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# “The Gift of Generosity”

Romans 12:1-18

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November 5, 2023

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

*Let love be genuine; hate what's evil, hold fast to what's good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Don't lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you. Bless and don't curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Don't be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Don't claim to be wiser than you are. Don't repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what's noble in the sight of all. If it's possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Romans 12:1-18

“Whoever said money can’t buy happiness isn’t spending it right.” That was the tagline for a Lexus ad. One commentator responded, “They hijacked the bumper-sticker line, ‘Money can’t buy happiness,’ for a commercial for a car so fancy that no one would ever dream of putting a bumper sticker on it.” What should make the ad infuriating is that they are offering a simple, expensive, and wrong answer to the question, “How can we transform the money we work hard to earn into the good life?”

Most of us would not say, “I’m working to buy more happiness,” but we sort of act like it. It is why we stay late at work and struggle to save money. But then the promotion, bigger apartment, or retirement fund does not cheer us up for long. (David Futrelle, “Here’s How Money Really Can Buy You Happiness”).

We chase happiness in the wrong ways. We continue to secretly believe that if we had a little more money, we would be a little happier, but then we get there, and we are not. In some ways, the more we make, the more we want. The more we have, the less effective it is at bringing us joy.

We understand the negative effects of money, working long hours in stressful jobs, but never being satisfied. Once we get our basic needs met, a lot more money does not make us a lot happier. We overestimate how much pleasure we will get from having more. Earning more does make us happier in the short term, but we quickly adjust to our new wealth—and everything it buys us. We get a thrill when we buy a TV screen the size of DaVinci’s Last Supper, but we get used to it.

What more money does lead to is more envy. H.L. Mencken said, “The happy man is one who earns \$100

more than his wife's sister's husband." That is sort of true. What we have relative to others makes a bigger difference in our sense of well-being than how much we have in an absolute sense.

We compare what we have to the people we work with, friends we grew up with, neighbors who should not have more than we have. To an outsider it looks like we think that money is a sign of worth. That seems to be how we value movie stars, purses, and polo shirts.

We smile at Dorothy Parker's line, "If you want to see what God thinks of money, just look at all the people he gave it to," but we still push for the most money we can make. How much money do we need to be happy? All we really want is enough money to prove that money will not make us happy.

St. Paul describes a better way. Paul wants to help people he cares about have more joyful lives.

He writes: "Don't conform. Don't copy everyone else. Don't be greedy like everyone else."

That is easier said than done. We conform and copy all the time. We fall in step with the materialism that surrounds us. We go to the school to which others think we should go. We take the job that will impress others. We want the promotion others want. We dress like those who have the success we want. We buy things we do not need, because others have them. We want more like others want more.

Paul thinks that when we are too much like those around us we miss better possibilities. We forget that life is wilder, richer, and more profound than most recognize. We stop hearing God's invitation to a different way.

Reinhold Niebuhr said that we need a “genuine Christian nonchalance.” Christian nonchalance is not indifference towards hurting people. It is nonchalance to the foolishness that surrounds us. Christian nonchalance means we do not care about the stupid things others care about. We do not worry about the status symbols others covet.

We do not care about some things. We do not long for the newest toys. We do not show off for people we do not know. We do not want the corner office because someone else wants the corner office. We do not have to impress strangers with the school we attended or the school our child attends. We are not afraid to look our age. We do not need a television that is bigger than we are. We do not try to let people know how important we are with the clothes we wear. We do not care about how close our seats are to the stage. We do not worry about having more than everybody else or more than anybody else.

And we care about some things more than others do. We care about people—our parents, our partner, our children, other people’s children, friends, neighbors, strangers, victims of abuse, victims of poverty, victims of racism, victims of gun violence, transgendered people, senior citizens, and Venezuelan refugees. We care about being generous and big-hearted. We care more about wanting less than buying more.

We care about peace, hope, and joy. We care about social justice, health care, and the environment. We care about worshipping, praying, and giving. We care about the church.

Paul writes this about caring for things that matter: “Let love be genuine. Hate what’s evil. Hold tight to what’s

good. Love one another. Outdo one another in showing concern for the poor. Put others above yourself. Be willing to let the people who long for credit take the credit.”

“Be enthusiastic. Be hopeful. When things go badly, look at it as a chance to try something new. Go out of your way to extend hospitality. Don’t badmouth people, not even greedy people.”

“Join in the fun with those who are having fun. Join in the tears with those who are broken. Make room for other’s sadness and gladness. Do not be so preoccupied with your own views that you can’t accept people where they are.”

“Don’t be stuck-up. Treat people equally. Pay no special attention to the rich. Talk just as much to the poor. Overcome greed with generosity.”

The world of status-seeking and the need to be constantly focused on our career keep us from the rich life Paul describes. Contemporary scholars of happiness are catching up with Paul. One study showed that people who were worried about their finances felt better after they gave money to someone else. Another study found that people who give to help others are more resilient in the face of stress. Most people have the misconception that spending money on themselves will result in greater levels of happiness when compared to giving money to causes in which they believe. But researchers find that people report higher levels of happiness when they spend on causes rather than on themselves. Our lives could be better. We could channel our ambitions to being genuinely generous.

Barack Obama said, “Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a certain poverty of ambition. It asks

too little of yourself. Because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential."

Today is an opportunity to hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself. Plymouth is filled with generous people who have not been infected by greed, and whose focus is not on themselves. They are big-hearted. They look for ways to share. They love the church.

Stewardship Sunday is the day when we attempt to relieve the wealthy of the burden of their money, and help them realize their potential. The church is here to care for those of you who would benefit by giving more money. We are here to help you share what you have, as you help us do a better job of fulfilling our mission.

Doesn't this mission statement sound like a cause to which we want to give our money: "To know God placing Jesus Christ at the center of our lives through worshipping God, studying God's Word, and responding to God's call; To grow together in community by learning together, serving together, and caring for each other; To live out our faith boldly and generously by pursuing God's shalom in the world."

We ask for money because we believe in the work God calls us to do. We give to share in a hope bigger than we are.

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