

I had a lovely mother in law who sometimes would say to the various members of her family, "Count your blessings!" It's good advice. From time to time I catch myself grumbling about things I don't like, or things going wrong. You may (or may not) do this yourself! This week I've been taking my mother in law's advice to heart and reviewing my blessings. The list became rather extensive, and I won't bore you with all the details this morning. Suffice to say my blessings are grouped around such things as my family, my church, my health, my country and all of God's provision, of which his provision through Jesus for my salvation stands out.

Life could have been so very different for me. And in counting my blessings, I have no hesitation, or reluctance, in saying all of them have come from God's good hand of providence and guidance. I can only say that God has treated me generously; far better than I deserve. This morning, in my introduction, I want to invite you to share my testimony by claiming: God has treated us – he does treat us – generously.

These past few weeks I've been kind of "springboarding" from one message to the next! Last week, we asked with Peter, "*What kind of people ought we to be?*" And we followed Peter's answer to his own question. I want to ask the same question again this week, this time picking up on something Jesus said, and a pattern we see in him through the gospels. What kind of people ought we to be? According to Jesus' words and example, we should be *Generous People*.

As he called his first twelve disciples, and gave them his authority, and sent them out in ministry, he told them, "*Freely you have received; freely give.*" This is to be the basis of our ministry, too; among ourselves, and beyond the church to the world around us. This morning, I want to list some aspects of life where we can put Jesus' words and example into practice. Like my list of "blessings", this list kept growing too, until I had to say, "Enough!" Behind each element we'll consider are Jesus' words to his disciples, "Freely you have received; freely give." Our order is fairly random, but we're starting with

A. Compassion.

We can and should be, generous with our compassion. I wonder if we are. Compassion is one of the first qualities we note in Jesus' life and ministry. I've included just one example this morning: Jesus healing ten men afflicted with leprosy. This pattern is repeated throughout the gospels. Here is a man born blind, a woman whose son has died, a centurion whose servant is gravely ill, a man possessed by demons, a woman with a tarnished reputation, a man with no friends, up in a sycamore tree. Jesus and his compassion is the common denominator.

Jesus had the power and the authority to intervene in these situations. Compassion motivated him to use what God had given.

Important as physical healing is to those with needs like these, spiritual healing is of paramount importance to us all. Jesus has power and authority in this realm too. But the cost of intervention in our desperate need is devastatingly high. Jesus has the power to save us; but

it will cost him his life, almost unbearable physical suffering, and the spiritual and emotional burden of your sin and mine, and everyone else's, too. Who could blame Jesus if he'd made a different decision that evening in the Garden? Obedience to his Father's will, and a deep compassion for God's lost and hurting people, tipped the scales in our favour.

Will we then monitor carefully our own reserves of compassion, and dish it out to others in small, measured amounts? Freely we have received; freely give.

Our first response to God for all he's done, and the second area where we can afford to be generous, is

B. Gratitude.

According to one survey from the gospels, 90% of the recipients of God's mercy and grace lack gratitude! Is there hurt in Jesus' voice when he asks, "Were not *all ten* healed? Where are the other nine?" Is Luke just being racist when he identifies the one man who did return as a Samaritan? Or does he reflect Jesus' disappointment that his own countrymen failed to come back and thank him?

Now we can make excuses for the other nine: they were excited to discover their leprosy gone; they had friends and family they wanted to share their good news with; in their joy, they simply forgot.

It would have only taken a moment; what Jesus had just given them was priceless; they owed him their very lives. What cost, a little gratitude?

I like to think the Samaritan man's gratitude extended beyond that moment of time, and the words he found to thank Jesus. I like to think his gratitude translated into actions, and a lifetime of "paying forward" the wonderful gift he received that day.

Of course, I'm not really talking about a man so long ago. As serious as leprosy was back then, sin and its consequences were and are even more deadly. We can afford to be generous with our gratitude; to those around us, as well as to our God who makes it all possible.

Which brings us to

C. Giving;

probably the area we think of first when we think about generosity. This will be the point from today's message that launches another one. The Bible has much to say about money, our attitude to it, and the way we give. It talks about the dangers of greed, and the value of contentment. It talks about tithing; and we have numerous stories of those who used money well, and others who misused it. We don't have time this morning to go into the detail; instead we'll stay with the underlying principle: God's people are to give generously.

We see this in the early church after Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost, around three thousand new believers were added to the church, just on that one day!¹ Amazing! Luke tells us others were added on a daily basis.²

Some of us met last week with Claire, our auditor, and were reminded of the cost of running a church! Even back then, with a very different structure, the church had costs. How did they meet them? Through the generosity of their people. In Acts 4 Luke describes a level of generosity back then that leaves us shaking our heads. They shared everything!³ There were no needy people among them. As needs arose, people sold land or houses and gave the proceeds to the apostles.

It’s in this context that we first meet Barnabas, and discover his real name is Joseph. He sold a field and brought the money to the apostles. We get the picture. This was not a small contribution from Barnabas’s surplus, or petty cash. This was a sacrifice; a generous gift; because evidently Barnabas’s passion for the early church and its ministry was greater than his attachment to his personal possessions. Again, we can afford to give generously, because God has first given generously to us. Which leads to our next point:

D. Encouragement.

Luke tells us the nickname “Barnabas” means “Son of Encouragement.” If you’re going to have a nickname, I reckon “Barnabas” is right up there with the best. I was always called “Akes” when I played football; and “Mr Akes” by the kids in our youth group (many years ago now!) A nickname is often a shortened version or a distortion of your real name; or a drawing of attention to some physical feature (some of these can be quite cruel); or a name that highlights a personal attribute (or deficiency!).

Joseph was called “*Barnabas*”; (he’s never called anything else after this). He was recognised and identified as a man generous with his encouragement. I’m sure the apostles were greatly encouraged when Barnabas arrived with his gift. Yes, I’m sure they could use the money. But he was also saying to them, “I believe in what you are doing. God has blessed me so I can be a blessing to others. I trust you to handle this wisely and well.”

When the early church scattered because of persecution in Jerusalem, Christians took their faith with them to Antioch, where many became Christians. Who would the leaders send to guide the new church there? Barnabas! When he arrived and saw their faith, we read “he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”⁴ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus, to find the newly converted Saul, or Paul; and he brought him back to Antioch and worked with him for a whole year. How much of Paul’s effectiveness was the result of the quiet, steadfast, consistent encouragement of his friend and mentor, Barnabas?

¹ Acts 2:41

² See Acts 2:47

³ Acts 4:32

⁴ Acts 11:23

What a difference a word of encouragement can make! It carries a benefit out of all proportion to the effort it takes. What a blessing to a community – a Christian community especially – are those who exercise this ministry. I want to thank those who are and have been an encouragement to me and our family over the years. I was touched to have Ian Rendell back with us a couple of weeks ago. Ian has always been a Barnabas in our church.

There's always room for more! Let me encourage you to be encouragers of one another, and especially of our younger people. I would never have considered the ministry without the encouragement of those in our little church I spoke of two weeks ago. You may never know when your quiet word of encouragement becomes the catalyst that changes someone's life.

Can you see now that generosity should be a way of life for God's people, extending across a whole range of areas? You may not have considered our next point as a place for generosity:

E. Forgiveness.

Now we do know that forgiveness is important; but we can be grudging and half-hearted; or, we can be generous.

Peter thought he was being generous when he suggested to Jesus he was pretty noble if he forgave his brother seven times. I've often wondered, was Peter referring to his literal brother, Andrew; and if so, just what did he have in mind, when the eighth time came round?

Jesus gave Peter something to think about! He gives us something to think about, too. Not seven times; seventy-seven times. Or seventy times seven! We get the message! Generous forgiveness goes on forgiving, as long as the other person continues to offend. And some of us want to say, "Come on! Enough is enough! There has to be a time when we're allowed to clobber the guy!"

Straight after Peter's question, Jesus told the story of the servant who owed his king an impossibly large amount. The king forgave him. That servant then took hold of a fellow servant, whose debt to him was trivial, and had him thrown into prison. We know the story, and we share the king's outrage. Then we acknowledge *we are that first servant!* God has forgiven us a debt so large, the amount anyone else ever owes us is trivial by comparison.

Freely we have received; God requires us to be generous in our forgiveness.

With what we've discussed so far, we have some flexibility, and varying capacities. The next one is a little different. We're talking about

F. Time.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE? (2) "Generous People!"
Matt. 10:1, 5-8; Matt. 18:21, 22 Luke 17:11-18; Acts 4:32-37; Luke 6:37, 38

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I wonder, do some of us struggle to be generous with our time? There is only so much of it; and so many people and activities wanting to claim a chunk of it. (And it's nice if there's a little bit left I can call "mine", to spend as I like.)

Of all our resources, time is the one that requires careful priorities. Can we really afford to be generous with our time? Yes we can! But we have to face some rather confronting questions: How much valuable time do I waste? Where can I save minutes, hours, even days I could then distribute generously? I'm not even going to make suggestions for you this morning! Wouldn't it be great to have more time we could give away generously?

You may not have anticipated our next one. We should be generous in

G. Assessing Others.

This is my way of putting positively what Jesus said negatively, and quite bluntly: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged."⁵ Do any of us not understand what he's saying here?

The Bible calls us to a high standard of life and behaviour. As Christians, we expect a high standard from ourselves. It's just a small step, then, to evaluating the lives of those around us critically, and negatively. Jesus says we are not to do this!

(And you wouldn't believe this, but I'd just finished typing that last sentence when the phone rang, the second caller in about a minute who wanted to talk to me about our electricity supply! Do I have to be nice, and generous, in my assessment and my conversation with telemarketers? Yes, of course I do! Now I was firm, but then I expressed my sympathy for them having to do what I consider a thankless job! They both said it wasn't too bad. The second caller said that for every fifty people who say "No!" about three agree to work through the process with him. I said, "Well, you have a good day." And he replied, "I always do!" Not all my conversations with telemarketers have been this friendly. I've been challenged!)

Let me share with you perhaps the most exciting verses in the Bible, Romans 8:1, 2: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." God looks at us carefully, and assesses us generously! He does not condemn us. Freely you have received, freely give."

Last one! We should be generous in

H. Sharing God's Love.

Look quickly down our list this morning, if you've filled them in. Generosity in each of these areas is really a way of sharing God's love with those around us. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us," we read from 1 John 3 last week. We were never meant to be

⁵ Luke 6:37a

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containers of God's love; he intends us to be channels. Blessings in: blessings out. Ask one of our plumbers. It doesn't matter how big the dam, or how full the reservoir; if the pipes are blocked, there is no water, no flow.

God's love has no limits... except the limits of the conduits through which he has chosen to send it. Are we facilitating, or blocking the free flow of God's love this morning?

Here's a word for you to consider this morning (one you probably wouldn't expect in this context!): Here it is: "*Miserable!*" We think "miserable" means "unhappy"; but look at the first five letters. "Miserable" people are unhappy because they are "*miser-able!*"; the very opposite of generous! How pointless for us to try and hoard God's love and keep it to ourselves! We're meant to be channels; we're meant to be generous.

Generosity is like... sniffles in a kindergarten! It's contagious. You being generous, in any of the areas we've considered this morning, has the potential to let loose a whole epidemic of generosity! Let me encourage you to do this little experiment (and you can start before you leave here, this morning!) Try being nice to someone! Smile and say "hello" to someone you don't know very well! Put some money in the "coins for a cause" jar! Give someone a hug! As well as making their day, it could do wonders for yours, too!

But don't stop when you go home; and don't limit it to Sunday! Be nice, be generous to those who share your home. What do you think might happen, if you kept this up tomorrow as you go to work, or head off to school? What might happen if we all did this, not just for a week, but as a principle for life? How far do you think this ripple of generosity might spread?

We could change the world! That was always God's intention!