

The Walk: 4. Give
Matt 6:19-21; Luke 6:38; Acts 20:35
October 17, 2021
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

We continue in our message series, *The Walk*, in which we are looking at the essential practices/habits that will help us have a deeper, more meaningful, more life-changing walk with Jesus. So far, we have discussed the practices of worshipping God, studying scripture and serving others. Today we come to the practice of generous giving. Often, we talk about giving of our time, talents and treasures. Today, I want to focus on the connection between our money and our spiritual life. Jesus makes it clear that our relationship with money can either sabotage our spiritual life or deepen it. It can feel awkward to talk about money in church, but do you know, when we look at scripture, we find that Jesus talked a lot about money and material possessions. Like, *a lot*. Almost more than anything else. The most frequent topic in his teachings is the Kin(g)dom of God. Right after that, it's money. Obviously, Jesus thought we needed to talk about it.

As we learned in week one, we say "thank you" to God five times a day because God has been so generous to us. This generosity is seen most clearly on the cross where the selflessness and love of God were poured out for all humankind. And because we were made in the image of God, we were made to be generous, generous towards God and generous towards others. Today we are going to talk about how generosity can shape our hearts and influence the way we live in this world.

Last week we learned that kindness is love in action. Generosity is love that has taken over our wallets. It is taking an honest look at the resources we have and asking, "how can I bless someone else with these?" because what we do with our money tells us something about our character and the condition of our hearts. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Jesus said, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." But we live in a society where every voice around us is telling us just the opposite. If we just had bigger, better, nicer, or cooler stuff, we'd be happier and more fulfilled. These messages pop up in every aspect of our lives. We see them in commercials on TV and on the radio and on our social media feeds. And these marketers are savvy. Have you ever had the experience where you are discussing something in your home and then very soon after that, an ad for that exact item pops up on your Facebook page? Jerry and I were recently talking about the possibility of getting a harness for our puppy Jack when riding in the car so he couldn't come into the front seat. I wasn't even sure if such a thing existed but the very next day, there it was on my Facebook page, just a couple of clicks away from buying one. The world is constantly shouting at us that if we could have just a little bit more, we would finally have the Good Life. But that's not how it works.

So, what is meant by the Good Life? For many, that means having ample money, material possessions and leisure time. It's what the ancient philosophers called hedonism. Hedonism is having the goal in life of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. It's not that these are bad in and of themselves, but when that is the goal of your life, if that is what you think it means to live the good life, you're going to be disappointed over and over again. Sometimes, the good life is found in sacrifice, putting others' needs before your needs. Truth be told, sacrifice can be painful.

The problem with hedonism is something we all have experienced, and it is what psychologists call *hedonic adaptation*. It's when you think you really want or need something but once you finally get it, you quickly discover yourself thinking about the next best thing that you want or need. Your satisfaction with your new thing goes away quickly and you return to a set level of happiness. Researchers have seen this in people who win the lottery. There is an initial influx of joy of course, but after about a year or so, they return to the same general sense of happiness as before they won the lottery.

In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, we find one person who expressed hedonic adaptation the best. His name was Solomon. Solomon devoted his entire life to acquiring things. His goal was to maximize his pleasure in life and minimize his pain. But in his old age, as he was nearing the end of life, he wrote this, "I built houses for myself, planted vineyards for myself. I made gardens and parks for myself.... I made reservoirs for myself. I acquired male servants and female servants; I even had slaves born in my house. I also had great herds of cattle and sheep.. I amassed silver and gold for myself... I acquired male and female singers for myself, along with every human luxury, treasure chests galore!... I refrained from nothing that my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. Indeed, my heart found pleasure from the results of my hard work."

Now this sounds like someone who was happy, doesn't it? And why not? He had everything life had to offer. But over and over again Solomon comes to this conclusion, "I realized that it was pointless—a chasing after wind." If your life is built on a constant acquisition of more stuff, maximizing pleasure, and minimizing pain, you're going to find that you'll never be happy. You will never live the Good Life because happiness is found somewhere else. So, what does it mean to live the Good Life?

Today, I want to share with you three keys to finding happiness and living the Good Life. The first one is the antidote to hedonism and that is **wanting what you already have**. If you want what you already have, you are going to find inner peace, and joy and fulfillment in life. So how do we do this? It's so simple. Gratitude. By saying thank you to God for the gifts that you already have, you will come to appreciate them more. Let me give you an example. Jerry gave me this Apple Watch for Mother's Day in 2016. And I really like my Apple Watch. It has over 25 apps but I really just use 5 of them. I check the time and the temperature and forecast. I also use it to track my walking/running and I like the timer feature, so I don't leave the sprinkler running too long or clothes tossing in the dryer for too long. I have had this watch, the first generation, since 2016. They are now on Apple Watch 7. Last Christmas, I decided that I'd ask for a new Apple Watch. Now there is nothing wrong with my Apple Watch, I've just had it for 5 years. But it's a One model and I could have a Seven model. But in speaking with my daughter, Emily about her new, upgraded Apple Watch, she told me, Mom, there is NOTHING special about the Apple Watch 6. So, I let it go and gave thanks for the watch I had. But then on Mother's Day, I started thinking about my watch again. So, I called Emily and asked about her new watch. Again, she said, mom, there is nothing special about it. So, I let it go and gave thanks for what I already had.

Number two: **Live purposefully**. We've learned that hedonism is purposeless, a chasing of wind. So, if acquiring all this stuff is meaningless, perhaps the Good Life means finding what adds meaning and purpose to your life? For Christians, that means following Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." And then he shows us the way, teaches us the way, and then helps us understand the way. And these practices (worship, reading scripture, serving others and being generous givers) help us remember that this is where we find

meaning, purpose, joy and fulfillment. It is loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor, theologian, and participant in the German resistance movement against Nazism. When Hitler came to power, the church began to be infiltrated by Nazi theology and many welcomed the rise of Nazism. Bonhoeffer raised his voice in opposition to the Nazification of the church and to the persecution of the Jews. He called on the church to make their stand against these threats to Christian values. But in 1937, Bonhoeffer was arrested and taken to the Tegel Prison in Berlin, and later he was deported to the Flossenburg concentration camp and eventually executed, wrongly, for treason. What if you were imprisoned and condemned to die for a wrong you did not do? Could you find purpose and meaning in life? For Bonhoeffer, the answer was yes. He had an unbelievable sense of gratitude and cheerful disposition in even the worst situations. That was his purpose for living. A British officer who was one of the camp survivors said: "Bonhoeffer was different, his soul really shone in the dark desperation of prison. He always seemed to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near." Live purposefully. The last of the keys to living the Good Life is **generosity**, generosity towards God and towards others. What we do with our money is an expression of our love for God. We were made in the image of God; therefore, we were made to be generous. We give thanks to God five times a day because God gave everything to us for our pleasure.

So, this week, the fist reminds us that when we give to God through the ministry of the church, we can do big, impactful things that we cannot do by ourselves. We've seen this at work right here at Messiah Church this year in our giving away of \$150,000, \$50,000 each to our ministry partners of Bloom, Imara and Habitat for Humanity. These are life-changing gifts and many of us could not do on our own. But by pooling our resources and giving them to God, we can have a collective impact on our world.

The five fingers remind us that we are also meant to give generously as individuals at least 5 times a month. To look around and ask, "who needs my help? How can I share what I have with others?" We do that through acts of kindness, as we discussed last week, but we also do that through our financial giving. It was Winston Churchill who said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Many of us have figured out how to make a living but we haven't yet figured out how to make a life.

That is what Jesus was getting at when he said, "Give, and it will be given to you." This doesn't mean that for every dollar you give, you'll get more money back. That is what you'll hear from the TV evangelists who preach the Prosperity Gospel. And contrary to that teaching, Jesus did not discuss how to get wealth and hoard it. He did not tell people that their personal worth was dependent upon possessions. He did not advocate that people give money so to get much more in return.

What he did say is there is something about giving that blesses the giver. Giving fills you with a sense of purpose and joy. Researchers have found that giving has a positive effect on our bodies. It decreases our anxiety, lowers our blood pressure and heart rate and gives us a better sense of self-esteem. It is more blessed to give than receive. You were created for this. But like any habit, we must work at this.

That is why every fall Jerry and I fill out our pledge card together. I wish I could tell you that we have always been generous givers but to be honest, we struggled with that for many years. We

often waited to fulfill our pledge until the end of the year. And you know what the end of the year is like, with the holidays and travelling to be with family, there was never enough money left over for us to give. For many years, we waited until the end of the year to fulfill our pledge. Waiting until the end of the year made it hard and we never found joy in our giving because we were giving our leftovers and not our first gifts. But we continued to worship, participate in a faith group, and serve. God was working on our hearts. Eventually, we sat down and took a step in our giving. We found this feature on our bank's website called Bill Pay and set up automatic payments to go out on the 1st and 15th of each month. These were the days that we received our paychecks so the first gifts out of our paycheck, were given back to God. And do you know what, we didn't feel the pain of giving like we had when we waited until the last minute. We felt joy! In fact, we have made it our goal to increase the amount of our gift every year. This is the Biblical model of giving, giving the first gifts to God. It is a tangible way for us to say Thank You, God for everything!

Let's pray: Thank you God for everything. We recognize that everything we have is a gift from you. Help us to become more generous and willing to share what we have with others as we remember your unending generosity towards us. In Jesus name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 17, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Creator God, make me glad this day. Remove my distractions, my heart-worries, my to-do lists and should-have-would-have-could-haves and all the constant stress and strain. And in their place, O God, give me more of You, so that my heart is filled with peace, my mouth with laughter, and my tongue with shouts of joy! Fill me to brimming and overflowing with the joy of the Lord: a good measure of God, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. Amen.

Monday, October 18

Scripture: Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

Observation: The Jerusalem Temple was a huge religious, social, and even business center, bustling and noisy. Sustaining the institution took many large gifts—and many people gave such gifts. (Matthew 6:2 even hinted that some people hired a bugler to attract notice as they gave large gifts to good causes.) But Jesus noticed, and honored, a different kind of giver. He praised a generous, trusting widow who gave her "fortune"—two tiny copper coins—to the Temple.

Application: How much equipment or staff would the widow's offering, which Jesus praised, have made possible for the Temple? Sometimes we think we give just to boost the church or other worthy institutions. In honoring the widow's trusting generosity, what spiritual impact of generosity did Jesus recognize? How does giving, of any amount, enrich you spiritually?

Prayer: Lord of heaven and earth, teach me how to love you as much as the widow Jesus noticed. Teach me how to offer my time, my talents, my treasures, and myself for your glory. Amen.

Tuesday, October 19

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24

“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how terrible that darkness will be! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Observation: We must choose what we value most even in our hobbies (for example, if a band you love has a concert on the same night your favorite team has a big game, which do you attend?). Jesus focused on the biggest choice all of us are called to make in life—the choice of our ultimate, governing loyalty. Wealth, in and of itself, is value neutral, but Jesus said putting it at the emotional center of your life is not. He taught that “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and added, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Application: We can spend money on many things—vacations, various collectibles, prized belongings, tickets to special events, houses, fancy cars, retirement savings. Have you ever put money into something touted as “secure” that proved to be insecure? What do you think Jesus meant by collecting “treasures in heaven”? Where is your heart—do you put as much time and energy into “investing” in heaven as into earthly investments and spending choices?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are Lord of my life, and I want to collect treasures in heaven. As I make concrete, everyday choices of how to spend my time, energy, and money, increase my capacity to live out your values. Amen.

Wednesday, October 20

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

“Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Observation: Using exaggeration to make a point (as in “That bag weighs a ton”), Jesus warned against worry, not against planning. So, today’s passage may feel radical at first,

against all common sense. That may have been even more true for Jesus' first hearers. Jesus' audience would have been ordinary peasant people who had to worry about their next meal all the time, yet Jesus tells them not to worry about anything. He asks them instead to view the world with new eyes, in order to see all around them evidence of God's care and provision.

Application: Jesus seemed to anticipate modern research, saying, "Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?" (vs. 27) In fact, worry shortens our life! What inner arguments, if any, do you make about why it "makes sense" for you to worry, or why it would be "irresponsible" not to worry? How can you distinguish needs from wants, and make plans without worrying?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.

Thursday, October 21

Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

Someone from the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus said to him, "Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?" Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." Then he told them a parable: "A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and goods. I'll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, 'Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

Observation: Jesus' sad parable underscored a basic kingdom principle: "One's life isn't determined by one's possessions" (vs. 15). The day comes for all when the only question is, "Who will get all the stuff I've accumulated?" Both Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5 called greed a type of "idolatry," of loving something more than God. This life, and any material possessions we enjoy in it, will end. Only God can (and does) offer us eternity.

Application: The man in Jesus' story never asked the question, "How much do I need?" He never said, "Maybe I'll give away some of this huge harvest." How easy or hard is it for you to be generous with the money, time, or stuff you have? What wishes or fears get in the way of living generously?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, whenever my life ends, I want my greatest treasure to be stored up with you, not left behind for an auctioneer to dispose of. Guide me into the kind of life that is rich toward you. Amen.

Friday, October 22

Scripture: Mark 10:17-22

As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. You know the commandments: *Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't cheat. Honor your father and mother.*"

“Teacher,” he responded, “I’ve kept all of these things since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Observation: A devout, apparently earnest young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life. Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him and identified the man’s fixation on wealth as his main spiritual obstacle. Unwilling and unable to reset his priorities, the man went away sad. It didn’t seem to take him long to decide that he didn’t want eternal life THAT much.

Application: Jesus’ startling question to the young man wasn’t a general command. But the young man’s response confronts each of us with the hard question, “Which possessions, if any, do I value so much that I’d choose them over following Jesus?” We know the young man turned away from the “treasure in heaven” Jesus offered. If Jesus asked you to give up, not everything, but maybe your biggest treasure, how would you answer?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you offer me heaven’s riches. Give me a heart that can accurately assess the treasure of your kingdom, valuing it properly against any other claims. Amen.

Saturday, October 23

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn’t give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, *He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.* The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. Your ministry of this service to God’s people isn’t only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ’s gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. Thank God for his gift that words can’t describe!

Observation: Paul was gathering a gift for Christians in Jerusalem. He was more concerned with the spirit in which people gave, though, than with the amount raised. “God loves a cheerful giver” was not just an upbeat slogan. It was a serious call to check why they gave. “They shouldn’t give with hesitation or because of pressure,” he said. Paul didn’t invent that idea. In Exodus 25:2, the word about offerings to build the desert tabernacle was “Receive my gift offerings from everyone who freely wants to give.” Then Paul wrote, “God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace” (verse 8), and “You will be made rich in every way” (verse 11). Paul, a traveling Christian preacher who owned, as far as we know, no real estate, no life insurance policy, and no retirement plan, wrote about having more than enough!

Application: Have you ever given reluctantly or under compulsion? What was that experience like? For what reasons would God want us to give from free, grateful hearts without coercion or pressure? Have you ever given that way? If so, how was that different from giving under pressure? In verse 15, Paul exclaimed, "Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!" What gift was he talking about? When (if ever) have you received a gift from someone that "left you speechless," that words couldn't fully describe? How would you compare that kind of experience with God's freely given gift which Paul described?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, open my eyes to the abundance you provide around me. May my heart sing as, out of your abundance, I seek to be your physical presence to the people in my world. Amen.