

More frequently than I would like I am asked to prepare a funeral
or memorial service for someone.

When that kind of request comes, I meet with the family,
either here or in one of their homes, and we sit around and talk about the deceased.

I ask them to tell me about their lives, where they grew up, what sort of family
they came from, what work they did, what values they embodied.

And then I ask them to try to describe one defining characteristic of that person.

“What defined your husband?” “How would friends and neighbors describe your
mother?” “What mattered most to your daughter?”

And then I ask how their loved one might describe themselves and exactly what
they would like to be remembered for.

I learn so many things by sharing this sacred time with bereaved families.

One day someone is going to come and sit in your living room.

They will gather with your family and friends and ask similar questions about you.

What will your loved ones say?

What are the defining characteristics that others will remember about you?

I would hope that one of the defining characteristics of your life would be
generosity. For generosity is a true fruit of the spirit, a visible manifestation of the

Christian life. I hope that at the very least, our loved ones would say:

“She really was a generous and giving person, who sacrificed for others.”

“He really gave freely of himself—his time, money, energy, attention.”

“He left this world better than he found it.”

Christians do have a unique relationship to generosity.

We know that we will never find abundant life until we learn to use what we have
for a bigger purpose, until we become unselfish and truly generous human beings.

Said Winston Churchill “We make a **living** by what we get,

but we make a **life** by what we give.”

While generosity is one of the hallmarks of a Christian, it is something that many
Christians agree to in spirit, but not in actual practice.

We are always at battle with the voices of selfishness, greed and fear, particularly
in times like these. The impulse to be generous is instantly met with resistance:

Will we have enough money to send our kids to college, to take a vacation, to
retire when we want to?

Will we end up destitute, will there be enough?

The voices out there tell us that we should be hoarding and not giving, we should be thinking about ourselves and not others.

They tell us to be cautious and conservative because you never know what the future may bring.

Those are the voices we are all hearing these days, but they are **not** the voices of those who are generous. And they are certainly not the voice of Jesus.

Alan Gompers was a selfish man who led a very colorful life, which he wrote about in his best selling book Maximum Security–The True Meaning of Freedom.

After living 40 years in self made prisons of greed, manipulation and insatiable hunger for more, Gompers finds himself in a maximum security prison.

He could attest to those words from 1 Timothy: “Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble.”

His life-long search for security, recognition, and power drove him to make (and lose) million-dollar fortunes, betray friends and family, and deal drugs, which ultimately brought him a hefty prison sentence. Having sold an ounce of cocaine to an undercover police officer, he was sentenced to life in prison. The sentence was the only one allowed under the harsh New York state laws at that time. The extreme negativity and deplorable conditions of prison life completely shattered his ego, creating a spirit that was open to God for the very first time.

Under the mentor ship of a former Catholic monk, Gompers found a rich freedom behind the walls of his physical surroundings. His spiritual journey of introspection led him to places within himself that he forgot existed, bringing him to a state of gratitude. Gratitude for all the choices he made that led him to that prison that ultimately led him to God

In a maximum security prison he finally found –within himself – what he had been seeking all along: the true meaning of freedom.

He was in solitary confinement and only there, for the first time in his life, did his mind become still enough to hear the voice of God.

He learned this most important lesson:

When we find our own true purpose and value in life, is when we learn to give.

He realized he had always been a **taker**, his whole life was about taking.

He wanted to be a giver for a change, and to be remembered as a giver.

He wrote, “Generosity fuels the spiritual journey and lights the path to God.”

It’s true. It is a spiritual light on the path toward God.

The Bible reminds us of this fact again and again.

It is more blessed to give than receive; when you lose life you find life,
when you share you are blessed beyond measure.

Besides, none of it belongs to us anyway. We are stewards of God's gifts.

That is the theological foundation for generosity, it all belongs to God.

Said the Psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it"

Book of Leviticus has God saying: "The land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants upon the land." The point is that none of this belongs to us. It never did.

We are expected to use our resources wisely.

It all came from God in the first place. And the money we give to God's work is used to bless the poor, help the widow and orphan, and make the world kinder and more humane. And to make us kinder and more humane.

This is part of every spiritual tradition—one of the 5 Pillars of Islam is the requirement to give alms to poor and within Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and so on, there are strong requirements to give generously to the Temple or Mosque to support those in need. This is universally considered an essential component of spiritual growth. All spiritual traditions have this in common—you cannot really know God until you become generous.

Now, the Biblical model for what we are expected to give to God is 10% which is the tithe. The Bible talks about giving God the first fruits, not what is left over, but that which is first, 10% right off the top.

That is the model we are expected to emulate to please and honor God.

It is a wonderful guideline for what we should be giving to God, besides 10% is really not that much—it is considered a cheap tip these days.

Fred and I have found throughout our married life that the more we gave away, the more we were blessed and the better we feel about our lives.

Sometimes it is hard to be generous, but it is never without rewards and satisfaction.

I know it is a struggle to tithe and for some of you it is impossible to begin this spiritual practice of generosity right now, I understand that.

But it is something to which we should all aspire as we grow closer to God.

I am reminded of Peter Marshall, a Presbyterian pastor who became Chaplain of the U.S. Senate at a time when that position really meant something.

I could not tell you who the Chaplain of the U.S. Senate is today.

Marshall was quite respected as a religious leader and he told a story about a Senator who

came up to him one day and confessed just how hard it was to tithe, now that he was well off.

He said it was so much easier to tithe when he was struggling, on a salary of \$20,000 a year he could easily give \$2,000 to God, but now that he made \$300,000 a year it was really challenging to give \$30,000 of that to God.

It just seemed like too much money, he could no longer do it.

So Peter Marshall said “I understand you have a serious problem, and I would be happy to pray about it with you.” The man agreed, so Marshall put his arm around his shoulder and earnestly prayed:

“Dear God, you know my friend is struggling with his level of generosity toward you. This is no longer easy for him, and over the years tithing has become much more of a struggle. So I want to ask you to please bring him quickly back down to an income at which he can afford to tithe.”

When it comes to money, at some point we all need to ask ourselves, “Just how much do I really need?” There will always be those with so much more, and those with so much less, but exactly how much do we need?

What does enough look like? How would simplicity and generosity bless us?

There are 968 billionaires in the world according to the most recent Forbes Survey. And they only gave away 1.2% of their income last year.

Of course there are exceptions like Bill Gates and Ted Turner, but for the most part the world’s billionaires only gave 1.2% of their income away.

Now I have tried to understand that, but I simply cannot.

How can you be a billionaire and only give away 1.2% of your income?

Do you need the rest of it, just in case? Is there really that much stuff you can spend your money on? Perhaps. I remember reading that Brittany Spears spends about \$787,000 a month and has not put one dime in savings.

Maybe that is the way some billionaires live, but it is not God’s way.

It is not the way that leads to contentment, and abundant life.

I would challenge all of you to become tithers and to grow in generosity.

Next Sunday, November 23 is our Commitment Sunday when we will offer our tithes and pledges to God for the coming year.

It is always so moving for me when we all come forward and commit a portion of our blessings to God, as we place our cards in our little wooden church, symbolic of our faith in the ministry of this church in the days ahead.

I know that times are tough, and I know that most of us have lost money in the last year. We all need to tighten our belts and become more careful with our money. But our giving to God is not the place to cut back. This is no time to withhold our gifts when we need to be generous and there are so many who need our help.

In prosperity and want, in good times and bad God is there for us, and as followers of Jesus we are expected to be generous people.

For generosity fuels the spiritual journey and lights the path toward God.

I do not know how it is for you, but I have been on the receiving end of far more gifts that I have ever deserved.

Sometimes they are small gifts of thoughtfulness and kindness, such as a hug or a card sent in sympathy after the death of a loved one.

And then there are the large gifts like being born in America, having people who love you unconditionally, and the gift of good health.

We can never repay God for those gifts, but can be generous in return.

We can be a giving people who seek to be a Christian in more than name only.

When all is said and done, people will remember not what we acquired, but what we gave away.

None of us came into this world with anything at all, and none of us will leave this world with anything at all, except the reward of a life well lived and the promise of eternal life.

As the first letter to Timothy states: “We entered this world penniless and will leave it penniless, be satisfied with enough.”

So what will your loved ones talk about when they meet with a pastor to plan your Memorial Service? How will you be remembered?

I hope we will be remembered well, and that generosity will be one of the defining characteristics of your life, and mine.

Amen.