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“Already Blessed”

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1 Timothy 6:17-19

About 7 years ago I attended a Conference where the featured speaker was Christopher Reeve who has since died at the age of 52. Reeve was an actor, director and producer who became famous for portraying Superman in the movies. In 1995 he became paralyzed from the neck down in a horseback riding accident. He became a huge advocate of stem cell research and finding resources for people with spinal cord injuries. Anyway, he came onto the stage in his wheelchair, and said some things I will never forget. He said that he never feels sorry for himself because it does no good, and that life is too short for negativity. He said that although he was now a quadriplegic, he was so grateful to have the 3 most important things—heart, mind, spirit. Reeve shared that he learned so much from his accident and he is a much better person than he was before he became paralyzed. He is more compassionate, kind, thankful. He also shared how essential it is to keep your sense of humor no matter what life sends your way. He told about a letter he received from a guy who wrote, “I totally identify with you since that horseback riding accident made you a quadriplegic, Chris, because I have had a life-long battle with indigestion.”

I am humbled by people like Christopher Reeve, who have carried nearly unbearable burdens but do so with hope and grace. People who do not have easy lives but consider themselves already blessed.

This includes so many people who live in poverty. In the United States about 40 million people are defined as living in poverty right now, which is a family of 4 people living on about \$21,000 a year. According to the World Bank the definition of acute global poverty is those millions of people in the world who live on less than \$1 a day. In study after study concerning people who are poor, researchers have found the poor are far more generous than the everyone else. Their per capita giving is a higher percentage of their income overall. People who struggle financially seem to instinctively know that you cannot keep what you do not share.

After his first missionary journey, the apostle Paul fell out of favor with Barnabas, and so he asked a prominent member of the church in Jerusalem named Silas to accompany him on the second journey. Silas was a Roman citizen, highly respected, and he was named after our Youth band!

Silas agreed to travel with Paul on that 2nd journey, and soon they found themselves in Phillipi, hoping to start a church there. But before long, they got into trouble, which happened pretty much everywhere Paul went. In this case they removed an evil spirit from a slave girl, taking away her owners source of income. They were stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail, where their feet were put in chains. The book of Acts tells us that in that jail at about midnight Paul and Silas were singing praises to God.

Paul later wrote a letter to the Christians in Phillipi from another prison cell and he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.” Beaten, put in chains, hungry, exhausted and imprisoned Paul could rejoice because he knew that he was already blessed.

And of course, so are we. In about 10 days we will gather with family and friends on a day set aside to count our blessings. Aside from Thanksgiving, most days we do not even think about how blessed we really are.

In order to help us do that today, and in our continuing efforts to Rethink Church, we are going to get a different perspective from Rob Bell who is the founding pastor of Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Bell created a series of Videos called Nooma, meaning Spirit, that explore various questions of faith. This series is currently being facilitated by Jim Marshall here on Sunday mornings. Let’s watch.... (12 minute video on generosity)

You don’t have to read very far in the Bible to get the message loud and clear that when God blesses you it is for one reason and one reason only: to be a blessing to others. We are never blessed for ourselves alone, in order to become self-indulgent and self-absorbed. We are blessed by God to be a blessing in this world. As both Jesus and Timothy remind us, we are to put God first, to do good, to help others, to be extravagantly generous.

One week from today we will hold Consecration Sunday, and we will invite you to make a pledge to support our ministry for the coming year. I hope we will all be moved by the Spirit of God to be just as generous as we can be, rejoicing that we are apart of an organization that is making miracles happen every day.

How I wish you could see what those of us who work in the church see. There are hundreds of people in and out of this building in any given week with Meals on Wheels, Preschool, Parent’s Day Out programs, various church events and activities. For the most part, people are better and happier for having been

here. I wish you could gaze into the tearful eyes of a man trying to feed his hungry kids, who has been helped by your church. I wish you could see the battered woman, being told she never has to return home ever again because of your church. I wish you could go downstairs to the Summit Jungle and see a child really understand that they are loved by God for the very first time. I wish you could see a sullen and alienated teenager realize that he is accepted and forgiven. I wish you could see what I see and hear what I hear, because I get to witness miracles, and our generosity makes those miracles possible. Our money mysteriously activates the power of God in human lives and changes reality.

The services of your church are offered freely to everyone who needs them. I will provide counseling, baptisms, weddings, funerals, visitation and communion to anyone. We would never deny our services to people based upon their ability to contribute financially. You won't get a subscription renewal notice for the Flame, you don't have to pay a fee for classes or so that your kids can attend choir, Silas, Youth Group and Sunday School, and you won't get a letter saying that your membership will be terminated unless you pay your dues in full by the end of the year.

What you give to the church is a free choice, and it is entirely between you and God. But the extravagant generosity of those of us who are richly blessed, makes our services available to those who cannot give anything at all. To me it is a privilege and an honor to be a part of an organization primarily devoted to making the world a better and happier place. Time and time again I have learned that the more generous I am the more I am blessed. What you give always comes back to you many times over.

Sandra Aldrich was lost the first Thanksgiving after her husband died. She was dreading it, and could not bring herself to cook a big meal for just herself and her two kids, because it would be too sad. So she decided they would volunteer at the Salvation Army soup kitchen serving families in need. She later said this: "As I wiped down the tables when the meal was over I had to wipe away many tears. They were not tears of sadness, but tears of gratitude. Tears of thanksgiving offered up to God for helping me get through that first Thanksgiving as a family of 3 by allowing me to realize just how blessed I was and have always been."

Already Blessed. In snow and sunshine, good times and bad. That's us.

