GROWING GENEROUS FOLLOWERS

LESSONS FOR ADULTS

cbf Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

SMYTH & HELWYS®

GROWING GENEROUS FOLLOWERS

LESSONS FOR ADULTS

Study by Michael McCullar
Commentary by Dan Bagby
Revised by Rickey Letson

NextSunday Resources
6316 Peake Road
Macon, Georgia 31210-3960
1-800-747-3016
©2009 by NextSunday Resources
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of
American National Standard for Information Sciences—
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.
ANSI Z39.48–1984. (alk. paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP Information on file.

Table of Contents

Growing Generous Followers

Study Introduction 1

Lesson 1 The Fuel-efficient Church
1 Corinthians 12:7-26
Study 2
Commentary 8

Lesson 2 The True Meaning of Life
Ecclesiastes 5:18-20; Hebrews 13:1-6
Study 14
Commentary 19

Lesson 3 What's In It for Me?
2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Philippians 4:14-19
Study 25
Commentary 31

Lesson 4 Giving That Should Hurt
Luke 21:1-4
Study 38
Commentary 43

How to Use This Study

NextSunday Resources Adult Bible Studies are designed to help adults study Scripture seriously within the context of the larger Christian tradition and, through that process, find their faith renewed, challenged, and strengthened. We study the Scriptures because we believe they affect our current lives in important ways. Each study contains the following three components:

Study Guide

Each study guide lesson is arranged in five movements:

Reflecting recalls a contemporary story, anecdote, example, or illustration to help us anticipate the session's relevance in our lives.

Remembering provides a frame of reference for the Scriptures.

Studying is centered on giving the biblical material in-depth attention while often surrounding it with helpful insights from theology, ethics, church history, and other areas.

Understanding helps us find relevant connections between our lives and the biblical message.

What About Me? provides brief statements that help unite life issues with the meaning of the biblical text.

Commentary

Each study guide lesson is accompanied by an additional, in-depth commentary on the biblical material. Written by a different author than the study guide, each commentary gives the opportunity for learners to approach the Scripture text from a separate but complementary viewpoint.

Teaching Guide

In addition to the provided study guide and commentary, *NextSunday Resources* also provides a *free* downloadable teaching guide, available at NextSunday.com. Each teaching guide gives the teacher tools for focusing on the content of each study guide lesson through additional commentary and Bible background information. Through teacher helps and teaching options, each teaching guide also provides substance for variety and choice in the preparation of each lesson.

Study Introduction

Great news! Stewardship can be an exciting topic of consideration for Christians. Certainly, stewardship relates to money, and, yes, we need to tithe. However, stewardship branches out into multiple areas of life. Properly practiced, this act of service can lead to peace and purpose in living.

Each day, millions of people try diligently to control their lives. They plan, implement, scheme, invest, position themselves, and plunge forward in life. However, while planning is necessary, none of us can control all the aspects of our lives. This unit of study concentrates on the scope of stewardship. We will address the topic of money and sacrificial giving because it is an aspect of stewardship, but we will also consider how stewardship of our spiritual gifts contributes to God's kingdom and to personal contentment.

Stewardship is a beautiful requirement for the Christian that can make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us. God desires a stewardship life for us. When we are ready to accept the call, God will provide the strength to serve.

Lesson 1 Study

The Fuel-efficient Church

1 Corinthians 12:7-26

Central Question

How are stewardship and spiritual gifts interrelated?

Scripture

1 Corinthians 12:7-26 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. 12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the

body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Reflecting

For many people, *stewardship* is one of those "church words" that makes us cringe. Others have only partly defined stewardship as a money issue. Say the word stewardship, and money comes to mind; guilt usually isn't far behind. There are others for whom *stewardship* has lost meaning altogether; it is a religious ritual long past its prime. Frederick Buechner wrote, "After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody's much interested anymore" (38).

Stewardship, however, is a multifaceted Christian practice. Best defined, it is holistic in nature and encompasses how we practice the fullness of our faith. Although stewardship is much more than monetary giving, it includes money because we cannot separate money from life. Perhaps more significantly, stewardship incorporates the spiritual gifts of Christians. How a Christian treats his or her unique gift(s) is stewardship. So cheer up! This session is about stewardship, not money.

Remembering

Corinth was an important city in the Roman Empire. It was strategically located for travel and trade, attracting people by sea and land. Due to its prime location and value as a commercial center, it became a diverse and cosmopolitan city. Corinth boasted several large-scale Greek temples and shrines as well as numerous pagan religions. There was a large Jewish contingent in Corinth, as well as the obligatory emperor worship required by Rome. In the midst of this diverse cultural and religious landscape, the new Christian church formed. Although the church at Corinth eventually became one of the most successful churches of the first and second centuries,

early on it struggled with many serious problems. In *Messy Spirituality*, Mike Yaconelli lists the problems at the Corinth church: "incestuous affairs, vicious lawsuits, divorce and separation, idol worship, over-inflated egos, doctrinal infighting, jealousy, sexual promiscuity, and getting drunk during communion" (90).

First Corinthians is Paul's response to questions sent to him by church leaders. Chapter 12 addresses several issues relating to spiritual gifts and their proper use. It seems that the church in Corinth mirrored the "melting pot" of the city's people. The church included converts from raw paganism, various Greek religions, and Judaism. As would be expected, converts brought past knowledge and practices to their new faith. This tendency often caused confusion within the new church. Many problems centered on spiritual gifts, especially those dealing with speech. *Glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues, was a central issue of many intrachurch questions. Paul's answers indicate that within the church there were improper motives, misplaced priorities on certain gifts, and problems of pride. First Corinthians paints the picture of a people who wore certain gifts as badges of achievement or elevated spiritual status. Paul attempted to show the importance of all spiritual gifts, the necessity of exercising all gifts, and the spirituality of gifted service. This is the point where gifts and stewardship meet. Being a proper steward of one's spiritual gift(s) is as important as being a proper steward of money.

Studying

Ignorance of Gifts (12:1-3) It is understandable that new believers in a young congregation would be functionally ignorant about particular spiritual gifts. Paul's letter alerted them to the dangers of false teaching and evil that could accompany verbal gifts. The practice of speaking in tongues was common in Corinth and within pagan groups. Paul warned that unchecked attitudes concerning verbal gifts were considered a form of heresy. These gifts were seen as "higher level," an important manifestation of God's pleasure. According to Paul, the source of all *genuine* gifts is the Holy Spirit. Paul reminded the Corinthians that gifts are not to make one person look good; they are from God and for the community. Stewardship of God's gifts is central to what Paul wanted this community to see: how they would use their gifts for God and one another had everything to do with who they would become. In Paul's view and teaching, the Holy Spirit is a unifying force, linking gifts to believers and gifted believers to each other.

Unity in Diversity of Gifts (12:4-11) In these verses, Paul continues speaking about the source of all genuine gifts—the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that bad teaching and certain traditional practices were a constant danger to the new church. Paul emphasized the centrality of the Holy Spirit to each believer's varying gifts. This statement gave new Christians a unique point of unity within their inherent differences. While they were obviously linked by their belief in Jesus as Messiah, they were also linked at a deeper level by each individual gift from the Spirit. One person's unique gift is linked to another's unique gift because they come from the same source. All are for the good of the community. Through their spiritual gifts, the believers are joined in a new purpose.

Paul cites several specific gifts provided by the Holy Spirit, though the list is certainly not exhaustive. It does, however, include some of the more flamboyant gifts. Most likely, these were the types of gifts causing problems. Corinth wasn't the last or only church in which certain gifts were worn as badges of spiritual superiority. This negative practice defeats the sole purpose of spiritual gifts and undermines their validity. God means for each believer to discover, develop, and exercise his or her gift(s) in concert with other believers. With each believer playing an integral part, the kingdom of God progresses in unison. An undiscovered or underdeveloped gift slows the overall progress, and ministries go unperformed. When people exercise and apply their gifts, they are being good stewards. In other words, if we are stewards of our gifts, we are doing our part to participate in the kingdom of God.

Although the idea of discovering our spiritual gifts seems rather mysterious, there are many certainties. We know that all are gifted and that the Holy Spirit is the source of all gifts. Our gifts unify us as the body of Christ, and it takes all gifts for the church to work effectively. There is great diversity in spiritual gifts, but the gifts combine to do the work of God. We must be aware of an additional certainty: If each believer does not exercise his or her gift, the church and kingdom will surely suffer.

Simple and to the Point (12:12-20) Emphasizing his main point, Paul uses a familiar example to make sure new Christians understand. Using the analogy of one body with several parts, he cites the absurdity of a human body effectively functioning without the cooperation and concert of all its parts. He cites the ridiculous prospect of one body part's self-appointed importance over the other parts. Simply put, there is one Lord who functions as the head of the kingdom. In turn, God calls each believer

to function as a vital part of the kingdom (v. 20). When a believer, as part of the overall body, does not function in the appointed role, the body and kingdom fail to function as well. The overall body fails to the same degree as the individual believer fails. This fact accentuates the critical need for all believers to be stewards of their gifts.

Understanding

Too often, stewardship is equated solely with money and materialism. However, stewardship includes time, focus, priority, service, money, resources, and our spiritual gifts. The church in Corinth consisted of new believers who were understandably immature in matters of faith. Paul's response to their questions was a primer on how to view, embrace, and exercise their unique gifts. Our churches today should be well above the entry level of the Corinth church. However, recalling basic matters of faith is a good exercise for even mature believers. We know that the Holy Spirit uniquely gifts us. We would do well to remember how important it is to use our gifts in service to God. Many organizations want our time, our commitment, and especially our money. We should remember, however, that employing our gifts in concert with our fellow believers' gifts helps our church function according to God's plan. Finally, we should remember that how we treat our gifts determines our belief and practice of stewardship.

The good news from the Corinthian church is that they went on to become one of the most successful first- and second-century churches. Obviously they learned from the teachings of Paul. How will history view us?

What About Me?

• ***Stewardship is multifaceted and includes much more than monetary giving.*** It is far too easy to fall for the idea that stewardship is all about money. Stewardship actually touches on most life issues. It certainly includes money and tithing, but it also encompasses attitude, family, vocation, time, service, practices, and spiritual gifts. What we do with our gifts defines our level of stewardship every bit as much as tithing does.

• ***Discovering one's spiritual gift is the first step to finding God's unique purpose for living.*** God bestows unique abilities upon all of us. God also

calls us to use our abilities to progress God's kingdom. In other words, our gifts are both blessing and responsibility.

• *The future of the church is very much at stake.* It's not hard to see that many churches are declining. Why? Most likely there are multiple factors, but one factor is tied to the stewardship of spiritual gifts. However, if Christians acknowledge and exercise their gifts, the church today can equip itself well for the future.

• *All gifts matter and are needed.* As in Corinth where the "important" gifts were getting the attention, it is easy to assume that only sizable gifts matter when it comes to stewardship. However, studies show that churches who have cultivated strong giving are the beneficiaries of large, medium and small gifts. All gifts matter. All gifts are important. The most important question is not the size of our gift but rather our willingness to offer it to God and God's work.

Resources

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973).

Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

John Laughlin, "Corinth," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990).

The Fuel-efficient Church

1 Corinthians 12:7-26

Introduction

Paul's correspondence to Corinth clearly was addressed to a congregation in the early stages of maturity. Acts 18:2 identifies Aquila and Prisca (also known as "Priscilla") as instrumental in the development of the early Christian community in Corinth, probably around AD 50. The town was a cosmopolitan melting pot, and the community was lax in moral standards (as early as 400 BC, the poet Aristophanes had contributed a common saying for describing a "loose-living life": "to live like a Corinthian").

The young Corinthian church had its share of problems: factions and divisions (chs. 1–3), immorality among church members (ch. 5), lawsuits between believers (ch. 6), confusion about marital status while waiting for Christ to return (ch. 7), what to do about food sacrificed to idols (ch. 8), the rights of an apostle (ch. 9), false worship (ch. 10), what to wear in church (ch. 11a), and selfish behavior with the Lord's Supper (ch. 11b). No wonder this is not Paul's first letter to the church (5:9)!

Having "cleared his mind" of the initial questions the Corinthian church had probably asked him—by letter or by word—Paul turned to broaden the Corinthians' thinking about *themselves* and to answer another question about spiritual capacities and their value. Paul wanted them to know that they were not just a gathering of human beings trying to learn how to get along with each other, but a creation of God (1:4-9). He wanted them to grasp that the presence of God actually chose to dwell in them (Jn 14:15-17). Paul was probably talking to a group of spiritual late-adolescents trying to determine who was most important in the gathering—and who had the greatest contribution to make.

The church at Corinth was attempting to weigh the value of different spiritual gifts in the congregation. Churches often ascribe certain power (value) to particular individuals on the basis of their perceived contribution

(interesting word) to that congregation: leadership, money, personality, etc. Some members in Corinth regarded certain "gifts" or signs as being more important than others—or spiritually superior. Paul addressed this problem of "spiritual superiority" with an analogy—perhaps the best analogy in his entire correspondence with the churches. Here is the sequence of his thought.

Paul responded to their question by affirming two critical truths: (1) All spiritual gifts (Greek, *charismata*) in the church have one source, the Holy Spirit; (2) the manifestation of spiritual gifts is for the good of all—not for private edification (v. 7). These affirmations challenge two erroneous presuppositions that members of the church were espousing: (1) Members possessing certain gifts (capacities) were being valued above others in the congregation, as if they were more important or possessed a greater spiritual maturity for "housing" such gifts. (2) Some church members were identifying certain behaviors (for example, speaking in tongues) as strong evidence of "spiritual" vitality, whether or not these manifestations benefited anyone else.

Paul, wanting to expand his readers' understanding of spiritual gifts, emphasized a variety of talents and gifts that were (and are) evidence of God's presence in a member's life: wise utterance, knowledge, passionate belief, capacity to heal, working of miracles, gifts of proclamation, discernment, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (vv. 8-10). He also pointed out that God's spirit works individually in the life of each member to bestow these manifestations (v. 11).

Apparently concerned that some church members were elevating themselves because of a particular gift, Paul created the wonderful analogy of church members as *parts* of a human body, all parts of a greater whole—the body as a *complete entity* (vv. 12-14). God's spirit is the common thread that unites all parts into one—the body of Christ. Driving home his point with ironic clarity, Paul uses humor in verses 15-17 to illustrate the ridiculous: "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

God has bestowed different functions (gifts) upon different members of the body—just as God's spirit has bestowed different capacities upon different members of the congregation. Paul hoped his readers would

understand that there are no "bragging rights" about spiritual gifts (v. 18). The significance of the message should not be lost upon anyone who might take credit for possessing a "superior" gift: All gifts are bestowed by God, and no one gets any credit for being "at the head of the class" spiritually.

But there is more: Paul wanted his readers to note that no one is to devalue one member's contribution (gift) over another (vv. 19-22). Every member needs the other, as we participate in the greater "whole." There are no inferior member-parts to the body. Corinthian church members (and present-day church members) were reminded not only to resist feeling spiritually superior, but also to respect and value the contribution of each member—as each gift was a manifestation of God's spirit in that member (vv. 23-24).

Paul's concluding climactic message is that members of a united body do not work against each other (for that is really working against oneself!), but realize that when one part of them suffers *or* celebrates—the entire body is affected. As I reread his comments, I am reminded that when I have a headache, all of me is affected. When I am moved to tears of joy in worship, it is not my eyes alone that celebrate: the entire person participates (I've never said: "My liver [or my arm] is very happy today").

What can we learn from this dialogue?

- Spiritual gifts are bestowed by God and should be acknowledged with humility. Those who focus on themselves or take credit for the Spirit's work confess that they don't understand how God's presence works in people. Spiritual gifts become a source of pride or idolatry if the recipient interprets them as a sign of personal superiority.
- Every church member possesses God's Spirit and should be valued. Which church members are valued most by your congregation? Are there forgotten (or "less honorable") members in your church? If so, how can they be honored?
- We all need each other. The gifts of the Spirit in members of the congregation should be recognized and affirmed so that no one feels "outside" the body or "unessential." Are there marginal members who have found no function/use in your local body of believers?
- Spiritual gifts are not possessions to be "hoarded" but capacities to be shared. As a member of the body of Christ, whatever gifts I have received are to be shared with the congregation—not kept to myself. The strongest measure of a spiritual gift is NOT what it does for the individual, but what it offers other members of the body of believers. How does this gift edify my neighbor?

- Each of us has a wider purpose and contribution in God's will. The oft-quoted John Donne poem that "no man is an island complete unto himself" is more than ever a central truth about the body of Christ: We are part of a greater whole, we have an important contribution to make, and we are incomplete and "unnatural" if left to ourselves (an eye was never meant to stand by itself—nor was any other part of the "whole" body).
- The body of Christ has a special role in valuing and affirming "weaker" members. The more visible and more recognized members of any church body have the power and the capacity to identify and affirm the hidden gifts of less visible members. The next section (chapter) of Paul's letter calls believers to recognize a "more excellent way"—love as the highest expression of God's presence. The gift of love provides an atmosphere in which members of the body are valued and affirmed by the greatest action in the body—love (1 Cor 13:13).

Spiritual gifts are bestowed upon members of a Christian body to be received humbly, celebrated joyfully, shared with the whole body, and utilized for mutual edification.

Notes

Notes

The True Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20; Hebrews 13:1-6

Central Question

Is it possible to live a life of contentment and satisfaction with what we already possess?

Scripture

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. 19 Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. 20 For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

Hebrews 13:1-6 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

Reflecting

Remember the Jones family, who always had stuff everyone else wanted? There was a day when everyone was trying to "keep up with the Joneses"! They must have been quite wealthy. I wonder what happened to them. You don't hear much about them anymore. They probably had to move to find a place large enough for their great acquisitions. Pity. Now who's going to set the standard for the rest of us? Who will we try to keep up with? What if we aren't pushed to buy things and to have those "must-have" items? What if the pressure to have the most and best is removed and we no longer spend money left and right? Suddenly, this isn't sounding so bad. In fact, it's sounding very nice. I wish the Joneses well, wherever they are, but I for one am glad they moved.

Remembering

The book of Ecclesiastes details the real struggles of life. The writer begins the book pessimistically, resigned to life's harsh realities. Later, the Teacher (as he calls himself) becomes more positive, championing the need to find satisfaction in life as it is. His teaching offers the primary lesson that life's most important focus must always be God, not the good or bad events of our lives. Frequently in the history of ancient Israel, their focus, indeed their obsession, was the struggle of day-to-day existence. Justifiably, the Israelites were not content in Egypt, but shortly after their release from captivity, the freed slaves bemoaned life away from Egypt. It seems that an intense focus on the difficult circumstances of life handicapped their progress. Although his difficulties may have been different, the writer of Ecclesiastes ultimately realized the need to focus on God.

The New Testament book of Hebrews contains exhortations to Hebrew Christians who found it difficult to move fully away from Judaism. They found security in the laws and traditions of the Hebrew faith, neither of which provided the building blocks of New Testament faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, the faith Jesus taught was founded on love based in relationships. This faith-based relationship with a personal God replaced rigidity and rules. According to Jesus, change is initiated by love and honor for God, not by a stiff code of conduct. At the same time, Christianity affects all facets of life. How we live our lives, how we handle our responsibilities, and how we fulfill our charges is stewardship. Christian stewardship is the result of a transformed life. In the final chapter of Hebrews, the writer creates a simple

framework for steward-ship living. The high point of the argument is that there is a better way to live than the followers of God had practiced—the way of living life to the fullest is in relationship with one another.

Studying

Only God (Eccl 5:18-20) Ecclesiastes is pessimistic in tone and scope. The writer experienced life mostly on his own terms; even so, he came away dissatisfied and discontented. He vented his frustrations with a difficult life in a world of inconsistencies. Neither wealth, position, nor IQ could keep life simple.

While the majority of the book leans toward the negative, however, the final and focal verses point to a logical, positive, and low-stress approach to living. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes eventually found solace in God. He pushed through the unanswerable questions and found responses. In his writing, he tells us life is short and impossible to control or shape for our purposes. He tells us we should embrace life as a provision of God. In short, the message is to be a steward of what life offers us and to be content with life as we know it. In the eyes of the Teacher, this way of living is "wisdom," the highest and most noble way to be.

Righteous Living (Heb 13:1-6)

The writer of Hebrews offers a formula for righteous living. We are to exhibit love, embrace strangers and those suffering, honor marriage vows, ignore the power of money, and be content with what we have. This is a beautiful explanation of stewardship living based on love. While many of the exhortations are others-oriented, they actually point us toward God and God's intention for our lives. Remember the words of Jesus concerning those who will inherit eternal life: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:35-36). Furthermore, Jesus said, "Truly I will tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40).

Hebrews recognizes that this formula of stewardship offered by Jesus literally covers all the bases. The writer of Hebrews seems to argue that "we serve God by loving other believers as brothers, entertaining strangers, remembering those in prison or those ill-treated as if sharing their

experiences, upholding marriage and avoiding sexual immorality. God is also honored by those who keep free from the love of money and are content with what they have. The secret of such contentment is learning to trust God for what is needed" (Carson et al., 1352).

The results of adopting a lifestyle of stewardship include ministering to others in need, honoring marriage, and being content despite difficult circumstances. A blessed peace from God rewards those who live as stewards. Paul adopted this lifestyle, which allowed him to persevere and grow spiritually despite numerous setbacks. Paul "was dominated by real faith in the core of his being. He put aside everything that he had hoped to do and pursued God with all his strength and zeal. Instead of basing his level of enjoyment in life on circumstances or other people, Paul received great joy from God" (Ganz, 131).

Adoption of a God-centered lifestyle provides the possibility of contentment or peace in every circumstance. It is giving up control in a positive way and allowing God to be central to our living. When we are able to live in gracious thanksgiving for what we have and what we can share because of Christ, we are truly becoming servant stewards of Christ, who loves us and gave up everything for us.

Understanding

Discontent is a regular component of many lives. Countless people describe themselves as unhappy. You probably know individuals who try to find purpose or meaning through relationships, addictions, or money. Sadly, no one finds long-lasting ease by such means, which are short-lived and come with a high price.

The writers of Ecclesiastes and Hebrews provide responses for the human dilemma of discontent and chaos. Arguing that contentment cannot be found in more effort or more things, both books focus on God's intended path for living life. What Ecclesiastes calls "wisdom," Hebrews refers to as the "better way." Both writers point to the truth that the only path to peace, contentment, and purpose is the path away from envy, greed, and coveting. This way of living entails trusting God with life itself. To those without a faith perspective, living life in this way seems ridiculous. Generosity and a sense of shared responsibility are not pervasive today, if ever. Stewardship living involves selfless love—deciding that life is God's gift and should be lived to that end. It means knowing that God blesses us

with what we already have and with life itself. It is being God-directed rather than self-directed. To that end, stewards realize that what they have is not their own. Stewards are safe-keepers of God's world and know that their mission is to use what they have for the good of God's creation.

What About Me?

• ***The attitudes we hold about "stuff" affect our peace, contentment, and stewardship.*** Living without a sense of what it means to be a steward of God's world rather than a keeper of our own earned goods can lead to feelings of self-entitlement and discontent. The writer of Ecclesiastes eventually understood that life is God's to provide and ours to live and enjoy, always in that order. Life is a gift, even on the bad days. The writer of Hebrews bids us to seek contentment, refusing to allow selfish intent to destroy that possibility.

• ***How we live our lives defines our stewardship.*** Stewardship affects the whole of our lives, and the whole of our lives affects stewardship. This reciprocal relationship means that what we do affects who we are becoming.

• ***God wants the best for us.*** It is abundantly clear in Scripture that God will provide for us. There is no mystery about that, nor is there need for worry if we will heed the message and share what God has provided. Why not opt for contentment with the life God will provide if we stop trying to do the job ourselves? Our answer will define stewardship.

Resources

D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, G. J. Wenham, "Hebrews," *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Herbert O. Edwards, "Stewardship," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Richard L. Ganz, *The Secret of Self-Control* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 1998).

Marie Isaacs, "Hebrews," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995).

Edgar McKnight, "Hebrews," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990).

The True Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20; Hebrews 13:1-6

Introduction

One of my indelible memories is a story my father told me when I was a child. Midas, the king of Phrygia in Greek mythology, was so obsessed with riches that he obtained from Dionysus the power to transform everything he touched into gold. Midas went about touching everything he could lay his hands on. When he sat to eat, however, each item he brought to his mouth instantly was transformed into the hard, coveted metal, and he began to starve in a house cluttered with wealth. The final curse to his "golden touch" occurred when his precious daughter ran into his arms to receive an embrace—and became herself a golden statue. Repentant and deeply grieved over his ill-advised request, he sought freedom from his curse and was allowed by Dionysus to dip into the waters of the River Pactobus to lose his "gift."

The two Scriptures for today's session reflect an almost universal longing: the search for contentment and satisfaction. As children, most of us wish for many things, enamored by the magical notion that "things" will make us happy. Many of us never outgrow our longing to discover something that will "make us happy," and the authors of Ecclesiastes and Hebrews help us identify that struggle—and what we can learn from our search.

What brings us true contentment in life? What is the fountain of satisfaction? When will we be content? At what point are we satisfied—and what "delivers" true satisfaction? The book of Ecclesiastes offers the first attempt at the answer.

Ecclesiastes (identified as Qoheleth in Hebrew, probably referring to someone who addresses an assembly—a "preacher"—though the style of the writing is that of a teacher) was written during a period of deep dissatisfaction in the history of Israel's life.

Compiled after two long exiles and the destruction of a temple and a capital, this collection of Jewish philosophical reflections is an honest refrain by a disheartened writer or writers. Though often attributed to Solomon, the style of the writing and the terminology strongly suggest that it comes from more than one source and time (late Persian and Greek periods in Jewish history), before the Maccabean uprising (George L. Robinson, "Ecclesiastes," *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1929], 614). The writer declares that he is not the king, that the government is bad, and that the king is despotic and the judges corrupt (1:12; 3:16; 4:1-3). The early theme of the collection repeats the cyclical discovery of those who seek personal contentment: life and its joys are fleeting, and everything has its allotted time (O. S. Rankin, "Introduction to Ecclesiastes," *The Interpreter's Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956], 4).

The complex and sometimes disorganized structure of Ecclesiastes adds to its mystery. The author seems content to challenge traditional beliefs about life and God's activity in human existence (the present is as the past; nothing is new; only eternal sameness occurs). He is dramatic in effect, moving from sadness to frustration, agony to joy, and clarity to confusion. Qoheleth is willing to let the reader wrestle with the unfinished conclusions, and he almost invites an argument by the matter-of-fact manner in which he describes how life unfolds. Yet the tone is not completely negative; Ecclesiastes affirms that contentment in life lies in accepting one's "lot" and options. Let's examine the text.

I. A First Secret to Contentment: How We See Life, Eccl 5:18-20.

Qoheleth celebrates the value of enjoying the pleasures of life that daily labor affords: the satisfaction of eating and drinking, not only as a means of survival, but for the significant enjoyment these activities provide (v. 18). The Teacher suggests that "simple pleasures" can be lost in the pursuit of distant contentment, and that some of the most pleasing experiences in life are available in the course of the day's events. Anyone reading these words doubtless is challenged to consider the many varieties of tastes available to the human palate and the universal enjoyment in the exercise of eating and drinking. If we have experienced the want that comes from hunger, we can better appreciate the taste of food to the yearning body. In the same manner, the parched throat is more likely to celebrate the sheer ecstasy of drinking water—let alone the varied pleasure in so many "liquid tastes."

The author of Ecclesiastes also celebrates the satisfaction that work can offer the meaning-seeking person. Labor and employment bring contentment to the human soul and probably add to the satisfaction of a human being who eats and drinks from the labor of work.

This philosophical writer affirms that the enjoyment of whatever wealth we have is a source of satisfaction to be accepted and celebrated. The meaning in the text is not only that we enjoy the "things" we have, but that we be content with what we have received because it comes from God (v. 19). Even our work is to be accepted as a gift from God—and our "lot." Centuries later, Paul echoed these sentiments: "For I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (Phil 4:11b). The idea is not simply to be resigned to whatever work and wealth we have. Ecclesiastes affirms that we will actually find contentment in wanting only what we have—as opposed to wishing for what we do not have!

The writer also suggests that those who focus all energy and time on what they possess and can do will be both busy and content in life—short as it is. If we accept the work given to us and derive satisfaction from our daily labor, our hearts and hands will be full—and satisfied—as we are (v. 20). We will not need to wish for what we do not possess nor pine for what we do not need. The sources and secrets of our satisfaction *are* in our hands.

II. A Second Secret to Contentment: Serving Others, Heb 13:1-6.

Our second Scripture plumbs the Christian secret to true satisfaction in life: service to others. The author, though unknown, is conversant with the faith and tradition of the Jewish people and challenges Jewish Christians to understand the link between their Jewish faith and Christ's fulfillment of that religious tradition. After connecting several Old Testament events and promises to Jesus Christ, the author calls readers (it seems this letter was written for general circulation, not to a specific group or church) to a practical understanding of behaviors that bring fulfillment and joy (chs. 1–12).

The writer's first admonition is that love should produce reciprocity so that believers respond with love to love they have received. The key sequence of this truth originates in the nature of God, who loved us first, thus initiating the process by which love produces returned love. This dynamic creates the multiplication of love; those loved respond by loving

others, thus continuing the "change of transformation" that reverses selfish behavior. The writer indicates that in the very extending of hospitality to strangers, the divine initiative continues as love gives birth to love. To connect Jewish readers to a familiar and beloved Hebrew story, the writer recalls Abraham's reception of strangers as they traveled through his area (Gen 18). The visitors were actually "angels" who blessed Sarah and Abraham by confirming that they would bear a child of their own, by God's promise (vv. 1-2).

The author offers two recommendations in regard to "forgotten people": prisoners and victims of torture. The writer suggests that believers remember prisoners as if they were in prison with them—in order, no doubt, to remind Christians of how isolated and forgotten prisoners feel (v. 3). Secondly, the writer invites believers to extend love to people oppressed and physically abused with the same suggestion—that they imagine themselves tortured and harmed. Amnesty International reports that prisoners of political systems in various parts of the world say the most encouraging message they receive is "You are not forgotten."

Next, the writer calls his readers to affirm the vows of fidelity in marriage (v. 4) as a gift of reciprocity; faithfulness and love extended inspire the same gift in return. Then, repeating the message from Ecclesiastes, he intimates that the love of money and the constant focus on "getting what you don't have" are enemies of fulfillment (v. 5). Concluding his reassurance, the advisor of Hebrews quotes a psalm, reminding his Jewish audience that the God of Israel will supply their every need in the face of adversity or fear.

What can we learn here?

- The search for personal meaning and contentment in life is universal. So is the myth that what we possess is what brings us satisfaction and that the more we possess, the greater satisfaction we will have.
- Some experiences are out of our control. One of these may be how much wealth we possess; yet it is not what is "outside of us" that gives meaning to life.
- The deepest contentment and meaning in life have to do mostly with how we see and interpret what is available to us.
- Living beyond ourselves by focusing on the service of others brings greater meaning and satisfaction in our lives than anything we do for ourselves.

Notes

Notes

What's In It for Me?

2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Philippians 4:14-19

Central Question

What do Christians receive from being genuine stewards?

Scripture

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Philippians 4:14-19 In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. 15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and

receiving, except you alone. 16 For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 18 I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Reflecting

Have you ever known a wealthy person who hoarded money and never seemed to spend it? How about the direct opposite, someone who spends money before earning it and who often ends up in serious debt? It's not that it takes all kinds; it's that there *are* all kinds, especially when people and money are concerned. Money can have seductive powers that lead people to do unproductive things, like exert false power or build a life based on possessions. No human being is immune to the effects of money. Almost every book of the New Testament speaks in some way of the negative power of money. In fact, money and its use is one of the most popular topics found in Jesus' teaching.

Remembering

It's no secret that money has been a problem in the lives of many Christians and for many churches. What we do with money—the priority we give it—helps define our stewardship commitment. Is it any wonder that each October during stewardship focus there is gnashing of teeth over money talk? Michael Durall refers to annual pledge drives as "congregational root canal[s]" (6). People actually leave churches because of what they consider an excessive focus on money.

The good news, if we can call it that, is that this isn't a new problem. Problems of money, power, and position existed as far back as the early church. In today's Scripture texts, we read about the problems Paul faced as he taught young churches to share their blessings. Similar to church situations today, in the early years there were both wealthy and impoverished churches. Paul asked all churches to aid the poor and/or persecuted churches. He offered a marvelous example of the poor

Macedonian churches supporting the needy and heavily persecuted believers in Jerusalem. A contrasting example is the wealthy church in Corinth that promised and pledged support but did not follow through with the gifts. Rather than use guilt or condemnation to prod the Corinthian church, Paul took a positive approach. He told the church members about the benefits that result from genuine, selfless giving. In that same fashion, Paul also told the poor Macedonian churches that they would benefit from their selfless giving. From Paul's point of view, practicing stewardship benefits everyone involved—both the givers and the receivers.

Studying

2 Corinthians (9:6-15) Paul used what we might call "reverse psychology" on the readers in Corinth. Corinth was a cosmopolitan Greek shipping center that boasted a large but troubled church. While no first-century churches were wealthy by today's standards, Corinth was in much better shape than other new fellowships. Whether this level of comfort played a role in their backing out of an earlier commitment is debatable. However, there is no denying that something led to their neglect. Paul reminded them that he put his reputation on the line in boasting of their eagerness and generosity. He also wrote that he hoped his boasting wouldn't prove "empty" (v. 3). If it did, Paul reasoned that both he and the Corinthian church would be humiliated.

Paul called for the Corinthian church to honor their earlier commitment and provide a bountiful and voluntary gift for the struggling churches in Macedonia. Anything short of their voluntary giving would be a setback for all sides. Paul assured them that their blessing would be in direct accordance to their attitude and levels of giving. The promises are stark: "If you sow bountifully you will reap bountifully" (v. 6); "God is able to provide every blessing in abundance so that out of that abundance you can share with abundance" (v. 8); "you will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (v. 11).

Philippians 4:14-19 In relation to the Corinthian church, the Philippian church was at the other end of the spectrum. The Philippians were one of the poor Macedonian churches that had already given generously to persecuted believers in Jerusalem. Despite their poverty, they were willing to help meet the needs of other believers. In these verses, Paul compliments their generosity and tells them God will reward their stewardship. Scripture often records the promise of a future, heavenly reward for

genuine stewardship. However, Paul was not referring to eternal rewards in his compliments to the church in Philippi. He spoke of the present, and he promised God would meet their needs because of their complete faithfulness. There was no need to cajole the Philippian church or try to shame them with the threat of looking bad to other churches. They gave out of their distinct poverty with willing hearts; thus, Paul promised all their needs would be met.

Corinth and Philippi By contrasting Paul's statements and promises to both congregations, we can discern the benefits of genuine stewardship. Both the negative climate in Corinth and the positive one in Philippi provide an answer to the age-old question, "What do I get out of this?" Whether it's right or wrong to wonder what one receives from giving is a personal choice. Some feel uncomfortable even considering the possibility of a return from giving, while others expect a return. Regardless, the Bible does speak of blessings that flow from genuine stewardship, so we need to gain a better understanding of the benefits God promises.

Linda Belleville details four beneficiaries of stewardship giving in the Corinthian passages (2 Cor 9:8-14):

(1) the giver (vv. 8-11)
(2) the recipients (v. 12)
(3) God (vv. 11-12)
(4) the church (vv. 13-14) (237).

Understanding these beneficiaries provides a clearer understanding of the benefits of genuine stewardship.

Paul's language in Philippians and 2 Corinthians speaks of "blessings" that ensue from stewardship giving. Reading 2 Corinthians, it is easy to come away with the idea that God will provide tangible blessings in response to selfless giving. While tangible blessings may be possible, spiritual blessings are an absolute certainty: "The richness of God's mercy and provision is made known in Christ Jesus. In him, God's full wealth of revelation and redemption (Col 1:27–2:3) is contained, so that we are rich in him by faith, and thereby linked to the source and supply of all true wealth" (Martin, 185). The greater lesson of Paul's writings is that we should give cheerfully and willingly to meet the needs of ministry.

Understanding

According to Scripture, God expects Christians to provide for ministry, the church, and the kingdom of God. God calls us to tithe and practice stewardship of all our gifts—monetary *and* spiritual. Paul makes it clear that this basic commitment can fall by the wayside when life turns in positive directions. We need to remember that the early churches most likely to give generously were also the poorest.

Today, the average church goer still struggles to give a significant portion of their income to their congregation. In fact, according to recent research done by the Lake Institute that connects giving with frequency of attendance, those who attend church infrequently give $257 on average annually to their congregation, those who attend monthly give $74 and those who attend frequently give $2,459." While it is heartening to see that a deeper engagement in one's community of faith leads to a deeper practice of the discipline of generosity, it is discouraging to do the math and discover how small a percentage of current average incomes these figures represent. Certainly, while income and wealth are on the rise in our society, generosity and stewardship often lag.

Whether it is right or wrong to expect return from one's giving, Paul tells us that there are benefits to stewardship. Will these be tangible returns? The Bible does allow for the interpretation that God will provide for faithful givers so they may continue giving. The Bible also portrays a multitude of *spiritual* blessings that will follow genuine faith living.

So what's in it for me? Numerous blessings. Wouldn't it be worth letting go of the control of money by dedicating it to God? If your answer is yes, then the benefits of stewardship are already clear.

What About Me?

• *Where money is concerned, we all are selfish at times.* Money can have debilitating effects on all people, Christians included. We can allow money to gain more control than God intends. Clearly, money can become one of the "other gods" mentioned in the Ten Commandments. Too easily we can get in the habit of "earning more to have more" rather than realizing God's intention that we provide for one another.

• *If blessings do result from genuine giving, enjoy them!* Some people feel uncomfortable expecting God to bless them because they are committed to stewardship. If blessings are available, why not enjoy them? It would be wrong to expect a new car simply because of a tithe, but nothing is wrong with expecting God to enlarge our hearts through Spirit-led generosity.

• *God honors cheerful giving from a willing heart*. Paul states this truth many times in his writings. God will bless voluntary, love-based, cheerful giving. Giving from duty may help others, but giving as a loving response to God's grace opens the door for us to learn, to grow, and to find other opportunities to serve God as Christian stewards.

Resources

Linda Belleville, "2 Corinthians," *IVP Commentary* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

Michael Durall, "Why Stewardship Is a Constant Struggle," *Net Results*, November–December (Lubbock TX: 2001).

W. Hulitt Gloer, "Second Corinthians," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995).

Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

T Austin "Average Annual Religious Giving by Frequency of Worship Attendance" Indiana University: Lake Institute on Faith and Giving. Philanthropy Panel Study (2015/2018).

What's In It for Me?

2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Philippians 4:14-19

Introduction

I have enjoyed the story circulating lately about two brothers. They were poised over a piece of cake that they were to divide between them, each ready to "fight for his rights" and not get cheated into a smaller portion than that of his brother. Their mother intervened, trying to help: "Now boys, if Jesus were dividing a piece of cake with his brother, he would give the larger piece to his brother...." One boy looked at the other, and after a quick pause, shoved the cake toward his brother and said: "Here! You be Jesus!"

Generosity is not our primary reaction in life. We are often afraid of being cheated or losing out if we don't take care of "number 1" first. The two Scriptures for today describe a completely opposite feeling. The title of our session is important: "What's In It for Me?" There is more than one way to get what we really want. When we are anxious about our survival or afraid we won't get our share, we are focusing on our needs. If we don't take care of our needs, who will?

The capacity to be generous has a lot to do with trust, and generosity most often develops as a result of gratitude. Last week we focused on being content with what we have and doing things for other people in order to receive a gift. Today's conversation affirms that people are capable of achieving a higher—and more fulfilling—level in life by focusing on the needs of others rather than their own.

The capacity to be generous, present in each of us, requires a significant inner transformation. From birth we practice the art of taking care of ourselves. Adolescence schools us not only in the importance of self-definition, but also introduces us to self-preoccupation. According to several students of human behavior, many of us become so consumed with meeting our needs that we enter adulthood as emotional late-adolescents (Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1968], 88ff.).

The struggle to become an adult affords an opportunity to examine the assumptions we have accepted about life and how to live it. Choosing our set of beliefs is a journey toward maturity. That journey is not easy; a few of us take a long time getting there.

Several years ago, Christopher Lasch wrote a book describing a characteristic of our culture that he titled *The Narcissistic Self*. Lasch identified, as others have, a tendency from infancy to focus on satisfying our needs. The baby who cries wants food for hunger, a diaper change for comfort, a nap for fatigue. Children and adolescents focus on themselves and learn to meet their needs as quickly as possible. Many of our needs are appropriate and require gratification; as we mature, however, we learn that other people have needs as well and that sometimes we should postpone meeting our needs in order to meet someone else's. Developmental people call such struggles the "capacity to postpone immediate gratification"—learning to set aside impulse gratification in order to meet someone else's needs.

Some people never "graduate" from a primary focus on themselves. Such folks rarely learn to love because true love requires setting aside one's interests or needs to meet someone else's first. The central tragedy in the legend of Narcissus (for whom the term "narcissism" was coined, after the man who fell in love with his own image in the water) is that he did not actually love himself—he was infatuated with an image of himself and thus left the scene still yearning to fill an emptiness dissatisfied by self-adulation.

Our two Scriptures today have a lot to say about people understanding themselves enough to know how to meet their needs in life in a fulfilling, lasting way. Consider them with me.

I. The Corinthians, 2 Cor 9:6-15.

This is one of several letters Paul wrote to a congregation for which he cared deeply (2 Cor 2:1ff.). Some students of the Bible believe this is at least his third letter to Corinth, for he mentions several visits and letters in his correspondence, and the tone of 2 Corinthians 1–9 seems quite different from the sudden shift and emotion in chapters 10–13. We mentioned previously that in 1 Corinthians 5:9 Paul alludes to a former letter. Since we know that in ancient times letters were written in rolled-up vellum and placed together in parchment paper, it is likely that we are witnessing

an ongoing correspondence between an engaged apostle and a "high-maintenance" congregation. But the tone of the writer as he approaches this section of Scripture is both affirming and encouraging: Paul commends the saints in Corinth for their willingness to collect monies for the benefit of the congregation in Jerusalem, who apparently were beset by financial and personal needs (1 Cor 16:1-3).

In the process of celebrating the generosity of the Corinthians, Paul uses several comments to communicate a foundational truth about life and how we meet our needs: meeting the needs of others is the most effective way to have one's own needs met! Beginning with a popular saying ("the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly," and vice versa), Paul suggests that people who withhold don't receive as much as those who offer themselves (v. 6). He knew that giving (of oneself and of one's possessions) must be a voluntary act in order to be valuable either to the giver or the receiver (v. 7); coercion is the enemy of a free and generous expression of care. Paul curiously uses the Greek word *hilaron* (from which we derive the word "hilarious" in English) to describe the "cheerful" attitude of a giver (God loves a hilarious and happy-hearted giver!).

Paul also affirms that God is the first generous provider. Any giving we do is only in response to God's having given first! God's gift offers us an opportunity to experience the joy God has in giving—and to "get the hang" of the amazing abundance God makes available to us. This generous "First Giver" provides enough so that even the poor find enough to share with someone else (vv. 8-9). Thus, the human giver feels blessed in imitating God's generosity. Each generous effort multiplies the gift in the sharing with others. God in turn provides even more through generous, open hearts (v. 10). The generous, giving heart will be enriched in the giving so that life is blessed with fulfillment it could not receive by keeping what we had for our own use (v. 11).

Paul wanted to affirm that multiplied acts of generosity by Corinthian believers would evoke numerous prayers of thanksgiving to God from the recipients in Jerusalem. Thus, God would receive multiple affirmations because of what the Corinthians had done for others. These generous believers in the church at Corinth were indeed responsible for blessing God! We have heard of "vicious circles" of harm—Paul is describing "generous circles" of joy. God, out of the abundance of divine love, shared generously with the believers in Corinth, who in gratitude expressed that

same generous love to believers in Jerusalem, who in turn raised prayers of thanksgiving to God for creating such generosity, thus blessing God, who celebrated by affirming the generous hearts of the Corinthian people.

Everyone's need is met by meeting someone else's need—a secret in life that some people miss. The church in Acts 2 had begun to learn the truth about "what was in it" for them: thanksgiving that produced generosity, joy in giving that afforded fulfillment beyond measure, and multiplication of thanksgiving that blessed the original Giver. Such a cycle of care can exist only when people surrender their anxieties and fears—the anxiety of wondering if I will have enough for tomorrow (Mt 6:25-33) and the fear that I am on my own (Ps 23:4).

II. The Philippians, Phil 4:15-19.

Paul's letter to another congregation reaffirms the significant power of generosity and how believers in a congregation can sustain others and be fulfilled. He declares with thanksgiving that the Philippian church members were the first to recognize his personal needs and they responded generously before anyone else (vv. 15-16). He indicates again that such generous acts create a depository of love and grace, as in a bank account (Paul uses financial terminology in these verses, referring to the church's "profit ledger," their "account, " and his "receipt"—paid in full) (vv. 17-18a). He shifts his metaphor in the latter verse to connect the Philippians' gift with a Hebrew sacrificial offering in which the aroma of the sacrifice would be pleasing to the God to whom it was offered (restating his comment to the Corinthians that generous gifts from believers "multiply" thanksgiving by eliciting expressions of gratitude from recipients, which ascend to God).

Paul tries in both passages to link generous giving to an abundant God who provides for everyone and to emphasize that the generous care of another is the most fulfilling way to have one's needs met. Rather than focus on ourselves, which is a lonely and unfulfilling effort, Paul declares that in truth we are related to a God who relates us all to one another and who meets our needs as we work with God to meet the needs of others.

A rabbi friend with whom I worked in West Lafayette, Indiana, told me of an ancient Jewish parable about a man who dies before his time and arrives at the gates of heaven and hell, only to be told to return to earth to finish his "term." He asks a favor of the angel. Since he is at the gates of heaven and hell, could he be allowed to "peek in" for a moment, to see what

he can learn? He is granted his wish, and he goes over to the door of hell first, where he hears moans and groans before he even approaches the door. When he looks through the window, he sees people sitting at a banquet table lavishly furnished with all kinds of foods—but very unhappy. Then he notices that everyone at the table in hell has their elbows locked and tied so that no one can bring the food to his or her mouth. Hunger and misery are rampant. Seeking a happier view, the man runs to the door marked "heaven," only to discover people sitting at a table filled with food. To his surprise, he notices that again each of the diners has their arms locked and tied so that they cannot bend their elbows to feed themselves. But there are no groans, and everyone looks happy. Perplexed, the visitor asks the angel, "What is the difference between hell and heaven?" "Look carefully," replies the angel. When the man looks again, he notices that in heaven the people sitting at the table are picking up food and feeding the person across the table from them—while those across the table return the favor.

"What's in it for me?" is the question with which we started this session. The answer? The secret of abundant living is understanding that we are linked by God to one another so that we may care for each other and be cared for, sharing God's joy and satisfaction the way God designed life—and avoiding the anxieties and fears that result from self-preoccupation.

Notes

Notes

Giving That Should Hurt

Luke 21:1-4

Central Question

What effect do our possessions have on us?

Scripture

Luke 21:1-4 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Reflecting

Like some of you, I remember a time of party-line phones, television with three channels, our first air conditioner, and the groovy sounds of AM radio. It is amazing how far and how fast we have progressed as a nation since those days. Yet the sad news about our prosperous fortune is that we give proportionately less today than in leaner years of the past. Though we are much better off, we no longer give in levels that match our record prosperity. Is this a new trend or simply a cycle of human nature rife with selfishness? As our session highlights, selfishness often increases with the amount of money a person acquires. The effect of money and acquisitions has been present for ages, and it was certainly a malady in the first-century world of Jesus. In some ways, we really haven't come a long way!

Remembering

In the sections of Scripture preceding our focus for this session, Jesus condemned the religious leaders for their pompous pride and subsequent lifestyle. Seeking indulgences and special treatment had become pervasive among the Scribes and Pharisees. They wore ornate robes, expected special greetings, and arranged for themselves front-row seats for feasts and special synagogue events. More pointedly, Jesus condemned them for taking advantage of people through their roles as religious leaders. This hypocrisy was borne out as they took advantage of widows and the poor while engaging in long, flowing public prayers that cited their care of the less fortunate (11:42-44; 18:9-14). Seemingly ignoring their original call to holiness and service, these Scribes and Pharisees lived a life of ungodly travesty and selfish pursuit. They pretended to be holy by publicly appearing pious, believing they had achieved favoritism with God. In truth, God called them to offer grace and salvation to everyone. Their actions were in sharp contrast to God's intention for Israel and her leadership. From this dire contrast, Jesus cited the all-encompassing gift of the poor widow in comparison to the token gifts of the wealthy.

Studying

Jesus must have watched the comings and goings of the temple area known as the Court of the Women. Located in the outer area of the temple, this place contained boxes for the collection of temple taxes and offerings. On a busy day in the outer court, Jesus observed the traffic around the collection boxes. Suddenly, he called attention to the actions of an elderly, seemingly insignificant widow who dropped two small coins in the box for offerings. Why would Jesus notice an older widow who gave such a pittance to God's work? Surely there were a number of large contributors who provided a more substantial offering. Surely their gifts made more of a difference in the life and work of the temple. Besides, at this point in Israel's history, the people believed wealth was a sign of God's favor.

Wealth equaled privilege in all facets of Hebrew life, especially the temple. The elderly widow Jesus saw that day was obviously poor. In the eyes of her community, she would have been seen as holding little favor with God. In fact, she might as well have been invisible to the religious leaders and others of elite status. They considered her a victim of her own choices and lack of discipline. Even Jesus' own disciples struggled with this

view of the world when they asked Jesus about a man born blind (Jn 9): "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" Their question informs us that their way of understanding God's favor does not align with Jesus' way of relating to God.

Jesus noticed both the woman's presence and her gift, and he used her actions for a lesson in faith giving and living. In an amazing statement, he cited her gift of two small coins as being more than contributions of much greater quantity. How is that possible? Did first-century Hebrews do basic math differently than we do today? Or was Jesus supplying a lesson in proportionate giving? According to Darrell L. Bock, math is math, especially when two small coins are involved: "These coins, lepta, were the smallest coins possible. They were worth about 1/100 of a denarius, or five minutes labor at minimum wage. Hers is a minimal gift, at least on the surface" (331).

The woman's minimal gift of coins provides a powerful lesson in sacrificial giving. Jesus singled her out for giving all she had while others simply contributed from their abundance. This suggests that the amount of the gift is actually inconsequential to God. The true barometer of giving is what's left after the gift is given. The true gift of giving is not what the recipient gets but what the giver gets. The woman's coins would have bought others very little. Yet her coins represented an immense gift in her own life. Her gift changed her life because it represented an immense proportion of what she had.

The widow gave all she possessed to God as an offering. All of it! How would she eat? How would she pay taxes? How would she survive? It seems she didn't worry about those issues as she made the sacrificial offering. She made it and walked away in peace and faith. The widow offered the greatest gift that day at the temple. She sacrificially gave all she had while others gave a portion out of plenty, which made no real difference in their own lives. The true gift of giving is not for the recipient, but for the giver.

Understanding

It's hard to imagine a modern believer matching the all-encompassing gift of the widow. It's also hard to imagine a modern church in which *all* members tithe ten percent. Our early twenty-first-century church finds itself struggling with ministry budgets and with leading Christians to practice genuine stewardship. In the most affluent period in the history of the world, giving is proportionately lower than at any time in the past. Why? There

seems to be a direct correlation between affluence and the influence of money in life. The truth is, our possessions now seem to possess us. Being possessed by material pleasures wears away our willingness to appreciate and embrace God's place in our lives. With so many possessions, God becomes only one more. For both the religious leadership in Jesus' day and for us now, piety seems more about us than about God.

In his interpretation of the widow's gift, Jesus provided a simple key to understanding our relationship to God and each other. God sees both what is given and what is left over. The lesson here is not necessarily about how much we *give*, but how much we *keep*. What differences might we experience in our lives if we practiced sacrificial giving?

God led the poor widow to give sacrificially...and she did. God can and will lead today's believers to give sacrificially too. Could that mean God might call us to give more than ten percent? Maybe, especially if God sees we need that gift in our lives, if God determines our possessions have possessed us. Remember the rich young ruler who was possessed by his possessions? In all the Gospels, he is the only person to walk away from Jesus' gift of grace. His life was too full to accept that gift (Mt 19:16-22).

A friend told me his personal story of God urging him to rid his life of several luxuries that had begun to blur his stewardship focus. Due to the slowing economy and an income based on sales, his money became tight. Tithing was an early casualty of the downturn. He reports that one sleepless night God impressed upon him the necessity to reorder his life. He listened and heeded the words of God and began to see luxuries for what they are, the polar opposites of necessities. God refocused his life and changed his perspective.

What About Me?

• *Tithing is our commitment to God*. Rather than haggling over questions of whether to tithe from the gross or net income, we should be focusing on how we honor God.

• *Like the widow, we are to give sacrificially*. The widow had sufficient faith to give God all she had. Put yourself in her place and ask if you would/could do the same. The widow couldn't help knowing the difference between necessities and luxuries.

• *The true gift of giving is as much for the giver as for the recipient. Too easily, we look at the potential beneficiary and rationalize, "They don't need my money...my time...my resources." Yet, already, we have missed one of the real truths of giving. Generosity changes the world and us too.*

• *The true gift of giving is for the giver, not the recipient*. Too easily, we look at the church and rationalize, "They don't need my money...my time...my resources." Yet, already, *we* have missed the real truth of stewardship; we need to give more than *they* need to receive.

• *Generosity is a spiritual discipline.* Just as activities like scripture reading, prayer, worship and journaling are healthy practices that help grow our faith and relationship with God, being a person of generosity is also an equally critical discipline to keep.

Resources

Darrell L. Bock, "Luke," *IVP Commentary* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

GIVING THAT SHOULD HURT

Luke 21:1-4

Introduction

Growing up in South Brazil where my parents served as educational missionaries in Porto Alegre, I traveled regularly across the river from where we lived to a church my father served as an unpaid pastor because the congregation could not afford a salary. We traveled by bus and ferry to the church and stayed with church members for lunch, since the long return home was after the evening service. The church families were mostly poor people, and horses and bicycles were the only transportation. One family of eight invited us to their home for lunch once a year, and it was a while before I understood that they spent most of the time in between saving money to have us again!

The first time I went to eat at their house I was eight years old, and I didn't understand why my friends did not sit down to eat with us when we went to the table. When I insisted that one of the boys come sit next to me as we ate, my dad quietly told me to "drop it"; the father answered that the boy would eat later because he was "helping." I was on my way home before being told that the only table in the house (in the kitchen) had room for six people, and we four were the guests of honor. I also learned then that their children waited to eat until we finished to make sure we had been properly fed. My father also told me that to refuse to eat first would offend the family, who were offering the meal as a gift. What amazed me most was looking back on the scene, remembering the genuine look of joy on the faces of those kids as they watched us eat—as if we were doing them a favor! The stunning reality in their brilliant smiles was that they believed they were being honored.

Should giving ever hurt? Our session today places the spotlight on an unknown woman who quietly offered her "two cents" at one of the Jerusalem temple collection sites. The custom for offerings in the temple area in Jerusalem was for priests to be stationed at one of thirteen "offering horns" in different courts. As the giver approached the offering receptacle,

he or she declared the amount of the contribution and its specific intent (S. McLean Gilmour, *Luke*, The Interpreter's Bible [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952], 359). In our Scripture for today, Jesus Christ is standing opposite one of these offering centers. The presence of the woman suggests that they were in a designated space on the temple grounds that permitted women worshipers. The amount of the offering was not private, since anyone passing by probably could hear the giver (or the priest) state the amount contributed as it was dropped into the receptacle. What caught Jesus' eye, however, was that the giver was obviously a very poor woman, a widow with limited resources, offering what was for her a substantial amount of money. Let's look at the passage.

Jesus has just had a series of heated debates with the scribes and Sadducees, who were less concerned with learning from him than trapping him in an argument (ch. 20). Jesus concluded the conversation by warning his disciples about the scribes, suggesting that they often sought prominence and recognition in public places, making a show of their religious practices (20:47). He then turned to observe several people of means bringing their offerings to the holy place. In sheer contrast to professional religious show-offs and people who "parade" their faith, the Messiah was struck by the humble and unassuming gesture of a woman who placed two copper coins (*lepta*, worth about one-half cent in our money) in the plate. Jesus chose to look at her gift in a qualitatively different way than most of us would; he was not concerned with *how much she gave* but with *what she had left after giving*.

Christ was in the final days of his work, announcing and introducing the reign of God on earth. As he looked in a sacred place for the people identified as the "most religious" or "most important" in the assembly, he elected a totally forgotten person as perhaps *the one* who had caught a glimpse of what living by faith really means. She, not the religious leaders or the rich folks, modeled kingdom membership.

There are some truths that we must recognize in this brief passage.

- *Sacrificial giving is a declaration of the depth of commitment and love a person possesses*. The widow gave even though it "hurt"; she risked herself because she cared—and found it important to do so.
- *Giving expresses a level of faith unequaled by word or intent*. Years ago I heard the story of one of the high-wire performers who decided to cross Niagara Falls. Several reporters gathered at the site of the demonstration

as the man made his intent public. The winds were strong that day, and to maintain balance and stability on the wire the performer chose to push a wheelbarrow full of bricks across the divide on the wire. Photograph flashes and excitement greeted him on the other side, where a crowd had gathered to witness the event. One journalist, however, declared the feat not only unimpressive, but quite safe in the manner it was performed by the entertainer. Frustrated at hearing his action dismissed so easily, the high-wire expert turned and asked the newspaper man, "Are you certain this walk is not unusual, nor unsafe?" The man replied, "Neither." "And do you believe, then, that I could go back across without any difficulty?" "Yes," was the journalist's reply, "I'm sure of it. I saw you do it." "Then," said the acrobat, "I'd like to take the bricks out of the wheelbarrow and ask you to get in the wheelbarrow as weight—and we'll go back across now together."

It's easy to talk about faith. It's even relatively easy to say I trust in God. But really to believe in the kind of world where God provides enough for us so that we can risk tomorrow is a daring kind of generosity.

Our session invites us to enter a completely different level of understanding about life, faith, and our possessions. I'm not sure I'm ready to trust God foolishly about tomorrow—nor do I believe God wants me to do that. But I do believe things are only instruments in our hands with which to bless ourselves and others. I believe God would share with us the secret that our greatest fulfillment comes in generous acts for others, which multiply the number of blessings we receive in return. I further believe that giving to the point of sacrifice offers a dimension and depth to love and generosity that is in the nature and image of God.

The widow in this passage grasped the nature of God's love for us. Somewhere along the way she understood the sacrificial gift God offered us by choosing to take our shape in a Bethlehem stable and walk beside us with a generous grace that carried us through all the dark places to a hill where he died for us, so that we might live unbound. This orphaned woman also understood that she still belonged to a family, even though her husband was dead, and that she had a responsibility and a relationship to others in which she could sacrificially offer her part.

"Sacrifice" is no longer a popular word. Our fear of being abused or used makes us cautious of opening up, and we withdraw and withhold ourselves. Unfortunately, such holding back cheats us of the richness that others can contribute. Such hoarding of ourselves and our possessions is an act of fear,

not of love. The One who showed us love declared with his sacrificial life that "giving when it hurts" is a higher dimension of loving.

I heard a story of an eighth-grader's birthday. Her mother and aunt were busy cleaning the house and baking a cake. The birthday girl quietly walked into the kitchen and said to her mother, "Mom, if you don't mind, keep your gloves on today when my friends come in for the party. When they see those scars on your hand and that crooked finger, they stare and ask questions, and I'd rather not have to answer or explain." "Okay," said the mom with a smile, as she pulled the cake out of the oven. The aunt, overhearing the conversation, followed her niece back into the other room. "Did your mother ever explain to you about her hands?" she asked. "Not really," said the girl. "She told me that there was a fire when I was just a little girl and that I was too young to remember it." The aunt replied, "Sit down a moment. There was a fire," she said, "when you lived in another house, not far from here. You were just a baby, asleep upstairs, where the fire must have started. Your mother ran out with everyone when smoke and flames and screams alerted everyone there was a fire. Then she turned back, because you were asleep in your room, and no one had brought you out. She ran up the stairs and into the room, pulled away the bedspread that was on fire, shoved away the curtains, took you in her arms, and started down the stairs. A beam or two from the ceiling fell down in front of you, and she shoved and pushed some burning frames away on her way down, holding you tight as fire singed her clothes—and yours. She made it down and out of the house, pulling burning blankets from you in time. She handed you to a fireman and fainted." As the aunt finished her story, the doorbell rang. The girl's friends arrived. At last the assembled birthday party guests were ready to sit and eat. "Before we begin," the young teenager said, "I'd like to welcome you to the house, and I want to make sure you've met my mother! Oh, and by the way, in case you've never seen my mother's hands, I'd like for her to take her gloves off so you can—there—aren't they beautiful? They saved my life!"

There are many ways to share. There are many ways to love. Christ tells to notice the hands—and hearts—of those who give. He says, "Notice those who give when it hurts. They understand love. They understand what my life is all about. They understand what we are here to do and be for each other."

Notes

Notes

COOPERATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP

Invited to serve.

Equipped to lead.

Transformed in community.

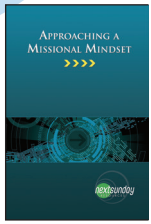
cbf Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

www.cbf.net

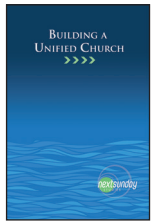
nextsunday STUDIES

NextSunday Studies provide adult Bible studies on a wide range of topics, all of which are useful for individual or group study. A printed Study Guide offers four, five, or six lessons with in-depth commentary and Bible background material. A free, downloadable Teaching Guide features a wealth of options, questions, and ideas for teaching each lesson.

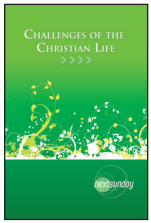
A Savior to Serve



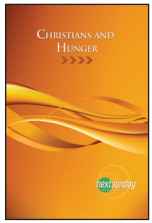
Approaching a Missional Mindset



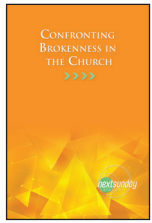
Building a Unified Church



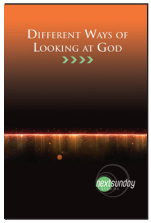
Challenges of a Christian Life



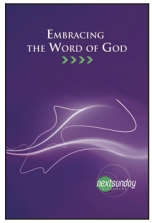
Christians and Hunger



Confronting Brokenness in the Church



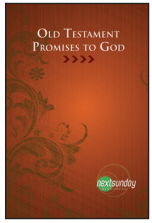
Different Ways of Looking at God



Embracing the Word of God

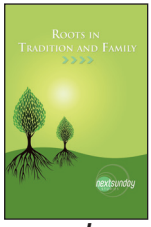
Facing Life's Challenges

Is God Calling?

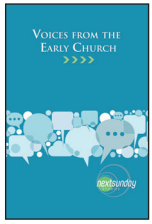


Old Testament Promises to God

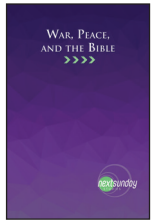
Prepare the Way



Roots in Tradition and Family



Voices from the Early Church



War, Peace, and the Bible

... and many more!

To order call **800-747-3016**

or visit **www.nextsunday.com/nss**

NextSunday Resources