

Tethered to God

Matthew 6:21

John Breon

One of the greatest gravity-defying events of all time was the Orteig Prize, a \$25,000 reward offered in the 1920s by hotel operator Raymond Orteig to the first person who could fly across the Atlantic Ocean between New York City and Paris. Several teams attempted this feat. Let me tell you about three of the competitors.

Rene Fonck was a World War I French flying ace. He wanted to arrive at his homeland in style with three others in his crew. The interior of his plane was more like the living room of a chateau than the fuselage of an airplane. There were heavy chairs, mahogany tables, and a sofa that could be converted into a bed. Fonck took everything, including the kitchen sink! (There was a cooking area with a small kitchen.) He brought cases of wine and champagne. He loaded up gifts for friends. Before takeoff he had a local hotel deliver a hot dinner that included clam chowder, terrapin, roast duck, and turkey. To keep it all warm, he placed it inside a heavily insulated cabinet. His plane was designed to carry no more than 20,000 pounds. Fully loaded, it weighed in at a whopping 28,000 pounds! He actually had to retrofit an extra wheel on the tail section to support the load.

Gravity defeated Fonck. Even with full power, the plane only made it to the end of the runway. It rolled over a small incline, toppled forward, and burst into flames. Though Fonck and his navigator made it out, the other two crew members didn't (Tim Brady, "The Orteig Prize," *Journal of Aviation/Aerospace Education & Research*, Volume 12, Number 1 [Fall 2002], 48-49; cited in Tom Berlin, *Defying Gravity* 59-60).

Millionaire *Charles Levine* financed another team that may have had the best chance to claim the Orteig Prize. He had a great plane and a qualified crew, but they never functioned as a team that had the single goal of getting to Paris. Levine was all about drama. He wanted two pilots ready, and he planned to choose between them on the runway just before departure, thus attracting greater publicity. He eventually abandoned that idea but nevertheless chose two flyers, Chamberlin and Bertraud. These two

disagreed on virtually everything from the flight plan to the equipment. Just when it appeared that things couldn't get more dysfunctional, Levine presented Chamberlin and Bertraud with contracts the night before takeoff that said they would each receive a small salary while Levine would collect all the prize money for himself. Bertraud filed a temporary injunction on the flight and they were grounded (Brady 54-55; Berlin 60-61).

Charles Lindbergh also wanted to be the first person to fly from New York to Paris and claim the prize. He was personally involved in every aspect of the trip. Lindbergh was in the factory as the plane was built and made sure to keep it simple. *The Spirit of St. Louis* had only one engine, to conserve fuel. To save weight, it had one seat for one pilot. Lindbergh famously trimmed excess paper from the edges of his navigational charts to save weight. There were no luxuries, not even a forward windshield. Unable to see straight ahead, Lindbergh navigated by using the side window and a small periscope to see what was in front of him.

Lindbergh landed near Paris on May 21, 1927, a full thirty-three and a half hours after he took off from New York. Thousands of cheering people waited for him. The press dubbed him "Lucky Lindy" in honor of his success (<http://www.charleslindebergh.com/history>; Berlin 62-63).

In those days, a flight from New York to Paris didn't happen by luck. It took careful planning and intentionality. The point for our stewardship is that *generosity doesn't just happen by luck*. Generosity happens by design. Even many of the people who don't give to charity may wish to. They just don't see how they can be generous.

The problem is that so often we're like the competitors for the Orteig Prize. Some of us are like Fonck, so weighed down by the gravity of possessions that we're unable to experience the freedom of generosity. Some couples and families are like Levine and company. They have competing financial goals and conflicting personal values, and they lack basic communication skills, especially when the topic is money. Until those things change, they'll never break free from the culture of more.

If we want our life journey to be a generous one, we need to be more like Lindbergh. Generosity happens by design. People who are generous know that to make a real contribution with time or money, they need to

think about what they want to accomplish, plan a strategy that fits their other financial and time allocations, and then muster the courage to act. Just as Lucky Lindy didn't count on good fortune, we must have a clear plan of action to be generous.

Research into the habits of generous people reveals three secrets to generosity. Many of you should probably be giving this message. You have more knowledge and experience of this than I do. But, it's my job, so here we go.

Secret #1: Make a Budget

Budgets remind us that all our finances matter to God. If faith is truly central to our lives, we must begin with the portion of our income that we plan to invest in the work of God's kingdom. If we don't plan this first, we'll simply be offering God leftovers. And, as we all know, by the time the other bills have been paid, the leftovers are often nonexistent. Discipleship can't begin after the spending ends.

The Bible is clear that we're to provide for the needs of ourselves and our families. Such provision creates a safe environment where people can generously use their gifts and graces for others because their own needs are being met. It provides a place of safety and even abundance where marriages can prosper and children can develop physical and emotional health.

The apostle Paul states clearly that people need to care for the members of their family, especially if they're vulnerable. Paul told Timothy, "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:7-8).

(Show "Sermon Video 3: Ropes Course":  3-Ropes Course_1.mp4)

If negotiating finances is like the ropes course in the video, then a budget is like a carabiner, the metal clip that allows us to engage and disengage as needed. A budget keeps us safely attached during our

gravity-defying journey. While others are grounded, we're able to move with confidence toward our financial goals. When we meet the basic needs of life, our money is used in ways that are in concert with God's will. We defy the financial gravity that pulls us and we're set free from the culture of more.

Using a budget will enable us to look at the level of spending that's pleasing to God in each area so we can balance our resources accordingly. Our generosity to others won't happen by accident. It can happen, however, when we become serious about being stewards of our income and make appropriate allocations in every area of our financial world. We gain that ability when we use a budget to clip our lives to a safety line.

Secret #2: Live Simply

If we want to live within our means, we need to *keep it simple*. Many generous people, even the very wealthy, practice this. While higher-income individuals often have a great deal more in terms of income and assets than their neighbors, many keep life simple in terms of what they possess. The authors of *The Millionaire Next Door* discovered this several years ago. Often people of high net worth live in average homes in their communities, drive used cars, and don't wear the most expensive clothes. They have a clear vision of the difference between their needs and their wants in life. These people often gained their wealth through careful attention to how much money moved in and out of their businesses. They do the same at home. The disciplines of frugality, saving, and working a budget push them toward the practice of simplicity. *The principle of simplicity is the most effective tool that can be employed by people who want to escape the financial gravity of our culture.*

Gravity-bound people usually see simplicity as *absence*. They assume that *simple* means the bed is hard, the car is undependable, and the shirt is camel hair. Because people see simplicity as absence, there's no motivation to practice it. The good stuff, they assume, is inside the ads on the computer screen or in the deals offered by local retailers. Gravity-bound people pursue such things with abandon and believe they're the path to the good life.

That's why we find our cabinets, drawers, closets, basements, attics, and sometimes storage units full of stuff and more stuff. All that consumption leaves a trail.

Gravity-defiers see simplicity as freedom. It's freedom from the pressures of debt and freedom from the complexity of having more than we need. Living a simple life is less about rules and guidelines and more about the discovery of what brings fulfillment. To gain simplicity, we have to identify what brings us real joy in life and allow it to weed out what brings us less joy. Simplicity isn't about denying ourselves. It's about avoiding things that keep us from completing our mission.

Simplicity involves single-minded commitment and whole-hearted devotion to God. We practice simplicity when we "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" and trust that other things we need will be provided (Matthew 6:33). Simplicity keeps us focused on God's call and purpose and how we participate in God's kingdom.

Paul speaks to people like us when he writes:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (1 Tim 6:17)

The principle of simplicity, this sorting of needs and wants, enables us not to place our hope in our finances. Simplicity enables us to be content with what we have.

Secret #3: Set Goals for Generosity

Paul goes on, "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:18).

One practice that enables people to make the journey of generosity each year is to set numerical goals for the good they hope to do with their time and money. They pray about God's calling in their lives. They consider what activities bring joy to God that also uniquely bring joy to them. Then they find ways to participate. As these activities are discerned, financial goals for giving are projected for their annual giving.

When we're generous, we're not doing things for God so much as we're becoming a part of what God is doing in the world. *That's our mission.* Like Lindbergh, we know what we're about, and nothing will get in our way. That's why it's important to begin the year with financial goals of what we hope to contribute to the ministries, organizations, and projects to which God is calling us. It's amazing what we can do—at any income level—when we set goals for generosity and order our lives according to those priorities.

Inevitably someone will say, *I can't do that. I can't afford that.* If you feel that way, try setting a generosity goal and seriously consider your life and journey. Paul talks about the outcome of generosity: "In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19).

Paul's biggest worry is that if we're not careful, we'll settle for a life that's held down by the gravity of our culture. We'll miss the abundant life promised to us in Christ. In our heart of hearts, we don't want an ordinary life; we long for the *extraordinary* life.

In generosity, we can defy gravity and cross the great distance from committed consumer to generous steward if that's our goal.

Giving Challenge

Recently you received an Estimate of Giving card in the mail. If you didn't get one, we have some available today. This week, fill out the Estimate of Giving card. Set a goal for your generosity. You can be a part of launching witness and service and mission from this church. We'll talk more about it next week, and we'll present our cards as an act of commitment and consecration.