

October 23, 2016
National Presbyterian Church
What Jesus said: Gracious & Generous
Mark 4:21-25, 10:17-22, 12:41-44
David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the fall, we're looking together at specific words of Jesus: "*What Jesus Said.*" And, in particular we're looking at words recorded for us in Mark's account of Jesus' ministry

So far we've considered Jesus' words about –

1. **Time:** God's presence and power have invaded time and history at a particular moment in the person of Jesus. Jesus calls this action the "drawing near of the Kingdom of God," and calls us to respond: "*Repent and believe the good news!*"
2. **Healing:** especially spiritual healing. Jesus says, "*those who are well, have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*"
3. **Listening:** Jesus repeatedly emphasizes the importance of listening and being listened to, saying, "*Those who have ears to hear: Listen!*"
4. **Others:** Jesus calls us to live our lives not just as individuals, but in community and connection with others – as family. He says, "*you are my mother, and brothers and sisters – who do the will of God*"
5. **Marriage** – Jesus emphasized the high standard of God's original intent, but balances it with the real world in which we live ("*In the beginning God created us male and female*").
6. **Prayer** – "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*" Jesus calls us to pray! To speak and to ask, but not just so we can get what we want! What God wants especially is to use prayer to build up our relationship and connection with God

Today, what I want us to think about are Jesus' words about the act of GIVING – Jesus' call (God's call) to respond to his grace and kindness within our lives by becoming generous, by becoming givers.

This is a topic that Jesus speaks about on a number of occasions three of which we read about in our Scripture passages today, in Mark, chapters 4, 10 and 12.

In Mark 4, for example, Jesus says,

*'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you **give**
will be the measure you **get**, and still more will be **given** you.
For to those who have, more will be **given**;
and from those who have nothing,
even what they have will be taken away.'*

Now, this is not a statement, first of all, about financial or material generosity, but, rather, it's a general observation about the consequences of giving ourselves to any project or a cause. Think, for example, about becoming physical fit, or simply immersing ourselves in the act of learning.

When we do that – when we give ourselves to learning or becoming fit – we almost always increase our capacity to go further, to think more clearly or to find more energy in many areas of life.

So (as Jesus said) “the more you give the more you get,” the greater the return. With the reverse side being true (sadly) as well: that when we fail to give ourselves away (*in learning – or fitness – or whatever*) we end up losing in all kinds of ways: both mentally and physically we can shrivel up!

There’s no rocket science here: Jesus is just making an everyday observation (standing within Israel’s great wisdom tradition) about life in general. But there’s no question either, that what he says applies not just to life in general but to financial and material giving as well.

- When we give financially, we also get (*the return may not always be financial – but it will be there*)
- And when we fail to give, somehow, instead of winning, we end up as the losers

In 1994, Ben Gill wrote a book called *The Joy of Giving*.

Ben is the founder of an organization called RSI, which helps churches raise money for all kinds of different projects. He begins his book like this (with some minor edits)

My life has been spent helping people learn the gift of giving. After 25 years in this pursuit one fact has become increasingly clear: the happiest people on earth are the people who learn the joy of giving. I say this after having seen it experienced by thousands of people in thousands of ways.

- So he says of the very wealthy: *I heard it in the voice of a businessman in Atlanta* who had made a commitment to give \$1 million to help build a new sanctuary for his church. He later told me that nothing he had ever done in his life had meant as much to him as that decision to stretch himself in the giving process.
- And then with the very poor: *I saw it in the face of an elderly woman in Dallas* who had just decided to take a Saturday job in order to be able to give to her church. The tremendous joy of that decision was evident in her eyes as she told of it to others.
- And then with those struggling in the middle: *Over the years I’ve come to appreciate more and more the model of generosity set for me by my mother.*

My father passed away when I was less than a year old and my mother with two young sons set out to make a life for us. She tilled the soil of an Arkansas farm to scratch out a living; and then, when I became ill with asthma, she moved us to New Mexico and worked for the atomic lab at Los Alamos. Through all of this she taught us to give. We went to church and we were expected to put our nickel or dime in the offering envelope but the lessons also carried over into the world around us: no one in need was ever turned away from our door. Giving was a way of life in the Gill household. My mother was a model of generosity.

When you give, says Jesus, you get!! Always spiritually and emotionally; and sometimes financially too!

But that’s not all Jesus says, of course, about giving – that “when we give we get”

In Mark 10, the message is that *the opposite is true as well*, “When we get, we give!” When we realize that all of life (including eternal life) is a gift from God – not something earned or deserved –but simply a gift of grace, then the ability and desire to give increases dramatically.

So Mark 10 tells the story of a man coming up to Jesus and asking him about eternal life. He claims to have kept all the ten commandments of Moses since he was young, and seems to think that this moral response, being good and religious, is the way to find, or ‘earn,’ eternal life.

AND Jesus stuns him – and the rest of Jesus’ own followers – by saying this: he says (even *if you have kept all the ten commandments*), “*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and then come, follow me.*”

“Go! Sell what you own!” (everything you own – that you possess, or, perhaps more accurately, that possesses you!).

But the man was simply unable and unwilling, to do it, to sell it all so turns away from Jesus in sorrow! It’s a painful scene!! And we might be excused for thinking that Jesus was being rather cruel to the man: since he clearly doesn’t ask this of everyone maybe he could have made things a little easier for him. But he didn’t – and the reason, Mark tells us, was this: that Jesus believed that what he was saying was actually the most loving thing that could be said at *that* moment, to *that* person.

Jesus’ words, Mark tells us, flowed from love:

¹⁹You know the commandments (said Jesus): “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” ’

²⁰The man said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’

²¹**Jesus, looking at him, loved him** and (only then) said, ‘*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*’

So, if this is a statement, a command, that flows from love, what’s Jesus trying to do? How is Jesus loving this man when he makes him sorrowful?

Well, as so often is the case, Jesus seems to be doing here what he does time and again – He probes until he finds the tender spot in our lives, the place where we’re holding out against God! He sinks his words like a knife into the man’s soul to see what he really loves and trusts; to see what really shapes his hopes and dreams and identity.

- Is it God (whom he cannot see)? Or is it the achievements of life, material or moral that surround his life (and that he can see)?
- Is it the grace of God that shapes his identity and destiny? OR is his identity and destiny shaped by what he has or by what he’s achieved?
- Does he see life as OR as a gift – including eternal life; a gift given by a gracious God? OR as a right, -- something he controls or possesses or earns or deserves?

Because, if it’s the latter *then* not only has the man got it wrong, *but* in the depth of his soul he’ll almost certainly always spend his energy grabbing and getting, rather than being generous and giving.

I remember one occasion, years ago, driving my son to school in a beat up old Ford Explorer, which my son called the “Exploder” (it never did explode – he just

liked the name, and the car!), and we were talking about ads on TV, including car ads. As we passed someone driving a really nice car I asked: “*Do you really think the person driving the car feels better about himself because he’s in that car?*”

To which he replied without a moment’s hesitation: “Well, Yes! Of course.”

The power of our material culture – and the advertizing industry – is enormous! And repeatedly tries to tell us that what we have, what we’ve earned, what we feel we deserve, are integrally tied to who we are, our sense of self worth.

And the rich man, 2000 years ago, for all his moral and religious standing had bought into this idea as well. And what Jesus does in love, is simply, though painfully, to expose the lie, and the truth: life, and eternal life, our value, both now and for eternity, are gifts of grace. And when we see this as the truth – it sets us free to give!

SO, not only does Jesus teach

(1) “When you give, you get,” (Mark 4)

But

(2) When you get (when you see life as a gift) you also find the ability and passion to give (Mark 10).

And

(3) sometimes, even to give generously and sacrificially, like the widow in our third passage in Mark, Chapter 12, who stands in absolute, stark, and perhaps deliberate contrast with the rich man in Mark 10.

- He’s male – she’s female
- He’s made it – she has nothing
- He’s uncertain – she’s confident
- He’s holding on – she’s letting go

In Mark 12:41 we read

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then 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. ⁴⁴ 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.’*

It’s as if Jesus is saying,

If you really want to get, if you truly know life is a gift, and want to respond, then here’s the model, the unexpected model: Like the widow, give sacrificially, even if it hurts!

When the Bible speaks about generosity and giving it never makes a big deal about the actual size of a gift, the dollar amount, but rather about what’s left over after you give. The focus is on the element of sacrifice, on whether or not it costs us something to give, on whether our giving hurts us or forces us to change our priorities in some way – like the story of the Chicken and the Pig.

A chicken and a pig walking down the road together when they pass a church having a breakfast fundraiser. The chicken says “*That’s a neat idea. Let’s help them out.*” To which the pig responds, “What can we do?” To which the chicken says, “*Let’s offer them free ham and eggs.*” -- “*Not so fast,*” said the pig. “*For you that’s a contribution, but for me it’s a total commitment. A sacrifice! There’s a cost! It’s not so free!*”

Clearly, for the woman, her gift was an act of total commitment: it cost her dearly. Whereas for most everyone else giving that day they could give, and never miss what they’d given. Their giving didn’t change their plans, their hopes, their dreams; didn’t lead them to re-arrange their priorities or their lives in any way no great element of cost. But for her it was quite, quite different!

In fact, she was like the woman Ben Gill mentions, *who took another job in order to give!* OR like the women in the Congo, whom retired missionary Howard Cameron met in 1997 in the Limete Presbyterian Church in Kinshasa. He writes (in Conversations of Faith and Courage, 1998):

On August 1, 1997, 423 women of this congregation gathered to commit themselves to prayer for God’s blessing on Congolese refugees gathered in Kinshasa and to ask God’s guidance in how they could meet the refugees’ needs.

These women are amazing! Their own needs are overwhelming – they have practically nothing. The average monthly salary of 1m zaires (less than \$10) doesn’t allow for much of anything. The struggle to feed the family begins at dawn and continues until long after sunset. A change in the political situation could, in just hours, make them refugees in their own country. Yet they do what they can **for those** who have been run out of their homes, **who have less than those who do not have enough.**

- From a nearly bare cupboard, a woman brings one of the three cups she has for a family of five.
- Another brings the shawl she throws across her shoulders to ward off the early morning chill.
- Another woman brings a pot.
- Another brings some food.
- Another brings a small amount of money.

And another, and another – all of them bringing a small something. Four hundred and twenty three small somethings. *They divided nothing between themselves and came up with a big “something.”* They then took their “something,” and shared it with the refugees.

There were greetings, songs, prayers, and conversation. It’s called *kusamba muntu* – which means *to comfort and encourage someone who is suffering or grieving by surrounding that person with love and leaving something in their hands.*

The church of Jesus Christ doesn’t shine any brighter than in this miracle.

A miracle! In which everyone gives, joyfully, freely until the church itself begins to look like Jesus, who gave himself completely, sacrificially, for you and me, as a gift: the ultimate model of gracious and generous giving!!

Paul puts it best, in 2 Corinthians 8 as he challenges Christians in Greece to become gracious and generous:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—

And why? – well, the explanation comes in v. 9:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that

- though he was rich, (as the eternal son of God)
- yet for your sakes he became poor, (as the baby born in a barn, and as the leader hanging on a cross)
- so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Jesus is our model for gracious and generous giving – to the point of sacrifice

(1) When you give, you get, says Jesus

and

(2) When you get (when you see life as a free gift) you give (you find the power to let go and give)

and

(3) When you give, and give sacrificially (not looking at the amount, but giving until it costs, it stretches you) you become the person you were made to be: like the widow; like Jesus himself -- gracious and generous.

This is who I would like to be! You too?

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800