The Challenge of Generosity

Third in the series: Doing Our Part to Change the World

# Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

# Key thought: Generosity is a trait God loves.

# Intro:

In 1976 six men took over a Nebraska based company called Bethesda care centers. The company administered 15 nursing homes into acute care centers at that time but it had already lost $3 million and was facing bankruptcy. The six men were not your typical businessman. One was a biology teacher, another a math teacher, one a rancher, another a used car salesman, another a construction worker and one an accountant. But they were all Christians and they had the gifts of faith and giving. Despite the dire financial picture one of the first things the six did was donate $5000 to a missionary.

To make a long story short, four years later the company was in the black. And 12 years later the company had grown to 34 successful nursing homes scattered over seven states. They were so successful that they received a very lucrative offer for their business.

They accepted the offer but instead of setting themselves up for leisure and pleasure for the rest of their lives; instead of letting Uncle Sam take his huge bite out of the proceeds; they opted for a corporate not-for-profit restructuring which put $25 million to work for their heavenly Father. To make a long story short, from 1976 to 1996 they gave away $35 million. Says Dave Burdine, one of the six, “We’re just common people who like to work and play but have a passion for the lost and want to reach as many people as we can with the gospel.” (750 Engaging Illustrations p. 196)

What causes six successful businessmen like these to use their funds for charity instead of for their own estates and pleasure? The answer to that question is at the heart of the story that we read from the life of Jesus.

## The setting

It’s important to understand the setting. In Jesus’ time, people at a formal dinner did not sit in chairs around a table like we do. Instead they reclined with their heads toward the center of the room and their feet toward the outside of the room. At a fancy dinner at the home of a well-to-do person such as in this text, people who were not invited to dine could come in and observe and listen to the conversation.

This is the role of the woman in this story. She had observed that the common courtesies usually extended to guests of the times- washing sandal-clad feet and a cordial kiss had not been bestowed upon Jesus. She felt sorrowful about these hurtful oversights and this was the cause of her actions. Jesus perceived this but the host saw only her past reputation.

What Jesus is trying to teach his host as he explains what is happening will help us as well.

# Generosity correlates with thankfulness.

Moses Montefiore, a British philanthropist, had this motto in his home, THINK AND THANK. It reflects the fact that the English word thankfulness comes from an old Anglo-Saxon term that meant "thinkfulness."

With the parable, Jesus helps us make the connection between thankfulness, love and our own motivation to give. Jesus was trying to help his host see that the reason for the extravagant generosity of the woman was not the dark thoughts he was thinking based on her past reputation. It was instead, a deep gratitude and thanksgiving for the compassion and forgiveness offered to sinners like her by Jesus. Jesus confirms this by saying to her, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). Those words are one of the surprises of the passage.

When we think about what God has done for us we also are deeply thankful. When we appreciate the spiritual debt we owe to Jesus, we are humbled. The more thankful we are, the more our hearts spur us on to give generously today too.

On the other hand, the host had everything he needed. Presumably, as a member of the Pharisee class, he was well-to-do. His religion was largely based on rules which he kept scrupulously. He, like many people, felt that his status both materially and spiritually was largely a result of his own well-doing. Frankly, this kind of thinking has much in common with many Americans today. We believe that we have earned our way to where we are. Our own ambition, hard work, good education and wise choices have brought us many benefits.

We need to hear what Jesus is saying to his host. First we need to note what the host had neglected. Why was the woman washing Jesus feet with her hair? Why was the woman kissing Jesus? Were these simply overblown expressions of affection? As soon as Jesus explains, it becomes painfully clear to the host that the answer is no. In a Palestinian home, when a guest came it was only common courtesy for a servant to wash the guest’s feet. People wore sandals. The roads were dusty. Think of how Jesus performed his act in the upper room for his disciples. Another common courtesy in the Eastern world would be to greet the guest with a ritual kiss.

As we noted, the woman who was part of the story was not a guest at this dinner. She was an observer. We learn from the culture of the time that observers were allowed to come into these fancy dinners and stand around and watch and hear the teaching of the visiting Rabbi, something that would be unheard of today. That is what the woman was doing. But the woman had noted that neither of the two common hosting courtesies had been extended to Jesus. So her tears were simply mourning over the lack of love for Jesus and her actions were to make up for the lack of courtesies shown by the host. She was using what she had to extravagantly compensate for the host’s lack of love.

Jesus is gently chiding his host, implying that the host was not very thankful for the gifts God had allowed him, and so showed little generosity.

Could Jesus chide us also for lack of thanksgiving and resulting lack of generosity? We need to remember that the more thankful we are to God for his gifts to us, the more generous we will be with others.

# Generosity correlates with love for God.

When one interprets the events of Jesus’ life and especially events that include parables, one should always look for the surprising things in the narrative. These are usually the keys to understanding what is happening.

Another key to this narrative is the surprising discovery that the religious person, the Pharisee, is the one who loved less and gave less. On the other hand, the one whom everybody called a sinner, loved more and was amazingly generous. The surprise also is that the one who everybody thought that Jesus would approve, was not the one who received the approval. Instead the one whom the host thought Jesus should condemn was the one who received his approval. How could that be? It was because Jesus judged on a different level. He looked at the heart of love and generosity rather than the outward appearances or the religious status. Jesus read through the host’s superficial hospitality and saw his lack of generosity and true affection. Jesus also looked past the reputation of the woman and saw her repentant heart of true faith and worship.

Have you run into religious people like the host of the story—people who should have been generous but were actually stingy-- Christian people who hung onto the gifts God has given them? Have you seen religious people keeping rules but being cold in their hearts? Such people often dislike a pastor teaching about tithing. They don’t want to hear about disasters in the world either because there’s a need to give. They don’t like additional offerings at church because there’s another opportunity to lose money into the offering. Something is not quite right about that psychology!

Now let’s talk about JoAnne and me. We are two grandparents who need to hang onto our money like anybody else our age. But we have a bad weak spot – two little grandchildren. If it’s something for Annabelle and Sam, suddenly the mathematics seem to be different. I wonder why that is? The answer is obvious and simple. Love! We cherish those two little persons. One day I was with Sam in Walmart and we found a new bicycle that he liked. Nobody was in there that day and I was letting him ride around on it in the back side of Walmart while I supervised. He had outgrown his old one. Well you know what happened. Grandpa loaded it on the cart and bought it and out the door it went with us. I just couldn’t help myself. Love and generosity go together.

So it will be on so many levels, including our giving for the current disaster relief funds that we at Copper Hill church are now raising funds for. The more we fall in love with Jesus and the more we catch from him his love for other people, the more generous we will become. Friends, if your Christianity hasn't made you generous, it isn't yet the kind of Christianity that God intends it to be.

# Generosity trusts the Giver.

In the last phrase in the text, Jesus says to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). This indicates one more key truth. Christians can be especially generous because their faith is in the Giver of all good things.

We can rely on God’s good promises to those who are generous.

A generous person will prosper;  
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. Prov 11:25 NIV

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously…And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Cor 9:6, 8 NIV

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:38 NIV

But as one wit put it, a lot of church people are not standing on the promises, they're merely sitting on the premises. They put in their time at church but they are not really trusting in Jesus to supply their needs. As a result, they live with a scarcity mindset, not an abundance mindset.

Now I’m not talking about prosperity Gospel—God wants to make you rich—type teaching. God wants to make us rich all right – rich in grace, rich in love, rich in mercy. And he does promise to meet our needs and give us enough so we can help others. But he pours out his blessings so we can use his blessing to be a blessing, not so we can enjoy comfort and ease. But with this understanding, we can indeed trust the Giver of every good and perfect gift to supply our needs so we can be generous.

Bob McCuen story (told by John Maxwell (Tape 2, side 1, beginning)) His son wanted large fries at McDonald's. Instinctively he reached over to grab a fry or two. His son said, "You can't have any of these fries. These fries are mine." Bob was hurt. He thought to himself, “My son has a bad attitude. He doesn't understand where these fries came from. I bought them. He doesn't realize that I can take those fries from him or I could go over and buy 20 more large fries and cover him in fries.”

Then Bob thought about the comparison. Maybe this is how God feels when we hold back in giving. Bob’s real hurt was the attitude of his son. God’s real hurt is when we are not grateful—when we are not loving—when we are not trustful. God’s real hurt is that we do not realize who we serve. He is the one able to cover us with blessing. And since we don’t reckon on the divine supply, we hold back from giving when we should be generous.

# Conclusion

The Man Behind Quaker Oats (Real Stories for the Soul p. 252)