



## “The Secret of Life: 6. Live Generously”

Texts: Psalm 10 and Psalm 112

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We were sitting on the patio at a local restaurant on evening, when I spotted a woman in a t-shirt that read, “Live Generously.” I thought it strange that anyone would be wearing a shirt with those words emblazoned across it. I was delighted - thrilled - to see it. It caused me to see a parade of people I have known for whom that could have been their motto, or personal mission statement. “Live Generously.” Succinct, short and snappy, concise, and straight to the point. “Live Generously.” Hash-tag that. It inspired this sermon. “Live Generously.” That’s the introduction.

Before us this morning are two psalms that stand as something of bookends for our conversation. At the one end is Psalm 10, which is a prayer that God will intervene against those who live outside of God’s way. “The wicked,” says the Psalmist, “persecute the poor...[they] boast of the desires of their hearts...[they] vaunt in their very lust, grasping for gain.” “Their mouths are full of oaths, but beneath their tongues are guile and deceit, mischief and misdeeds.” “They wait like a lion in its lair, to snatch up the poor.” Just a reminder: this was written thousands of years ago and not last week.

At the other end of our sermonic spectrum is Psalm 112. It is an acrostic poem with words beginning with aleph, bet, gimmel, and so on. “Happy are those who desire God’s commandments...abundance and wealth are in their houses and their righteousness endures forever...Good are those who show grace and lend and conduct their affairs with justice...They distribute freely, they give to the needy, and their righteousness will endure forever.” It sounds a lot different from the first of our readings from the Psalms, doesn’t it?

One way of life is identified as “grasping,” “deceit,” and the abuse of the poor. It is a way of life in which the compulsion to gain more is strong. It is a dissatisfied, ungrateful, and unappreciative way of living. The other way of life is filled with “grace,” sharing with those in need, and living a life on the pathway of justice and integrity. One way of life wears the t-shirt, “Live uncaringly.” The other way of life wears the t-shirt, “Live Generously.”

So, how do we find that ways of living generously? My friend, Dr. Bill Enright, the former pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis and the founding director of the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at Indiana University, suggests three lessons - three understandings - that are foundational to this business of living generously.

First, Bill says, **begin to see money and possessions as gifts of God.** But, you say, “money is the root of all evil.” I would remind you that the correct and complete quote is, “the love of money is the root of all evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10) When money and possessions take the place in our lives that is reserved exclusively for God and the things of God, we get into all kinds of trouble.

It was Saint Paul who told the Corinthian congregation, “What do you have that you were not given?” (1 Corinthians 4:7 CEV) We all know the answer, even if we don’t want to admit it. “What do you have that you were not given?” The answer is “nothing.” God is the great giver who gives to us beyond our deserving or our worth. Money and possessions are gifts from God.

It was Saint Clement of Alexandria that gave us an image. Money, he teaches us, is kind of like that organ up there. It’s neither good nor bad. It’s morally neutral. Now, if you or I went up there to the organ and began plunking and pounding on the keys, it would make a noise - maybe joyful, maybe not. But, put those keys under Robert’s skillful fingers and beautiful music emerges. He knows how to use the instrument and put it to its best use. So it is with our money and possessions. When we skillfully use what God has entrusted to us, we can bring forth beautiful change in the world for God’s glory and honor. **Begin to see money and possessions and gifts of God.** That’s step one on the way to living generously.

Second, Bill suggests we begin seeing **money as a fragile gift, to be handled with care.** Anyone with a 401K knows that money is a fragile and delicate thing. One day you have it. The next day you don’t.

The Bible is replete with stories of people who were incredibly rich and lost it all. King Solomon made his wealth an obsession and lost it all. Job had everything and more and it disappeared. Nabal was a wealthy landowner who hoarded his wealth and never gave a thought to using his gifts from God to help the poor, the hungry, or treating those who worked for him with justice and righteousness. David, when he was fleeing from King Saul, asked Nabal for food. Nabal denied him and David took a notion to kill him. Nabal’s wife, Abigail, gives David the food and

intercedes on Nabal's behalf. Nabal, by the way, means "fool." When Abigail gave the food to David, she said, "My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he." More closely translated, "Nabal is an old fool just as his name says he is." Jesus told a story of a greedy farmer who had been blessed with an abundant harvest. The farmer was about to spend and spend on more and more, when that very night, God said to him, "You fool! Tonight is your last night."

**Money is a fragile gift, to be handled with care.** Even John Calvin realized this truth when he wrote, "God's gifts [are] created for our good and not our ruin." When money is misused, Enright writes, "we either tumble toward miserly frugality or toward greedy self-indulgence."<sup>1</sup> But, when we use our gifts wisely, the world is made better.

Third, Bill Enright suggests that **money and possessions are to be used in neighborly ways for the flourishing of humanity.** Think about that oft-quoted second greatest commandment - to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves." In his book, *Jesus and Money*, Ben Witherington urges us to remember that it is a call to love with "exuberance and abundance."<sup>2</sup> It has economic implications. Our gifts and possessions are to be employed in loving our neighbor in life-enhancing action and not just loving words - "thoughts and prayers" - that make little difference.

The Psalmist reminds us that the care of the poor, the orphaned, the oppressed, is the work of those who walk in God's way. The Psalmist boldly tells us that good neighbors - godly neighbors - are "gracious, compassionate and good...they donate and lend generously, they lavishly give to the poor...their generosity goes on, and on, and on." When we give generously, we break the grip that money has on us and shatter the chains of enslavement to possessions. We begin to live as God intended us to live. We "live generously."

And here's the strangest thing of all and you may not believe it. Listen to this, please. There is a paradox in generous giving. When we give, we receive joy. I know you may find it hard to believe, but it's true. When we give, we are enriched with feelings of satisfaction and contentment. You might well think that we would experience diminishment and dwindling. But it's not true.

When the girls were smaller and we went on vacation, we visited a Presbyterian church for Sunday worship. There's a lot to this story, which I'll save for another time. But, when the time came for the offering, my wife - who is a good person - pulled a \$20 dollar bill from her purse and made ready to put it in the offering plate. I stared at her. When we got back to the car, I asked her what that was all about. "Is God double-dipping?" I asked her, knowing full well that we were meeting our financial commitment to God through this congregation. She stared me down, which I have finally come to understand, means that I have lost the argument. That story took place before my conversion - at least my stewardship conversion.

A couple of years ago, one of my beloved seminary professors retired. At the time of her retirement, I had an indescribable urge to do something - something big. I have a little account that's just mine. I looked at the balance and decided to write a check to a cause near and dear to the heart of my professor. It wasn't a lot, but it was the largest check I had ever written to a cause other than the church. It paled in comparison to what I had received from my professor. And it felt great! It was joyous. It was fulfilling. It brought contentment and thanksgiving and gratitude. My cheapness was transformed to - dare I say it? - generosity. I received more from giving than from holding on to what I erroneously called "my money." It was a gift from God that I simply put back into use within the realm of God.

As I think back over the happiest people I have known - especially within the church - they are people who are generous in every aspect of their lives. Some had so much money it would make your head spin and some had so little money you might wonder why they were giving at all. But, regardless of where they were on the economic ladder, those who gave generously were indescribably happy. Their hearts were full and light. They had a better attitude than those who didn't give generously. They were grateful people who found life-changing ways to express their gratitude. They discovered one of the greatest secrets of life. It was simply, "live generously."

There are two kinds of people, according to the Psalmists. One looks inward and cares only for self. The other looks outward and cares for others. They love their neighbor in actions that make life better and fuller.

Some see what they have as what they have earned and deserve. Others see everything in life as a gift of God.

I'll give it to you as it was once given to me. "Who you are and what you have is your gift from God. What you do with that is your gift to God."

Looking for happiness? Looking for fulfillment? Looking for contentment?

Live generously. For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1.) *Kitchen Table Giving*, p. 57
  - 2.) *Jesus and Money*, p. 151



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