

[TBBT Clip 1] Does getting presents stress you out? That might seem like a silly question, but Sheldon's plan sounds a lot like how we approach giving gifts. It's a web of careful calculations designed to keep our relationships balanced. We don't want to go "in the red" with anyone relationally. We don't want to feel in anyone's debt by receiving too much. Nor do we want to give more than we have to. Such giving is not really gift giving. As Sheldon demonstrated, it's a complicated system of exchange. No wonder we just settle for giftcards. It's practically cash, which makes keeping things even a lot easier.

[Book + Volf] But as we've seen over the last couple of weeks, if we cannot *give*, we are not living fully human lives. This series is called Free of Charge, and it's ultimately about forgiveness and grace. We're drawing from a book of the same name by Miroslav Volf, one of my all-time favorite theologians. We're building a framework for understanding forgiveness, and that framework begins with giving.

The first week, we saw that God is a giver, and so because we are made in God's image, we were created to be givers. Last week, we asked how we are supposed to give. Again, we saw that God gives generously to us, so we are to give generously to others.

This week, we need to talk about the big objection to this framework: we are *not* God. Yes God is a giver, and yes, God gives generously. But how can we be like God?

We want to deny this is even possible - that God is infinite while we are finite, that God is self-sufficient while we are wholly dependent on God, that we are sinful while God is perfect.

The good news we will see today is that while we are right - it is impossible for us to become like God, in God's infinite grace, gives us the Holy Spirit who makes us like God, able to give good gifts generously.

God makes us able to give.

Before we get into the good news, let's make sure we understand the problem: Sin. The story of the first sin is found in Genesis 2-3. After God creates the man, God gives us a command:

The Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden — except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." -- Genesis 2:16-17

You've probably hear the story - a talking snake convinces the man and woman to eat from the tree God said not to. The serpent tells them that if they eat the fruit, they'll be more like God.

[Tree with sign: Don't eat This!] This story is worth about 5 sermons on its own, but for today, I want to focus on the prohibition. Sort of like telling someone not to push a big red button... we all want what we can't have. We feel like laws and rules are restrictive. We interpret prohibitions as shackles.

But God said, "You may eat freely of every tree in the garden except one." There is tremendous freedom and abundance in God's command. God says, "Look at all this! It's all yours! Just leave this one thing alone."

But why do that at all? At minimum, this prohibition reminds the man and woman - and us - that the world is not simply here. We didn't find it, lay claim to it and so are free to do as we wish. Rather, the world is a gift. It does not belong to us. It is *given* to us, and we have an obligation to receive it well. The prohibition reminds us we live in God's world, not ours.

Sin is when we don't receive well. Sin looks not at all God has given us, but at the little God reserves for God. Sin is deciding we are free to do as we want - which is exactly what the man and woman did. It's refusing to participate in God's giving economy, treating God's good gifts as though we are entitled to them.

And when we do that, the fruit of our sin poisons all our gift-giving abilities. Sin warps us and makes us less than human. Two particular fruit of sin spoil our ability to give good gifts generously: pride and sloth.

**[Prideful Giving]** How often do we give out of guilt? We make a mistake, so we bring a box of chocolates or a dozen roses. We miss a game or recital so we offer a new toy. We want to make an impression so we wow with something we know they love.

Giving can often be more about ME than the person I'm giving to. I give to show off. I give a large sum to a charity or make a big production out of presenting my gift. I give so I will have influence in an organization or over a person. I give to the Church so that God will answer my prayers or feel favorably toward me. Or I give just so I feel better about *myself*.

When I give to manipulate others, or when I give to make myself feel better, I am not giving. The sins of pride and selfishness have tainted my gift.

**[Scripture Slide]** How can we combat prideful giving? Jesus offers one antidote in his Sermon on the Mount. Turn with me to Matthew 6. This whole sermon is practical instructions on what Jesus' new life looks like when we live it out. He talks specifically about giving in chapter 6, and his antidote to pride is to give secretly. Listen to what he says:

"Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." -- Matthew 6:1-4

Secret giving is an antidote to pride. If no one knows, then you can't receive any acclaim for your giving. Our giving app here at Catalyst is one of the ways we work to make this sort of secret giving possible. When you give through the app, no one but you actually knows how much you give. I don't even know - I made a commitment when I became a pastor not to look at how much people give so there's no way that can taint how I interact with people in the congregation.

If you struggle with pride when you give, Jesus says to look for secret ways to give. Drive your giving underground and pride has nothing to latch onto.

Well that's not entirely true, is it? One of the great frustrations with giving is when we see someone who is ungrateful for our gifts. Let's say I buy a sandwich for someone for lunch. I give it to them and they immediately throw it on the floor. I'd be pretty ticked. I paid for that with my money and gave it freely. And you're just going to throw it away?

Again, this is Pride. We worked hard for what we gave away, and we don't like to see someone squandering so frivolously the fruit of our hard work. This makes us less likely to give in the future, and we become angry and resentful toward the recipient of our gift.

**[Flow Graphic]** When we encounter this sort of pride, we must remember that the gifts we give are not ultimately from us. As we have seen over the last couple of weeks, God is the primary giver of every gift. God gives to us so that we can become givers like God.

When we give with God, God lives within us and gives through us. We become a channel for God's gifts. If you hand me a sandwich and tell me to give it to that guy over there, and he still throws it on the floor, I have less invested - literally. I will still recognize that action as ingratitude, but I don't take it as personally. And it doesn't affect my willingness to be a channel of gifts in the future.

Seeing our money, energy, time and possessions as gifts from God changes how we see ourselves. Understanding that God gives to us *so that we can become givers* changes how we give. And understanding that much of what we have God intends for others - because they are the intended recipients of our gifts - changes how we see others. These root out our pride so that we can give better gifts.

**[Sin of Sloth]** The other way sin taints our gifts is through the sin of Sloth. Sloth is not a sin we much talk about, but it is a sin. Sloth is the sin of inaction. It's failing to do what God is calling us toward. Sloth taints our giving in that many of us simply don't give at all, or like we should. Giving takes work. Take money, for instance: You have to earn money. Then you have to budget that money so you have some to give. Then you have to decide who gets the money. And then you actually have to give, and go without whatever you could have bought with that money.

The same could be said of time and resources. It's not easy and it's not what our culture considers good. This is why the Church is so important for us. The Church forms us as givers. In the Church, we live in community with others who are also learning to give as God gives. In the Church, we are surrounded by people who need what we have - gifts, talents, resources, and we learn to share with them. To give to them.

The Church should be an organization that is easy to give to. We give our time, energy and money to Catalyst not because we have to, but because of what God does in our lives through Catalyst. We give so that this space can exist for others, too.

[Scripture Slide] Sloth also convinces us we're too poor to give. But turn with me to 2 Corinthians 8. Here, Paul is talking specifically about giving. He's taking a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem and he's inviting all the churches he's planted to contribute to the cause. The Corinthian Christians were very poor. They had less than any of us sitting in this room, less than 99% of people living in the USA. They were at or below subsistence level.

Let's look at what Paul tells them. He began by reminding the Corinthian Christians that in their giving, they are imitating Jesus:

You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. -- 2 Corinthians 8:9

Paul begins with theology. Jesus gave up Heaven and became poor - figuratively and literally - for US. Again, we give because God gives to us. We are rich because Jesus lives in us. We are rich not because of what our bank account balance is. We have more than anyone who first received this letter, and yet Paul declared that in Christ, God has made them rich.

This is because Jesus makes us new. He frees us from the power of Sin. Rather than looking at the one tree we can't have, Jesus turns us back to the whole garden, to show us how truly rich we are because of what we already have.

God gives us the Holy Spirit to transform us into good givers. Rather than the fruit of Sin, the Spirit creates in us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. The Spirit enables us to receive from God and give to each other.

When we live in the Spirit, we are rich no matter how much money we have. Miroslav Volf, the theologian who inspired this series, describes the Rich Self like this:

[Quote with pic of book and/or Volf] A rich self has a distinct attitude toward the past, the present, and the future. It surveys the past with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given. A rich self lives in the present with contentment. Rather than never having enough of anything except for the burdens others place on it, it is "always having enough of everything." It still strives, but it strives out of satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving. A rich self looks toward the future

with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. -- Miroslav Volf

God's love is an infinite gift we could never afford or repay. Yet it is ours for free. We are rich not because we have achieved a certain number in our bank accounts, a certain square-footage of house or number of cars. We are rich because we have responded to God's freely given gifts and been transformed into generous givers.

Receiving that gift transforms us. Remember Sheldon's plan to exchange carefully valued gifts? Watch what happens when the gift he receives is far more valuable than he could ever have imagined:

[TBBT Clip 2]

Receiving an infinitely valuable gift overwhelms all our pride and sloth. When we truly receive God's gifts as gifts, we cannot help but respond in love and generosity. Friends, this is why giving can never be a law. Because giving, to be giving, must be a response to God's love and the Spirit's work in our lives.

Friends, sin does not have to poison our gifts. The Spirit is making us new, and in the Spirit, we are free to give as God gives. We are free to generously as God is generous.

This is why Giving is one of the Spiritual practices Catalyst emphasizes. We are most like God when we are giving because God is a giver. If regular, intentional giving is not part of your life, our Spiritual Practices guide is a great help to get started.

[Spirit overcomes Sin to make us generous] Giving generously is not impossible. It's how we were created to be. We are, in the very core of our beings, givers. God gives to us generously so that we can be who God created us to be: generous givers.

If you don't give, what's stopping you? Is it your pride? Give in secret. Is it your sloth? Spend time today considering all God has already given you. Begin to give. And trust the Spirit to work in the time you give, in the resources you share, in the money you donate. Trust that the Spirit is helping you to give. Trust that the Spirit is making you new. Trust that you are giving in union with God.

Let's be a church famous for our generosity. Let's be a church that amazes people. Let people see us and say, "Look how rich they are!" Not because we have red carpets and pastors who drive luxury cars and tax our members, but because we already have so much. Because we face not the prohibitions but the freedom we have in God.

### **Communion + Examen Setup**

[Communion Slide] All who are hungry...

1. When in the last week did you act generously toward others?
2. When in the last week did pride or sloth hinder your generosity?
3. When in the next week might pride or sloth hinder your generosity?
4. How can you give in this next week, trusting the Spirit to work through your generosity?