

BE EXTRA

Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-11; 1 Timothy 6:17-19, and Galatians 6:6-10

PERSONAL REMARKS

Thank you for joining us today. Shout out to all those of you joining us online live or later - you're here, and we are glad you're with us! I'd like to take a moment and give a shout out to our worship team and our tech team. Without our tech team we would still be going live from my iPhone - I tried that a few times and it was kind of a disaster, actually. Thank you, again, guys, for the great work you do for us! [applause] I know everyone viewing at home and parts unknown are cheering wildly too.

We have had a profitable time in THE LENT EXPERIENCE. Are you enjoying your small group discussions? We've had great discussions, both in my Wednesday night small group that meets, and the youth small group that we have on Sundays at 11am. Fasting, Solitude, Repentance... have all been stretching for me. And now we come to alms-giving. What is that? More on that in a minute.

INTRO

One of the biggest joys in my life is parenthood! I will never forget the births of any of our children. For Dads of course, it's a lot more fun than it is for Moms, so... I remember the wonderful happy feeling I had bringing our first baby home, 26 years and four months ago. She was perfect, and life was perfect. Then something terrible happened - for her and for every other child I've ever met... all of a sudden, she had to learn how to share.

Have you noticed that this whole sharing thing is a real problem? It seems like early on, right after they say their first words, the next words babies learn is NO and MINE. They're territorial about things like toys, blankets, parents' attention and affection.

I think it's worse when your siblings are the same sex you are. In my case, my only sibling is my sister. I remember when I was in high school... yeah it was in the '80's... the NINETEEN 80's. Growing up in Ohio we survived our winters in sweaters. Big, thick, bulky sweaters. I could never find my favorite, coolest looking sweaters when I wanted them. That's because my adorable little sister stole them and wore them to school as sweater dresses! So, yes, sharing with siblings was a real problem for me, too!

Have you noticed that the life lessons of sharing never seem to end, either? It seems like when you've mastered it on one level, you get a new lesson that challenges you to a new level of sharing. We need these constant lessons because how we feel about our possessions and especially our money lies at the core of who we are as individuals.

It's all about learning to be generous. If we have attitudes of generosity, then we are growing into having the mind and heart of our Savior Jesus Christ.

The first lesson of generosity is tithing. We see this from the beginning. Hundreds of years before Moses brought the Law down from Mt Sinai, father Abraham brought a tithe of all he

had to a priest named Melchizidek. [Slide: "See Genesis 14 for more information on Melchizidek."] From the law of Moses we read detailed instructions that the first 10% of crops, fruit, and wine - all representative of what we think of today as money - were to be brought to the Temple for the sustenance of the priests and Levites and their families. Their lives, of course, revolved around serving in the Temple. The practice of tithing, rooted in the Law God gave to Moses, evolved into giving money instead of crops, but it was still 10%. This practice continued on in the church, and even continues to this day... as we talk about bringing our tithes and offerings for God's work here in the church.

"But wait," says the TV announcer, "There's more!" Now that we've taken care of the minimum level of generosity that God desires, the tithe, **it's time to be extra**. Now don't get me wrong ... extra is not unimportant. It's a key part of developing a mindset of abundance and living larger into God's purposes for our lives. This is next-level stuff.

Next level generosity includes alms-giving. What on earth do we mean by "alms-giving?"

I'm so glad you asked!

Like tithing, alms-giving has its roots in the law God gave to Moses. The word itself comes from a Greek word. But wait, wasn't the Old Testament written in Hebrew? Yes, but as Greek influence became dominant, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, and so were Hebrew concepts like tzedakah, or the giving of alms. "Alms" comes from a Greek word that means **to be merciful**. Tzedakah, the original Hebrew word, carries strong notes of mercy and compassion, and also justice and righteousness.

Jesus identified alms-giving with prayer and fasting as acts of worship that should be practiced before God, not performed to impress others. The very first alms-giving is recorded in 2 Kings 12:9 when Jehoiada the high priest at the time took a special collection. That was a simple chest with a hole bore into it for money, placed near the entrance to the altar in the Temple. The next iteration of alms-giving had elaborate trumpet-shaped receptacles. They were wide at the opening to encourage people to throw in their gifts, and they narrowed quickly just in case someone had second thoughts about their gift-giving. These were placed in not one, not two, but thirteen different locations in and around the Temple.

[Slide of Matthew 6:4] In Jesus' day, religious leaders were fond of praying and fasting publicly, and made an Olympic sport out of giving to the poor. This self aggrandizing benevolence probably left the poor feeling humiliated and helpless, like they were props. Jesus flipped it, reminding everyone again that, like prayer and fasting, alms-giving isn't an external mark of spirituality, but indicative of an inward condition of the soul.

And... just a reminder, one more time: **alms-giving is over and above my tithe to the church.** It is a way I align myself with the values of God's kingdom, especially helping the poor.

God had lots to say about helping the poor. For example, in the agriculturally-driven economy of ancient Israel, fields were considered assets, and the crops growing in the fields, and vineyards and trees, were considered income. The property owners were instructed that when they harvested, they were supposed to gather all they could the first time, and not worry about harvesting the tight corners of their fields. **[Read Leviticus 19:9-10 for more info on gleaning.]** Then the poor could follow the workers of the property owners and glean the crops, grapes, and fruit that had been left behind. Can you hear the objections now? “But I’m the one who worked for this! I plowed, I planted, I nurtured and I am hiring the workers to harvest the field! I’m supposed to leave some behind? For the moochers?”

God says, **Check your attitude toward those in need. Give open-handedly.** Let me say that again, check your attitude toward those in need. Give open-handedly.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’ (Deuteronomy 15:10-11)

GOD, THE SOURCE OF OUR WEALTH

Are you wealthy? Congratulations! You built that business! Your good judgment helped you accumulate that wealth! But who gave you the strength to build? Who gave you the wisdom to make savvy business decisions?

In Proverbs 10:22 we read, “The blessing of the Lord makes a person rich and He adds no sorrow with it.” In James’ epistle, he reminds rich people that their lives are fleeting, and beauty can be destroyed but a life of enduring commitment to God will yield everlasting wealth. **My money isn’t mine!** It came from God, and I can’t keep it anyway!

Jesus said, **“From everyone who is given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” (Luke 12:48)** Our money, our time, our abilities, are not ours to hoard. They are ours to manage. **God wants you to be a river, not a septic tank.**

Our attitude toward our alms-giving should reflect God’s attitudes toward the people He has made. He created us. Throughout the history of our world, He has given us many opportunities for us to come to Him. He loves us so much He sent His Son to die for us. He has a lot invested here! And yet, if you believe as many of us do in the doctrine of free will, there was no guarantee of any return on His investment. Yet He created, called, and gave anyway. And He still creates, and calls, and gives.

Does that mean that if I give to someone I shouldn’t seek to hold them accountable for how they spend the money I gave them? That’s up to you. That may bear tremendous fruit in

their life - and your life! But, **in its purest form, slms-giving is done with no expectation of return**. Like life, it's a gift.

Jesus modeled a life of giving to those who could never repay Him: miracles performed, free lunch for thousands, bringing dead loved ones back to life, loving and accepting unconditionally. Here's how He articulated it for His followers:

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."
(Luke 14:12-14)

Many of you know that we lived for almost a decade just a few blocks outside of Chicago. Throughout Chicago there was a program for down and outers called Streetwise. It's vaguely faith-based, and was around long enough to have become a Chicago institution. At the beginning of the day, this organization would sell their papers to these guys for 99 cents each and allow them to sell Streetwise papers for two dollars. For many of these guys, this was how they lived. On every street corner in the morning, there were guys shouting "Streetwise, two dollars! Streetwise, two dollars!"

Now I can tell you stories of charlatans begging for money. But that's another sermon. I made a commitment that once a day every weekday I went to the office, if I had two dollars, the Streetwise vendor of my choice got two dollars from me. I'd tell him to keep the paper and sell it to somebody else. I always had two dollars folded up in one pocket, and a \$5 or \$10 bill folded up in the other pocket so I wouldn't have to get into my wallet on the street. Occasionally, I purchased fast food or groceries - or make a rare cash donation - to others who asked me for money on the street. I figured if I were giving them money because God wanted me to, then the honesty of the person asking me for money was between them and God.

PERSONAL STORY

One Sunday afternoon in early December, Christina and the girls and I went downtown for an afternoon of seeing the festive decorations, and do a little Christmas shopping. On our way past Chicago's historic Fourth Presbyterian Church, we noticed that they were open for an Advent choral concert. So, with shopping bags and all, we went in and enjoyed an uplifting, perfectly performed, concert of beautiful seasonal music. Then we went to find our car.

When we pulled up to our parking space that afternoon, Christina and I were really excited about the fact that we could find one empty parking space on the street just a couple blocks from the heart of the Magnificent Mile.

We came back to the parking spot, but our car wasn't there. Suddenly our perfect afternoon was shattered. It was getting darker, and colder, and the once happy streets started to seem less inviting in the shadows. There were plenty of buildings around, but

they were all back doors to places, mostly unlit because it was Sunday, and there were no identifying signs anywhere.

A man, probably in his mid-sixties, walked around the corner and said hello to us and asked me if we needed help. I explained to him what had happened and he lifted a low-hanging branch from the tree that I'd parked near, to reveal a city sign that read NO PARKING TOW ZONE. He said he worked in the building we were standing in front of - or in back of - and asked if we'd like to come inside and warm up and use the phone to call the tow yard and get a taxi.

He directed me to his office phone and then made hot chocolate for the girls - who were on the edge of hysteria. After I called the tow yard to confirm my car was there, I was about to call for a cab when he said, "The tow yard is difficult to find, but it's on my way home. How about I drop you off there."

On our way, he told me about himself and asked me lots of questions, like what did I do for a living, how did I end up being a pastor, how had Christina and I met, and we had a great conversation. He pulled up to the tow yard office, jumped out of his car and was to my door in a moment. He shook my hand and as he shook my hand, he pressed something into my palm and closed my hand again. We thanked him and headed into the office, to get in line behind about other unlucky people who'd had their cars towed that day. I opened my hand to see what my new friend Mike had pressed into it when he shook my hand. It was enough money to pay for the tow and all the fees associated with the towing. I looked at that money and I silently prayed, "God, thank You! This would have ruined our Christmas! But why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

And I actually heard God speak to me, "Streetwise, two dollars!" and then He brought to mind the faces of a couple other people I'd bought little sandwiches or groceries for and He said, "You honored Me by helping the poor, even though you're not rich. So, here. And I will bless you again."

I helped others, even though I didn't have a lot. I experienced help in my time of need. And I was the positive recipient of this biblical principle: **You reap what you sow. (Galatians 6:7)**

We have some very practical ways to give alms coming up. This really is where the rubber meets the road. And this is going to seem more like a commercial than spiritual encouragement. But here goes...

Today is UMCOR Sunday - it's the Sunday that we receive a special offering that goes toward funding all the overhead costs for UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. That way, if you give toward UMCOR disaster relief, that money goes directly to disaster relief.

SECOND... we are taking a special offering for Easter that is going to go the work of the Salvation Army here in Bakersfield. We don't often acknowledge the work that they do. This year because of their faith-based values their kettles have been cancelled by

several major retailers and it has cut into their donations, which goes to serve needy families and run some incredibly effective addiction recovery programs.

THIRDLY... this is a long-term commitment for at least one year... coming up on April 18th we, as individuals or families, will have an opportunity to make a huge impact in a child's life in Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, through monthly child sponsorship. This is through a World Vision program called Chosen. \$39 a month takes care of a Swazi child's basic physical needs.

In your small groups this week, you may discuss other ways to do alms-giving.

St John Chrysostom, a prominent early church father, said that **alms-giving is a fourth path of repentance**. How is alms-giving repentance? In our alms-giving we are repenting of bad attitudes about people in need. In alms-giving we repent of selfishness about money and in a true act of repentance we do the opposite - instead of holding onto our money for our own use, we give it away open-handedly to someone in need simply because they need it! My money isn't my own! **My life isn't about me!** God wants me to be a river, not a septic tank!

When I give alms, I reflect Christ's heart and the values of His Kingdom. Giving regardless of whether or not I feel the person I'm giving to is worthy of my gift. Giving open-handedly and sometimes, even out of my own need. Giving with no expectation of reward here on the earth.

We are redeemed only by the blood of Jesus, but Scripture teaches that what we have done for Him and in His Name follow us into eternity. Matthew 25 Jesus tells of a day that one day He will return as Judge of all nations. He will say to those who have trusted in and lived for Him, "Come, blessed of my Father. I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was naked. I was sick. I was imprisoned. You looked after Me and saw to My needs. Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to Me. Enter now the joy of the Lord." By God's grace, let us live our lives together for that Day. Amen.