

Our Giving God: Check Your Heart

The Purpose of French Fries

Good Morning Everyone. My name is Darrell and it is good to see you all here this morning. If you are visiting us this morning, we are glad you here and hope that you feel welcomed into this worship experience. Last week, Pastor Richard launched us into a new series called “Our Giving God” and he shared a brilliant message about why Christians should make giving an active part of their faith journey. For me, the most tangible take away from his message was a story about French fries. I get it, it is kind of goofy, we laugh about it, but it was a great illustration of how many of us view giving. French fries by nature are made for sharing. In the food industry French fries are commonly considered shareable food. Someone buys one container and puts it in the middle of a group of people where everyone can share it. In a perfect world they give us an opportunity to be generous, to share with others, and to build community around a similar purpose and goal. Despite this recognized purpose, many of us view them the same way that little boy did. “They’re MINE!”

Personally, I can relate to that feeling. I am a fry hoarder. I don’t want to share. If we go through the drive-thru at In N Out you should be hesitant to let me hold the bag of food once it is received because if not watched carefully I will steal fries. You cannot trust me with them. You see the glory of a drive-thru bag is that things get jumbled and mixed up, resulting in one of God's many gifts to us: Bag Fries. Bag fries are fries that have fallen out of there container and into the bottom of the bag. They are no longer assigned to a particular person’s meal they are simply floating in the abyss of the bag. As a result, when I receive the bag of food I consider them to be fair game. They could be from your container or mine, it doesn’t matter I’m going to eat them and eat them before you do. Anyone else want to confess to French fry theft this morning? I opened the flood gates; you might as well jump on and get it out there. While to many of us this illustration may seem pointless; we are just talking about French fries after all. **The truth is that you can learn big truths about people from small, “pointless” actions.** If you can’t trust someone not to eat your fries . . . Can you really trust them at all?

Trust Issues

Last week the point of the story Richard shared was the reflection of the father. He was concerned that his son was unwilling to share his fries because they were “his” even though he only had them because of his father’s generosity. This week we are going to reflect on how a “They’re MINE” mentality reveals a deeper picture of what is going on inside our heart, mind, and soul. **In our world, Greed is a valued behavior.** If we want something, if we have

something, if we value something, were going to do whatever we can to make sure we get as much of it as possible. Whether we are talking French fries, Halloween Candy, Sports Cars, Guns, Jewelry, Artwork, Books, Shoes, Money, etc. When we value something our instinct is to collect as much as we can and use it for gratification. We live in a world where many people see collecting excess as a sign of prosperity, a sign of achievement. Yet, in spite of this mentality, if we went around the room and took a poll, the majority of us would say greed is negative behavior. We know it is wrong, but somehow materialism infiltrates our way of life. Why is that? Some of it is cultural influence, but some of it is because greed is not just an ailment; it is also a symptom of a deeper issue. **Greed is a symptom of . . . selfishness**. It seems kind of funny, this thing that our world values is the result of something we teach the youngest children to avoid. Many of us have taught our own children that selfishness is not healthy behavior. We recognize that when children learn to share, they learn that joy can be found when we are generous and allow others to play with us. Somewhere along the line though, that teaching slips away and we fall back into the selfishness trap. Maybe, it's because we have not dealt with the real issue. You see in many instances greed and selfishness, while troublesome, reveal that there is yet again a deeper issue in the depths of the human heart. **They reveal that we have a TRUST issue.**

At this point, some of you may be thinking, "Trust Issues? Hold on now, I thought we were talking about French Fries. Now you're telling me that my greedy snack food tendencies reveal some fundamental flaws in my character. That's an awfully big jump. You are right, it is. While I recognize that everyone is different, the point I want us to consider is that the struggles surrounding generosity in our life are the result of a systematic pattern. We steal all the French fries because we are greedy, we are greedy because we are selfish and only look out for ourselves, and we are selfish because we don't trust others to not eat our fries. **The "small" issue of greed may, in fact, reveal that we struggle with the deeper issue of trust**. What seemed like a "simple" problem in our life journey has now become a bowling ball that impacts every relational area of our life. When we cannot trust, we can't succeed as spouses, family members, teammates, coworkers or pretty much any relationally interactive position and our relationship with God is not numb to these negative effects. If we can't trust God, of course, it going to be difficult for us to engage him relationally nevermind share our financial resources with him. Whether we are motivated by greed, selfishness, or a lack of trust or inability to be generous with our God-given resources serves as a barometer to our relationship with God and others. Scripture is full of stories where someone, who personally knows God, is plagued by greed or selfishness and makes a decision that prevents them from experiencing the true extent of God's power, which then leads to a crisis of faith, and ultimately forces them to choose between sin and righteousness. **Giving generously in itself is difficult, but if we cannot trust God, the source of our gifts than we have bigger fish to fry**. A quick glance at human history through the lens of the bible will tell you this conflict is not new. The first generation of

humans born on this earth struggled with trust just like we do. Let's see how they responded. Turn with me to Genesis Ch.4.

Caine's Bowling Ball

Today we are going to look at the story that I have affectionately titled Caine's Bowling Ball. The reason for this new, modernized title is simple: The story of Caine and Abel shows the same progression from greed to selfishness to a lack of trust that I described earlier. It's kind of like rolling a bowling ball downhill, once it gets going you cannot easily stop it. Caine and Abel were brothers, the first two sons of Adam and Eve. The Bible indicates they were born into a working-class family who needed to cultivate and grow their own food. As a result, Caine became a farmer and Abel became a shepherd, both needed skill sets so that their family could survive. As was customary for their people, Caine and Abel both brought forth an offering to the LORD from their labors on the earth. This where the story gets interesting: Caine brought an offering of produce assumingly vegetables and fruit he cultivated on his farm. Abel brought forth an offering of lamb, the very best lamb that his flock had to offer. The LORD responded to their offerings and informed Abel how pleased he was with his offering, while he informed Caine that he was not pleased with what had been offered. The text is not really clear what the issue was here, but consultation of sources on OT literature indicates the issue was most likely that Caine, unlike Abel, had not offered God the very best of what he had. **Caine allowed greed to motivate his offering to the LORD.**

Instead of approaching God with humility and seeking to repent from his mistake, Caine becomes angry with God, refusing to understand the reason for God's objection to his offering. At this moment, just as any good father would, God recognized Caine's passive-aggressive behavior and approached him to settle the issue and allow Caine to restore their relationship. Verses 6-7 state,

"The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.'"

This is a pretty clear statement, right? It seems like advice that any father would give to a son who not met the expectations set forth for him. "Don't get mad at me for a mistake you made. I want to help you fix this problem, but if you're not careful this attitude you have is going to make your situation worse than it already is." After his initial failure, God offered Caine grace, hope, and a chance at redemption. Instead of this, Caine chose to be consumed by his sin and again ignore God's attempt at restoration. **Caine's selfish behavior leads him to fall deeper into his sinful pattern.** Using his own power he removes what he believes is the real problem in the situation. Verse 8 says,

“Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.”

Now things are really out control. Caine’s lack of trust, selfishness, and greed is no longer hurting just his own life. **Now, he is ignoring God and he is allowing his issues to impact the lives of others, he is letting sin take an even deeper hold on his life.** God seeing how dire this situation is becoming steps in a second time to try and help Caine avoid the reckoning that is ahead. Verses 9-12 state,

“Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?’ And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’”

This conversation was another of God’s efforts to get through to the wayward Caine. God gives Caine a chance to confess his sin, to acknowledge that he has forsaken his birthright and chosen to harm his brother. As the oldest brother, Caine had a God-given responsibility to protect his brother, to keep his brother safe. Again, his own sin prevented him from living the life God was calling him too. Caine tries to ignore God, but God already knows what happened. **Caine’s lack of faith led him to ignore God THREE separate times.** Caine now has a broken relationship with God, a broken relationship with his family, and no perceived purpose on earth. Caine still doesn’t repent, he still won’t trust God, and he believes the consequences for his actions are too tough. The story closes when out of his deep love for Caine, God offers him one last bit of grace. In spite of his lack of trust, in spite of his selfishness, in spite of his greed, in spite of his arrogance, and in spite of his lies, God promises to protect Caine as long as he lives.

In this story we focus on the murder as the root of Caine’s problem, Caine was a messed up guy because he murdered his own brother. **The reality is that it is simply not true. Caine was a messed up guy because he actively chose not to trust God enough to follow through on his commands.** Abel’s murder was the result of a pattern of faithless, selfish, and greedy behavior. The murder was not his only sin, it was the climax of the effect that sin had on his life. The root issue was his lack of faith, his decision to ignore the commands of God. Caine’s attitude concerning a simple offering revealed to us the direction his life was headed. His choice to not be generous with God revealed the true condition of his heart and it sent a powerful bowling ball rolling down a steep hill. All he had to do was stop and listen, just one time, stop and listen to the voice of God is his life. Like Caine, all of us have struggles, we all have chances to let the bowling ball that is our lives get out of control, to let sin rule our lives. All of us also have a choice, a choice to trust God with our life or like Caine, to take our chances on our own.

Check Your Heart

In our Story today, Caine was given lots of opportunities to see how his lack of faith was impacting his relationship with God. He was given three chances to repent, to let the grace of God saturate his life and reorient his priorities. This was not an accident; this was not God trying to win Caine's generosity and affection. These were moments of pure grace, grace that Caine did not deserve, grace only God was capable of giving. These moments of grace represent a choice that you all have to make before we even begin to talk about the impact of giving. **You have to make a choice about the impact a relationship of God will have on your life.** You see long after Caine, God realized that the struggle Cain faced was big and according to his standards He needed a big generous sacrifice to prevent it from completely devouring us. At that moment, God decided that he was going to set the standard for generosity. He decided that he was going to give up what only he could; he decided that Jesus, his only son, needed to come to this earth live a human life, die a human death, and ultimately win the one battle no human warrior could ever win: The battle against sin and evil. God loves you so much that the only thing he could he give, sacrifice everything so that you might have the chance to say yes, to forsake your broken and sinful life, and follow him. Before we can tackle any of this "small" stuff that builds faith you have to decide where your faith lies. Until you see the reality of the generous gift God offers you, the rest of this stuff won't make any sense at all.

When I was growing up my youth pastor used use the phrase "Check Your Heart" except for he used to say it more like "Cheeeeck Yoooo Heerrrrrt." That was his way of telling us we need to stop and make an assessment, assess actions were taking, choices we were making, words we were saying, etc. We needed to take a look at some small actions and how they were impacting our big action: Trusting God. My hope for all of you is that this can be one of those moments. When you think about giving, don't respond right away. Check your heart. Stop. Think. Pray. Listen. Then Act. The bottom line is this, generosity is a small thing that gives us insight into a very big thing. **Giving is one of many small choices you will make in response to the biggest choice you have ever made.** If you are struggling with it, then you need to ask yourself why. Are you struggling because of greed? Do you just want to collect more money? Are you struggling because you're selfish and you only want to spend money on your terms? Are you struggling because like Caine, you don't trust God to provide enough to meet your needs? Take some time to "Check Your Heart" and answer those questions. Consider your relationship God and keep in mind that giving is an indicator for where your faith lies. Then consider the two directions that the "big choice" you make in this life can take you. Will you choose to trust God? Or like Caine will you only trust yourself?

Giving is also an indicator to others of the work of God in your life. Talk to people who give generously and I can almost guarantee you it's because they learned that behavior from someone close to them. They witnessed an example from someone close to them and that example had a dramatic impact on their life. Caine's lack of generosity had a dramatic impact on the people around him! Your choice to live generously affects more than you. It affects your children, your grandchildren, the person sitting next to you in church, your cousin who just happens to be visiting from Michigan, not to mention the beneficiaries of your generosity. How would your decision to give generously impact not just your life, but the life of people closest to you?

Continuing a Legacy

Last week, Pastor Richard shared a powerful message about why we should give. **This week we discussed why we don't give.** Here at FUMC – Bakersfield, God has called us to be a lighthouse for our community. He has called us to be a place that demonstrates what it means to trust God, to allow generosity to drive the choices we make. Church we have a history of setting the generosity standard for other churches in our community. Pastor Richard jokes about it sometimes, but it's true. Do you know who the Mission at Kern calls when they want to start a project? They call us. They know that we will get them started, they know that if our hearts are "in" on a project that God is moving and it's time for them to start moving. That's the legacy you all have set for the next generation. This church has a legacy of generosity toward its community and it is up to those of us here now to make sure that legacy lives on, to make sure that every chance we get that our community knows of the "Transforming Power and Jesus Christ." One way to ensure that happens is through our generosity to this community to make sure that people know we believe in the community of Bakersfield, to make sure people know that God believes in the community of Bakersfield. If we can do that God's impact our community will begin to make deep roots in our society, we will see his full power on display. **Our generosity will serve as a proof of our faith to our community because we literally put money to the words coming out of our mouth.**