

Defined By Generosity

1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

I received this piece of mail this week from a local agency that recommends different local companies. On the cover, it says, “You Can’t Take It With You,” with a picture of a coffin piled high with ‘stuff.’ Inside is an article about a company that will come to your home to clean out all of the stuff that you have so your children won’t have to after you die. And if someone has already died, this company will work with the heirs to do the same thing, to clean out the house of all the ‘stuff.’ It caused me to pause and think about all of the stuff our society has and the legacy we are leaving our children.

When a friend or family member dies, one of the things most of us do is to spend time remembering things about that person. I know that when Pastor Mike, Pastor Jill, or I go to visit with a family after a death, we ask them what they will remember most about that person. I think one of the things that most people remember is that they were generous, that they gave of their time and money. I know that when my grandparents died my family did the same thing. I especially remember with my grandparents how important family was to them. But I also remember that they did not live extravagantly. I remember that they were generous people, always looking out for others even before themselves. My grandfather was the director of music at their United Methodist church in Wisconsin for over 40 years. And my grandmother was the organist at the church for the same time. My two strongest and lasting impressions of my grandparents are how strongly they believed in and supported their family and how strongly they believed in and supported their church. Their lives were defined by generosity.

I think most of us would say something similar when we really think about how we want to be remembered. We want people to remember how we cared for the needs of others, how we supported our church and missions. Things that we spend most of our lives thinking are important all of a sudden seem so unimportant at the end of our life. At the end, does it matter how high we climbed on the corporate ladder, often sacrificing time with family and friends? At the end, does it matter that we bought all that ‘stuff’ at the expense of giving back to God? At the end, it can be painful to look back and realize how many of the things which we spent so much time worrying over were the wrong things to be worrying about. It is easy to look back and see a house full of stuff that in

the end will just end up in the trash or at a garage sale. As one of my favorite professors at Duke used to tell us, “you never see a Brink’s Armored Truck at a funeral.” As Paul tells us in our scripture, you can’t take anything with you at the end.

We are nearing the finish of our church-wide study entitled, “Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity.” Over the past few weeks we have looked at the struggle many of us have with money. I think many of us feel like we are slaves to money. We spend so much time worrying about the bills and how to put food on the table. We hate thinking about money because of how little control we think we have. I hope this study so far has given you some tools to fight back against our culture which says you always have to have the newest and best thing to be happy. I hope that our focus today helps you to take back control of your finances. I know it is hard to think about giving to the church, giving to others, being generous in general when we can barely keep our own heads above water.

So we turn to our scripture for today, written long ago and yet still so relevant to our lives today. 1 Timothy is known as one of the Pastoral letters, written by Paul to his young protégé, Timothy. “These letters were intended to be read to the church as a whole”...to help early Christians know how to live and behave in the midst of the culture in which they lived.¹ So they can speak to us as well as we struggle to live in a culture that tells us other than what scriptures does.

What scripture tells us and Paul reminds us, is that we were created to give, we were created to be generous. We were created in God’s image. And we are reminded that all that is in the world is ultimately God’s. We were given power over the land and our possessions to act as God’s trustee. While we are tempted to think that the things we own and the money that we have is ours, it ultimately is God’s. It can be a struggle to believe that everything belongs to God, because we think we worked so hard for it, we sweated over it, we earned that paycheck and it is rightly ours. Yet we forget that even our ability to work and provide for our families is a gift from God. God has given each of us unique skills in order that we might earn a living and care for his creation.

God wants us to be a blessing to others, to share that which we have with those who are in need. We are reminded in Genesis that humanity was created in God’s image. Look at the example God provides us with how we are to be generous. God gave the ultimate sacrifice, the life of his son, Jesus Christ, in response to our sinful actions. We were created in the very image of the one who gave his life. What does it say to us that we were created in the image of one who gave his own life and we struggle to give a tenth of the money that God has blessed us with. What does it say when we struggle to give even a fifth of what God has given us? And what does it say when we struggle to give even one percent of all that God has given to us? We have been changed, we have been corrupted, and sin has taken hold of our lives. It feels so hopeless. It leaves us hating to think about money when we struggle to live day to day, pay the monthly bills, buy the kids new clothes, even put enough food on the table. We struggle with these very basic and instinctual things. It can be so overwhelming. It is amazing how a pile of bills and credit card statements, made of paper, can feel like a ton of bricks on our heads. And yet somewhere deep inside of us, we think and hope there must be a better way to live. Is this really what God had in mind?

¹ James D.G. Dunn, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume XI*, “The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 782.

The short answer is no. We were created to be generous and to be a blessing to others. Yet I know we struggle with generosity at times mainly because of two voices: the voice of fear and the voice of self-gratification. When we struggle to help others, it is typically one of these two voices at war with the will of God in our heads. I know I struggle the most with the voice of fear. I fear that something will happen down the road and we won't be able to pay our bills. I fear that we won't be able to put food on the table for Owen and Eli. I fear that we won't be able to provide for them and they will suffer because of our decisions. So my tendency is to save. The ongoing struggle for me, and for those of you who have this voice of fear, is hoarding. Ultimately hoarding does not give the security we are looking for. That security will only be found in God.

The other voice we struggle with is the voice of self-gratification. We hear over and over in advertisements that to be happy we have to buy their product. So we think that if we give to someone else in need, we won't be able to buy something which our culture tells us will make us happy. We fear that giving away money will mean there won't be enough for me. The struggle for those of us who hear this voice is that we will over-spend and there will never be anything left over to give.

The way to defeat these voices and to become generous people is to hear and practice what Pastor Mike preached last week. We defeat these voices when we are content with what we have and when we are able to tune out the voice of our culture. We defeat these voices when we turn to Christ instead of opening our wallets and pulling out our credit cards. We defeat these voices when we learn to put our trust and security in God's promises to provide for our needs. We defeat those voices when we learn the difference between those things we think we need but are really desires, and the things we actually need to live. We defeat those voices not alone, but with the help and support of God and the Holy Spirit. The more we grow in our faith, the easier it becomes to listen to God's nudging in our hearts. The more we grow in our faith, the more we will see the need around us and think, "If I don't help, then who will." The more we grow in our faith, the more we will grow in our generosity.

We have a tool to help you as you work to be defined by generosity. If you have missed either of the last 2 weeks, I hope you will pick up the tools at the back of the church on your way out, a window cling with 6 financial principles on it and a key tag like your grocery store tag with the word contentment and a prayer printed on it. Today, in your bulletin you will find an insert called "Personal Goals and Commitment." I want you to pull that out and take a look at it. You will find five blank areas that I want you to spend time this week filling in. The first is a way to help you remember that all that you have is a gift from God. How much time will you spend in prayer to God thanking him for all that you have? The second is how you will work toward being content with what you have. I want you to plan on what you will spend each month, essentially what is your budget for spending. The third is crucial as well because most of us carry too much debt. When we carry too much debt, we are paying more to banks and creditors, rather than on being a blessing to others. How can you work toward reducing and eliminating your debt in the coming year? The fourth line is what your goal will be for the coming year to save for your retirement. How much will you set aside for you and your family's future? And finally the fifth line is how you will worship God by what you give back to God through your tithe and offerings. How much will you commit each month to give to your church for the work of Christ in our community and world? Please, please note that

this sheet is for you to use personally. We do not want you to return this card to the church. This is to help you plan for next year and remind you through the year of what your goals are. Put this in your bible when you complete it so that you can pray over it in the year ahead. Your response on the fifth line will give you your estimate of giving for Christ and his church. You will receive in the mail this week an estimate of giving card for 2010. We want you to talk and pray about this with your family, fill it out and bring it back with you next Sunday or the Sunday following. When you bring it back, you then can place it before the Lord as your offering and your desire to be defined by generosity.

A note about your giving to the church. As many of you know in the Old Testament, God directed his people to give a tenth of all they had. Their worship was directly centered on their offering to God. They would burn their offerings on God's altar. They gave the best of what they had. The ten percent was taken off the top, it was the best, it was the first thing they did. They did not wait until the last ten percent, the animals and grain that were the worst. They gave their best and first fruits to God.

What about today? Are we still bound by what God asked of his people before? I believe we are. God says look, I gave you all that you have, even your life, and the least you can do is return to me a portion as a way to worship me and a way to say thank you. It is a way to acknowledge that God has richly blessed us. But I know that it can be a hard thing. Many of you say, 'give a tenth?' that's crazy; I could never do that. Adam Hamilton uses an example that he got from David Slagle, a pastor in Georgia to illustrate this struggle that we have.

Imagine that these ten apples represent everything that you have and earn each year. They represent your wealth and your income. God says you can take nine apples and use them however you like. They are yours. Use them to buy food and clothes for you and your family. Use them for your home and for education. Use them for trips and vacations. Use them for your transportation and insurance to protect you from the unexpected. Use them to help out friends and family members in need and use them to save for your retirement. You have these nine apples that you can use any way you want. But God says, "One of them is mine." It's meant to be given first to God as a way of praise and thanksgiving. It's meant to be given to God as our act of worship. It's meant to be given so that God's mission can be fulfilled in the world.

But the problem for many of us is that the nine apples just aren't enough anymore. With so much to buy and do that society tells us we have to have to be happy, we just can't make it on nine apples anymore. We don't want to miss out on all the fun and cool things in life and so we take God's one apple and say, God, I just need a little bit of this, I know you won't mind. There is this really cool trip that I want to go on with my friends. It's going to be a trip of a lifetime and God I'm just going to take a little slice of your apple. He'll understand. And then Christmas is only a few months away, already there are Christmas displays up in some stores. And I haven't put anything aside for all the presents I need to buy for my family and friends. So God I just need to take a little more of your apple so I can give presents to other people. It's kind of giving, so I'm sure you won't mind God. And then we start thinking about our retirement and realize it will be here before we know it, and we just need to put a little more in our IRA, so we take a little more slice of God's apple. Then an emergency puts us in the hospital and we can't pay the bills so we take another slice. And then our car breaks down and we have to get a new one, but we haven't saved for it, so we pull off another slice of God's apple for new

car payments. And you know the Super Bowl is coming up before we know it so I need to get a new HD TV to watch the Packers play, so I'll just take another little slice. And our house, it just doesn't work for us anymore so we want to upgrade and get something better. Pretty soon before we know it, there is nothing left from God's apple except the core. And we say.... Oh wait. (Take a last bite.) Here is your part God. And we place the apple core on God's altar as our gift to God and he ends up with our leftovers.²

Now I know that it is not easy to tithe if you have never done it before. If you already are tithing that is wonderful and something to celebrate, but it also is not the place to stop! I want you to turn back to that insert that we looked at earlier and on the other side you'll see a chart to help you if you are not currently tithing. I know it may be unrealistic to go from giving nothing to God, to all of a sudden giving ten percent. So use this chart to help you get closer to a tithe. On the far left side of the sheet you will see a column entitled monthly income. Find the row that lists your approximate monthly household income. Many people get stuck up on whether this should be based on gross or net income. And when they get stuck on that they end up doing nothing. If that is you, I would suggest either net or gross income is ok...just pick one to get started. It may be easiest to look at your take home pay from your last paycheck to see how much you earned after all deductions were taken out and base your tithe on that amount. Once you have found on the left where your monthly income is, then find what percentage you are currently giving to the Lord on the top row. Where the two intersect in the middle is the monthly amount that you are giving to God. You can also work backwards if you know your monthly income and how much you give each month to find the percentage that you are giving if you're not sure. Now whether you are giving nothing, a little, or a tithe already, I want to encourage you to step up your offering this year. To do that, once you have found your box that is your current monthly offering, move one box to the left. That will increase your giving by one percent this year. If you really are feeling like you want to step up further in faith, then move 2 or 3 or more boxes to the left. Make a decision between you and your family and God that you will continue increasing each year by one percent until you get to a tithe, ten percent. And then don't stop there!

I think it gets harder and harder the more money we make to continue giving a tithe to God. There is a story about a chaplain called Peter Marshall. "There was a man who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. The man said to Marshall, 'I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly some years ago, but...but now...I am earning \$500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give about \$50,000.' Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said, 'I can certainly see your problem. Let's pray about it.' The man agreed. So Marshall bowed his head and prayed... 'Heavenly Father, I pray that you would reduce this man's salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe.'"³ If you are making much, perhaps you can give more than ten percent back to God for God to use in our world.

Let me conclude briefly by how are giving affects God and how it affects us. When God would smell the burnt offerings of those people long ago, it pleased God. It was not the smell that pleased God, but the fact that his children were worshiping him by offering their first fruits back to him in thanksgiving. When we give to God, we are

² Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 82-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

saying, God here a part of what you have given me; thank you. But God is not the only one that our giving affects. We were created to give, to be a blessing to others. We were created to be defined by generosity. And so when we give, our hearts are enlarged. We receive back multiple blessings from God. Now please don't hear this the wrong way. I am not saying that if you give to God, you will never lose your job or struggle financially. But you will be blessed in other ways, by a closer walk and relationship with God. Through your giving, you can change the world in sometimes small and sometimes large ways. And through your giving, God's mission to all his children in the world can be fulfilled. James Kraft, the founder of the Kraft Cheese Corporation, gave about 25% of his enormous wealth and income to Christian causes for many years. He said, "The only investment I ever made which has paid consistently increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord."

God will bless you when you bless him by your financial offering. As you pray and talk this week with your family about what your estimate of giving will be for next year, think about how you want to be remembered. Will your life be defined by generosity? As a reminder to you of your first apple that is the Lord's, we have available on your way out of the church today, baskets full of apples. I would invite you to take one on your way out as a reminder of God's call to us to return a tenth or more of all that God has blessed us with. Hear again Paul's words to Timothy. We are to be generous and ready to share so that we may experience the life that really is life. If you want to break the hold that money has over you so that you can experience true joy in your life would you bow your head in prayer with me. Dear Lord. We thank you for giving us life and for blessing us with so much. We pray that you would help us this week as we pray and struggle with what to give back to you as our offering for next year. Help us to care for the poor and those in need. Open our hearts to your prompting and quiet the voices of fear and self-gratification that so often take over our finances. Help us to do your will, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.