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Neighbors & Nations

Missions Focus 2022

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Week 3

The Heart of Giving

The influence of our affluent, American culture makes generosity challenging. The way we are trained to view money is often so antithetical to the Kingdom of God that it takes a powerful work of the Spirit to heal us from a sickness many of us don’t know we have. If we’re going to do our part in fueling the mission of God, we must get well.

This week we’re going to look at a few passages in the Bible that deal with money to see discover the heart of giving. We will think about how the source of our money dictates what we should do with it and how embracing God’s view of money can set us free.

Day 1| Whose Money is it?

If you wanted to invest in the stock market and you turned funds over to a broker, the money would still be yours, wouldn’t it? If the broker began using your money in ways you didn’t approve or kept some for herself, she would be either incompetent or a thief. A broker’s task is to take what you’ve given them, multiply it, and return it to you.

One of the reasons we can fail to be generous with our money is that we are under the misapprehension that our resources actually belong to us. The gifts, talents, and knowledge we use to earn an income come from God and he has called us to invest his resources in his Kingdom. This has always been the way.

Before his death, King David began amassing the resources his son Solomon would use to build the temple. 1 Chronicles 29 explains that David first contributed treasures from his own personal wealth, and then invited the people to also give, which they did, joyfully. David responded to their generosity with a prayer to God. “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand” (1 Chronicles 29:14).

David recognized that in giving to the Lord, neither he nor the Israelites were offering anything that wasn’t already God’s. Furthermore, what was the purpose of the temple? It was the place where God met with the people. The temple provided them the opportunity to access God and showed the surrounding nations his glory, so they might come to know him. God returned the people’s generosity with something much more valuable than earthly riches. He offered them himself. The people invested in the Kingdom of God on earth (Israel) using resources that belonged to God anyway, and then received rewards as the beneficiaries of his goodness. You’ll have to agree, that’s a pretty good deal. The economy of God’s kingdom is built upon his grace.

Jesus also emphasized our role as “investment brokers” for the kingdom, but this time for the kingdom of heaven rather than the nation of Israel. Matthew records a story Jesus told near the end of his life as he was getting closer to his death and resurrection. This parable comes in the middle of a section in which Jesus is teaching his followers how to prepare for his return.

Matthew 25:14–30

14 “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. 15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. 17 So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19 “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

21 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

22 “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

23 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

24 “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

26“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

28 “‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. 29 For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

According to verse 14, how did the master divide up the bags of gold?

What rewards do the faithful servants receive?

Why does the master get angry with the servant with only one bag of gold? What reason does he give?

Think About

In the parable Jesus shared, the master leaves on a journey and entrusts three of his servants with portions of his wealth. The bags of gold he leaves with these servants represent enormous sums of money and he gives responsibility to them based on their ability to handle the task. Not all of them were expected to produce the same return on investment, but they were all expected to increase the master’s wealth.

As Christians, we have the opportunity to multiply what Christ has given to us and will be held accountable for doing so. God entrusts us with his goodness and grace through financial resources and those of us who wisely invest in his Kingdom will be rewarded. We are invited to share in the master’s happiness.

What makes our master happy? What brings him joy? Welcoming others into his family and seeing the values of his Kingdom such as love, justice, mercy, and compassion multiplied in this world. Put simply, Christians are called to invest their resources in proclaiming the gospel, making disciples, strengthening fellow Christians and helping those in need. When we use the financial gifts God has blessed us with for the cause of Christ and the advancement of his Kingdom, we are bettering our world now and sharing in our master’s happiness forever. We show that we are not passively waiting for heaven, but part of our Father’s good work today. To deny that God has a say in how we use the money he’s given us is to act like the stock broker who kept an investment for herself.

Reflect

Why is it important that we continually remind ourselves that all our money actually belongs to God? How does that change how we live?

Based on what we’ve discussed today, why should we give?

Day 2| Where’s our Hope?

When we talk about greed, it’s easy to condemn big corporations or corrupt politicians. But, we have to be careful to recognize that greed is not just an upper class problem, but an every-class problem. It’s not just the top 1% who are susceptible to its lure, but the rest of us as well. Jesus and Paul both warn us to beware.

In his Gospel, Luke records an incident where a young man asks Jesus to intervene in a family dispute. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” (Luke 12:13). You can tell by the way he phrased his request that this man is not looking for arbitration, but for Jesus to take his side. Jesus, more concerned with the heart than the inheritance, issues a strong warning to not only the man, but the entire crowd. “Watch out!” Jesus replies. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (12:15).

We don’t know what was going on in the man’s life that caused Jesus to issue such a rebuke. There’s nothing inherently wrong with wanting one’s inheritance, having money, or owning things. Jesus is warning against greed and finding our identity and hope in money or the things it can buy. There are all kinds of greed.

In researching her book, *The Overspent American*, Juliet Shor discovered that most of us don’t believe we are spending wastefully or lavishly:

“Rather many of us feel we're just making it, barely able to stay even. But what's remarkable is that this feeling is not restricted to families of limited income. It's a generalized feeling, one that exists at all levels. Twenty-seven percent of all households making more than $100,000 a year say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need. Nearly 20 percent say they ‘spend nearly all their income on the basic necessities of life.’ In the $50,000-100,000 range, 39 percent and one-third feel this way, respectively. Overall, half the population of the richest country in the world say they cannot afford everything they really need.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Most of the planet lives on less than a few dollars a day, yet the overwhelming majority of Americans think they are barely scraping by.

Greed isn’t like an open wound on the surface of the skin that calls for obvious medical attention. It’s more like a hidden tumor that grows undetected until it becomes life threatening. If we put our hope in our financial health, rather than our spiritual one, we are flirting with disaster.

Consider how Paul addresses the wealthy (which by the world’s standards means most of us reading this) in 1 Timothy:

1 Timothy 6:10;17–19

**10**For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

**17**Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. **18**Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. **19**In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

We treasure and protect what we love and rely on it to bring us happiness. Money and the things it buys cannot bear the weight of that expectation. Financial prosperity comes and goes with the ebb and flow of the market. Only God is certain, so it is in him we must put our hope.

What better way to demonstrate we have put our hope in God than to be generous with our money? When we share our bounty with others, we will be laying up treasures in heaven. Instead of trying to find our lives in the abundance of our possessions, we will take hold of the life that is truly life.

The life our culture offers is an endless cycle of consumption and unmet expectations that will enslave us. The “life that is more than life” is focused on more than having; it is focused on our relationships with God and others.

Reflect

How could being generous keep us from the love of money?

Based on what we’ve discussed today, why should we give?

Day 3 Where’s our faith?

In this series we are considering the effect generosity can have on our neighbors and the nations. This week we are answering the question, “why give?” Today I want us to flip that question and ask, “why *don’t* we give?”

Like me, you probably know many incredibly generous Christians. You may also know some who say they want to be more generous, but offer a variety of excuses as to why they aren’t. Some of us, as we saw in Day 2, have found ourselves caught up in our consumerist culture where “wants” have become “needs.” Our insatiable desire to acquire more has left us cash-strapped with little room for generosity. Others of us have a different issue when it comes to money. We find our security in our savings accounts; and if we dig down to the root of our excuses, we’d find it is fear that hinders our generosity. It’s not that we lack compassion, but rather the confidence that God will be able to provide for our needs.

Jesus knows how susceptible we are to fear and how meager our faith in him can be. During his time on earth, he taught his disciples that only trust in him allows for a healthy view of money.

In Day 2 we looked briefly at Jesus’ warning: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). He then illustrates his rebuke with a parable about a wealthy farmer who attempts to stockpile his abundant harvest so he can relax and focus the rest of his life on pleasure, only to find that he has already arrived at end of his days.

Jesus ends the story this way:

20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

21 “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:20–21)

Jesus then moves on to address his disciples, and that is the passage we are focusing on today.

Luke 12:22–31

22Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? 26Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

27“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! 29And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

What reasons does Jesus give for having faith in God and not worrying?

According to verse 31, what should we do instead of worrying?

Think About

In Luke 12, Jesus deftly transitions from warnings about greed to warnings about worry because both show a dangerous lack of faith in the goodness of God. Like greed, worrying can also cause us to focus on accumulating money and possessions rather than on loving God and people. While greed can tempt us to put our faith in riches to find joy and wholeness, worry insists that we find our security through them. “Greed can never *get* enough, worry is afraid it many not *have* enough”[[2]](#footnote-3) In either case money becomes an idol we seek out to meet our needs.

According to Jesus, faith in God can keep us from making an idol out of money. God’s love for us is such that he will provide for his children. Using creation as an example, Jesus demonstrates the gentle care of God who feeds common birds and adorns flowers. Our Father is not a reluctant or stingy care-giver, and because of his generosity, we can be generous.

We can hoard our money in order to feel safe, but anyone who has watched the value of their home or 401K float up and down with the changing economic tide knows that there is no security in wealth. The loss of a job, a natural disaster, or a serious medical crisis can decimate even the most conscientious person’s savings account. We hear stories of these financial crises all the time. You may have been through one yourself.

Yet the other thing many Christians who have endured financial ruin will share is how God came through for them even when things seemed hopeless. Now, the trial was painful, and they may not have had everything they wanted, but they had what they needed. Even more importantly, they got to know God and his love in such a real and intimate way that in the end, they actually found themselves grateful for the experience. They wouldn’t trade their encounter with the Father for all the financial security in the world.

Instead of worrying about our needs (that in many cases aren’t really needs), why don’t we give to those who lack a place to live, food to eat, or clothes to wear. Instead of buying into the idea that wholeness is a thing we can buy, why don’t we invest in spreading the gospel: the one thing that can truly make people whole. When we are generous, we get to be conduits of God’s grace in the lives of others.

Reflect

How does knowing that God will care for our needs encourage us to be generous with our money?

Based on what we’ve discussed today, why should we give?

Day 4 | Where is our love?

So far this week we’ve seen that in God’s economy, everything is his. When we acknowledge his supremacy through generous giving, the Spirit works to free us from greed and worry. So, giving benefits us.

Today, we’re going to look outside of ourselves at how giving allows us to love others and invest in God’s kingdom. We’ve been following Jesus’ teaching on wealth and possessions in Luke 12. We’ve seen him warn against greed and worry while exhorting us to seek his kingdom. We will pick up in Chapter 12 where we left off.

Luke 12:31–34

31But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What has the Father given us?

Based on these verses, how would you describe “heavenly treasure”?

Think About

In the verses we looked at on Day 3, Jesus exhorts his disciples not to worry, but have faith in the love and care of God. Followers of Jesus are free to invest themselves in his eternal kingdom, knowing that their earthly needs will be met. Jesus doesn’t want us chasing after temporary, material things like those who don’t know him, but instead, we are to seek the kingdom.

Jesus tells his disciples to “Sell your possessions and give to the poor.” This is a jarring imperative until you consider the context. The Father will not only take care of his children now, but according to Jesus has “already given you the kingdom.” The children of God are rich beyond measure. What earthly riches could compare with the extravagant goodness of God? We are free to be generous because in light of eternity, we are exceptionally wealthy.

According to Jesus, there are two types of treasure: that which rots and that which has eternal worth. Not only are possessions going to literally disintegrate over time, but most of the time our admiration for them corrodes long before they become dust. Often we eagerly anticipate buying something new, only to cast it aside later for something else after the excitement wears off.

Material possessions break and rot, but people are eternal. Loving others, building relationships and pointing people to Jesus have far more worth than earthly riches. Investing in the kingdom means pouring our money into that which will have everlasting impact. That kind of treasure-building can take many forms. We can be called to meet physical needs as well as emotional and spiritual ones.

When Jesus tells us not to worry about having enough food or clothing, where do you think the care he promises will come from? Sure, God could send manna from heaven to feed us, but more likely he is going to send another person to meet the need of his beloved child. In God’s economy we get to be the agents of his grace. Within the body of Christ, we should be honored to be each other’s safety net in times of need.

How can generous giving strengthen the family of God?

Based on what we’ve discussed today, why should we give?

Day 5 Reflect, Connect, Respond

This week the Bible has challenged us to consider money and possessions from God’s point of view as we’ve sought to answer the question, “why give?” Today take some time to pray and reflect on what God has shown you this week.

Reflect

After this week’s study, how would you answer the question, “why give?”

Which of the reasons for giving we’ve discussed this week has been the most meaningful to you? Why?

Connect

When my son was two, he discovered how much fun it was to step on the lever at the base of the kitchen trashcan to open its lid. He became mommy’s little helper, always ready to help by throwing things away. One day while I was in the laundry room I heard the pitter-patter of little sneakers going down the hall followed by the familiar SLAM! of the trashcan lid. As I rounded the corner, I saw my son standing outside the pantry pointing excitedly to the garbage can inside. He was obviously very proud of something he had accomplished. “Let’s see what you did.” I opened the lid to see one five-dollar bill and three one-dollar bills crinkled up inside. He was helpfully tidying up my desk by throwing away seemingly useless bits of green paper. What a sweet boy!

The next day my son became attached to the cap of a Gatorade bottle. He carried it around for a while and even stuck it in his little pocket for a bit. I guess to a two-year-old, the bright orange disc was quite a prize. I was okay with his choice of treasure until he kept putting it in his mouth. Not wanting to test my memory of the Heimlich maneuver, I exercised my parental authority and took the cap away. He was absolutely crushed. I felt like the Grinch who stole Christmas when I threw the worthless bit of plastic away.

The juxtaposition of the two events struck me. To a two-year-old, eight dollars was trash and an orange Gatorade cap was a prized possession. It made me wonder how often I act the same way, fixating on things that are eye-catching, but cheap, while neglecting the eternal, kingdom treasures God would have me store up.

Our generous God has allowed us to be part of his kingdom economy where grace is the primary currency. When we give our money to spread the gospel, make disciples or help people in need, we are giving much more than dollars. We are extending the grace God mercifully bestowed on us to someone else. Instead of investing in earthly treasures that won’t last, we are demonstrating the supremacy of God’s kingdom. We are valuing the relationship we have with our Father over things that have no eternal worth.

In America we can so easily be trapped into thinking that our life consists of the abundance of our possessions. It becomes almost natural to love things and look to them to meet our needs, find our identity and be our “god.” Let’s wake up and allow the Spirit to set us free from such a soul-damaging way of life.

Respond

What’s Your Next Step?

If you are like me, then your study this week has been convicting! We’ve considered reasons why giving generously not only allows us to bless others, but it blesses us as well.

Consider taking some time over the next week to prayerfully consider each purchase you make and why you’re making it. If you are married, see if your spouse would be willing to do the same and then set aside some time to talk about it. Think about what you already give to God’s purposes and ask him if you should be satisfied with that amount.

Money and giving is a sensitive subject that we are usually not comfortable talking about even with other Christians, so let’s give each other permission to be open and authentic about this topic. Those who are strong in this area, please share how God has worked in your heart and life. Those who are weak in this area, be honest about your struggles. As the body of Christ, we can help one another grow to be more like Jesus.

1. Juliet B. Shor, The Overspent American, (New York: Basic Books, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. William F. Arndt, The Gospel According to St. Luke, Bible Commentary Concordia, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)