



A Generous People

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

We're in the section of Deuteronomy where Moses asks the question "so what?" Moses says, "God has brought you out of slavery. He has fed you and cared for you in the wilderness. He's about to bless you by bringing you into this good Land. Your lives will be full of God's blessings. Now then, let me answer the question, so what?" This is an important question for us as well. God has rescued us from slavery; God has is bringing us into an even better promised land, now so what?

One of the first things Moses says to answer this "so what?" question may surprise you. He says to be generous; open your hands towards those in need. Moses even makes a rather outrageous statement as he talks about this. He says, **"There will be no poor among you"** (15:4). You can almost look at this like a command. God is saying that it's his heart that no person in the Israelite community would be in dire need. No one homeless. No one jobless. No one going hungry. He's saying the Lord is going to bless you so abundantly that if you live by his ideals and give generously to those in need poverty will no longer be a part of your vocabulary. But it won't happen automatically. In order for that to happen they would have to learn to be generous as a way of life.

How about us? Is it possible that the same ideal holds for us in the family of God? It's a sad fact that people today who follow this same God are often thought to be the least compassionate towards those in need. I don't believe that portrayal is always accurate. I could tell you many stories like the one you heard this morning already. At different times in my life I've been the recipient of the generosity of friends in Christ. But I'm not here to pat us on the back. I know how much I need to grow in this area. Considering all God has blessed me with, I don't feel I'm nearly as generous as I ought to be. If you feel at all like I do then learn with me from Deut.14-16 five principles about generosity.

I. We're to be generous in both our worship and work.

The first thing we learn is that we're to be generous both in our worship and our work. What does it mean to be generous in our worship? Look at 14:22-27.

"You shall surely tithe all the produce from what you sow, which comes out of the field every year. You shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God, at the place where He chooses to establish His name, the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and your flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. If the distance is so great for you that you are not able to bring the tithe, since the place where the LORD your God chooses to set His name is too

far away from you when the LORD your God blesses you, then you shall exchange it for money, and bind the money in your hand and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household. Also you shall not neglect the Levite who is in your town, for he has no portion or inheritance among you."

Every year the Israelites were to take a tithe from all the produce of their land as well as the firstborn of their flocks and herds and bring that to the place of worship. Part of it was to be eaten by them in a kind of family feast "in the presence of the Lord." This was part of their worship. If they lived too far away to haul all that food to church then they were to sell it and buy the meal once they got there. He says, "Buy whatever you want. It's a party! Have fun! Rejoice! Eat and drink to your heart's content in the presence of the Lord."

Does this surprise you? Why spend so much on worship? It reminds me of the time a woman came up to Jesus and broke a vial of expensive perfume and poured it on his head as an act of worship. The disciples were upset: "What a waste! That could have been sold and the money used for the poor." But Jesus praised her. "Leave her alone" he said. "She's done a beautiful thing for me." Why? It was an act of worship; an act of love and love often expresses itself in extravagant ways. Look around. This is nice building we meet in. We spent a lot of money on this building. We spent a lot on this sound system. Someone even spent a lot on these flowers. I'll bet you could have taken the money it cost to buy these flowers and fed a few homeless people with that. What a waste! But it's not a waste. It's an act of worship. You see, there is a place for beauty and even extravagance in the worship of God. And notice how he says not to neglect the Levite. Why? Because they were instrumental in making the worship happen and they had no other means of support than what the people brought.

But worship isn't the only place to be generous. Generosity should also be a part of our everyday lives, especially our work and our life in the community. We see that in what Moses says to do in the seventh year, what is called the Sabbath year. Skip down to 15:1-2. **"At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed."** This is great! If

you owed money, when the sabbatic year rolled around, your debt was canceled. Can you imagine getting a letter from your credit card company every seven years saying your balance is zero? I'd go on a spending spree in the sixth year! But this was one of the ways that poverty would be prevented because nothing can make you poor faster than debt! So every seven years you got a fresh start.

But that's not all. The seventh year would also be a time for releasing slaves. This was often tied to debt because if a person couldn't pay their debts they would sometimes have to become a slave of their creditor. Look at what Moses says about this in 15:12. **"If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free."** So not only were debts to be released but slaves were as well. Again, this would be wonderful for the slave but a sacrifice for the master.

Notice how generosity is something that impacts our whole lives; not just our worship but our work. I have a friend here at CPC named Sergio. Sergio was born in Bolivia and he now owns a business in which he imports a grain product called quinoa. Quinoa is about the only thing that grows at 13,000 feet and Bolivian farmers and their families live off it. Fortunately it's high in protein. When Sergio began working with them they lived on \$45 a month for an entire household. They couldn't even send their kids to school. Sergio began buying quinoa from them and by eliminating several middlemen he was able to pay them more per pound. Then there was a supply problem and the price of quinoa shot up here in the States. Instead of pocketing the money and paying the Bolivian farmers the same price Sergio transferred the profits to the farmers. They started out making .50 cents per pound; now they're making \$1.05. Now they can send their kids to school. Sergio even has a plan to isolate the protein in Quinoa and use it for protein powder and then take the profits and build hospitals and schools for the farmers. Sergio told me he would love to buy a new car or move his family out of their rental and buy a home, but this gives him a lot more satisfaction.

II. Generosity is to be built into the rhythm of our life.

We're to be generous in both our worship and our work. That's the first thing. The second thing we learn is that generosity is to be built into the rhythm of our lives. 14:22 says this tithe would come from the field **"every year."** And then in v.28 it says **"every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year."** This is another tithe; a second tithe. And we already read about what would happen every seven years. But that's still not all. Chapter 16 is all about three different feasts they were to celebrate at the same time every year and that was also a time to be generous. **"Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you"** (16:16-17).

We have to remember that these regulations were

tied to the ceremonial law which is fulfilled in Christ. We're not bound to all the same rules. But the idea that giving is to be part of a regular rhythm of our life does carry over. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **"...on the first day of every week...put aside and save."** The first day, of course, was and still is the day that Christians met for worship. It's what we call Sunday. Paul viewed giving as something that was to be as regular and habitual as going to church was. He viewed giving as a holy habit which is done with repetitive regularity throughout our entire lives.

It reminds me of a little girl who experienced a major breakthrough in her life when she learned to tie her own shoes. But, instead of excitement, she broke down in tears. Her father asked her, "Why are you crying?" She said, "I have to tie my shoes." He said to her, "But you just learned how. It isn't that hard, is it?" She replied, "I know, but I'm going to have to do it for the rest of my life."

My hunch is that some of us feel the same way about our giving. The joy of learning how to give has been replaced with a bit of dread because we know we're to do it over and over again for the rest of our lives. But it's not just on Sundays that we can be generous. What are some of the other rhythms we have? What about holidays? What about birthdays? What about finding unique ways to give to those in need during these times? I know of one family with three kids under the age of ten, who celebrate the birth of Christ in a unique way. Instead of just focusing on presents, they make pancakes, brew an um of coffee, and head downtown. When they get there they load the coffee and food into the back of a red wagon. With the eager help of their three-year-old they pull the wagon around the empty streets looking for homeless folks they can offer a warm breakfast to on Christmas morning. The three kids look forward to that time at Christmas more than anything else.

III. Our generosity should be sacrificial.

Generosity ought to be built into the rhythm of our lives. You can imagine that with all those different times and seasons they were supposed to give, the amount they ultimately gave away added up. This leads to the third thing we learn about generosity: it's to be sacrificial. It ought to hurt a little bit.

When we talk about the tithe, we know we're talking about 10 percent. Many believers use this as a guide for how much they give today. And it's not a bad standard. Honestly, for many people maxed out on their bills from month to month 10% is a hard standard to meet. If all of us at CPC gave 10% of their income to the church, we'd pay off the 4 million dollar debt on this building in no time. But consider a couple of things. First of all, if you add up all the tithes and offerings the Israelites were required to give, they equaled between 27-40% of their income! Also consider that never once are we explicitly told to tithe in the New Testament. The standard is never set at 10%. The standard is set by Jesus. In encouraging the Corinthians to give sacrificially to the needy in Jerusalem, Paul says, **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich"** (2 Cor. 8:9). I know that we

can never outgive him, but he's our example. He sacrificed so much he went from being rich to being poor.

Marva Dawn was born in Ohio in 1948. She's a lifelong scholar, having earned four masters degrees and a Ph.D. She is also a teaching fellow at Regent College in British Columbia. Marva has written many books, is a gifted musician, and speaks to pastors all over the world. Her life is a reflection of her belief that seemingly small acts of faithfulness can have a profound and significant impact on the world. All of the profits of her books go to support charities like Stand With Africa: A Campaign of Hope, which "supports African churches and communities as they withstand AIDS, banish hunger..." Marva and her husband live off his teacher's salary, which is not much. Despite Marva's many medical problems, she still refuses to take more money for herself. She can't imagine spending to make her life more comfortable when so many people are desperate and dying throughout our world. She says her 1980 VW bug with its broken heater helps her focus more on prayer and to better identify with those in need.

IV. Generosity is about open hands and open hearts.

Our generosity should be sacrificial. But this doesn't just have to do with our hands but with our hearts. Look at 15:7-11.

"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'"

Notice he mentions what we do with our hands. He says "don't close your hand" from the poor; instead you're to "freely open your hand to him." This is talking about the act of giving. It's wonderful to feel sorry for someone in need, but it doesn't really do much good if we don't open our hands to them.

But open hands will start with an open heart. Verse 7 warns us not to "harden your heart." Verse 9 warns against a "base thought in your heart" where you say to yourself, "Hey, I'm not going to lend any money to this guy because the seventh year is coming up and I will have to relieve this debt." Moses is a realist. He knows how we think. He knows how greedy the human heart can be, so he identifies one of the ways that manifests itself. All of this is talking about our heart attitude towards people in need. Often we find powerful rationalizations for a hard heart:

"Oh, why they don't get a job?"

"If I help them I'll just be enabling their laziness."

"Why doesn't their family help them out?"

"What if they use the money for the wrong thing?"

We can think of all kinds of reasons to harden our hearts against the poor. God's word says don't do it. And he warns us in v.9 that God will hold us accountable. He says "if you give him nothing, then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you."

One of the things that impacts our heart attitude is how we view these people. Maybe that's why Moses calls the poor man "your poor brother." Why does he call him that? He's reminding these people that they're part of a family. This is exactly what the apostle John wrote to the church. He said, **"But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?"** (1 Jn.3:17). Notice what he calls the one in need. He's a brother. He IS a part of your family.

One Sunday morning, Mike Yankoski was challenged by his pastor's sermon. Mike was living a comfortable life, attending Westmont College and spending a lot of time reading and talking about God. But he felt he lacked a life of "radical, living obedience." He had claimed he depended on Christ, but never put his claims to the test. So he set out to live like the homeless in six American cities. Mike wanted to put his faith to the test alongside those who live with nothing every day. He also set out to understand the life of the homeless and see how the Church responds. His book, *Under the Overpass*, follows his five-month journey — hearing the stories of the homeless and constantly struggling to find food, a place to sleep, a bathroom and compassion. What is most striking in Mike's story is how the Christians he met treated them. Every Sunday, a dirty, smelly, homeless Mike would try to go to church. He often felt rejected by church members. He struggled with the hypocrisy. He writes, "If we respond to others based on their outward appearance, haven't we entirely missed the point of the Gospel?" Yet he also met churches and individuals who reached out to bring him comfort. In San Diego, a woman named Carla invited him to feast at the church potluck. She made sure he felt welcome. He discovered simple kindness meant so much. The hardest part of all was his reentry back to his old life. He writes how the "terrible dangers of lacking nothing came clear to us... It numbs and blinds the human spirit." He felt American Christians "knew how to enjoy God's material blessings, but had forgotten — or didn't care to know — how to use those blessings to help others in Jesus' name."

V. We're to be generous because God has blessed us and God will bless us because we're generous.

We've seen that generosity ought to invade both our worship and our work; we should build it into the rhythm of our lives; make it sacrificial; and open both our hands and our hearts. But there is one thing missing here, and that's the WHY. Why should we live a life of generosity? If we don't identify the WHY we'll run out of gas in our giving; we'll go for a while on good intentions but it won't last. Here's the WHY Moses gives: We're to be generous because

God has blessed us and God will bless us because we're generous.

Over and over in these chapters Moses mentions how God has blessed them. For example look at 15:14 where Moses tells them what to do when freeing a slave in the seventh year. **"You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you."** It's like, "Don't send him off empty handed. Give him enough to get a good start on his new life." Why? "Because the Lord has blessed you in the same way!" If we're going to be generous people we'll have to first of all realize that what we have comes from God; what we have is the result of God's blessing; and part of the reason he's blessed us is so that we can bless others with what he's given to us. Do you see all that you have from your monthly paycheck to your retirement fund to your cars to the clothes on your back as part of God's blessing? Or do you see it as simply coming from your blood, sweat and tears? Did YOU generate all of this or did God? Part of the answer to the WHY question is God has blessed us.

But there is something else as well. Moses also mentions over and over again how God will bless us even more because we give. It's like a boomerang. You throw it out there and it comes back to you. For example, look at 15:10 where he talks about what to do when you see a poor person. **"You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings"** (15:10). This isn't about the prosperity gospel where you give and expect God to make you rich in return. There are a lot of ways God can bless you for your giving. That's why he says "in all your undertakings." But this is a promise that he will bless because we give.

CONCLUSION

Shortly after the tragedy of 9/11, a wonderful story of how giving comes back to bless us emerged from a school in Columbia, South Carolina. First understand the historical perspective. Two years after the Civil War, with much of Columbia still in ruins, some of the bitterness over the North-South conflict was put aside by a single gesture: New York firefighters set out to collect pennies to buy Columbia a firetruck. A devastating blaze had devoured about one-third of the city. Columbia had lost most of its firefighting equipment during the Civil War and needed used bucket brigades in their attempt to douse flames.

Not long after, New York City firemen raised \$5,000—mostly in pennies—and put a hose-reel wagon on a steamship bound for Columbia, South Carolina. On the way, the ship sank, but instead of giving up, they took up another collection and sent a wagon in June of that same year. So overwhelmed was former Confederate Colonel Samuel Melton that he made a promise on behalf of the city of Columbia to return the blessing should misfortune ever befall New York City.

About a 150 years later, after 9/11, a school principal in Columbia and her teachers were trying to find some tangible way their students could respond to the attacks. The children were too young to give blood, and no one liked the idea of simply sending money to an impersonal national fund. So they decided to collect money to buy a fire truck. Then Turner stumbled on records of New York's long-ago gift while researching the cost and what type of truck to buy. They got city leaders and the state governor to join in. The effort was renamed "South Carolina Remembers." After 134 years, the day to remember came and the children of Columbia took it on themselves to honor that pledge.

They collected pennies at football games, held bake sales, and sold T-shirts in a drive to raise the \$350,000 needed to replace one of the dozens of New York City fire trucks destroyed in the 9/11 attacks. The idea began from a lesson in giving. Donations poured in. One donor wrote: "When I was growing up in Columbia, Mama always said you need to return a kindness. I know she'd be as glad as I am to be part of this wonderful thank-you gesture."

I think the people of New York and the people of Columbia understood the "Why?"—we should be generous because the Lord has blessed us and God will bless us because we were generous. Do you understand that? Do you believe that?