. When you go to Church Center, you will see a button at the very top that says "Join a serve team". If you have been thinking about how to serve using your talents and your time, and are not sure what to do, just press that button. You will go to all the ways that you can serve, whether it is on Sunday mornings, or through

the week, or on some of our teams that go out into the community, and really bless other people. So take a look at that, and through this 3P model, challenge yourself to take on something new.

The same thing goes for treasures. This is something that we do in our house annually. We take stock, we look at budgets, we plan for the next year, and we just did that this weekend. And we were able to, in a matter of about 10 seconds on the Church Center app, set up the giving amount that we made a priority, is proportional, and was a challenge to our family. And we set up and got that ready to go for the year. I encourage you to take a look at these as well as you do this. As you think about how the Lord has called you to be generous and to support the Lord's work here, in Our Savior's Way.

In the end, remember what Paul says, "You will be enriched in every way..." For what reason? "...to be generous in every way..." Why? So that other people will see Jesus, so that the kingdom of God will increase, so that people will give thanks to God, here in this community and across the world, for how good He is to them.

Let's close in prayer. *Heavenly Father, we thank you for being with us today, for opening up your scriptures to us, so that we might hear your word. We give you thanks for the gift that Jesus has given to us of new life. We pray, Lord, that the generosity that your Spirit works through us will bring life to the people around us. To our neighbors who are in need, Lord, let us bring those things that they need to live. But also, let us bring the message of your salvation through Jesus. So that they might not just live in this life, but live eternally. Let us focus on that. As we, Lord, walk together, your way, right here together, as Our Savior's Way. We pray it all in Jesus' name. Amen.*