

Defying Gravity

“Breaking Free”

[Luke 15:11-24](#)

Black holes are among the strangest things in the universe. According to NASA, “a black hole is a place in space where gravity pulls so much that even light cannot get out.” If a star gets too close to a black hole, it will be ripped to shreds.

We are told that the Milky Way galaxy contains some 100 billion stars. According to physicists, that means there can be about 100 million black holes in our galaxy; however, only about a dozen have been identified so far. But, don't be alarmed. Luckily, our planet is nowhere these massive invisible vacuums cleaners of space. The nearest one is several thousand light years away, which is far enough away to not have an effect on Earth.

As there are black holes in space, there are financial black holes which exist in our lives. Although they are invisible, we can detect them by measuring the distortion they create in our personal universe. Money and the things it buys can produce a field of gravity so strong that many people simply cannot escape from its death grip. Today's scripture reading tells us about a person who found himself in such a state of no escape.

The parable of the prodigal son is one that all of us are probably familiar with. We know about the brash younger son who demands his inheritance early and receives it from his father. He leaves his hometown with his gifted fortune and winds up in a foreign land, far away from home. There, he squanders his wealth by living an extravagant life style.

The once-rich but now-poor young man eventually has to return home. He knows what will deservedly await him is his father's wrath, but he is too hungry and too desperate to continue carrying on in the foreign land. So he decides to go back. As he is on his journey home, he thinks of ways to beg for his father's forgiveness, of how he will propose living at his father's house as one of his hired servants, considering the shame he had brought to his whole family.

So, can you imagine how shocked he must have been when he saw his father running toward him, not with anger written on his face, but love? It was unheard of in 1st century Israel for an older man of his stature to be running anywhere. Doing so would have required raising up the long tunic he would have been wearing. And back then, baring one's legs in public was considered socially humiliating and shameful. Yet, this father was running! Instead of looking away in disgust, he was running toward the son who had surely brought only shame and ridicule to him and his family!

This was just the beginning of what would be an extravagant welcome home. Soon, the son was showered with gifts and a party. What he had expected upon his return was punishment. What he received instead

was a kindness he did not deserve, a forgiveness he did not merit, and a love that he did not anticipate. His father's generosity gave him new life.

What sort of impact do you think the experience of receiving such a full welcome and unconditional acceptance had on the younger son? I believe it transformed him. Through the father's love, the once selfish young boy became a new man who could look to the needs of others instead of focusing only on his own. Having lived the extravagant lifestyle in the foreign land, he knew that happiness did not await him there. It allowed him to recognize that being at his father's house and doing the will of his father was what would bring him peace and joy. The grace he encountered at home must have left him kinder and more gracious. And perhaps this is most important of all -- having been the undeserving recipient of his father's welcome, he could honor his father by passing his generosity onto others, thereby becoming an active participant in his redemption.

Just as the pull of financial gravity was evident in the prodigal son's life, we too can see and feel it operating in our own. Just think about what we pray for. Often, our prayers to God are about things *we* hope to receive. We ask for guidance to make the right decisions, for good health and recovery from illnesses, for comfort for our grieving hearts, for jobs and money to pay the bills, for healing to come over broken relationships. The list goes on.

No matter how well intended, our desire is often to receive from God rather than to serve God. How often do we pray about how we can reach those who do not know Christ, how we can feed the hungry, how we can comfort those who mourn, how we can care for the sick, house the homeless, and visit the imprisoned? Highly likely, the ratio of "seeking to receive prayers" to "seeking to serve prayers" is much higher on the side of the former.

There is a moment of epiphany for Christ-followers when we recognize the difference between merely being a beneficiary of God's kingdom and being an active participant in God's kingdom. When you find yourself submitting your kingdom of "me, myself, and I" to the kingdom of God, good things begin to happen. Actually, this orientation toward God's kingdom is life-changing. It creates an identity rooted in generosity. Generous people see themselves, their lives, and their purpose differently than people whose lives are weighed down by financial gravity. Generous people are more interested in what they can give than in what they can get.

When we become participants in the kingdom of God, we become *stewards*. A steward is a person who manages someone else's property. Stewards have broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or how a household is run, but they know that their primary role is to act as an agent, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. We, Christians are stewards of a gift God gave us, a life with talents, strengths, and resources. Yet, sadly, we do not truly act as God's stewards. Financial gravity pulls us to a distorted belief that we are the sole owners of what we possess and that we can use it to support the lifestyle we desire. We submit to no one when financial gravity gets a hold of our lives.

And, most people in the United States live like owners rather than stewards. If I am an owner, all that I have is mine. In their book, The Paradox of Generosity, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson found that “very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually tend to lead to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way” (The Paradox of Generosity, p. 99).

According to their research, 44.8% of Americans said that they gave 0 percent of their income to any charitable purpose. Yes, zero, not even a dollar. They said no to Girl Scout and Boy Scouts fundraisers, school orchestra or band collections. They ignored the sound of the Salvation Army Christmas kettles, And of course, they gave nothing to the church.

The report went on to say this. Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the United States is offered by about 15% of the population that is willing to give away more than 2% of their income. (The Paradox of Generosity, p. 103)

Maybe, you are thinking now: ‘But, many people give their time, and time is valuable.’ Yes, time is valuable. Volunteerism is extremely important to charitable organizations. The ministries of our church depend on the time our volunteers give. Many of you give your time and labor for various ministries, from ongoing works to one-time tasks. Think about just Sunday. How many people do you think have given and are giving their time for this hour of worship, Sunday School, and fellowship afterwards? I counted over 40 people, and I have not yet added the choir, yet! Some tasks, like ushering and greeting, and serving as the liturgist and acolytes are visible, but there are many other tasks that are done behind the scenes, like refilling oil in the altar candles and making copies of the worship bulletin and stuffing them with inserts. I cannot thank you enough for your dedicated service to our ministries.

However, in the same study that Smith and Davidson conducted, more than 76 percent of the people self-reporting said that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That is 3 out of 4 people!

Lack of generosity is not about resources, but about identity. Stewards understand that their identity is not as owners. They manage the money and assets with the thought of pleasing the true owner. In order to become a steward of financial resources, one has to accept the challenge to set aside an amount of money to invest in the work of God’s kingdom.

As a way to get serious about their desire to participate in God’s work, many Christians pursue generosity through proportional giving to their income with a tithe, or one tenth of their income, as the goal. For these Christian believers, tithing is a practice of giving the first and best of what they have, not the last or what is left over.

Giving a tithe was a practice God gave to the people of Israel, and the money people gave was used to support the worship life of Israel and take care of the most vulnerable people in their society. Why would God

ask God's people to do this? It is possible that the tithe was requested not for God's sake, but for their sake? Could it be that the act was intended to be a spiritual discipline which enabled the participants to better see and expand God's kingdom?

And, it is for the same reason that I am now inviting you to this biblical practice of giving a tithe. The practice of proportional giving calls us to offer our very best for God's kingdom as a way to live into our identity as God's stewards.

How does the practice of generosity change us? Let's watch this video of Ms. Margaret. She talks about how important giving was to her life and the joy she found in giving. (Video #2: "Ms. Margaret.") Ms. Margaret shaped the life of her family through generosity, and you can do the same. The only way to gain her joy is to take on her practice.

As Christians, we are called to be stewards of all that we have, from our possessions and money to our time and abilities. God calls us to be faithfully employed in God's service. Yet, all too often, financial gravity restricts our stewardship. We hold on tight rather than letting go...

Do you love God and desire to follow Christ and seek the will of the Holy Spirit in your life, but find yourself not having made the move from being a recipient of God's grace to being a generous participant in God's kingdom work? It's time. It's time for you to make that move. Do not wait till you think you can do it. It will never come because it is not something you can do on your own but with God's help. So, pray for God's help. I can tell you this from my own experience: Actually, it is easier to make that move when you do not have much. The more you have, the harder it gets.

So, let this gospel message you've heard challenge you, that you will pray about it. May this gospel message bother you that you will wake up in the middle of the night and pray about it. I pray that God will give you courage to take a leap of faith with your spiritual practice of giving, so that you will break free from the bondage of financial gravity and experience true joy, peace, and happiness God wants you to have. Amen

Learning how to align your life for generosity is our next subject, and Mr. Michael Pope, our Conference lay leader will be our guest speaker.