

The Heart Behind It

Great to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of 1 Chronicles, chapter 29. That's right, *1 Chronicles*. I know most of you probably spend your daily devotional time *exclusively* in 1 Chronicles, but for the rest of us, just stop on by the table of contents, or there's a page number up on the screen for where you'll find it in one of our bibles. Just as a heads up, I will be reading from the *NIV* translation of the bible today, so I know that's a little different than our paperback bibles. But we'll be in 1 Chronicles 29 here in just a bit.

So last week, we kicked off this series we've called *Give Like God*. And what we're looking at specifically is how the generosity of God towards us leads to our own generosity towards others. That's **the big idea: that God has been unbelievably generous towards us as his people, and that as a direct response to that, we are called to be unbelievably generous too**. So today to start off, we're gonna look at what I think is a really interesting Old Testament example of that principle at work. We're gonna look at a time when God's people in the Old Testament grasped that big idea really well and acted accordingly. And I think there's a lot we can learn from it.

But real quickly before we get to the story, let me give you just a little background so that you can understand what's happening here. Back in the days of 1 Chronicles, God's people understood the *presence* of God to primarily reside in a physical location. For a while, that was called the *tabernacle*, and then later, the *temple*. The temple was this physical building where God's people would come together to worship, and make offerings and interact with God himself.

Now—God doesn't operate that way *anymore*. The *New Testament* makes it very clear that we—the Church—followers of Jesus—that *we are now God's temple*. **God's presence now resides in us, not in any physical location or structure**. Like, this right here is not a temple. This is wedding venue. People come here on Saturday nights to watch a friend or family member get hitched, and then often get incredibly wasted to celebrate that. I know that because there are some mornings that we show up bright and early and parts of this space smell distinctly like stale beer. Now, there's nothing wrong with *beer*—I'm a fan of it myself—but I can tell you there is nothing spiritual *at all* about the *smell* of *stale* beer. My point is simply that there is nothing especially holy or spiritual about this building at all. Our hope is that you do encounter God's spirit in this space, but that really has nothing to do with the space *itself*. It has everything to do with the *people of God* using the space. Does that make sense?

But that being said, back *then* it was *different*. At one point, people thought of God's presence as especially residing in a specific physical location, in this case called the *temple*. And so where we pick things up in this story, God's people are *in need* of a temple. And building a temple was a *community project*. It took all of God's people coming together and offering up the money and materials and resources they had. It took every one of them chipping in and doing their part. So where we are in the story, Israel's king David has just asked all of God's people to chip in so they could build the temple. And they do just that. Now all the stuff has been brought in, it's all there in one place, and David gets up to address everybody who has given towards it.

So let's take a look, starting in v. 10 of ch. 29:

[10] David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, "Praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." [11] Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. [12] Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. [13] Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

Now I want you to think about this with me. David has just overseen one of the most successful giving campaigns in Israel's history. And he is now addressing the people who *made it* such a success. So that being said, who would you *expect* him to talk about? Who would you expect him to *thank*? *The people who gave*, right? This is where you have your end-of-the-campaign moment where you tell everybody you're so *incredibly* proud of them and they're so generous and they're the real MVP's and thank them for all of their world-changing generosity. And David gets around to some of that *eventually*, but that's not what he does *first*. His main focus is on someone else *entirely*. And who is it on? *God*.

So that's a little different, is it not? **We are now about halfway into David's thank you speech and he hasn't really said anything about the people who gave. Instead, he has repeatedly acknowledged the incredible riches and generosity of God himself.** So far, all he has done is called people's attention to the fact that everything on planet earth belongs *to*, and comes *from*, God himself. That God rightfully claims ownership of everything. I say "everything" because according to the passage the list includes: greatness, power, glory, majesty, splendor, wealth, honor, strength, power a *second time*, and oh, in case he left anything out, *everything [else] in heaven and earth*. That pretty much covers it all, right? **In David's mind, every single thing that exists rightfully belongs to God himself.**

Here's another way the bible puts it in Psalm 50 [this is God talking, by the way]:

For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. [11] I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. [and look at this line] [12] "If I were hungry, I would not tell you [God throwing some significant shade—I dig it], for the world and its fullness are mine.

The Scriptures consistently teach that God rightfully owns everything single thing that there is. Everything on heaven and on earth rightfully belongs to *him*. **Which means everything you and I have was first given to us by God, and ultimately belongs to him. Everything.** Including and especially our money and our resources. Now, you might respond to that by saying, "no it doesn't—I worked really hard to earn everything I have." Okay, but who gave you the strength and ability to work hard? "Well I learned my work ethic from my parents." Okay, who caused you to be born to those parents? "Well I just studied really hard in school to get ahead." Okay, who gave you the brain and the intellect that enabled you to study hard and get ahead? Are you seeing where this is going? Everything we have ultimately comes from God and therefore *is* God's.

Here's the way Tim Keller puts it in his fantastic book *Generous Justice*:

If you had been born on a mountaintop in Tibet in the thirteenth century, instead of a Western country in the twentieth century, then no matter how hard you worked, you wouldn't have had

much to show for it. If you have money, power, and status today, it is due to the century and place in which you were born, to your talents and capacities and health, none of which you earned. In short, all your resources are in the end the gift of God.

Everything comes from God himself. Now, for those of us still having a hard time with that idea, here I think is why: **I think some of us have operated for so long as if our money belongs to us, that we've actually begun to believe that it is ours.** Even if it isn't. I'll explain it like this. A lot of you guys know that a few months ago, we inherited a church building right over the river in South Knoxville. Well, with that building, we also inherited a dumpster that sits on the property, and inherited the *cost* of having it regularly emptied. Before long, we realized that there were plenty of people *using* that dumpster that shouldn't have been using it. To the point that we were having to pay money to empty it like every few days—money we didn't really have. So we put a lock on it. Well then one day, I'm walking out to my car near the dumpster and a lady is walking directly towards it with two trash bags in her hands. I introduced myself, tried to be nice and just explained the situation to her. And immediately her demeanor changed from pleasant to angry and she yelled at me "just because you *own* the dumpster now, doesn't mean you get to decide who does and doesn't *use* it!" I looked at her and said, "I have terrible news for you. That's actually exactly what it means". But listen—I feel her pain, right? I mean she had probably been using this dumpster as if it were her own for 2, 5, 10 years! Who was this random guy just coming along and telling her she couldn't use it anymore. **She had been treating that dumpster like it was her own for so long, she had convinced herself it was her own. Like it was rightfully hers.**

I wonder if some of us are in a similar place with our money. **I wonder if some of us have operated as if all of our money is our own for so long, that we treat any claim God lays to it, any call to be generous, any of that triggers immediate skepticism, or even hostility in us.** Any time God asks us to do something different with our money, we feel as if it's not *up* to him. I wonder if we've actually trained ourselves to believe God's stuff, is *our* stuff.

But it's not. And David knows that it's not. **That's why, despite the *incredible*—listen, *incredible*—generosity of the people standing before him in this passage, he starts by thanking God for his generosity towards those people.** He knows that's where it all starts. // And then, and *only then*, does David get around to talking to the people who gave. But even when he starts talking about *them* (God's people), it's all still couched in this idea of *God's generosity towards them*. Take a look, picking it back up in v. 14:

[14] "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

[15] We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. [16] Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. [17] I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.

So even in *acknowledging* the extravagant generosity of the people there, David almost downplays *their* generosity and *highlights* the God who made it all possible. **David's prayer is quite literally, "thank**

you God for giving us stuff so that we could have the incredible opportunity of giving it back to you.” *Central* to his understanding of generosity is that all that stuff ultimately belongs to God anyway.

Okay, so hopefully I’ve made my point on that by now (some of you are like “yep, actually about ten minutes ago.” Fair enough). But here’s why I care so much that we get this. Here’s why *knowing this* matters: **to get anywhere with becoming a generous person, you have to first accept that *nothing you have ultimately belongs to you anyway*. If you don’t get that, it will always feel like God’s call to be generous is him trying to *take something from you***. You will always feel like when God calls you towards generosity, he is trying to take something that is rightfully *yours*. *But*, when you understand that every single thing you have belongs to God, generosity makes total sense: **if it all belongs to God anyway, then doing what he wants with it is a logical response**.

The word the bible often uses to explain this idea is the word *stewardship*. We are to be *stewards* of resources we’ve been given by God. Now, *stewardship* isn’t a concept we’re super familiar with today, so try thinking of it in terms of a money manager or investor. So a friend of mine back in South Carolina is a financial advisor. So his job is to take money that clients give him, and invest that money, manage that money in a way that is in *his clients’* best interest. Sure, the way it’s set up, he also gets a cut, a percentage of some of it. He gets *some* benefits from managing their money. But at the same time, he has an *obligation* to invest that money in ways that *most benefit* his *clients*. To the point that there are *legal repercussions* for him if it is proven that he’s doing something other than that. And the reason there are legal repercussions for that is because *it’s not his money he’s investing*. It’s *their* money.

That is a picture of stewardship. That’s the framework we’re given for how we should view what we’re given by God. We are called to manage it, to *steward* it in ways that bring about the ultimate good of God and his kingdom here on earth. Now, sure there are some benefits to that. God gives us some things to enjoy in the process. But that’s almost *secondary*. The *primary* thing we are to do with what we’ve been given is to manage it, *steward* it in ways that bring about the good of God and his kingdom. And so **if we neglect to steward it in the ways he asks us to, it’s not just that we neglected to do something good that we *should’ve done*—it’s that we have actually *wronged God himself***. In Malachi, God tells people who haven’t been generous that they are actually *stealing* from him. If it is ultimately God’s money, then *not* using it the way he wants is actually *theft*. So this is the type of thing that God takes very seriously.

But when God’s people see their money and resources as coming from God and belonging to God, we get something altogether different. We get instead a beautiful picture of generosity like we see in 1 Chronicles 29. And David celebrates it, he points out how incredibly beautiful and good it is. And then he says this, in v. 18:

*[18] Lord, the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, **keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you.***

So David ends all this with a prayer that God would keep this mindset, this attitude towards wealth and generosity in his people for generations and generations to come. He says, “God, I want to ask you that your people would always think about their money and their possessions in this way—by seeing all of it as belonging ultimately to you and not to them.” What an incredible prayer, right?

Now I want you to see how God *answers* that prayer of David's. Flip over with me a whole lot of pages to Acts 4.

So a lot of time has passed since this whole situation with King David and the temple. Jesus has come and walked the earth, and then been crucified, he's come back from the dead, and then before ascending back into heaven he has given his followers some last instructions. Those instructions effectively commission this thing called the Church—this body of people who are called to live out the way of Jesus and represent Jesus to the world around them. Acts, in many ways, is a book describing how the Church got started doing just that. Now I want you to look specifically at how the author of Acts describes the way the early Church thought about their *money* and *possessions*. Look with me at Acts 4, starting in v. 32:

[32] All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

Now I've heard people joke before that this was the first historical occurrence of socialism. And you could definitely see where they're getting that from. But notice, people still *had private possessions*. It uses the language "*their possessions*." So people still had *legal ownership* of their possessions—their things didn't *actually belong* to others. It was theirs. But at the same time, they *chose* not to see it that way. **Instead, they believed it was all first God's.** They understood everything they had to be *from* and *for* God. And so they gave generously. Does that sound familiar at all to you? Yep, that's exactly what David talked about in 1 Chronicles. That's exactly what he *prayed* that God's people would continue to remember and practice. And God answered that prayer.

Now keep reading, v. 33:

[33] With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all [34] that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales [35] and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Okay, let's stop here and make sure we understand what this passage is describing. So here is the way that we generally approach generosity. So let's say someone in our LifeGroup has a \$500 need. Maybe their car broke down, maybe they had an unexpected trip to the hospital—something comes up and they have a \$500 expense to just be able to function in life. Here is the way I often approach that, and I'm guessing most of us probably do too. I look at my budget to see if I have \$500 of wiggle room. For some of us, we don't even look at our budget because we just know there's no wiggle room in it. But *optimistically* what we do is look at our budget, and we go "do I have \$500?" No, looks like I don't. So I text back my life group and say "I don't have \$500. Sorry, I'll be glad to pray, but I can't help." That's how it normally goes, right? Something like that. And I'm glad we are at least looking to see if we can be generous—that's a great thing to do.

But just so we're clear, here is the way the *early Church* approached that type of situation. If the early church heard that there was somebody in their community that needed \$500, they looked at their budget, and I asked "do I have \$500?" And if they *didn't* have \$500, the *next question* they would ask was, "okay

then what do I *own worth* at least \$500 that I could *sell*?" All the way up to—according to the passage—their *land* and their *houses*. So like this is not like a little garage sale fundraiser that they're having (not that there's anything wrong with garage sale fundraisers). This is them *liquidating major assets in their possession*, so that they can give to people among them in need. The thought was "well there's no reason for me to own land if somebody next to me doesn't have what they need." Do you see how that's different than how we sometimes approach generosity?

And I want you to see too: this wasn't a one-off type of situation. This was a *common occurrence* among the early Church. They didn't make a show of it. Like most likely today, if someone was this generous with their money, we'd bring these people up in front of everybody, name a pew after them, shoot a video testimony with them to highlight their spectacular generosity—we'd make a big deal out of it. But back then, this was just how they operated. "Oh yeah, last week we had another member sell their house for somebody who had some needs. You know, just your average Tuesday." This was not an isolated incident. This was a semi-regular occurrence in the early Church. This was how people thought about their money and their possessions in the early Church as a *pattern*.

And here's *why* people did these things. It's back up in v. 32, don't miss it: it's because none of them saw any of their possessions as their *own*. **In their minds,, those houses, that land that they owned ultimately belonged to God anyway.** So whatever need *God* had for it, that was what they knew they should do. They all saw every item they owned as belonging to God. Which meant they did with it what God would have them do. They used them for the good of others. What an incredible picture that is of God's generosity towards us.

Okay. So with all that being said, I feel like it would be easy for me to get up here after showing you all those radical examples of generosity in the bible and go, "alright team. We've obviously got a long ways to go because all you guys are filthy stinking rich Americans and you all love money too much. So get to work not being selfish, awful human beings and start sharing your stuff like good Christians *used to do*." And I've sat through sermons like that. Some of you may have too.

But here's what's cool for me as one of your pastors teaching passages like these: this type of stuff *is happening* in our church as we speak. I just heard about one of our LifeGroups two weeks ago who had a couple in need and has given over three thousand dollars to that couple in need. Just a few weeks ago when Sean passed away and his family was in need, you guys gave *sacrificially* of your time, your energy and your money to make sure they had what they needed. I'm not saying we're perfect at this stuff—not at all—but by and large, you guys *embody* this attitude towards your money on a *regular* basis. I want you to know that.

Now some of that might just be us giving our *extra*, the *margin* we have in our budget—and that's *fine*. That doesn't make it not *count*. But at the same time I know a lot of us. **I know that a lot of us couldn't give the amounts we've been giving without being at least a *little* sacrificial.** We're not a rich church by any means. So if we're giving some of the amounts I know we've been giving to people in need, there's gotta be *some* sacrificial generosity going on there. So let me say that that is not going unnoticed. By us, or by people in our city. We as your pastors are incredibly encouraged by the heart of generosity God is knitting together in you guys. And people outside of our church are taking notice too.

So here's all I'll say in response to that: *don't stop*. Keep doing what you're doing. **If you read through the book of Acts, you'll notice that nearly every time it talks about the growth and explosion of the early Church, it's on the heels of the Church being radically generous.** So keep after it. And if you aren't already, continue looking for how to be not just generous, but *sacrificially* generous. Giving not just out of your extra but beyond that too.

But **I also want to make sure we don't ever forget the reason why we do this.** I think it would be easy in a church like ours, where there *is* generosity happening regularly, to forget the motivation for it all. And really the motivation is the most important thing. So in that vein, I want us to take a look at just one more passage before we're done today. I know we've covered a lot of ground this morning, so thanks for hanging in there. This one will be on the screen.

We're going to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 8. So in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul is speaking to followers of Jesus in a local church, much like ours. Paul has been asking several of the churches he started to save up some money, so that they can all rally together to give towards a particular need. But some time has passed, and Paul gets word that the *Corinthian* church hasn't exactly been diligent in setting aside for this need. And so in response, he writes this to them. 2 Corinthians 8, starting in v. 8:

[8] I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

So Paul could *command* them to give. He really could have. Their church there in Corinth literally *exists in the first place* because of Paul. He could've just written, "hey guys, be generous. Stop being selfish, stop being greedy and materialistic, and just give what I told you to give. Signed, sincerely, *the very reason you exist, Paul.*" He could've said that to them. But he doesn't do that. He chooses a different strategy altogether. Look at v. 9:

[9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

So **instead of commanding them, Paul chooses instead to remind them of something.** He chooses to remind me of them of the generosity of God *himself*. Paul considers that to be a *far more effective* strategy than anything else he could do. He says, "let me remind you of what Jesus did for you. Let me remind you of God's generosity towards you through Jesus." And he trusts that that will motivate the Corinthians to be generous in response.

He chooses to remind them of something *very important* about Jesus. And that's that Jesus himself chose to give up the comforts of heaven and become poor, so that we—you and I, followers of Jesus down throughout history—could become *rich*. **That is how Paul chooses to motivate the Corinthians' generosity. Not with guilt, not with shame, not with commands—but with the unbelievable generosity of God himself in sending Jesus. Because Jesus became poor so that we could become rich.**

Now, something you should know about the way Paul uses the word "rich" in this passage—he's not talking about *material wealth*. I know that because earlier in this passage, he says that the another group of people, who were poor, showed "rich" generosity. So whatever Paul means by "rich," he does not

mean “materially wealthy.” Rather, it seems like **in Paul’s mind, how generous you are has absolutely nothing to do with how much money you have.** And instead, **it has everything to do with how you perceive God’s generosity towards you in Jesus.** Because **if you understand that Jesus chose to become poor so you could become rich, it is a no-brainer for you to become poorer so other people could have what they need.** That’s only logical, right? If Jesus impoverished himself more than we could ever imagine on our behalf, then why would we *not* become a *little* poorer so that someone else could become a *little* richer? That would be a very natural response to the generosity of God, would it not?

So I’ll just end here. Last week we ended very *practically*—this week we’re gonna end very *conceptually*. Here’s the question I want to you to consider: what are your thoughts on the *generosity* of God? When you think of God, do you think of him as being *generous*? Do you think of him as the one who gave you every single thing you possess? So when you think of your *house*, do you think “man I sure am glad I worked hard to earn the money to buy this house”? Or do you think, “I sure am glad God gave me the means to buy this house so I can use it for his purposes”? When you think of your *job*, do you think “I sure am glad I am talented enough to get this job?” Or do you think “I’m glad God gave me this job so I could use it and the paycheck from it the way *he* wants me to?” Do you think of God as being *generous*?

Here’s why I want us to consider that question. Because the *answer* to that question is what’s behind all of this. So here’s what I’d be willing to bet. Those of us who see everything as exclusively our own and no one else’s, are going to have a really difficult time with all of God’s calls to be generous with our money. It’s gonna feel like pulling teeth to get us to loosen our grip on our finances in any way. But at the same time, **those of us that truly see everything we have as coming from God himself and therefore existing for God himself—are gonna be some of the most generous people on this planet. Regardless of financial situation or life circumstances—regardless of any of that.** We’re gonna be like God’s people in 1 Chronicles 29, like the people in Acts 4—people that said “I’m so glad God entrusted me with this stuff so I could be generous with it.” We’re gonna live in ways that make us the continued answer to David’s prayer. We’re going to become *living demonstrations* of God’s generosity towards us.

As the Spirit is already doing this in us, I pray he does it more and more. I’d love to pray to that end.