

THE SCIENCE OF GIVING



Scripture:

Psalm 146

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! ²I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. ⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



For the next three Sundays I will be doing a series on the Science of Generosity, Belonging, and Gratitude. I am premising these sermons on the perspective that science and theology are complementary and not in conflict with one another. As John Polkinghorne, the Presbyterian Pastor physicist said in his book, *Theology in the Context*

of Science: “Science gives an account of nature and history of the universe; theology asserts the universe to be God’s creation. Science offers its understanding of the processes of the world; theology affirms its belief that God is providentially active within the world’s history and creation of those processes.

“These beliefs operate at different categorical levels. A simple way to understand it is: Science is concerned with process while theology is concerned with purpose and meaning. Therefore science and theology are not direct rivals. The true relationship between science and theology is complementary.”

SOCIAL RELATIONAL RESEARCH

In the past few years, scientists have become interested in the relationship between behavior and wellbeing. This type of social relational research addresses many of the social behavioral prescriptions we find in the Bible. Scientists are finding, for example, that if you live your life according to the ten commandments, (Revering God, practicing your faith, honoring your parents, not stealing, not murdering, not coveting, not committing adultery, nor being false or slandering others) you will have a healthier social life and a happier wellbeing in general.

It makes sense that if you follow the ten commandments in your life you will be happier and healthier compared to people who don't follow these ancient laws for living. Don't you think?

GENEROUS GIVING BEHAVIOR

Scientists are also studying the biological and social consequences of generous giving behavior which is frequently mentioned in the Bible, too.

“There's an old story about a dad who gave his son two quarters as he heads for Sunday School. He told the boy that he should give one quarter into the offering at church and he could keep the other quarter to get an ice cream cone. (The price for an ice cream cone proves how old the story is).

“As the boy walked down the street he accidentally dropped one of the quarters which then rolled into a storm drain and disappeared. The boy looked for a moment down the drain and then slowly looked toward the sky, sighed and said, ‘Well God, there goes your quarter.’”

THE WIDOW'S MITE

Today's widow's mite story is one that we can easily laugh at, too. Don't you agree? A widow, who has a child, according to the painting on our bulletin cover, gives her last coins to the church? How silly is that?

Yet Jesus holds her up as a role model to all the disciples. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are

contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Let's pause for a moment and place this in the context of his final teachings, Jesus is addressing the disciples and the temple leaders who were trying to trap him into saying something wrong so they could have him arrested. He has just taught them that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart soul mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. So this next teaching connects to those greatest commandments.

Now he turns to watch the people giving their offerings in the temple and contrasts the giving between those who gave a small portion from their abundance and the poor widow giving out of her poverty trusting that God will somehow still provide for her and her little family.

Jesus highlights both the generous giving of the widow, who had no power or property, and no voice in the political structures of the day compared to the scribes and other temple leaders who took advantage of the poor so they could wear nice clothes, sit in the best seats, and receive praise from their followers. Christ is also highlighting the huge gap between the widow and the wealthy in that society. He wants us to see the injustice in the way widows were being treated during that era and yet this particular widow responded with generosity for the church despite her poverty and victimization.

Do you know the Bible is a sacred guide book for good health? And it shows us in many places the importance of giving and being generous. Giving of ourselves is highlighted in famous stories like the story of Ruth and Naomi in the Old Testament and the story of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament.

Giving a generous portion from our first fruits is highlighted in the Old Testament in the Cain and Abel story in Genesis.

And in Matthew 6 Jesus says: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Then Jesus goes on to say: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Matthew 6:24)

NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY STUDY

Yet generosity is paradoxical, according to the authors of an extensive study on giving behavior. Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson of Notre Dame University studied the giving behavior of two-thousand Americans for five years. They published their study results in a book entitled: *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

They concluded:

"Those who give receive back in turn. By spending ourselves for the wellbeing of others, we enhance our own wellbeing. In letting go of some of our possessions we secure our own lives. By giving ourselves away we ourselves move toward flourishing. These are biological, not just religious teachings; these are sociological facts."

Also science shows that giving behavior increases endorphin output which makes your brain feel good.

The Notre Dame researchers explain that the generosity paradox can also be stated in the negative. "By grasping onto what we currently have we lose out on the better goods that we might have gained. By protecting ourselves from future uncertainties and possible misfortunes we live more anxiously and make ourselves more vulnerable to misfortunes."

By failing to care for others we do not properly take care of ourselves. Smith and Davidson point out that the word miser is a root to the word miserable.

But these statements should not be surprising. Scientists and wise philosophers who studied human life and development over recorded history have taught these principles for centuries.

- An ancient Hebrew proverb teaches that, "One man gives freely, yet gains more while another withholds and ends up impoverished."
- The Buddha teaches, "Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression."

- A Hindu proverb points out that, "They who give have all things, they who withhold have nothing."
- And often Jesus of Nazareth teaches, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will preserve it."

GENEROSITY STUDY

The authors of the generosity study begin by addressing the false assumption that giving equals loss. A loss of goods given, a loss of time volunteered, a loss of safety and security when you reach out to strangers. Instead of finding that giving equals loss, the authors found that the more generous Americans experience more happiness, health, and purpose in life. They conclude that generous practices enhance personal wellbeing. The causal mechanisms are explained in their book about why this relationship between giving and improved health and wellbeing happens.

The concept of generous giving is universal among all the main world religions. Both the book of Proverbs and the book of Corinthians tell us that God loves a cheerful giver. And the most revered virtue in the Confucian religion is called Ren, which is translated to mean benevolence to humanity. A core teaching of Buddhism is the teaching to not cling to material things. And the Koran teaches in the Muslim faith that "Our worldly possessions are bounties from God, who is Al Kareem, the Most Generous. Muslims believe that everything originates from God and everything will return to God; thus, it is logical to behave as if that which we possess is merely a loan, something we are obligated to ultimately share."

DESTROYING THE DEMON GREED

These ancient quotes of wisdom, still apply today. Richard J. Foster, in his book: *Money, Sex & Power* says: "Giving with glad and generous hearts has a way of routing out the tough old miser within each of us. Even the poor need to know that they can give. Just the very act of letting go of money, or some other treasure, does something within us. It destroys the demon greed."

So may our demon greed that lurks inside all of us be squelched by following the advice from God and from Science that we are healthier and happier when we give of ourselves and our resources so others may live.

We don't know what happened to that widow after she gave her last coins to the temple. But we can imagine that something good must have come from Christ's attention to her. Maybe she joined up with the many women followers of Jesus and found a family through them.

**You can live a life of giving.
Give a smile, a compliment, a hug,
say a prayer for others.
All of it is giving.**

If you want to see what happiness results from the monies given to our church, I encourage you to go along sometime with Gwen and Connie to see the smiles on faces of the Director and other staff of the Boys and Girls club across the street when they show up with the snacks for the kids every Monday. Or ride in the church van and see how happy the passengers are to hitch a free ride to church. Or join in the Voyagers event this next Saturday at the Redwood Empire Food Bank to see where some of our mission monies go. Or come to eat a free breakfast some morning in Bowen Hall between seven and eight a.m. and see the happy high schoolers receiving the best hot breakfast you can find around! Or attend a Buildings and Grounds Tuesday morning gathering and see how busy those skillful bees are repairing all the parts of the church that are falling apart around us.

If you choose to join us for any of these activities, you will see some ways your giving helps our church and its ministries enabling us to keep on serving and reaching out with nurturing love to all God's people near and far. Amen

Benediction:

In the book, *How Successful People Think*, leadership expert John Maxwell says that the spirit of generosity gives people an appreciation for life and an understanding of its higher values.

Seeing those in need and giving to meet that need puts things into perspective and increases the quality of life of both the giver and the receiver.

Zig Ziglar said it this way: "Life is an echo. What you send out comes back, what you sow, you reap, what you give, you get."

So may your life always echo loving kindness and generosity so that you may live an abundant life in Christ all the days you have left here on earth.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen

References:

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November 8, 2015**