

Extravagant Generosity I

This is the final practice of the Five Practices. We have been leading up to this point all along. Each one of the Practices has led into the next, until we finally find ourselves at Extravagant Generosity.

Here's how it works according to Bishop Schnase:

Churches embrace newcomers with a sustaining sense of belonging when they practice Christ's Radical Hospitality. Through Passionate Worship, God shapes hearts and minds, creating the desire to grow in Christ. Through the practice of Intentional Faith Development, people make themselves available to listen for God's Word and for the Spirit to mature their understanding of God's will. Inner spiritual growth finds outward expression in Risk-Taking Mission and Service as people respond to God's call to make a positive difference in the lives of others. As people grow in relationship to Christ, they grow also in the practice of Extravagant Generosity, offering more of themselves for the purposes of Christ and providing the resources that strengthen ministry and that help the church touch the lives of more and more people in the same way their own lives have been transformed by God.

Clearly, Extravagant Generosity is about more than money, just as stewardship is about more than money. But, if we cannot be extravagantly generous with our money, how generous are we going to be with our time and energy?

Extravagant Generosity is not giving generously out of guilt or peer pressure. It is not about giving because you want something back, as if you are bargaining with God, although the Bible indicates that God does reward generosity.

Extravagant Generosity grows from the heart, from the desire to please God, to thank God for His generosity to us. It comes from a joyful desire to share our abundance. It is giving until it hurts, until we feel it, until we have to make sacrifices in order to give what we want to give.

According to Bishop Schnase, *"generosity enlarges the soul, realigns priorities, connects people to the Body of Christ, and strengthens congregations to fulfill Christ's ministries."*

Extravagant Generosity transforms us. And it transforms the church, because we ARE the church. Never forget, you don't attend church, you ARE the church. And, being generous doesn't just allow the church to do more ministry here and around the world, it deepens our relationship with God and our connection with all God's children.

If we were to look inside ourselves and try to find out how generous our hearts are, we would have to ask the question, “How healthy is my relationship with money?”

Does it have too strong an influence in our lives? Are we serving its call to accumulate more and more money? Do we spend a lot of time worrying about money? According to one poll, Americans – regardless of their income and net worth – believe they would be much happier if they made an average of 20% more than they currently make. So, people making \$20,000/yr think the ideal income is \$24,000. If they make \$100,000, they need \$120,000. If they make \$10 million, they need \$12 million. Evidently, the whole concept of being satisfied with what we have has been lost, if it ever existed.

What does the Bible say about Extravagant Generosity? Let’s start with the OT prophet, Malachi, who hears God saying:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

Yow. Malachi is pulling no punches here. He is telling us that anything less than a tithe is robbing God of His due. A tithe is 10% of your income. You can tell by looking at our congregation, then looking at our budget reports, that most of us are not tithing. If we all tithed, our Finance Committee would not have to try ways every year of decreasing the church budget. If we all tithed, we would literally not know what to do with all the money.

The ideal situation would be that we all tithe, then if an emergency came up, we’d give even more. That is our offering, above and beyond the tithe.

So, the question becomes Why are we not tithing? Why do we feel put upon to give 3% or 5%, and never even consider giving 10%?

It’s because we are not practicing Extravagant Generosity. As we can see through the Five Practices of **Fruitful** Congregations, this is a symptom of something deeper. At some level we do not feel grateful enough to God for all the blessings we receive. At some level, we are afraid to let go of too much money, because we know we’re going to need it, and we figure God understands. God understands, all right. According to Malachi, God understands that we’re robbing Him.

But, we say, let's get out of the OT with its demanding God and ask what Jesus has to say. He's usually pretty easy to get along with. Well, right smack dab in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, he says,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus clearly knows where our heart is. Do we? Are we sure we know where our heart is? Can others look at us and all our stuff and tell where our heart is?

Let's give Jesus one more chance to make us feel better. When some Pharisees come up to him and ask if they should pay taxes to Rome, he asks to see a coin.

“Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”

And what belongs to God? What are we supposed to give God? Everything belongs to God. We have been put here to take care of things, to be stewards. And what we do with our wealth and the earth and our neighbors is our stewardship.

According to John Wesley, in his sermon, The Use of Money, we should not worry about what percent we are giving back to God, because we owe everything to God. God owns everything. So, we are supposed to take care of our NEEDS (not our wants), then give the rest away – mainly to the church so it can do its ministry.

Christians who practice Extravagant Generosity create a church that practices Extravagant Generosity. If we are generous in our giving to the church, the church must be extravagant in its giving, and not horde the money for a rainy day. And I promise, knowing the leadership of this church, if we suddenly find ourselves with a windfall, we won't horde the money. The poor and sick and aged will know the hand of God because of our generosity, because that is the will of God.

Rev. Walt Westbrook November 22, 2009