

January 25th: The Generous Kingdom

Welcome friends, to our new series called Kingdom Economics–this is a series that we put together to combine our annual Stewardship Campaign with the conversations that our Social Justice Book Group has been having surrounding faith and economic justice. That means that over these seven weeks, we’re learning about all things related to money, resources, and how to build a better community using those gifts. The Bible has a lot to say about these topics, because God is fundamentally interested in a more equitable world, and we get to be a part of that important work. So if one of your New Year's resolutions is to work on a better relationship with money, or you’re unsure of how to use what you already have–this is the series for you.

We’ll get started in just a moment, but first, I invite you to pray with me.

Generous Creator, you wove together the fabric of our world with a desire to see all of your beloved children thrive. You delight in us, and you rejoice when we are at peace with each other. This morning we remember that it is our turn to be generous—with our time, attention, and resources—we are given the opportunity to build communities where all are valued and supported. Help us to embrace this mission with our minds, bodies, and spirits, so that we can join you in this work of making our world more whole. Empower us all to give with grateful hearts, for your glory and our neighbors good. Amen.

A few weeks ago, when the Powerball jackpot was once again more than a billion dollars, I told myself that this was the time I would buy a ticket. Every night, as I drifted off to sleep, I allowed myself to dream about what it would be like to win—and I had a whole plan ready to go in case I had the golden numbers. With a \$1.817 billion dollar prize, the lump sum cash option was just under \$835 million—so I estimated about 40% for taxes, leaving close to \$500 million to spend. After setting aside a good amount for a comfortable retirement, starting immediately of course, I planned some hefty gifts to family and friends. I took great pleasure in imagining the house I would buy for my mom, the college funds I would set up for my younger cousins, and the land I

would purchase in order to set up a giant animal sanctuary. And because I'm not a total selfish jerk, I decided that a full half of my jackpot would be shared with charities and nonprofits that I believe in. I told myself, if I had half a billion dollars, I would definitely be generous. I would fund food banks, affordable housing, education initiatives, local churches, and more. I'd become an old school philanthropist—spending all of my time going to fancy fundraising galas and writing big checks—not just financially big, but also physically big—you know, those checks that take multiple people to hold up—that's what I would do. Sounds fun, right?

Now, I clearly did not win—somebody in Arkansas did—but I'm willing to bet that I'm not the only one here who's done this kind of lottery math every once in a while. It's a nice break from reality, so no judgement here. But if you've ever dreamed about how you would spend a jackpot, you know how easy it is to be what I'm going to call “potentially generous.” And by “potentially generous,” I mean generous in a kind of hypothetical, abstract way—like how you might act if all the restraints and challenges of our current reality magically went away. Being “potentially generous” often involves a sense of imagination—it's not tethered to your actual financial status or the real number sitting in your bank account. Being “potentially generous” is fun, but it's also a little dangerous, and that's because it doesn't necessarily mean that we will be generous with what we already have. Sure, I can feel good about giving away my pretend millions, but when I look at my giving patterns now, it's really hard for me to give away a much smaller number, much less half of what I own. Donating half of my annual income would be crazy! Even setting aside 10%, the traditional tithe that certain passages of Leviticus talks about, can seem like too much in certain situations. In fact, when I sit down to think about my monthly spending, being generous sometimes seems like the very last priority.

Maybe you feel the same way—maybe you're also feeling like being generous is easy, until it becomes tangible. Maybe you also dream about being generous, but sense a disconnect with your current behavior. In that case, I'm glad you're here today. I'm glad I'm not alone in feeling like being “potentially generous” is a lot easier than actually being generous.

But here's my question for us: what might our Bible have to say in response to that? What do you think God would ask us to think about if this is our current mindset?

Well first, let's look at God's own character. From the beginning, God gave humanity all that they would need to thrive: in the Garden of Eden, God provided an abundance of fruit trees for humans to eat. During the time in the wilderness, God provided manna each day so that the Israelites could be strengthened for their journey. The Psalms are full of passages where God's generosity is remembered and praised—we have Psalm 23 which famously records, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Psalm 65:9 says this, You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it." And Psalm 107:8-9 tells us "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things."

If God is generous with the resources of creation and his affection for us, then it makes sense for us to determine that generosity is a fundamental value in God's Kingdom. And because generosity is so deeply rooted in God's Kingdom, it has to be a part of the church's behavior as well, because we are the ambassadors of God's Kingdom in this world. We are the ones who should seek to emulate and display God's character to our neighbors.

You might be tempted to believe that our biblical ancestors excelled at this task of practicing generosity, but our scripture reading for today comes from a context where this is definitely not the case. If you have your Bible with you, we're looking at a passage from 2 Corinthians, one of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the newly formed church in the Greek city of Corinth. Earlier in these communications with the Corinthian church, we hear that there are already divisions within the congregation—especially along financial lines. Paul has noticed some tension between the different social classes

present in the membership, and there's even been a dispute over segregated meals—the rich eating with the rich, and the poor eating with the poor. So Paul has to do some teaching about what it looks like to practice generosity together—even when our lives and bank accounts look very different. Starting in chapter 9 verse 6, Paul begins his instructions to his fellow Christians, and in verse 7, we read this piece of advice that has become somewhat of a one-liner when churches or pastors talk about generosity. Paul writes, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

How many of you have heard that before? I've been in church my whole life, and I can't tell you how many stewardship drives or pledge campaigns, or fundraising projects I've heard talked about this way—with a tag line like “God loves a cheerful giver! Be a cheerful giver today!” And it is biblical, it's right there in Paul's writing—but it sometimes strikes me a little funny. Paul is advising his friends, and especially the wealthier members of the Corinthian church to share their resources to not only share their abundant resources, but to be happy about it. Unfortunately, cheerful is not an adjective that I think most of us would use to describe our financial situation or money conversations. Complicated yes, anxiety producing, yes, downright stressful, yes, but cheerful, that's a big fat no.

Let's look at another passage that might help us reframe our thinking—a story from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12 verses 41-44. This passage is part of a long section of teaching from Jesus, just after he enters Jerusalem for the last time. It's his final week of life, and this is what he wants his disciples to know. This wisdom is part of his message to the people who will be the leaders of the early church.

At this point, Jesus and his disciples were gathered in the temple courts, right in the hustle and bustle of communal religious life. They were at the center of their spiritual practice, and Jesus chooses this moment to talk about money. Mark writes, “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many

rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

The passage ends there, so we don’t get to hear how the disciples responded, but there’s an implied sense that Jesus is inviting his followers to remember this woman for a specific reason: she’s the example that they are meant to imitate in their own life. Despite her low status and overlooked presence in the temple, Jesus lifts her up and says that she’s the person to admire. With only two coins, she demonstrates more faith than anyone else who came to worship. According to Jesus, this is what it truly means to be generous—to give out of our need, rather than simply out of our surplus.

I’ll be the first to say that this is one of Jesus’ most challenging instructions. Like Paul’s instructions to be a cheerful giver, this kind of advice might feel unsettling or even impossible for us to follow. So if you’re listening to this and starting to think about all the ways that you couldn’t possibly live this out, I get it. It is really hard to put into practice, especially in our current economic climate.

But here’s what I’d like us to consider this week, as we continue to think about living more fully into God’s generous, jubilee, upside down kingdom. Both Paul and Jesus seem to be communicating that generosity isn’t about a specific dollar amount, it’s an attitude of the heart. Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian pastor most well known for his iconic TV show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, put it this way, “The real issue in life is not how many blessings we have, but what we do with our blessings. Some people have many blessings and hoard them. Some have few and give everything away.”

If you want to try and move from being potentially generous to actively part of God’s generous kingdom—here’s a couple suggestions for your prayer time or reflection time this week:

I invite you to think about any anxieties surrounding money or what might be keeping you from being generous right now. What's keeping you stuck? What is preventing you from giving the way you might want to? Are those obstacles real or imagined? What might need to change in your mindset to make generosity possible? If cheerfulness isn't the word that resonates with you, what would it look like to give out of a sense of deep gratitude for what you possess?

I also invite you to reread the passages we talked about today—the various psalms, 2 Corinthians 9, and Mark 12, and discern how God is inviting you into this holy work of creating a more abundant and equitable world. What do you have to offer that others don't? What opportunities to be generous are already present in your daily routine or weekly activities? Where might you be able to bless someone else in a meaningful way? If you're limited in your finances, what would it feel like to give your time, wisdom, or even just a listening ear to someone in need?

Challenge yourself to be generous in a new way or with a new heart, and see what happens!

My friends, I'll close with this, because I need to hear it too: you don't need millions or billions in the bank to be generous, you can start right now, with what you have. A gift that could seem inconsequential or small to the world might be just what God is calling you to give. And when you practice generosity, you are actively showing God's love to our broken world—you are demonstrating divine care and presence in a way that transforms our communities and relationships. When you are generous with God and others, like our God is generous to us, you join God in making all of creation more healed and whole.

As the Apostle Paul says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"
Amen.