

“The Extravagant Generosity of God”

Date: Oct. 20, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Luke 12:14-21 Theme: Stewardship, Giving

Occasion: Extravagant Generosity series

For the past couple of months we have been talking about spiritual gifts, mission and service. Today we turn our attention to the spiritual discipline of giving, what Bishop Robert Schnase calls *extravagant generosity*. But, before we get too serious, I have a little story to share:

Did you know there are more Catholic churches in Las Vegas than casinos? I haven't been there, but I'm told it's true. Not surprisingly then, some worshipers at Sunday services will give casino chips rather than cash when the basket is passed along the pew.

Well, since they get chips from many different casinos, the churches have devised a method to collect and sort the offerings. All of the churches send their collected chips to a nearby Franciscan monastery for sorting, and then the chips are taken to the various casinos to be cashed in. And all of this work is done, of course, by the “chip monks.”

Oh, that was bad even for me. Well, on to the message for the day. John Wesley was convinced there is a direct connection between our discipleship and the use of our financial resources. He called money “an excellent gift of God” and was clear that the “love of money,” not money itself, was “the root of all evil.”

His challenge to the early Methodists was to “gain all you can, save all you can and give all you can.” He believed it was an essential practice of a Christ-centered life.

Now, lest you think this sermon is a desperate plea for money because the church is running a deficit, I want you to know we learned at

church council this week that we are several thousand dollars in the black. This is not a cry for more money because the church doesn't have enough to work with. To the contrary, Lakewood is doing very well compared to many other churches when it comes to our finances.

The reason for this sermon, and for this series, is so that we have a better understanding of *why* we give. What's our motivation for giving? A biblical understanding of the relationship between our money and our faith begins not in what *we* do, but in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

"We love because he first loved us," 1 John 4:19. We give because Jesus gave, Titus 2:14. In other words, our generosity is a finite response to the infinite generosity of God. Christian generosity is modeled after nothing less than the extravagant generosity of God's love to us in Jesus Christ. So that what goes around comes around.

It's a circle of generosity. God's generosity to us results in gratitude, which we then express through our generous acts and living. This circle of generosity changes our lives, bringing us to the realization that we are stewards of God's free gifts, rather than owners of what we have.

The Bible has a great deal to say about our financial lives. In fact, Scripture contains more than 2,000 references to the subject of money and possessions. Jesus spoke frequently about the use of our financial resources.

One of the central messages is that there is a direct connection between our relationship with money and our relationship with God. There are three biblical principles which form the foundation for how we approach the stewardship of our resources as disciples of Jesus Christ.

First, God created everything. **Second**, God owns everything. **Third**, as disciples of Jesus, we are not owners of the things we possess, but

trustees of things that belong to God. Let me repeat those three things.

Jesus understood those principles in the story of the rich farmer whose land produced so many crops that he had no place to store them. The farmer decided to tear down his old barns and build larger ones in which to store his grain and goods. The self-satisfied, overly stuffed farmer then says, “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.” (Luke 12:19)

Our culture would call that man a success. But Jesus saw him through the eyes of God and said, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Jesus concluded his story, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” (Luke 12:20-21)

His warning at the beginning of the story is a warning to us all: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

So what are we to conclude? Well, a Christian understanding of the stewardship of our resources begins with the conviction that God entrusted us with financial and physical resources to meet our needs. Yes, we need money to live.

And also, as trustees of those resources we are enabled to participate in God’s redemptive work in the world. All that we earn and possess is not ours to keep for ourselves. God expects us to use and to give some of what we have been blessed with to further God’s work on earth.

Here is a spiritual truth that many people never learn: Once we are able to offer God control of our finances, we can offer God our entire lives. And when we do, we will experience the spiritual freedom that God intends

for us. For many of us, it's hard to be faithful trustees of our resources because of the materialistic culture in which we live. The prevailing culture tells us to want more, to need more, and to get more. And what you have is yours to keep. Essentially it's every one for themselves. But the way of the world is not the way of Christ.

Episcopal priest and author Harold Keucher gives this sound advice: "If you really want your heart to be with God...then you might want to change how you give to your church and to God's work accomplished by other charities.

"Don't treat your charitable giving as just another bill that has to be paid – or one that doesn't get paid if there's not enough left over. Don't think of your gift as a tax or as club dues, and for heaven's sake, don't let it be just a tip that's less than you spend on lunches.

"Make your gift a first-fruits offering. Fix a percentage in your heart and in your head, and give that percentage off the top to God every time money goes into your bank or into your hand." (end of quote)

The important first step is recognizing that all we have comes from God and belongs to God. We can practice extravagant generosity because we have a God who practices extravagant generosity. All that we have is because of the Lord. And all that we have belongs to God.

So let me ask you, do you believe God owns everything? Do you believe your money comes from God and belongs to God?

If yes, how have you been a trustee of God's gifts to you? Are you giving of what you have with a heart of gratitude? May it be so. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from "A Disciples Path Daily Workbook," James Harnish and Justin Larosa, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 65-68.