



The Covenant of Generosity
Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 8:32
October 12, 2014

Stephen King writes horror novels. I read one of his children's books, but do not have the courage to his adult books. I like to sleep at night. Anyway, several years ago, Stephen King gave a commencement address at a college

While walking along a country road one day in 1999, Stephen King was struck and severely injured by a passing minivan.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing you're not going to do," he said to the graduates, "and that's take it with you. I'm worth [many] millions of dollars ... and a couple of years ago I found out what 'you can't take it with you' means.

"I found out while I was lying in the ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in the ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. ...

Stephen King continues: "Of all the power which will shortly come into your hands ... the greatest is undoubtedly the power of compassion, the ability to give. We have enormous resources in this country — resources you yourselves will soon command — but they are only yours on loan. ...

"I came here to talk about charity, and I want you to think about it on a large scale. Should you give away what you have? Of course you should. I want you to consider making your lives one long gift to others, and why not? ... All that lasts is what you pass on. The rest is smoke and mirrors."

What struck was his statement: "making your lives one long gift to others."

I call it extravagant generosity. We are going to talk about what is it and why we should do it as followers of Jesus Christ.

Before we read the scriptures, let us pray. Prayer: Loving God, we come to you in thanksgiving, knowing that all we are and all we have is a gift from you. In faith and love, help us to do your will. We are listening, Lord. Speak your words into the depths of our souls, that we may hear you clearly. Amen

Background to Matthew passage:

As I read this scripture passage, consider the culture Jesus is speaking. Jesus is speaking to the ordinary Jew who find themselves under the authority of Rome. A Roman soldier could ask a Jewish person to carry his gear. Romans taxed the people, ruled over the people, humiliated the people. With this in mind, let us read the Matthew passage.

Read Matthew 5:38-42

To carry the gear of a Roman soldier was humiliating. So, when Jesus said go the extra mile (carrying the gear of the Roman soldier), this was radical. Then Jesus goes on (this is the Sermon on the Mount) and says, don't punch back. Love them. Don't overcome evil with evil. Overcome evil with good. Don't strike back. Can you imagine how hard that would be as a Jew ruled by Rome?

Jesus is talking about generosity. Even when people take advantage of you, you are to meet them with astonishing generosity.

Generosity is the act of doing more than is expected of you. Astounding people. Leaving them dumbfounded for an explanation. It's not enough to be good to the people who are good to us, but Jesus says, it must flow to the very people that we don't want to be generous.

Ecclesiastes 11 is about generosity. The chapter opens with the familiar words, "Cast your bread upon the waters." This was a well-known Arab proverb. It meant that sometimes we do things for others that may appear to be wasteful, extravagant. Who would take good bread and throw it in the water? This "casting of bread" means that we should be willing to take a chance where we perceive there is a need.

Extravagant generosity is the practice of sharing and giving that exceeds all expectations. We all know we are supposed to give, but Jesus says do it extravagantly, and here's why. The answer is under the Matthew passage in your bulletin:

Our generosity is to remind people of God's generosity.

Our generosity is grounded in the generous giving of God. God's generosity is all over scripture. I have one listed in your bulletin.

"He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" Romans 8:32. This is extravagant generosity.

Here's some other scripture passages that did not make it into your bulletin.

...God, who gives life to all things... 1 Timothy 6:13

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...James 1:17

God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. 2 Corinthians 9:8

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16

What is so amazing about John 3:16 is that God's generosity is pointed at his enemies, to those who turn their backs on God. God so loved the whole world that He gave His Son not to condemn the world but rather to give them a way out.

By the way, God's generosity doesn't have to be this profound. What about the simple gift of adding flavor to food. God didn't have to do that, yet God creates those things. We see God's generosity in the "common graces," the simple gifts to humans. Everything you enjoy was created by God. All of life is sustained by God, gifted by God, held together by the generosity of God whether you love God or not.

Isn't there a song about counting your many blessings, name them one by one. How has God dealt generously with you?

We pattern our generosity after God's generosity. Our generosity is like God's and it comes in the form of giving to those in need, hospitality, forgiveness, loving our enemies, going out of our way, doing more than what is asked of us.

I have another reason why we practice astonishing generosity besides the fact that it reminds people of God's generosity: it gives life to you.

Take the example of the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is the saltiest body of water on earth, therefore very few living things can survive in it. It is dead. The reason it is so salty is

because the Dead Sea is landlocked. Water can flow into it, including salt water, but no water can leave. It receives, but does not give...and so it is dead.

The Apostle Paul says we should set our hope “on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” Therefore, “be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...so that [we] may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Paul wants us to practice Extravagant Generosity so that we can “take hold of the life that really is life.” We don’t just receive; we give, so we don’t become dead like The Dead Sea.

Generosity lives in the heart. It is our joyful response to God’s generosity towards us. We are generous not because we are supposed to but because it lives in our very soul and being. Grace is made visible when the people of God are generous people. Grace is made visible when we live with an open-handed and open-hearted understanding of all we have and all we are.

Thus, we practice extravagant generosity so the world may know God’s grace AND so we will have life abundantly in Christ...the life that really is life.

In last week’s email blast, I asked you to think about examples of astonishing generosity you have witnessed – in our church, within your family, with friends and neighbors. I received an email from one of our members who couldn’t wait to give me her example of extravagant generosity. It is about a friend of hers.

The friend has a next door neighbor who is financially challenged, and has a daughter living in Portland Or who has had many treatments for cancer. She has children and needed a car. The friend not only gave her his van BUT it needed an expensive repair for which he had done and paid for. The daughter was given an airline ticket, came here with a sister, and they are now driving the van back home.

Another example of the same friend: in her words: A few years ago, we were running errands in Tucson and passed a gal at a corner holding a sign that said " Everyone needs a little help sometime." We had the light so went on our way; but it really bothered me and I said that to [my friend]. He dropped me off at Macys and when he returned and picked me up he told me he went back and gave the girl money. When I said how much he said \$ 30.00. I said why did you give her so much? He said , "That's all I had!!!"

Extravagant generosity.

Here are a few examples of extravagant generosity in our church (and this is just a few; I could name many, many more and we would be here for a long time):

People from pastoral care who visit assisted living/nursing homes on a regular basis. One woman goes every week and bakes a cake on their birthdays.

The owl express is an act of generosity. I hear time and time again that God is experienced in the parking lots of churches on Sunday mornings. And as long as I am on this topic, the Deacons are looking for people to drive the owl express. This is a simple way to do an act of generosity. Let me know if you are interested.

There are people from this church who assist at the food banks and Crossroads. Our church office staff went to Crossroads last week and made lunch for the people who live in Nogales.

Women in our church who make shawls which are then prayed over by the Prayer Team, and given to people in need of healing. I've been with Chris Erickson when she takes a prayer shawl to someone, and the joy that comes over face as they take the shawl and rub it on their face, knowing that it holds the prayers of our people.

At another church, I heard one pastor ask his people to open their Bibles as he read the scriptures. He said this: If you're a guest with us this morning, there should be a hardback black one around you. If you don't have a Bible, if you don't own one, this is our gift to you. Feel free to take that with you."

So I am going to do an act of generosity on behalf of our church (and without permission!): I invite you to take one of our Bibles if you do not have one. They are blue and in the rack in front of you. They are our gift to you.

May we be a church of astonishing generosity so people will know the grace of God. We already do so many acts of generosity. Think of ways we can do more and more so people will know the love of God.

And remember: Generosity is not a matter of a large bank account or an abundance of resources, but instead of a huge heart and an abundance of compassion. In a world that is desperately in need of seeing the difference that God makes in a human life, generosity is a clear witness to a life that is living for God.

Amen? Amen

So, we now practice an ancient act of generosity: giving of our tithes and offerings. I ask the ushers to get up and prepare to serve in this holy act.

Before we receive our tithes and offerings, let us respond to God's word with a statement of faith. It is found on the bottom of the sermon page. The question and answer state why we have a covenant of generosity.

Statement of faith

We learned today that we practice extravagant generosity because it reminds people of God's generosity. We practice extravagant generosity because it gives us life. And we practice extravagant generosity in the giving of our offerings because God tells us to give. And when we do, God says I will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not be able to contain it. Did you hear it? When we are generous, God is even more generous with us. Extravagant generosity.

Let us receive our offerings.