

Unwrapping Christmas I - The Gift of Generosity

The Bible uses the word “believe” 275 times. It uses the word “pray” 371 times. It uses the word “love” 714 times, but it uses the word “give” or “giving” 2,162 times. Surely an indication of just how much God values it. As we experience the holiday season over the next few weeks, we will be bombarded with opportunities and requests and pleas and pitches for gift giving which makes us question our generosity. Rather than bemoan the fact, which is certainly not going away, what if we embraced generosity? What if we aspired to be generous this Christmas?

This weekend we begin a *new series*, for a *new season* and that’s what this series is all about. God is a generous giver, and everything is a gift. He has given us birth, life, friends and family, talents and possessions, opportunities and advancements, and on and on. At Christmas we celebrate that God gave us his very best. At Christmas we celebrate that God the Father gave us his Son. Perhaps the most famous line in all of Scripture says, “*For God so loved the world he GAVE his only beloved Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” John 3.16 The Son loves us so much , he gave his life for us that we might have life. God loves so God gives. God loves so God gives.

Since God is a generous giver, to grow as followers of Christ means *growing in giving*. **No, this message is not about stewardship; it is about the gift of sharing ourselves.** If you are becoming more like Christ, then you are becoming more generous in all aspects of your life just as He is generous.

It is tempting for us to think of generosity and giving as a label for larger than life heroes like Saint Francis or Mother Theresa, but **it’s not so**. In fact, on one occasion, someone saw Mother Theresa caring for a dying AIDS patient and remarked, “*I could never do that.*” To which Mother Theresa responded “*Don’t ever say that again. You could do this, if you wanted to.*”

Nearly every moment of every day we have opportunities to give something to someone else. And giving doesn’t require any kind of extraordinary service or heroic virtue. It simply involves thinking more of others. And in our heart of hearts, we all want to be like that; we want to be givers. When we look at the end of our lives we want to be remembered as generous people. No one is ever honored for what they received or took from others. People who are honored

and remembered fondly are remembered for what they gave and their contributions for the benefit of others. We also know intuitively that generosity is the key to joy and happiness. There is joy in giving in a way that benefits others. On the other hand the word *miserable* comes from the root word "*miser*". The more I hold onto what I've got, the more miserable I become.

While we want to be givers and generous people, we face obstacles to growing in generosity... The **first** follows from the sheer instinct for survival: I think of myself first *and* at the exclusion of everyone else. One of the first words children learn is the word "mine." Sharing is not instinctive for kids. Because human nature is designed for survival.

A **second** obstacle that flows from the first is scarcity mentality. I fear that there won't be enough for me. If I give my money or resources, then I won't have enough for my family. If I share a contact to help you, then that contact will be less likely to help me. If I give my time to you, I won't have enough time to get done what I need to get done. We often think of life in this zero/sum game that generosity decreases my resources.

A **third** obstacle we face is the fear being taken advantage of. I have seen so many people in church world who have given of themselves to others and just got used up and burned out. As a result, we don't give because we fear that we will be in that position.

In his book Give and Take, bestselling author and research psychologist Adam Grant, reports on a research project he undertook of the American workforce. He found that employees, broadly speaking, fell into one of three categories. **Takers** he described as people whose way of operating in any interaction or exchange was determining what they could get out of it, what's in it for them. Takers like to get more than they give and put their interests ahead of others all the time. Their motto is "*You have to look out for number one.*" They may help others but only if the benefits outweighed the personal cost. **Matchers** he described as people who only give as an exchange. I give to you and you give to me. They are interested in an even exchange. They protect themselves by seeking reciprocity. **Givers** he described as people who contribute without worrying what they would receive in return. -They care more about what they give than what they get. -They pay more attention to what people need from them. -They shared their time, energy, knowledge, skill, ideas, and connections

with others who can benefit from them. -They looked to add value to other people's lives.

In the course of his research, Grant came to a startling discovery. When he studied the highest performers across most every profession, they were primarily givers. Matchers and takers went to the middle, or the bottom of the performance scale. The givers who were high performers learned to give wisely. They learned to harness the benefits of giving while minimizing the costs.

We make a mistake in believing that generosity and wisdom or generosity and success or generosity and ambition are opposed to one another. They are not opposites. **They go together.** Generosity does not always work or seem successful in the short term, in a sprint, but in the marathon of life, it can pay great dividends. And when we look at giving in the light of eternity, generosity and giving can pay even greater dividends.

In St. Paul's letter today, after he thanks God for the Corinthians, he says "*in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift.*" Let me say that again "you are not lacking in any gift." So, what does that mean? By virtue of our Baptism, we have been given the graces, the spiritual gifts we need to follow Him and model ourselves after Him. We only need to be open to those gifts. We have work to do.

Jesus describes acts of giving and generosity that will reap rewards, chief among these *giving* food in response to hunger drink in response to thirst kindness and care in response to neediness. Over and over again Scripture teaches us that there are rewards for giving and the calculation begins with the lowest and the least. Because, when we give in this way, it is giving to God. It's not *like* giving to God, it *is* giving to God. The neediness he describes is His neediness.

There are certainly literal opportunities to do this, all around us all the time, especially when it comes to our ministry and mission outreach. But far more common in our experience in our community are the many other ways people around us are in need of nourishment and clothing and care: attention, encouragement, kindness, recognition, inclusion, courtesy, civility, cheer, praise, promotion, wisdom, insight, correction, direction.

Moreover, the givers, in the act of giving, have cultivated the right character for the life of heaven which is what the Gospel is saying to us today. We are called to watch and be ready for the day when Jesus comes again. By contrast, the takers, in the repeated response of taking, **have not** cultivated the right character.

At this festive season of the year we are more inclined to give to others. The instinct for giving and generosity takes the upper hand, its easy and expected. **But how about if we took advantage of this time to do more, - to do the unexpected.** To be on the lookout for opportunities to be generous to those in need as they present themselves to us as a way of giving to God. Over the next few weeks, we are going to work to notice those opportunities so that we grow to have more generous characters.

So here is your homework, this week, be on the look out to give what you have to the people around. Every day when you wake up, ask God to help you to notice the unexpected opportunities you have to give to other people, no matter how big or how small. Remember, St. Paul's letter, you have the grace and the spiritual gifts that you need to make this happen, but you need to be open to them.

The Christmas season reminds us that God has not treated us fairly. God is not a Matcher. **God has treated us generously.** When you and I unwrap Christmas, that's what we will find