



Series: Taking the Next Step
"First Things Next"
Rev. Dr. Scott Field
Matthew 6:25-33
April 15, 2018
9:15 AM Service

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:25-33 NIV)

While we are still riding the wave of Easter (even though snow is in the forecast today!), remembering the outstanding musical presentation of the children last Sunday, and walking today with the Rokusek family through the deep valley of death's shadow, I want to bring our attention again to the powerful, living hope we have been given through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is Lord of yesterday and today, of the day and the night, on the mountaintop or in the valley when we are able to run with perseverance and also when we have to be carried just to make it. He is Lord of the Universe and the Hope of the World!

Yet, from time to time I wonder about us.

If Jesus has already done the heavy lifting of victory over sin, death, and the devil, how come our engagement in God's work is often so hesitant, has such marginal impact, and barely raises our blood pressure?

One of the underlying reasons for our settling for "less than" we might do and be for God's Kingdom work is because, I think, we are accustomed to holding back. We're worried. We want our Plan B in place in case this whole God thing doesn't work quite as advertised.

Fair enough.

That's why we're beginning a four-week focus called *Taking the Next Step*.

Yes, it's about money.

More importantly, it's about our spiritual development as individuals and households.

And no, it isn't about the church budget.

Many of us are familiar with giving and churches --

There's **crisis giving** because something has happened like the 15-year roof is already on year 30 or the boiler needs replacing after over 60 years of faithful service, or whatever.

And we are probably familiar with **obligatory giving**: I guess I have to do something.

And then there is **comparative giving**: tell me what others do and I'll try to meet the average.

Or **leftover giving**: "After I pay all the other bills -- well, I'll see if there is something leftover I can give.

Our language about money isn't very helpful, either.

We sometimes hear about "stewardship" That is a church word filled with duty, obligation, and responsibility. Generosity is an aspect of character -- it is about us as individuals, not about us as a member of a particular organization. "What's your stewardship commitment?" is a dollars and cents question? "Am I a generous person?" or "Am I becoming more generous?" is a question about character and the impact of the Holy Spirit's work in my life. It touches on matters of faith and my trust in God's Word, God's Way, and God's Faithfulness.

Jesus knows the fears and apprehensions of the human heart. He knows what you and I worry about. And one of the things that has been ingrained in most of us since our childhood is a fear that we will not have enough. Hence, our oversized worry about money. It has us worrying all the time. There are great positive benefits from careful the budgeting and planning of how we use the money we have, but when we treat money as an end in itself, we fall into the trap of accumulating for accumulation's sake.

So, Jesus asks a question in Matthew 6.

This is a section of the Gospel of Matthew we sometimes call "The Sermon on the Mount." It is a concise summary, in the words of Jesus himself, of the difference between being a partner in the Kingdom of God or simply drifting with the currents of the culture of which we are part. And when it comes to our worry over money, Jesus has a couple of pretty penetrating questions. We'll come to those in a moment. A couple of illustrations first.

Sean Owen writes:

I spent much of my childhood in Los Angeles. I'm convinced that people in Los Angeles are more image obsessed than any other city in the world. This leads to a number of odd phenomena.

While the aspirational in the rest of the country are often house poor, for example, many in Los Angeles are what I'll call "car poor" — guys making \$30,000 per year driving a Porsche while living in a microscopic concrete box with one window and no furniture.

A Porsche doesn't do you much good in L.A. — after all, you can rarely break 30 MPH, what with the traffic and all. But we all know it's not really about going fast. These guys aren't even all that into cars, per se. They just want to look cool.

In short, in their heart of hearts, they don't really want a Porsche. What they want is to be the guy who has a Porsche. That guy is cool. He gets invited to the hottest parties in town. He gets (the women). And the car-poor guy wants you to think he's that guy, even though he is in fact the guy who can barely afford a (ten-year-old Nissan Sentra).

(<http://renewablewealth.com/articles/do-you-want-it-or-do-you-want-to-be-the-guy-who-has-it/>)

What's with that? Why do we do things like this?

According to Jesus, our worry -- and our grabbing for whatever having "more" means -- grows from our suspicion that God cannot be trusted. We're on our own. He points out the illustration of the birds and the flowers, how they are provided for, how beautiful they are -- and they don't seem to worry for a moment.



How about a day lily shopping for a new outfit? Of course not. Jesus points out that God provides for them. And, comparing the smaller to the greater, he says if God cares for the birds and the flowers, why would we not trust God to provide for us as well?

The average American household throws away \$2,200 worth of food every year; in fact, 20% of the food we buy is never eaten.

(<https://www.cnbc.com/2015/04/22/americas-165-billion-food-waste-problem.html>)

And when it comes to clothes, well, the information from Closetmaid, a major supplier of closet organization and storage options, is suggestive. They surveyed 1,000 American women. The average woman has 103 items in her closet. 33% are considered too tight; 24% are considered too loose; 21% are considered unwearable for others reasons; 12% are new, but not worn. Of the 103 items, on average, this leaves 10% available to wear and this 10% might not lend itself to making up an acceptable outfit. Hence, 40% of women respond that they don't like ANY of the clothes in their closets. I am not making this up! (Info graphic from <http://blog.closetmaid.com/2016/05/full-to-the-brim>). My point is to illustrate simply that something other than, different from, the actual number of

real clothes determines whether or not we "feel" we have something to wear. We do have the clothing, but we won't wear it. How come?

Last week we sent a book to every household in the church family. If, for whatever reason, you didn't receive one, please pick one up at the information desk today. And, since some have said it has been such a refreshing daily reading, yes, you can take one to pass along to a friend or family member.

One of the daily readings includes this insight:

(Generous) giving is a means of putting God first, a method for devaluing to God and to ourselves the rightful order of our priorities. When we practice it, we live with a more relaxed posture about money, less panicked and reactive. We take possession instead of being possessed. Money becomes a servant rather than a master. By provoking us to give, God is not trying to take something from us; God is seeking to give something to us. Every time we spend money, we make a statement about what we value. All inducements to spend money (advertising, social expectation, seeking to impress people) are attempts to shape our values. When we fail to conscientiously decide what we value and align our spending habits accordingly, a thousand other inducements and voices stand ready to define our values instead....

The practice of generosity opens us to deeper reflection and conversation about wealth and how it relates to purpose and happiness. (Deliberate and intentional giving) leads us to ask, "What is my/my family's definition of success? How wealthy do we hope we, or our children, will be, and why? What motivates us as a household, and what matters most to our happiness? What will become of the wealth we accumulate?

How much do we give, and why? What difference does (our use of money make to us and to the world in which we live?)

(Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving*, Abingdon Press, 2011, pp. 46-47)

Let me invite you to your next step on the journey of generosity.

Most of us don't wake up one morning and say, "Today, I'll be generous!" Like so many important matters of our character, generosity grows specific practices over time. The generosity journey, as we understand it, has four primary steps:

The practice of regular giving

The practice of giving in proportion to our income

The practice of tithing (Giving 10%)

The practice of abundant giving (giving more than 10%)

Sometimes having pastors talk about money feels a little like we're singing for our supper because our compensation comes from the church's financial resources. I want you to know that Lynda and I are also tithers at the least. She was raised in a home that practiced and taught tithing. I didn't have that advantage, but upon becoming a follower of Jesus during my college years I was blessed to have some more mature believers who also engaged me with the biblical practice of tithing. I love Bob Schnase's

description of the result. We've experienced it: more relaxed, less panicky and reactive when it comes to money.

Hallelujah!

Over the next several weeks take the journey. Ask the questions of yourself and those in your household. What is your next step? The practice of regular giving? The practice of giving in proportion to your income? The practice of tithing? The practice of abundance beyond the tithe?