



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"From Hypocrisy to Integrity"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on Sunday, April 30, 2023, from Matthew 6:1-18*

There was a new pastor at the Baptist church getting ready for stewardship season and asked the treasurer for a report on the giving records of all the members. The pastor was startled to find one of the wealthiest members had never given. So, she met with the man and said to him, "The annual report of your company lists your salary at \$10 million, but I noticed you've never given to the church. May I ask why?" The man replied, "How presumptuous! Did the report mention my mother is ill with extremely large medical bills, or that I have three children at expensive private schools, or that my brother, who has a wife and two kids, was injured in an accident, and can't work?" The pastor said, "Uh, no." "Well," the man concluded, "If I don't give any money to them, why would I'd give anything to the church?"

We all know what it looks like when someone is not generous, but we have a harder time determining what generosity is or why we're called to be generous people. During this season of stewardship, we're inviting you to take a journey with us on the road to generosity. We're asking you to look into your hearts, think about your life, and ask the question "What is generosity? Am I being called to go further on the road to generosity?" Now I know what some of you are thinking, "Oh no! I've come to church on the Sunday of the dreaded stewardship sermon! How could I be so unlucky? Is there any way out of here? That'll teach me not to read the Weekly!" First, greeters, please lock the doors. Second, friends, we're in this together. From preacher to people, from pulpit to pew, we all moan about stewardship season, which is why I thought about taking a page out of NPR's playbook and telling you that if we meet our goal before the campaign is over, I'll preach on a different topic next Sunday.

Why does everyone dread stewardship season? I think the reason is nobody wants to talk about money, especially in church. We see the church like a giant dinner table where certain topics are off limits like sex, politics, and money. I'd add religion, but I think you're supposed to talk about religion in church. The irony is that the average Christian would rather talk about sex or even politics in church than money. In fact, by the end of this stewardship series some of those who've been longing for new sermon topics will be begging me to go back to preaching about social justice! That is how much we hate talking about money! We want money to be a private matter, a secret affair that is hidden from our fellow church members, neighbors, the world—even ourselves. But the secret, hidden, taboo nature of money is what makes it so powerful and gives money such an intense grip on all our lives. Things are always more powerful when they are hidden.



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Philosopher Michel Foucault wrote, “power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself [and] its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”ⁱ No one can deny that money has an extraordinary power over our lives, which means that if we want to loosen the death grip that money has over our us and liberate ourselves from the power it has over our communities, we need to talk about it. We cannot free ourselves from anything that has power over us until we name it. This is what powerful things do not want us to do. They do not want us to name them, because once we name them, we can see them, and I heard somebody say, “One you name something, then you can tell it what to do.”

The great composer and social activist, Bernice Johnson Reagon, who founded the Freedom Singers and Sweet Honey in the Rock, wrote a song where she named the power of money. She sang, “I’ve been thinking about how to talk about greed. I’ve been wondering if I could sing about greed. Trying to find a way to talk about greed. Greed is a poison rising in this land, the soul of the people twisted in its command. It moves like a virus seeking out everyone, greed never stops, and its work is never ever done. Creeping, choking, killing, invading everywhere; there is really no escaping greed’s sneaking snare...Not partial to gender or sexual desires, all it wants is for you to want to own, possess and to buy. Nothing seems to stop it when it enters your soul, has you buying anything spending out of control. It moves within the culture touching us all. Greed really isn’t picky it’ll make anybody fall...Maybe you don’t know exactly what I mean, you don’t really want to know about your and my greed. You may wonder whether you’re infected by greed, if you have to ask, then that’s all you really need. Greed is sneaky, hard to detect in myself, I see it so clearly in everybody else.”ⁱⁱ

Bernice had a gift for naming the powers, but naming is just the beginning. We also need an activity to follow the naming process that can break us free from the powerful death grip money has over our lives. Scholar Walter Brueggemann calls that activity, “radical generosity.” He claims, “An immense act of generosity is [the very thing that is] required to break the death grip of fear, anxiety, and greed. We live in a system of anxiety and fear and have no time or energy for the common good, because anxiety causes us to focus our total attention on ourselves at the expense of others. But overwhelming generosity can redirect our energies away from anxiety toward an investment in the common good. A surprising act of generosity, beyond our categories of expectation, [is the only thing that] has the power to break the deathly pattern of anxiety, fear, and greed. When we are immersed in such immense generosity, we’re able to get our minds off ourselves, and focus on the work of loving our neighbors. It is precisely an inexplicable act of generosity that delivers us from the cycle of scarcity and frees our lives for community.”ⁱⁱⁱ



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The most fascinating thing about our text today from Matthew 6 is not actually Jesus' words about avoiding hypocrisy. The most fascinating thing are Jesus' presuppositions. Did you notice he didn't say, "You should give," or "If you give," he said, "When you give." Jesus presumed his audience was already giving! Now that's why I know Jesus was lunatic! How could he make such a ridiculous presumption? Jesus talked about money more than any other topic, yet it is incredible that of all the things he said about money Jesus never told people to give. That's because he presumed they were already giving! He presumed they knew giving was one of the fundamental acts for those seeking to follow him. Jesus' followers were Jewish, which means they had already had commands to give generously to their neighbors. It was a part of their culture. So, Jesus never tried to explain to people why people should give, instead, he simply told his followers how. Sadly, it is not as self-evident to Christians today that we are called to give, which means that if Jesus were here this morning, he'd have to start from a completely different place. He'd say, "When you give..." and church folks would interrupt him to ask, "Uh Jesus, what do mean by when?"

In Matthew 6, Jesus presumed another idea that seems radical to most Christians today; that giving is the most important and fundamental spiritual practice—more important than even prayer and fasting. Look how he ordered his spiritual instructions at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus didn't begin with prayer or fasting. He began with giving, returned to giving, and ended with giving. Giving was the Alpha, Mu, and Omega. And according to Jesus, prayer is a practice we engage in to remind us why we give—so everyone receives their daily bread and daily wages, financial debts are forgiven, and the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. And according to Jesus, fasting is a practice we engage to spend less on our own insatiable desires so we can free up money to give away to the poor. At the end of the day, prayer and fasting are both about money and giving! For Jesus prayer and fasting can only be understood through the lens of generosity.

This is what drives me crazy about new age spirituality and the millions of Americans who now identify as "spiritual but not religious." There has never been a form of spirituality that does not begin and end with generosity—not Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Bahai, Christian, indigenous, or any other true spirituality. There is simply no spirituality without generosity. All healthy forms of spirituality take account of our material reality. If not, they're a form of spiritual bypassing that uses spirituality to avoid the material world, deny the struggle of daily life, or avoid the hard truths of human existence. We can't deny the reality of money, or transcend money, or escape the real world of money by living in a delusional fantasyland. Jesus talked directly about money and what we do with our money, is at the very foundation of our spirituality.



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I thank my mother for trying to teach me this lesson at an early age. When I was in middle school, she gave me a three-ring binder with five plastic envelopes inside. Each month she gave me an allowance for doing my chores and told me I had to divide it into these five envelopes. One envelope was for lunch money, one was for clothing, one was for savings, one was for the church, and one was for fun. As a middle schooler, the temptation to take the money set aside for church and spend it on something else was monumental, and I succumbed to temptation more than a few times. But the lesson of those envelopes stayed with me despite my failing. I learned that giving was a spiritual practice, a necessary part of my life, and a critical activity I was called to do with my money. As an adult, my parents made an even stronger impression on me as I watched them tithe 10% of their income to the church faithfully and sacrificially even through financial difficulty. Our deacons might want to try to persuade them to move their membership to our church.

What really stings about Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6 is that whenever we try to be spiritual without being generous with our money—we're like the hypocrites he warned the disciples about. The word "hypocrite" comes from Greek theatre. It means to put on a mask, to play, to act, to pretend to be something else. Jesus used it to describe people who possessed a wide separation between theory and practice, faith and works, word and deed. People who talk the talk but do not walk the walk. There are a lot of people today pretending to follow Jesus. They say they're spiritual, but they haven't let Jesus into their finances yet. They say they're spiritual, but they haven't let Jesus look at their investments. They say they're spiritual, but they won't follow Jesus about their money. They say they're spiritual, but they aren't interested in generosity.

Society tells us that we should be generous for a host of reasons. Scientists at UC Berkely have uncovered evidence that humans are biologically wired for generosity and that generosity activates the same reward pathways in the brain as food and sex. We Baptist's have always linked generosity and food, but I think we've really missed an opportunity not connecting stewardship with sex. We need to consider this for our next campaign. I can see the slogan now, "Giving to MPBC is as good as sex!" The researchers at Berkley also found a strong link between generosity and happiness. People are happier when they give, and even more interesting, they found that giving is associated with better health, delayed mortality as well as psychological health and well-being. With all the rewarding health benefits generosity provides, we should have no problem with raising the annual budget in the church. The rewards are so great we shouldn't even need stewardship campaigns, right?!



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I asked our administrator, Leigh Anne, to run some statistics. We have 1,846 families on the rolls as members of our church, but unfortunately, only 515 contribute financially. That means only 28% of our members are giving. Less than that, only 17%, have made a pledge to let us know what they're planning to give this year. These are stunning statistics, but I believe I know what the problem is—I'm guilty of it myself. We look out at our amazing staff, our beautiful sanctuary, our massive campus, our cutting-edge programs, our exceptional music, our incredible worship services, this extraordinary community of love that people all over the world would walk across hot coals to have in their city, and our minds engage in magical thinking. We imagine all of this happens without money. We imagine all of this is being paid for by somebody else with deep pockets. We imagine that what we could give wouldn't really make a difference. But if every member of our church who doesn't give started giving just a \$1 a day, or \$7 every week, we'd have \$500,000. And if every member who is giving increased by \$20 a week, we'd have another \$500,000. This is why we desperately need to free our imaginations from magical thinking.!

I could get up in this pulpit for the next three weeks and tell you all the wonderful rewards giving to our church will have in your life. I could tell you it will make you happier, extend your life, contribute to your mental health, psychological well-being. I could tell you it would be incredibly fulfilling and that it is better to give than to receive. I could tell you that your gifts will help expand our programs, help take care of our staff, provide the necessary funds for the upkeep of this beautiful facility, and drastically increase the good we can do in this community. And all that would be true, but there's only one problem. We're not supposed to give so that we can get something in return. We're not supposed to give so we can receive a reward. Giving to receive something in return is not generosity, but reciprocity. Everything in our society has become transactional, including relationships. It's hard to imagine giving that is selfless and sacrificial without expectation of anything in return. But in church we imagine that all the time, it's called grace.

This is what Christianity has consistently gotten wrong throughout history. We were not called to give so we receive praise, prestige, or notoriety. We were not called to give to appease the wrath of an angry God. We're not called to give so we can secure our ticket into heaven. We were not called to give so we can buy indulgences that spring our dead loved ones out of hell. We were not called to give so we receive financial prosperity or health and wealth in this life. We're not even called to give so we will be happy, live a long life, achieve mental health, or psychological wellbeing, even though the scientists tell us that's what generosity can do.



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The pie in the sky theology of our ancestors, the prosperity gospel of the present, and the new age spirituality of health and happiness are not in line with Jesus' teaching. These are all false gospels based in a toxic theology of rewards and punishments that uses "carrots and sticks" to motivate people to do the right thing. Are we not more spiritually evolved than that? Are we not people of grace?

Generosity is the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly, without expectation of reward or the prospect of receiving something in return. Generosity is the practice of giving to another person something that is ours, as an act of freewill, without obligation. Generosity is the principle of being liberal and extravagant in our giving. Generosity is the decision to act in direct opposition to all the greed, hate, contempt, envy, anger, and indifference in our world. Generosity is the only thing that has the power to break the deathly pattern of anxiety, fear, and greed. Generosity is the only thing that can get our minds off ourselves, to redirect our energies away from anxiety so we can focus on the work of loving our neighbors and making investment in the common good. Generosity is the only thing that can deliver us from the cycle of scarcity, and free our lives for community. And at the end of the day, the number one reason to be generous is that generosity is the activity that has the power to create community.

Without generosity there is no community. Without generosity there is no church. Without generosity there is nothing but godless individualism, grotesque greed, grueling loneliness. And so, we give this thing called money so that we can tell it what to do in the world—so we can tell it to make a community. We give because we know we belong to one another. We give because we know we need each other. We give because we know we love each other. We give because we care about this church. We give because generosity is tie that binds us. We give because generosity is the fabric that connects us. We give because generosity is the mortar that unites us. We give because generosity is the glue that holds us together. We give because true generosity is grace, and grace has the power to liberate us all.

ⁱ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*.

ⁱⁱ Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Greed (Sermonette)".

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 2010, p. 28-29.