

Breaking Free

Luke 15:11-32

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Last week we met a rich young man who felt financial gravity so strongly that he couldn't bear to break free and accept Jesus' invitation to be a disciple. He couldn't or wouldn't submit his wealth to Christ.

Today we consider another rich young man who appears in the Gospels. He's a character in a parable Jesus told about a loving father. He's the younger of two sons who feels financial gravity with such force that he goes to his father and asks for his inheritance early. You can imagine how the family would react to the younger son's wish.

Basically, the young man was saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." In that culture, his actions in asking for his inheritance early would have shamed his father. And yet we see the father's generosity on display here. He doesn't rebuke his son or kick him out of the house. Crazy and shameful as it may be, he grants the request. He divides his property between his two sons. The older gets two-thirds and the younger gets one-third, according to Jewish custom.

This young man wanted to pursue fully the kingdom of self. He must have felt like he was floating as he set his course and began to experience the pull of a distant land. Having spent his life in a fairly confined space, he was excited to begin a great adventure. What he didn't know was that he was about to be sucked into a black hole.

A *black hole* is a place in space where the gravity is so great that nothing can escape its pull, not even light, which is why black holes can be felt but not seen. Once something enters the gravitational field of a black hole, the effect is dramatic. The kingdom of self is a space full of black holes.

For many people, money and the things it buys can produce a level of gravity that keeps them from escaping. One of the worst combinations in this regard is to place a large sum of money in the hands of a person with low spiritual and emotional maturity. This is exactly what happened to the young man in the parable. His spending choices were predictable: "Not

long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living" (Luke 15:13).

Most of us understand the problem the young man faced. He was anxious to be independent, but he was immature and had trouble handling money. His vision was limited to his immediate future. His impulse control was so weak that all options for how to spend Dad's money looked equally inviting. He lived fast and large until it was all gone, and then stumbled away in regret when a famine picked the last denarius from his pocket.

The once-rich but then very poor young man in Jesus' parable eventually returned home. The turning point is when "he came to himself" or "came to his senses." It's like he woke up and realized where he was and what he'd been doing. I heard a man recently tell about when he was younger and got a new video game system. He started playing and after a while thought it was probably time to stop and do something else. He thought he'd been playing for maybe an hour. He looked at the clock and saw that he'd been playing for *twelve hours*. He said he unhooked the system, put it in the box, and never played again. Possibly the young man in the parable was shocked at how much he had done, how much money he had spent, how quickly it had gone.

But after he came to his senses, he said, "I will arise, I will set out and go back to my father." He knew he deserved his father's wrath, but he was hungry and desperate, so he decided to ask his dad for a job on the estate. As he walked up the familiar road home, he was amazed when he saw the old man running toward him. That's not what older men in that culture did. It was undignified for an older man in Israel to run anywhere, much less toward a son who had rejected and brought shame to the family.

That was the day the son came to appreciate his father's generous spirit. His father restored him to the household and put a ring on his finger. He was brought a new robe to wear. He was given shoes to show he was still a son. Slaves didn't wear shoes, but a son did. It was a kindness he didn't deserve, forgiveness he didn't merit, and love he didn't anticipate. His father's generosity gave him a new life.

Think of how that experience must have changed the son's character. The selfish boy died in the distant land and was resurrected as a new man

through his father's love. In the story of this lost son being welcomed home, we hear echoes of resurrection, of lost children being restored, of lost Israel brought back from exile. Jesus' ministry was all about God restoring and resurrecting all kinds of people. Jesus doesn't fill in the details of this story, but we can imagine that, rather than thinking about himself, the young man now looked to the needs of others. Extravagant living in some distant land no longer appealed to him. Being with his father, enjoying the company of his father, doing the will of his father would be what now brought him joy. He probably became kinder and more gracious. Most important of all, rather than simply receiving his father's generosity, he now had the insight to participate in that generosity.

The pull of financial gravity that was evident in the prodigal's life shows up in our lives too. Often, our prayers to God are about things we hope to receive. We ask for guidance to make decisions, good health and recovery from illness, comfort for the bereaved, jobs and money to pay bills, healing in relationships, along with countless other requests. Our desire, regardless of how well intended, is often to acquire or receive from God rather than to serve God. Jesus does teach us to ask and he shows how generous God is. But he also teaches us to surrender ourselves to God and to ask on behalf of others. How often do we pray about how we can reach people who don't know Christ? Are there people you're praying for to come into relationship with Jesus? Do we pray about how to feed the hungry, comfort those who mourn, assist the physically or mentally ill, house the homeless, gain access to prisoners, or provide needed services like job training? The ratio of "receive" prayers to "serve" prayers can be pretty high.

There's a moment of revelation and realization for Christ-followers when we recognize the difference between just benefitting from God's kingdom and participating in God's kingdom. When you find yourself submitting your kingdom of self to the kingdom of God, good things begin to happen.

The younger son did this. He came to his senses, he went back home, he fell into the father's embrace. The older son was invited to do this. This older son was in a far country of his own even though he'd never left the farm. He was distant from the father. He didn't really know or share his

father's heart of generosity and grace. But the father invited him to. At the end, when the older son refused to go into the party for his brother, the father goes out to him, assures him that he's given him all he has, and invites him to share the joy.

Being oriented toward God's kingdom is life-altering. It creates an identity founded in generosity. Generous people see themselves, their lives, and their purpose differently than people whose lives are weighed down by financial gravity. Generous people are more interested in what they can give than in what they'll get.

We become *stewards*. A steward is a person who manages another's property. Stewards have broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or how a household is run, but they know that primarily they're servants, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. Christ-followers understand we're stewards of a gift given to us by God—a life with unique strengths, talents, abilities, and resources to use in ways guided by God's own Spirit who lives within us, so as to honor and glorify the giver of the gift.

A lot of Christians don't act as God's stewards. One reason is that financial gravity pulls us toward a deep belief that we're the sole owners of what we possess and that we can use it to support the lifestyle we desire. Being an owner means we can make decisions free of the control and even the consideration of others. We submit to no one when financial gravity holds us back.

In their book *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson review the data and find that "very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually tend to lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way" (99).

The Paradox of Generosity shares data captured in Smith's five-year, multi-disciplinary Science of Generosity Initiative, released in 2010. Here's what they found people reported about their own giving: "44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose." Zero. Not one dollar. They didn't even put a quarter in one of those plastic funnels where you can see it go round and round and spin

real fast before dropping to the bottom. Nearly half of us gave away nothing at all. These people turned down Girl Scouts, refused high school band collections, didn't slow the offering plate at church, ignored the cancer research drive, told the Salvation Army they had no change at Christmas, and then said, "I didn't give at the office either!" The study went on to say this:

Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income. (*Paradox* 103)

You may be thinking: *But at least people gave their time, and time is valuable.* That's true, and volunteers are extremely important to charitable organizations. In the same study, more than 76 percent of the people self-reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That's three out of four people. It seems we're in a generosity famine.

Lack of generosity isn't about resources; it's about identity. Stewards understand that they're custodial agents of whatever sum they administer. They manage money and assets with the thought of pleasing the true owner.

The older brother didn't understand. His attitude and resentment kept him from having a right relationship with his father. They kept him from knowing the father's heart. He complains to his father, "I've been slaving for you!" But they had actually been working as partners since his father had already divided his assets between the two sons (see N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*). The father says, "You are always with me and everything I have is yours." The son missed that generous spirit and lived like a slave instead of a son and partner. What if we saw stewardship not as bondage and a burdensome duty? What if we saw that stewardship is living as children and partners of a generous Father?

That could change our attitude toward generosity and giving as well. If we're stewards of financial resources, we accept the challenge to set aside an amount of money to invest in the work of God's kingdom. Many

Christians, as a way to get serious about their desire to participate in God's work, pursue generosity through giving proportionally of their income with a tithe as the goal. A tithe is one-tenth of our income. A tithe is meant to be the first and best of what we have, not the last or what's left over.

The tithe was a practice God gave the people of Israel. The money from the tithe was used to support the worship life of Israel and to take care of the most vulnerable people in the society.

Why would God ask them to do that? It's not like the Almighty is short of money. Clearly God doesn't need the tithe. Could it be that the tithe is requested not for God's sake, but for ours?

It seems clear that the tithe is intended to be a discipline that enables people to extend the influence of God's kingdom. As we give our tithe, we show we are God's servants. Through our generosity, we gain a sense of identity. The practice of proportional giving calls us to offer our best for God's kingdom as a way to live into our identity as stewards.

How does the practice of generosity change us? Tom Berlin tells about a woman who was a member of his church years ago. She was in her early nineties. The topic of giving came up and Ms. Margaret talked about how important giving was to her life and the joy she found in giving a tithe.

(Show "Sermon Video 2: Ms. Margaret.")

Margaret shaped the life of her family through generosity. Whether your tithe fits in a mason jar or a charitable trust, you can do the same. The way to gain her joy is to take on her practice. As Christians we're called to be stewards of all that we have, from our possessions and money to our time and abilities. God calls us to be faithfully employed in God's service. Yet, all too often, financial gravity restricts and inhibits true stewardship.

The father said to his older son, "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." When resurrection is happening, when new life is bursting out all around, we have to celebrate. If we don't celebrate, we fail to meet generosity with gratitude (Wright).

We're holding tight rather than letting go. Many people who love God and want to honor Christ and seek the will of the Holy Spirit in their lives haven't made the move from being a recipient of God's grace to being

a generous participant in God's kingdom. We may want to give, but we need to learn how to align our lives for generosity.