

Title: Radical Generosity
Text: Acts 4: 32-35
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I want to start with one of my favourite jokes. Warning – I have told it before, but it's too good not to repeat.

An older couple, Morris and his wife, Esther went to the local show every year. Every year, Morris would say, "Esther, I'd like to ride in that helicopter." Esther always replied, "I know Morris, but that helicopter ride is 100 bucks and 100 bucks is 100 bucks."

A few years later, Esther and Morris went to the show again.

Morris said, "Esther, I'm 85 years old. If I don't ride that helicopter now, I might never get another chance." Esther replied, "Morris, that helicopter ride is 100 bucks and 100 bucks is 100 bucks."

The pilot overheard the couple. He said, "Folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take the both of you for a ride if you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say a word, I won't charge you, but if you say one word, it's 100 dollars for each of you."

Morris and Esther agreed --- and up they went. The pilot did all kinds of fancy manoeuvres but not a word was heard. He did his daredevil tricks over and over again, but still not a word.

When they landed, the pilot turned to Morris and said, "Crikey, I did everything I could to get you to yell out, but you didn't. I'm very impressed!" Morris replied, "Well, I was going to say something when Esther fell out, but 100 bucks is 100 bucks."

The truth is that many of us find it easier to let go of most other things other than money. But the reverse can be true as well.

The medical journal Neuroscience recently published an article a very unusual account of a man in Brazil who developed what doctors called "pathological generosity." In the article, doctors described the story of a 49-year-old man identified as "Mr A" who had a remarkable personality change after suffering a stroke.

His physicians said that after the stroke affected the subcortical regions of the man's brain he suddenly had an "excessive and persistent" urge to help others. He wouldn't stop giving money and gifts to people he barely knew.

According to his wife, he would buy lollies, soft drink, and food for kids he met on the street. He was also quit his job as a manager of a large corporation.

Dr. Larry Goldstein, a neurologist at Duke University said, "Although the observation of personality change is not that unusual, this particular one is apparently novel."

'Pathological generosity' – what a great phrase!

Now, here is the good news; you don't have to have a stroke to enjoy pathological generosity. In fact, there is nothing pathological about generosity; God designed us – in his image – to be generous, as he is generous.

Last week we explored how the resurrected Jesus commissioned his disciples to share in his mission in the world:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.
(John 20: 21)

'As the Father has sent me', Jesus says. The Father sent Jesus as an offering to and for the world. Jesus did not just give from his life; he gave his life. The church commissioned by Jesus is, like Jesus, an offering to the world – prepared to sacrifice all other agendas expect to glorify Jesus and point people to him.

And that is what the early church did. Radically and sacrificially witnessed to Jesus. And empowered by the same Holy Spirit they were baptised in, we are called to the same.

There were three attributes the early church was perhaps best known for, and over the next month we are going to explore each of them as we reflect on what it means to respond to Jesus. Those three attributes are:

Radical Generosity
Deep Community
Sacrificial Service

Today we are going to explore the first attribute of a God-honouring, Acts 2 church - Radical Generosity.

Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were all together on one place when the Holy Spirit fell on them with power, driving them out into the streets where they fearlessly testified to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thousands were saved – became believers. The church grew exponentially. There was a spiritual snap, crackle and pop in the air. Summarising those early days, Luke offers undoubtedly one of the most famous description of the early church:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

(Acts 4:32-35)

Deep community and sacrificial service were undeniable marks of the early church. But so too was radical generosity. What I mean by radical is this; generosity that was noticeable, against the grain, abnormal – over and above what could be expected.

One the clearest evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the early church was an overflow of radical generosity.

As God sent them into mission in the power of Spirit, he empowered them in the grace of giving. And that is what God wants for us as well; that we will excel in the Holy Spirit fuelled grace of giving.

The Acts church gave as, where and when God called them, principally under four categories that I will draw parallels to here at Newlife and in how Sue and I give.

They gave to the poor.

For example, the Apostle Paul spend years taking up an offering from the churches he planted, made up mainly of Gentiles, to support persecuted and impoverished sisters and brothers in the Jerusalem church.

Here at Newlife you can exercise the biblical mandate to give to the poor through your donations to Newlife Care – our care services arm as with counselling, emergency relief, and homeless support services we bless the otherwise marginalised and forgotten in our community.

Or you could join the hundred or so people in our church who sponsor a Thai or Cambodian child's education through our Acts 1:8 partnerships.

They gave the church.

They gave to support those set aside for full time ministry – apostles, pastors and so on.

Lean in closely. I have a shocking secret to share with you. Part of your tithes and offerings goes to pay my stipend, and not just mine – but also Melissa's and Ralph's and Mike's and all of our ministry team. This financial support of those is 'set apart' ministry is consistent with not only how the early church worked, but also the ministry of Jesus. Luke tells us that for the three years of his public ministry, Joanna and Susanna and other women of means financially supported him and his disciples.

They gave to mission.

For example, Lydia and the Philippian church supported Paul in his apostolic ministry.

Our Annual Report indicates that last year from our tithes and offerings and other income, our church gave \$261,000 to mission beyond our congregation, both here in Australia and also overseas.

They gave to each other.

They gave to each other 'as they had need', until there 'were no needy persons among them.' The early church was known for blessing each other with financial and practical gifts. Wow – can you imagine a community like that – made up of rich and poor and yet no unmet material needs among them?

These four New Testament categories of giving form the basis of how Sue and I worship God with our wealth.

First, we give a tithe – 10% of our total income before tax – to the work of God through this church.

On top of that, we support various Acts 1:8 mission initiatives as God prompts us, and give to other mission organisations outside our church.

We give to the poor primarily through the work of Newlife Care and by sponsoring one of our Acts 1:8 kids in Poipet, Cambodia.

Finally, we have the joy from time to time of hearing and addressing a need of someone known to us. Where we can, we try to do this without the person knowing who it is that is blessing them.

I tell you all of this simply to say that Sue and I are like many of you, people with a mortgage and other commitments and retirement to plan for, who with God's help are learning the disciplined joy of radical generosity.

A defining mark of the early church was their Radical Generosity. Captivated by the radical generosity of God demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and immersed in Holy Spirit power, they overflowed with joyful generosity.

That was their story. And that can be our story.

A couple of decades after Pentecost, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth with this encouragement:

Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.
(2 Corinthians 8:7)

Excel in the grace of giving – what a wonderful phrase. Giving is a grace. Grace is defined as the unearned, unmerited, undeserved favor of God.

In other words, to give is a privilege – to give is a gift in itself. Here's the thing - God does not need your money! God has all the resources of the Universe at his disposal. The Psalmist put it beautifully:

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.
(Psalm 50:9-10)

God does not need our money to fulfil his mission in the world; instead through our giving, God offers us the privilege – the grace – of participating in his mission – of being co-labourers with God is the message of the gospel. How amazing is that!

When we give an offering we are not paying for religious goods or services rendered. We are not paying a church tax. We are engaging in profound expression of worship and grace-filled participation in the mission of God.

The grace of giving is built on the fundamental understanding that all that we have is a gift from God to be stewarded, not hoarded. Let me illustrate:

Suppose you have an important package to send to someone who needs it. You take it to courier service. Suppose that instead of delivering the package, the driver took it home? When you hear about it you confront him, and he says,

"If you didn't want me to keep it, why'd you give it to me in the first place?"

You'd say, "The package doesn't belong to you. Your job is to deliver it to the person who needs it." Here is the point:

Just because God puts his money in our hands doesn't mean he intends for us to keep it. Here is another thing - the more we grow in this grace of giving, the more we grow spiritually – the more we learn to give, the more like Jesus we become. The REVEAL Spiritual Life Research has demonstrated conclusively that one of the most catalytic disciplines for spiritual growth is the grace of giving. Rick Warren said it this way:

As physical exercises raise your metabolism, spiritual exercises like prayer, serving, giving raise your spiritual temperature
(Rick Warren)

So here is the question I want to address for the rest of this message; responding to Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, how do we live a life of radical generosity like the Acts church? In our materialistic, consumer driven, money obsessed culture this is a huge and ever-present challenge.

To answer those questions, I want to explore some very practical pieces of instruction from the Apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says this:

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.
(1 Corinthians 16:2)

The context of this verse was the collection Paul was taking up for the Jerusalem church. The next verse is from his second letter to the Corinthians:

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.
(2 Corinthians 9:7)

These two verses illustrate that the radical generosity was, and is a disciplined joy.

Let's get really practical. Paul says every week we are to set aside an amount to give that is in keeping – in proportion – with our income.

The first question is what proportion of our income should we give?

Every week here at Newlife we provide an opportunity for you to give to God your 'tithes and offerings'. A tithe simply means a tenth part, or ten percent of our income given back to God and God's work. An offering is a gift over and above the tithe. Here at Newlife we believe that a starting point in expressing radical generosity is to give to God a tithe, or a tenth of our income, wherever that income comes from.

The origin of the tithe is found in the Old Testament, where the people of Israel were commanded to give a tenth of their agricultural produce to God as an expression of worship. Actually, the Old Testament records more than one type of tithe.

First, Leviticus records the command to give the Lord's tithe that went to support the work of the Temple and the priests that served it – 10% every year.

Then Deuteronomy records the command to give the festival tithe, which was used to fund religious celebrations – another 10% every year. 10% a year for celebrations – imagine how good they must have been!

On top of all this, Deuteronomy records the command for a third type of tithe that was collected every three years, and which was used to support the poor – which equates to around 3% every year.

This means mandatory tithes for faithful Israelites were 23 percent of their income annually—a tithe for the priesthood, a tithe for national religious feasts, and a tithe that aided the poor.

Then, over and above all of this were 'freewill' offerings, where the Israelites were encouraged to give as God prompted them in their heart to give. For example, God at one point God directs Moses to collect an offering for the Tabernacle:

Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give.
(Exodus 25:2)

As I said before, here at Newlife we believe that a starting point in expressing radical generosity is in the weekly discipline of giving a tithe – 10% - of our income to the work of God.

Some of you might be thinking, 'Well the tithe is an Old Testament law and we are New Testament people. We live under grace, not law.' And I would agree with you 100%. To you I would say this:

The tithe is an Old Testament law that reveals a New Testament principle.

Undergirding the law of the tithe is the principle to give to God our first and our best as a response to God giving us his first and his best.

Honestly, I am less concerned about the percentage of your income and wealth you give to God than I am about whether you have actually prayerfully and carefully considered and then decided what you should give. Have you actually done this?

I have shared before that it was when we were in Bible College that Sue and I became disciplined in our giving. We faced three years of very limited income while raising a young family and paying a decent mortgage. So we did something radical; we prayerfully prepared a budget. In doing so, we decided to give God a tithe – the first ten percent of all of our limited income. I need to tell you it was a step of faith, especially for a control freak like me.

But the testimony of that season is that God provided again and again and again, in small and large and often surprising – even miraculous ways.

There is a verse in scripture that I have never, ever quoted or preached from in my eight and half years here at Newlife. It is a scripture that I've seen so misused and abused that I have avoided the possibility of doing the same. The verse is from the Old Testament prophet Malachi:

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."
(Malachi 3:10)

Back in Bible College I was worried that we could not afford to give a tithe. My thinking is now completely reversed; now I think that, spiritually speaking, we can't afford not to tithe. This verse is not saying, as some preacher can suggest, that giving to God is some sort of get-rich-quick scheme. But it is saying, and this is what Sue and I have experienced, that as we honour God with our first and best, God will bless us in ways we can't imagine. Mark Batterson has a helpful way of putting it:

Tithing is trusting that God can do more with 90% than we can do with 100%.
(Mark Batterson)

I honestly believe that God has blessed every one of us with the capacity to tithe – to give 10% of our income for the work of God. But what proportion you give is a conversation you and God need to have. Some of you may be thinking Its not that you can't afford to tithe, but that 10% of your income is a lot of money. Should you really give that much?

One of my favorite stories is told about Peter Marshall, who was chaplain to the United States Senate.

A man came to him with a concern about tithing. He said: "I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$50,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$5,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year."

Peter Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: "Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?"

The man agreed, so Peter Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority.

"Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."

The real question is not whether you can afford to tithe, but whether you can afford not to. Here's another verse I have avoided preaching for the last eight and half years. It comes earlier in the same chapter of Malachi as God addresses the people of Israel:

Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'
"In tithes and offerings."
(Malachi 3:8)

Ouch. Robbing God seem to me to be a serious offence. And yet some of us are effectively doing just that, not because we're not giving an exact 10% tithe, but because we haven't given any thought or prayer to what we should give God, and so are simply giving God our leftovers – leftover time, leftover gifts, leftover money.

But God does not want our leftovers; God longs for our first and our best!

God does not want us to give him what's left, but what is right!

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
(James 1:22)

To procrastinate obedience is to disobey God.
(Randy Alcorn)

We are rivers, not reservoirs.