

1 One of the greatest gravity-defying events of all time was the Orteig Prize, a \$25,000 reward offered in the 1920s to the first person who could fly across the Atlantic Ocean between New York City and Paris. One competitor for the prize was Rene Fonck, a World War I French flying ace whose plane was as expansive as his personality. The interior of his plane was more like the living room of a chateau than the fuselage of an airplane. There were heavy chairs, mahogany tables, and a sofa that could be converted into a bed. He brought cases of wine and champagne. Before takeoff, he even had a local hotel deliver a hot dinner. His plane was designed to carry no more than 20,000 pounds, yet fully loaded, it weighed in at whopping 28,000 pounds! He had to retrofit an extra wheel on the tail section to support the load. You can guess the result. Gravity defeated Fonck. Even with full power, the plane only made it to the end of the runway. It rolled over a small incline, toppled forward, and burst into flames.¹ Trying to live our lives fully loaded, blissfully disregarding all limits, produces the same results; a flaming crash after an all too quick joy ride.

A second competitor was millionaire Charles Levine. He had a great plane and a qualified crew, but they never functioned as a team that had the single goal of getting to Paris. Levine wanted two pilots ready, and as a publicity stunt he planned to choose between them on the runway just before departure. The two pilots disagreed on everything from the flight plan to the equipment. Just when it appeared that things couldn't get more dysfunctional, Levine presented the pilots with contracts the night before takeoff that essentially said he would not share any money from publicity on the trip. One of the pilots filed a temporary injunction on the flight and they were grounded.²

A third competitor was personally committed to the goal and involved in every aspect of the trip. He was in the factory as the plane was built and made sure to keep it simple. His plane had only one engine, so as to conserve fuel. It had one seat for one pilot to save weight. He even trimmed excess paper from the edges of his navigational charts to save weight. There were no luxuries, not even a forward windshield. And the result? Charles

¹ Tim Brady, "The Orteig Prize," *Journal of Aviation/Aerospace Education & Research*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Fall 2002), pages 48-49.

² *Ibid.*, pp 54-55.

Lindbergh landed the Spirit of St Louis near Paris on May 21, 1927, 33½ hours after he took off from New York. The press dubbed him “Lucky Lindy” in honor of his success.³

2 Does anybody remember the Spruce Goose, built almost entirely of wood because of war-time restrictions on metal availability? Flight is never a matter of luck. It takes careful planning, intentionality, and often sacrifice. So too, Generosity doesn’t just happen by luck. Generosity happens by design. Most of us would like to grow in our generosity, but we’re stuck like the competitors for the Orteig Prize. Some of us are like Fonck, so weighed down by the gravity of our possessions that we’re unable to experience the freedom of generosity. Some couples and families are like Levine and company. They have competing financial goals and conflicting personal values, and they lack basic communication skills, especially when the topic is money. If we want our life journey to be a generous one, we need to be more like Charles Lindbergh. We need to commit to what we want to accomplish, plan a strategy that fits our resources, and then muster the courage to act. Just as Lucky Lindy didn’t count on good fortune, we too must have a clear plan of action to be generous.

3 Do you remember the video we watched with the man tethered to a sled loaded down with weights? I’m going to share with you three secrets of financially generous people that will help you stay tethered to God. We were never meant to be tethered to stuff. We were created to be tethered to God, free to enjoy creation and make God-honoring choices, but also safely tethered to our creator when we encounter the strong winds and perilous heights of life. In a way, the Christian life is like navigating a high ropes course. Let’s take a look.

{Show video: 11.10.19 Ropes Course}

4 The first secret is to make a budget. Budgets remind us that our relationship with money matters to God. If we don’t steward God’s gifts carefully, including planning to invest in the work of God’s kingdom as a first priority, we’ll wind up doing what so many others do, offering leftovers to God as it suits us. Discipleship can’t begin after the spending ends, it has to begin before the spending begins. Managing money is hard, and it seems like it gets more complicated every year. We need all the help we can get. A budget is like a

³ <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/history>

carabiner on a high ropes course, that metal clip that allows us to engage and disengage from the line as needed. A budget keeps us safely tethered to God during our gravity-defying journey. While others are grounded by their attachment to their possessions, we're able to move with confidence toward our goals. We can grow in generosity when we become serious about being careful stewards of our income. We gain that ability when we clip our lives to God's safety line with a God-honoring budget.

5 The second secret is to live simply and below our means. Simple living doesn't necessarily mean you have to live in a tiny house, although it could. Living simply is a principle that works for people of all income levels. It might surprise you to learn that even people with a lot of money often live in average homes in their communities, drive used cars, and don't wear the most expensive clothes. They have a clear vision of the difference between their needs and their wants in life. The disciplines of frugality, saving, and working a budget push them toward the practice of simplicity.⁴ People of more limited income can do the same thing. The principle of simplicity is the single most effective tool that can be employed by people who want to escape the financial gravity of our culture.

Gravity-bound people, tethered to their stuff, usually see simplicity as absence. They assume that simplicity means the bed will be hard, the car will be undependable, and the shirt will be tattered. Because they see simplicity as absence, there's no motivation to practice it. Gravity-bound people pursue objects with abandon and believe they're the path to the good life. That's why most people inexplicably find their cabinets, drawers, closets, basements, attics, and sometimes even storage units full of stuff and more stuff.

Gravity-defiers, securely tethered to God, see simplicity as freedom. It's freedom from the pressures of debt and freedom from the complexity of having more than we need. To gain simplicity, we have to identify what brings us real joy in life and honors God. Simplicity isn't about denying ourselves so much as it's about avoiding things that keep us from completing our mission. The principle of simplicity, this sorting of needs and wants, enables us to be content with what we have and to not to place our hope in our things.

⁴ Thomas J. Stanley and William D. Danko, *The Millionaire Next Door* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996) (<https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/stanley-millionaire.html>).

6 The third secret is to set goals for generosity. The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy, “Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others.”⁵ Setting specific goals for the good we hope to do with our time, talent, gifts, service, and witness is a time-tested way of growing in generous giving. Notice how these three secrets build on each other. It’s unlikely you’ll have much to give, let alone a plan for giving, if you’re not living below your means. It’s impossible to know what your means are if you don’t make a budget.

As we grow in generosity, we begin to understand that we’re not doing things for God so much as we are becoming a part of what God is doing in the world. This is our mission: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation and healing of the world, so that all may know joy. Like Lindbergh, we know what we’re about, and nothing will get in our way. This is why it’s important to begin the year with financial goals for what we intend to contribute to the work Christ’s Church to which God is calling us. It’s amazing what we can do—at any income level—when we set goals for generosity and order our lives accordingly.

7 Don’t settle for a life that’s held down by the gravity of our culture and miss the abundant life promised to us in Christ. Don’t settle for an ordinary life when you can have an extraordinary life of generosity.

We’ll never grow in generosity without doing the hard work upfront, before the annual spending begins. That’s why you recently you received a Promise of Giving card in the mail. If you didn’t get one, you’ll find some in the lobby today. You’ll also find a copy of this Stewardship Planning tool that we passed out last week. This week, spend some time in prayer, conversation, and planning. Then fill out the Promise of Giving card and bring it to worship next week as we consecrate our promises of giving to the work of Jesus in transforming this world. When we’re securely tethered to God, we can dare to join Jesus on the adventure of a lifetime.

⁵ 1 Timothy 6:18 (CEB)

**This message adapted from the original sample sermon by Pastor Tom Berlin, in Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More- Program Tools (Abingdon Press).*



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