

“Fearless Generosity”

Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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The kingdom of God has a math problem, and by that I don't mean that Jesus will give us a math quiz before we can go to heaven. I mean that the math is problematic in God's kingdom; things don't always add up. Maybe I should call it an accounting problem to be more accurate. You see, when we learn how to do math in elementary school, we start with basic problems like this: if I have four apples and you take two of my apples, how many apples do I have left? The normal answer, of course, would be “two apples,” but in God's kingdom, four apples minus two apples doesn't always leave you with two apples. The most familiar example would be the time Jesus started out with five loaves of bread and two fish, then took away several thousand loaves and fish to feed the thousands of people who were gathered to hear Him teach, and He still had a dozen baskets full of bread pieces when they were done. Five loaves minus five thousand loaves does not equal twelve baskets full. It doesn't add up, and God is always doing that.

This is one of those things that I think we cannot emphasize often enough, that the kingdom of God operates on the principle of generosity. Four apples minus two apples does not always leave you with two apples in God's kingdom; in a lot of cases, you end up with more apples than you started with. God loves being generous. From the very beginning, God is generous. He created everything out of nothing, and then He gave it order, then He filled it with abundant life and called it very good. The very act of creation was an act of joyful generosity. When you're dealing with a God who can take nothing more than His own words and can create a universe out of them, four apples minus two apples does not always leave you with only two apples.

When God led His people out of slavery from Egypt into the wilderness, they went with only what they could travel with. When they didn't have water, He split open a rock and gave it to them. When they didn't have bread, He rained down bread from heaven every morning. When they didn't have meat, He sent them flocks of quail. For forty years they wandered, and an entire generation of God's people was kept alive by nothing more than God's generosity.

When they settled in the land God had promised them for their home, He instructed them on how they should live to be His people. He told them that when they were harvesting their crops, their grain, their olives, their grapes, that when they dropped something they should leave it there, and they shouldn't go over everything twice to make sure they've gotten every last crop, and they shouldn't harvest all the way out to the edges of the fields. They were explicitly commanded not to extract every last thing they could from their land, because whatever was left was available for the poor in the land to collect for themselves. As a farmer, you showed your trust in God's generosity and your gratitude for it by being generous to others. When you started your harvest, even, the firstfruits of what you collected were devoted to God as a sign of trust that more was coming.

And it was built into the law of the land that every so often, parcels of land would revert back to their original owners, debts would be cancelled, and slaves would be set free. It was an entire economic system built on the assumption that God would continue to be generous in providing for His people, and therefore they were called to similar generosity. It wasn't fair; it was generous. In fact, when they were not generous, when they defrauded the vulnerable people in their society, or

when they preferred their own selfishness to taking care of the widows and orphans and immigrants in their nation, they were reprimanded by God and His prophets. Their lack of generosity was one of the reasons He sent them into exile for seventy years. From the very beginning, God had told them that He was going to bless them, and through them He would bless the entire world. Those who are blessed must be a blessing. Those who are grateful are generous.

We read part of Isaiah 25, just one passage out of many that we could have read, and it's certainly not the most familiar to us. But the passage we read is fascinating because it comes right after a chapter that is full of punishment; chapter 24 begins with, "See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; He will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants," and the chapter doesn't get any happier as it goes along. There is a message of terrible judgment and destruction followed by what we read in Isaiah 25, a message of extravagant generosity. Though there may be punishment for a moment, the eternal goal is "a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines." And with that, God promises a deeper generosity: "He will swallow up death forever." You may punish your child for a moment of time, but the overall character of your relationship with your child, presumably, is one of generosity; you don't expect them to pay you back for all the food and clothing and everything else you've given them, and you don't punish them all the time. Likewise, though there are times when God punishes, the overall movement of the kingdom is generosity. Even in judgment, God is generous since He often holds back to give time for repentance.

I could go on and on and on listing examples of times when God miraculously provided sustenance for His people, when all seemed lost and their only hope was God's generosity, and He came through to save them. There are stories from the Bible, stories from history, stories from your life and mine when the math simply didn't add up. In God's kingdom, if you take two apples from four apples, you don't always end up with only two apples. Especially when you give away those two apples, you just might find that you wind up with more than you started. The point is that generosity is one of the most important characteristics of God and His kingdom. Generosity shows how God works and where God is taking us in history.

But God's kingdom operating on generosity is on the opposite side of the spectrum from the economics of our world. There's an ongoing economic debate in our country, and of course neither side has heard that if you don't have something nice to say, you shouldn't say anything. One side calls the others socialists (which is actually accurate in some cases, for once), while the other side calls them greedy and selfish in return. But still, everyone involved would say that their goal is prosperity. The disagreement is not over the goal, the disagreement is over how we get there.

The economics of our world are focused on how I can get what I need, plus a comfortable margin, because the economics of the world are the economics of scarcity; there's only so much to go around, so getting enough for myself means taking from someone else. The economics of God's kingdom, however, are focused on how I can trust God with what I have and be generous with it. When the economy is shaky, we all get worried about having enough, so we tighten our grip on what we have, and it's only natural. And yet it's times like these, when people are afraid and trying to keep what they can for themselves, that God's generosity calls us to ask how much we can give away. The world is convinced that if you take two apples away from four apples, you've only got two apples left, so if you want an apple you'd better hurry up and grab one; this is the perfect time for us to show them that there is a kingdom that operates on generosity, and it is better.

Generosity is central to the kingdom of Christ, and yet it runs so contrary to the economics of our world. And therefore, being generous people is one way that we can take a step toward being deep, beautiful, and fearless. Generosity is unexpected and sacrificial on the part of the giver; giving generously of ourselves demonstrates that we place our trust in God's provision for us and God's priorities for us. Being generous helps make us fearless, because we have to learn to rely on God when we give sacrificially, and sometimes we have to wait on Him.

Let me just say that I am not preaching this sermon as a means of scolding this congregation into tithing more. Some preachers start preaching about giving when the church budget is looking a little anemic, or when they want to start a building campaign and need to raise money, so it's time to trot out some Bible verses to convince you all to give the budget a boost. This congregation has regularly given in support of missions and world justice issues over and above our normal offerings, and you have given generously, and you are to be commended. Pastor Carey and I have made the choice never to know who gives what because we don't want money to influence our decisions like that, but in the past I've looked at some statistics of our church's giving and found that, considering our average attendance, we have a fairly high percentage of families who give something over the course of the year. This is a generous church, so I am not scolding you.

However, the truth remains that generous giving is one way of shaping us into deep, beautiful, fearless people. We have to overcome fear in order to give. Our spiritual lives are not "just" spiritual, or felt in our hearts, or thought in our heads; what we do with the physical things of life, our money, our resources, and our time impacts and forms our walk with Christ. Taking the time to evaluate our income, prioritize our spending, and then give of ourselves to bless someone else is a spiritual act. It builds faith in Christ. And as we do this, we see ways in which God blesses our generosity. If you take two apples from four apples, you might not be left with only two apples.

Generosity comes more naturally for some people than others, and it may be easier for you to be generous in some ways than others. Maybe it's more natural for you to be generous with your time than your money. The goal is to take one step forward in generosity. If you haven't tithed before, that might be one option. Tithing is the practice of giving one tenth of your income for kingdom work, usually to the church, though it doesn't have to be. I've said before that if you feel that God is calling you to give to some ministry other than this church, that's fine, because the kingdom is a lot bigger than just this church. Giving one tenth has good biblical history to it, but it's just a good round number to start with, not a command. It's enough to force us to plan our giving and our spending, to be more deliberate in what we do with our money. But really, the biblical expectation is that we will give as much as we are able. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8, "if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have."

But our generosity has to do with more than just money. In fact, sometimes we give money rather than doing something that would really stretch us; it can be easier to just write a check. Generosity can flow through gifts of time, gifts of listening, gifts of attention, gifts of kind words, gifts of prayer, gifts of food, gifts of whatever we might be talented in. The goal, as Paul said, is to give ourselves "first of all to the Lord," and then by the will of God also to others. Generosity is a practice of love for God and others.

Generosity makes us beautiful people because it begins with God's goodness to us and then channels that goodness through gratitude and on out to others. So how has God been generous to you? Are you grateful? And are you letting that gratitude shape you into a beautiful person who is not afraid to be generous? As we've been saying all along in this series, beauty has nothing to do with your physical appearance, but it has everything to do with receiving God's grace and then reflecting that grace to others. Fearlessness has nothing to do with being macho, but it has everything to do with recognizing the power and goodness and faithfulness of God, and then being willing to make costly decisions for the sake of others because God can be trusted.

So how has God been generous to you? How has He provided unexpectedly for your needs? How has He surrounded you with His love, His protection, His encouragement? How has He blessed you by inviting you into the beloved community of His family? How has He answered your prayers? How can you channel your gratitude into generosity? Is practicing generosity a way that you need to take a step toward becoming a deep, beautiful, fearless person? What is one way that you can demonstrate the generous character of God's kingdom?



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