

Five Fruitful Practices: Extravagant Generosity

March 29, 2009

Money. There, I have said the forbidden word from the pulpit. Well, it almost seems like it. We seem afraid to talk about money in the church. That is often because there has been so much negative use of money in some T.V. churches...with Televangelists begging on late night television for donations while riding around in luxury limos and living high on the hog while children go hungry and people are homeless. People are not blind, and they see the hypocrisy of it. Now they often paint all churches with the same brush and use these few to condemn the whole...which is equally unfair. But it is understandable.

If we were to take all the times Jesus talked about money, you would be surprised not about how little, but about how often he spoke of money or wealth. This is because Jesus knew that a person's treasure was often where their heart was. Where a person considered their value or wealth says a lot about them. The reality is, we can say a lot about what is important to us, but what we spend our most precious treasures on is what really is important to us...our true treasures are used on our true priorities. And I am not talking about just your money here, but that which is more valuable than gold or silver. Our time. Because once it is gone, you can not buy more of it. You can always make, beg, borrow or steal more money...but you can't get more time. Once it has run through your fingers, it is gone forever.

Stewardship is our shepherding of our core treasures from God...that which God has entrusted to us to shepherd throughout our lives. When we are young we horde...everything is MINE. Even when we can't use it all or eat it all, we want it all. You can't have any, because it is mine. Parents teach the two and three year old to share...and hopefully we all learn to do it joyfully...because it is good and because others share with us as well. But some folks seem to never get beyond this stage. Or sadly, when they become adults, they return

to their terrible two's again...and are forever saying the immortal words, Mine, Mine, Mine...while trying to grab all they can. I think that is what got us into the financial mess that the country is in right now.

This comes from greed and from deep insecurity. But when we come to know how much we are set free from our need to perform and how completely we are loved...warts, faults, failures and all...and how completely forgiven we are...we are changed. We are set free to loosen our grip on life. We don't have to try to hold on so tightly. We can depend on Jesus to fulfill our hearts desires and to set us free. Remember, his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Paul uses one such group who had been set free to give as an example to the Christians in Corinth, the Macedonians. The Corinthians were in the process of collecting an offering for the Christians in Palestine and the surrounding region. This was a new and unique thing that was being done. An offering to bring relief for a famine. Before this, groups did not donate to help others. This was not done. You helped your family, when you could. But you never helped outsiders. And certainly never helped anyone outside your extended family. And certainly never anyone who was from another country...who cared about them?

These were people they had never met or heard about? BUT, they were fellow believers...followers of Christ who were in need. When word got out that the region had a great famine, the believers throughout the Roman empire had banded together to take an offering to send with the Apostle to buy food and relief supplies when he arrived in Jerusalem. It is hard to really express what a new thing this was. It is so common to us today, but it was a new creation in Christianity...moved in love to help even strangers across the globe whom you did not know and would never meet...out of compassion. Christian love had broadened the definition of a person's neighbor...

So Paul tells the Corinthians about the Greeks...the Macedonians, the decedents of Alexander. They had exhibited several principles of Christian giving that Paul wanted the Corinthians to see....

The first is that the Macedonians gave themselves fully to Christ first. that is the beginning of generosity. It flows from a heart committed to Christ. There is the story of when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. He had his soldiers baptized, and many of them wanted to be baptized not because they believed but because they felt it would protect them in battle. But the story is told that when they were baptized they held their sword hand up out of the water...for they would not submit it to Christ's authority, for it belonged to the Emperor. The same can be said for many who make commitment to Christ and the Church...the hold much back. They do not allow Christ full reign in their heart or their mind...not in their business practice or their financial actions or their intellectual practices...

The Macedonians gave themselves fully unto Christ. Their giving was an act of Worship.

And they gave themselves to Paul and to others. The best gifts contain some of us in them. We must give some of ourselves in the gift as well. Even if it is only money that we give, if there is a sacrifice involve, a part of our heart goes with it. If we give it in prayerful sacrifice and service, a piece of our heart goes with it.

Now when you give your heart, sometimes there is sacrifice...and suffering. Sometimes the gift costs you. But that does not mean that you don't give it. Even if you know it is going to cost you...love moves you to give it anyway. That is what love does. Love is willing to give, to sacrifice, to serve. Sometimes it is from afar, sometimes it is close up. The gift that you give may mean your willingness to do for another without anything in return...like a parent who walks the floor with a

newborn and all they get in return is a smile. Hardly seems worth it sometimes, but you do it.

They are filled with an abundant joy and a rich generosity. This is something God does. As we give ourselves to God and to each other, God is at work in our hearts and fills us with Joy.

Then Paul gets practical regarding the giving of the Corinthians. He shares some principles which are still important for us today.

The gifts you give should not be forced, or out of obligation or guilt. The giving should be freely from the heart, something you want to do, feel called to do. Not something you feel obligated to do. Let each person do what they can, what they want...you can't give what you don't have and you should not try. You should not feel guilty about not giving what you can't give or what is not yours. If you have a family, the money you might give is not yours...it is all of yours...and you as one member must think of the whole family before you decide to give away what belongs to the whole.

There is way too much manipulation in giving campaigns and guilt. Yes, it's ok to motivate people, but there is a fine line between motivation and guilt and what Paul calls "Obligation".

God wants your gifts to be considered...thoughtful. Spontaneous giving is good, but you also should have a giving plan. It is not enough to just reach in your purse or wallet occasionally when you're moved and pull out some money. Your giving to God should be something you consider and pray about...Let each one give as they have considered...as they have thought about...thoughtful and from the heart.

Giving should be significant, enough to be worthwhile...sacrificial? The bible talks about a tithe, and I see that as God's goal for you. We tithe and I know many here do. It has not hurt us and I believe God has honored it. But it is at times a challenge. And you have to work up to it.

the idea in the old testament of a tithe is that the gift is significant...it is sacrificial, and everyone's gift is the same (a percentage makes the all equal).

Do what makes you happy...Remember...God loves a cheerful giver. And we are not talking about Money only. God loves a cheerful servant. Someone to help teach Sunday School. To help us with produce once a month. To help with the sound system set up and tear down, to sing in the choir, play in the band...sing on Sunday? Can you do it cheerfully to the Lord? If it is not cheerful, don't give it. God loves a cheerful giver.

Your generosity returns to you. God blesses those who bless others. Not quid pro quo. But as we bless others, we are blessed. As we are in ministry with others, helping in times of need, we are helped. As we pray for others, we are lifted up to heaven ourselves and our burdens lifted. As we serve others, we find ourselves served. The generous heart is blessed, the cheerful giver has abundant joy and rich generosity.

God is the most cheerful giver of all.