

The Paradox of Generosity

Have no fear – this is not a Stewardship sermon. There are no pledge cards in your bulletins, so you can let go of your purses and your wallets.

But as we wrap up our look at the paradoxes of the Kingdom of God, we have to consider the one which we probably resist the most: the paradox of generosity – that in giving we receive.

That idea should not come as a surprise to us. As Paul was saying his good-byes to the elders at Ephesus, he reminds them that Jesus had said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” So we have Jesus’ own word on the subject – that those who give receive blessings.

That principle is, of course, ripe for abuse. How many preachers have made a mint by promising God’s richest blessings for those who send those preachers big checks?

But our story from Mark 12 makes it clear that the size of the gift is not what matters to God. Although Jesus points out to His disciples that the widow’s contribution was all she had, He is not saying that the relative size of the gift is what matters. What matters to God is the size of the heart behind the gift: the amount of love and devotion and appreciation that prompts the giving.

We pick that up from Proverbs 11, which uses words like “gives freely,” “withholds unduly,” “generous,” and “refreshes others” to describe the righteous and the unrighteous. Those are not specific amounts or percentages; those are actions that come from specific attitudes.

First, the actions reflect an attitude that all that we have comes from God, so it belongs to God anyway. We are just temporary trustees of God’s gifts to us. So when we give to God directly or indirectly by helping others, then we are *investing* God’s gifts on God’s behalf. And like a conscientious stockbroker who invests a client’s resources wisely, there is a payoff: we are blessed when we invest God’s resources in God’s Kingdom.

We can argue that we have worked hard for what we have – but we must remember that even the strength or intelligence or skill we used to earn what we have are gifts from God – so it really is all from God.

Second, the actions reflect an attitude of humility – which flows naturally from of the first attitude. The widow quietly dropped her coins into the box, in a way that only Jesus would notice. The rich ones “threw in large amounts” – probably to attract attention with the rattling of many large coins. It is no coincidence that the collection boxes in the Temple were shaped like trumpets and were made of brass!

This is not to disparage our noisy offering, which is designed to be a fun way to raise some extra money for special ministries. But truth be told, more ministry work can be done with those soft, quiet bills than with loud change!

The widow’s coins – called lepta – were the smallest coins in circulation in Judea at the time of Jesus. Each was worth about six minutes’ wages for a typical worker. Based on Ohio’s minimum wage, the two coins were worth about \$1.65.

Imagine having only \$1.65 to your name, in a time with no Social Security, no pension plans, no life insurance, no food stamps, no SSI – and then you toss that little bit you have into the offering plate. That was all you had to live on.

But when you think about it – people who live that close to the edge often have far stronger faith in God’s ability to provide than people who never have to give a second thought to how they will pay for new brakes on their Mercedes.

As a teenager, I went to summer camp in Maine. One of my camper friends was a girl named Marjorie. Her parents were divorced, and her mom struggled to support the family. So Marjorie got a job as a waitress at a local restaurant. As I remember – after 40 years – her check went to help the family, but she got to keep the tips for personal spending money (very important to a teenager).

One Sunday at church, there was a loud noise during the offering as a jar full of coins and some bills was emptied into the offering plate. I was not there at the time, but a lady from the church told me about it later. There were tears in her eyes as she said that Marjorie had given all her tips from the week.

Her contribution certainly was not going to cover the pastor’s salary or even the electric bill – but it was far more valuable than that. It moved God’s people. And I’m still talking about it 40 years later. So she has been blessed in ways that you cannot put a price tag on.

And that is the third attitude reflected in our Proverbs today: an attitude of trust. The widow believed that God would continue to sustain her as He had done so up to that point. Besides, she had learned to live on less than most other people, so she was more able to let it go. The rich gave a lot more, but it wasn’t going to change their lives. To give in a life-changing way would have required a lot more faith than they had. If we boil it all down, both the widow and the rich people gave as much as their faith would allow.

We do need to remember that giving is much bigger than cash donations. If we have the right attitudes toward all that we have received from God, then we can see that God has given us time and abilities, too – and that those can be invested in God’s Kingdom, as well..

We don’t know the widow’s backstory, but I suspect that she had a home where she housed other widows who were homeless, fed the hungry, cared for the sick, or prayed for other people. People who have the faith to give sacrificially usually do that in all areas of their lives – not just in their offerings.

While I was serving in Neffs, I loved to hear the stories of people who lived along the railroad tracks during the Depression. Their parents could barely afford to keep them fed, but they would share what little they had with men who were riding the rails, looking for work. The hobos would often leave the outline of a cat – painted or carved on a tree or bridge, or drawn with a finger in the dust on the house – to tell those who came by later that “a kind lady lives here.” A lady who would make sure they were fed.

Kind? Definitely. But most likely, a woman of faith who was grateful to God for keeping her family fed and willing to trust God to keep doing it. And to hear their children tell those stories – these women were richly blessed: their children admired them for doing it. That’s another blessing you cannot put a price tag on.

Do we have those attitudes? Do we recognize that all that we are and have are God’s gifts? And do we trust God to continue to provide? May we generously invest our time, our treasure, and our talents in God’s Kingdom.

Amen.