

“Givers and Takers”

A Sermon based on Luke 2:21-32, Mark 14:22-24, John 3:16-17

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They say there are two types of people in this world: givers and takers. Givers view the world with a mindset of abundance; they think to themselves, “There is plenty for everyone.” By contrast, takers view the world with a mindset of scarcity; they think to themselves, “There isn’t enough for everyone so I’d better make sure I get enough for me before somebody else gets it.”

The contrast between a mentality of abundance and a mentality of scarcity was very well illustrated in that short little video shown to us by my friend Cesie after she preached the sermon about stewardship for us on December 8. Recall that it had to do with a woman who was known for always helping others in her community. Since she herself needed a new car, she started saving money. After saving \$5000, however, she met a poor widow who needed money badly. In response to the widow’s need, the helpful woman gave the widow the \$5000 she had saved to buy herself a new car. Now, most of us would think this is foolish: it’s one thing to help others; it’s another thing altogether to give away your last dime when you’re trying to save money for a new car. Yet this shows that we are thinking with a mentality of scarcity: I will give to others *only* after I have taken care of myself first! But what happened to that helpful woman who gave away the \$5000 she had been saving to buy herself a new car? When the other people in her community heard what she had done for the poor widow, they got together and raised enough money to buy her a new car—and I mean a *really* new car, not just a car that was new for her, but a brand new car right off the lot, whereas she had been saving to buy another used car since she

knew that a brand new car was way out of her price range. So, then, imagine this: a woman, with little money for herself, gave away all she had saved in order to help someone less fortunate than herself; and, instead of finding herself in even greater need, she was blessed with something she had never dreamed possible: a brand new car that no one else had ever owned before. This is the mentality of abundance that thinks: "I trust that God will provide what I need; hence, when I meet someone else who needs my help, I am ready to give." The story of this helpful woman illustrates the mentality of abundance with great poignancy: she gave away all that she had and yet she was richly rewarded for her generosity.

Sadly, by contrast, I can think of no better illustration of a mentality of scarcity than my own brother. Maybe I've already told you about him. My brother is an extremely wealthy man; indeed, he lives in a house that was once owned by former President Ford and his wife Betty. Yet, for all his wealth, my brother is deeply insecure. Not only does he live in an enclosed community watched over by guards, but he also admitted to me that he is stockpiling guns for the day that the poor people of this country rise up in revolt against the rich people of this country. Even though, for him, \$5000 would be a drop in the bucket, like 5 cents for the rest of us, he wouldn't ever offer to help to anyone in need. He thinks poor people are lazy and don't want to work. I've met a lot of people like my brother; they pride themselves on their wealth but, in truth, they are miserable. For one thing, they live in fear that someone is going to take their wealth away from them. On top of that, they are trapped by their own selfishness. My brother has no larger purpose in life than to accrue even more wealth so that he can enjoy the sensual pleasures and material comforts that wealth makes possible. Yet he has nothing to shield him from his own vulnerability and mortality. One of these days he's going to die, just like the rest of

us, and then, if he's reflective at all, he will have to ask himself what his life really amounted to in the end. I'd much rather be that helpful woman who gave away her last \$5000 than my brother who's as rich as King Midas. You see, takers aren't really happy people; the givers are the happy ones. That was the moral of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*; Ebenezer Scrooge was wealthy but not happy. It was only when he ceased being a taker and became a giver that Scrooge learned for the first time what real joy is. The takers live in fear of scarcity, whereas the givers live out of a sense of abundance and have great joy in giving. What a paradox! What *uncommon* sense this is!

From the Christian perspective, takers are missing out on the real purpose of living. They falsely think that their lives consist in how much they can get from others, how much they can hoard for themselves. But a life based on greed and selfishness is not a real human life. As Winston Churchill so correctly observed: "We make a living by what we get; but we make a life by what we give." The purpose of making a living is not only that we can provide sufficiently for the needs of ourselves and our families; it is also that we may be in a position to help others when they need help. Remember my friend Bruce who died so suddenly and tragically this fall? When he learned that our church needed another \$1000 to finish repairs on the parsonage, he promptly pulled out his checkbook and, without giving it a second thought, he wrote us a check for \$1000. Also, when he heard about Susan Cottrell's ministry to parents of gay children, he sought her out in order to make a substantial financial gift to her ministry. Although Bruce had done well for himself financially, as a Christian he understood that the purpose of his wealth was to share it with others, not to hoard it or to guard it fearfully. Whereas my brother asks, "Why should I give *my money* to others?" Bruce asked the question as John Wesley formulated it:

“How much of *God’s money* should I keep for myself?” I wish my brother could have met Bruce and had a conversation with him about the difference between making a living and making a life!

Psychological studies have shown that selfish people are usually people who do not love themselves very much; they feel there is something missing inside of them and thus they are constantly trying to compensate for this lack inside by taking from others. I once worked with a woman who suffered from such a severe psychological deficit. I had never before met anyone with an inferiority complex of this intensity. It distorted all her interactions with others since she was constantly trying to draw attention to herself and her own achievements. Every conversation ended up becoming a conversation about herself. It was as though she were consumed by a black hole inside of herself that had been created by never having been truly loved by others. Yet in her incessant efforts to win the love and admiration of others, she only succeeded in pushing others farther away. No one liked her. Hence, she was trapped in a vicious cycle: wanting desperately to be loved and admired by others, she was unable to act in ways that might lead others to like her and appreciate her. Although I disliked her as much as everyone else did, I felt truly sorry for her. It was obvious to me that her self-centeredness came from a deep sense of her own unlovability. But there was nothing any of us could do to free her from her own self-absorption. The surprising about life is that it is only when we can let go of our preoccupation with ourselves that we can experience the blessings life has to offer us, including the love of others; only after we have stopped trying to secure our lives by hoarding wealth can we perceive the world as a place of abundance instead of as a place of scarcity. It is only by letting go of ourselves that we can find ourselves. Again, what a paradox! What *uncommon* sense!

From this angle, we can approach the meaning of Christmas anew. What do we learn about the character of God at Christmas? Is God a giver or a taker? Clearly, the message of Christmas is that God is a giver, not a taker. John 3:16 is probably the most famous passage in the entire Bible. Note what it says: “For God so loved the world that he *gave*...” We know that the entire verse reads: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” But I think we should pause for a moment over the word “gave”: “God *gave*...” Giving is an expression of love. Indeed, giving is love. “God so loved the world that he *gave*...” God gave because God loved and, as an expression of God’s love, God gave what was most precious: God gave of Godself to the world. God is clearly a giver. *That* is the message of Christmas.

Because we have been loved by God, because God has generously given to us, we too are *enabled* to live our lives as givers. I deliberately say “enabled,” not “required.” No one is forced to give gifts. A gift that is coerced is not a genuine gift. A gift has to be given freely. It is also true that we can receive a gift without being truly grateful. But a person who receives a gift with a lack of gratitude is a taker. A person who is not moved to gratitude upon receiving a gift has not really grasped what a gift is. But gratitude for gifts received turns us into givers of gifts ourselves. Givers are people who appreciate what has been given to them. As a result, givers *want* to give to others. They are *enabled*, not required, to become givers. Having known the goodness of gifts given to them, they want to share this goodness by giving gifts to others.

Our Christian love for others is rooted in God’s love for us. To know God in the Christian sense means to know ourselves as having been loved by God, as having been the recipients of God’s generosity to us. Those of us who know ourselves as loved by God are thus freed from insecurities about our self-worth and, as a result, we are free to be there for others.

Like the generous woman in that video who gave her last \$5000 to help someone poorer than herself, we are freed up from selfishness and fear of scarcity. Like Jesus who fed five thousand hungry people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, we Christians know that in God's good world there is plenty for everybody. It's a wonderful feeling to be freed from selfishness! It's a wonderful feeling to give to others; yet many people in our society have yet to realize this truth. Soon after I was appointed to be your minister, Diana took me out to lunch and we were talking about the fact that there are so many unhappy people in our society who don't understand that true happiness comes from giving of oneself to others. They don't understand what Churchill understood: "Whereas we make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give." So many people in our society want a job or a career that will make it possible for them to earn lots of money; but they don't realize that the purpose of money is not only to take care of oneself and one's family but also to help others in need. *The purpose of money is not so that you can eat, drink, and be merry while others are starving!* So many people in our society are unhappy because they have never found the love they desire; yet they fail to realize that love isn't only about receiving, it's about giving as well. Love is about giving of oneself to another.

Healthy people, that is, spiritually and emotionally mature people, understand that we human beings have a need to give love to others and not only to receive it. Whereas children just want to *get* gifts from others, adults—that is, real adults—know that giving gifts to others often brings the deepest joy. Just imagine what our society, our world, would be like if most people were givers, not takers, if success was equated with *selflessness* and selfishness was seen as failure. But as I said: we really can't tell people that they *ought* to be givers if they have never been given unto; we can't expect selfish people to become loving people if all they have ever

experienced in life is selfishness and a lack of love from others. The givers are those who know that they have been richly given unto by others. They have thus have been *enabled* to be generous to others

A posture of giving to others means we want to make a difference in the lives of other people. Sometimes I receive notes and letters from my former students who write to tell me what a difference I made in their lives through my teaching and mentoring of them. I am always deeply gratified to receive such notes and letters. But I'm gratified not because I need praise or need to have my ego massaged; rather, I'm gratified because of the joy that comes from knowing I made a difference to the quality of somebody else's life as a result of having given myself to them. I need no greater reward than that. I will probably die with only a few dollars in my bank account, but I don't mind at all. I know I am a truly wealthy man because I made a real difference to someone else's life when they needed someone to be there for them.

Jesus' entire life was one of giving to others, even though he himself was very poor. He had virtually no possessions of his own such as a house or a car or a 401K. Yet in everything he did and in everything he said, he was representing on earth God's generosity in heaven. As God gave Jesus to the world, so Jesus gave of himself to others. From the manger in Bethlehem to the cross in Jerusalem, Jesus's whole life was summed up in the words that Mark uses to narrate Jesus' actions at the Last Supper: referring to the bread and the wine, which symbolized his body and blood, twice Mark says: "He *gave* it to them" (Mark 14:22-23). And before giving them the bread and wine as signs of giving his own life to them, Mark says that Jesus gave thanks to God. Note that we even use the phrase "to *give* thanks" and we have a holiday called "Thanksgiving."

Jesus lived out of deep gratitude for what God had given him. He *gave thanks* to God and *gave himself* to others. Like God, Jesus was a giver, not a taker. And he enabled his followers to be givers, not takers.

The gospel is the good news that God has first loved us, and so we too are *enabled* to love others. The gospel is the good news that God has abundantly given to us, and so we too are *enabled* to give abundantly to others, thus fulfilling our true purpose as human beings created in the image of God who is a giver, not a taker. The only thing that can possibly change selfish people into unselfish people, or turn takers into givers, is when they themselves have an experience of being really loved by God so that they too are enabled to let go of their mentality of scarcity and thus are enabled to live out of the mentality of abundance of which Jesus spoke when he said: “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Abundant life: that’s what we all want, but takers will never find what they’re looking for until they can accept the gift that God wants to give to them and become givers themselves. For an abundant life is a life of giving: “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.”

Old Simeon had been waiting for God to send the messiah, God’s greatest gift to Israel. The Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the messiah come. When Joseph and Mary brought their son Jesus into the temple, Simeon knew that God had kept his promise. So he took the child up into his arms and blessed God, saying: “Now let your servant depart in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared for all people...A light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel” (Luke 2:29-32, paraphrased). Simeon had been waiting all his life for this Christmas gift; and once he had received it, he could die in

peace. For he knew that God was a giver, and that, in Jesus, God had given his most precious gift, not only to Israel but to all the world. That's how unselfish and generous Israel's God turned out to be; the messiah of Israel is also the savior of the entire world! There is no human being, whether Jew or Gentile, to whom God does not want to give this gift. Whether we are givers or takers, there is none of us whom God does not love, even if the takers don't yet realize how much God loves them, even if they don't yet realize how much God has given to them and wants to give them an abundant life.

Today we bring forward our pledges to the church for this coming year. As most of you already know, our little church needs to get back on a solid financial footing if we are to continue serving God and God's children in this place. This is an opportunity to give. If you have experienced God's grace in your life, if you have received God's gift to you, then here is an opportunity to express your gratitude to God. Our church does not exist to make a profit. Our church seeks not to take, but only to give. We seek to give thanks to God and we seek to *give notice* to all of God's children that God is a giver who wants to give them a gift, indeed, the greatest gift of all: abundant life, a life free of self-preoccupation and selfishness, a life of openness to God and to all others. Just as God gives freely, so does the church. And if it should turn out that we will not be able to sustain our little church financially in the long term, like the helpful woman in that video we too will give our last \$5000 helping those in need. For, like God, *we want to give* since that is the real purpose of life and the hallmark of an abundant life, even if our giving, like that of Jesus, means that we will have to give up our very life. But in this question, as in every other question, we live by faith alone, faith in the God who is a giver, who

has richly given to us in the past and whom we trust will continue to give to us as we move into the future. Amen.