

The Necessity of Hospitality

Romans 12:13c

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We have been talking about the stewardship of our money -- the subject of what we have put in the offering basket, for instance, or what money we give to charities or deserving causes. In passing we've mentioned a principle that is popularly known and sold on television today as "the seed faith principle." It's based on scripture in Luke 6:38 and it's a bit contorted after we use it for our own ends but you'll recognize the words: "...give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." It's so extravagant that it hits you: "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down", you have to press it down, you shake it together to get it to press down tight and running over; then the container will be put into your lap. "For the measure you give, will be the measure you get back." The popular interpretation of it runs like this, "If you give money to my cause then you'll get it back multiplied by 10 or a 100."

Coming over raw like that it's very hard to believe that many of us will give out of our love for God or our generosity to others. It's very hard to believe that we'll not give instead in order to get, when it's presented like that. I think when it's sold like that, "look if you give to me, if you give to my cause then here on this scripture I can assure you that God is going to give back to you 10 times that amount, a 100 times that amount" and we're all sitting there saying "Oh more and more" because we think that's a good deal. "The bank cannot do that, so I'm game to give to that man's cause." And loved ones the tragedy of that kind of presentation is that it plays up to our own selfish motives rather than to our generous motives.

And I would challenge you: is it not true that the great bulk of people listening to that kind of plea will say, "Goody, goody we'll give in order to get. Yes, sure I love God. Yes, I want to be generous to others but boy I like that deal most of all so, I'm prepared to give." Maybe a worse side of it is that it discourages us from a personal love and relationship to our dear Father who takes care of us and it tends to encourage us in our view of religion as a set of principles and techniques that we use for our own benefit. Maybe that's the worst of it, you see. It encourages you to see religion as a kind of game and if you play it right you'll be better off than everybody else, instead of seeing Christian faith as a relationship with a dear loving Father.

Now what is the real interpretation of Luke 6:38? Because the other interpretation certainly seems as if it will produce the very opposite kind of person to what God wants. God wants generous, loving people; he doesn't want bargain hunters who are out to use him for their own benefit. So what's the right interpretation? It's very like a couple of clauses that we all know in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us", that's it. (Matthew 6:12) That doesn't mean God waits for us to forgive somebody who has trespassed against us before he will forgive us who have trespassed against him, it doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean that God requires us to forgive somebody who has trespassed against us first and then he will forgive us one trespass that we've trespassed against him. It's not that kind of trespass forgiven for trespass forgiven, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, blessing given for blessing received --it's not that kind of legalist principle and you know that. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," simply means that God's love for us, despite our sins, will be experienced by us if we love our neighbors despite their sins.

In other words it describes an attitude. It doesn't describe quid pro quo: you give me this and I'll give you that. It isn't that kind of legalistic technique. It's an attitude that God is encouraging and he is saying, "I am generous with you. I overlook the things you do against me because of Jesus and because of my love to you. Now I expect you to do the same and as long as you do the same, you'll experience my forgiveness." So, loved ones it's the same with Luke 6:38. God is saying, "I am a generous Father. I will give you all that you need and if you'll do the same with others, you'll continue to experience that from me. It's a general attitude that I have towards you and I ask you to have the same general attitude to me. So, will you be generous in what you do?"

And it gets at the very heart of managing our money, doesn't it? Because we've got to decide, is the world a dog eat dog, catch as catch can situation in regard to our finances? Is that reality? Or has God in Jesus in fact overcome the world with its miserliness and its greed? Has he in fact put to death the principalities and powers and has he destroyed us and the whole world and remade us in himself so that the world and reality itself is basically generous and magnanimous?

That's what God implies from the very earliest days in the Old Testament. He implies that reality is not a miserly old scrooge sitting up there saying, "You give me 2 cents, I'll give you 4; you give away \$3, I'll give you \$12." He is not a miserly old scrooge who is bargaining with us but he is a generous Father who has given when we couldn't give him anything and he is saying, "This is what reality is." And that's the attitude that's written in Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border; neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God."

God is saying, "I've covered the mountains with trees, I've covered the meadows with grass, I have filled the world with birds and fish and animals. I've given you more of everything than you need; I've given you far more air than you could all breathe if you were huffing and puffing like mad for years. I've given you plenty of everything. Now, this field of yours, it's not yours to gouge out every shock of wheat that you can get from it for yourself, or to strain out of it every cent and dollar that you can get hold of. This field is mine and I am lending it to you for a while so you can administer it and I've put enough in that field for you and for others who need your generosity. Now, as long as you deal with the field that way, you'll find you have plenty for yourself and you have plenty for everybody else too. So stop this business of reaping the field right up to the edge; start seeing that I am still a Father who measures generously and I can work a world within this world that is generous." That's it, loved ones.

You may say, "What you're describing is the ideal but the people I work with Monday to Friday are not like that; the banks aren't like that, the business world isn't like that." But don't you see that God in his son Jesus has created a world within the world and he has created the miracle of a generous world within this narrow, miserly world and when you believe that, you begin to take part in the blessings and the fullness of that little world. It's a little Noah's Ark in the midst of this mess of a flood and the moment you begin to believe that, loved ones -- that God has changed not only you but in Jesus has overcome the things that would destroy you financially -- you begin to take part in that generous world, which eventually, of course, will swell and swell and swell and will overcome this miserly world.

But that's what the Father is saying, "Stop this business of trying to gouge everything out for

yourself; I have given you plenty. If you believe in me in that way, you'll have plenty." In other words, in regard to your finances -- do you trust or are you managing? That's it. That's what this business of a tithe is all about; giving one tenth of your income. We said it seemed the most likely thing from scripture that giving one tenth to the local body of which you are a member and which you attend week by week and whose elders you trust and whose ministry your heart is in, is where we are to give one tenth of our income. And then we're to give something more to other people who need our help day by day as the week goes by.

And the principle of that is that you believe that the Father sees you and is going to give you not only what you need yourself but what other people need in generosity from you. And so he asks you, "Will you arrange your finances, so that you'll be able to give one tenth to the body of Christ to which you belong and so that you'll be able to give perhaps another five percent or another ten percent or whatever it is, as people need from you? Arrange your finances that way, arrange your expenditures that way, and then you'll find yourself arranging your financial life around my ministry and not around your own personal needs. And because you are seeking first my kingdom and my righteousness, I'll add all other things unto you."

And so the issue is, do you trust, or are you managing? Do you trust that the Father will actually give you enough to be as generous to others as he is to you, or are you managing? I have a friend who manages, just manages. I ask him how it's going and he says, "Boy, I didn't think I'd crank that old money machine around another turn this month. I thought I wasn't going to make it, but I have cranked it around once more. Don't know if I'll make it next month but I got it this month. Sometimes I don't think that handle is going to make it." That's managing; you're just making it through. You scrape a bit here, you scrape a bit there, you delay a payable over there and you just make it. You never seem able to buy the things that you want to, and you never seem to have anything extra. You just make it day by day, week by week, month by month with a lot of fretting, a lot of worrying, a lot of groaning, a lot of moaning, and a lot of anxiety; you just manage.

Now what's interesting is that trusting is no different from the point of view of just making it month by month; you just make it. God does not tempt us by giving us more than we need -- he gives us our needs. So trusting is just making it month by month. You make it, that's it. You don't have a lot over. But you are not the god of the whole operation. You are not sitting there as the god, "How am I going to make it? How am I going to make ends meet this month?" You are God's child and you know your Father is in charge, and that he controls the money supply and that he is going to give you enough to be able to give ten percent to his redemptive ministry and to be able to give something extra to other people who need your help. And if you arrange your affairs that way then you can relax in him and you can trust him that he will somehow enable you to have little things that you never thought you'd be able to buy.

And that's strange; whenever you arrange your finances like that you always end up able to buy little things that you didn't think you'd ever be able to buy. You always end up surprised in little hidden, secret ways; things work out and you didn't think they would work out at all. Not great obvious miracles -- that's the beautiful way God does it -- not big miracles that you can use to tantalize other people with, but in quiet hidden ways your finances seem to work out because you are no longer regarding this as your business that you have to manage, but you are trusting: "Father, I'll arrange my expenditure accordingly, working in this ten percent and five percent that you have encouraged me to do and then I'll leave it in your hands. Whatever you think that I need, you give me."

It's relaxing coming to the end of the month with everything right; just makes it again, but there is no strain, there is no agony about it. So, I'd ask you, do you trust or, are you managing? Usually we are managing because there are things we want that we don't think God will let us have. And often that is true, but often too, that in itself is due to our lack of respect for his generosity and for his desire that we'll have the desires of our heart and we'll be happy.

Loved ones the heart of our trusting is putting God and his ministry in the middle of our finances and then building up after that. But you know how it goes: how many of us put our own personal needs in the middle? First we put the big ones -- the rent or the mortgage, and then it goes right down the line; the car payment and so forth. Then at the end we put his ten percent +.

So loved ones in order to break that iron grip that selfishness has on us, God has enjoined us to do something else in the rest of this verse we've been studying. Maybe you'd look at it in Romans 12:13: "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality." Practice hospitality. Hospitality is "philoxenia" and "philo" is love, friendly love, and brotherly love and "xenos" is "stranger" so it means "show love to strangers." It originated in the early years after Jesus was crucified when there was tremendous persecution -- the Christians were hated by the Jews, hated by the Romans, hated by the civil authorities, hated by the religious authorities. Wherever you went to talk about Jesus nobody would recognize you or be your friend; you were an alien in an alien land. That's why hospitality became one of the most important Christian virtues; because if you didn't share your home and all that you had with your brothers and sisters in Jesus who had come into your area to talk about Jesus, they could starve to death because everybody else hated the Christians so much.

So hospitality was vital in those days in order to prevent Jesus' life being crushed completely. That's why Paul uses the word that is translated "practice" in our Bible but it's actually not "practice" it's "?????????". It's used again in verse 14: "Bless those who persecute -- "?????????" is "persecute". So Paul actually says, "Persecute hospitality" and he says that because he says, "Pursue it aggressively, pursue hospitality aggressively to those who themselves are being persecuted for their faith." And that was vital if Jesus' life wasn't to be destroyed. But loved ones it's just as true for us. If you don't want Jesus' life crushed out of your own heart and your own spirit, you better "persecute hospitality" -- pursue it aggressively with all your heart, really. Because it begins to enable the Holy Spirit to break that band of selfishness and self-preoccupation that keep so many of us tied inside our own narrow little hearts.

So it's vital to see that a daily responsibility you have is to show hospitality to others. Now it's not just the secular hospitality that's become a norm in our society where you ask the person over for dinner and take them on a tour of the house, then you talk a little about family and what you've been doing, and what your job is and then it gets to around 10 O'clock and you say "Well, I have to get up at 6 O'clock in the morning." So everybody breaks and goes home -- just as much exiles and strangers from each other as they were when they started so it's not that kind of hospitality. But it's the hospitality that is so preoccupied with the other person and so interested in what they're experiencing and so concerned about what their lives are like, so anxious to put yourself in their shoes and walk in their moccasins and stand in their place, so anxious to feel what they're feeling and think with their minds and have your heart beat with their hearts that you actually lay all your resources at their disposal and you regard your things as theirs; that's hospitality, that's it.

Some people here have shown hospitality to me. It's not that I have been to their home, but many of

you have shown hospitality to me in great kindness and tenderness -- that kind of thing. I don't know how to describe it, but I know it's different from the old friendly friendliness sort of "Hi, how are you?" "Fine, how are you?" kind of stuff. It's something where some of you, both ladies and men, seem to be able to have a tender heart for another person and seem to be able to get that over. Actually, one person did it after service last Sunday; she didn't give me anything, but boy I felt built up after she had shown such concern and interest in me.

So it's a powerful thing; real hospitality, loved ones and that's what God is saying, "Get outside yourself, start living generously, start being magnanimous, start giving things away, start putting other people in the center where you used to dwell yourself, be big-hearted and magnanimous and you'll find that the heart of the eternal is kind and compassionate." And the reality behind the universe responds to that.

Loved ones, it's vital to be generous, it is, but not in that old legalistic seed faith way. It's vital to be generous because that's reality and God will deal with you that way.

[Question from the audience regarding how you calculate your tithe—on the gross or the net?]

[Answer] "Yeah--I am going to get the old calculator out, brother, on that one. [Laughter from the audience] Is that ten percent gross, or ten percent net? Seems to me you put your finger on the heart of it: that we need to begin to see that if we say ten percent gross the Father will probably deal with us in accordance with that. If we say ten percent net he'll probably deal with us in that way. He is pretty good at calculating too! And I think that's the important thing: that our Father's heart is not a gross heart, or a net heart, it's not a careful calculating --he is simply being generous beyond anything that you can imagine. If you look at the world of nature, loved ones, it's incredible! Do you know how many flowers grow in the light of all the seeds that are planted? Very few. Think of all the seeds that are produced, springtime after springtime, and how relatively few flowers grow from them. And I think that's it: the Father has the heart of the eternal.

I remember an old Irish hymn that we sang as children, "The heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind." And it seems that he is generous beyond anything. He is not down there with this calculator "Oh--you're calculating after your income tax, or before your income tax." He is not: he is a big hearted God and you can never out-give him and you'll never end up giving him more than he has given you.

You remember Jacob: he didn't hold on to the tenth. He said, "I'll give you a tenth, Lord, because of all that you've given me." But then on the top of that he was giving other things; giving to the widow, giving to the orphans, leaving extra grapes in his vineyard. It seemed that even the Jews who rose into the saintliness that the God wanted for them lived in that big hearted kind of way that seems to me is the key to it.

Loved ones, where I am from in Ulster, Northern Ireland, we are in a way Scots-Irish. And it seems to me that's the last thing God's heart is, it's not Scots, you know, it's not Scots-Irish. Maybe God's heart is an American heart. Americans certainly have big hearts; it's a generous and a magnanimous heart. That's certainly the heart my wife and I found when we came to America; a big, massive heart. And it seems to me that's God's heart. I would urge you all to get into the bigness of God's heart with your finances.

Some of us got into this agony: "Oh--will I give the tenth? I'm left with debts unpaid." No, you

better pay your debts, you better get that settled. But you are to begin to take steps now to arrange your finances the right way: to say, "Father, I am going to rent an apartment, buy a car, buy clothes, set up my policies or my stocks and shares so that I can take care first of all these generous things you are exhorting me to do. So first Lord, I will take my \$1200 and set aside \$120 as basic for your redemptive ministry. And I'll put an extra \$60 aside (or whatever) for extra giving and I'll subtract those and go on." But that's a guideline because the Father isn't measuring it out and he doesn't want you to measure it out. But let's hope that he keeps on giving us on the generous side of the calculations and, therefore, shouldn't we? I give him the benefit of the gross or net.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you that you are so big and so generous and so magnanimous. Lord, thank you for that. Thank you that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Thank you that you do not deal with us according to our sins or reward us according to our iniquities. Father we thank you that you have such a magnanimous heart and we thank you that you want us to be the same and that you will be faithful and generous enough to us for us to be the same. Father we thank you that you do not want children who are miserly or who scrape and scrimp but you want children who are like you and who show the world that "the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind." So Father we pray that you will make us a big-hearted people; free of all meanness and miserliness and then that you will make us individually to our neighbors and to our colleagues at work and to our relatives -- big hearted, generous people who declare by our attitude to our money, our faith and trust that our Father will never leave us nor forsake us and will supply every need of ours from his riches and glory in Christ Jesus. Lord, we thank you that when we do that we simply affirm reality and we thank you. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen.