

The Walk: Give
Luke 6:38
Sunday, September 28, 2025

This is one of those scriptures that really bothers me. In it, Jesus seems to be telling us that the reason we should give is so we can get.

Now, the imagery he uses here is a little foreign to most of us, but when you boil it down, this is a story about grocery shopping. Back when Kirsten would let me do the grocery shopping, there would be these scales hanging in the produce section. You'd weigh out your apples and potatoes to know how much you were going to pay for them because they were sold by the pound. Maybe they still have those.

Well, that isn't how it worked back in Jesus' day. Instead of weighing basic staples, like flour for instance, they would sell them by volume. They'd put the stuff in a bowl or a basket and fill it to the top.

Now, we all know that there's filling the basket and then there's filling the basket. In our kitchen, we've got a trash can. Eventually, the trash reaches the top of the can. At which point, I look around to see if Kirsten can see me, and if she can't, I'll reach in and push the trash down, compacting it so we can fit more trash in there, all in an attempt to ensure that I'm not the one stuck taking out the garbage when it can't be compacted anymore.

Well, Jesus is talking about something similar here. He seems to be saying that if you give a "measure", you'll get that same measure back, only it'll be all shaken, to make sure there are no air holes or bubbles, and then pressed down, to get as much in there as possible. In other words, he's saying when you give, you get it back fully compacted, with even more on top.

And the reason this idea bugs me is it's the argument religious con men use. "Send in your donation, and you'll be blessed with riches beyond your wildest dreams." And so people do. But, of course, that's not usually the way it works. The elderly widow sends in her last \$20 and instead of receiving \$100, she goes broke.

But even worse, this approach to giving fosters an understanding of God as a cosmic vending machine. If you put your money in, you're going to get some money out. No muss, no fuss. It makes giving all about me, all about what I'm going to get out of it. It takes God out of the equation.

So, that can't be what Jesus is talking about here, right? Right?

Well, let's see. Let's start by looking at how Jesus treated money and giving in general. As you may know, Jesus talked more about money than anything else in all the gospels. In fact, we've talked in this sermon series about worship, prayer, and study. Well, Jesus talked about money more than all three of those combined.

But he focused on money not because of how awesome and wonderful it is; not because we ought to do whatever we can—including giving money—to get more of it. He talked about money so much because he considered it dangerous. In fact, he talked about money more than anything else because he considered it, and the stuff we can buy with it, THE most dangerous thing to our faith.

Now, Jesus wasn't necessarily anti-money. Money was, and is, a useful tool. We can do lots of good things with money. We can support the ministries of the church, we can give it to people who are in need. But Jesus knew that money—and the power it represents—are God's

main competitors for our hearts. He said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” In other words, your heart follows what you treasure. And, it also *reveals* what you treasure. What you do with money, how much of your attention and time is dedicated to money, shows much more clearly than anything you might say, where your true allegiance lies.

Now, I’m sure there are a lot of reasons Jesus considered money so dangerous. For one thing, it’s the main way human culture has tended to keep score of who’s winning and who’s losing the game of life. It’s surely the main way *our* culture does so. And we all want to be winners, right?

And at a deeper level, it’s the way so many of us seek to find meaning and purpose. It, and the stuff it can get us, is immediately tangible. Research studies have found that when we hit the “buy” button on Amazon, we get a hit of dopamine, a neurotransmitter in our brains that’s largely responsible for happiness and contentment. Same thing when the package arrives on our front doorstep. I can testify. There is an undeniable excitement in opening up the package, unboxing whatever it is, and seeing and trying it out.

But, I can also testify that dopamine wears off. Sometimes it’s just a matter of minutes before the bright, shiny new object of my affection isn’t so bright and shiny anymore. And I’m on to the next thing, which I’m sure *this time* will provide a more lasting sense of well-being and contentment. But, of course, it doesn’t. When we try to find our peace and joy in our money and what it can buy, that peace and joy is going to be fleeting, at best. And, at some point, it’s going to give way to bitterness and *discontent* as our greater and greater efforts to create our own contentment prove less and less fruitful.

So, what's the alternative. Well, in three of the gospels, we read about a rich young ruler who asked Jesus that very question (Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 18:18-30). He wanted to know the secret to eternal life. So, Jesus tells him. He tells him to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus.

Now, some serious Christians have taken this as a literal command for all Christians. I respect their opinion, but I don't think so. I DO, however, think it was a serious command for *that* person in *that* situation. That young man may have allowed his money and his stuff to completely displace God at the center of his affections. Money and stuff might have *become* his god, his idol. And giving it all away might have been the only way to lessen or eliminate its hold on him, opening up space for him to attend to the one true God.

And, while the rich young ruler's situation was extreme, the principle Jesus expresses here applies to all of us. What we treasure is going to change our heart. And, as our heart changes, it changes what we treasure. Because of money's tangibility, immediacy, and usefulness, Jesus recognized that it is going to be a constant threat to our relationship with God. We are going to be constantly tempted to enter into the self-reinforcing loop whereby our focus on money and stuff inclines our heart towards money and stuff, which increases our focus on money and stuff.

So, Jesus tells the rich young ruler, and us, to give it away.

But giving it away goes even deeper. It isn't just about avoiding the pull of money and stuff. It's also about becoming who we were created to be.

At the very beginning of the Bible, we learn that we have been created in the image of God. And then, for the rest of the Bible, we learn that God gives. God gave Israel freedom from their Egyptian slavery. As they wandered in the wilderness, God gave them food and water. God gave them the promised land. God gave them—and then us—this book, God’s revelation of who God is. And God finally gave the ultimate gift, the gift of Jesus, through whose life, death, and resurrection, we are all enabled to enjoy new, bountiful, and eternal life—the kind of life we were created to live.

That’s the image we were created in. That’s the kind of life we were created to live. And when we give, we’re living into our true identity.

This is the fourth week in our sermon series on spiritual practices, The Walk. We’ve talked about what I call “internal” practices, like worship and study. Practices through which we breathe God’s presence more deeply into our lives. And last week, we talked about what I call external practices, like service, through which we breath God’s presence out into the people and world around us. Well, today’s spiritual practice is giving, and in a lot of ways, it’s like the flip side of service. When we serve others, we’re *giving* them our physical presence, our hands and feet. And when we give to others, we are serving them through the giving. We are making a positive difference in the world around us—making God’s presence more real, more tangible.

And at the same time, we are coming more and more deeply into touch with the core of who we are as beloved children of God, created in God’s own image. We’re becoming who we were created to be.

When we give, we bless others. But we bless ourselves at least as much. We don't give *so that* we will be blessed. If you've ever tried it, you know that doesn't work. It's when we bless others simply because it's who we are and what we were created to do, that we realize we have been blessed, usually far in excess of any blessing we may have given.

And, when you get right down to it, I think *that's* what Jesus is talking about in today's scripture passage. When you give for the sake of giving—rather than getting—you're going to get your measure handed back to you. Only, when you get it back, you'll realize it's been shaken up, compacted, and far fuller than it was before.

Devo

I was reminded this morning of maybe the funniest story I've ever been a part of. The story begins with my 77 year-old mother walking into an East Austin *carniceria*. She asks the butcher for the fresh ham my dad had sent her to get. The butcher asks her to wait a minute, goes to the back of the shop, and comes out with a suckling pig draped over his shoulder. My mother exclaims, politely but firmly, "That's not my pig." And the butcher responds, just as politely and just as firmly, "Yes, it is." And so it begins.

My dad had been wanting to smoke a pig for a while. Several years earlier he had gotten himself a smoker. He'd done brisket and ribs and sausage, but he really wanted to smoke a pig. So, one day, he just decided to do it. He ordered a pig. But then he had a problem: how to get it home. He didn't feel like getting it himself and he knew my mother would never allow it in the

house. He had to approach this delicately. So, he told her he'd just ordered a ham and sent her to the store.

Well, my mother (did I mention she was 77 years old) eventually wrestled the pig into my dad's lime-green prius and then wrestled it up the garage steps into the house. My dad was thrilled. He fired up the smoker and put the pig on.

Now, to understand what happens next, you need to know my dad. He was probably a little over 80 at the time and while he may have had good intentions, his attention span wasn't what it had been (and it had never been that good). He put the pig on and then went in to watch TV. He'd watch some golf and (yet another) rerun of the 2005 Rose Bowl, and before too long, the fire in the smoker would go out. He'd eventually remember the pig, fire up the smoker again, and then go back inside, to get caught up on the 1999 Masters. This happened several times over the course of a couple of days.

Now, Saturday just so happened to be Kirsten's birthday, and so my parents invited us over for dinner: smoked suckling pig. Although I should have known better, I was actually pretty excited. I had never had suckling pig before. I still haven't. After we got to my parents' house and got the pig off the smoker, I was given the honor of carving it up. But when I began, two things became immediately apparent: (1) it was practically raw; and (2) it didn't smell very good ... at all. After a brief consultation, we decided to go out to eat for Kirsten's birthday. It was wonderful.

But, as they say in the commercials, "Wait, there's more." My dad refused to give up. I guess he was both hard of hearing (my mom's complaints) and hard of smelling (the increasingly

rancid putrescence emanating from the pig). He put it back on the smoker and kept sort-of smoking it for the next day or so. Eventually, my mother put her foot down. The smell was getting so bad that she was concerned the neighbors might report them to the authorities.

In fact, the smell was so bad that she couldn't stand the prospect of the pig sitting in the garbage can for the rest of the week. So, she decided to dispose of the body. Under cover of darkness, my 80+ year old father and 75+ year old mother loaded a heavily laden lawn/leaf bag smelling of an abandoned meatpacking plant into the back of the Prius and headed for the country. There, in the dark of night, by the light of a full moon, on the side of a Texas Hill Country dirt road, my mother lifted the bag out of the back of the Prius and tossed it in a ditch.

I tell this story because I just about fall down laughing every time I think of it (and because the statute of limitations has long-since run). I also tell it because it reminds me of my faith life. Like my dad, I have been guilty of getting enthusiastic about some program or process related to my faith. I'll go all in ... until I stop. I'll fill up the fire box with wood, but then go in, turn on Seve Ballesteros, and forget all about what I was doing. And the results are predictable. Everything ends up half-baked (or half-smoked), and eventually starts to stink.

And one of the reasons this seems to keep happening to me is the sheer volume of things to get distracted by. Leaving aside the obvious stuff like my phone, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, Facebook, squirrels, etc., it seems like I'm being presented on at least a monthly basis with a new Simple Five Step Plan For Complete Spiritual Enlightenment In Just Seven Minutes a Day. The spiritual equivalent of Seven Minute Abs. And I'm constantly tempted to try it out. So, I switch from the 1985 PGA Championship to the 1979 Cotton Bowl, to a documentary about World War II, and the firebox goes out.

Quite frankly, I'm not exactly sure how to get off this merry-go-round. But I'm trying. And the way I'm trying is by trying to keep the first thing the first thing. Jesus says over and over again in chapter 15 of John's Gospel, "abide in me." He says elsewhere, in Matthew's Gospel, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you as well." It's so easy to get distracted. But now that we know what happens when we do, let's see if we can just abide a little instead. After all, none of us want to see my mom coming at us with that leaf bag.