

“Jesus Was Right”

Acts 20:35

Pastor Charlie Berthoud | Sermon for Sunday, October 10, 2021

I got an email this week that made me very happy. A member of this church wrote:

I am so enjoying the seven-week challenge of “Getting Back on Track,” although most of them for me have been through YouTube. I’m “5 for 5” with attendance so far; I have created a chart to keep track of my attempts for 5 daily prayers; and my country of interest is Guatemala.

We are in week six of our seven-week series, and I’ve been encouraging everyone to read *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*, by Adam Hamilton. We have copies in the church office, and we’ve mailed them to several people—to learn about the five practices of the Christian life, with the hope that together we could get back on track spiritually, emotionally, personally.

Last week with World Communion Sunday, we added a practice: loving our global neighbors.

More important than reading the book is implementing the practices and growing in the Christian life. So I’m glad to hear from many of you how you are doing that—putting these practices into practice!

Specifically, inspired by the book we have invited you to:

- Join us for worship these seven weeks
- Pray five times a day
- Read/study five minutes a day
- Do five acts of kindness per week
- Learn five things about another country

Today the practice is giving. We've already introduced the concept with the wonderful song, "God Whose Giving Knows No Ending," which conveys the simple and profound message that God gives to us, and we are called to give to others.

Our scripture reading today is just one verse. Listen for God's word from the apostle Paul, in the book of Acts.

In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

That was a very short scripture reading. I want to share one more with you.

The fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness,

gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

(Revised Standard Version, 1946)

That comes from Galatians 5 and it's one of the first Bible verses I memorized, over thirty years ago, from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, popular in the middle and late 20th century.

One helpful hint to memorizing was that the first three on the list are one syllable, the next three are two, and the final three have three syllables.

I've always loved this imagery of a fruitful life, a spirit-filled life, a life that is getting back on track. These are good words to ponder.

But soon after I memorized those words, new translations of the Bible came out, and some biblical scholars came to believe that Greek word agathosune (**ἀγαθωσύνη**), previously translated as goodness, is better translated as generosity. So the passage has become:

The fruit of the spirit is

love joy peace

patience kindness **generosity**

gentleness faithfulness self-control

(New Revised Standard Version, 1989)

Unfortunately, this messed up the 1-2-3 syllable rhythm, but that's OK because generosity is a good word.

The fourth of the five essential practices in *The Walk* is "GIVE" but it could just as easily be **generosity**.

God is generous with us—giving us the gift of life and a beautiful world to live in and blessings every day. We are called to be generous in return.

Adam Hamilton does an excellent job in his chapter on GIVING, focusing on learning to be thankful and generous and on discovering a life of meaning and purpose.

If you haven't read any of the book yet, you can jump right in with this chapter.

Jesus had a lot to say about money and possessions—more so than any other topic. Jesus says:

- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. (Matthew 6.19-20)
- You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6.24)
- How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (Mark 10.23)
- Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. (Luke 12.15)

Adam Hamilton writes:

"Jesus made it clear that our relationship with money can either sabotage our spiritual life or deepen and support it." (p. 88)

Sabotage or support. The choice is ours.

Jesus shared hard teachings, but Jesus was right. A healthy relationship to money and wealth is vital to our spirituality.

We welcome new members today, and the new members' questions ask people about turning away from sin and evil and turning to God and God's ways. Every day we have choices to make about how to use our time, our talents, and our treasures.

We could use money for great things or foolish things. We make decisions all the time. Sabotage or support.

In the book, Adam Hamilton goes on to talk about tax returns, with the fascinating concept of a "tax return selfie"—meaning that our tax returns and reports of charitable giving and how we spend our money tell us a lot about our spiritual life and what we hold important.

Statistics tell us that the wealthier people are, the smaller the percentage of charitable giving. Have you ever looked at your charitable giving in terms of percentages?

Some churches emphasize the idea of tithing, the biblical teaching of giving 10% of one's income to serve God—through the church and elsewhere. There are actually churches that ask prospective members to share their tax returns, to show their income and giving, to make sure people are being generous.

Let me be clear that we are nowhere close to doing that here at Covenant! But I do encourage you to at least consider what percentage of your income you are giving away and to prayerfully reflect on your finances and spending habits.

I've read that on average Christians give about 2-3% of their income to churches and more to other good causes.

Have you ever thought about your tax returns, or your checkbook, or

your Venmo account in terms of how you are loving your neighbor?

The focus isn't on guilt or obligation. The focus instead is on recognizing how we have been blessed, being thankful for what we have, and really learning to love our neighbors and discover deeper meaning in life through generosity.

We've probably all had experiences of giving—money or time or whatever—that made us feel really good. We've felt the truth of Jesus' words, the blessing of giving.

But it's an uphill battle to become generous. We are inundated with messages about getting more for ourselves. Adam Hamilton notes:

We live in a society where every voice around us is telling us just the opposite of Jesus' teaching—that our lives in fact do revolve around an abundance of stuff we own. (p. 91)

With all the noise around us, with all the distractions, with all that could sabotage our good intentions, this is where we need to integrate the five practices

- We make worship of God a priority, with less focus on our stuff
- We pray for the needs of the world around us, along with our own
- We study God's word which teaches us to love our neighbors
- We listen for God to speak to us above the noise
- We look for ways to give and share

The goal of all these practices is for us to become more loving, more kind, more generous, more alive. The goal is to get back on track and discover a life of meaning and purpose.

Adam Hamilton encourages people to do five acts of giving per month. I'm glad to be at a church that is filled with generous people.

This very month, we are:

- collecting books for prisoners,
- sharing food with hungry people,
- writing notes to kids at Stephens Elementary,
- and making plans for an auction to support education in Guatemala.

On an ongoing basis we are:

- Sharing tens of thousands of dollars with mission partners near and far
- Making our building available for neighborhood and community groups
- Taking time to care for people in all sorts of need

This month is our annual stewardship campaign, when we ask members and friends to prayerfully consider ways to give in support of our ministry in the following year.

Packets were mailed this week to members and friends, asking people to make pledges in support of our common ministry for 2022. And we're asking people to fill out our Serving Survey, to see what skills and gifts we have together, to make the church stronger, to make God's love more real.

To help us plan in a timely manner, we hope you could turn in that info by Sunday, October 24, which is Generosity Sunday. But actually, any Sunday is generosity Sunday. Any day is a good day to be generous.

Being generous with church and your pledge is great. It's important. Thank you.

But more important is being generous in your daily living—taking the time to be kind and patient, to help someone in need, to do a good deed that no one else knows about, to intentionally do five acts of generosity per month.

Recently I came across a story about someone who has learned the joy of generosity and has become more alive.

Carolyn Collins is a school janitor near Atlanta. One morning several years ago as she was taking out trash, she heard someone knocking. It was two siblings from a homeless family, hoping to get into school early. Carolyn got them some food, and that day the Giving Closet was born. Since then she has distributed food, clothing, shoes, toothpaste, shampoo, deodorant and more to hundreds of needy students.

Along with some donations, she has spent her own money every month—and remember, she’s a janitor, not a CEO—to support kids in need. She’s even helped kids with clothes for the prom.

She has spent hundreds of dollars of her own money, but she doesn’t seem to mind. The articleⁱ quoted her: “When I tell them, ‘I love you,’ and I see the smiles on their faces, that’s pure joy. Everybody needs somebody. Seeing that they know they are loved, that’s my reward.”

Jesus was right: It is more blessed to give than receive.



ⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/09/04/this-school-janitor-has-been-quietly-been-giving-homeless-students-clothes-soap-and-more-from-her-care-closet/>