

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Spiritual Disciplines: Generosity & Simplicity
2 Corinthians 8:1-5

We started the year with a series based on a book called *The Christian Atheist*. The author's premise is that 87 percent of the people in America say that they not only believe in God but they believe that Jesus is God. We are theists, but we believe *this way* and we live *that way*. We live as if God either does not exist or God does not care. The concept behind *The Christian Atheist* is that what you do is what you really believe and it tries to bring together the different places where we believe one thing and live a different thing. When it turned to Lent we said, "If that is the case, is it possible for us to follow Jesus in a way that starts to make it so that what we believe is closer to how we live?"

We have been looking at some practical exercises or practices or disciplines that we might put into our lives on a regular basis that would help bring what we believe and what we live come together. We started out with the idea of solitude; that God often speaks to us when we are finally quiet and can examine our lives. Then we talked about what real worship is like. Is it the emotion behind the song or the long prayer or the short prayer? How does that impact us? And then last week young Lee talked about the power of confession, the spiritual discipline of not only admitting our brokenness in general, but specifically to God and to somebody else - how that could free us up, not just from guilt but to live differently as we go forward.

Today I want to return to something that we talked about earlier in *The Christian Atheist* series, the same topic as four or five weeks ago. As I was flying recently, I was thinking about the sermon, and it felt a little weird, a little odd, that we would do the same thing four weeks apart, but I remembered something one of my mentors, a famous preacher, said. He said, "John, if the sermon is only worth being given once, then it wasn't worth being given once." I still wasn't sure about it, but then I remembered a book by a guy named Juan Carlos Ortiz from Latin America. Ortiz was part of a movement throughout Latin America where thousands and tens of thousands of people from the lowest class of society all the way to the richest were not only coming to church but were coming to God in powerful ways. Juan Carlos Ortiz was one of the first ones who caught that wave, and he wrote a book called *Disciple* that I read when I was in seminary. When I read it the first time, I did not need glasses. Ortiz talks about things they changed in order to have God change them. He said, "One of the things we changed was the way we did church and preached because our people would hear a lot of things. They would listen and listen and listen year after year. What could they do besides listen? I mean, two messages a week, 52 weeks a year, 110 messages. They thought they would have been better off to say to themselves, 'I'll listen to this one message, and then I'm not coming back to church until I'm putting it into practice in my life.'"

I am not recommending that you stop there, "I'll listen to this one and put it into practice in my life, instead of next week being on to the next thing." Ortiz says at the end, "I have seen so

many people fill so many handkerchiefs in church and still not be obedient. We don't need to weep so much as we need to learn how to obey, and we can only obey if we are not thinking that you can hear something in 25 minutes and understand it and agree with it and put it into practice." It sounds a little arrogant when I say it that way, but we need to believe that Jesus had a very limited range of things that he talked about, and He kept coming back to them over and over and over.

How many of the things that we have talked about, whether in *The Christian Atheist* series or in the *Spiritual Disciplines* series, have you been able to implement into your life to establish a new pattern that you feel has brought you closer to God, or are you just coming to church to hear a sermon? How many of you, like me, need a reminder because you want to live like that but you forget? How many of you have tried a tool that we talked about but it did not work and you need a different tool? So let's be like Jesus and talk about something that we've talked about already because God seems to think it is important.

I introduced this topic by talking about a friend of mine. Remember I talked about the old Scottish elder who got up in the pulpit and said, "Ah've coom today to talk to yooou 'bout money. Y've got it. We want it." We went on to talk about the idea of the temptation of money. I'd like to do it from the other side now. Sometimes it can feel a little weird when a church talks about money. You start to think, "All the talk about money is so they can get our money." Well, that is not it exactly, but let me just say this up front. If giving generously to the church isn't part of your life, then you need to find another church worth investing in, a church where you are excited about what they are doing, and then you need to get behind it in a significant way. I am not trying to guilt anybody. I am just saying, "If this is about us and God and living differently, then that ought to affect us. I am saying that so that you don't think that this is about, "Give more money." This is not that sermon because I believe if you get involved with what you support, the tone starts to change from "Is it that time again? I thought we just talked about money last week." And instead you will start to say, "Wow! How can we do more?"

The apostle Paul wrote a bunch of letters, several to a church in Greece in a town called Corinth. We've got 1st Corinthians and 2nd Corinthians. He probably wrote at least four different letters back and forth to the Corinthians. In the first letter he talked to them about money, and he ended the letter this way.

² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Now several months later Paul is writing probably a third letter to them, but it is found in 2nd Corinthians 8. He said this.

¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

They are just down the road.

² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even

beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.⁵ And they went beyond our expectations; having given themselves first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us.

Then he turns to the Corinthian church, a very proud church, and he says to them in verse 7,

⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love....

Faith and hope and love,

...we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving....

¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.

And they are off! The tradition of the Christian church is to talk about different temptations. In the Middle Ages they talked about the three temptations of the church being the world, the flesh, and the devil. About 25 years ago a man named Richard Foster wrote a book called *Celebration of Discipline*. He said that if Jesus were writing today, He would probably talk about money, sex and power, the world, the flesh, and the devil, so I am getting into this assuming two things. The first thing I am assuming is that you very much want to be less worried about money and, frankly, that you want to be generous. Everybody wants to think that they are generous. Then the second thing is that it is a battle, a battle between what I want and what I haven't got. The early church struggled with that all the way through, but somehow following Jesus together changed their lives enormously. Remember, it says in Acts,

⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple....

As each person had to eat, they pooled all their belongings and distributed them so no one in their company would go hungry. This ethic spread. There was a Roman emperor, Julian, who hated Christians. He was jealous of Christians who by now have spread all over the Empire. He writes to one of his regional governors about the Christians and says, "Their success lies in their charity to strangers. These impious Galileans support all their own poor and ours as well."

Julian and the church historians agree that generosity was at the forefront of the explosion of the early church. Something had changed in these people's lives that was so attractive - "I've got to be part of that." At the same time, they struggled all the time with money. There was a gap between the rich and the poor that seemed to grow. There was the desire to impress other people with generosity, to look more spiritual. There were even people who lied about how much they were giving. Can you imagine that, a month before tax day, that somebody would be lying about how much they were giving? I can't imagine it.

A lot of these people in the early church had great intentions but did not follow through when it came to generosity. I want to look at this passage and ask, how does Paul help them, and if you are really worried about money and would like to be generous, how can Paul help you? Here is

what I would like you to do. In the bulletin there is a little space there called Sermon Notes. I would love it if each one of you or each family at least would just grab a bulletin and the pencil or pen in the pew in front of you. I am going to give you three phrases, and at each one, I am going to try to remember to ask you to grade yourself from zero to ten. Let's start with the baseline. If somebody were to ask, **how generous are you**, if Scrooge was a zero and Mother Teresa was a ten, where would you be? This is just between you and God and that nosy person sitting behind you. Okay, zero to ten. That is our baseline. Let's start there, all right? How do we become more generous people?

Well, the first thing Paul said is that we need to make it more about the vine and less about the grapes. People will talk about great wine or great grapes but in many ways, the grapes are the product. The vine is what matters. That is the way it is with generosity. Generous acts are often used by you and me to prove that we are close to God, that we are good people. That's grapes. Well, the apostle Paul says, "If you get close to the vine, you will produce good grapes. If you concentrate on just grapes, it will be sour." What I want to say is this. Generosity is the result of the grace that God has given you. It says it there right in the text, doesn't it?

¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

Generosity is the result of the grace God has given to you, and without receiving the grace first, all you are doing is distributing grapes, trying to prove that you are good. Paul says the same thing to the church in Corinth. He says,

³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

If I give everything I have to the poor and don't have love, then it is worthless. It doesn't mean anything. We have to concentrate on our relationship to God's grace and His love and realize that we cannot be free of the grip of our money without grace because when we receive God's grace, then we learn slowly over time to trust God.

Many of you believe in God but do not yet trust God. You do not trust that God will actually take care of you. You are hoarding. You are holding on. Paul says that it all starts by making it about the vine and not about the grapes. So, again, zero to ten, when you think about your faith, how your faith connects to your giving, are you closer to the vine? God has loved me, and I want to love others, that is a ten. Or if I give more money, God will like me more, that is a zero. Or, if I don't give at all, nobody will know, that is zero. From zero to ten, **where are you, the vine or the grapes?**

Another thing I saw in this passage is that Paul is not talking to a person, he is talking to a whole group of people and he is not talking just to the church in Corinth but to a lot of churches. They passed these letters around to each other. This idea of generosity is a community activity. It is not just about you, it is about us. So I think what the apostle Paul wants is for you to join the company of clowns. I think God wants you to be a clown. For some of you joining the company of clowns will be less of a stretch than for others, that we should look weird to the world, like a clown.

I got this image when Laura and I took the kids to Chile a couple of years ago. We are in Patagonia, the bottom of the world. We are on a bus, and we are the only non-Chileans on this bus. We are on it hour after hour when all of a sudden in the middle of nowhere, there is a roadblock in front of us. This can't be good. The bus stops, and into the bus come five or six clowns. They walk through the bus and look at everybody and go out the back door. Then they come around and walk through again. The second time they walk through the bus, the Chileans on the bus empty their pockets and give them money. Well, I'm not stupid. We give them money, too. Then we asked, "What is the deal?" In my halting Spanish I understood the lady next to us say, "These are the emergency service providers throughout Chile. For these three days of the year, they dress up like clowns and say, 'Help us help others!' When we see the clowns, we are delighted."

I want you to join the company of clowns. My ideas about this have changed a little because I think clowns are people who live differently than everybody else does. A couple of years ago we had the president of World Vision here, Rich Stearns. Rich talked about his book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*. He says most of us believe in the Gospel of God but we have a hole right in the middle where our money falls through. He says he believes God wants to close the hole in the Gospel. It was a great weekend and at the end of it, it was late in October, I had offered to take Rich golfing. I invited a friend of mine from St. Paul over, and we went to play golf. The two of them hit it off in the way only men can, just by insulting each other ruthlessly. They had a great time, but it had gotten so barbarous that I was a little worried because I had put a couple of copies of *The Hole in Our Gospel* in the backseat. I was going to ask Rich to sign a copy for this friend and give it to him. At the end Rich signs a book and goes, "You stink at golf. Let's hope you are better at this," and he throws the book at the guy.

I hear from Rich a couple of months later, and he says, "I lied." He said my friend had had a year end appointment with his accountant and his tax guy. He had met with them between Christmas and New Years. They wanted to talk to him because his giving patterns had changed. They said, "This is foolish. You cannot continue to do this. This better be a one-time occurrence." He said, "Guys, this is just the beginning." He said he gave each of them a copy of *The Hole in Our Gospel* and told them, "I want this book to wreck your lives like it has wrecked mine because I want company."

The company of clowns believes that the God of grace and generosity wants to free us up to be simple, generous people. We think we can't do that alone because we would look weird. You know how it is when you think of the people who are prophets, who give it all away to the poor, the long hair, the homemade clothes, the loud voice. We had one of them here at church. His name was Shane Claiborne. Shane is a fantastic guy. We spent time with him in Israel. He is just super and yet, he's weird, okay? He is different. He is one of the clowns. He is clearly a prophet, and he is one of the clowns. My question is, do I have to look like that to be what God wants me to be? Let me give you three minutes and five seconds of Shane Claiborne, and you tell me whether you think it is the way he is dressed or not.

(Video begins.)

Interviewer: All right, when we talk about the redistribution of wealth and sharing with others, you are not just talking about writing a check to the United Way, right? What are you talking about?

Claiborne: Yeah, it is very interesting in the 25th chapter of Matthew when Jesus talks about “When you do it to the least of these, you do it unto Me.” These aren’t distant acts of charity. It is not, when I was hungry and you wrote a check to the United Way, I ate there. When I was naked and you gave money to The Salvation Army, they clothed Me. These are all very personal acts. When I was in prison, you visited Me. When I was sick, you took care of Me. When I was homeless, you welcomed Me into your home. When you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto Christ.

What I see in that is this culture relationship, acts of charity or redistribution. That is really, really important. It is part of what I think it means to be a Christian in the call of Christ, but just as important as that is that we are in relationship to the poor. Mother Teresa said, “It is very fashionable to talk about the poor, but it is not as fashionable to talk *to* the poor.” I think we can do all sorts of things to promote fair trade, you know, drive a hybrid car, whatever it is, and still not be in relationship with people who are hurting and in poverty, but that is, really, one of the central calls of Christ.

I am convinced that the great tragedy in the church is not just that rich folks don’t care about poor folks, but that rich folks don’t *know* poor folks because when we really have an encounter across class, the discomfort of the poor becomes our discomfort. It begins to challenge the things that we hold true. It changes conversations in church board meetings when you are arguing whether or not you are going to buy a heater for the baptismal and you’ve got sisters and brothers in El Salvador who are dying because they don’t even have water. I think that is just as important as campaigns like *make poverty history*. Just as important, I think, is to make poverty personal.

Interviewer: Is it a sin to be rich?

Claiborne: It’s funny. I’ve gotten to know Rick Warren’s outfit. He wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*. He was asked that question and had a great answer. He said, “It is not always a sin to get rich. I mean sometimes you write a book, and you sell a million copies.” But he said, “It is a sin to die rich.” That is really an interesting answer. I think sometimes we don’t know what all comes at us, but we need to get rid of it as quick as we can.

John Wesley, who is a hero of mine, said, “If I should die with more than ten pounds in my pocket, may everyone call me a liar and a thief because I’ve betrayed the Gospel”. What he did was, he captured his income loss every year. He would only live off of a certain amount and would give the rest away which in the beginning was pretty easy because he didn’t have much money. But when he started generating large amounts of money, he still lived at the poverty level and gave the rest away. I think it almost doesn’t matter how much we give but how much we have left.

(Video ends.)

I think we better stop there. I think one of the things that struck me when I first saw Shane was how weird he looked and how odd it was to hear a prophet with a southern twang but as I have had the privilege of getting to know him, I think how much we are called to live the same life. He has a little commune in Philadelphia called The Simple Way. They live in community and share

all their stuff. They live among the poor and yet he says that it is not about that. I love what he said, "It is fashionable to talk about the poor, but very few of us talk *to* the poor." It is not that the rich people don't care about the poor. It is that they don't *know* the poor.

So here is the next of these. If you are in the company of clowns, you are slowly getting to know some people who are among the poor. How is that going for you? It might be something as simple as a sponsored child. That is more than a check. You write letters. You get letters back. I deliberately did not put Families Moving Forward in the announcements but on Easter Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, we have the privilege here in the church of being the host for the poor. We cook their meals and play with their children, and we give them a safe place to sleep and rest. That gives you the privilege of having conversations with poor people that will bless us all.

It is not a sin to be rich. It is not a sin to get rich. It is a sin to die rich. That is one that I think we need to struggle with some, the calling for you and me to alter the way that we live. So zero to ten, **how are you doing on simplifying your life so that you can be more generous?** Not going out and buying weird clothes but simplifying something so that the money from that something can go to something different. How are you doing on that?

If it is more about the vine than about the grapes, the grace God has given us, then it is more about community than it is any one person. When you talk about generosity, my brothers and sisters, you need to celebrate. You need to celebrate the *why* because it is so easy when you lose track of the *why* to either feel like, will this never end, they are always talking about money, or, hey, I'm doing pretty good. Instead, we need to celebrate the *why* because that celebration energizes us. Paul says, "We want you to know all about what God has been doing in the Macedonian churches." In other places he will say, "I want to remind you of how spectacularly you did last year. We want you to never forget this. We want you to see it again with fresh eyes."

One of the things some of you here do to not see the poor as the poor but as your friends is tutoring. There are several different places. One of the members here who tutors up at Calvary has developed a friendship with a young man named Eric. Eric is a sixth grader, but he reads between second- and third-grade level on a good day. All year they have been working on his reading. He hasn't done well, in part, because all of his friends there for the tutoring program made fun of him, so the tutor got an office so he is one-on-one with Eric. It is starting to pay off and in slow ways Eric is reading. One day at the end of the session, the tutor said, "That's great! I think we're done for today."

Eric closes his books and starts to stand up, and the tutor says, "Eric, Eric, look at me, okay? Eric, I want you to know one thing. You are an amazing young man. Where you have come from and what you have suffered through, you think that you are a loser, but you are an amazing young man." "Okay, okay, thanks." "No, no, Eric, look at me. You are an amazing young man. Tell me what I just said." And Eric goes, "I am an amazing young man." "No, no, tell me what I just said," "I am an amazing young man." But he doesn't believe that yet. They go out of the office, and the reward for Eric working hard is that the tutor will play pool with him. They are playing pool and the director of the tutoring program comes up, and the tutor turns to Eric and says, "Tell him what you learned today." Eric says what they were reading, what they were working on, and then he looks at the director and goes, "I am an amazing young man." I think a little bit of heaven came to earth right there because he *is* an amazing young man.

I got this email from a dad whose college age son writes to him and says, "Dad, I'm giving up coffee for Lent. I'm giving the money to IJM [International Justice Mission]." The kid said that and now I'm getting a daily update from his dad. His son says, "I've saved six kids from slavery today. How is your day going?" Don't you want your kids to see that in you?

We are going to end with a song, *Take My Life*, and then we will close. We often sing these songs to make us think about simplicity, but simplicity is not simple in a world filled with braces and recessions and mortgages and college payments and fixed incomes and people who are living very much like you, a world where you are afraid to look like a clown. I pray that you will not let this sermon degenerate into just another teaching. I pray that the love of God will help you become a more generous child of God, that you will find one thing to be simple about and discover how to share the life that is really life.

Lord Jesus, You came among us, and You lived a simple life. You said You didn't even have a place to call Your own, but You were wildly generous with your time and Your love and Your healing power. If you had money, You would have given that away, too. I pray that You will put Your Spirit inside of us to inspire us to be generous people, to find the great joy of knowing those who have less, those who are the least, the lost, the left behind, and not just share our money but our lives with them and that You will bless them and You will bless us. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All God's children said,

All: Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.