

I want to talk about the connection between money, generosity, and participating in God's abundance.

The scriptures start out with Genesis 1, which is a poem that is exploding with abundance and overflow. And after every movement of creation, there is this repetition of "It is good." It is a poem that begins with an overwhelming sense of goodness. Six times God looked at what he created and called it good, and the seventh time he looked at the creation of the image bearer and called it "Very good."

It is bursting with goodness, but even more so, God blesses it and endows it with vitality. The creation itself is filled with generativity. The animals and land are equipped within its essence to produce more of itself. There is a generative potential within creation. It is good, and it is blessed to continue to thrive and make more. Everything in its kind is to multiply the abundant goodness that flows out of the very essence of the Triune God, our creator.

Look back at verse 27 and following.

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground - everything that has the breath of life in it - I give every green plant for food.' And it was so." vv. 27-30

Two things you need to note from this text.

1. He Invites us to "subdue" and "rule."

Notice that God gives for a purpose. Back up one more verse to verse 28, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" These two Hebrew words...subdue and rule are pregnant with meaning. Subdue in Hebrew is *kabash*. This word is linked to the idea of cultivation; it is largely an agricultural word. It is the work of taking raw materials and making something more from them. For example, taking wheat, flour, and a little bit of yeast and allowing bread to come about. Or grapes, that are crushed and allowed to ferment over time to make wine. Or raw plain musical scales mixed with rhythm, cadence, and crescendos to make beautiful music. So, we are cultivators at our core.

The Hebrew word for rule is *radah*. Remember that to "rule" here is not to dominate, but to partner with God in bringing the created order somewhere. This is a responsibility that is given only to the image-bearer, and not to any other created being - it is the task of ruling or exercising dominion over the rest of creation.

2. God gives.

Verse 29 makes the bold statement that God gives. Who made the world? God. And does God keep it to himself? No. The text says God gave; he provides food, oceans, plants, streams, fruit...he gives. This is stunning. Rather than the creator of all things hoarding his very own creation, he gives it over to Adam and Eve and invites them into his abundance. He gives everything to the image bearers because that is the economics of God. Who planted the garden? God. Did God hold back the garden for himself? No.

God is abundantly generous. God is not stingy and does not hold back. He is lavish and extravagant. He does not withhold, but rather at the beginning of our scriptures is a liturgy of abundance. Everything is humming with reverence and overflowing with generativity. At the center of the universe is a creator, God, and one of the first things we learn about God is that God gives.

This is the narrative that must seep into our bones and is rather difficult for us enlightened modern westerners. But as this narrative takes deep root into our bones, we recognize the generosity of God and respond with gratitude.

Viewing the world through gratitude versus entitlement

To view the world through abundance and gratitude is to recognize that the entire world is God's. And it is all on loan; it's all grace, it's all gifts. Every dollar, every hour, every breath - it's all gifts. Every drop of water, every moment, every sunrise - it's all grace. We live under God's roof, breath God's oxygen, eat God's food, and drink God's water - all of it is his. Of course, we work hard to partner with God, but ultimately it is all God's. It's all gifts; it's all God's grace. And this is the posture of so many of the faith that have come before us. Consider the psalmist writings and their posture toward God's creation.

Psalm 104 - Creation Psalm

Of all the Psalms, this is the longest creation psalm. It demonstrates the Israelites celebration of God's creation, and in some ways, it is a commentary on the Genesis 1 account of creation. The Psalm begins with the author surveying the entire created order. 104:1-23

The psalmist gives language to all he sees - the heavens and earth, the waters (springs and streams), trees, birds, goats, wine, oil, bread, people, and lions. He is consumed at the thought of all of God's creation.

104:24-26

"How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

104:27-35

God is pictured as the great sustainer of all the created order. Without God's presence, all things would crumble. The psalm ends by picturing God as a great respirator. The fruitfulness of the world is guaranteed.

The Psalmist understands all of creation as a gift from God. And what results is the exuberance of praise. It is the recognition that everything we have been given is a pure gift. There is one more text I want to move to, which reflects on the liturgy of abundance in Genesis 1, Psalm 150.

Psalm 150 - The Final Psalm

The closing Psalm is one of abundant praise, without any particular cause for the praise mentioned, it is simply an expression of praise at every level of creation.

These three texts combine to proclaim the abundance of God as a life-giving force. Genesis 1 affirms generosity and abundance at the core of our faith. Psalm 104 celebrates the vitality of creation and pushes against anxiety, for it is all God's. And Psalm 150 embodies the response of all creation to praise the abundance of God.

This is one of the first major themes of the book of Genesis: abundance, generosity, vitality, generativity, and praise. But sin enters the story. Right in Genesis 3, humanity is deceived, and they seize power seeking to dominate in ways that benefit only them. And you see this abundance begin to break down as the cause of human brokenness. And the effect of this sin is that we were turned from cultivators into consumers. The fall moved Adam and Eve from gratitude to greed. It turns all of us from cultivators to consumers. But God seeks to restore this liturgy of abundance through the work of one family.

And it is this move of sin, that launches a different narrative that will run throughout the scriptures, but particularly throughout the book of Genesis. It is the narrative of scarcity that challenges the abundance of God. It is these two narratives, abundance and scarcity, that bookend the book of Genesis. It opens with abundance, and it closes with scarcity.

Introduction to Scarcity

This awareness of God's abundance is the dominant theme throughout Genesis until we arrive here at Genesis 47. Let me bring us up to speed with where we are in the narrative. Pharaoh, the ruler in Egypt, has had a dream about an upcoming seven years of abundance that will be followed by seven years of famine throughout the land. Joseph interprets this dream for Pharaoh and then is placed in charge of Egypt to rule on behalf of Pharaoh. Pharaoh commissions him to organize, administer, control, and monopolize the food supply for the entire region. And it is here that for the first time we see a narrative of scarcity play out on a large scale. While much of the story up to this point has been the struggle for humanity to rebel against the abundance of God in efforts to individualize the flourishing.

Pharaoh now introduces the concept of scarcity, that there will not be enough. It is in this fear of not enough that Pharaoh uses his power to consume more than needed and control the abundance. Pharaoh now puts Joseph in charge of supply. When the crops fail, and the people run out of food, we see this play out. Notice the downward spiral that takes place, take note of where the narrative of scarcity leads.

There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace. When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone."

"Then bring your livestock," said Joseph. "I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock.

When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, "We cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. Why should we perish before your eyes—we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate."

So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other. Genesis 47:13-21

It was through an economic transaction rooted in a narrative of scarcity. It is these two narratives that are at play throughout Genesis and still at play throughout our world. They animate billion-dollar industries; they organize our personal finances and our global economy. It is either the narrative of abundance, where we recognize the gift of the world in which we live and from that place then organize our lives around enough, living open-handed with whatever resources have been given to us. Or we live according to a narrative of scarcity that seeks to hoard and consume all that we can in an endless zero-sum battle against all others in order to ensure our own security at the expense of others. The way of abundance is to participate in God's abundance. It is to get on with what God is doing in our world.

So what is the role of the people of God who live in this tension between abundance and scarcity?

Blessed to be a Blessing - The Central Theme of the Story

"The Lord has said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 'I will make you into a great nation, and I

will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” - Genesis 12.1-2

God is longing to bring the world back into order, to bring the world back to the way it was intended, and sought to do this through a people - a man and his family. Eventually, these people became Israel and then ultimately all the way down to you and me. So, God says to Abraham, “I will bless you, but you then are to in turn bless all others.” This is the rhythm of the story of the scriptures from the beginning. Blessed by God (in whatever means that may look like) to bless the world around us.

Every follower of Jesus is called to be transfigured by this reality, that we are blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. Because it is God who has chosen to enact restoration and healing through a people, and we are invited to participate in God’s abundance. In God’s eyes, you and I are conduits of God’s blessing to the world. It is the way in which we have been wired for transformation that we then are shaped by this story to bring about this sort of change. God is up to something in this world. He is working to bring it back to rights, and restore the original abundance for all of creation, and we are invited to participate in that abundance. We are invited to step into the rhythm of being blessed to be a blessing. And again, hear me correctly...this is not that God is blessing you and you are getting rich, this looks much like the life of Jesus, who ultimately gave up everything for the sake of the blessing the world, but it was in giving everything up that he found life and life abundant.

The Jewish and Gentile churches are in sharp disagreement. They were having a difficult time merging as a newly formed community. During the time of Paul’s writing and missionary travels, he finds out about a famine that hit the area of the Jewish churches. Paul sees an opportunity to leverage the crisis to bring about greater unity between this newfound Jesus movement. The Gentile churches were in affluent urban environments, and are very well-off, and the Jews back in Jerusalem are very poor, with little money. So Paul traveled around the Gentile churches and started to collect money for the sake of the Jewish churches to help them in their time of need.

2 Corinthians is one of these letters. He is writing it ahead of his travels to the church to prepare them to receive this offering.

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. vv. 8:1-5

Paul is in the midst of traveling between churches that he planted, one of the focuses he was looking at was raising money to help support the

various churches throughout the first-century world. And so right here, we see the Macedonians giving an extraordinary amount to support the ministry.

Their giving exceeded what Paul was anticipating. It was an immense amount of generosity. Notice how this takes place within Paul’s understanding of giving. It takes place in the second half of verse 5. *“And they exceeded our expectations: they gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.”*

It began with the Macedonians finding themselves fully immersed into the life of God’s abundance. It is his grace that they have fully found their rest in. And from there it is much easier to give one’s money. If your entire life is given to God, money is merely one piece of it. If you give the past, present, future, fears, hopes, dreams, everything...then giving your cash becomes much easier. If everything is a gift, it is easy to give money as a gift.

So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. vv. 6-8

Notice that for Paul, giving is simply a part of your walk with Jesus. Here is his list...faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love...see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”

It is not something that is an aside, or something in addition too, but rather it is lumped in with every aspect of your discipleship. According to the New Testament, you cannot divorce your money, your generosity, and your walk with Jesus. It all goes together and cannot be torn apart. Why? Because Jesus understands that your money and your heart are intimately connected. You either live from the narrative of abundance or are swept up in the narrative of scarcity. For “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Now, think about this for a second...If we believe in the abundance of God, that everything is his, does God need your money? No! Of course not. God is not after your money. What he is after is your heart, and God recognizes the unique connection between your wallet and your deepest passions.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. v. 9

Jesus as the Archetype of Blessed to be a Blessing

For Paul, all generosity is in light of God’s generosity. All of it is compared to what Jesus has given for us. You don’t give from guilt or shame, but you give from the response of who God is and what he has done for you. For Paul, the archetype, the ultimate example of what it means to be blessed to be a blessing is Jesus himself! Jesus, as the son of God, gave everything up for the sake of his creation. And it is through Jesus’ poverty that we have been made rich, and this richness is in more than

what money can buy. Our generosity is to mirror the generosity of Jesus. This is the call on our own giving.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

I want to end by honing in on a few specific questions you may already be asking. It is easy to allow discussions on giving to remain in the realm of lofty philosophical musings, but we must dig deeper to see the impact of our day-to-day giving.

Giving should be generous.

Paul, in chapter 9 of the same passage, said that “whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will reap generously.” The word generously here can also be translated as sacrificially. It should hurt a bit; it should cost us a bit and should require a bit of faith. If I am really honest, I don't like this thought. I'm growing in this, but this is an area that is really difficult.

Giving should be cheerful

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Don't give from guilt or shame, God isn't after that, but rather we are called to learn the joy of giving. Have you ever met anyone who is extremely generous and grumpy? It just doesn't seem to be the natural case. The generous people that I know tend to be some of the happiest people.

Giving should be rhythmic

It should be consistent and not sporadic. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul opens the chapter and says this, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income...” Meaning to Paul, it isn't just random acts of kindness but should be built into the daily practice of life with money. It should hold a line-item on your budget.

I should direct my giving in three specific places according to the New Testament writings. The Church (Acts 4, Corinthians 9, 1st Timothy 3). The New Testament clearly teaches that you should be a part of a local church and should be giving to that local church. I think there are a few reasons for this. Think back to the Genesis 12 text, when God commands Abraham that when he is blessed, he will bless the world.

In that moment, God is establishing his mission to restore the world back to its vision of abundance. And the means through which he does that is in cultivating a people/family/church that will be the primary means through which God transforms the world. So in your giving to the church, you are partnering with God in the ministry of this church. Your dollars that go to the church go to our local ministry, but also much

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

of our global work. It is for the ministry that is poured back into the world and is then distributed broadly to the work of the church. Giving to the local church also demonstrates a sort of buy-in to the mission of the church. It is essential that part of your giving, probably the priority of it, is given to the local church.

You see Paul raising money all over the New Testament for the work of the Gospel going forward, church-planting, etc. So much of the money given to CPC goes out beyond these walls to mission work and gospel work that is going right outside these doors into the mission of the Gospel.

Dare I say it is impossible to read the scriptures and not be stunned by God's specific heart for the poor. People are in staggering need all throughout this Bay Area, and we are called to give to the poor. This is partnering with God in his work throughout our world.

1 Corinthians 16:2 - “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income...” Paul writes here that the amount is flexible.

Back in 2 Corinthians 9, Paul said, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give.” Not reluctantly, not out of compulsion, no guilt trip, just give. In chapter 8, he said, “I'm not commanding you.” There is no number in which you should give.

But rather, the New Testament speaks far more about mirroring our generosity on that of Jesus. This question becomes much easier in light of a narrative of abundance. If all things are God's and all of life is a gift, then to not live open-handed with our resources - monies, time, etc., is to miss that all of it is God's in the first place. This doesn't mean we don't ever say no, but it means we live from the posture of abundance, seeking to cultivate a way of living in which our first impulse is to give. Here Paul specifically speaks about setting aside an amount of money, “in keeping with your income.” He seems to be alluding to the flexibility of giving what is within your ability to give. The baseline is this, give what God puts on your heart. Not what you have on your heart, but what God is calling you to. Invite God into this process.

At the end of the day, giving is about faith. It is about which story we are going to buy into - the narrative of abundance or the narrative of scarcity. Do we trust the God of abundance to supply for us, that everything is a gift, that God will continue to sustain and provide for us? Or do we believe in the zero-sum approach of scarcity - that more money will bring greater security and hope. Church, may we continue to learn how we are called to participate in God's abundance. May we learn to live open-handed because God has been generously pouring out his life for our sake. And we will, in turn, find ourselves wrapped up into the rhythm of being blessed for the purpose of blessing others.

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