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4 Week Series

Week 1: A Little Is Enough

Mark 6:30-44

“You give them something to eat,” said Jesus.

Jesus can be unreasonable. I mean that not as blasphemy but as an honest assessment of this passage. Consider an analogous situation: Your boss creates a situation of great demand needing immense resources but does nothing to provide for

those needed resources. As people crowd forward demanding to be served, your boss simply turns to you and says, “You handle it.”

Small wonder the disciples protested. “They said to [Jesus], ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ ” We today would protest too. Their response cryptically translated is, “Are you crazy?” A reasonable person can readily identify with the disciples. They live with the syndrome I call “life in your face.” Step back with me for a moment.

Jesus and the disciples have been engaged in the Master’s ministry. They have heard the disheartening news of the cruel death of John the Baptist and withdrawn, perhaps, to be with their grief, possibly to compose themselves for the arduous task that lies ahead. Mark tells us, “They went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.”

“Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” Sometimes life is like that. You need a moment to catch your breath, but people still come to you with issues, needs, and problems. The events and people of life demand of us, “Deal with me! I don’t care how tired you are or how you feel!”

I remember a wonderful Christian couple telling me about raising their three children, then grown. The husband, a noted lawyer, recalled how it was when the children were young. He said that he would get home from work, and his wife would meet him at the door with a baby in her arms saying, “Here, you take him. I have to have a minute of peace!” He would mumble something like, “At least let me put my briefcase down,” but she was not deterred. We all know that feeling, don’t we? Here is where this lesson from the gospel intersects our lives.

Significantly, this is one of the few stories of Jesus’ ministry that is reported by all four Gospels. Something important is transmitted in this teaching of Jesus. With life in our face, we tend to rush ahead and fixate on Jesus blessing and breaking the bread. We revel in the miracle of multiplication and the wonder of how God provides. However, in our haste, I believe we miss a profound truth that Jesus wishes us to know.

I remember a story I was once told about a mighty warrior mounted on a magnificent horse trotting down a road. Everyone, of course, made certain to get out of his way.

He noticed, however, directly in his path, in the very middle of the road, was a sparrow. The bird was lying on its back with its feet in the air.

The horseman drew in his reins, halted, and dismounted. He went to the sparrow and asked, “Are you dead? And if not, what are you doing in the middle of the road with your feet in the air?”

“No,” answered the bird, “I’m not dead, but I heard the sky might fall down, and I’m helping to hold it up.”

The warrior thundered and shook with laughter. He rolled on the ground and slapped his thighs. At last, he wiped the tears from his eyes and said, “You silly bird! Even if the sky did fall down, what difference could you possibly make with those puny, spindly little legs?”

“Well,” explained the sparrow, “you do what you can do.”

Generous living begins here; we do what we can do. The gospel story from Mark tells us the disciples ascertained how much food there was. Jesus took the food, blessed it and broke it, and gave it back to the disciples. Under his direction, they passed it out to the hungry crowd. They did what they could do. In the hands of Jesus, a little is enough.

Take any of the clutch of activities that might run under the rubric of faithful discipleship—our stewardship giving, our sharing of time and talents, teaching in Sunday school, perhaps volunteering to serve the poor, or possibly sharing in visitation ministry—faithfulness lives not in genius or great skill but in doing what you can do. In the mystery of faith, we who are engaged in doing what we can do, discover Christ’s divine presence and blessing. In the hands of Jesus, a little is enough.

When I was a camp director in New England with the Hartford County YMCA, during one of the two-week sessions we had two inner-city kids in the same cabin. One was black and one was white. Both were nine years old. Jerry and Tim came from large, relatively poor families; and both knew what it was like to be hungry. At every meal the cook always put out a plate of bread and a large can of generic peanut butter. If you didn’t like the meal or were still hungry, you could have a peanut butter sandwich. Jerry and Tim always ate peanut butter sandwiches, even after eating the regular meal.

One of the lessons those two boys taught the rest of us was the importance of passing the bread. They would loudly insist that you only took your share (two slices) and that, before you went on to feed yourself, you passed the bread to the others so that they could eat. Such is the way of faith. We share what we have, and in the hands of Jesus, it is transformed.

Week 2: The Gift of Giving

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

The recent revival of Victor Hugo’s great novel *Les Miserables* on Broadway brings to mind a famous scene that takes place between Jean Valjean, the bishop, and the magistrate. Jean Valjean is befriended and given lodging by the bishop. Later he steals his candlesticks. The bishop reports the theft; a magistrate is brought in and questions Jean Valjean in the bishop’s presence. As the scene unfolds, Valjean appears headed for jail. Surprisingly, the bishop retracts his charges and offers an excuse for the missing candlesticks. Jean Valjean is stunned. When he and the bishop are alone, he asks, “Why did you do that? You know I am guilty.”

The bishop replies, “Life is for giving.”

This is a great principle of generous living.

As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he shares basic components of the Christian faith and instructs the church on how one lives as a Christian. In doing so, Paul lays out three elements, which engender the gift of giving.

The first element is a reminder of a basic law of life. “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly

will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” It is almost like saying two plus two equals four. Whether we agree with it, love it, or hate it, sooner or later this basic law of life will assert itself. Jesus says, “The measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matthew 7:2). Generous living reaps a harvest of love and kindness.

I suspect it is human nature to reject this truth. The lottery is based on the faint hope that, by sheer statistical improbability, we might reap what we haven’t sowed. It is not so in life. Even those seemingly “lucky” breaks are the result of a huge amount of sowing. If we sow bountifully, we reap bountifully. In our more reflective moments, we know the elemental truth of this biblical phrase. Jesus put it this way: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

The second element in the gift of giving is simple. God’s love is poured out on those who are cheerful and joyous in their giving. It is a part of the gift! Giving enhances our joy! Jesus has said that he wants his joy to be in us and our joy to be complete or full. Thus, “God loves a cheerful giver.”

While pastoring in Kerrville, Texas, I preached once a month at a retirement center and nursing home. The lay leader of the worship service was a resident. In his younger days, Van Gleeson (not his real name) had been a professional musician for some big bands. An exuberant joyful Christian, then in his eighties, Van still played his trombone—loudly (which was the way they liked it, because many were partially hearing impaired). It was great! There we were, me in my twenties and the rest them in their eighties, just rocking out. In his giving, Van’s joy was infectious. It flowed out on us and back on him. When asked why he continued to play, Van would comment, “When I came to the Lord, I brought my trombone with me!” He lived a joyful life. It showed in his “alive-ness,” not just for God, but with and for others. Life for Van was in the giving.

The blessing comes when the giving is joyous and willing. Paul cements his conviction that the gift of giving is inextricably linked to joy and cheerfulness by stressing that the decision to give is taken individually and without force. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

The gift of giving in cheerfulness or joy not only enhances the value of our gifts but also provides real worth for them. Whether it is large or small, a gift of friendship, support, money—you name it—rebounds back upon us. Cheerful, joyful giving leads us to a third element.

I find it interesting that it is here the Bible lesson gets pointed. It is as if Paul looks us in the eye and says, “Look, if you really trust God with all of what you are and all of what you have, God will both provide for you and pour out blessings upon you.” To share in the gift of giving, we must live in trust.

Paul says, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.” Herb Miller writes: “Giving is not so much a matter an act of generosity as it is an act of trust. We do not feel secure financially because we have; we feel secure financially because we trust God to continue providing what we need” (Herb Miller, *Money Isn’t Is Everything: What Jesus Said about the Spiritual Power of Money* [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994], 15). The third element in the gift of giving is: God will provide.

I find such trusting difficult. It takes an act of courage and maturity of faith. Often God provides in ways that are not of my preference, but in ways I truly need. I have discovered and rediscovered that, every time I am willing to risk, God comes through. In the gift of giving, I receive blessings in abundance.

I have a close treasured friend. One year his wife gave him the assignment of providing entertainment for their seven-year-old son’s birthday party. He sweated bullets about what to do and finally went out and hired a clown. He told me about watching that clown entertain the kids and enjoying their joy. My friend said, “That’s the best money I ever spent.” Joy came in the gift of giving.

Week 3: The Blessing of Giving

Acts 20:32-38

A review of the teaching of Jesus could almost be summarized in one word: give. There is a blessing in giving. Consider the evidence in Holy Scripture. In Luke 6:38 Jesus says, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Or take Jesus' statement in Luke 14:13-14, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

In today's Bible lesson taken from chapter 20 of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul echoes this seminal teaching of Jesus. The context is significant. It begins in verse 17 where the apostle Paul meets in Miletus with the elders of the church at Ephesus, which he helped establish. It is a sad farewell. Paul is bound for Rome for imprisonment, and perhaps eventual execution. Paul has taught them, raised them in the faith, and now offers a valedictory address.

It neatly breaks into three parts as this great Christian leader sets out expectations for the Christian leaders who will serve after him. In verse 28, he instructs them to feed the church. In verses 29 through 31, he warns them against various dangers facing the church. Finally in verses 33 through 35, he admonishes them not to be greedy for personal gain but to give for a blessing. Verse 35 closes with his echoing Jesus and sharing the instructions upon which Paul has based his life. "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The biblical truth couldn't be plainer. A crucial step in living the life we've always wanted is to give. We are blessed in giving. Notice how Paul has framed this central teaching. In verse 32, he sets his whole farewell speech in the context of God's grace—freely forgiving love. "And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified." Did you catch that? It's able to build us up and give us an inheritance. He's telling us this is how you come to live the life you've always wanted.

In verses 33, 34, and the first part of verse 35, Paul cements his case by offering himself as an example. He hasn't coveted wealth or possessions. Paul has worked to support the weak. While others see a tear-stained future, the apostle Paul embraces great living. He comforts them and remembers the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The problem with such a teaching is that we believe and yet almost simultaneously doubt its veracity. Why is that? Oh, we know the answer. We get captured by the cult of the mall. It is so easy to buy (pun intended) into the illusion that spending for something new can make us into something new. It is difficult to ignore these powerful false gods, which clamor for our adoration. Yet, instinctively, we know that great living comes in giving—giving of our time, our energy, or our possessions, including our money.

Contemporary research reveals through scientific study what Jesus knew through spiritual instinct. The six greatest needs of every human being are meaning and purpose, self-esteem, loving relationships, spiritual connection with God, security, and a sense of immortality. Why did Jesus talk so much about money? Why do so many of Jesus' parables discuss the appropriate and inappropriate use of money? Because money has the power to help or hinder people from meeting these six basic needs that determine the quality of our daily living. "Money cannot buy happiness," we say repeatedly. True! But the way we use our money directly influences how happy we are. (Herb Miller, *Money Isn't Is Everything: What Jesus Said about the Spiritual Power of Money* [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994], 44).

Giving is one of the crucial steps in living the life we've always wanted.

There is an old cartoon where a pastor stands in the pulpit speaking to the congregation. He says, "I would like to remind you that what you are about to give is tax deductible, cannot be taken with you, and is considered by some to be the root of all evil" (Miller, *Money Isn't Is Everything*, 41). We all laugh, but there is a much more positive reason for giving. We are blessed in giving. We are enriched in giving. "John Wesley said that if you have poor giving habits, you are robbing God. Jesus went beyond that. He said that if you have poor giving habits, you rob yourself" (Miller, *Money Isn't Is Everything*, 41).

Soon, we as a congregation will once again have the opportunity to embrace the life we've always wanted. We will again have the chance to decide if we trust the Lord and believe his word. Paul speaks to us: "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" We are invited to an adventure in faith. This is the path in living the life we've always wanted. We are blessed in giving. Amen.

Week 4: Great Power and Great Grace

Acts 4:32-37

Over the years, I have gotten all kinds of phone calls. One of the strangest and most joyous calls came near Christmas about six years ago. It was at a time when the price of oil was devastating the local economy and causing a number of people to be laid off. Despite the fact that the church was growing in membership, many of the new members were without jobs, and the church was in financially bad straights. The phone call came from a man who had converted to Christ just a few years earlier. He was a new believer who was married to a woman who was a longtime Christian. When we got done exchanging pleasantries, he said, "Mike, I've been praying about this, and I want to give my wife a special Christmas gift." (I thought to myself, "That's fine. But, why would you call me about her Christmas gift?") He continued, "I totaled the amount of money that I spent on her Christmas last year. (They were fairly well off.) By my total, I spent about two thousand dollars. Well, I want to give her that Christmas gift this year by giving the church two thousand dollars in her name for you to use in the budget any place you see fit."

I was dumbfounded! His Christmas gift to his wife was going to be a two-thousand-dollar check to the church. "That's right," he said. "I don't think anything else would please her more." He requested that I draw up a little certificate for him to give her. He came by the next day to pick it up. The certificate wasn't anything fancy.

Early that January, she came into my office with that certificate. Her husband had framed the certificate, wrapped it up with a bright bow, and placed it under the tree. With tears in her eyes, she talked about how wonderful it was as a gift and how she had never received anything better at Christmas.

A scene of similar joy and generosity is found in Acts. They experienced great power and great grace. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold." When the family of Christ gathers together, generosity erupts! Generous living defines and shapes their relationships. This passage teaches us that the use of our financial resources is fundamentally a spiritual issue. A spiritual life anchored in God is intimately tied to generous living. Those who believed lived generously. They had great power and great grace precisely because the use of their possessions was freely surrendered to God's will, purpose, and desire.

To be a Christian is to be a part of a generous family. This is so because our leader, Jesus Christ, lived with an extravagant generosity that defined Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God is generous! This is the basic reality of God, the provider of all good gifts. You and I cannot outgive God!

About a year and a half ago, I found myself standing in a hospital in front of the windows viewing newborn babies. The father, both sets of grandparents, and I were standing and gazing through the windows of the hospital nursery at this newborn child. As everybody beamed, smiled, cooed, and celebrated, one of the grandparents turned to his son and said, "He looks just like you." I thought to myself, "No he doesn't." But in a certain way the baby did. There was a family resemblance.

There is something special about the physical resemblance that identifies the oneness of the family. The child is identified with his father or his mother. Similarly, I believe that God is pleased when God sees a family resemblance in us through our actions and our attitudes.

The tough question for all of us is how. How do we take on a family resemblance and move into generous living through the giving of our resources and ourselves? Step one: Begin with prayer. Get honest with God in careful-listening prayer, and God will honor you with divine guidance. For years we tithed (gave 10 percent of our income for the work of the Lord) after taxes. I remember one year praying to God about what we should write down, and God said to me, "Look, stop fooling around. Trust me with the real 10 percent, not 10 percent after you've already taken out a number of things." God wants us in the family picture. Pray to God and listen for God's guidance. Generous living starts in prayer.

Step two: Give to God first. Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce." Don't give God your leftovers. The joy of generous living comes through firstfruit giving.

Step three: Give of yourself. It is not enough just to write a check. The joy of generous living comes through serving. Great power and great grace belonged to the first Christ followers because they took care of those in need.

Step four is crucial: Make a public commitment to live generously. When we make something public, we bind ourselves to keep the commitment made. Periodically, I've had people ask me why they need to join the church. "Can't I just keep coming?" they will say. I ask them if they loved their husband or wife before they got married. Inevitably they respond, "Of course." "Why did you get married, then?" I'll ask. "What is gained in the wedding ceremony?" The answer is simple. The public commitment seals the bond before God and the congregation. It is instructive that not once, but twice in this brief passage we are told that they brought what they had and "laid it at the apostles' feet." They made a public commitment to live generously. We are to do the same.

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