

**Introduction:**

Oh, friends. I am so happy to talk to you this morning. I really, really am. I'm not sure what you're expecting today. But I want to begin with a quote from Paul. It's from 2 Corinthians, and it's a passage with a context, the same context as that passage from Corinthians that was just read to us.

Paul's been raising money for the Jerusalem Church, which is the largest Church, and needy for all sorts of reasons.

He writes:

***“Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them.”***

“It's not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints.” This is how I feel this morning. Everything I say this morning is colored by this one truth: You are generous already. You're a generous people. I know this. So. Whatever else I say this morning, this is something I've kept in mind.

But even Paul follows up the “you don't need any instruction” by, you know, giving them a whole bunch of instruction. So, who am I to argue with his example, right?

And here's what we're not talking about this morning: “tithing.” Because, you know...I just don't believe in it. Or,

rather, what I mean is this:

Tithe means “tenth.” We might know that. It doesn’t mean the money we put in our offering basket, unless it does happen to be a tenth of what we’ve earned lately. But we’ve all heard people say things like “I’ve increased my tithe,” when what they mean really is that “I’ve increased what I’ve given to the offering basket. But “tithing” really means giving a tenth of something, usually of our income, and it is an Old Testament principle.

And it’s a fine principle, as far as principles go, a fine habit, like regularly showering or dusting things.

But the New Testament principle is different. Just like so many things that have to do with this Jesus-centered life, it’s more nuanced. The New Testament principle really is a responsive generosity. We’re called to be generous with everything, because in Christ God has done all the things God has done for us. And generosity is what we’re going to talk about today. First, we’ll pray.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Concerning Generosity:***

Now, we all know what being generous is about, right? It’s about giving freely, giving abundantly.

The word has a Latin base, related to nobility, and this makes sense; because giving freely of what you own is a noble, honorable, isn’t it? A generous person is in some real way noble.

And in a lot of ways, generosity--freely giving--could hold its own among the highest Christian virtues.

To give freely, without trying to decide if your giving is a wise investment, to give freely without tying a thousand strings to your gift, to give freely, but not pretend that the valuable thing you give is worthless--I mean, this sounds a lot like grace, doesn't it?

And the word we translate as "grace" means, really, to give graciously; to give freely. We can think of generosity as a sort of "applied grace," a faith-changed life revealing itself through actions.

And I believe that we can position ourselves to become generous. We cannot muscle down a generous disposition, can't force ourselves to have an attitude of generosity. That's like hitting a child until they start to act happy. But we can have our hearts changed into generous hearts.

And let me say: I'm talking about specifically financial generosity today, right? I mean we've got to have some boundaries, or I'll never get off the stool.

We'll talk about obstacles to generosity, and we'll talk about some things that can act as ingredients in a generous life. At the end of all this, we'll talk about how this relates to the church's offering basket.

### ***Obstacles: Me***

The first, and most basic obstacle to any "sermon," about generosity is that I'm suspect. Me, Rich. I mean, it's clear

that I have a vested interested in you giving money to Smoky Row, right? My paycheck comes from what you all give to Smoky Row.

One of the most fundamental obstacles in today's conversation is that in many places--of course I pray not here, but you never know--in many places, if someone benefits from the generosity of others, that person's bias is seen as so great, that they can't be a legitimate source of wisdom on the subject.

I could try all sorts of things to persuade us to hear me out today, but at the end of the morning, we will or we won't. The Holy Spirit will have been a part of what comes out of my mouth, or the Spirit won't. You know me, and trust me, or you don't.

But this is an obstacle, and while I hope by now our time together, and any trust it's built among us, has overcome it, maybe not?

### ***Obstacles: Worn Out***

A basic obstacle to us hearing a message about "tithing" is simple exhaustion. Some of us just don't have all that much money; we don't have much in the way of financial resources.

And when those of us who fall into these groups think we're going to be asked for money, asked to give, again or more: we have an emotional response before we have a thoughtful one. We don't even have to be asked; if we think we might, we respond by shutting down, or getting aggressive, or

excusing ourselves, or feeling guilty.

Not because we're jaded, not because we're bitter; but simply because the emotional weight of having to say no wears us out. And we are asked to give money all the time in this society of ours. It's too much. Our lives feel complicated, and we don't have time to explain ourselves; all we know is that we can't give, and don't want to be asked. And even if we give of our time or our talent it doesn't feel like it's as valuable, somehow.

We're less likely to dodge this obstacle than to just let it run us over. But Scripture has so much to say about those who have little being the ones who change the world.

### ***Obstacles: Practiced Generosity***

Another obstacle to hearing a message like today's is simply the fact that some of us are very generous with our money, and on some level we're aware of it.

We make sure that we always have money to give when it's needed, we look out for ways we can provide for those with needs, we've practiced generosity until it's just part of who we are, and so we become not generous with just our treasure, but also our time and our talents.

We love the church. Or we're dutiful people. But, say, we give to Smoky Row all the time: and so, when someone tries to talk to us about giving cash....we know that the message isn't for us, and so we check out. Or more subtly, and worse, we get offended--doesn't Rich know how giving I am? I have an examined personal theology about giving. What does this

guy want from me? A leg? I don't want your leg; God does want our whole bodies.

### ***Obstacles: Not for me:***

Tied with this, though, very closely. Is the fact that some of us just think that this message is irrelevant. We've already resolved to give what we give, or not give what we give, and we're done with it.

But part of the life of the Christian is to examine with some regularity the conclusions we've already made.

### ***Obstacles: Our Money***

There's this, too: We work hard for the money, right? We work hard for the money. One major obstacle that we have to deal with if we are going to talk about giving money is the fact that our default mentality is "mine." This is my money. I earned it. And, by extension, I can do what I want with it.

Adding to this the fact that we are consumers. We want good value for our money when we spend it the way we want to spend it, right? This isn't a surprise. We want value for our money, don't we? I'm hanging out here until I get a response. We do! We do! We want value.

And the reality is that for many of us--maybe not you, but some other Christian--the church is not the central thing in our lives. We aren't usually by default church-oriented; we have clubs we're a part of, groups we're a part of, work & school & hobbies & all sorts of communities that we Christians turn to before turning to the church. This is true despite all we've talked about regarding the Church at large

or Smoky Row, last week. The point is that we Christians can often value other groups more than we value the church, and of course, in a world in which we have only so much to give, we wise consumers will give to that which we value most.

And this is a symptom of a fragmented, mobile, highly-networked society, it's an obstacle I can't "fix," and it's not one I'm out to "fix," so much as one that some of us might really need to think about. The trickiest part of this is that so often, the product the Church provides isn't for us; it's for those out there who have great needs.

But we should examine, if this is an obstacle for us, why we believe the money is ours, and what we really believe about the church, and its value.

This last obstacle I don't want to talk about, but it's real. It's disobedience.

### ***Obstacle: Disobedience.***

The truth is that as Christians we're called to use what we have for God's glory and our neighbors' good. If we don't, if we seek to avoid that as much as possible, then we're simply, well, not obeying God. This again has nothing to do with our Sunday offering, but just generally has everything to do with how much or how little we believe all the things God says about us: what we have been made for, what we have been given, spared from, and promised.

We can't be hoarders. Generosity is demanded of us. Selfishness is to be rejected, and in all ways we must become like Christ.

## ***Becoming Generous: A Generous Recipe***

But if these are the obstacles to generosity, what's the recipe for it? Because that would be something to know. If, of course, you want to end up generous.

What do we need to do or think about or believe in order to become generous people? What are the ingredients in that recipe?

And some of us know them very well; but all of us need reminded.

### ***Ingredient: Self-Examination***

In one passage that was read to us this morning Paul writes

*“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Cor 9:7)*

Now, this relates to a specific instance; Paul had invited First Corinth Church to give funds to help out First Jerusalem Church. They had time to think about what to give, had time to consider their finances, their needs, the needs of the group, they had time, right? (cf. Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul, 175ff.)

If there's something we're short on it's time. And not having enough time is one of my favorite justifications for all sorts of dysfunctional behavior. But we need to make time to consider our own financial giving. We need to examine this part of our lives. Some of us have, once in the long-ago-enough-to-be-meaningless-past, some of us do every month



or week, we're right on top of this. Some of us have taken that arbitrary-but-real opportunity the New Year brings to reexamine this part of our lives; I know Carolyn and I have, maybe you, too.

Here's the rub, though: If we don't make decisions about financial giving prior to being asked to give, we are not all of a sudden going to default to selfless generosity. We are going to default to self-protective insecurity and a "maybe next time." Or, more rarely, we'll give to the point where we can't keep promises or commitments we've made, and so we end up in that place Paul warns us against, when he says "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality."

But if instead, we take time, and resolve that we will give this much money to x, y, or z, that we will set aside this much money for those needs that come up that we can't plan on, then we'll be in control of our giving, instead of controlled by the thousand self-protective mechanisms that click on when we think we might lose some of our money.

So one ingredient in the recipe of generosity is taking the time to examine our finances, and resolve in our heart to give some amount out of them, no matter how small that amount might be. God doesn't care about how much or how little we give; only that we do.

### ***Ingredient: Trust***

Further in today's passage, after the "God loves a cheerful giver" bit, Paul keeps rolling:

*“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,*

*‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;  
his righteousness endures forever.’*

*He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”*

I don't need to go too much in depth on this, do I? We know what this is about. It's about God's providence. If we are going to become generous people, we have to trust that God will be generous to us. There are ways to develop this trust.

Here they are:

### **Notice & Remember & Recite**

Notice & Remember & Recite. We need to notice the way that God provides for us. We need to notice the way God provides for others. We need to remember the way God has provided for us. We need to remember the way God has provided for others. And we need to recite these things, talk about them, share them with one another. We need to give voice to God's daily generosity in our lives. A once-a-year sermon about what Smoky Row means in the world can inspire us for a week, maybe, maybe even two; but we don't need emotional inspiration, we need a well-exercised

memory of God's providence.

I want to nuance this, talk about why this is hard--and it is--but today all I can say is that we simply have to do this: notice, remember, and recite.

One ingredient in this recipe for generosity is trusting in God, which we can do by developing the habit of noticing, remembering, and reciting all the things God has done for us and others financially.

And of course, at the end of the day, our generosity is directed toward the glory of the one who has been generous to us, our God who has given us hope beyond death.

### ***Ingredient: Mortality***

And death is worth mentioning here.

Because it's not simply that God will provide for us now, right? It's that God has already made provision for us on the other side of death. There is a new name we'll be given, a tent we'll be clothed with; there's a resurrection body, everlasting, that we look forward to.

God hasn't just provided for us; he will provide for us on the other side of death.

And because of our Easter hopes, our resurrection hopes, we're free to do the one thing that we should maybe do more of than others, which is to reflect on the fact that we will die. We're going to die.

The things we right now hold tightly to will fade, will go out of style, will be misplaced, forgotten, and mildew. You won't even be able to sell them on eBay. And so will these bodies of ours. There is an impermanence to the stuff of our lives.

We shouldn't wait until we're dead for our will and testament to be read; we should invite people to see it read in our lives now, and it's seen in our generosity while we're still living.

So a basic ingredient to become a generous person is to soberly understand that death is coming, and as far as our finances go, we should live like it. We need to live richly to the God who is giving us everything.

***Ingredient: Stewardship not Ownership***

And one way to live richly to this God who will heal us from death is to think of ourselves not as owners of what we have, so much as stewards.

A steward was the guardian, the manager, of a household or estate. The steward looked after what the property owner owned, and kept everything running, working, ensured that everyone was playing the part they were supposed to play in the healthy functioning of the estate or the house or the kingdom.

We're stewards of the stuff we have; we're simply not free to look out only for our interests, but as Paul reminds us, we're to look out for the interests of others, just like Jesus did.

Jesus shares a parable in Matthew 25 about a wealthy man who leaves his property in the hands of servants, stewards,

and gives them various amounts of “Talents” to watch over.

This is a financial parable, by the way. A Talent was about a lifetime’s worth of cash. A lifetime’s worth. Think of all you have earned, and all you will earn, and being given five times that, then two times that, and to one of us, we “only” get one lifetime’s worth of money to watch over.

Most of us know this story; the servant who was given only one Talent, one lifetime’s worth of money, buried it, out of fear of the wealthy master. The other two doubled their money--and the master rewarded them both the same for their hard efforts “Enter into the Joy of your Lord.”

The steward who buried his cash--he got kicked out of the estate, tossed into “the outer darkness where men weep and wail.” He was told that he at least should have stuck it in a bank and gathered some interest.

We use this parable to talk about the ways we shouldn’t waste the gifts “talents” that God has given us, right? But if we’re going to use this parable that way, we should be talking about money.

Our Lord is full of joy, and has given every one of us a lifetime amount of cash, right? Our own, personal, lifetime amount of cash. We can hide it, check on it now and then to make sure it’s there, watch as those around us use theirs in ways pleasing to our Lord. Or we can be one of the ones who enter into the joy of our master by doing good with what we’ve been given.

So one ingredient in becoming a generous person is to begin to think of ourselves as stewards, and what we “have” is really God’s property that we’re meant to steward well.

We can’t, as it is explained in a financial parable that Jesus gives, hide it for reasons that have nothing to do with God’s desires.

### ***Ingredient: Want***

A couple of times Jesus points out that those who have been forgiven much are the most grateful. This is just a mathematical statement, right? And he’s talking about sin; those of us who are most aware of the rotten things we’ve done, and most aware of the fact that God has forgiven those things, are most likely respond with thanksgiving.

But there’s a parallel financial truth that accompanies this, which is that those of us who have been most in financial need, most broke, most poverty-stricken, are likely to be those most grateful when we find ourselves not in need any longer, stable, with an abundance.

I honestly think that at least one way to discover thankfulness for some sort of financial stability is experiencing poverty, want. It isn’t necessary; but it’s helpful.

Now: should we put ourselves in positions of poverty? Create some sort of artificial poverty for ourselves, so that we can experience want? I don’t know. Remember that Paul, when he talks about being generous to the Church, says, ““Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard

pressed, but that there might be equality.“ “

We can do other things, though: We can do is create boundaries in the expansion of our wealth. We can decide, if we get a raise, not to adjust our standard of living to this new cash flow. These things may or may not be possible. We can decide to choose periods of financial limitation, in order to give more, the same way Paul calls married couples to choose periods of sexual limitation as an act of faith, so that they can better devote themselves to prayer.

The goal of exercises like these is to create in us an attitude like Paul's. He's writing to the Philippians, who he's thanking for a financial gift that they've given to him, the context is cash, here, which has been a great help to him; he's so thankful for it, right? But he says to them:

*“I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me [seen in the cash you've sent]. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Phil 4:10-13.*

If we only know what it means to be well fed & live in plenty, I don't know if we can experience the dependance upon the Lord's strength that Paul talks about here. It seems like we

inevitably slide into dependance upon our plenty. So we who do have might want to creatively explore ways to self-limit our “plenty” now and then.

So this ingredient might be called self-limitation, or remembering lean times of want in our lives. It’s another basic ingredient in a generous life. It takes faithful creativity, of course, but it's no small thing.

One more this morning, out of the many we could mention:

***Ingredient: thankfulness***

Even stewards get to buy themselves clothes, right? We are on the way to Resurrection and world without pain. Times of want have given way to times of plenty, and we have all had enough to at least get us here this morning. If we tried to write down the answered prayers in our lives our hands would cramp.

When Paul summarizes the Christian life in Colossians, and says “whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” He is trying to say that our lives should be thankful ones.

This ingredient of thankfulness is one of the most important in a generous life. If you haven't set aside a moment to remember what you have to be grateful for, it's time.

***A Generous Life***

And so if we take these things, if we could, if we wanted:



**...examine our finances, resolving to give some portion of them,  
...notice, remember, and recite all the things God has done for us financially,  
...remember that death is not our end; but we cannot take our money with us,  
...consider ourselves stewards not owners over what we have,  
...choose to create boundaries in our financial lives,  
...and give thanks**

If we can take these things, mix them in equal measure, and practice them--like a golf swing, like a game on our smart phones, like a musical chord--over the course of our lifetimes, or this week--then we will become generous people. We will. We won't be able to help ourselves, I think.

We'll become people who really are "rich toward God"--with our finances, and in all things.

### ***How does Sunday Morning fit into a generous life?***

We can talk about what the offering basket--what giving to Smoky Row--"does" to us or for us, can't we? It does give us a chance to give, so we can practice that self-examination thing. It does force us, even for an awkward second, to think about financial giving of some amount or another.

But let me speak really frankly for a second about what it seems to me the offering really does, at least for us.

***What the Offering Does:***

In many ways, it maintains all that institutional stuff that we talked about last week. And I'm talking to us, so it makes sense to talk about our institutional stuff. It keeps our buildings and grounds rolling; it positions our staff to manage their oversight and the programming that's related to what we do with ourselves. It unites us in the shared role we play as a congregation for all those who interact with us. It enables our programming, our partnerships, our ministries—all the work we do together for each other, and for the community around us.

If you didn't hear last week's message, please, please go to [smokyrow.org](http://smokyrow.org) and listen to it or read it. Or let me print it out for you. I don't often ask that, you know, because it feels so...weird. And I don't want to imply that 2017 is all down hill from here, but last week's message was really, really important for us to get a sense of our recent triumphs and the future challenges that we have together as a congregation.

An institution may or may not care for its own; but a church does. And so the money that we put in our offering baskets also goes to caring for one another when needs arrive in our lives--if we, of course, can risk sharing our neediness and receiving the care.

The truth is, most of us do want to house and supply the Food Pantry, most of us do love the fact that we have a voice in our neighborhood and we are doing for the Lord great things for our neighbors. Most of us believe in the ways we're able to leverage all the institution-side of the church

while still caring about each other. We do daydream about all the things we'll do in the coming years, and enjoy the things we do in the present, with the resources we have as both the church and the institution we are. We do want to provide for each other, in the caring ways we do.

So the money in our offering basket's goes to the maintenance and promotion of God's Kingdom, through the programs that we do, and the staff that we support--myself included. Our interests are internal and external; focusing on caring for ourselves and others.

My guess is that for those of us who grown up being a part of a church, have seen our elders model to us financial giving to a congregation, that we are simply more likely to lean into this as a primary way we practice generous living. For those of us who have come to Christ's Church more recently, it's my guess that we may be less likely to see the Church as a primary way we practice generosity. We've come in the side door, you know, when it comes to this. And yet: Our work as Smoky Row is meaningful, practical, measurable, and bears witness to the God who sustains each of us in all our ways. It's worth us to consider how we can, in turn, sustain the work God is doing through Smoky Row.

Smoky Row will need patrons in the coming years. You see that right? We'll need generous people who can give generously financially as well as in other ways. Some of us can be those patrons; some of us cannot. I get that. But what the offering basket does is invite each of us to consider how we will financially unite around the work we do together, how we will care for the staff we have, and position them to

achieve, for us, work we couldn't do on our own, but very much appreciate being done.

Being financially generous to Smoky Row is critical for us as an institution to survive, totally necessary. And while our financial needs are very large, frankly, our impact and role in the community, our influence and voice in the lives of those who care for others alongside us, and our witness to the love of God are far, far greater than our needs. Each time that basket goes around, every obstacle to a generous life pinches us, and we're invited, whether we put something in or not, to reflect on how we ourselves bless the world through Smoky Row, and the institution our cash nurtures, and that's a gift.

### ***Conclusions:***

But being financially generous to Smoky Row, it comes out of a generous life, right? We see that, don't we? If we're financially--what's the opposite of generous? Probably something like the opposite of those ingredients I mentioned earlier--distrusting, unreflective, ungrateful, maybe deluding ourselves about our mortality, living without financial boundaries--if we're these things, we're not going to start giving money to Smoky Row all of a sudden.

I care that we give of our finances to Smoky Row, put stuff in the offering basket, I do: Without it, I lose my part in the blessing we together are to our neighbors and each other, and that is...it's special to me. But I care so much more that it is just part of what we do out of our generous lives. I care so much more that I am a part of a generous people.

And I am. I know that. I'm proud of us. We are small, and yet beyond just what we give to Smoky Row, I hear about all that we do with our money out in the wide world, all we do to support our families and friends in need, all we do to bear witness to God's own providence. It's...just awesome.

We live in a world of baskets that are going around, you know? The obstacles to a generous life are great. I'm grateful for the ways we overcome them, and I'm grateful for the financial support we give to what we do together. If, after prayer, we discover that God is calling us to financially support Smoky Row more than we do, well then...let's lean into that.