

“The Way of Jesus: Extravagant Generosity”

Mark 12:41-44 ¹

It’s always interesting to me what reasons people offer for choosing not to follow Jesus. I had a conversation during Christmas with someone who was more candid than most when he noted that “Following Jesus would cost me money.” His point was that the Bible teaches tithing in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and he didn’t want to do that.

While the Bible does indeed *teach* tithing, this isn’t really a sermon *about* tithing. This is a sermon in which I hope to encourage you toward the experience of **extravagant generosity**.²

According to fairly recent statistics, twenty percent of American Christians give nothing at all to any church, and the vast majority of us give very little—the average is 2.9 percent. As in many areas of life, the 80/20 rule applies to giving as well, with twenty percent of all American Christians giving more than eighty percent of the total (86.4%).

While the most generous five percent of us give well over half of all contributions to churches (59.6%), higher-income American Christians as a whole give a smaller percentage of their income than do their poorer neighbors. And over the last century, as our personal income *quadrupled*, the percentage we gave to our churches actually *declined*.³ That’s what makes this morning’s text so truly amazing.

Please take your Bibles and turn again to Mark 12, beginning with verse 41: ⁴¹ *Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. ⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”*

The fact that this woman was a widow makes the story all the more amazing, and yet she’s not really an anomaly, even today. Recent statistics indicate that 8.6 percent of non-widowed Americans tithe their incomes, while 17.6 percent of widows and widowers do so—more than double the non-widowed amount.⁴

I’ve done my parents’ taxes for a number of years, a labor of love that will be completed once and for all when I file Mom’s taxes this last time. When I did their taxes for the year before Dad was resurrected, I discovered that Mom and Dad had given 19% of their adjusted gross income to Kingdom work that year; but it was even better than that. After they had paid their retirement home fees, utilities, and taxes, they gave 73% of what was left to Kingdom work.

What would cause people of reasonable but ordinary means to do such a thing? And what caused the widow in the Temple to “*put in everything—all she had to live on*”? Our quest this morning is toward greater understanding of the underpinnings of such extravagant generosity.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 13, 2013.

² United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase has written that “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 place 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?” (Five Practices of Fruitful Living [Nashville: Abingdon, 2010], p. 129).

³ Ron Sider, “A Lot of Lattés,” *Books & Culture* (November/December 2008).

⁴ Ted Olsen, “Go Figure,” *Christianity Today*, November, 2008, 18.

Our journey will mostly take the shape of telling several stories about people who understood this principle.

You may know that research consistently confirms that once our basic needs are met, there is absolutely no correlation between higher income and greater happiness;⁵ but you may not know that there is a strong relationship between extravagant generosity and greater joy.⁶ United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase pointed out that “*Extravagant* does not correspond with giving that is merely dutiful, required, burdensome, mandated, or simply doing one’s part. *Extravagant* denotes a style and attitude of giving that is unexpectedly joyous, without predetermined limits, from the heart, extraordinary, over-the-top, and propelled by great passion.

“*Extravagant* is the generosity seen in those who appreciate . . . 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.”⁷ And Bishop Schnase noted that “The people whom we admire and respect for their generous spirits, spiritual wisdom, and deep-heartedness have invariably practiced giving in such an extravagant manner that it has reshaped them. . . . Our giving becomes a way of putting God first, an *outward* sign of an *inner* spiritual alignment. . . .”⁸

“Tithing is not merely a financial decision; it is a life choice that rearranges all the furniture of our interior lives. That’s why we do it. . . . Tithing is not merely about what God wants us to *do*, but about the kind of person God wants us to *become*.”⁹

When Thomas Cannon died in 2005 in Richmond, Virginia at the age of 79, he described himself as a “poor man’s philanthropist.” Thomas’s father died when he was three years old. His mother later remarried, and their family of six lived in a three-room wooden shack without running water or electricity.

When he grew up, Thomas worked for the postal service, where he never made more than \$25,000 a year. After he retired, he and his wife lived in poverty; and yet over the course of thirty-three years, Thomas gave away more than \$156,000, mainly in the form of \$1,000 checks he sent to people he read about in the newspaper who were going through hard times or who exemplified courage or kindness.

Thomas’s motivation came from an incident that happened when he was a young man at Naval Signal School in Chicago. When an explosion took the lives of many of his shipmates, Thomas concluded that he had been spared to help others, and this led to his passion for giving.

Thomas’s biographer commented, “Not many people would consider living in a house in a poor neighborhood without central heat, air conditioning, or a telephone, and working overtime *so that they could save money to give away,*” but Thomas did.¹⁰ Sounds a lot like our widow, doesn’t it?

One of the editors of *Christianity Today* recently told a personal story about how God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others: “About five years ago,” he wrote, “my wife and I visited a man who had once been our pastor. We discovered that he and his wife lived not far

⁵ For example, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2019628,00.html.

⁶ *Living*, p. 132.

⁷ *Living*, p. 133.

⁸ *Living*, pp. 129-130.

⁹ *Living*, p. 131. “Tithing provides a consistent and universal baseline,” he continued, “a theologically and biblically faithful standard that is nominal enough to allow people of nearly any income to meet without imposing great hardship and yet large enough to stretch us and to cause us to do the necessary reordering of our priorities that spiritually reconfigures our values” (p. 130).

¹⁰ “Thomas Cannon had Little Money to Give,” Omaha Sunday World Herald (July, 2005), 13A; Margaret Edds, “Cannon’s Canon,” www.HamptonRoads.com (7.24.05).

from us, and we renewed our old acquaintance. During one of our first visits, the man's grandsons—14-year-old twins—came for a visit. The moment I met them, an inner Voice told me that someday I would play a role in one of their lives. I brushed it off and thought little more of it.

“During the next several years, we got to know the twins well, and one of them shared with us his sense of call to the ministry of music. When the twins were 17, they and their parents visited us and toured the campus where I teach. The one called to music ministry was immediately impressed that he was to attend this particular university and none other. Over the next year, it became clear that he was very serious about this, and as far as I could tell, it had nothing to do with the fact that I teach there; he was following an inner sense of divine guidance.

“But my university is expensive, and his family is of modest means. During his senior year of high school, he applied for scholarships at my school without success. Even so, his enthusiasm for studying for ministry at this particular university remained strong. I wanted to help him, but professors don't make a lot of money, even at expensive Christian schools, and my books had never earned very much.

“On one beautiful morning in October, 2005, I went for a walk and began to cry out to God for my young friend. ‘Dear God, please use me to make it possible for him to go to this university!’ I don't know what I expected to have happen, but I committed myself to letting God use me however He wanted to on this young man's behalf.

“The next week, I was at the same spot in my morning walk when something truly amazing happened. A book title came to me, completely out of the blue. It was so clever that I knew two things instantly: it wasn't my idea, and it would sell.

“Then, in almost the same instant, the entire outline of the book appeared in my mind—every chapter and its title. I went home and immediately began to write. As I wrote, I had the distinct feeling that it was not I doing the writing. I had never written anything like this before. The words just poured out, and two weeks later, a 200-page manuscript sat on my desk.

“I knew it was good, but what was I to do with it? I'd never before written a book without a contract; but as I sat and looked at the printed pages, the name of a well-known Christian publisher suddenly came to mind. I'd never dealt with the company before, but I had met the chief editor at professional society meetings. I felt directed to contact him, even though I knew that publisher did not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

“I sent my acquaintance an e-mail containing the title and the outline. I received an encouraging response the very next day. He wanted to read the manuscript, and within weeks, I had a contract that amazingly required only very small revisions to what I had first sent.

“On top of this, the publisher wanted to pay me an astonishing advance royalty for the book—*ten times* anything I'd ever received up front before. I felt like I'd won the lottery!

“On another morning walk, I wondered what to do with this financial windfall. It seemed providential that the cost of my house's much-needed new roof was the same as the advance payment from my new publisher, so it seemed clear that we should get a new roof.

“And then God spoke: **‘It's not your money.’**

“ ‘What do you mean it's not my money?’ I asked, defensively.

“**‘It's not your money. It's his.’** The Voice inside my head was as real as if it were audible, and I was certain that it wasn't my imagination, because I didn't want to hear it.

“Then whose money is it?”

“The Voice named the young man for whom I had been praying. **It’s for him to go to the university and study for the ministry.**’

“All of it?”

“**That . . . and the rest.**’

“I knew ‘the rest’ meant any further royalties the book might earn, and I raised my fist and asked resentfully, ‘Well, *what about my roof?*’

“The Voice answered, **I’ll take care of your roof, if you’ll be obedient.**’

“If you want to use me to help him go to the university, why don’t you give me everything it will cost? Why just this?”

“**Others have to be obedient, too,**’ I heard in reply.

“When I got home, I told my wife, who had been looking forward to a roof that wouldn’t leak, about this conversation. I was shaking with emotion and sobbing almost uncontrollably. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

“Because my wife is more spiritual than I am, she immediately agreed to this plan. We would wait for a new roof. And I’m happy to tell you that today, my young friend is indeed attending my university in preparation for service as a Minister of Music.”¹¹

Now, with this story in mind, fast forward to what may yet happen through the life of that young friend who by now has probably finished his college studies. Here’s a story that could easily happen again:

When Keith Taylor was attending graduate school in Tennessee, his car broke down, and the repair bill caused him to be short on his rent that month. But fortunately for Keith, his boss at his part-time job paid the rent for him—as a gift, not a loan.

Later, as Keith reflected on his boss’s kindness and on other acts of generosity that had blessed his life, Keith decided that one day he would dedicate his life to helping others. “When I’m really rich,” he thought, “I’m going to start an organization to help the working poor.”

But then Keith was seized by a remarkable thought. “It occurred to me all of a sudden,” he says, “that no one who had ever helped me had ever been wealthy. They had just been ordinary people with extraordinary compassion.” And that’s when Keith Taylor began to act.

Keith decided that he would help one person each month get through some kind of financial crisis, and he set aside \$350 to get started. He also set up a very basic website that invited requests for assistance; but when that site was featured on a popular blog, Keith’s plans went out the window. He received 1,100 emails the next day, most of which were requests for help, but a surprising number of them were from people who wanted to help.

Building on this interest, Keith incorporated a nonprofit organization called “Modest Needs” (www.modestneeds.org). The organization’s first official grant saved a woman’s life—she received money for a mammogram that discovered a tumor—and it has been gaining steam ever since. “Every day is another miracle,” Keith says. “It’s beyond my imagination.”

¹¹ Anonymous, “My Conversation with God,” *Christianity Today*, March 2007, 45-47.

One exciting thing about *Modest Needs* is that almost 70 percent of those who receive help end up donating money back to the organization later. Kindness produces more kindness, and generosity produces more generosity.¹²

To close the loop on these stories, a recent book pointed out that if just the “committed American Christians” (defined as those who attend church at least a few times a month) decided to tithe their incomes, there would be an **additional 46 billion dollars a year** available for kingdom work. Here are some things \$46 billion could do:

- Send 150,000 new indigenous missionaries;
- Sponsor 50,000 additional theological students in the developing world;
- Make 5 million micro loans to poor entrepreneurs;
- Provide food, clothing and shelter for all 6,500,000 current refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East;
- Sponsor for 20 million needy children; and
- Provide all the money for a global campaign to prevent and treat malaria.

The authors concluded that “**Reasonably generous financial giving of ordinary American Christians would generate staggering amounts of money that could literally change the world.**”¹³

I think Richard Foster was right when he wrote that “When we let go of money, we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security, and this is precisely why it’s important to do it. . . . Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God a real adventure, and that is worth living and giving for.”¹⁴

As we wrap all this up for today, I suggest to you, my friends, that “**Others have to be obedient, too**” is a divine affirmation that may well have your name on it. I invite you to make extravagant generosity a way of life.

Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love, at the impulse of thy love.

Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee;
take my voice and let me sing always, only, for my King, always, only, for my King.

Take my lips and let them be filled with messages for thee;
take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold, not a mite would I withhold.

Take my love, my God, I pour at thy feet its treasure store;
take myself and I will be ever, only, all for thee, ever, only, all for thee.

¹² Jim Kavanagh, “The Unexpected Power of \$10 to \$20,” www.cnn.com (12.22.09).

¹³ Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, with Patricia Snell, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Richard Foster, quoted in “Reflections,” *Christianity Today*, June 12, 2000.