

## “Fruit of the Spirit: Extravagant Generosity”

1 Timothy 6: 2-10; 17-19

This is probably the sermon everyone has been dreading. Okay, well, maybe not everyone. I'm sure the Admin Team, you know the money people are glad one of the practices we are taking a look at is extravagant generosity.

But for the rest of us, let's be honest, we have probably all been dreading this sermon. I'm sure everyone is thinking, “Here she goes. Another sermon talking about money.” We all know what comes next when the church starts talking about money. Usually the next line is, “Please give more!”

Okay, let me ease your mind. I'm not going to ask anyone for money today nor am I going to guilt you into giving more. However, if you feel so compelled to share your tithes and offerings with this congregation, who am I to argue with you?

From the very beginning of this sermon, I want all of us to hear that this sermon is not about guilt. It is not about arm twisting. I'm not even going to show a picture of a crying child. Rather, I want us to understand that this sermon is a call for us to practice extravagant hospitality.

What's the difference you ask? Well, once we understand that, then all our conversations about faith and money will change. Let me explain:

Recently in the news, a pastor in Atlanta has been causing quite a stir. He has asked his followers to donate \$300. Why? Our first hope is that this money will go to eradicate hunger, to end homelessness. Or we would even be okay if this money went to implement plans to create youth outreach programs to prevent a rise in youth violence and crime. We would be okay if this money would go somehow, someway to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation.

Just imagine the possibilities. After all, this pastor has over 200,000 followers. Imagine if all of those 200,000 did give just \$300 apiece. Just imagine what that money could do to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation.

What is this pastor doing to do with this money, you might ask? The answer to that question is that he is going to purchase a plane. And not just any plane. This pastor wants to purchase a top of the line, biggest, fastest, most luxurious, most technological advance plane there is. All it would take is for his 200,000 followers to each donate \$300.

Now before my cynical grumpy side takes over, I will admit that this pastor said he needs the plane to travel the world to share the Gospel message.

I will tell you that my first thoughts while reading this article was that I'm sure this pastor has done lots of good but how is this plane really going to help the poor? I just couldn't get past the fact that I knew that Jesus said a lot about taking

care of the least of these but I'm not sure where a luxury private plane fits into the picture.

And I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Some of the comments after reading this particular article were scathing and very critical of the church. There were comments like, "See that's why I don't bother with the church any way. It is just one big scam." There were other comments like, "It is easier to preach the word of God for millions than do actual work. Religion is a fraud." And my favorite: "This preacher and all the others have the perfect set up. They sell you salvation and then you can't even sue them when you die because you realize that it was all lies."

As I read these comments and others like them, I was heart-broken. Is this what the wider church is really seen as? A fraud, a scam, a money-making operation? What about loving others as God has loved us? What about taking care of the least of these? What about promoting justice and grace for all of God's children? Why isn't the church known for those things instead?

As soon as I asked those questions, I realized my mistake. We've all seen the rise and fall of TV evangelists. I grew up on Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker. The expanse of their ministry was legendary in North Carolina. Their fall from grace

was even more so when it became evident that fraud was a huge part of their organization. For many people, this is what the church is. It is all excess and greed.

A lot of people will also argue that majority of the offerings given to support the church go for building upkeep and salaries instead of missions. Boy, I'm glad Ray isn't here to hear this sermon. He would be probably worried that the next words out of my mouth would be for us not to give to our General Fund!

However, I think we can all admit that the church has an image problem when it comes to money. Somewhere along the way the church allowed the lines that separate this culture of consumption from the Kingdom of God to get blurred or erased. We as people of faith have turned our faith into a product, into a consumable item that for the right price it can be yours. We don't have to look very far for examples of this consumable Christianity. We hear and experience them every day.

You see, within the wider Church, there is an understanding being shared called the prosperity gospel. This particular gospel says that if God favors you, then you will prosper. And if God doesn't favor you, then that's why you are down on your luck. So people need to do whatever it takes to win God's favor.

I will tell you that I have a hard time accepting and believing in this prosperity gospel. First of all, it flies right in the face of God's grace. We can't earn God's grace. It is freely given and it can never be taken away.

And second, when we think we can earn God's favor, we turn God into a wish granter or magician. God is none of those things. God is our creator who loves us more than we can imagine. The promises that we hear from our God tell us that God will always be there for us. Good, Bad, Ugly, Breath takingly beautiful, all those moments in our lives, God is there for us.

Okay, preacher, so how are we supposed to understand money and people of faith and what in the world does this all have to do with practicing extravagant generosity in the first place?

I'm getting to that. I want us to take a look again at our text from 1 Timothy. We all assume that money and faith don't go hand in hand. But really that's not what the Bible says. Paul understands that money is a fact of life. We need money to buy things like food and clothing. Money is a part of our lives and it is not going away.

Paul knows this. He knew it took money to finance his ministry. Jesus knew it took money to finance his travels while he was teaching and preaching. Money helps the Kingdom of God come to fruition here on earth.

What Paul wants Timothy to understand and us to understand is that money is not the end of be all. Think of it this way: Take a penny. Hold it in front of the sun. If you hold the penny far enough away from your face, the penny looks small and we can still see the sun. But if you hold the penny right in front of your face and concentrate only on that penny, you are going to miss out on everything around you.

Paul in this letter to Timothy never denies the value of money. It is not just the ultimate value. Paul wants Timothy to understand that the aim of our life's pursuits should be God and developing our relationship with God and with other. Paul says that we are called to be content.

Many people turn up their nose at that word content. We tend to think being content is a bad thing especially in a world that tells us more is always better.

But that is not always the case. What Paul has discovered and he is sharing with Timothy is that what begins as a quest for just a little bit more, you know, just enough to pay my bills, pay off my debt, just a little bit more to make life easier, this quest for just a little bit becomes what owns us. We fall into a cycle and soon discover that it is never enough. It becomes more and more until we lose sight of everything else in our lives.

Paul tells Timothy that this is how this world works. It is built on power and greed. It eats you up while you strive to fill that emptiness inside. We want more and more. We take and we take. The rules of this world always say there is a winner and a loser. And for me to have my more, someone has to lose, someone has to be without. This world teaches us a zero sum mentality.

But there is another way. The Kingdom Way, a way that understands that we have everything we need right now, a way that teaches us that there is more than enough to go around, a way that teaches us a positive sum mentality. We have been given everything to us by a God who loves us more than we could ever imagine. Our lives are filled with the abundance of God. And we don't have to strive for more and more. We are already filled. Our souls are already filled with God's grace. Our souls are already filled with God's love. Our souls are already filled with God's peace, that we can be content, happy, to look around and enjoy the world around us.

You see, extravagant generosity is not about more. It is not an economic exchange. Instead it is a generative act. By sharing out of my abundance, I create more abundance for all of God's people. Extravagant generosity does not subtract from what we have. It multiplies the effect we can have on the world.

