

The Spiritual Power of Generosity

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January 19, 2008

A. Introduction

The way of Jesus begins with thankfulness and generosity. Thankfulness connects us with God. Generosity connects us with other people. Today, I want to focus on generosity and the importance of practicing generosity.

Generosity is one of the Fruit of the Spirit. The Fruit of the Spirit are the character qualities of Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23 the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.

Generosity is characterized by an inner quality of letting go or relinquishing. Letting go, giving up, or relinquishing is actually the same state of mind as generosity. And these capacities come from within us as we allow God's Spirit to flow through us.

B. Generosity: Attraction and Avoidance

Generosity is something we are both attracted to and something we avoid. On the one hand, we have heard, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Acts 20:35. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

2 Cor 9:6-8. 9:6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 9:7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 9:8 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.

As these verses highlight, generosity is both *a path to God* and *a divine blessing*. The great spiritual masters through the ages have all emphasized that growing in generosity can be a *source of great satisfaction*.

On the other hand, let's be honest, it doesn't always feel that way. Can you think of a time when you gave something away—whether your time, money, service, or

possessions— and it didn't feel like a blessing? Sometimes giving can feel more like a hardship than a blessing. Why is giving difficult?

a. One reason why it is difficult to practice generosity is because *we have attachments*. Our attachments/addictions to possessions, power, or pleasure make it difficult to open our hand and give to others.

b. Another reason why it is difficult to practice generosity is because *it takes practice*. Like other spiritual disciplines, generosity and service takes practice. Generosity, just like prayer, is a skill that needs to be cultivated.

C. The Poor Widow

1. Mark 12:38-44

Mark 12:38-44. 12:38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

12:41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins [two Jewish *lepta*], which are worth a penny [a Roman *quadrans*]. 12:43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 12:44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on [lit. "her whole life"].

2. Comments

The setting of this story is in the Jewish Temple [describe]. Jesus and his disciples are in the Temple, sitting opposite the treasury. And Jesus takes this opportunity to teach the disciples about *two types of religious persons*, about true and false generosity.

Look at **the rich ruling elite** and their retainers, **the scribes**. The rich rulers and the scribes controlled the Temple. The Temple was the religious and economic center of Israel. Like all ancient temples, the Jewish Temple had a treasury, which functioned like a national bank.

Notice how Jesus introduces the **scribes**: "Beware!" Why does Jesus warn us of danger?

Because there are scribes "devouring" widows houses. This is a reference to foreclosure on the widows' estate. At this time, many peasants couldn't pay all the taxes and tithes, so they borrowed money from the Temple treasury.

When they couldn't pay it back, the Temple rulers would foreclose on their property, which left peasants without homes.

3. Analysis of the Conflicts

- a. What is the conflict *within* Jesus? The religious leaders? The disciples?
- b. What is the conflict between characters? With society and authorities?
- c. What does Jesus value? The religious leaders? The Widow?

The poor widow stands in contrast to the scribes and the rich rulers. Whereas the scribes were attracting attention to themselves and sought their own financial gain, she is little noticed, sincere, and generous. Whereas the rich rulers gave out of their excess wealth, she gave out of her poverty.

The widow is a *model of generous devotion to God*. She doesn't give to impress or manipulate people. She doesn't give because of the results it has. Remarkably, the woman isn't even angry at God or distrustful of God for what the scribes did to her.

- d. State in one sentence what is at stake in the conflict

The traditional interpretation of this story emphasizes that everyone can give something no matter how impoverished we are.

However, I believe the story is, in fact, emphasizing how much you give—you must give “the whole of your life” to God. And if you give your whole life, what you give and how much you give takes care of itself.

D. The Power of Generosity

1. Generosity fulfills one of our basic human purposes. It used to be that psychologists were skeptical about altruism (the unselfish concern for others). They argued that people helped others because it made them *feel good* or *look good*.

However, recently psychologists paint a different picture.¹ Psychologists tell us that we have an inborn need to help others. If we don't help others or care for others, we feel a great lack in our lives. We are not only help people we've never met, but we help people we may never see again!²

When we practice generosity and service toward others, we fulfill our genetic design or, we could say, our divine purpose.

2. Generosity brings great joy. We experience joy in forming the intention to be generous; we experience joy in the actual act of giving; and we experience joy in remembering the fact that we have given.

¹ So Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality*, 252.

² William Glasser believes that human beings may have a genetic disposition to be altruistic. *Choice Theory*, 26.

3. Generosity helps us take on the character of Christ. In a single act of giving, we express and realize all of the Fruit of the Spirit. When we're generous we experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

4. Generosity helps us abandon negative emotions.

- a. We let go of craving and grasping, and the anxiety that comes with it.
- b. We abandon anger, which creates separateness and distance between people.
- c. We abandon fear that we will not have enough. Generosity cultivates trust in God—the feeling we have enough to share because God provides for all.

5. Generosity is liberating. When we give we free others and we free ourselves. If we give freely—without strings attached, without expecting certain results or return favors—then both the giver and receiver experience freedom.

In those moments of free giving, the “wall of separation” in my mind between myself and the other person falls away. Generosity accelerates spiritual growth; it helps us transcend our own egos toward Christ consciousness and the realization that every human being is just as valuable to God as I am.

6. Generosity fulfills one of our basic divine purposes. When we practice generosity, we become conduits of God's light in the world.

James 1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Matt 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works [generosity] and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Divine Light comes through whatever part of ourselves we use to help others.³

E. Conclusion

1. Practicing generosity is *a path to God* and a *divine blessing*.
2. Practicing generosity has obstacles. We need to overcome attachments and we need to develop the skill of living generously.
3. True generosity is giving your whole life to God as Jesus' story of the Widow shows.

³ Story told by Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality*, 258-59.

4. Practicing generosity helps us fulfill our human potential, brings great joy, help us take on the character of Christ, overcome negative emotions, and help us fulfill our divine purposes.