

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 24 & 25, 2012
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The Gen 3 Project: Generosity
Luke 12: 32-34**

Good morning! These last three weeks we've been doing a series entitled *Gen 3, Generating Generosity across the Generations*. It is really just simply about what if all of us who follow Jesus were to surrender and allow Him to live His life through us, and in this needy world, give of our time, our talent, and our treasure. What might that look like? John [Pastor John Crosby] and Brad [Pastor Brad Jackson] kicked off the series talking about the generative power of the Gospel and how that changes everything. Last week Lee [Pastor Lee Hanssen from The Table] spoke about how generosity is not a function of how old you are. It's not confined to certain stages and ages of life, but is expressed throughout all generations. Today we close out this series looking at what it means to be generous. Biblical generosity. So let's read now from chapter 12 of the Gospel of Luke.

²² Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ²⁵ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? ²⁶ Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

²⁷ "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. ³⁰ For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. ³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Do you ever stop and wonder what causes fear and anxiety and worry in us? Do you know that almost every Book in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation has these phrases in it, "fear not" and "do not fear"? It occurs in the passage we just read. We live in a world that's full of anxiety and worry and fear. One of my fears, I must confess, is talking about money. It's kind of ironic, isn't it, that I'm the one who pulled that straw, but that's one of my anxieties, talking to people about money. I don't like talking to my own wife about money, let alone a congregation full of people who might have an adverse reaction, so I decided I was going to mix things up a little bit today. You know, there is this old saying, "Money talks". Well, I kind of wanted to play around

with that idea. What would money say to us if it were unredeemed and trying to pull us away from God? On the other hand, what would money say to us if it *were* redeemed, if it was actually trying to lead us in the direction of God?

So I want to do a message this weekend, kind of around the idea that money talks. To help us get a better understanding, a clearer sense of that, I have this little visual representation here. I have *money* written on this piece of paper. This is a flash of inspiration I got from one of the political conventions this year. I have this empty chair, and I'm going to have a conversation about money, not with you but with the empty chair. What would money say? Well, the first thing money would say is that you should look around and compare yourself with other people. Not other people who have less than you, but people who have more than you. That's what money would say.

There is a really interesting study that came out of MIT. They were studying the happiness level of Olympic medalists. After an event, obviously the gold medalist comes in first and did best, then the silver medalist, then, thirdly, the bronze. Well, who do you think is the happiest after an event like that? The gold medalist. Who do you think is the second happiest? Strangely enough, it is the bronze medalist because the bronze medalist is actually looking downward and comparing himself with No. 4 and thinking to himself, "I almost didn't get a medal at all. I am just so grateful to be here on this stage." But guess who No. 2, the silver medalist, is comparing himself with? The person who got the gold. That's because he is saying to himself, "If I had just gotten the gold, if I had just been a few seconds faster, I would be so much happier. Oh, if I just could have done that!" There is something really deep in the human psyche and the human heart here. Money will say to you, "Keep looking at people who have more than you, and just think about how much happier you would be if you had that." This is from Proverbs, chapter 14. The writer says,

³⁰ A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.

Another thing that unredeemed money would say, in trying to distract you from living in the full flow of God's Spirit, and kind of related to the first statement is this, "You don't have a greed problem." Unredeemed money will say, "You don't have to worry about being greedy because greedy people are way wealthier than you are. You don't have enough money to be counted as greedy." Interestingly, Jesus was talking one time to a crowd of mostly very poor people, a lot poorer than you and I are. He said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

What is really interesting as you look at this text is that earlier in chapter 12, Jesus was confronted by a person with a lot of money, a man of means. The man had an inheritance and he had this question about money for Jesus. Jesus turns to him and tells a parable about the rich, young fool. In other words, Jesus responds to the man of means with a parable, a story, about a man of means. But now shift to this part of the chapter. Jesus turns to His disciples, and you know that His disciples were basically working class poor, not people who had money. Actually, they were often in a position of wondering how to make ends meet. Yet instead of turning away from this subject of the spiritual dangers of money, Jesus goes into twelve more verses of some of the most hard-hitting teaching on the subject. Now why would He do that?

The most important teaching we get out of this message is that Jesus is saying that money affects you. The presence of money or the absence of money, either way, can distort your life. Jesus is saying you are not free from the distorted power of money just because you don't have any. Money has the ability to blind you and control you and corrupt you whether you have it, whether you don't have it, or whether you are somewhere in the middle. It is very easy, especially for people who don't have much money, to see how those people who have money or are in the presence of money are blinded and corrupted and controlled by it. It is so easy to see when money is present how it does that. You see, one of the things that money will do is, it will try to lure you into thinking that, as long as there as there is a Bernie Madoff in this world, then I'm okay. Then I know I don't have a problem.

Well, another thing that unredeemed money will do is, it will try to lure you away from God by saying, "*Worry* about me. *Worry* about money." There are a lot of surveys that have been done about what makes people worry, what makes people anxious. Do you know what the No. 1 subject is that always tops the lists? Money! We worry about money. Verse 22,

²² Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.

You know the strange thing is I have the illusion that what I need to keep me from worrying about money is acquiring more money. If I just had more money, I wouldn't worry about money. But I keep getting more money and I keep thinking more *about* money. I keep worrying more about it, and additional money just doesn't bring me the relief that I had hoped it would.

Another thing that unredeemed money would tell you is that there is such a thing as *enough*. You just don't have it. You keep running after it because you will get there. Eventually you'll get there. Bill Hybels at Willow Creek, [Pastor at Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago]...some of you know Bill...he noted a survey where they were asking people, "What is your favorite recreational activity?" And do you know what the No. 1 favorite recreational activity for an American is? Shopping. Not a sport, not a hobby, not being with friends, or learning or reading. Shopping, for crying out loud! Bill's wife, Lynne, decided that she wanted to get off this consumer treadmill. She just felt like she wanted to get a little more of the heart of God than she had, and so she had this adventure with God around this. She decided that what she was going to do was to not buy any clothing for a whole year, for 12 months. No shoes, No dresses. Nothing for an entire year and see how that went.

Now Bill describes himself as 100 percent Dutch, and so he was fine with that idea. But Lynne decided not only was she not going to not spend the money, she was going to give away all the money that she would have spent on clothing to fighting AIDS in Africa. While she was doing this and engaging in this, she started giving more money than she would have had she spent it on clothing. She started giving so much that by the end of the year, her husband Bill was begging her to go back to shopping.

Money will whisper to you, "If you just keep getting more, it will get you to enough." And one of the things that following Jesus will do for people sometimes is this counterintuitive thing, this counterrevolutionary thing. It would be possible for many of us to do it here. To say, "You know what? I have enough." Instead of this reflexive, instinctive, "I have to keep increasing my lifestyle. So, if more resources come my way, it means more, bigger, better, newer, more," let's just say, "Enough!" Can we just say that enough is enough? Today I am just declaring Enough

Day! My lifestyle is adequate for my life. If God sends more resources my way, instead of just thoughtlessly trying to build that up, I'm going to actually ask Him, "God, can You use this to bless other people?" Okay, I think we've heard enough from this guy, this unredeemed guy.

What does God say? What are the positive things that the Bible says about money, stuff, values, possessions? These are all God's inventions. These are all things that God created. He wants them to be redeemed because money can be a force to draw us to God. Money can be a source of great satisfaction for ourselves and for others. Here is what I think redeemed money would say to us if it was repurposed, if it was actually helping us grow closer to God. I think the first thing it would say is, "Don't look to money for contentment." What would a world look like if we lived in contentment? I heard an interesting story a couple years ago that was so striking to me because it made international news. A man named Allen Large and his wife Violet, a couple in Canada, won \$11 million in the Canadian lottery and then they gave it almost entirely away. That made international news as you can imagine. Our world was stunned to hear Violet, who was just barely recovering from cancer say, "What you never had, you never miss." And Allen, who commented saying, "The money we won was nothing. We still have each other." Their act of generosity, of contented generosity, as a couple who had very little, giving away \$11 million stunned the world. Is it possible for love to be so full in our lives that we are content, that we are generous?

Wait a minute! Some of you may be asking, and rightly so, we live in a world with plenty of reasons for discontent, is it possible to be content? There is cancer. There is divorce. There is unemployment. There is violence. This week our attention has been focused on everything that is wrong in the world. If you look at God's house in Egypt and Eastern Congo, the people are fleeing war and disease, struggling as refugees, seeking food. People are desperate to find a dollar to feed their children and give their children a future. That is the world we live in. Is it possible to be content? This is what the apostle Paul says when he wrote to the church in Philippi. Let's read this in chapter 4 together.

¹² ...I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Now a lot of times you hear those words, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength," but then those words get ripped out of context and applied to all kinds of stuff. The actual strength that Paul is talking about here is the strength to say, "I don't have to have everything the world tells me I need to have in order to be content." In fact, Paul said, "I have learned the secret of being content." Contentment is actually something that you learn, not something that you buy. He says, "I've learned the capacity for contentment even in situations when I'm hungry. Even when I'm in want, I can be content. Not through my own power. I can do everything through Christ, through Him who gives me strength. I'm not waiting any more for my situation to make me happy, to make me content, because situations change." If there is anything we should have learned in these last four years, it is this. Finances and markets and cash flows go up and down all the time. Anybody notice that? Recently I heard a guy say, "You know, my wife and I have wanted to downsize for some time. We used to live in a \$500,000 house. Now we live in a \$250,000 house, and we didn't even move." Situations change all the time. If you are waiting for situations to make you content, it is not going to happen.

So how do we do this? How do we live into this? Jesus says, "Consider." He says this word twice; consider, think. We are told in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit's job when we are considering, when we are thinking, is to come and show us that we are children of God.

¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are God's children.

Now the two things that we are called to do are actually rather simple and yet they are also very hard. Jesus says to **seek first the Kingdom above those other things.**

³¹ But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Seek first the Kingdom over these other things. Treasure in heaven, eternal things, same thing. Why would God say that? If you know that you are adopted into the family of God, you know you are saved, but not because you are a good person. You know you are saved because of what Jesus Christ has done, what Jesus Christ went through. One of the ways you know you are a sinner saved by grace, and not a moralistic person who thinks that you are saved by being good, is that you know you have been given the Kingdom. Jesus says, "You're not performing to get it. You have been given the Kingdom." You are saved through adoption and brought into God's family. How do we know that?

Well, the second thing Jesus says we are called to do is to **start putting our money into the poor.** There is an interesting admonition in verse 33. He says,

³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor.

One of the ways you definitely know you have been brought into God's family is that you will want to give to the poor because when you see the poor, you know you are seeing yourself. You know that you have been saved by grace and not by works because when you look at the poor, you never, ever say, "What's wrong with these people? Why don't they just pick themselves up and get themselves together?" Never! It would be impossible for you to say that! When God looks at the poor, He sees us without resources, not capable of coming to ask for what is needed, and He comes to us. Though Jesus was rich, He became poor so that through His poverty, our poverty might be wiped out; through His poverty, our poverty might be redeemed. Do you know that? When Jesus says to His disciples, "Sell your possessions," certainly they didn't have bank accounts. If you were going to give anything away then, you had to sell something. It meant going to the mat.

Now here is where it gets really personal because this idol, money, is a very powerful idol in our day and age, in our hearts. Here is the question. If you are a follower of Jesus, will you fully surrender your time, your talent, your treasure, your possessions, your income, your lifestyle? We sing songs about this. We'll sing one about this in a few moments. It is pretty easy to sing songs, but we are not talking about singing songs right now. Will you really surrender? Will you give God full authority over all of your life including your material, your financial wealth? Again, it is not a legalistic thing, and it will look different for every single person here. We don't judge anybody on this. This is between me and God. It is between you and God. What if money were no object? Would we live the same way? Would our priorities change?

I had an interesting conversation recently with my son, Jake. Jake is a college freshman. He's spent a lot of time in the last couple of years being anxious, stressing out about his academic

performance to make sure that he got into the right school and guarantee himself success in life. In the process, I ended up transferring all of my stress and all of my anxiety and all of my fear onto him. You can relate to that. Well, finally one day Jake said to me, “Dad, here is a link to a video that I saw on YouTube. I want you to watch this and after you watch it, can we talk?” So I watched it, and I want to share it with you.

(Video shown.)

What makes you itch? What sort of a situation would you like?

That supposed, I do this often as vocational guidance for students. They come to me and say, “Well, we are getting out of college, and we don’t have the faintest idea of what we want to do.” So I always ask the question, “What would you like to do if money were no object? How would you really enjoy spending your life?” Well, it is so amazing. As the result of our kind of educational system, crowds of students say, “We’d like to be painters.” “We’d like to be poets.” “We’d like to be writers.” But as everybody knows, you can’t make money that way!

Another student says, “I’d like to live an outdoors life and ride horses.” I say, “Well, do you want to teach at a riding school?” Let’s go through with it. What *do* you want? When we finally get down to something, to what the individual says he wants to do, I will say to him, “You do that and forget the money, because if you say that getting the money is the most important thing, you will spend your life completely wasting your time. You will be doing things you don’t like doing in order to go on living. That is, you’ll go on doing things you don’t like doing, which is stupid.” It is better to have a short life that is full of what you like doing than a long life spent in a miserable way. And after all, if you do really like what you are doing, it doesn’t matter what it is.

Then you will be able to get a good fee for whatever it is, so don’t worry too much about what everybody says. Somebody is interested in it, and if you think you would be interested in it, then you will find out. But it is absolutely stupid to spend your time doing things you don’t like in order to go on buying things you don’t like and doing things you don’t like. You have to teach your children to follow in the same track: bringing up children and educating them to live the same sort of life in order that they may justify themselves and find satisfaction in life by bringing up their children to bring up their children to do the same. Therefore, it is so important to consider this question, what do I desire?

(Video ends.)

Well, the message of this video is pretty pointed. If there is any shortcoming in it, it would be the emphasis that it’s all about me, all about us. Our theological framework would add that God has uniquely fashioned each one of us and our ultimate goal, in fact, is to go against the stream of society and culture but ultimately into the unique calling that God has for each and every one of us. What if money were not an object?

After I watched the video, we talked, and Jake informed my wife and me that he was quitting school. He was going to live more simply and travel the world and figure out what it would mean for him to get off the rat race and recalibrate his life. Jake’s middle name is Luendu, which is

from my native language and means traveler. Jake said, “Dad, you shouldn’t have named me that if you didn’t want this outcome.” Well, this is very inconvenient timing, given this sermon I am preaching today. My first inclination was to panic and try to talk him back to his senses. I’m still not convinced that his decision is the right one for him, but I’m more convinced than ever that I have to surrender, even this, to God.

If you need to settle that surrender issue, now would probably be a good time. In a minute I am going to ask that we would bow our heads, and I invite you to pray and have a moment with God about nobody else but you and Him. Maybe the Holy Spirit is tugging at you. I don’t know what it will be like for you. Maybe you don’t either. Maybe it’s scary. “God so loved the world that He gave....” If you haven’t done it, and you know Jesus and He is in your life, will you surrender to Him right now? Let’s pray.

God, I want that idol to come down. You know it’s scary. You know God, that my possessions are what feel like my security, what feel like enough. I’ve been clutching to that, but I want to surrender. Heavenly Father, as best we can, we make You, with Your help, Lord over our financial lives. We now boldly name and confess that the money idol is powerful where we live and is even present in this room. God, You keep working at our hearts and gnawing away at us until You bring us to the freedom that comes when we surrender. We are grateful for Your gift, the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, who though He was rich, yet for our sake became poor so that we through Him might be made rich. We pray in Jesus’ Name. 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.