

The Beauty and Blessing of Generosity

Who's more generous – men or women? In a study done by the University of Chicago and the University of California at Berkeley, they found that, although men and women are equally generous when approached for money without prior warning, when both are given the option to opt out before being asked, women were more likely than men to take this opportunity. But wait until you hear the reason for this! The researchers said this was true because “women... recognize social clues better than men, and will avoid the pressure [to give] where possible... Men on the other hand, don't recognize social clues [In other words, we're clueless, guys! Here's the proof!] and have a “simpler thought process” so are more likely to donate simply because they were asked to.”ⁱ

Today as we begin our Generosity series, we're going to study two women who, though they had plenty of opportunity and social clues to “avoid the pressure” to be generous, not only did they respond generously when asked but they continued to give throughout their lives. So, let's begin with a brief look at...

I. The Beauty of Generosity

The two women in our study are Ruth and Mary. While the Univ. of Chicago/Berkeley study showed that women in general are more sensitive to social clues, these women chose to ignore those clues and, in fact, acted AGAINST the social pressure. Ruth is the classic example of this since she was a Moabite woman. Her husband, a Jew, had died as had her brother-in-law and father-in-law. Her mother-in-law, Naomi, begged her to go back to her people, find a new husband and have a normal life. But Ruth wouldn't do it, even though her sister-in-law did. Listen to what she said to Naomi:

...Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

You know, Ruth had other less radical generosity options. She could've said, “Okay, Naomi. I'll go back home, but when I get re-married and I get settled, I'm going to be sending money to you every month just to be sure you're okay.” She had other forms of generosity she could have shown, but Ruth chose a radical, extreme form of generosity – she gave her life.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, obviously did the very same thing. When the angel appeared to her and explained what God was intending to do, I believe Mary had a choice whether or not to accept this mission. The grammar of the angel's message was all future tense, “*The Holy Spirit WILL come upon you...*” It wasn't a done deal. She could've said, “Thanks for thinking of me, but no thanks!”

*“I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love,
I'm in love with a wonderful guy!”*

But Mary didn't sing that song. She sang:

"I am the Lord's servant... May it be to me as you have said." (Lk.1:38)

Do you see what Mary was being offered? She was being offered a maternity dress for a wedding dress. She was being offered a first year of marriage filled with rumors about how she lost her virginity. She was being offered side glances and under-their-breath gossip in the marketplace every day for the rest of her life. Ladies, when you were engaged, would you have said "yes" to that offer?

The generosity of Ruth and Mary didn't include their names being etched in stone over the entrance to a children's cancer ward so that everyone who walked in would bless them for their unselfish giving. The generosity of Ruth and Mary didn't mean being invited to celebrity-filled banquet halls where a video montage would be played over dinner of how starving children had been fed through their foundation's philanthropy. No, the generosity of Ruth meant moving to a foreign country and caring for a cranky, depressed mother-in-law by going to the farm fields every day and scavenging for wheat that had fallen off the harvest wagon.

Generosity for Mary meant a few years living under a cloud of misunderstanding with her husband Joseph and then, after he died while the kids were still young, having to make do with whatever a teenage son could provide as a blue-collar carpenter. But no one forced or tricked these women into this kind of life. They chose it. They chose the sacrifice of radical generosity.

Why did they do this? Why? Don't miss this. They did it because of...

II. The Blessing of Generosity

Neither Ruth nor Mary were promised a specific blessing if they would accept the challenge of participating in radical generosity.

Mary was visited by an angel and he said a lot of wonderful things about who Jesus was and what He would become, but none of that included any particular honor or blessing for Mary. The only thing encouraging that the angel said to Mary was that she had, *found favor with God*. That's a good thing; we'd all like to have an angel say that to us, but there was no mention of a blessing. In fact, when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be consecrated in the temple, the prophet Simeon took the baby in his arms and said to Mary:

...This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel... so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:34, 35)

Mary and Ruth's generosity demanded great sacrifice but it also came with great blessing in spite of the fact that none was promised. If you know the story of Ruth, you know that, because she humbly went to the farmer's field every day to scrounge leftovers, it was there that her path crossed with Boaz, the owner of the field. Boaz fell in love with Ruth. He saw that her beauty was more than skin deep. He eventually married Ruth. Boaz was in the royal family tree which meant that when Ruth gave birth to Obed, she, a Moabite woman, now had royal blood flowing through her veins. She became the great-grandmother of king David!

For Mary the same was true. Mary is a descendent, by blood, of Ruth. Because she said "yes" to the angel's offer of radical generosity, she will be honored forever along with Ruth, the grandmother from whom she is separated by 40 generations.

So, what about you?

III. Will You say, “YES,” to God’s Challenge of a Radical Generosity?

In 2012, as a body, at our church’s Annual Meeting, we accepted a huge challenge from God. It was included as one of our eight Destination Statements. It’s our Sharing goal: *“Every person living in Hartford and Litchfield Counties will be reached relationally with the grace and mercy of God.”* We’ve been talking about this now for months. This involves 1.2 million people. Where did we come up with this idea? Well, it began when I went on a teaching trip to Cameroon in West Africa. I met 16 pastors there who had banded together as brothers in Christ and covenanted with each other to reach their whole nation of 22 million people with the Grace and Mercy of God before they died. That was back in 2006. Guess what’s happened since then?

- Those 16 pastors are now over 1,000 pastors.
- Nearly 12,000 people have become followers of Jesus Christ.
- They’re now spreading their work into neighboring countries.

I came back from Africa believing that, if they could take responsibility for completing the gospel in their whole country, we could take responsibility for at least part of our state. But how could we do this?

Dr. Henry Blackaby says if you want to know God’s will:
“Watch to see where God is working and join Him.”

Every year, Liz and I attend our denomination’s annual pastors and wives gathering. It was there several years ago that we began to hear about a strategy for spreading the gospel called “Multi-Site,” one church in many locations. God definitely seemed to be blessing this strategy. Today, there are more people in America attending a Multi-Site church than all the Mega churches put together. But could it work in New England? We heard that Walnut Hill Community Church in Bethel was doing this. Look at their statistics:

[Show Walnut Hill slide]

After much prayer, discussion, fasting and more prayer, our Elders decided to present this proposal to our Annual Meeting this past June. We had the largest attendance we’d ever had at an Annual Meeting and the proposal passed unanimously. This included the direction from that meeting to raise the necessary funds to accomplish this enormous task. So, what will this cost?

[Show “Funds Needed” slide]

Step one is to raise the funds needed for our first multisite location. Our goal is to raise 1.5 million by Dec. 31, 2013. How could we possibly do that? We have 1863 giving units in this church. To reach our goal, we would need to average \$805.15 from each giving unit. How do you respond to that? Some of you are thinking, “Pastor, are you out of your mind? \$805 before the end of the year?” The answer to that is, “Yes, I am literally out of my mind, because I truly, literally believe it is God Who is asking, not me.” Dr. Blackaby says this:

When God invites you to join Him, the task will have such God-sized dimensions that it will cause you to experience a crisis of belief. Your response will require faith... The first thing you will do is adjust your life to God. The second step will be to obey what God asks you to do.

And what exactly has God asked us to do regarding giving?

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings... Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”
(Mal. 3:8-10)

Our combined church income compared to the average household income in this community shows that, as a church, we are giving less than 5% per household to God’s storehouse. So, if you ask me if I’m nuts to ask for hundreds of dollars before the end of the year, I can honestly say, “No, what I’m trying to do is position you directly under the windows of blessing which God promised, HE PROMISED, to open up when you stop robbing Him.” That’s what I’m trying to do.

Now, I fully understand that \$800 is a lot more difficult for some people to come up with than others. So, here’s my suggestion:

A “whole tithe” would be 10% of your combined family income. But if everyone in this room gave 1% of your income to our Grace & Mercy Campaign before Dec. 31, 2013, I’m convinced two things would happen. First, we’d reach our goal of raising 1.5 million dollars. And secondly, you will move one step closer to being under God’s window of blessing.

Some of you are saying, “But I already tithe.” That’s awesome. Would you consider giving a 1% offering? In Malachi God speaks of both tithes and offerings. The beauty of generosity is that it always leads to a blessing.

We’ve supplied these response cards that say, “Sharing Grace & Mercy” across the top. I’m going to give you an opportunity to pray about this and fill it out right now. There’s a place to put your name, but we don’t have to have that. We would like you to put down an amount, whatever 1% is for you or whatever you decide you will give before Dec. 31. Some of you may feel you need to take this home and pray – that’s fine. But I would simply ask, “If the Holy Spirit is telling you to do this, why wait in making the commitment?” Write the check later but make the commitment now.

Ruth’s Moabite sister-in-law went back to Moab. Was that wrong, was that a sin? No. Her name was Orpah. (By the way, Oprah Winfrey said she was named after this woman, but her mother just got the spelling wrong.) No, Orpah just looked at the situation with Naomi and said, “Not me, not here, not now.”

But Ruth was in the exact same situation and she had a very different reaction. Ruth said, “Just me, right here, right now!” “Just me; even if it’s just me. I’m going to say, ‘YES! I will do this! Right here, right now!’” Which response is yours – Orpah’s or Ruth’s? And because she did, Ruth positioned herself directly under God’s window of blessing and when He opened that window, she and 40 generations after her were blessed wonderfully by God. No one’s going to force you to do this. It’s your choice. Take a minute right now to consider what your response will be.

[music]

Let’s pray...

ⁱ Mail Online, “Women donate less to charity...” 29 May 2013