

Real Faith for Real Life: Giving/Generosity

Lessons: **Malachi 3:8-10 & Luke 21:1-4**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Malachi%203:8-10;%20Luke%2021:1-4>

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Some of you know that I used to be a waitress. For a year or so, I worked the graveyard shift at the Bagdad Café. The Bagdad is a diner in the Castro district of San Francisco. Restaurant patrons are an eclectic group, even more so at diners, and a diner in the middle of the night in the party center of San Francisco draws a truly wide variety of people, with truly diverse needs and desires. Diner patrons, particularly in the wee hours of the morning, particularly after much carousing, do not tend to put on what you might call “company manners”.

Waitresses working the graveyard shift in a diner might as well be wearing a big target on their shirts. It’s amazing how much you put up with: customers moan about their wives or husbands or partners, they tell you every little thing about their lives, they give you highly specific orders for things they don’t really want, or that aren’t very good for them. Or they won’t tell you what they want then they’ll complain about what they receive. And always, always, they think you’re not listening AND that you don’t want to help them.

I sometimes wonder if God feels like a diner waitress on the graveyard shift.

One night at the Bagdad, I overheard a customer chastising one of my sister waitresses. I don’t know what the issue was, but I remember his very carefully instructing her that “TIPS” stood for “To Insure Prompt Service”. And he went on to say that the reason you give a tip is to ensure that you get what you want, how you want it, and when you want it. If, at the end of your meal, you didn’t get what you wanted, or how you wanted it, or when you wanted it, you don’t tip.

I sometimes wonder if God feels like a diner waitress on the graveyard shift. Because it seems to me that a whole lot of folks think that giving – faith giving, church giving, giving back to God – is really a tip, based on God’s service. Did God give me what I wanted, how I wanted it, when I wanted it? Okay, then I’ll give God the leftover change in my pocket.

This fellow who reamed out my friend was one of those people who thought the appropriate tip on a meal was whatever change you had left in your pocket. If you came in with \$20 leftover from partying, and your meal was \$18, you left two bucks. But if you weren’t happy, you left \$1 or nothing. But there are other types: at my table one night, I had a customer tell me with pride how much she had spent on her girlfriend to take her out and show her a good time. She had her arm around her honey, and was so proud. She’d spent a couple hundred dollars, what with flowers, drinks, early supper, theater tickets, and so forth. We had a great rapport while they were dining. They were happy, and had gotten everything they wanted, how they wanted it, and when they wanted it. At the end of their meal, she took me aside and quietly apologized, sincerely saying that I had done a great job for them, but she was out of money once they paid for the food.

Sometimes I wonder if God feels like a diner waitress.

When I was waitressing, I really appreciated Dear Abby. Dear Abby used to say that one should not go to a restaurant unless one comes prepared and willing to leave at least 15% on top of the bill. So if one has \$20 in one’s pocket, one should not spend more than \$17.40 on dinner, so that one could leave a

proper gratuity. Because, after all, the meal would not have appeared at one's table at all had the waitress and the cook not prepared it and delivered it.

The difference between Dear Abby and the fellow at the Bagdad Café at 2 in the morning is this: the guy gave a tip if he was completely satisfied with everything. Dear Abby gave because she was grateful for what she received.

When you give to God's ministries, are you tipping God to insure prompt service? Are you giving to make sure you get what you want? Or are you giving in gratitude for all God has already done for you?

Folks who are "tippers" give to God based on what they don't have. That is, they look at what they don't have in their lives, whether it's money or happiness or purpose, and they give from their feeling of scarcity.

If they think of giving to God at all, they do their budget first, and then decide what's left over. If nothing is left over, they don't give.

God-tippers also don't give if they don't think they have personally received what they want from the church or from God. They are willing to give or to give more, they say, when God blesses them. "If God blesses me with more money [happiness, purpose] then I'll give more." Or "If the church does X for me, then I'll give more."

Sometimes God-tippers give based on what services they use. They'll think "I'm not using child care or the food pantry or pastoral counseling, so I don't need to give." Like you're paying God for services rendered, and if you don't need anything from God you don't need to give.

To be honest, I've never met anyone who didn't need something from God, and who didn't receive everything they have from God.

I'm making light of this because it's hard to talk about money. But there's a truly serious side. The tippers are waiting to be blessed by God, but that blessing never comes. Why? Because they are incapable of recognizing a blessing when they receive it. Since the blessing that they're looking for never comes, they never give more than the loose change in their pockets at the end of the meal.

Here's the truth about God-tippers: They live in a feeling of scarcity, of not having enough, and not being enough. That is a terrible, fearful place to be. When you feel you do not have enough, or that you are not enough, you feel tight and closed. Your soul clenches. You may even grind your teeth, or resent the little bit you have. Gifts from others may make you feel guilty, or trapped. Scarcity, fear, is an unholy place to live your life.

Tippers in a church are sad, sad people. They never recognize how much they've been given, and they never feel as though they have enough. They don't trust God to provide for their real needs. Tippers don't understand, deep in their hearts, that they're loved, and safe, and cared for. They don't realize that they are already saved. And they cannot take in that they themselves - their gifts, their talents, their money, and their own experiences - are critical to fulfilling God's purpose. Tippers think of themselves as optional people, basically irrelevant to God's kingdom.

The comedian George Burns, who, among other achievements, played God in two movies, was known both for his abilities as a straight man and his affectionate and giving nature. Burns said: When you stop giving and offering something to the rest of the world, it's time to turn out the lights. George Burns lived to be 100. You are needed.

In Malachi, in the ancient texts we know as the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament, God tells the people to give 10% of their crops back to God. And not the bottom 10% -- not the stuff you sweep off the floor after the good stuff has been eaten -- the first and best 10%. There are two reasons for this: You give the first 10% 1) because God has blessed and is blessing you, and 2) because it all belongs to God anyway. "Bring the whole tithe [that's 10%] into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house." It's my house, says the Lord. My house. Bring the whole tithe (which is mine anyway) so that there might be food in my house. And then God, who we all know is not to be tested, says, "Test me in this, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

God has promised and is giving you eternal and abundant life. When you make room for God to give you more, God will. But you have to make room in your life for God to give to you, and God will give you more than you need -- so much that you will not have room enough for all the blessing.

The other kind of giver -- the Dear Abby kind -- knows this. The Dear Abby giver gives out of gratitude for what she has already received, and in anticipation of what God will give. The Gratitude-giver knows that everything she has, everything she is, comes from God. And if she makes room in her life for God, God will bless her beyond her imagining. Where the God-tipper gives out of a feeling of guilt or obligation, the Gratitude-giver gives out of freedom. When you know that you are free, when you know that you are blessed, when you know that God will take care of you, when you know that you are essential to God's kingdom purpose, giving is easy and natural. It comes from a space of freedom and love.

It's easy to give when you feel loved, and loving, and free. But you cannot wait to learn how to give until you feel that way. Part of learning that you are loved and free is giving. We've been studying the six marks of discipleship -- praying, worshipping, reading the Bible, serving, relating, and giving -- and I've mentioned that Mike Foss gives these an acronym -- PoWeR SuRGe, because practicing them gives you a power surge. You ought not wait until you feel graced by God to pray, worship, read, serve, relate and give, because practicing these things helps you connect with God's grace. "See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." says the Lord God.

Tithing, giving the first 10% back to God, is both commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures and is a sign of trust in God's love and power. The Christian Scriptures add this: We reap as we sow. Most of us have been taught to take that as a moral imperative, or a symbol of karma: if you're mean, people will be mean to you. But the whole concept stems from our Christian practice. Paul writes: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" ... (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). (Paul might have said that God loves a Gratitude-giver there.) The promise follows immediately: "And God is able to provide you with every blessings in abundance" ... (2 Corinthians 9:8). Notice that attitude part: we are to give not out of obligation or reluctantly, but cheerfully. When you practice giving as part of your expression of love, it cannot be pinched. And what you get back will be abundant life.

Some have argued that Jesus no longer requires a tithe, and that you can see that in his treatment of the widow who gives just two cents. You know this story: Jesus sits down in the courtyard of the temple and watches people giving their money, many of whom gave large amounts, and he praises the widow who gives just two small copper coins. People will say that this means that God no longer cares about the rule of tithe. That's true: God in the person of Jesus Christ no longer wants 10% of what you have and what you are.

Here's what he says about the widow and her two coins: "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

I've come to really appreciate Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of the Purpose-Driven books. Warren is now reverse tithing — giving 90% of his income. He makes a lot of money, but you and I know you can have a lot of money and still feel stingy and tight. But Warren just gets more open and loving and focused on doing God's work of love in the world. And God keeps blessing him, and blessing through him.

Jesus showed us that the 10% is a guide; but what God really wants is you. All of you — your talents, treasure, and time. And your love. The tithe is the place to start, but our goal is what is called sacrificial giving: giving from our everything. Jesus' truth, which is measured by his walk to the cross, is this: if our wealth is measured by what we do not really need, then we are not called to give from our wealth. Instead, we are called to give what is essential. We are called to surrender all of who we are to God. And you cannot do that without trusting God, loving God, and having a free soul.

How do you learn to trust God? Practice. To love God? Practice. To be free? Practice. And little by little, your trust grows. Your gratitude grows. Your freedom expands.

When you practice giving, if your choice is truly between putting basic food in your child's belly and giving to God, feed your child first. Beyond that, I encourage you to risk trust. If you are ready to open yourself up to even greater blessings, don't wait. Dedicate 10% from your take-home pay to God, and 10% to your retirement, and learn to live on the rest. Or, if that leap makes you gasp for air, increase your giving 1% each year. But whatever you give, give it joyfully and freely.

This week I was speaking to someone in this congregation who tithes. This person was saying how they — the family — just kept increasing their giving each year until one day they realized they were tithing. Now as soon as they realized it, they panicked a little, but kept going.

And God has blessed them in ways they could not have predicted or imagined. Their financial situation has changed, but they're still tithing, because they can no longer imagine not doing so.

Since I decided to learn to tithe, I've been giving 1% more of my income each year. That's just in my God-giving; I also give to other nonprofits. Then, when I receive a cash gift or money for consulting, I give one-third to God's ministries here. Each year, it has thrilled me to be able to give more, because the ability to do that has not come from my soaring income, but from my soaring soul. We have made choices in our lives in order to live abundantly. God has blessed me beyond my wildest dreams. And I have to tell you that that 1/3s I give from my off-budget money is one of my very greatest pleasures in life. I can give that so freely. It is such a huge blessing to me to give that money, that little bit of what God has given to me. And every time I give it, I pray that this church — you — will touch someone who needs to know God's love. Every time I write a check, I give it in confidence that God is doing God's work of love through my life, in the lives of others, and in the eternity of God's creation. I know that I, and each one of you, is essential to the creation, and to that work of love.