

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: In God We Trust

(Generosity and Stewardship)

The Church's Generosity Gene

(Acts 2, 4, 11)

Study #4

Introduction: Becoming the apple that falls close to the tree...

We instantly understand what they mean when we hear someone say, "*Well, that apple didn't fall far from the tree!*"¹

Like produces like. Kids naturally pick up traits from mom or dad.

For instance, my son, Ben, recently took his 13- and 11-year-old kids on a backpacking trip to Colorado. My son, Zach, just got back from an overnight camping trip with his 6-year-old son in New Mexico. My sons came by their love of camping honestly. Those apples didn't fall far from the tree.

We all know that Peyton and Eli Manning were great college and NFL quarterbacks. Let's not forget that their father, Archie Manning, was a great college and NFL quarterback before them.

Kids can pick up negative traits from parents. In that case, we would say that a rotten apple fell not far from a rotten tree.

¹ The first American to have said this was apparently Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the saying can be traced back to ancient times.

But kids can also pick up on a parent's hospitality, love, and patience. There, a good apple fell not far from a good tree.

What's true about apple trees and human families is also true in the family of God.

We who have believed in Jesus have become sons and daughters of God. We have, therefore, inherited a whole array of attributes. We might say that we now have received a new set of spiritual genes. And when we who have been saved by Him also walk with Him, we will display a strong family resemblance.²

There is within every redeemed soul the potential to become that healthy apple. That means that the same potential resides in every church to be a healthy crate of apples.

Where there is spiritual health, outsiders looking in will be able to look at us and see that we haven't fallen far from Jesus, our Tree.

And I believe that Scripture tells us that among the new genes we have received in Jesus is a generosity gene. After all, when we look through the Gospels we see that Jesus was outrageously generous.

We follow a very generous Jesus...

- He promised to *GIVE* "living water" to a Samaritan woman (John 4:10).
- He *GAVE* authority to His disciples (Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1)
- He sometimes *gave* orders (Matthew 8:18; Mark 5:43; 7:36) and He *GAVE* instructions (Matthew 11:1).
- He *GAVE* fish and bread to huge crowds. (Matthew 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6; Luke 9:16)
- He *GAVE* rest to weary souls (Matthew 11:28).

² For instance, after hearing Peter's bold, articulate speech that urged the leading Jews to trust in Jesus the Messiah for salvation, they began to [**Acts 4:13**] *recognize them as having been with Jesus.*

- To Simon He *GAVE* a new name (Mark 3:16) and He *GAVE* the keys to the kingdom (Matthew 16:19).
- To the twelve He *GAVE* understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom (Mark 4:11).
- He *GAVE* His disciples an example of servanthood (John 13:15), a new commandment to love (John 13:34-35), and the gift of peace (John 14:27)

Jesus was a Giver. Throughout His life, He constantly gave. Of course, His greatest gift was the gift of His life, given to you and me.

[Mark 10:45] "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to GIVE His life a ransom for many."

His life ended with the ultimate act of generosity. And this is the essential message of Christianity: Entering into a relationship with God and receiving eternal life has nothing to do with what we can give to God. It is about what He, in Christ, will give to us when we believe.

The Father loved the world so much that He *gave* His only begotten Son. Jesus willingly *gave* His life on the cross so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have eternal life.

He gave everything He had to give for you when He gave His life. But the Christian message is also that the end of His life wasn't the end of the story.

Backstory...

He died on a Friday afternoon and was raised to resurrection life on a Sunday morning. Then, He appeared to His disciples over a span of forty days and ascended into heaven, leaving His followers to wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

They waited. And then, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them with power.

The one hundred and twenty disciples were all together on that day when they heard a noise like a violent rushing wind, saw tongues like fire resting on each one's head, and then began to speak.

They spoke about "***the mighty deeds of God***" (Acts 2:11) in languages that they had never learned, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Gathered in Jerusalem where this happened were hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims who had come from all over the world to observe Passover.

Passover, though, had occurred fifty days previous - and these pilgrims were still there. We learn from scholars who study these things that it was not unusual for the Jews to stay in Jerusalem all the way through Pentecost and to then return home.

On this Pentecost holy day, when Simon Peter preached a message about Jesus to the crowd there in Jerusalem, three thousand people believed in Jesus.

At the point of believing, they were indwelt by the Holy Spirit who gave them a new spiritual genetic makeup that gave them new spiritual capacities.

We see this new genetic makeup in the description of the first-ever church near the end of Acts 2.

The Generosity Gene on Display in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-45)

Immediately Following Pentecost (Acts 2:42-45)

Continually Devoting Themselves to... (v. 42)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

These three thousand were devout Jews who took their Jewish faith so seriously that many of them traveled long distances to spend a month and a half observing the Jewish festivals of both Passover and Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Then, post-Pentecost, they turned on a dime and gave their undivided attention to whatever teaching they could get from the apostles about Jesus and His ways.

These three thousand had come in family groups to Jerusalem. Different groups of them spoke different languages (see Acts 2:5-11), had distinct cultures and customs and didn't know people in the great crowds gathered in Jerusalem.

But the believers in Jesus instantly enjoyed a shared life (fellowship / koinonia) because of their bonds in Jesus.

This newly unified group of thousands met frequently in houses to eat meals, always using whatever food and drink was present to remind them of the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus.³

And they prayed. By twos, threes, or fours, all at once or one at a time, they prayed "*continually*."

Their devotion to these things speaks of an infusion of a new set of capacities that had not been present before. Previously, there were no bonds with other people based on faith in Jesus. Now, instantly, the bonds were present and strong.

New Spirit-given genes created new possibilities. Feeding these capacities led to growth and health.

Luke tells us that **[43a] Everyone** (that is, all the believers) **kept feeling a sense of awe** at the unity the Spirit had created.

³ Most Bible scholars believe that this references the worshipful act of taking communion rather than eating meals together socially, which is in view at the end of the passage. (2:46)

And God was at work in the Jerusalem church, as **[43b]...many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.**⁴

To sum up, the church in Jerusalem was feasting on the stories of Jesus, enjoying a God-centered shared life, were vibrant witnesses, displayed God's grace and power, worshiped - and one more thing.

They were generous.

Generosity Rules! (vv. 44-45)

Many of the Jews who were in Jerusalem, who heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost and had then believed in Jesus, had come from lands hundreds of miles from Palestine.

They had traveled to Jerusalem to stay through Passover and until Pentecost.

But their original plan had NOT been to remain in Jerusalem after Pentecost. They had been planning to leave shortly after Pentecost. Then came the surprise miracle at Pentecost.

The new believers in Jesus desperately wanted to remain and grow in their new-found faith. But they didn't have homes to live in AND they had a finite amount of available cash to make ends meet.

Some of those who were now a part of the church were running low on funds and had to be supported, either by the residents of Jerusalem or by those who had come to Jerusalem with more cash.

So, what happened?

[2:44] And all the believers were together and had all things in common [45] and they would sell their property and possessions and share with them all, to the extent that anyone had need.

⁴ The apostolic pattern was that God would do the things that only He could do to show His love and to get people's attention. Then, the disciples would follow up and share the Gospel.

Those who had means decided that they would free up whatever of their wealth was necessary to meet the needs of their brand-new brothers and sisters in Christ.⁵

That was a beautiful demonstration of generosity. There was no coercion.⁶ Nobody told anybody to do this. The practice was a completely voluntary response to need.

The people with means didn't all sell their property at the same time and put it into a big pot. No. As people had needs, donations were made. Needs of Christ-followers were met by other Christ-followers.

And, thanks to this generosity, where there had already been fellowship / shared life, the fellowship was now even more meaningful. Those who *had* generously gave material support to those who *had not*.

There is no question that the fellowship and prayer and the wonder-working power of God were tools the Lord used to reach people for Jesus in the early days of the church.

There is also no question in my mind that generosity led many people in Jerusalem to the conclusion that there must be something to all this talk about Jesus.

In fact, generosity gave testimony to the life-change that had occurred in the hearts of those who now believed in Jesus.

That's why the story of the birth of the church ends with this: ***[Acts 2:47]...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.***

So, just as giving undivided attention to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer spoke of new and improved capacities, so generosity highlighted the same thing.

⁵ Some (not me) believe that this sharing indicates their understanding that Jesus was coming back soon. I think it shows genuine compassion.

⁶ At Qumran, the pooling of material resources was *required* for entrance into the group called the Essenes. The Christian practice was purely voluntary.

Generosity was on display in the first days of the church of Jesus. It was still on display a few months later when we get our next glimpse at life in the church in Jerusalem.

As Luke zooms in to give us another glimpse of the church, it is good to see that it has remained healthy.

A Few Months, Post-Pentecost (4:32-37)

A healthy church (vv. 32-35)

[4:32a] And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul...

This was the same experience of unity we saw earlier. The church continued to grow and to flourish. And it has matured. It has weathered some serious opposition.

And the same experience of generosity was also in place.

[4:32b]...and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them... [33] And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. [34] For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales⁷

⁷ The practice of having a common fund, fueled by the proceeds of the sale of the wealthier members' land and possessions would eventually deplete the store of wealth. Of necessity, it had to be a temporary practice. Not because of this practice, though, but because of famine and persecution, by the time Paul was writing his letters, the Jerusalem church had become an extremely poor church, requiring financial assistance from Thessalonica, Rome, and elsewhere to survive.

[35] and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to the extent that any had need.⁸

The same commitment to love and care we saw in the earliest days of the church was still active.⁹ This “family generosity” continued to speak volumes about the transformation that the Gospel had made in their lives.

And, knowing that a picture is worth a thousand words, Luke tells of the actions of a first century hero who serves as “Exhibit A.”

Inspirational generosity (vv. 36-37)

[4:36] Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), [37] owned a tract of land. So he sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This Joseph was a major player in the early story of the church. He pops up in several places in the first half of the book of Acts.

But even here, so early in the story, his reputation had spread to such an extent that the apostles had given him a nickname - ***“the son of encouragement”*** (or, in Hebrew, ***“Barnabas”***).

While Barnabas was a Jew, he didn't live in Israel. His home was the beautiful Mediterranean island of Cyprus.

So, it is clear that he was one of those who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost. He was probably one of those who had come to faith in Christ on the day of Pentecost.

⁸ At this early stage, the apostles supervised the distribution of relief funds, a practice that would become increasingly burdensome as the church grew, and which will lead to a crisis that is recorded in Acts 6.

⁹ The same power was evident and at work in the fellowship. ***[4:33] And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.***

And Barnabas was a man of means. He owned a tract of land - whether on Cyprus or somewhere else we don't know.

But seeing the great needs all around him, he sold the property and brought the money from the sale to the apostles¹⁰ for them to do with as they saw fit.

No one put Barnabas under compulsion or laid a guilt trip on him. Nobody suggested, *“Hey, Mr. Encouragement, it sure would be ENCOURAGING if you sold off some of your land holdings to meet the needs of the poor!”*

No, the beauty of what Barnabas did was that he did it **spontaneously** and **voluntarily** and (note this) **publicly**.

That's right. Everybody knew **THAT** Barnabas had given and **WHAT** he had given.

It may seem odd to you that we are reading about “who gave what” when we also know that Jesus said that when it came to giving we were not to let our left hand know what our right hand was doing. (Matthew 6:3)

Well, evidently, when the giver is not giving to get praise from those around him and is giving to bring glory to God and to meet genuine needs, it is OK to let the word get out about giving.

So, since Mr. Encourager was also Mr. Generous, Luke made a positive example for all time out of Barnabas.

Generosity was evident in the earliest glimpses we see of Jesus' church. The believers were givers, just like Jesus was. They hadn't fallen far from the Tree.

¹⁰ Laying the money at the feet of the apostles was a sign of his submission to their leadership.

And, before we wrap up our time together today, we'll look at one more scene where this same generosity gene is evident among healthy believers.

To see this, we're moving from the first church ever in Jerusalem to another church. This church was located hundreds of miles away from the mother church. And it was as distant culturally as it was geographically.

But it was as healthy as the Jerusalem church was and it was just as generous. It is the church at Antioch, located north of Palestine in Syria.

The Generosity Gene on Display in Antioch (Acts 11)

The Thriving, Flourishing Church of Antioch

The establishment of the church

The church at Antioch formed as Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem due to the persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen. (See Acts 7).

Those who fled Jerusalem took the Gospel with them. Some of these found their way to Antioch, where they established a church.

Of course, the Christians who had made it to Antioch from Jerusalem were all Jewish. But the city was mainly Gentile-ish. As more and more people came to faith in Jesus in Antioch, the church that developed became more and more a Jewish / Gentile mix.

It wasn't long until news of the tremendous response to the Gospel in Antioch made its way back to Jerusalem.

So, the apostles dispatched an investigator to check things out. They couldn't have made a better choice than the man they sent out. They sent Barnabas.

Luke tells us that Barnabas was **[11:24]...a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and faith.** And, with him there in Antioch, working alongside others in the church **"considerable numbers were added to the Lord."**

Barnabas served as Antioch's coach and mentor. It wasn't long before Barnabas saw that he needed help. He needed a co-coach.

Team ministry

So, **[25]...he left for Tarsus to look for Saul**

Barnabas and Saul (soon to be Paul) had met earlier in Jerusalem when Saul came to Jerusalem as a new convert. Barnabas welcomed the former persecutor with open arms and ushered him into Christian community.

Knowing Saul's background and value as a teacher, he left Antioch, made it to Tarsus, and brought Saul back to Antioch where they teamed up in ministry - and had the time of their lives.¹¹

For an entire year they were together in Antioch carrying out the Great Commission, teaching the new believers in Antioch to obey all that Jesus commanded.

We don't know all that they taught in Antioch. But we do know that they centered on Jesus. Everything came back to Him. And we know that because of the nickname the good citizens of Antioch pinned on them.

So successful were they at disciple-making that the believers in Antioch received a nickname as Luke lets us know that **[Acts 11:26]**

¹¹ It is certainly possible that Barnabas, knowing of Saul's earliest commission to go to the Gentiles, knew that for this reason he was the man for the job.

the disciples were first called Christians (literally “*Christ-ones*”) ***in Antioch.***¹²

Yep, the members of the church at Antioch hadn’t fallen far from the Tree.

I picture the wonderful church at Antioch looking a lot like the wonderful church in Jerusalem, except for the fact that Antioch was multi-ethnic.

There was Jesus-centered fellowship, prayer and worship, and apostolic teaching. And one more thing...

While Barnabas and Saul were serving the church at Antioch, a delegation of prophets arrived from Jerusalem. This group had made the three-hundred-mile journey from Palestine to Syria with a message from God to deliver to the church.

Antioch’s Acid Test (vv. 27-30)

Trouble in Jerusalem (vv. 27-28)

[27] Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] One of them, named Agabus,¹³ stood up and indicated by the Spirit that there would definitely be a severe famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.¹⁴

¹² It wasn’t a compliment. It was a term designed to insult, as in, “*That group over there - all they ever talk about is Christ! Just a bunch of Christ-freaks. Fanatics!*” The *Christians* were fine with that and wore the name as a badge of honor.

¹³ Agabus, a prophet gifted by God to foretell the future. (see Acts 21:10-11).

¹⁴ We know from extra-biblical sources that famines were a regular occurrence during the reign of Emperor Claudius. The famine to which Agabus referred was to overtake a large section of the Roman world. See Luke, chapter 2 to see how he referred to the census taken when Jesus was born.

As is the case today, so it was then. Famines hit the poor especially hard - and the persecuted church in Jerusalem was very poor. Agabus brought his prophecy with an implicit plea for help.

So, what will these Christ-ones do now that they have heard of the disaster that is going to come to Christ-ones whom most of the church has never met who are living in Judea? Catch this.

Solutions from Antioch

[29] And to the extent that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brothers and sisters living in Judea. [30] And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.¹⁵

What better way could there possibly be to affirm unity in Christ than...

...for the church in Antioch to help the church in Jerusalem?

...for Gentile believers to share their wealth with Jewish believers?

...for a prosperous church to give to help a poverty-stricken church?

...for a church enjoying peace to help a persecuted church?

And just as it has been in each of the scenarios we have seen today, the measure of the church’s generosity was not reported in terms of amount or percentage, only as “***any of the disciples had means.***”¹⁶

Antioch gave to Jerusalem just as Jerusalem had given earlier. No coercion. Completely voluntary. From the heart.

Conclusion:

¹⁵ This is probably the gift that is mentioned in Galatians 2.

¹⁶ Note, as well, that the money was sent in the care of two of the primary leaders of the church in Antioch, Barnabas and Saul, safeguarding the gift by entrusting it to men of integrity. The money was given directly by Barnabas and Saul to the elders of the church in Jerusalem, completing the safeguarding process.

The Head of the church is a Giver. Into the soul of each one who believes in Him, He drops His giving gene.

Each son or daughter of God has a born-again capacity to be outrageously generous, just like Jesus. So, yes, it is possible that we will each be, and our church can be the apple that doesn't fall far from the Giving Tree.

But, as those who study these things will tell us, genetic potential alone doesn't determine success.

As an example, athletic potential is, to some extent, genetically determined. But athletic success is not genetically determined.

It's true that success in a certain athletic pursuit will never rise above genetic potential.

So, if you are a runner and you want to win the Boston Marathon, but you mostly have fast-twitch muscle fibers, you are going to be a very frustrated marathoner because running for 26.2 miles straight requires slow twitch muscle fibers.

Likewise, if you want to break the world record in the one-hundred-meter sprint, you'll need fast-twitch muscle fibers.

All runners can improve their running, but only those with the right genetic makeup will be the fastest runners. But the best genetics don't guarantee athletic success.

It's only when good genes combine with conditioning and rigorous training and intentional work that races are won.

And Jesus calls us to intentionality if we would reach our born-again genetic generosity potential.

Now, how are we to intentionally condition ourselves to train the generosity gene?

Training the generosity gene

I suggest that we begin with a heart open to grow.

You could tell God, even right now, *"Lord, I see the beauty of the generous life that Jesus lived, and I am eager to live generously, myself. I am willing to respond to a need that arises today."*

With a wide-open heart, we can open our eyes and ears.

If we keep our eyes open, we may notice someone who could use an invitation to lunch after church. If we listen, we might hear somebody make a comment that describes a need you could meet.

Meeting that need will either cost time, energy, or cash. It might involve helping with a car repair, a household chore, or an hour of attentive listening.

Let's keep our eyes and ears open to where we can invest in serving or giving toward what Jesus wants to accomplish here at our church.

Let's keep our eyes and ears open to situations of great need, globally, where we might direct prayers and financial aid.

Today, our generous Savior is calling us to imitate Him in the grace of generosity and become the apples who didn't fall far from the Tree.