

1 Last week we learned that just as gravity exists in the natural world, *financial gravity* exists in the material world in which you and I live each day. Financial gravity is generated by the culture and economy in which we live, and, like Earth's gravity, it's just a fact of our daily lives that we all have to come to grips with. The gravity that holds us close to our possessions becomes a problem for us when that force is felt with such intensity that instead of money and belongings serving our needs, they begin to control our attitudes and behaviors.

Gravity is a force that pulls all matter together—the more matter, the more gravity. Money and possessions have their own mass as well. They pull us in. The more we amass, the more we experience the gravity that comes from their mass. The force of gravity has a tendency to keep us down, at the dark bottom of what's been metaphorically called a “gravity well.” The good news is that we don't have to remain trapped in the gravity well of consumerism. God has both the plans and the means for us to break free.

2 The connection between financial gravity and our spiritual lives is complex and powerful. We can see that even in our prayer lives. It wasn't until the 16th and the 17th centuries that we began to understand that the sun, not the earth, is at the center of our solar system. Just as our egos want our planet to be at the center of the solar system, the gravity of our attachment to the stuff in our lives often sucks us into egocentric prayer.

We ask for guidance to make decisions, we ask for good health and recovery from illness, for comfort for the bereaved, for jobs and money to pay bills, for healing in relationships, along with countless other requests. Don't misunderstand me- there's nothing wrong with asking God to provide for our needs. In fact, Jesus gave us the example to do so in the Lord's prayer. But the heart of our prayer sometimes gets weighed down by the gravity of our desire to receive, and regardless of how well intended, our desire becomes primarily to acquire or receive things from God rather than to serve God.

How often do we as individuals, or small groups, or even as a congregation, pray about how we can reach those who don't know Christ, or how we can feed the hungry, comfort those who mourn, assist the physically or mentally ill, house the homeless, bring

Good News to prisoners, or provide needed services such as job training to underserved peoples? From my observation, even in my own prayer life, the ratio of “receive” prayers to “serve” prayers is very high.

3 There’s a moment of epiphany, a moment of revelation when the divine and the human intersect, when Christ-followers recognize the difference between being a beneficiary of God’s kingdom and being a laborer in God’s kingdom. When you find yourself submitting your kingdom of self to the kingdom of God, good things begin to happen. And that’s the essential change that needs to happen in our hearts if we hope to break free from the gravity well of consumerism. A servant orientation toward God’s kingdom is life-altering. It creates an identity founded in humble generosity that follows the self-giving generosity of Jesus on the cross. Generous people see themselves, their lives, and their purpose differently than people whose lives are weighed down by financial gravity. Generous people are more interested in what they can give than in what they will get.

When we learn to see ourselves and act as though we were building the Kingdom of God instead of just waiting for it to spring up around us, we begin to become good stewards. A steward is a person who manages another’s property, with broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or how a household is run. Stewards know that primarily they’re servants, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. Christ-followers understand they’re stewards of a gift given to them by God—a life with unique strengths, talents, abilities, and resources to use in ways guided by God’s own Spirit that lives within them, so as to honor and glorify the giver of the gift.

4 Sadly, most Christians don’t truly act as God’s stewards. Financial gravity pulls us toward a deep belief that we are the sole owners of what we possess and that we have unlimited license to use it to support the lifestyle we desire. Being an owner means we can make decisions free of the control and even the consideration of others. We submit to no one when financial gravity holds us back.

Most people in the United States live like owners. If I’m an owner, all that I have is mine. In their book, *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson find that “very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful

lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually tend to lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way” (p. 99).

5 Their five-year survey of two thousand Americans, along with in-depth interviews, offers new insights into the positive outcomes of generosity when its exhibited or withheld in the life of an individual or family. Here’s what they found: 44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave none of their income to any charitable purpose.

You heard that right. Zero. Not one dollar. They didn’t even put a quarter in one of those plastic funnels where you can see it go around and around before dropping to the bottom. Nearly half of Americans gave away zip, nada, squat, zilch. Nothing at all. These people turned down Girl Scouts, refused high school band collections, didn’t make plan for giving through their church or even make occasional gifts, ignored the cancer research drives, told the Salvation Army they had no change at Christmas, and then said, “I didn’t give at the office either!”

Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income (p. 103).

Some of those same people did give their time, and time is valuable. Volunteerism is extremely important to charitable organizations. However, in the same study, more than 76 percent of the people self-reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That’s three out of four people, a remarkable number. It seems there’s a generosity famine afoot in America.

Let’s be clear. A lack of generosity isn’t about a lack of resources; it’s about identity and purpose. Are we owners seeking to enrich the kingdoms of self, or stewards seeking to build the Kingdom of God? We can learn to be generous no matter how much material wealth we have. Stewards of God understand that they’re custodial agents of whatever sum they administer. They manage money and assets with the thought of pleasing the true owner, their creator and Savior, Jesus.

6 In order to become a steward of God’s gifts, we have to accept the challenge to set aside an amount of money to invest in the work of God’s kingdom. Many Christians, as a

way to get serious about their desire to participate in God's work, pursue generosity through percentage, or proportional giving to their income. The idea behind proportional giving is Biblical. We set aside the first and best portion of what we've first received from God, and then plan accordingly in other areas of our life. God never asks us to return a portion of what we never received in the first place. The practice of planned, proportional giving allows us to offer our best for God's kingdom as a way to live into our identity as stewards of God's gifts. Jana and I practice proportional giving, and we plan that giving ahead of time each year so that we can budget our other expenses accordingly.

How does the practice of generosity change us? We're going to watch a video testimony now from a woman known only as "Ms. Margaret." She was in her early nineties when she was interviewed for the video, and she had life experiences that keenly challenged her determination to live in humble generosity. [{Show Video, 11.3.19 Mason Jar \(1:50\)}](#)

7 Ms. Margaret shaped her life and the life of her family through generosity. No matter your age, whether your giving fits in a mason jar or a charitable trust, you can do the same. The only way to gain that kind of joy is to take on the practice of generous giving. As Christians, we are called to be stewards of all that we have, from our possessions and money to our time and abilities.

We love God and we want to honor Christ and seek the will of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but all too often we're not embracing the practices that will allow us to move from being a recipient of God's grace to being a generous laborer in God's kingdom. Today can be a fresh start for us, a new beginning. I want to grow in humble and joyful generosity, don't you? We don't have to live out our days trapped at the bottom of a financial gravity well. We can break free and find the joy we want, but only by laying down all that we have and following Jesus.

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Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com