

MONDAY

There Is Always a Way

One poor widow came up and put in two small coins. . . . Jesus . . . said, “. . . All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.”

— **Mark 12:42-44, The Message**

For hundreds of generations, the practice of tithing has sustained growth in personal generosity. To tithe means to give a tenth, and involves returning to God ten percent of income. It’s simple, concise, and consistent. Write down your income for the month, move the decimal point over one place, and write a check to the church for the amount you see. Do it first thing when you are paid, and you discover that the practice dials down appetites, reshapes priorities, and that all other expenses, needs, and savings will readjust. What could be easier?

A friend told me that the first time he wrote a tithe check, it felt like he’d swallowed an avocado pit! For most people, tithing is not easy. It takes time to learn and adapt and grow into the practice.

Some people perceive the tithe to be nothing more than a left-over from an Old Testament law-based theology. They think it is an arbitrary rule with little relevance today.

And yet Jesus commended the practice, even among the Pharisees whom he criticized for making a show of their self-righteousness. The early church practiced the tithe, and so have Christians in every generation since. John Wesley tithed and expected early Methodists to give regularly and generously at every class meeting and chapel service. Their gifts were meticulously recorded so that people could hold themselves accountable to the practice of giving.

The people whom we admire and respect for their generous spirits, spiritual wisdom, and deep-heartedness invariably have practiced giving in such an extravagant manner that it has reshaped them. God has used their long-term patterns of giving to form in them the spiritual qualities that cause them to be our mentors. They give extravagantly according to their means, and many beyond their means, and most practice or exceed the tithe.

Name one person you admire and respect because of all they *keep* for themselves. Name someone you consider generous and spiritually mature who constantly complains about giving, or who always seeks to give the least amount required. Largeness of spirit leads to an eagerness to give our utmost and highest.

Despite the outward challenges and inner struggles, and the countercultural nature of generosity, where there is a desire to give, there is a way. The two coins dropped in the treasury from the hands of the poor widow, noticed by Jesus and recorded for all time as a model of Extravagant Generosity, forever reminds us that there is always a way. Giving helps us become what God wants us to be.

- What kind of person do you want to become over the next ten years? What kind of person do you believe God desires you to become?
- How are your current practices of living taking you there? How is your generosity helping you become who God wants you to be?

TUESDAY

Teaching the Tithe

“Make an offering of ten percent, a tithe, of all the produce which grows in your fields year after year. Bring this into the Presence of GOD, your God, at the place he designates for worship.”

— **Deuteronomy 14:22, The Message**

Tithing helps the followers of Jesus understand that all things belong to God and that, during their days on earth, followers are entrusted as stewards to use all they have and all they are in ways that glorify God. What Christians *earn* belongs to God, and they should earn it honestly and in ways that serve purposes consistent with being followers of Christ. What Christians *spend* belongs to God, and they should use it wisely, not foolishly, on things that enhance life and do not diminish it. What they *save* belongs to God, and they should invest in ways that strengthen society. What Christians *give* belongs to God, and they need to give generously, extravagantly, and conscientiously in ways that strengthen the body of Christ and serve the mission of Christ.

One hundred and fifty years ago, if your great-grandparents were active in the faith, they tithed. Why were they able to tithe one hundred and fifty years ago, but yet we have trouble doing it today? Because they were so much wealthier than we are? The truth is precisely the opposite! We struggle with tithing because our hearts and minds are more powerfully shaped by our affluence. We find it harder to give extravagantly because our society’s values shape our perceptions more than our faith’s values do.

Those who are new to the faith may find the practice of tithing extremely challenging. Take it one step at a time and grow into it over a few years. If you are so overwhelmed with debt that you struggle under an oppressive anxiety, first make the changes in spending and lifestyle that grant you freedom from excessive debt. When you can breathe again, begin to give proportionally, and grow in the grace of giving toward the tithe.

On the other hand, those who have been active in the faith for twenty, thirty, or forty years and have attended worship faithfully and studied Scripture in classes and felt sustained by the fellowship of the church and offered themselves in service to others in Christ’s name, but who do not tithe . . . I would simply challenge you to think seriously and prayerfully about why this is. Why are the other faith practices relevant and helpful, but the discipline of tithing is not? Is the avoidance of tithing a fruit of faithfulness, or the result of submission to the values of a consumerist culture?

Practice the tithe. Teach children to spend wisely, to save consistently, and to give generously. Let them learn from their parents and grandparents so that they will be generous and not greedy, giving and not self-indulgent, charitable and not self-absorbed. Extravagant Generosity changes the life and spirit of the giver.

- How did you first learn about tithing? Have you seen others practice the tithe? How does it shape their lives?
- Do you tithe? If so, why? If not, why not? What causes you to resist growing in generosity?
- How do you teach and model generosity for the next generation?

WEDNESDAY

Through God's Eyes

“Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit in without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”

— **Romans 12:1-2, The Message**

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations thrive because of the extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving of their members out of love for God and neighbor. Such churches teach and practice giving that focuses on the abundance of God’s grace and that emphasizes the Christian’s need to give rather than on the church’s need for money. In the spirit and manner of Christ, congregations that practice Extravagant Generosity explicitly talk about the place of money in the Christian’s walk of faith. They view giving as a gift from God and are driven to be generous by a high sense of mission and a keen desire to please God by making a positive difference in the world.

The notion that giving rightly focuses on our need to give rather than on the church’s need to receive is not a money-raising strategy, but a spiritually powerful truth. The practice of tithing benefits the giver as much as it strengthens the mission and ministry of the church.

Americans live in an extraordinarily materialist and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds acquisitiveness, the appetite for more and bigger, and that fosters the myth that self-worth is found in material wealth and that happiness comes by possessing. Thirty-year-olds feel like failures because they don’t already have the kind of house that their parents own. Couples struggle under oppressive levels of debt that strain marriages, destroy happiness, and intensify conflict and anxiety. As one radio show host says, “We buy things we don’t even need with money we don’t even have to impress people we don’t even know!” (*The Dave Ramsey Show*).

At root, these are spiritual problems, not merely financial planning issues. They reveal belief systems that are spiritually corrosive and that lead to continuing discontent, discouragement, and unhappiness. We can never earn enough to be happy when we believe that satisfaction, self-definition, and meaning derive principally from our possessions, and we can never trust our sense of self-worth when it rests on treasures that are material and temporal. A philosophy based principally upon materialism, acquisition, and possessions is not sufficient to live by, or to die by. At some point, followers of Jesus must decide whether they will listen to the wisdom of the world or to the wisdom of God.

- How does living generously help you see the world through God’s eyes?
- How is your own philosophy of life shaped by materialism, acquisition, and the desire to possess? How is it shaped by the wisdom of God? How do you resolve the tensions?

THURSDAY

The Old Life and the New Life

“You’re done with that old life. It’s like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you’ve stripped off and put in the fire. . . . So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in a wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. . . . And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

— **Colossians 3:9, 12, 14, The Message**

Vines, branches, seedtime, harvest, soils, vineyards, trees, fruits—the Bible is replete with stories that lift high the notion that God expects us to use what we have received to make a positive difference in the world around us. Fruitfulness points us toward the result, the impact, and the outcome of our work for God’s purposes and saves us from merely congratulating ourselves on our efforts, our hard work, or our input.

But as any gardener knows, the biblical stories of plants and seeds and growth and vines and branches are incomplete without the idea of pruning. Some things must go. Some ministries are no longer fruitful and some programs have served their time and are no longer relevant or effective. Fruitfulness reminds us to ask ourselves, “Do our ministries really change lives and transform the world?”

Peter Drucker, the organizational expert who focused much of his professional energy on churches and non-profits in the later years of his career, offers this as one of his top lessons for church leaders: Practice *planned abandonment*. Planned abandonment involves intentionally closing down work that no longer contributes to the mission.

According to Drucker, the purpose of any non-profit organization is the changed life. If we are doing work and offering ministries that are no longer shaping lives in significant ways, perhaps we should stop doing them. As we initiate new ministries, create more effective mission projects, and plan how to better reach people, are there also services, activities, and outreach ministries that we need to reduce? How do we redirect our time, energy, and financial resources toward the ministries that most help us fulfill our mission? These are tough questions, but they are questions of stewardship. Jesus says, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). If it’s no longer bearing kingdom fruit, stop doing it.

Notions of fruitfulness and pruning also apply as we reflect on attitudes and behaviors in ourselves. In order for us to nurture the interior fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—we must leave behind enmity, anger, dissensions, and things like these (Galatians 5:19-23).

If we desire to become more generous, as I believe God would want for us, we will have to make some practical decisions that cause us to leave some behaviors behind. To give more to God may mean reprioritizing and spending less on other things that do not lend life and build us up. We may have to prune some expenses and change some spending habits to nurture greater generosity.

No one tithes accidentally. No one happens to have enough money left over at the end of the month to be truly generous. Extravagant Generosity requires intentionality. Tithing results from deep commitment, but also from carefully planning. We do it willingly, and willfully, or we never do it at all. We have to think about it, pray about it, talk it over, and plan for it. It’s a major decision involving everyone in the household. It requires us to change, and to begin to seek God’s priorities instead of merely our own.

The apostle Paul uses another image beside fruitfulness and pruning to describe the change that God works within us by the Holy Spirit when we follow Christ. He says that new life in Christ is like getting rid of old ill-fitting clothing and putting on new clothes that God has picked out for us (see above, from Colossians 3). Elsewhere Paul writes, “Everything . . . connected with that old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you” (Ephesians 4:23-24, *The Message*).

- What attitudes, behaviors, and values might you need to prune in order to live more fruitfully in Christ?
- How much planning, praying, and intentionality do you put into your decisions about giving? How would giving more generously require changes inside you and in your behaviors?

FRIDAY

One of My Own

“This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way . . .”

— **2 Corinthians 9:11, The Message**

A long-time member and proud grandfather stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter. Another infant from another family that was new to the congregation was baptized at the same service. Following the service, the two families intermingled at the front of the church as they took turns having their pictures taken. At one point, the mother from the new family needed to get some things out of her bag, and the grandfather from the other family offered to hold her baby. Other church members commented on the grandfather with the baby; and he found himself saying several times, “Oh, this one isn’t mine; I’m just holding him for a minute.”

Monday morning the grandfather visited the pastor at the church office and said, “I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about how to do that.” The pastor was stunned and couldn’t help asking about what brought the grandfather to this decision. The older man’s eyes grew moist as he said, “Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby. I kept telling people that he wasn’t my child, but then it dawned on me that he was part of my family, part of my church family. I’ve been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God’s eyes I’m a grandfather to more than just my own. I’ve taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children.”

Those who practice Extravagant Generosity have a God-given vision and faith to plant seeds for trees whose shade they will never see.

- How have those who have come before you in your family, community, and church paved an easier road for you through their generosity?
- How have you paved the road for those who will follow in the faith through your generosity?

SATURDAY

Generous Congregations

“What matters most to me is to finish what God started: the job the Master Jesus gave me of letting everyone I meet know all about this incredibly extravagant generosity of God.”

— **Acts 20:24, The Message**

Churches that cultivate Extravagant Generosity hold high quality annual pledge opportunities with wide participation, excellent preparation, and active lay involvement. While pastors provide leadership through preaching, teaching, and example, congregations rely heavily on the witness of extravagantly generous lay persons through testimonies, sermons, leadership talks, newsletter meditations, and website devotionals. They invite people into leadership who speak with integrity because of their own personal growth in the practice of giving, including people of diverse ages, incomes, and backgrounds.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations focus on giving during the season of annual pledging, but they also emphasize generosity throughout the year in preaching, Bible studies, and classes. They speak about how our relationship with God affects our views of money and how our relationship with money shapes our relationship to God. They teach about the place of wealth, affluence, acquisitiveness, materialism, selfishness, generosity, and giving. They do not avoid capital funds campaigns when they serve the mission of the church, and they enter into major projects with excellence, professional preparation, and outstanding communication. They regularly offer members the opportunity to support special appeals and new projects, knowing that giving stimulates giving; and they’ve learned that when special giving is aligned with the purposes of Christ, it enhances support for the general budget rather than diminishes it. They readily encourage charitable contributions and philanthropic giving by their members to service agencies and to medical, advocacy, and cultural causes that make a difference in the lives of people.

Such churches do more than encourage, teach, and support *personal* generosity, they practice Extraordinary Generosity *as a congregation*, demonstrating exemplary support for special projects, missions in the community and around the world, and denominational connectional ministries. They take the lead in responding to disasters and unexpected emergencies. Pastors and lay leaders view “giving beyond the walls” as indispensable to Christian discipleship and to congregational mission and vitality. They look for more and better opportunities to make a positive difference in the lives of people. They develop mission partnerships; support agencies that help the poor; and fund mission teams, scholarships, service projects, new church starts, and other ministries that transform lives. They make the mission of the church real, tangible, and meaningful. Their reputation for generosity bears witness to Christ.

Churches that grow in giving know that generosity increases with participation in ministry and community, and so they work to deepen the core ministries of worship, small-group learning, and mission. Many churches do not have enough money because they don’t provide sufficient ministry and mission. Rather than becoming obsessed with income, survival, and maintenance, generous congregations continually return their focus to changing lives, reaching new people, and offering significant mission. By growing in ministry, giving increases.

Congregations that practice Extravagant Generosity teach, model, and cultivate generosity among children and youth. Sunday school classes, after-school children’s ministries, vacation Bible school, and youth ministries all offer opportunities to give individually and to work together in groups to achieve a

ministry goal that is significant, tangible, and compelling. Rather than collecting offerings in a perfunctory way, children’s and youth leaders explain, teach, and connect the action of giving to the work of God. Generous congregations equip parents with ideas, suggestions, and practices that foster generosity for children and youth of all ages.

- Would you describe your congregation as generous? Why? Why not?
- Would you describe yourself as generous? Extravagantly so?

SUNDAY

Delight

“Tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God . . . to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life.”

— **1 Timothy 6:17-19, The Message**

People who practice Extravagant Generosity give with unexpected liberality, they make giving a first priority, and they plan their giving with great energy and passion. They go the second mile. They do not give from a “what remains” mentality, but from a “what comes first” priority. Giving seriously becomes a personal spiritual discipline, a way of serving God, and a means of helping the church fulfill its God-appointed mission. Focused conviction and intention causes them to give in a more pronounced way, without fear and with greater trust. Giving changes their lives.

Extravagant describes giving that is extraordinary, over-the-top, and propelled by great passion. *Extravagant* is the generosity seen in those who appreciate the beauty of giving, the awe and joy of making a difference for the purposes of Christ. Extravagant Generosity is giving to God as God has given to us.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity shift things around so that they can do more. Their generosity opens them to projects they never dreamed God would involve them in. They are conscientious and intentional. Generosity is their calling. They want to make a difference for Christ. They care.

They grow in the grace of giving. They learn. They take small steps until generosity becomes natural. They deepen their understanding of giving through prayer and Scripture, and they foster generosity in others. They give more now than in the past, and will give more in the future than they do today.

They push their congregations to become more generous. They advocate outward-focused ministry. They do not give in order to control the church but to support it. They excel in giving. They love to give. They are motivated by a desire to make a difference rather than by guilt, fear, desire for recognition, or to manipulate others. They give with humility. Yet, they draw others toward generosity and toward God through their example.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity teach their children and grandchildren to give, mentoring them on how to earn honestly, save carefully, spend prudently, and give lavishly.

They live with a sense of gratitude. They like receiving money, find pleasure in its responsible use, and experience joy in giving it to God’s purposes. They do not become too attached, and are not stopped, deceived, slowed, misled, or detoured in their following of Christ by the possession of money. They delight in Jesus’ way, the way of true life.

- How do you delight in the good you do through your giving?
- Do you give more now than in the past, and do you expect to give more in the future than you do today? How are you *learning* to give?