

Throughout this series, we've been focused on practices that connect us to God. We had an incredible 2011 at Beaver Creek Nazarene, but we believe that 2012 is going to be even better. We looked at how we read Scripture, why we gather to worship, and last week how we pray. All of these practices serve to refocus us, recenter us on who God is, on what it means to live as subjects of King Jesus. (which is weird to our democratic ears)

Today, we conclude this series by looking at one final practice essential to our personal spiritual formation: the practice of generosity. This cuts to the very core of our struggle to keep God at the center of our world.

Generosity is about giving away resources that we have. And as a whole, we're a very generous people. But I bet that you're like me. I bet most of us would like to be more generous. With our money, with our time. With our talents, gifts, skills or hobbies.

But... something holds us back. There's some reason – and it's different for all of us – that we say, “I can't”.

So I want to suggest to you today that generosity is really a question of priorities. That if we explore our “buts” our “I can'ts”, then we learn what we really value. Today is an opportunity for honest self-reflection.

Let's begin with this question: **What do I want?**

We all want something. We all want lots of things. We want as a function of being human. We were created as wanting machines. Can anyone in here say they've never wanted anything?

Of course not.

So let's think together about what we want for a minute. We want food (different foods for all of us). We want safety and security. We want entertainment (again, different for everyone). If we dig, at the bottom of all these is a desire for a full, meaningful existence. We want to feel like we matter, like our life has value.

All of our wants and desires are really an extension of this deep, fundamental, existential need.

It's not wrong to want. Desire is a morally neutral thing. It's powerful, but neutral. What matters is how we direct our desires.

Have you ever asked the question, **What do I want to want?**

How do you decide what you want? How do you aim your desires? *That's* certainly not a question we usually ask. Most of us probably thought our desires just happened. That they're an uncontrollable force that's just there. I like asparagus and you like broccoli and that's all there is to it. I'm a book person and you prefer movies. I like baseball and you like football. Ohio State fans are naturally brighter than people who pull for Michigan.

But that's not true. Desire is shaped. It's formed. And we ought to be very careful and intentional about how we shape our desires. Because most of us have misshapen, misformed desires.



According to the Scriptures, the purpose of wanting is to point us back to God. Let me illustrate:

I love books. I love to read. It's one of my favorite activities. So when eReaders came out, I wanted one really badly. So I got one, and it's great! But let's be honest: that eReader isn't going to give my life meaning. I am not a more valuable person because I own one.

And that's okay. I shouldn't buy something with the expectation that it's going to satisfy those deepest desires. Quite the opposite.

Nothing temporal can satisfy my longing for eternal things. Nothing temporary can fulfill my eternal cravings.

eReaders are very awesome. So are books. So are knowledge and stories. But none of those is eternal. All of those pass away. eReaders run out of battery, break or become obsolete. Books rot. Even knowledge isn't eternal – as those of us who've ever forgotten something know.



And that's okay. That's how God designed it. God doesn't *want* us to find fulfillment in the temporary because we were made for the eternal. When we become dissatisfied with our temporary pleasure, it's to point us beyond that temporary thing towards the permanent, the eternal. The idea is that at some point, we get tired of feeling disappointed or unfulfilled with this temporary, temporal stuff and we think, Oh, I get it. There's something, someone bigger, more permanent.

Desire is meant to point us to God. Only God can give our lives eternal meaning. On a life invested in God and God's Way is ultimately fulfilling. And our desires are meant to teach us that.

Every time we want something, that desire inside us is actually pointing through the temporary object of our desires towards the eternal source of all good gifts.

BUT

Especially in our culture, we forget that. Too often, we settle for that temporary thing. We look to it to fulfill us. To make us happy. To bring us some peace in our lives.

And that is what the Scriptures call Idolatry. Idolatry is what happens when we center our lives on something other than God. When we look elsewhere for our peace, fulfillment and joy. When we expect anything other than God to be the source of our identity.

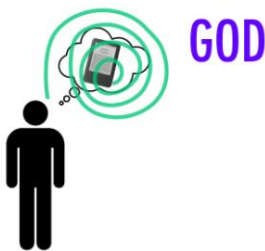
God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Our Desires point us past the created world. Everything around us is meant to be a sign pointing past itself towards God.

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

Paul isn't talking just about idols like we always think of them – little statues someone prays to. We take our eyes off God and we end up replacing the eternal God with temporary things – people, birds (obviously Paul was talking about Twitter), whatever.

So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. -- Romans 1:18-25 (NLT)



Something happens to us when we take our eyes off God. We forget that these temporary things can't fulfill us and we return to them over and over, expecting them to give our lives meaning. We worship them.

We were never meant to worship the creation. We were never meant to try to find fulfillment and happiness from the things of this world. I love my wife, but she doesn't fulfill me. She is not my source of happiness (sorry every chick-flick ever made). And I'm not hers. But in my love for her, in my desire for her, I find echoes of God. Amanda points me to God.

I love my job, but it's not my source of fulfillment. I don't get my meaning and value as a person from what I do. This job points me toward God.

If I look for my sense of self, my happiness, my fulfillment in Amanda or in my job or my friends and family or in my possessions or my bank account or anything, that's idolatry. Because none of this can satisfy my eternal cravings. They weren't made to. But that doesn't stop us from trying...

[click to watch: [commercial](#)]

Why does this commercial work? It *names* our selfishness. It takes our inclinations towards idolatry and alls it what it is. It works by taking a well-known saying "It's better to give than to receive" and flips it around.

It says what we're all thinking: I like to *get* more than I like to give. Getting makes me happy. Consuming fills me. I find meaning in the things in my life.

That's idolatry. It's poison. And the antidote is to flip the saying back around. Did you know it actually goes back to Jesus? Paul tells us that in Acts 20:

You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." -- Acts 20:35 (NLT)

Jesus says givers are more blessed than receivers. In the Scriptures "blessed" means to experience the presence of God. That's why saying "God be with you" is a blessing. Or why we "bless" our food - we're asking God to present as we eat together. To be "blessed" is to be with God.

So... the person who gives experiences God's presence more than the person who receives. According to Jesus, there are two types of people: those who at the end of the day are basically, fundamentally givers, and those who at their core are takers. And the givers are more like God.

Now, you might want to push back and say, Wait. That sounds like a pretty consumer mentality. Isn't Jesus saying that we can earn God's favor? That we can literally *buy* God's presence in our lives?

No. Just as we saw with prayer last week, God is already always working around us. And we know that God's love for us is not conditional. We can't buy God's love. We can't earn God's presence in our lives.

But we can ignore them. We can forget them. We can become blind to God. And when we're takers, when we just want want want, when we let our desires run amok, unordered and chaotic, we become selfish. We look to all this temporary, temporal stuff to give us meaning. So we miss out on God. We forget about God. We become blind to what God is doing.

And according to Jesus, generosity is an antidote to that blindness. Giving makes us aware of God's presence in our lives. So choosing *not* to give is very dangerous. Because our cultural story, the one we tell ourselves to define who we are, the ads story exalts taking. Not giving.

So against that, we gather in this space and we proclaim a different story. We come in here and say it's not how much you make, not how much you take that makes you great.

It's how well you give.

Not how much you give. How *well* you give. See that's the problem with us consumers. We want to put a price tag on everything, right? We say, okay, I get it. I need to give. So tell me how much I need to give.

But it's not about a number. Not even about money. It's about the condition of your soul. Are you fundamentally a giver or a taker?

In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul tells us:

Remember this-- a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." -- 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 (NLT)

I love that Paul doesn't give us a number. Like so much else, this is not about external, quantifiable realities (which drives the Type A people crazy). Paul says, Listen: this isn't about a number. And don't give out of obligation. Don't give out of guilt.

DON'T GIVE out of obligation. DON'T GIVE out of guilt.

When we give because we have to, or because we think we should, or because we're trying to buy God's love, we're still thinking like takers, consumers.

And that means our hearts haven't been transformed. We must be changed at our core. We need to be converted from selfishness to selflessness. From consuming to producing. From taking to giving.

That's why Paul says God loves a person who gives *cheerfully*. The person who puts a smile on God's face is the person who becomes a *giver*, not a consumer.

The antidote to idolatry is generosity. Be a giver. Give give give! Practice giving. Make a *habit* out of being generous.

And you might think "But I can't afford to give a ton of money!"

Remember: it's not about how MUCH you give. It's not even just about money!

When I visited the Dominican Republic, I met a woman named Milan. [[picture of Milan; I'll send it to you](#)] Through HOPE International, Milan had worked her way out of crippling poverty. She'd managed to buy a home and fulfill her dream of opening a school in her community (because most of the kids couldn't afford to go to the public schools). In no time, Milan had full sessions, both morning and afternoon, and a huge waiting list of children. She managed to move into a larger house, but still, her school filled up.

Milan had a dream of building a schoolhouse for her community - two stories, with room for all the kids. But she didn't want to rely on handouts from wealthy foreigners. She wanted the school to be a truly *community* school. So she challenged her neighborhood to give.

Milan told them, "[No one is too poor to give.](#)" If you don't have money, you help build. If you can't build, then you cook food for the builders. Everyone can give something.

Under her leadership, Milan's community built a full two-story school house that is still packed to the rafters for both morning and evening sessions (I think the parents' philosophy was, "I built this school; by God, you will GO to it!"). [[I have a picture of this as well](#)] When I was there, Milan was almost finished with her college degree and the superintendents of the surrounding public schools were sending their principals and teachers to Milan to learn how she ran such a wonderful school. Oh, and she was in the middle of hatching plans to build on a third story so even more kids could come.

Milan built a school because she believed No one is too poor to give. What do you think you could do with a generous spirit?

What do you think we could do?

We need Milan's story because so many of us think, I don't have anything to give. Or that what I have is so small it won't make a difference. But it's not about an amount. It's not about anything external, anything measurable. It's about the act of generosity.

I've seen incredibly wealthy people give tons of money, but not as an act of generosity. It's for the tax break. And I've seen people who don't have an extra dime to their name give sacrificially of their time, their space, their intangible resources.

Because remember: at the end of the day, we can't buy God's love. There's no magic dollar amount that makes you holy. Like everything else in this series, we're speaking not of external realities, but of matters of the heart.

You say, I can't afford to give. Milan says No one is too poor to give. We all have resources we can share. The question is not How much are you giving? The Question is Are you a giver?

So what is your obstacle? What's your "I can't"? I can't give because...? I can't be generous because...?

You don't have the money? Why not?

You don't have the time? Why not?

What in your life is out of order? What in your life has tilted you towards selfishness instead of generosity?

Do you understand that this is the difference between life and death? Between God and the world?

God calls us to be a radically, irrationally generous people. Because when we give, we become like God. In fact, our giving is always, only a reflection of what God has already done for us. Look at the larger context of what Paul said in 2 Corinthians:

Remember this-- a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.

And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say, "They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever."

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. -- 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 (NLT)

Because God has given us so much, we in turn are generous givers. And when we give, we are imitating God.

And is there any doubt that Beaver Creek Nazarene is a generous Church? We have a reputation for generosity. We give both here and around the world.

You remember that back in November, Jon and Ashley Barchus visited us from the Arbre de Vie orphanage in Sakate, Benin. We all listened as they shared about their needs at the orphanage. They told us that all 30 of the children currently share two rooms. That they had no place to study and no room for any more children.

Ashley told us that they had a dream for a new, bigger dorm. One in which each child would have a bed of their own. A space for their clothes and belongings.

To put up the most basic building would cost \$45,000. To furnish it, another \$11,000. We heard that and the Holy Spirit moved one of YOU to challenge Beaver Creek Nazarene to raise the \$56,000 by the end of the year. To give up our Christmas gifts so that we could give the children of Arbre de Vie a new home for Christmas.

With six weeks left in 2011, you accepted that challenge, and with three weeks to go, we exploded past the \$56,000 goal.

[*Thermometer* video]

We had to call Ashley back and ask her what else they wanted to do: now that simple new dorm will have a full kitchen. A giant great room where the kids can do their school work. A second story and a water reservoir so they can have running water.

All of this because of your generosity.

Before we'd even finished collecting the money, we recorded an announcement for the children. They didn't know that we were doing this, and Jon and Ashley wanted to surprise them on Christmas morning. They recorded the kids receiving the Good News so that we could celebrate with them. So Beaver Creek Nazarene, watch this video and know that it is because you chose to give.

[*Home in Benin* video]

Have you ever received a gift as wonderful as what you just saw? Have you ever bought or consumed anything that even approximates the joy that you feel at this moment from being a part of this new home?

Brothers and sisters, that was 2011. And 2012 is before us. I remain confident that God has even more in store for 2012 for Beaver Creek Nazarene.

I believe that we'll become even more generous around the world, in our own town, and within the community here at Beaver Creek Nazarene. I believe that we can become even more a people who resists the script our culture gives us. A people who refuses to be consumers, but instead to be givers.

No excuses. No “I can’t’s”. If you can’t, then manage your money better. Manage your time better. We can be givers. We *must* be givers.

Back in the long-ago 1990s, Billy Corgan wrote a song called “Bullet with Butterfly Wings”. It’s about what happens when we trust the world. What happens when we get wrapped up in the things of this world, when we get trapped in idolatry. He opens the song by reflecting that:

"The world is a vampire, sent to drain
Secret destroyers hold you up to the flames.
And what do I get for my pain?
Betrayed desires, and a piece of the game."

The world lies to us. Commercials lie to us. Do you think Amazon actually want you to be happy? Of course not! Your happiness is horrible for their business. It’s to their advantage that what they sell you doesn’t satisfy you. What do we get for our pain? Betrayed desires, indeed.

Nothing we consume, nothing we buy, can ever fulfill us. If we look to anything in this world to satisfy our desires, it’ll betray us every time. If we choose to be consumers, we’ll become blind to the good, loving God who is working around us, giving us every good gift.

The antidote to selfishness, to idolatry is generosity. God calls us to give not because we can buy God’s love, not because we have to earn God’s favor, but because when we give we become like God. Giving opens our eyes to what God is doing around us.

So the question before us is: What will you give?

Communion Set-Up

We close today with communion, because our generosity is always, only a response to God’s gifts. When we gather at these tables, we remember that Jesus gave us bread as his body, broken for us. He gave us wine (we use juice) as his blood that brought us into a new relationship with God.

Jesus freely, willingly gave us his life. He didn’t hold anything back.

So today, use this opportunity to reflect as you come to Jesus’ table. Generosity is not about a dollar amount. It’s not even about money. It’s about giving what you have - whatever you have - in imitation of God. Because your stuff doesn’t rule you. Your only ruler is Jesus.

[prayer]