

JOYS OF THE GENEROUS

Proverbs 11:24-28

"One person gives freely, yet gains more; another withholds what is right, only to become poor. ²⁵ A generous person will be enriched, and the one who gives a drink of water will receive water. ²⁶ People will curse anyone who hoards grain, but a blessing will come to the one who sells it. ²⁷ The one who searches for what is good finds favor, but if someone looks for trouble, it will come to him. ²⁸ Anyone trusting in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like foliage."

INTRODUCTION

There's a story of a country church in a farming community that struggled to meet its budget. The pastor thought of a way to increase giving. One Sunday, before the offering plates were passed, he said the person who'd been guilty of stealing eggs didn't need to give anything that day. God doesn't want *any* money from a thief. In response, every person in the congregation put something into the collection plate!

Ben Patterson has served as campus pastor of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA, since 2001. His books include *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent* (1991) & *He Has Made Me Glad: Enjoying God's Goodness with Reckless Abandon* (2005). But he knew little success or joy until **II Corinthians 9:6-7** captured him: "Remember this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver." The Greek word for "cheerful" appears just here in the New Testament. It's related to the "joyful mercy" God beams approvingly on us if we seek His forgiveness (**Hebrews 8:12**). God wants us to cheerfully approve what we give to His work as we want His joyful mercy beamed to us! Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), remarkable 19th-century historian & writer, recalls an incident of a beggar coming to his boyhood home at a time his parents were away and he was home alone. On a boyish impulse, he broke into his own savings bank and gave the beggar all it contained. Carlyle tells us that never before or since did he know such sheer happiness as came to him at that moment!

Ben and Lauretta Patterson, when first married, were so poor they often managed just two of life's three necessities—food, clothing, & shelter. Ben worked selling swimming pools. In their first 6 months of marriage, he sold just two. One Saturday morning, his company sent him to Irvine, CA, to pick up payment for a pool sold by another salesman; how humiliating! Lauretta went along. The man buying the pool was a Pentecostal Christian & psychologist. He insisted they visit before giving them the check. Over coffee, he spoke to them of the joys of tithing. Though Christians, they thought this strange, but put up with it to get the check. "But as the minutes passed," Ben writes, "I found myself feeling increasingly like he had read my mind, or my mail. It had been years since I had given much to anything but my own whims and desires. I'd felt uneasy about my selfishness, but now I was feeling something different. It wasn't guilt; it was more like longing for freedom. . . . [M]y heart was pierced by what he'd said. My lack of generosity extended to places beyond my pocketbook. As Lauretta and I drove down the Costa Mesa Freeway toward the Pacific Ocean, I asked her how she felt about what that man had said. She replied she too was deeply touched. As we talked, we decided to make a go of tithing. So we couldn't afford food, clothing, shelter—so what? Had not Jesus promised our Father in heaven would give us all we needed if we sought first His kingdom [**Matthew 6:25-33**]? The weeks that followed were just like stories I had read in Christian magazines. Somehow the money was always there. Once the amount we needed for rent appeared the day it was due, sealed in an envelope stuck in our mailbox. Another time we got a check for \$100, the exact amount we needed for car insurance. And that was only the beginning of the fun in freedom and generosity as we started to give not only to the church but also to others. Our Father God loves it when his children try to act like him. He loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7)."

Today we contrast the Misery of the Miserly with the Joys of the Generous. We *gain* blessings by

being generous with the resources and abilities God entrusts to us and we *lose* blessings by being misers.

I. MISERY OF THE MISERLY

The theme of our text is the tight-fisted person is his/her own robber and the generous person prospers [reread]. One who "withholds what is right" in **vs. 24** describes a preoccupation with getting and keeping things any way one can; fair or unfair. This brings to mind the joke, "Misers are lousy to live with, but they make great ancestors." **Vs. 26** faults those who greedily exceed an honest profit by hoarding their "grain" to drive up the price. "Grain" symbolizes all the produce of fields, orchards, and gardens necessary to sustain life. If someone hoards diamonds, gold, or paintings of the masters, this does not necessarily harm others. But what if a half-million acres in Brazil are consumed by a raging wildfire, except the fields of one farmer? He harvests far more than his family needs, but rather than having compassion upon others hurt by this fire, he fears another natural disaster and decides to hoard his food products. Or, if he sells them, he demands 20 times their normal value. This could mean some neighbors may starve. Even if it's legal by Brazilian law to do this, do you think it's "right" for him to be this miserly? Human laws cannot compel that we "love our neighbor" but our Creator can. In **Leviticus 19:18**, the simple reason God told us "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the reminder, "I am the LORD." **Romans 13:10** adds, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." Most people would agree if we allow neighbors who are victims of a natural disaster to starve because of our miserly desire to hoard or to exact exorbitant profits, this is wrong.

But the central thrust of **Proverbs 11:24-28** is not that being miserly is wrong, but that we wrong ourselves the most by being callously stingy. In mid-18th century Scotland, a wealthy merchant stumbled while walking along the docks, fell into a river, and nearly drowned. A poor workman bravely leaped into the river to pull him to safety. Upon regaining consciousness, this millionaire was told of his rescuer, put his hand into his dripping pocket, and rewarded his rescuer with the paltry sum of sixpence (\$1 in today's money). The gathered crowd immediately heaped such scorn on this miser he feared they might beat him. A noble-looking farmer then came upon the scene and asked what the ruckus was about. Upon learning what had transpired, he cast a withering look of contempt upon the merchant and told the crowd, "My friends, you are wrong. Let him alone. Surely he knows the value of his own worthless life—sixpence—better than any of us." Laughing with contempt, the crowd dispersed and left this miser to sneak away alone. The speaker was the celebrated poet Robert (Bobby) Burns. He most likely would have applauded this epitaph on a tombstone in an English village: "Here lies a miser who lived for himself, And cared for nothing but gathering wealth. Now where he is or how he fares, Nobody knows and nobody cares."

Our Creator designed our world to operate according to the Law of the Harvest: We reap what we sow, we reap more than we sow, and we reap later than we sow; just as a farmer does, except that we sow *deeds* rather than *seeds*. **Galatians 6:7-10** (NIV) spells this out: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

"Grain," the produce of fields & orchards, often took money's place in the barter economy of Biblical Israel. Our use of money is subject to the Law of the Harvest. Why make ourselves a target if people we wrong ask God to trouble us? Isn't it far wiser to so act that people will appeal to God to bestow blessings on us due to our generosity? **Vss. 26-28**: "People will curse anyone who hoards grain, but a blessing will come to the one who sells it. ²⁷ The one who searches for what is good finds favor, but if someone looks for trouble, it will come to him. ²⁸ Anyone trusting in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like foliage." In other words, the more we let "greed" master us, we impoverish ourselves of God's blessings; the more generosity rules us, we are enriched by God's blessings. A man was such a miser he insisted upon hoarding his wealth in the attic. That way, he could grab it on his way to Heaven to enjoy it there. But a

few weeks after he died, his wife began cleaning out his things from the attic. When she spied his bags of money, she chuckled, "The old fool. I told him he should have kept his money in the basement."

Christians in the United States give on average a mere 2.5% of their increase to God's work. This is what Islam requires. To test our trust in the Lord and protect us from being possessed by our possessions, what is the amount God specifies to entrust to Him? Not 2.5% but 10%; it's called "the tithe." If we type in "tithing" on Google today, most of the first Web sites listed are by those who argue against tithing. They claim it's something required of Old Testament Israelites but not New Testament Christians. Christians who are not confused by "higher education" or influenced by prideful sophistication hear a different truth spoken to our hearts by God's Spirit. Loretta and I met Maryama at the Hospital Christian Fellowship we attended in November of 2011. Her total religious influence, before becoming a Christian about 13 years ago while living in California, had been the Islamic culture of Somalia where she'd been born and raised.

The American who married her in Somalia and brought her to the United States deserted her when their two children were young. He paid no child support. This set her adrift in a foreign land with no job. She'd been trained as a nurse and soon qualified to work as an RN in the States by passing the state board exam. She'd begun to regain some family stability when, in 1995, the unimaginable happened. Her country as she'd known it ceased to exist when Somalia imploded in a full blown civil war! All the men in her family were killed, their land and homes were taken, and the women and children fled to the wilderness. She suddenly had the added burden thrust upon her to save her surviving Somali relatives! Overwhelmed by these daunting challenges, she cried out to God in desperation. One day she knocked on the door of a nearby church and told the secretary who answered her knock, "I need to know if your God is real." Thankfully, this church taught the true Gospel. They grounded her in a Christian worldview to correct the Islamic distortions in which she'd been steeped since a child. Then they led her to a glorious new life through saving faith in **Jesus**! Some time later, after she'd been trained and approved to work in the U.S. as a nurse, God's Spirit spoke to her heart she was to give 10% of her increase to her church and save 10% for the future. She was barely making ends meet but was obedient. God prospered her more than she thought possible!

As Maryama grew in knowledge of the Bible, God's Word confirmed what God's Spirit told her about tithing. Honoring God as the true Lord of our lives by returning directly to Him a tenth of all the increase He brings our way was **Commenced** by Abraham (**Genesis 14:17-20**) and **Committed To** by Jacob (**Genesis 28:20-22**), centuries before God proclaimed His Laws to the Israelites. Because tithing embodied God's will even before the revelation His Laws, it's no surprise Moses **Commanded** it (**Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:25-30**). Malachi, the Old Testament's final prophet, then **Confirmed** tithing (**Malachi 3:8-12**), and **Jesus** Himself **Commended** tithing (**Matthew 23:23**). Who are we, then, to **Cancel** it?

Of course, there's always the option of preferring a miser's misery to the joys of the generous. John D. Wendel died in 1876 leaving his son, John G. Wendel, and six daughters an estate in prime New York City real estate worth hundreds of millions of dollars. John G. Wendel instilled miserliness in his sisters to keep their inherited fortune in the family. He and five sisters remained unmarried. John died in 1915. When the last sister died in 1931, her estate amounted to more than \$100 million (nearly \$1.4 billion today). Yet, she never had a telephone, electricity, or an automobile. Her only dress was one she made herself and wore for nearly 25 years. "There is a tragedy that I have seen under the sun," Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 6:1-2** (God's Word), "God gives one person riches, wealth, and honor so that he doesn't lack anything he wants. Yet, God doesn't give him the power to enjoy any of them. . . . This is pointless and is a painful tragedy." Prior to writing **Ecclesiastes**, Solomon declared, "It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it" (**Proverbs 10:22**, NASB). We may selfishly accumulate and hoard wealth, but it won't bring us joy without the Lord's blessing upon it.

II. JOYS OF THE GENEROUS

I began tithing in 1977, while scraping by on a student's part-time pay. At year's end, God moved upon a former NFL player, whom I'd met while starting a mission church near Houston, to give me a gift equal nearly to the dollar of what I'd tithed. The next year, I began working full-time and tithed twice as much. At year's end, another unexpected gift returned almost to the dollar what I'd tithed. I got the message. I'd taken God's challenge found in **Malachi 3:8-12** (NCV) and God had met the test. "Should a person rob God? But you are robbing Me.' 'You ask, "How have we robbed You?" 'You have robbed me in your offerings and the tenth of your crops. ⁹ So a curse is on you, . . . ¹⁰ Bring to the storehouse [Old Testament Temple; New Testament church] a full tenth of what you earn so there will be food in my house [resources to carry out God's work]. Test Me in this,' says the LORD All-Powerful. 'I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour out all the blessings you need. ¹¹ I will stop the insects so they won't eat your crops. The grapes won't fall from your vines before they are ready to pick,' says the LORD All-Powerful. ¹² 'All the nations will call you blessed, because you will have a pleasant country,' says the LORD All-Powerful."

CONCLUSION

Of course, there are countless ways God brings joy to those who faithfully and generously support His work apart from monetary gain. Money can buy us a bed but not sleep, a house but not a home, books but not brains, food on the table but not fellowship around the table, so-called "lovers" but not true love, medicine and healthcare but not necessarily health or a longer life. Money may end financial worries but not deliver us from other worries. Money allows us to enjoy many amusements but it cannot buy us happiness. Yet, there are also times our circumstances suggest God is not fully honoring our faithful generosity toward Him. We may not fully understand how faithful God has been toward us until we get to Heaven.

The Talmud (from a Hebrew word meaning "learning" or "instruction") is a central text of mainstream Judaism and consists primarily of discussions and commentary on Jewish history, customs, culture, and law (especially its practical application to life). **Isaiah 55:8-9** (NASB) reveals, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. ⁹ 'For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" The Talmud aptly illustrates this passage.

A Rabbi once journeyed with the prophet Elijah. After walking all day, they came at night-fall to the humble cottage of a poor man whose only treasure was a cow. He and his wife welcomed the strangers for the night and offered them all the simple hospitality they could. Elijah and the Rabbi were given plenty of milk to drink, homemade bread and butter to eat, and were put to sleep in their bed while their kindly hosts lay down before the kitchen fire. But in the morning the poor man's cow was dead.

They walked again all the next day. They came that evening to the house of a wealthy merchant and requested his hospitality. The cold-hearted, miserly merchant offered them nothing more than a cowshed for lodging and fed them mere bread and water. In the morning, however, Elijah thanked him very much for what he had done, and sent for a mason to repair one of his walls which happened to be falling down, as a return for his kindness.

After they left, the Rabbi begged Elijah to explain his dealings with these two men. God's prophet, Elijah, said, "In regards to the poor man who received us so hospitably, it had been decreed his wife was to die that night. In reward for his generosity toward us, God took the cow instead of the wife. I repaired the wall of the rich miser because a chest of gold had been concealed near the place by the previous owner. If the miser had repaired the wall himself he would have discovered the treasure." "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. ⁹ 'For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'"