

SERMON FOR MARCH 29, 2020

GIVING

In the name of Jesus:

Gifts are funny, aren't they? Sometimes you can feel like you nailed a gift and it comes back to backfire. Other times you can give a gift you are not that confident in and it becomes a winner. With kids, you never know. Especially when the kids give the gifts. This year my grandson gave his uncle a toilet bowl plunger. It was a gift from the heart. That is the most special of gifts, when it is given from the heart, out of love. Some people are really great gift givers. Some of my favorite gifts at Christmas was a box of personal necessities given by my parents. Practical gifts, especially when I was single: Toilet paper, deodorant, soap, and after-shave. Gifts that I could actually use. The gifts continued after Luann and I got married. I got the same gifts, given out of love. My parents even added to the box after I got married. I got mouthwash. Practical, given out of love, I appreciated the gifts and I loved my parents for their thoughtfulness.

Giving can really have an impact on people's lives. That is the type of life God invites us into when we follow Him, a life of generosity and giving. So here we are, week 5 of the Red Letter Challenge, reading Scripture and seeking to put the words of Jesus into practice in our lives. The five principles

or targets that we are shooting for are summed up in these five words: Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving and Going. We've looked at the first three in each of the last three weeks and now we are moving to the 4th principle, the 4th target that Jesus invites His followers to practice. Giving.

Out of all the principles we talk about in the Red Letter Challenge, this is the one that Jesus brings up most frequently. As I read the Scriptures and notice how often Jesus talks about money and giving and generosity, I have come to this conclusion: **I'm convinced it's impossible to be a stingy Christian.** If you are truly following Jesus, you are generous! And I don't even think it's a gray issue. I believe it's a black/white issue. To truly follow Jesus means you are truly generous. He talked about this more than he did love, heaven, or hell. In fact, he talked more about this particular thing than any other topic except the kingdom of God.

Why would Jesus talk about money so much? Because people make money into an idol, a god that passionately followed. Consider that many today are living paycheck to paycheck and drowning under debt. In fact, a recent study that I just saw this week says that now 78% of people who are working full-time are living paycheck to paycheck with 71% being in debt today.

In our culture today, financial stress is completely normal. You see it in almost everyone you come in contact with. Today, living paycheck to paycheck, it's absolutely normal. Having monthly payments...normal. Debt...normal. Worry, anxiety, fear; is very normal. Having little or no financial margin is very, very normal. Let's all agree that normal is not working.

In spite of all of that, consider this earth shattering statement: **You are rich.** Pastor Andy Stanley says, "It's funny, rich people are in denial. And normally we are not in denial about things we know. For instance, tall people admit they're tall. Short people admit they are short. Athletic people admit they're athletic. Artsy people admit they're artsy. And they don't mind telling you that...their car is a mess, their room is a mess, their life is a mess, and they are as happy as can be. Introverts don't even mind telling you they are introverts, and extroverts can't wait to tell you they are extroverts. Like they really need to tell you. But when it comes to rich people, they won't admit it, they live in denial."

According to statistics, if you make \$40,000 a year you are in the top 4% in the world, and if you make over \$48,000 a year, you are in the top 1% of earners in the world. But no matter how much we make, we are not any happier and we find ways to blow it and still be in trouble. In fact, some of you

think if I can just get to this number then I'd be happy. And this number is different for some of you than others. This week I looked at an article that said 10% of those that make \$100,000 struggle to make ends meet. But it's all relative. One time I heard an athlete talk about how hard it is to live on 14.6 million dollars.

Here is the problem: no matter how much you make, it doesn't feel like we are ever content with what we have, no matter how much we make, it feels like it is never enough. And according to statistics, the more Americans make, the less they give away. The rich are actually statistically far less generous than the poor and the middle class. Christians aren't much better. Do you realize that the average American gives away \$1600 a year, while the average Christian gives \$1800 a year? If we are truly going to represent Jesus, then we have to look different and \$200 a year difference doesn't do it!

Remember when I said that you are rich! You are. The problem is that you and I have too much stuff. We have storage closets, junk drawers; we can't park our cars in the garage because we have too much stuff. And if we can't find a place in our home for our stuff, we can buy or rent a storage locker to keep our stuff. Our lives are cluttered with stuff, too much stuff.

We need to turn from all of our stuff and turn to Jesus. That is what repentance is all about, turning to Jesus. Jesus said you can't serve God and mammon, which means you can't serve God and the stuff you have accumulated, including money. The stuff of the world and our money has become our #1 idol, which is the reason why Jesus spoke so much about this topic. Don't have any other gods besides the One True God, and that includes money and stuff.

There is an incredible story in Luke about a generous woman who had just lost her husband but continued to live a life of generosity. Luke writes:

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Here's what's amazing. According to our currency today, she gave 2/5 of a penny. And we are still telling her story 2000 years later. There is no way she numerically out gave everyone else that day. Jesus is not against big gifts. But what this story shows us is God welcomes us into a life of sacrificial generosity. Because that is what truly shows where your trust and faith lie.

Jesus says, **“Where your treasure is, there your heart is.”** It is all about priorities.

And here’s the great thing about being generous. Especially when it comes to your finances. **Your money goes places that you can’t.** And it does things that you don’t even know possible. When you live a generous life, your money goes places. It touches people’s lives. If you look back at any of the great movements of God in this world it starts by someone or someone’s being generous.

If you aren’t a regular giver, if you don’t tithe, I want to challenge you. In fact, the RLC will challenge you this week to become a more generous person. I hope you don’t stop short. It’s great to serve, use your hands and feet, and that’s what we were focused on last week but now we move to your money. And it’s not just me that would issue this challenge to you. The only time God ever says that we can “Test Him” in the Bible is found in Malachi 3:10 when He says to His people: **Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. “Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.**

And one of the things that Jesus tells His followers in Matthew 23:23 is not to neglect the tithe. If in the Old Testament we gave out of obedience to the Law, then how much more generous should we be after receiving the grace of Jesus?

And just as we serve out of a response to God, we give because God gave to us. The most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16: **“For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life.”** God showed His love for us by giving His Son. Jesus showed His love for us is by giving up His life. The Apostle Paul expands on this when he says: I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. “ And you are rich, God has given you everything. He now invites you to be generous as He is generous to you. For the Lord loves a cheerful giver.

Why? Because when we give, we reflect the heart and character of our God. Giving like Jesus will definitely challenge you but why not? Our normal approach to be finances is not working. So let's be like Jesus.

You never look more like God then when you are a giver. God is a Giver and when we start living a life of giving our biggest reward will be the fact that we take on the very nature of this awesome God we serve. There is nothing I can think of that is greater in this world then being transformed into the very image of Jesus. Giving in love as He has given to us.

To the glory of God and in Jesus' name.

Amen