

“The Walk: Give”

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1 Timothy 3:17-19 (CEB)

¹⁷ Those who are rich at this time should not become egotistical and place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others. ¹⁹ When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.

Christmas, 1982. My sister, as usual, was the first one awake, watching the minutes tick by on her nightstand clock, willing the minute hand forward. I was next, as Kristi burst into my room with the pronouncement, “It’s Christmas!” My parents slowly emerged from their room, bleary-eyed but benevolent, reminding us that coffee needed to be made and the breakfast casserole put in the oven before we could start opening our gifts. Torture for us as 13- and 10-year-olds.

We surveyed the gift-scape in the living room, the magical produce of the artificial tree that had sprung into fruit overnight. Mom and Dad had alerted us that the number of gifts would be smaller this year – it was a transition year as Mom finished her degree and Dad still plugged away in seminary while serving three churches. But still, there were gifts – in various shapes and sizes, wrapped in festive patterns and foil, adorned with ribbons and bows – and they had our names on them. We noted that the folding doors between the living room were uncharacteristically closed, but a mumbled explanation about having someplace to prop a couple of boxes was sufficient; we were too focused on the anticipation of tearing open the unknown treasures before us to invest more than nominal curiosity.

Within 20 minutes, it was all over. An LP record, a new basketball, sweatshirts, and the obligatory socks lay scattered amongst wads of tissue paper and J.C. Penney boxes. The stockings remained, but those would wait until after breakfast. "Did you get what you wanted?" We affirmed our gratitude to the adults feigning satisfaction with handmade presents and a bottle of English Leather displayed before them. "Well, let's open the doors and sit at the table. The casserole will be finished in a minute." I will never forget that moment as my sister slid back the doors to reveal not only the dining table, but two bicycles, the first new bikes either of us had ever owned – a ten-speed for Kristi, a BMX style for me (just like the one I'd been talking about for months). Overwhelmed by surprise and joy, we both burst into tears, the only expression of joy sufficient for such an unexpected gift.

What's the best present you've ever received? Think back over the Christmases and birthdays of years gone by. Is there a gift that stands out in your memory, one that filled you with wonder and joy? Do you remember how it made you feel? How did you respond to receiving it? There were other presents other Christmases I had anticipated more, but none matches the utter astonishment of seeing that blue and silver beauty in the dining room that morning. That bike would become a constant companion for the next several years of my life. Not even Ralphie and his Red Ryder, carbine action, 200-shot, range model air rifle, with a compass in the stock could match the joy I experienced that Christmas morning.

As I've gotten older, I've found more joy in giving gifts than receiving them. Perhaps that's due to the passing of childhood imagination or the self-sufficiency that comes with adulthood. But I've learned to appreciate the words of Jesus quoted by Paul: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." You've probably discovered this in your own life. Giving a gift to

someone else, especially an unexpected one, makes you feel good, even if it's just making us feel better about ourselves. It's a good feeling to bring joy to someone's life. I wonder if that's how God feels toward us?

Part of our calling as followers of Jesus is to give ourselves for the world. Jesus spent his earthly ministry giving himself for others – spending time with people who had been left out, healing the sick, offering hope and life. He sent out his disciples to carry on his work, and that commission extends to us, too. That's why our fourth practice is *Give* – we give to bring joy and hope and life to the world. As bearers of Christ's name, we want to be known as generous people – not just as a church, but as the people who make up Church of the Saviour.

Our individual practice is to perform *five acts of extravagant generosity each month*. Send a card or a gift to someone who doesn't expect it. Buy lunch for your coworkers. Go to a restaurant and leave a generous tip – not like 20% generous, but like 50% or more generous. Pay for the person's coffee behind you in the drive through.

(That last idea has generated a lot of criticism lately. A social media post I read recently says, "Instead of buying that Starbucks for the person behind you, call a local school and pay off a child's overdue lunch account. Clearly, the person behind you can afford their own coffee." It's a great idea to cover the fees for a child whose family may be struggling to keep up with them. Doing one doesn't keep you from doing the other. While it may be true that the person at Starbucks can afford their coffee, we all need to experience more kindness.)

By practicing extravagant generosity five times a month, you'll be blessed knowing you've brightened someone's day – not because they deserved it, but precisely because they

didn't. That's what it means to receive a gift. Remember what it felt like to get that special present? Isn't it great to be able to make someone else feel that way?

It's precisely that kind of unearned, unmerited gift that we call *grace*. Grace is God's gift to us – not because we deserve it or because we are good, but because of *God's* goodness to us. God loves to give us gifts. Look at the incredible world God has placed us in, the food and the art and the culture God has inspired, the love we experience in relationship with others. The greatest gift of all is God's coming to us in Jesus, interrupting our world of certainty and stinginess and inviting us to a new way of living. Our model is the most quoted verse in the New Testament, John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he...gave his only begotten son.* That's the foundation for our fourth practice. Jesus gave himself for us not because we deserved it, *but because we didn't.* No matter what we have done or not done, no matter how close we are or how far we have strayed, we are offered life in Christ. It's all gift. It's all grace. It's all love. How can we ever repay such a gift? We can't. But we can be grateful.

We show our thanks to God through prayer and in worship, in the love we express to God. We also demonstrate gratitude through our actions. Imagine you give someone a scarf. They may thank you for it; they may even send you a thank-you card. But how much better does it make you feel to see them wearing that scarf and know that it is keeping them warm? A gift that is used is a gift that is appreciated.

We are giving thanks when we use the gifts God has given us – sharing our skills and talents, being kind, offering grace and forgiveness, speaking up for those who can't speak for themselves, using our resources to help others. Everything we have belongs to God. None of it came from us. We're entrusted with our gifts for a time, to put them to good use. When we

give, we are acknowledging the source of our gifts, using those gifts as they were intended, and expressing gratitude by our actions. We don't give to earn God's approval. But because we are the recipients of such extravagant grace, we are moved to be generous in return. *God does not love us because we are good; we are good because God loves us.*

At Church of the Saviour, we believe that God calls us to give the best of ourselves and our resources to God. The Bible names a standard for giving back to God, called a tithe – 10% of what we earn – given to God as an expression of gratitude. We think that's a good goal, though it's not a prescription. While the tithe is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible more consistently calls us to be *generous*, to give gratefully and cheerfully, not in response to an obligation. We encourage one another to give as generously as we can and to strive toward a tithe. We also think that it's important to measure our commitment not just by how *much* we give, but by what that gift represents. Whatever your capacity, calculate the what you give to God through your church as a percentage of your income. Take stock of all you have and how God has graced you. Decide between you and God what level of giving is an appropriate response to God's generosity in your life. Then give out of gratitude, not obligation. All giving requires a measure of sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice of love that sparks joy.

We live in a market-driven society. Our world measures success by material acquisition – income, home, cars, clothing, vacations. That mentality is so pervasive that we often aren't even aware of the spell it holds over us. That has always been true throughout human history to some degree, but no society or generation has experienced as much relative wealth and prosperity as we do here, now. The writer of the letter to Timothy urged us not to put our hope on wealth and material measures of success. That is to say, don't make financial security your

most important goal. Money is too volatile to be the source of our hope. And there's so much more to life than profit. As Jesus said, "Life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions." (Luke 12:15) Instead, we are to "hope in God, ... be rich in doing good to others and be generous." When we express gratitude through generosity, we re-orient our lives away from self and toward others, just as Jesus did. And the paradox is this: when we make life more about what we give than what we receive, we end up experiencing life far more abundantly. Or in the words of scripture, we "take hold of what is truly life."

Let's be people who are known by our generosity. Let's be generous toward God and toward the people around us as a regular, committed practice. God has been far more generous to us than we could ever hope to repay. Thankfully, we don't have to. Grace is God's gift to us in Christ. It is all gift, all free. We give not to repay, but to say thanks. Amen.