

[Pic of Book] When I was 16, my dad bought me a copy of Dale Carnegie's classic business book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In that book (which was first published in 1936), Carnegie tells the story of a manager who implemented a no-smoking policy in his factory. He had one particular employee who refused to comply. He would stand immediately beneath the No Smoking sign on his breaks and smoke. The manager bought an expensive cigar and approached the man on one of his breaks. He praised the man for his hard work and dedication to the company and gave him the cigar. Then, he asked him to comply with the new No Smoking policy by enjoying the cigar outside in the designated smoking area.

Carnegie praised the manager as wise and clever. And that story is one of many Carnegie uses in *How to Win Friends* to demonstrate how generosity is better business than the selfishness and cutthroat attitude that typically characterizes the business world. And I have to tell you: for 16-year-old JR., who was admittedly pretty selfish and entitled, this book was a game-changer. This book pushed me away from selfishness toward generosity.

But the older I got, that cigar story didn't sit quite right with me. True, it was a kind gesture. True the manager could've just fired the guy or docked his pay or something. But it wasn't *really* a gift. It was given so the manager could get something in return. I still think the story is a great example of leadership in the workplace, but these days I don't look at it as a model for generosity.

Last week, we began talking about how difficult it is for us to give and receive well. We struggle to give and receive without string attached. But if we are to live fully human, flourishing lives, we must learn to give generously. Generosity is the key to living as God created us to live, both as individuals and as a church.

Generosity is one of those words that feels better in abstract than in practice. We love the *idea* of being generous, but giving is hard! For some of us, it's scary - we feel like we're barely keeping our heads above water as it is, so to imagine giving more hurts. Others of us are convinced generosity is unwise. Giving too often rewards bad behavior - even the manager's cigar feels dirty, like he's rewarding someone for breaking the rules. And some of us are skeptical. Because we're in a church and churches *love* to talk about money, especially so their pastors can buy fast cars and private jets. All for the glory of God, of course.

I hear you. I get it. I've been there. But we'll see today that a call to generosity is a call to life. We'll see that *anyone* can be generous, no matter how much they have, and we'll see why generosity is the path to life and flourishing.

[Volf + Book] We're talking about generosity because we're in the middle of a series called Free of Charge, which is based on a book by Mirslav Volf, one of my all-time favorite theologians. Ultimately, we're moving toward talking about forgiveness. But we live in a culture that doesn't understand grace, so we're starting with a foundation of giving, then building forgiveness on top.

Last week, we saw God is most essentially a giver. That God doesn't need anything, so God is free to give. Unlike that manager, God gives us gifts not to get something from us, but so we can live as God lives. We are created in God's image, so when we give, we act out who we are. When we refuse to give, we act against our very natures.

The question before us today then, is How do we give? [Illustrate these as three different modes] Social Historian Natalie Davies has identified giving as one of three modes of exchange as we relate to each other. First is the **coercive** mode, which is all kinds of theft. In this mode, we don't give, we take. Second is the **sales** mode, which is buying and selling. Here I give to you, but I get something equivalent in exchange. I give you sweat, you give me money, which I then turn around and give for shelter, clothing, food, etc. **GIFT** is the final mode. In this mode, the donor offers something they don't owe and the recipient doesn't deserve. This is generosity. But it's more than just one way we exchange. It is the end of a path of spiritual growth.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Ephesians 4. In Ephesians 4, the author reflects on how the Ephesians have changed since they have experienced the new life God gifts to us all. He recognizes that we live in a tension between our old lives and our new life in God. He says,

Surely you have heard about Christ and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness...

Then he gives a string of advice, practical steps for putting away the old life and putting on God's new life. And in the middle of it all, he says,

Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. -- Ephesians 4:21-24, 28

[Three modes, now connected in a flowchart] Thieves are **coercive**. They take. And Ephesians says, Thieves give up stealing and work. Working is part of the **Sales** mode. We trade work for money. But that's not where it stops. Once thieves stop stealing and start working, they are free to "share with the needy." This is **Gift**, the final mode.

Let's not rush past this, friends. When we take off our old natures and put on the new life of God, we are transformed from being takers into people who work for what we have. But then we are transformed from workers into givers, the way God is a giver. Generosity is the outcome of a life with God.

Which should not surprise us, because as we follow God, we become more like God. And God is a giver.

If we are to give, how much should we give?

[Elephant made of money?] Let's go ahead and talk about the elephant in the room: Money. Would it surprise you to learn that God is not overly concerned with how *much* we give? I know, I know. Churches love to put a number on how much you should give. We call it "tithing" and we say you should give 10% of your gross income to the Church. Plenty of churches insist if you're not giving 10% directly to the Church, you're sinning.

There are plenty of problems with the 10% rule. If you do the math in the Old Testament, the number is something more like 33%, not 10%, and by the time you get to the New Testament, the concept of tithing has vanished. The New Testament insists that *everything* we have is from God and that we owe everything to God. So I guess 100% if you wanted to put a number on it.

The bigger problem is that 10% rule is just that... a rule. It's legalism. And what Jesus tells us is that God isn't concerned how much you give. God is concerned with what your giving *costs*.

[Scripture Slide 2] What's the difference? Flip over to Mark 12. Jesus is sitting with his disciples outside the Temple. And just like people give to the Church today, people in Jesus' day gave to the Temple. Let's see what Jesus saw, and hear what he thought of it:

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

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. 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." -- Mark 12:41-44

Here's why 10% is a bad rule: 10% doesn't tell you anything about the *spirit* of the giving. I've been part of some churches with very wealthy people. Their 10% was more than my annual income. For them to give 10% was nothing - in fact, they got a nice tax break for it. A tithe for them wasn't a sacrifice. (And full discloser: many of those persons were among the most generous people I've ever met. They gave much more than 10%.)

On the other hand, I have friends for whom money is *very* tight. 10% would bankrupt them. They're a lot more like that widow. They give pennies compared to those other folks.

Who gives more? In Jesus' story, it's the widow. Which is backward - her penny is clearly *not* more than all the wealthier people gave. But that's exactly Jesus' point. God doesn't *need* our money. We don't give so God can keep the world turning or reupholster his heavenly throne or whatever.

We give so that we become more like God. And God gives *generously*. Which means God gives more than God owes (which is nothing) to people who don't deserve it (us). God gives and gives and gives, up to and including God's own life.

What matters is not how much we give, but that we give what matters to us. Giving is about the cost, not the amount. When we give only what we have leftover, we are not generous. Generosity costs us, and in being generous, we imitate the God who gave up the throne of Heaven and his own life to buy us out of slavery to sin and death.

And let's make sure we don't limit giving to money. We give time when we serve, like when we spent weeks cleaning up after the tornado hit. We give resources, like when we provide meals for those who are sick or recently had a child (we've provided dozens of meals this year and it's only September!). We provide homes for C-Groups or guests. All of this is giving. All of it matters to God.

[Illustrate] If we are to give generously, to whom do we give? There are three primary categories of people we can give to. First, we give to **friends** or lovers. The gift is motivated by our affections for the other person. This is the form of giving we're probably all most practiced at. We also give to the **needy**. You have a friend or family member you help out with rent or a car payment or a place to stay. But we also give to **others** who are better equipped to help than we are. In fact, most of our giving looks like this. We feel this most immediately in the wake of a disaster like the tornado or the flooding in Louisiana recently. Many of us have a particular charity we give to as well.

This is also why we give to the Church. We recognize that we can do more for God's kingdom when we pool our resources and work together. Who among us, if we decided to be lone ranger evangelists, could do something like this every Sunday? Who could organize all the moving parts of our C-Groups and community service and minister to all our kids? I certainly couldn't.

We give our time and our money to the Church because we believe in what we can do together. Catalyst is a place where we can come together and receive from God together. We give in order to make that space available, because we know we need that space in our own lives and we want to make that space available for other people to come and meet with God as well.

[Flow graphic from last week] Strangely too, this is how God gives. God gives to US so that we can be channels of those gifts to others. Why? Because God created us in God's image, which means God created us to be givers. So God gives us good gifts with which we can become givers. When we begin to give, we begin to experience the life of God. We are wrapped up into the embrace of the Holy Trinity. And we find the selves God created us to be. God makes all this possible by giving to us so that we can be givers.

When we give, we imitate God. When we give, we become who we were created to be.

[Bring back the Modes of Giving flowchart] I was a pretty entitled teenager. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* helped me move from taking to selling. I moved from feeling like the world owed me, to desiring good for myself and others. But when I was in college, I spent a lot of time really studying the life of Jesus. It was there I learned that there's more even than giving and receiving for mutual good. I learned from Jesus what it looks like to be fully human: to be a

giver. To join with others in giving so that we can change the world. You bear the image of a God who gave and gave and gave and gave until he hung on a cross. And this God still gives and gives and gives today. When we give, we imitate God and participate in God's love, God's plan for the world.

If you're not a generous person, what's stopping you from giving? You may need to make some major changes in your spending habits. You may need to make a budget so you know where your money is going. You may need to reevaluate how you use your time, or your attitude toward your possessions. This should be something you undertake through much prayer and conversation with your C-Group or LTG. Let the Spirit teach you how to hold what you have as gifts from God, and let the Spirit teach you how to be generous (since Generosity IS a Fruit of the Spirit).

Remember: Generosity is not about the amount you give. It's about the cost. When I counsel people who have never given generously before and the question of "How much?" comes up, I challenge them to give a little more than feels safe. Just try it, and see what happens.

How are you already being generous? Where do you give your time now to your family, your friends, your church? How do you serve? How do you use your money for those who don't deserve it? How might the Spirit be encouraging you to continue in this generosity?

Friends, you were created for more than transactional relationships. You were created to give generously and freely. This is why Giving is one of the five spiritual practices we emphasize here at Catalyst. When we choose to give more than our leftovers, when we choose to give such that it costs us, we become like God. Giving helps us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Friends, let us be a generous people because our God is generous. Let us give good gifts because we have received so much from the giver of all good and perfect gifts.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] Communion makes us into the body. God's gift forms us into a giving community. In a world where there's no such thing as a free lunch, Jesus says, "All who are hungry, come and eat..."

1. When in the last week have I been generous with my time, resources and money?
2. When in the last week have I been selfish, or settled for transactional giving?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to be selfish or transactional?
4. How can I be generous with my time, resources and money this week?

Let us pray.