

## FINDING GOD'S BENEFITS

LUKE 6:27-38

Cheryl and I are heading out this afternoon on a much anticipated vacation, but this morning I want to introduce a three part message series on stewardship as a way of life. I know many pastors are reluctant to preach about giving and that was probably true of me when I was younger. But, frankly, I'm glad to speak about stewardship now, because I've realized that if you, as a follower of Jesus, are truly serious about improving your life generally and improving your spiritual life specifically, you will become a steward and live like a steward. You will learn how to become a giver and start giving. Furthermore, I know what good stewardship from a biblical perspective can do for you spiritually. It can change your life significantly for the better. God wants you to live a successful life – as He defines success, not the world out there – and the piece that we tend to forget, to overlook, to ignore, or to miss altogether is this piece called stewardship. What is stewardship? Very simply, it's the management of God-given resources. You are a steward whether you're conscious of it or not or want to be or not. The unanswered question is this one, "Are you a good steward?"

Now, today, I'd like us to review some of the benefits of stewardship found throughout the Bible. Many people – some of them followers of Jesus – think the Bible has very little to say about giving or money. The facts are actually very different. For instance, how many times do you think the words "believe," "belief", or "believer" appear in the Bible? 272 verses. How about the word "prayer"? 371 verses. How about the word "love"? 714 verses. Now, how many times do you think the words "giving," "giver," and "gift" are used in the Bible? Are you ready? Are you sitting down? 2,162 verses. It's both amusing and revealing when someone complains that the church just talks too much about money or giving. God, in and through His Word, speaks about giving three times more than He did about love, six to seven times more than He did about prayer and ten times more than He did about faith. We're going to look at a whole bunch of Bible verses today, but the primary one is found in Luke 6.

## FOUR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT

Here are four simple but key thoughts about that passage we just read. First, all of the behavior described here – including the giving part – is supposed to be a part of your everyday lifestyle. This is just normal Christian living any day and every day. Second, this behavior sets you apart from the world. Jesus makes it clear here that unless you live the kind of life He describes here – sharing, giving, loving – you won't look any different than people who aren't His followers. Third, this behavior is actually modeled by your Heavenly Father. For instance, it says here, "You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36 NLT) And then, finally, observe with me that this behavior will reap many benefits. "Then your reward from heaven will be very great... Forgive others, and you will be forgiven... Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back." (Luke 6:35, 37, 38 NLT). Before we take this overview of the benefits of stewardship as a lifestyle, let me mention...

## THREE STEPS TO DEVELOPING A GIVING LIFESTYLE

The first step is the most important one of all by far: give yourself totally to God. Stewardship never starts in the act of putting something in the offering plate when it comes to you on a Sunday morning. It starts when you give yourself totally to God. The great Christian leader, Paul, tells us in the New Testament about a group of churches that had given him a gift of money. He said they had given according to their ability, but then he corrects himself and says that they actually gave more than their ability. How can you give more than you are able to give? Paul says they first gave themselves to the Lord. True stewardship is always and forever about the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life. Until you give yourself totally and completely to God, nothing of real spiritual significance is going to happen in your efforts to follow Jesus. The first thing you give to God isn't your time, your talent, or your tithe. The first and foremost thing you give is yourself! Then, everything else you give comes far more easily. Sadly, many Christians never get around to living out that spiritual reality in their actual, Monday – Saturday, everyday lives. They miss out on many kinds of blessings as a result: spiritual blessings, financial blessings, relational blessings, emotional blessings. Why? They've never truly given themselves fully and completely to God, bowed their knees, confessed with their mouths, "Jesus Christ is Lord," and lived that truth out.

What's the worst kind of ingratitude? It's when God gives you something and then you put a fence around it and act as if it's only yours. No one helped you get what you think is yours and yours alone! The worst kind of ingratitude is possessiveness. Here's a central Bible truth: you and I own nothing. Everything we have - or will ever have - is a gift from God – life itself, health, family, friends, jobs, money. Ultimately, everything comes from the hand of God.

Dr. Peter Marshall was a pastor and the former chaplain of the United States Senate. One day a man came to him with a concern about tithing. He said: "I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year." Dr. Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: "Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?" The man agreed, so Dr. Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. "Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."

Tithing is all about giving yourself totally to God – that's the first and most important step in developing stewardship as a lifestyle not something you do just once and awhile or when it's easy and convenient. Second, learn the biblical benefits of giving. That's what the rest of today's message is going to be about. It's amazing to see what the Bible says about our giving and our grasping. Here's step number three: apply these principles to your life. It's not enough just to know about them; you and I must do them. How did Jesus put it? "If you know these things, you will be happy if you (Think about them? Meditate on them? Discuss them? No...) do them." (John 13:17 NLV) Now, let's

take that biblical overview and consider some of the benefits of making giving a matter of an everyday lifestyle rather than just something haphazard and occasional.

### **THIRTEEN BENEFITS OF A GIVING LIFESTYLE**

God truly desires to bless you. But we have to do life His way to receive all the blessings He wants to give. So, off we go! The first benefit of a giving lifestyle is the fact that it sees material wealth from a godly perspective. Jesus said, “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” (Mt 6:33 NLT) Jesus says that if you put Him first, then He will meet your needs. Here’s the problem. All too often we want God to meet our needs without putting Him first. The most obvious example is this one. Many followers of Jesus fail to see the contradiction in asking God to bless them financially while at the same time robbing Him of what clearly belongs to Him – the tithe or 10% of our income. God blesses us a little money and then we get possessive and tight-fisted acting like we deserve it and that it belongs to us. God then says, “Rick, I want you to return at least 10% to Me.” As we give it back to Him in the tithe or in offerings above the tithe, He gives back to us in numerous ways. Sometimes financially, but not always. Those are His blessings. But when we hold on to what belongs to God and then run into financial problems, God often says in effect, “Look, you already have what belongs to Me. You lost the blessing I would have added if you’d been obedient.”

The second benefit of a giving lifestyle is that it teaches that my giving should not be separated from my everyday living. Where is that principle taught? Consider Mt. 5:23-24 (NLV), “If you take your gift to the altar and remember your brother has something against you, leave your gift on the altar. Go and make right what is wrong between you and him. Then come back and give your gift.” In other words, Jesus teaches that it’s not enough to be a tither and still have a life littered with broken relationships, ungodly attitudes, or sinful behavior. It’s not as if you can just tithe and God will then overlook a lot of sinful nonsense in my life. No, giving should reflect the authenticity of your walk with God and the kindness and forgiveness with which you treat other people.

A third benefit of a giving lifestyle is the fact that it’s a key test of spiritual commitment. Jesus said, “And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?” (Lk 16:11 NLT) Jesus says in effect, “Look, if you can’t handle your finances – your checkbook, your cards, your accounts – and make me a part of what’s going on there – if you’re not trustworthy in material things, why should I trust you with the far more significant wealth of Heaven and spiritual things? If you can’t handle the blessings I want to provide on a daily basis, how can I trust you with eternal blessings?” There’s an interesting implication in Jesus’ words. Yes, God’s financial blessing upon our lives is often determined by our obedience to Him in the financial arena of life. But, Jesus also seems to imply that God’s blessing upon our lives spiritually is determined to some extent by our ability to handle money correctly and to have a giving lifestyle. “And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?” (Lk 16:11 NLT) They jump around quite a bit, but recent statistics reveal that the average church member gives between 2.5 – 3.5% of

their income to the Lord's work at his or her church. You know what's the saddest thing about that for me? That's a whole lot of both spiritual and financial blessing... forfeited. Blessing lost, because God's people will not be obedient to God when it comes to personal finances. God simply does not bless stingy people who rob Him of the tithe.

Do you know what your checkbook is? Or if you don't use a checkbook, what your cards or your financial assets reveal? They are theological entities. They indicate what and who you truly worship. It's relatively easy to come to church and say, "O Lord, we love You! We want to serve You, Lord!" God says, "Let me see how you handle your finances." Martin Luther, the great Christian leader from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, once said that when a person receives Jesus as Lord and Savior, three conversions actually need to take place – conversion of your head or your mind, conversion of your heart, and conversion of your purse – your finances. He added that the conversion of your purse – your finances – is the hardest conversion of the three.

A fourth benefit of a giving lifestyle is that it protects you from a life of financial enslavement. Do you remember – or have you ever seen - the old comedy routine Jack Benny made famous? A thief comes up behind Jack, sticks a gun in his back and demands, "Your money or your life!" Jack doesn't answer immediately, so the thief says again, "Your money or your life!" Finally, Jack says, "I'm thinking... I'm thinking!" That's a funny scene, but financial enslavement is no laughing matter. Many rich people are enslaved to money, but a steward is free from being mastered by money. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Mt 6:24 NLT) When your focus is God rather than the money you have or don't have, it frees you up to live life as God intended.

Back in 1987, the largest, single-day stock market crash since 1929 took place. In one day, Richard and Renee Stearns lost more than one-third of their life's savings and the money they'd put aside for their kids' college education. Richard was horrified and consumed with anguish over their lost money—and it showed. One night when he stayed up late trying to figure out how to salvage what they had left, Renee came and sat beside him. "Honey," she said, "this thing is consuming you in an unhealthy way. It's only money. We have our marriage, our health, our friends, our children, and a good income—so much to be thankful for. You need to let go of this and trust God." But Richard didn't want to let go of it. He told her he felt responsible for their family and that she didn't understand. It was his job to worry about things like this. Renee suggested they pray about it—something that hadn't occurred to Richard. So they did. At the end of the prayer, Renee said, "Now I think we need to get out the checkbook and write some big checks to our church and ministries we support. We need to show God that we know this is his money and not ours." Richard was flabbergasted at the audacity of this suggestion, but in his heart he knew she was right. So that night they wrote some sizable checks, put them in envelopes addressed to various ministries, and sealed them. And that's when Richard felt the wave of relief. They'd broken the spell that money had cast over him. It freed him from the worries that had consumed him.

A fifth benefit of a giving lifestyle is the fact that it gives you victory over materialism. One of the very best passages in all of the Bible on lifestyle giving is something Paul wrote to his friend, Timothy. “Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.” (1 Tim 6:17-19 NLT).

A giving lifestyle will, sixthly, strengthen your faith. How do I know that? Well, consider what God said through the prophet Malachi (3:10 NLT). “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,’ says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, ‘I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!’” Did you know that’s the only place in the entire Bible where anyone is encouraged to test God? In every other place where someone decided to test God, he or she got rebuked for lack of faith. Putting God to the test is not recommended, unless it comes to the matter of the tithe. Only here – in the area of tithing and giving – does God invite you and me to test Him to see if He is as good as His Word.

A seventh benefit of a giving lifestyle is that it will make you truly happy. When the Jewish people in the Old Testament were encouraged to give sacrificial, financial offerings to help build the Temple, we read, “The people rejoiced over the offerings, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord, and King David was filled with joy.” (1 Ch 29:9) Do you know the root word for “miserable”? It’s “miser.” The unhappiest, most joyless people in the world are the ones who must hold onto their stuff, who can’t let it go, and who are constantly looking out for themselves financially. A greedy, miserly, stingy mindset only results in misery.

An eighth benefit of a giving lifestyle is that it blesses us in return abundantly. That’s what Jesus said in the passage we read earlier. “Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap....” (Lk 6:38 NLT) When you live the life a steward, you will be blessed more than you are blessed. Here comes a ninth benefit of a giving lifestyle. It keeps you from losing your assets and abilities. When you become a giver, you keep – no, you increase – what you keep. Jesus states the principles like this, “If you cling to (or hold onto) your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it (or keep it).” (Mt 10:39 NLT) If you want to increase all of your assets in life, give them away. If you want to decrease your assets, hold tightly onto everything you think is yours. Now, I realize that makes no sense from a human point of view, but God doesn’t operate from a human point of view. Martin Luther made this observation, “I’ve had many things in my hands and I have lost them all, but whatever I placed in God’s hands, I still possess.”

Here we are now all the way up to benefit number ten! A giving lifestyle is the proof of your love. When Paul was writing a letter to his friends in Corinth, he said, “Since you

excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches.” (2 Cor 8:7-8 NLT) Yes, it’s possible to give without loving, but you can never love without giving. An eleventh benefit of a giving lifestyle is that helps us focus on the eternal rather than the temporal. Jesus said, “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal.” (Mt 6:19-20 NLT) When you tithe and then give above and beyond the tithe, you’re contributing to spiritual realities that will have eternal impact and significance.

Benefit number twelve of a giving lifestyle is recognition from God Himself. Do you remember the story Jesus told about the poor woman who gave her last two cents as an offering to God at the Temple? Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on.” (Mk 12:43-44 NLT) Last, but certainly not least, is a thirteenth and final benefit of a giving lifestyle. It just makes you more like God Himself. “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NLT) You are more like God when you give than at any other time of your life or your living.

A pastor by the name of Ed Young took his family to a high school football game. During the third quarter, his daughter, Landra, said, "Dad, can I have some money to buy some candy?" She came back with a sack full of Skittles. As Ed watched her eat them, he said, "Landra, can I have some Skittles?" She said, "No." He said, "Landra, just give me a couple." She said, "They're mine." Ed realized his little daughter didn't understand several things. Number one, she didn't understand the fact that he was the one who bought the Skittles for her. Number two, she didn't realize her dad's strength. He was strong enough to forcibly take those Skittles from her and eat every last one of them. If he'd wanted to, he could have done that. Number three, she didn't understand that he could have gone to the concession stand, put 300 packages of Skittles on a credit card, come back to her, and given her so many Skittles that she couldn't have eaten them all in a year.

We all have Skittles. Some of us have a pretty nice size pile of Skittles; others have a medium-size pile of Skittles; and some of us have little bags of Skittles. Our loving God comes to us and says, "Would you bring me some Skittles? Just a few Skittles?" What do you think our reaction often resembles? "No! They're mine!" God says, "Just bring me some Skittles." But we still say, "Uh-uh. I made those Skittles. I own those Skittles." Like Landra we don't understand several things. God is the one who gave them to us. They're His Skittles. He bought them. In an instant, God could take all of our Skittles. Also, we don't understand that God could rain so many Skittles down on our lives, we wouldn't know what to do with them. We couldn't possibly spend or enjoy all of them.

It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? Are we going to look at money God's way or the world's way? Are we going to handle the money that comes our way in life God's way or the world's way? The Bible reveals that there are all kinds of benefits to handling money God's way. I guess the question you and I must answer is, "Who are we going to believe?"