

Service & Giving

DAVE BAST

A lot of conversation in the Church today centers on what the Bible teaches about sex and marriage. Our culture, too, is full of this debate, and people feel very passionate in talking about it; but in fact, the Bible says a lot more about money than it does about sex; that we do not seem to be quite as interested in talking and hearing about that subject. Well, today on Groundwork, we are going to talk about it as we focus on the spiritual discipline of giving – giving your time, your service, and yes, your money. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, today on Groundwork we are continuing our series of programs on the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life as they are outlined for us and prompting us to follow them in scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; so, there are a number of disciplines we are covering in this series – there are actually more in the tradition of the Church, Dave, both in terms of monasticism and the like, but also just in the lives of all of us ordinary Christians – there are more than we will cover, but we will be talking about in various parts of this series things like silence and simplicity, prayer and fasting, we have talked about; so, we are going to be covering a number of these. Today we are going to think about generosity, service, and giving. Maybe we do not think about that sometimes as a discipline; we think about it as something to do...

DAVE BAST

Yes; duty, maybe...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Something Christians are supposed to do, and we do not really think of it as a discipline right up there with fasting and praying and meditating on scripture, but in the tradition of the Church, it is.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we are very pleased to welcome a special guest to this program. His name is Jeff Munroe. Reverend Jeff Munroe is the Vice President of Operations and Advancement at Western Theological Seminary in western Michigan. For many years prior to that, he was on the staff of Young Life, a ministry that aims at reaching high school age kids. He really has given a lot of thought and done quite a bit of writing on the spiritual discipline of giving. It is part of his job, but it is also a passion; so, Jeff, welcome to the program.

JEFF MUNROE

Thank you.

DAVE BAST

Let's start with the word that maybe springs to mind most often for Christians when they think about the idea of giving, and that is the word, *stewardship*, which does appear in the New Testament. It is required of ministers, Paul says; that they be found stewards or that they are stewards. What is your take on that?

JEFF MUNROE

Well, you know, Dave, I think that stewardship is a great word, but it obviously is a Church word. We hear it in church. We do not necessarily hear it that much in the rest of the culture. I think it is very important when you are thinking about giving that the organization that you give to, that you know what kind of stewards they are; about how they manage and use the money that you give. I think sometimes – and this is what I think you are asking me about specifically – I have tended to want people to use and think of the word *generosity* more than the word *stewardship* when it applies to themselves and their own giving, and that is for this reason: Sometimes I hear people using the word stewardship actually as an excuse to be stingy.

DAVE BAST

To not give.

JEFF MUNROE

To not give; to say, “Well, we are simply trying to be a good steward here.” There are pros and cons with it. I think we ought to fix more on the concept of generosity. Stewardship also sometimes implies that you are managing a limited resource; and one of the things that we know from the Bible is that God is a God of abundance. When Jesus gave the disciples a couple fish and a few loaves of bread, they had twelve baskets full left over. God always does and generates more. So, God is a God of abundance; and certainly the New Testament is full – the whole Bible is full of passages talking about that God blesses those who give; that there is abundance in generosity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think that is a really interesting point, Jeff, because, as I understand it, one of the places that roots and grounds our concept of generosity is in the character of God; and God is a triune God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and as I learned Trinitarian theology when I was in seminary, God is within God's own self this community of eternal self-giving; of generosity toward one another as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; always deferring to the other; making room for the other; giving to the other; sacrificing for the other in this great community. But you never think about God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as an example of stewardship; you think of it as just generosity. That is who God is.

DAVE BAST

I think the positive thing about stewardship is the reminder that we do not own the resources that have been given to us – have been entrusted to us – that is the basic idea. They belong to somebody else; they belong to God; but this idea of generosity is interesting in terms of the discussion on giving because of something Jesus says. Let me bring scripture in here a minute: A very familiar verse from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus talks about our treasures, and if anything, treasure implies abundance, not scarcity. Here is the verse: Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth where moth and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I know it is often said – because I talk to donors, too, as you do, Jeff – that people give where their heart is; but Jesus says here just the opposite, which is also true; your heart will be where your treasure is – where your giving goes.

JEFF MUNROE

That is absolutely right. You know, another thing about that passage: Think about treasures on earth as opposed to treasures in heaven, and how do we – in a sense, how do we make our treasures on earth into – how do we turn them into treasures in heaven? In the car on the way here, I heard a story about a country in

South America that is going through an inflation crisis and a currency crisis, and the people in that country are trying to convert the currency of that land into US dollars...

DAVE BAST

Right.

JEFF MUNROE

And the issue for us as citizens of heaven, how do we turn the currency of this earth into the currency of heaven? That is what Jesus, I think, in some ways is talking about. There is a famous saying in a book on giving called *The Treasure Principle* by a man named Randy Alcorn, where he says: You cannot take it with you, but you can send it on ahead. I love that idea that by giving money – by being generous with it – we convert the money of this world into a kind of eternal currency.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In this series, we also have a program on simplicity, and one thing I think sometimes Christianity or the Christian tradition can be caricatured sometimes as being: Well, I guess Christians are not allowed to have any money. Or they are not allowed to have possessions. They are supposed to just give everything away and have nothing. Actually, most of the Bible's passages about this are premised on the idea we will have resources, we will own property, we will have money; but what do we do with it? What does it reveal about our hearts in terms of what we do with it? It is not that we are not allowed to have any, but it is that we do not put our hearts on it, but we reveal our hearts in how we dole it out and give it away.

DAVE BAST

I want to pick up, though, on something Jeff just said a few minutes ago: Sending it on ahead. It makes me think of several of Jesus' parables about giving, like the parable of the rich fool – the farmer who just wanted to build bigger barns and his life was taken from him that night. I remember a comment one of the Church Fathers had on that parable, where he said: His bigger barn should have been the mouths of the poor. That is where he should have invested his surplus.

And then there is this other parable in Luke 16, where Jesus actually commends a shrewd but dishonest steward – manager – for making friends for himself with money. That seems to be the point. You can make friends for yourself by giving that will affect you in eternity. I mean, is that right? Do you agree with that? Obviously, Jesus says it, so we agree with it; but it sounds like you are kind of earning something for yourself.

JEFF MUNROE

Yes; well, that is a really curious parable; and I have made a habit any time I hear a sermon preached on that parable, I wait for the minister to say: Nobody really can say what this parable is about; because it is difficult that way; and one way to read it, it almost seems like Jesus is commending dishonesty; but there is a very plain verse, as you just quoted: Make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth. That Jesus seems to be saying – to me, the plain meaning of that passage is – Jesus is saying: One of the purposes, maybe a chief purpose of money, is to actually build relationships. Money can be used to destroy relationships; you see this in families all the time; you see this in businesses; partnerships that go bad; but money can also be used – when people are generous with it – when they have an open hand with it – it can be used to build relationships rather than to destroy relationships.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, that Luke 16 passage is fascinating in that way; and we have looked at Matthew 6, and there are others to look at; and we will take a look at a few more of those Bible passages in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee, and today our special guest, Jeff Munroe, I am Dave Bast, and we are talking about

the spiritual discipline of giving; and really, where we got to in the opening segment was the idea of generosity; not just giving as a chore or a duty or a responsibility; and actually, generosity is good for us; it is primarily about us. I remember – not to be too self-referential – but a sermon that I preached on that dishonest steward or manager idea; make friends for yourselves; all the really smart money is going into the kingdom; it is not going into the market, because that is what will have eternal consequences for us.

JEFF MUNROE

Yes; a question that I would ask is why did Jesus talk about money so much? Why is there so much about money in the Bible? I think it is because it is very simple. I think it is because Jesus is asking the question: In what or whom do you ultimately put your trust? Do you put your trust in God, or do you put your trust in riches – in money? It is a very kind of black and white question. I think that is why He keeps coming back to this topic again and again and again. I think also that Jesus shows us the antidote for the consumer-oriented environment that we live in, for the love of money. The antidote to that is generosity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Jeff, another passage where Jesus talks about that comes in Mark's Gospel. We looked at something from Luke, something from Matthew, and now we will go to Mark; Mark Chapter 12. Let's listen to these verses, 38-44:

³⁸As He taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the Law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. ³⁹And have the most important seats in the synagogue and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses, and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." ⁴¹And Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the Temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts; ⁴²but a poor widow came and put in just two very small copper coins worth only a fraction of a penny. ⁴³Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in everything; all she had to live on."

That is a very interesting passage, of course – the Widow's Mite, as it has become known. Usually what we take away from that is: Oh, she gave everything, whereas, they just gave a percentage, and still had plenty left over; therefore, maybe that is what we are supposed to do is give our all. I read an interesting commentary a while back that said that actually there is some indignation here for Jesus, especially if you connect the earlier verse where he says these teachers of the Law devour widows' houses, and Jesus is also saying to His disciples: She should not have to have given everything. If others had their hearts in the right places, she would not have to give away – they would be taking care of her – she would not have to give her last fraction of a penny. That is sort of interesting that sometimes the wealthy, who give just a percentage, are the same ones who can make it harder on those who have less. So, there is some indignation here, which I think is an interesting take on that well-known passage.

DAVE BAST

Kind of a social justice issue emerges out of what looks just like a story of generosity.

Let's talk a little bit about principles of giving and how we need to go about this. How generous do we have to be? I guess there is no hard and fast rule.

JEFF MUNROE

Well, you know, the concept of the tithe is a very old concept. The first reference to it in the Bible is actually found in the book of Genesis in Chapter 12 with the story of Melchizedek.

DAVE BAST

Right; Abraham tithes to Melchizedek.

JEFF MUNROE

Abraham tithes; so, it was known, and it certainly was known in the time of Jesus – it would have been very well known as a rule of thumb for generosity was ten percent. It is an interesting thing in that story that you just used...

DAVE BAST

Is that pre-tax or after tax? Are we talking gross here or net?

JEFF MUNROE

Gross or net – that is the kind of questions that happen. So, in the time of...

DAVE BAST

That is what Pharisees ask.

JEFF MUNROE

Right; in the time of Jesus what had happened was that there were all these commentaries – extra-biblical commentaries that had been built, and they were all to create loopholes for people to get out of giving the amount that they were asked to give. So, I think the question for us with the ten percent rule – I think the question for us often is, is that the floor or the ceiling for us? Is that a goal? For many people it is a goal to reach for, but for others, it is a goal that they should easily surpass.

DAVE BAST

Or a starting point, maybe.

JEFF MUNROE

A starting point; exactly. The floor rather than the ceiling.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what does it say if the be all and end all of our generosity... You said earlier, Jeff, that you prefer generosity over stewardship; stewardship can sound like a cold, calculating management: Well, there; I have done that; check the box; I am done. Whereas, generosity does not spend so much time calculating that, and generosity of the heart: Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," from the Matthew 6 passage; generosity is going to show up all across life, and we actually – as we prepared for this program, Jeff, we were having a conversation about even giving tips to servers in restaurants and how, very often, that can be a sign of where someone's heart is at.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; what is the least amount I can leave here on the table, because I want to keep my cost down for this lavish meal that I have just enjoyed? I am just thinking to myself while we are talking here, and how hard it is to give, at least for me, because, you know, money is always tight; it always seems like it is tight, and the ten percent is a wonderful goad, almost, for someone at least with my stingy personality; and we talked about the idea of making friends for yourself and how good this is for you; but I think there is a darker side to that too; because giving is the only way we can break the stranglehold that the idol, *mammon*, has over us; and that is the word Jesus actually used in the Sermon on the Mount: No man can serve God and *mammon*. It is almost personified; because money is so powerful, and it is so hard to give it away.

JEFF MUNROE

Yes; it becomes an idol for us; absolutely. I think the question of tipping that you talked about, Scott; I have actually done this across the country. I have asked people if they worked in the food service industry to raise their hands, and then keep their hands up if they got really excited when a church group came in, and oftentimes everybody laughs and they lower their hands. The point is all these good stewards from the church are not necessarily generous. They do not have a reputation for generosity.

DAVE BAST

Yes; notorious for stinginess, right?

JEFF MUNROE

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there have been stories on the news lately of instead of leaving a tip, they leave a religious tract; that is their tip; well, these people are dependent for their lives on that kind of money, and we do not evince a generous spirit when we are not generous across the board.

We could talk a little bit, too, maybe, as we close out this program, that it is also, indeed, more than money.

We talked earlier – this is a spiritual discipline, just like fasting and praying and meditating; and what is part of the discipline is that we discipline ourselves through prayer, through meditation, to be generous people, whether or not that is money. It can be time...

DAVE BAST

There is more than one way to give is what we are trying to say, and it is not just writing a check to your church or your favorite charity; but there is the daily giving of money, and maybe other things as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, some of the most generous people do not have money. There is this wonderful theme that runs all through John Steinbeck's great novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*; these people, the Joad family, they are dirt poor; they have nothing; and yet, there is this theme all through that Ma Joad is always saying: If you need something, don't go to rich people, go to the poor. The poor will always help you with whatever they've got. So, the idea is, they have no money to give, but they will give whatever else they have, including their time and their love. That is because that is what their spirit is, right?

DAVE BAST

There is one more passage on giving that we want to look at; it is another well known one, and we will do that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and our guest today on Groundwork, Jeff Munroe, as we are talking about, Dave, the spiritual discipline of giving – generosity.

DAVE BAST

Right, and there is one more passage we want to talk about with Jeff. It is the parable of the talents. It occurs in Luke and Matthew. Matthew's version is probably better known and it is a little bit longer, it is too long to read, but it is the one where the master gives different talents – amounts of talents – to each servant, and then the ones who made it work are told, "Well done, good and faithful servant." What is your take on the talents parable?

JEFF MUNROE

Well, I do not think it is necessarily a parable about money. It uses money; just in the same way I do not think the parable is...

DAVE BAST

Because the talent was a huge amount of gold, yes.

JEFF MUNROE

Yes, it uses money as an example. It is just like I do not think the parable of the sower is about farming. I do not think that the point – because if you took and said: Well, the point is about money, and then take it to its

logical conclusion is Jesus saying: Make riskier investments rather than safer investments? What is He really saying there? I think He is saying: How do you manage your life, and how do you manage all the things – money included – but, all the things that come into your life? What do you do with them; and to bury them is what is condemned in that passage. To take all the things that happen in life – I think of families that go on camping trips with this passage, where somebody says: Let's make this place better than how we found it. I think that is the point of this passage: How do we make things better? To bury things – to bury the experiences that happened – all the things that happen in life – is to be cast into the outer darkness, according to the terms of that parable.

DAVE BAST

Well, and then bringing it full circle: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. A talent was a treasure – it was a huge amount of treasure – and to bury it in the earth is to be stuck here in just the physical realm, rather than thinking of investing our treasure – whatever it is...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is also very curious in this parable that the timid servant who did nothing, who just buried it, the reason he gives to the master: I knew you were a hard man, so I did not dare. What the servant really missed was, no, he is a generous man; therefore, a generous God; a giving God; and if he had just gotten with the program and realized who his master – stand in here for God – really was, then he would have gotten with the program and given it away and taken the risks. So, when we misperceive who God is – that He is just stern and stingy and out to get us – then we misperceive who we are supposed to be – an imitation of God as well – and that too leads to a closed-off life.

DAVE BAST

What do you think, Jeff, is the single most important thing to be or do in order to give yourself... to become a generous person?

JEFF MUNROE

I think it has to do with your attitude and to actually make yourself sometimes do things that you do not want to do to give of...

DAVE BAST

There is the discipline part.

JEFF MUNROE

To be disciplined, yes; and to say, "Do I go through life squeezing, grasping, holding; or do I have an open hand?" Not just with money, but with all things: Our time, our talent, the way – all of our possessions. Do we share those things freely?

DAVE BAST

Be a lender.

JEFF MUNROE

Or do we hold on?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I can always remember a great line, I think it was in *Mere Christianity*, where C. S. Lewis said that some of the busiest professors he ever had were also the people who had the most time for you. They had plenty to do, but their character was one of giving and of generosity; and I think when that is the posture of your life, you are right, it will not just be money – it will be money, too – but it will be the time and your talents; these days maybe it is as much our time as anything that would reveal generous spirits.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and a special thanks today to Jeff Munroe. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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