

## The Paradox of Generosity Paradox: By Giving We Receive, by grasping We Lose

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Once again, we celebrate Thanksgiving – a day to remember God’s abundant provision for us. And a day to respond to others less fortunate than ourselves. And something more. Thanksgiving presents us with a paradox. The ‘*generosity paradox*.’ The paradox of generosity is this: “*by giving we receive, by grasping we loose!*” Let me say that again, “*by giving we receive, by grasping we loose.*”

By the way, that is also the title and theme of a recent best seller from a non-Christian perspective, written by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson. But why should we be surprised? For it is not only a theme Christian people have been preaching for two millennia, but also a universal human experience. Yet the contribution of Smith and Davidson has confirmed this truth by studying the lives thousands of people through a project sponsored by the University of Notre Dame. Their discovery: People who live generous lives, are happier, often healthier and experience more purpose in life than others less generous.

And the fact that their recent book focused on the ‘paradox’ factor should be no surprise either. For paradox is the stuff of which Christ’s upside down, right side up kingdom is made of. For in the radical teaching of Jesus, the way up is down, the way down is up, the weak are strong, the strong are weak, by gaining we loose, by losing we gain, and in dying to our selves we find life eternal in Christ. This paradoxical element in gospel teaching can hardly be summed up more eloquently than in words of Jesus, “for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake. . . . shall save it (Mark 8:35).”

And if the teaching of Jesus be true it leads inevitably to a radical conclusion: *We have been lied to! For everything our world has said to us, is the direct opposite of the truth. For we have been told, that if you work hard enough, get the highest grade, put in the most hours, make more money, have more things, then you will be happy. And then, you could start living!*<sup>1</sup> But face it: something about this just feels wrong. Gain it all and there is still a peace of the puzzle missing.

It reminds me of a scene from the movie the Matrix where the prophet like figure Morpheus says to Neo, “You’ve been living in a dream world... You must wake up.” And so it is, by giving we receive by grasping we loose.

At let me say before we take a step further that at the very close of this message, I will ask you a nine word question and you will know the answer immediately. Even though the answers may look differently for each of us. So listen, not with your ear alone but to the whispering of the spirit to your heart as it speaks to ‘you about you’ and at the end I will ask a nine word question and almost instantly you will know the answer. I guarantee it!

**Move #1:** And so the generosity paradox points to a simple truism, by giving we receive, by grasping we loose. *Certainly, the Old Testament, abounds such teaching.* Prov 28:27 says it plain, “He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “The Generosity Paradox,” Smith and Davidson

them receives many curses". Prov 11:24-25 reads, "One man gives freely, yet gains even more... A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." Prov 14:21 says also, "He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy." Prov 19:17 "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

Daniel Meyer in his book *'Witness Essentials'* tells of one such person who understood just this. She was an elderly woman who heard a sermon in which she felt God encouraging her to look for ways in which she could use her particular gifts and situation to minister to the needs of others. She thought about her gifts and realized that she'd been told by others that she had the gift of hospitality. She lived alone in a small apartment near a large university and had afternoons free. She pondered the needs around her and the people who tugged at her heartstrings. To her mind came the students nearby who were so far away from home. It was then that an idea both strange and simple suddenly arose. She got a stack of three-by-five cards and wrote on each one the following words: "Are you homesick? Come to my house at 4:00 p.m. for tea." She included a phone number and address and then posted the cards all around campus.

After a slow start, homesick students began trickling into her house each week for tea. When she died ten years later, eighty honorary pallbearers attended her funeral. Each one of them had been a student who, once upon a time, found a hot cup of tea, a sense of home, and the gospel of Jesus in the hospitable heart of this faithful servant.

And so her experience was that of the writer of Eccl 11:1 "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." In other words *by giving we receive. by grasping we loose.*

**Move #2:** *Well its not just the Old Testament that reveals to us the paradox of generosity but the New Testament also.* In Luke 6:38 Jesus promises, "Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."

When Michigan residents Christine Bouwkamp and Kyle Kramer got married in the spring of 2007, they held a wedding reception that was anything but traditional. Instead of hosting a formal dinner, they held a simple reception at their church where guests were invited to help distribute food to people in need. In the weeks leading up to their wedding, Christine and Kyle had decided they wanted to begin their marriage with an act of service to Christ. With that goal in mind, they figured out how much money they would have spent on a more extravagant reception and instead used that money to purchase five thousand pounds of food for those in need. The week of the wedding, the couple spread the word that a truck with free food would be at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Immediately after they exchanged their vows, Bouwkamp and Kramer put on aprons marked "Bride" and "Groom" and joined their wedding guests in distributing food to 100 neighborhood families.

When asked about the charitable act, the happy couple simply said they wanted to "bless God for blessing us with each other".<sup>2</sup> This young couple knew the truth of it, *'By giving we receive, by grasping we loose.'*

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Cetas, "Serving Together," Our Daily Bread (June 2008)

**Move #3** *But if Bible speaks truth of the generosity paradox, great thinkers through the ages have understood it also.* Francis of Assisi knew it saying, "For it is in giving that we receive." R. E. Phillips says the same thing only in different words, "You only keep what you give away". Art Buchwald wrote, "The best things in life are not things." Orison Marden said, "The best thing about giving of ourselves is that, what we get is always better than what we give. The reaction is greater than the action."<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands that I still possess".<sup>4</sup> Or the one I love the best by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Money often costs too much!" All of these point in different ways to the truth, "*by giving we receive, by grasping we lose*".

**Move #4** What else might this Paradox of generosity look like?" *This: it is an all pervading attitude to which we are called to live 'generous lives'.* This is part of what it means to live 'a soulful life.' It begins within. There is a Nigerian saying, "It is the heart that does the giving; the fingers only let go".

Well, we might ask, 'just what might a generous life look like?' It looks like being generous with our love, generous in looking for the best in people, and not assuming the worst. It looks like being generous in forgiving others. As someone said, "No one on their death bed ever said, I wish I had not forgiven this person." It looks like being generous in hospitality; generous in our encouragement of others; generous as we reaching out and welcoming others into friend ship. The worst that can every be said about a church is this: "I came in the door and left out the door and no one even talked to me".

And so in a thousand ways and more, the quality of a soulful life involves living generously to all who cross your path. It is an attitude of generosity. Be generous to others in all you do and God will be generous to you also. *By giving we receive, by grasping we lose.*

Jean Vanier, a Christian leader who founded L'Arche communities around the world for persons with severe disabilities, tells a story about a 76-year-old woman named Francoise, also known as "Mamie." Francoise had serious mental and physical disabilities. She was blind, bedridden, and incontinent. She could not feed or dress herself. She was unable to communicate through words. And yet the entire staff of this L'Arche community followed the words of Scripture and showed Christlike love for "Mamie".

But showing unconditional love wasn't always easy. One of the staff assistants, a young man called "Louis", was assigned to take care of Mamie. Louis was disappointed because he did not feel drawn to her. Faithfully, as he was asked, he fed Mamie, but he found it tiresome. Then one day, she placed her hand on his hand and smiled. It was, he said, a special meeting, a moment of transformation, a moment of grace. From that moment on, he loved being with her. What he had found tiresome and difficult became a blessing. Love had made all the difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Told by Leo Launio Montreal Filipino SDA Church Sept 14, 2002, "Generosity Pays--Principles of Faithful Stewardship

<sup>4</sup> Citation: Martin Luther, Christian Reader, Vol. 35, no. 2

Then one day a woman came to visit the director of that same L'Arche community. As the visitor watched Mamie struggle through life—weak, blind, voiceless, powerless to feed or dress herself—she offhandedly asked the director, "What's the point of keeping Francoise alive?" The director looked at the visitor and said, "Well, madam, because I love her."

And in doing so, the Director demonstrated something of the character of Christ who once looked out upon the teeming masses and in the words recorded in Matthew 9:36 it says of him, "He was moved with compassion for them, because they were faint... as sheep having no shepherd". And so once again we hear the truth, "*By giving we receive by grasping we loose*".

**Move #5** Yet there is more: *Giving is a response to the Gospel*. Let me say that again, *giving is a response to the Gospel*. For only as we grow in our understanding of Jesus can we comprehend what he has done for us. In the saddest book of the Bible, the title of which describes its tone, *Lamentations*, the weeping prophet, Jeremiah, strikes a chord of joy and hope saying, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness (Lam 3:22-23)! Again, our gratitude and indeed our giving is a response to the Gospel of God.

In the fourth chapter of the fourth Gospel recorded by John, we overhear Jesus speaking of this immeasurable gift, saying to a certain woman by a well, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water (John 4:10)" To which she responds by saying more than she yet knows, "Sir, give me this water so that I [will never thirst again] (John 4:15)." Yes, our gratitude and our generous spirit is always response to the Gospel. A once famous Scottish preacher by the name of Robert Murray McChyenenne, came to the same conclusion, "The more you understand who Jesus is and what He has done for you, the more generous you become... Thus, if you have tasted of the Gospel, you will be gracious." And the gift of Jesus lasts not for time only but for eternity! "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)." Giving is a response to the Gospel. And so it is, *by giving we receive, by grasping we loose*.

**Move #6** Very well, but DANGER! BE WARNED! There is a dark side to the otherwise glowing truth, *by giving we receive AND by GRASPING WE LOOSE – WE LOOSE INDEED!* Listen again to the promise and perilous threat of Prov 28:27 with emphasis on the threat, "He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, **but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses**".

As if this eternal principle is not clear enough, Jesus fleshes out the details in his prophetic image of judgment at the end of the age. Listen now to words recorded in Matt 25:41-46, "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one

of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

In other words, by giving we receive, BY GRASPING WE LOOSE.

**Move #7** God forbid that we end our days on that note! *God forbid, when it can happen otherwise.*

He carried a cardboard sign under his arm that read, 'I am hungry, please help!' His matted hair almost covering his eyes and tangled beard looked like he hadn't washed in ages. His ratty jeans were torn at the knees. His old and obviously 'hand me down' Kaki coat reeked of the smell of one who lived on the streets for months, perhaps years on end. On the same sidewalk a white haired businessman well attired in his Armani suit was tempted to cross to the other side of the street as he approached the sight of the homeless man. But as he was about to step over the curb, he heard the raspy voice of the man calling him by name, "Tom. Tom, its me. Tom don't you remember me?"

Reluctantly the business man approached as close as he dared, yet looking through the straggled hair that almost hid his face there was something hauntingly familiar in his blue gray eyes. "Tom. Its me Tom. Its me - your brother! And so it was - Tom's brother Nathan of whom he had lost contact with almost thirty years before.

Tom drew near him, and for a split second found himself strangely hesitant, then threw his arms wide open and embraced him. It was then Nathan looked down to the sidewalk saying, "Tom, could you lend me twenty dollars so I can get a good meal?" Tom flatly replied, "NO! You're coming home with me. I want you to meet my wife. You are going to get cleaned up, and stay with us as long as it takes you to get back on your feet!"

Now friends, you might be saying to yourself, that's a million and one chance that anything remotely similar would ever happen in my life. But you are wrong. For every time you help someone in need that one is your brother. And more, according to Jesus, every time you help anyone, you are helping HIM!

So as we draw to a close, listen now to the flip side of the picture Jesus painted on the wide canvas of things yet to come. A painting by the way, in which I hope your face will appear amongst the many.

Matt 25:31-40, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' " And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

**Response:** At the beginning I said I would close by asking you a nine word question that if you have been listening to this message at all, I guaranteed that you would know the answer immediately, even though your answers might look differently from every one else's. So here it is: WHAT HAS GOD BEEN SAYING TO YOU ABOUT YOU?... Let me say it again, WHAT HAS GOD BEEN SAYING TO YOU ABOUT YOU?

You already know it don't you? So think it and ink it. And today, share it with someone else you trust. Blessings.