

## **The Pure and Practical Generosity of God**

Ten years before Abraham Lincoln was elected president, his step-brother asked him for a loan to pay off his debt. This was not the first time he had asked Lincoln for money. On previous occasions Lincoln simply gave it to him. But this time he decided to take a different path. Lincoln wrote:

Your request for \$80 I do not think it best to comply with now. At the various times when I have helped you a little you have said, "We can get along very well now." But in a very short time I find you in the same difficulty again... What the defect is, I think I know. You are not lazy, and still you are an idler. I doubt whether, since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work in any one day... This habit of uselessly wasting time is the whole difficulty; it is vastly important to you, and still more so to your children, that you should break this habit...

Lincoln then offered that for every dollar his step-brother earned, he would give him a dollar. He then concluded:

Now, if you will do this, you will be soon out of debt, and, what is better, you will have a habit that will keep you from getting in debt again. But, if I should now clear you out of debt, next year you would be just as deep in as ever.  
Affectionately your brother,  
A. Lincoln<sup>i</sup>

Last week we studied what we might call the "theological" side of God's generosity. This week, we need to see the "practical" side of His generosity. So first, we need to notice that...

### **I. God's Generosity Comes to Us through Community.**

A clear teaching of Scripture is the fact that our God is a three-in-one God. The English word *trinity* is actually not a very good description of God because it only emphasizes the "three" part and not the "one" part. The German word for trinity is much better – *dreieinigkeit* which means "three-oneness." A proper definition is that "the Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence – so completely united as to form one God."<sup>ii</sup>

We saw this truth about God clearly revealed in Gen. 1 where God said, "*Let us make mankind in our image...*" (Gen. 1:26) This same truth is revealed in the New Testament in various places but to be concise, consider this; in I Cor. 8:6, the Father is called God, in Heb. 1:8-10 the Son is called God and in Acts 5:3-4 the Holy Spirit is called God. And Jesus said that new disciples should be baptized "*in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,*" (Matt. 28:19), which is an obvious demonstration that Father, Son and Spirit are equally God.

Now, while this is hard for us to grasp intellectually, it is easy for us to experience practically! Take a very practical issue like speaking with God. How does the 'three-in-oneness' of God come into play with that? Well, Jesus taught us to pray to the Father with the help of the Holy Spirit and to always do it "*...in my name.*"

When it comes to our day-to-day lives, Jesus tells us why the “three-in-oneness” of God is so important. He says:

**I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:12-15)**

Do you see the ‘tri-oneness’ here? This drives other religions crazy because they don’t have anything close to being as practical as our God. Because of the ‘tri-oneness’ of our God, we have all power, all authority, complete transcendence (separation from us), complete immanence (total connection with us), all in one God!! No other religion can begin to match this! There is no one like our God!!!

So, when you turn to our God for help, you have a divine community responding to you. Now, if we are to reflect the generosity of God to others, what does that truth dictate? Doesn’t it suggest that we offer our generosity to others through community? Liz and I have experienced the generosity of community throughout Liz’s recovery. Multiple people have helped us by pulling weeds in the garden, cleaning our bathrooms, preparing delicious meals - all so that Liz could rest and I could focus on her recovery needs. We have truly experienced God’s generosity through community and we can’t thank you enough. We have seen God in you. Secondly, we need to see that...

## **II. God’s Generosity Follows a Pattern**

I could easily spend an hour showing you the biblical evidence of this pattern, but I have time to show you only one example. First, what do I mean by a “pattern of generosity”? Well, in the story of Lincoln and his step-brother, Lincoln used two different methods of showing generosity to his brother, didn’t he? In both instances he was being very generous but they were distinctly different. Likewise, in Scripture we see a distinct pattern to God’s generosity with us.

In Leviticus, God laid out a very specific economic system for the nation of Israel. Theirs was largely an agrarian economy so it was described in agrarian terminology. God said that if they followed this pattern, He would be incredibly generous to them as a nation. Here’s the pattern:

**When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.**

**You may ask, “What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?” I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in. (Lev. 25:2b-5; 20-22)**

Why would God do this? Why ask the people NOT to plant a crop for a year? Well, this system was more than just about farming. It had an economic and social element as well. First, the agrarian reason for the land being given a rest. This is known today as “sustainable agriculture” and it is a proven method of keeping the soil healthy and productive for the next generation. It’s a foundational principle of organic farming. Listen to this description written by a sustainable farmer today:

A sustainable farm is a living system. Its sustaining ability depends on the self-renewing and regenerative capacity of its living systems – soils, plants, animals, and people... The biblical admonition for periodic rest of the land reflects an understanding of the necessity for ecological integrity in creating and maintaining sustainable systems. Natural systems have the inherent capacity for sustainability, but they must be allowed times of restoration, renewal, regeneration, interspersed with times of use and productivity...<sup>iii</sup>

On the economic and social side, every 50 years slaves were freed, debts were forgiven and land was returned to the original owners so huge conglomerates could not develop and permanent classes of rich and poor were impossible.

Do you know why God allowed the nation of Israel to be removed from the land and taken captive to Babylon? It was because they stopped practicing these years of rest and of Jubilee when slaves were freed and debts forgiven. They were to do this every seventh year, which in Hebrew is called the year of *Shemithah*. In Ezek. 4 God said that they would have one year of exile for every *Shemithah* they ignored. Which is exactly what happened.

God didn’t want to send them into captivity but in Lev. 25:23, 24 He said:  
**...the land is mine... Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.**

The Hebrew word *Shemithah* means “release” but it can also mean “to fall, collapse or to shake.” God set up His system of generosity to partner with the people – if they trusted Him by not planting in the seventh year, He would give them an overabundance in the sixth year; so much abundance that they could literally “rest” for one whole year without farming. But because they didn’t live by faith, after over 400 years of ignoring the *Shemithah*, and refusing to partner with God, God simply had no choice but to give the land the rest it needed by removing the people from His land for 70 years.

What’s the relevance of all this for us today? Look, I’m not an economist or an agronomist, but I believe God still wants to partner with us economically. Have the principles of agriculture changed since the Old Testament? Practices have changed, but are the needs of the soil for rest and rejuvenation different? Are sterile hybrid crops grown in soil that is chemically punched up every year with insecticides and fungicides and liquid fertilizer actually producing healthier food? If so, then why are people willing to pay premium prices for organically grown foods?

And economically, is it possible that God just might be more active in our economic system than we think? Let me show you something. For years, economists have noticed a pattern in our stock market. It’s an unexplainable seven- year cycle. We see it clearly over the last four decades, though it exists going all the way back to the early 1900’s. Every seven years there has been a major stock market correction

- a 20% drop. In the past 40 years they've basically been crashes - a 30 to 50% drop. If you're a stock market junkie, you know the dates:

1973 - Arab Oil embargo

1980 - S & L crisis

1987 - "Black Monday"

1994 - Bond market massacre

2001 - 9/11 crash

2008 - Worldwide Banking collapse

Now, most economists theorize that this is just the normal "boom and bust" cycle of capitalism. Maybe they're right. But a Messianic Rabbi recently pointed out that all of these crashes happened in *Shemita* years. And the last two, in 2001 and 2008, happened precisely on the exact day that the *Shemita* year ended, which on the Hebrew calendar is Elul 29, and which by the commands of Leviticus 25 is the exact day when debts were to be forgiven.<sup>iv</sup> Is this a coincidence or is God trying to tell us something? If so, what's His message?

Observing *Shemita* was a means of observing Sabbath. Are you observing Sabbath? Are you and your family taking one day a week to NOT produce anything but instead, to rest, rejuvenate, relax, spend time worshipping God and enjoying Him and one another? Oh, and by the way, part of the *Shemita* year was to allow the poor open access to your fields so that they could harvest the crops that voluntarily came up from the ground or were produced in your orchards. Serving God and serving people in need are also sanctioned activity on the Sabbath. If you refuse to do this and instead insist on working to make more money for yourself, will that really work or will God see to it that your private market "crashes" every seven years anyway? I'm just wondering out loud...

But let's end with a word of blessing, rather than judgment.

### **III. God's Generosity Comes with Purpose and Power**

It's a popular thing these days for state legislatures to pass what are known as "unfunded mandates." That is, they pass a law that says cities and towns MUST do a certain thing, like providing a specific service, but it provides no money to make it happen. So, it's up to the town to raise the money to obey the law.

God never does this! He shows us what to do and then He makes resources available to us to get the job done. He doesn't do the work for us, but He provides the resources for us to get the job done. We see this in what Jesus said to His disciples after the resurrection. First, He said:

**Peace be with you!** (John 20:21a)

Can we just stop there for a minute? This is the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples after the crucifixion. Matt. 26:56 says that after Jesus was arrested, ALL the disciples deserted Him. What are the first words from Jesus to these deserters? "What happened to you guys?" "Is anybody going to apologize for abandoning me when I needed you most?" No, Jesus' first words are, "Peace be with you!" In fact, He said it twice. Then He said:

**As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.** (John 20:21b)

Not only has Jesus forgiven them, but He re-instates them as His First Team players. Has anybody here messed up in an assignment for Jesus? Oh, I'm sure, like the disciples, you've had some great days walking with Him. Even a season where

you served Him faithfully, but as you sit here today – your head’s down, you’re afraid to look Him in the eye because you know you’ve messed up. Listen to me; these words are for you today. He says it twice, He says, “I know your heart. I know you wanted to do it right. But look, I called you to be a Deputy, not a Dependent. I knew there was a risk you wouldn’t fulfill the assignment perfectly. I forgive you. There’s peace between us. Now, come on. Stand up! Put your helmet back on. I’m sending you back in the game.” God’s goal isn’t that we serve Him perfectly or not at all. His goal is that we grow and learn from each act of service. But that’s not all that Jesus said. Look what it says next:

**And with that he breathed on them and said... (John 20:22a)**

Literally what this says in the Greek is, “*And breathing in, he then said...*” So, Jesus inhaled and then as He exhaled on them He said:

**Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22b)**

Remember what we said at the beginning about God? Well, the Holy Spirit is the power plug of the 3-in-1 God. The word “spirit” literally means “wind” or “breath.” In Gen. 1 God breathed physical life into the first humans. In John 20 Jesus breathed spiritual power into the first Christians. Without that power, they never could’ve accomplished any of the things Jesus was sending them to do.

Has it crossed your mind this morning that you can’t do what the 3-in-1 God is asking you to do? You can’t imagine having enough faith to bring a full tithe, 10% of your income, into God’s house or to have enough faith to live the Sabbath, to actually stop working one day a week and believe that God will somehow “bless you” with enough abundance in six days to cover your needs. You can’t imagine re-arranging your schedule so that you can serve God by serving others in some generous way. Look at what Jesus says. He doesn’t say, “Try harder!!” He doesn’t say, “Sacrifice more!!” No, Jesus says, “Peace... receive the Holy Spirit.” He is breathing on you right now. All you have to do is inhale. Close your eyes. Let’s pray...

Our generous God is breathing on you now...

- inhale an honest assessment of your life
- exhale your guilt
- inhale His forgiveness
- exhale your stress
- inhale His peace
- exhale your fear of failure
- inhale His Spirit’s resources of power, provision and protection

Now thank Him for being so incredibly generous with you

And ask Him to make you a more generous person with your words, your will and your wallet this week. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World: Vol. 3* (Jefferson: McFarland Co., Publishers 2011), p. 219

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<sup>ii</sup> These descriptions and definitions are from Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008), p. 203

<sup>iii</sup> John Ikerd, "A new Jubilee of Agricultural Sustainability," presented at Rural Life Day 2003, Jefferson City, MO.

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Snyder, "The Seven Year Cycle Of Economic Crashes That Everyone Is Talking About," *Economic Collapse*, Sept. 02, 2014