

**Living With Courage and Resilience**  
**Part 5: The Richman and the Storehouse (Generosity)**

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Scripture: Ecclesiastes 8:14-15; Luke 12:16-34

I don't consider myself a particularly generous person. Of course, I'd like to *think* I'm generous, and I'm no Ebenezer Scrooge, but of all the resilience characteristics we're covering in this series, I must admit that Generosity is the one I struggle with most. It comes least naturally to me.

Just the other morning – Friday, in fact – our daughter Maren, was supposed to move out of her apartment in Lincoln where she had just finished her second year in the architecture program at UNL. When Melanie awakened at 5 a.m. to get ready for work, she realized that Maren would have a pretty hard time packing and moving her things to our house before heading for Denver on Saturday. Melanie was frustrated that Maren had waited until the last possible minute to pack and openly wondered how Maren would do it all in a day. She asked, "Do you think I should take a personal day from work to help her?"

I said, "Definitely not. Maren needs to learn that she can't always wait until the last minute to do stuff like this before asking for help." I thought my logic was clear, concise, and had settled the matter.

Next thing I knew, I heard Melanie on the phone: "Hi, I'm afraid I need to take a personal day today." I may have had logic on my side, but Melanie had Generosity on hers. If you always have logic on your side, you'll never be a generous person, as Generosity involves giving above and beyond what is reasonable, expected, or logical. It's about giving out of the abundance of one's heart.

I've been bad at the Generosity thing all my life. Years ago, while studying in France, I was walking to a Franciscan church I'd been wanting to visit for some time. I was running a bit late, so I was walking fast. I spotted a homeless woman crumpled on the sidewalk crying about 50 yards ahead of me. Her head was bowed to the ground, so I knew she couldn't see me approaching, and her back was facing the other side of the street, so she'd never see me if I crossed over and continued on. "My French isn't that good," I said to myself, even though my

lack of proficiency hadn't stopped me from living with a French family. "And if I stop, I'll probably miss church," I said.

I crossed to the other side and moved on toward my destination. It wasn't until the shocking irony hit me of passing by an upset homeless person in order to get to a church associated with St. Francis – whose whole ministry revolved around generosity toward the poor – that I stopped. Feeling like the priest who crossed to the other side of the road in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, I hastily retraced my steps, picking up a couple of chocolate croissants on the way, hoping to share a little joy with the weeping woman. She was nowhere to be seen when I returned.

"Jesus," I whispered into thin air, "I hope that wasn't you!" I could almost hear a voice respond, "Does it really make any difference who it was?"

One of the reasons I've had a hard time with Generosity is because, since the earliest days I can remember, part of me has been convinced that I lack something crucial that everyone else seems to have. I grew up in an extremely wealthy suburb of Seattle – Mercer Island – but the only reason I was living there is because my parents were teachers in the school district. Being young, I had no concept of the laws of economics. Owning a fancy house, driving expensive cars, going skiing in the winter, boating in the summer, and taking amazing vacations seemed, in my perception, to be what "normal" people did and had.

My family and I were "abnormal." Something was wrong with us. I couldn't quite wrap my mind around what it was we were lacking, but I realized I could protect myself. If I were in a group of kids I perceived as intelligent, I wouldn't open my mouth, figuring I'd put my foot in it. If a "cool kid" took a liking to me, I'd shy away, figuring he'd quickly discover what a nerd I am. Even though my family never suffered a serious lack of money, I became deeply convinced that, because we lacked something I couldn't quite identify, my family and I were living just one quick step away from homelessness.

Eventually, I decided that the only way I could make it safely through this life was to develop such a high level of expertise in one or two areas that no one would notice how lacking I was in every other area of life – hopefully not even me!

It's not that I was so strategic about all this, seeing the problem and perceived solution as clearly as I've just laid it out. But if you ever wonder why I attended the most rigorous seminary I could find (Princeton) and left with a Ph.D. in Biblical

Studies after eight years when the 3-year Masters of Divinity was the only educational requirement for ministry, this is why. It's not that I didn't enjoy all those years of study (in fact, I absolutely loved it). Yet, part of what continually motivated me to burn the midnight oil and try to attain so much before ever setting foot in a pulpit was because I was convinced that, if I only got the amount of education that "normal" ministers got, it wouldn't be enough. People would see that I lacked something essential and fire me, just like they did to a minister at the church I grew up in.

So my basic M.O. is to be a hoarder. Not a hoarder of material things so much as a hoarder of anything I perceive that I need in order to maintain the illusion that I'm not lacking – at least in my narrow area of expertise. For instance, I hoard books – which really isn't about the material books themselves but about knowledge. I hoard personal time for the same reason. When I'm not at church, you're more likely to find me spending time doing something I perceive to be helping me be a better minister than something purely fun or frivolous. When I do actually indulge in some fun and frivolity, it's usually because I'm aware that you can't be a good minister unless you do something fun or frivolous now and again!

As a hoarder of time, knowledge, and energy, therefore, I find Jesus' parable of the rich man and his storehouses to be nothing less than a direct threat to my basic M.O. I know what it's like to be that man. I don't perceive him as uncaring or unkind – just as I don't perceive myself this way. He's just convinced that he lacks what he needs to be safe, secure, or "normal" in this world unless he has more than enough. He's working for the day he can "eat, drink, and be merry" without those inner voices telling him he needs to get back to work so that he can overcome his sense of lack.

I find it devastating that this man is criticized by Jesus for not being more generous with what he has before that day comes – either toward others or toward himself. Jesus says, effectively, if you're not being generous to others and yourself, you're not being generous toward God, because God's own desire is to be generous with you and others.

According to Jesus, God clothes the flowers of the field more extravagantly than Solomon, makes rain to fall on the just and unjust alike, provides even the birds of the air with everything they need to survive and thrive. Then he insists that God considers us so important that we shouldn't worry about our lives, what we will eat or drink, or how we will dress. He says that all you really need to worry

about is striving for God's Kingdom – giving as you have received – then “all these things will be given to you as well.”

In other words, there's no way you're ever going to live with courage or resilience in this world unless you learn that the more you give away, the more you receive. Life isn't a zero-sum game. It's not a pie where the more pieces you serve to others, the less you have for yourself. If you treat life this way, you will always be hiding in the shadows when it's time to step up to the plate. No matter how much you have, you will never feel like you have enough.

The kind of life that Jesus points to operates on a model of abundance, not scarcity. Parents who have more than one child quickly learn what this is about. With each child the parent's capacity to give love does not decrease. It increases. That's what happens when we give to others like God gives to us. Our heart grows. We experience abundance. If we're not generous toward others, we're not generous toward God. Our heart shrinks, like a piece of pie gradually being consumed to the last crumb.

So I'm saying to myself right now, “Oh my! How am I, who am every bit as much of a hoarder as the man in Jesus' parable (only perhaps in less obvious ways) supposed to preach a sermon on Generosity when I don't practice what I preach with any kind of regularity?”

Well, maybe I can be generous at least in confessing how much I struggle in this area. Maybe, too, I can be generous in confessing why I want so much to become a generous person before I die. I want to become a more generous person because, as one who is not, I see more clearly than others how much generosity is linked to living with courage and resilience in this world.

One of the most effective ways to push beyond the perception that you are lacking in something is by giving away that which you *think* you lack and discovering that the sky has not fallen and you still have enough of whatever it is you've just given away to live and give another day.

This is one reason why I tithe, by the way. It's not because I'm so much more pious than a non-tither. It's because, if I didn't convince myself every month that I have enough financial resources to get by, even while giving 10% of my net income away, I would totally feel like I'm on the edge of financial collapse all the time, no matter how much money I make – and I would constantly be finding

ways to make more. I tithe, therefore, not because I'm so spiritually healthy but because I'm so sick.

Given the very concrete, positive way that tithing keeps me aware that I have more money than I actually need to survive and be happy, I would love to bring this same discipline into other areas where I always seem to feel I don't have enough.

I'd like to tithe my time, for instance, because I never seem to have enough of it. What tithing my time looks like, to me, is doing things I perceive to be a "waste" of time ten percent of the time – things that have nothing to do with developing my area of expertise in which I feel most safe and secure.

I would also like to tithe my emotional energy. It's not that I feel constantly drained. I just suspect that if I give too freely of my emotional self, I'll either get burned or others will continue to ask more and more of me until I'm depleted.

My latest tithing project is to tithe my prayers. I don't mean that I intend to pray ten percent of the time. Rather, I want to spend ten percent or more of my prayer time praying for others. I must confess that, until a few years ago, I rarely prayed for others, even when I said I would. Or at least, I rarely prayed for more than a few seconds for others. Why? Because I was convinced that if I started praying for others in any serious, engaged way, I would never have enough time left to pray for myself, or listen for God's guidance. What I have been finding as I've worked on this practice is that, not only is there enough time to talk and listen to God both for my own sake and that of others, but in praying for others, more of my own needs get met than when I don't.

While I perceive that most of you are more generous than I am in everyday life, I don't think I'm being too hypocritical if I openly wonder how courageous and resilient we would all be if we were more constantly generous with our time, talent, and treasure. Is it possible that, through our greater generosity, we would all trust Jesus' advice not to worry about our lives so much?

I don't know. But what I do know is that those who don't constantly worry about their lives live with far greater resilience and courage than those who do.