

“Generosity”
Proverbs 3:5-12
December 6, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We’re looking today at our fourth core value of being a giving community. Like our previous two core values of being a healing and a welcoming community, this one comes straight out of the heart of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that God has been generous to us, sparing no expense to restore us to a relationship with him. His generosity is the essence of sacrificial giving because he sacrificed his only Son that we might have life. When we receive his generous gift to us, it begins to transform us into generous people as well. It changes us from monkeys to Babette.

I have read that one way to catch a monkey is to place inside a bottle some shiny thing that the monkey wants. The neck of the bottle must be large enough for the monkey to squeeze his hand through, but small enough that he cannot withdraw his hand as long as he is making a fist while holding on to the shiny object he wants. The monkey would rather hold on to the thing he finds precious inside the bottle than let it go and escape.

Instead of the foolishness of the grasping monkey, we are to be wise like Babette, a character in a story written by Karen Blixen. The story of Babette’s Feast is about two sisters, Martina and Philippa, who were the daughters of a pastor. After their father dies, things don’t go well in the church and the people begin bickering and fighting with one another. But the hundredth birthday of their late father is approaching, and Babette, who has come to live with the sisters, offers to prepare a feast. It turns out that she was a famous cook in Paris who had been forced to flee when she was caught on the wrong side of a political struggle. She had just won the lottery, and the sisters are sure that she is about to leave them with her new riches. But she prepares an extraordinary feast, one that costs all of her winnings. It turns out to be a feast that brings healing and good to the guests. At the end of the story, the comment is made, “The vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is.” The true nature of the universe is that of grace and generosity. The problem is that we are all grasping monkeys by nature. So let’s look carefully at what the writer of Proverbs says about living wisely as generous people.

I. Generosity Commanded

The command is to **“honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce”** (v. 9). It commands both an activity and a

heart attitude. The activity is to give of the firstfruits. In an agricultural setting, the firstfruits were simply the first crops to be harvested. After Israel's redemption from Egypt, God told Israel to give to him the firstfruits of their crops and the firstborn of their animals and sons in recognition of his redemption of the nation. The idea is that God owned them because of buying them out of slavery, and the firstfruits offering was an acknowledgement of his ownership rights.

What does it look like for us to give to God out of our firstfruits? I think it means to give off the top instead of giving what is left over. To give to God first is an act of trust in God. To give what is left over is in effect to trust ourselves. It says, in effect, "When I am satisfied that all my needs, both present and future, are adequately cared for, then I will give to God." What happens more often than not is that we are never satisfied that those needs are met, with the result that our giving is only token. But when we give to God off the top it says in effect, "God, I don't know what is going to happen in the future for which I may need to use this money. But you know, and I'm trusting you to provide for my needs as I give this to you."

One of the questions often asked about giving is how much to give. In the Old Testament, the basic requirement was to give a tithe, which means 10 percent. Jesus affirmed the tithe in Matthew 23:23, but the New Testament also seems to move beyond the tithe in tying our giving to the greater grace we have received in the fuller revelation of Jesus. So I think it safe to say that as Christians our giving should begin with the tithe.

But this verse commands an attitude as well as an activity. We are commanded to honor the Lord, to have hearts that desire honor to be brought to God and is willing to give of our money to do so. In other words, this verse commands a generous heart as well as generous giving. That's why Paul said that God loves a "cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). We can sin in this area, then, by giving either inadequately or mechanically.

II. Generosity Rewarded

Both here and throughout the Bible, God promises reward for those who give. **"Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine"** (v. 10). How should we regard this promise? Most of us are aware of how this promise has been misused to manipulate people into giving. A Christian leader will appeal to people's greed by saying, "If you want to get rich, then give to my ministry. You can't out-give God, so give to me and God will give you even more." Or they might appeal to people's fears. "If you're struggling financially and don't know how to pay your bills, then give some seed money to my ministry and watch God bring in the harvest." Like most

false teaching, there is a mix of truth and error in such appeals. The truth is that God does promise to reward generous giving. The error is to base the appeal on selfish desires. If I am giving to God in order to get money from God, I am honoring myself instead of God.

Let me offer a crude analogy. Have you ever taken a piece of meat in your hand and waved it before your dog's nose? The dog will follow your hand wherever it moves and ignore everything else, so eager is he to scarf down that piece of meat. It would be a mistake for you to think that the dog was interested in your hand, though his eyes follow your hand wherever it goes. But if you were to separate the hand from the meat, does anyone doubt where the dog's attention would go? He only cared about your hand as long as it was holding what he really wanted. He was honoring the meat, not the hand. If we give to God only to get from God, we care nothing for God, but only for ourselves. God is simply an instrument to get what we want.

It would be a mistake, however, to ignore this promise just because some misuse it. God promises over and over to provide for us as we honor him with our giving. Paul writes of this in terms of sowing and reaping. **“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully”** (2 Cor. 9:6). Years ago I remember reading about a wealthy man in Pittsburgh who had been blessed greatly by his own tithing. He worked with the pastor of his church to encourage others to begin tithing. What he did was to set up a fund in his church and to attach this promise to it. He said that if anyone who had not been tithing would begin doing so, and if after six months they regretted that they had done so, they could have all their tithes refunded to them out of this fund. The church had quite a few takers to the challenge, but not a single person collected on it. All agreed that it had indeed been a great blessing to them.

Our church has experienced the same. For many years, we have been able to give about 25% of our tithes and offerings to ministries outside our own church, to such things as missionaries, church planting and ministries to those with a variety of financial needs. During the twenty-two years I have served this church as its pastor, I can't remember a single year where we have ended the year in the red. I don't think God gives us any guarantees that we will end every year with more income than expenses, and this year may very well be the first one with red ink in our bottom line. The greatest gifts of God are not financial, and sometimes abundant finances are more harmful than helpful. Sometimes we need to struggle financially in order to gain the blessing of prayerful dependence on God. But God knows what we need and he always gives abundantly, sometimes in a financial way and sometimes in even greater ways and always without regret on our part.

By God's grace, our family has had the joy of experiencing God's provision in many different ways. There was a period of time several years ago when we made money on three cars we owned. Even after driving them for quite a few years, we sold them for more than we paid for them. When our children were young, one of their favorite things to do was to go to the thrift store with their mom. With Wendy's encouragement, they would pray for precisely the things they wanted and then treat the experience as a treasure hunt for those very things. As God provided many of the items prayed for, he also blessed our children with a growing faith that they had a Father in heaven who cared so much for them that he heard their prayers about even the smallest things.

III. Generosity Enabled

New Yorker magazine had a cartoon in it once in which a man said to his fiancé, "I'm not going to promise to change, but I will promise to pretend to change." Similarly, we can give our money away, but we can't make ourselves become generous people. At heart, we are all grasping monkeys instead of generous Babettes. How do we actually change and become generous people? The answer to that question comes by noticing that these verses about generosity appear in a context about trusting God.

The way of wisdom, the way that leads to a generous heart, is to **"trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding"** (v. 5). The opposite of trusting God is not doubt, but trusting in your own understanding. Or in the words of verse 7, it is to be **"wise in your own eyes."** There are many people who think they know better than God how much money they need. They are convinced that they need just a little bit more, and then they get angry at God when he doesn't give them what they think they need. This is what our author means by being wise in your own eyes. It is thinking you know better than God. How many people are there who have been convinced that the path to the kind of life they want to live requires enough money to retire at a relatively early age? But then when it happens they discover that they are not at all happy in retirement. We are wise not to be wise in our own eyes.

Another way he speaks about trust in God is by saying, **"In all your ways acknowledge him"** (v. 6). The word *acknowledge* is literally to *know*. We are being told to "know" God in all our ways. What does that mean? I think it means that we need to see every part of our lives, even the smallest part, as an opportunity to know God. If the furnace in your house dies, it is an opportunity to know God better as you trust in him. If you need to have a hard conversation with someone, it's an opportunity to know God. If you are given a financial windfall, it is also an opportunity to know God.

Notice the promise attached to this: **“he will make straight your paths.”** Straight paths are a biblical metaphor for realizing the right goals in life, the ones that will lead to happiness without regret. The Bible is clear in stating that the essence of that goal for each one of us is to become more like Jesus Christ. He is one who knows what it is to trust God. He is one who knows what it is to be generous. Jesus, though he was rich before that first Christmas when he came to the earth, was willing to give up everything. He became poor not just for the sake of becoming poor, but in order that we might be made rich. God knows how to make you like Jesus, how to make straight your paths. Do you know how to do that? I don't. God does, and we can trust him.

How do we know we can trust God? How do we know that especially when things aren't going smoothly? I knew someone once who decided to buy a used car at auction because they were so much cheaper than other used cars. This couple prayed that God would lead them to exactly the right car, one that would be mechanically sound. Not long after they purchased the car, it became clear that it was a lemon. They ended up spending more on repairs than they did to buy the car in the first place. They said to me, “I don't understand how God let that happen when we were really trusting him.”

How do you know that God is trustworthy when things don't work out as you want them to? There is only one way. You have to look to Jesus. He gave up everything for you, and he did so even before there was anything good about you. A God who would be that generous toward us can be trusted fully. If he took care of my eternal future even when I didn't know that was an issue, I think he can be trusted when my car needs repairs or when he asks me to give to him the firstfruits. He knows how to direct my life.

CONCLUSION:

Back in the days when people crossed the Atlantic Ocean in ships instead of airplanes, a military officer and his wife were on a trans-Atlantic ship when a raging storm arose. The man remained calm, but his wife was terrified. His calm attitude seemed to antagonize her, and she grabbed him and shouted, “How can you be so calm?” He stepped back a few feet, drew his sword and pointed it at her heart. “Are you afraid of this?” he asked. Without hesitation, she replied, “Of course not!” “Why not?” “Because it's in your hand, and you love me too much to hurt me.” He pressed home the lesson to his fearful wife. “I know the One who holds the winds and the waters in the hollow of His hand, and He will surely care for us!” We can trust God and become generous because we know the love of the Father through Jesus.