Love Generously: The Choice Cuts
1 Cor. 13:3

As we prepare ourselves for the Advent Season, we will be taking a break from our Believe Series to focus on one of our core values here at Colonial, and that is our value called, “Love Generously.” Before we get started, I would like to map out the next few weeks in regards to our schedule. This morning I will begin our series with a message entitled, “Straight Talk About Giving.” Then, next week, we will be blessed to hear from Desiree Monize who created and directs a ministry that we partner with called “Avenue of Life,” an organization that embodies what it means to Love Generously. The following Sunday, Dec. 9, will feature our annual Walk to the Manger service, where we will have the opportunity to consider the generosity of our Father when he sent Jesus into the world as our Savior, and we’ll have the opportunity to respond generously as we bring gifts for children in our community as well as financial gifts to our local and global partners. I will deliver two more messages in this series on Dec. 16th and Dec. 23rd, and then wrap up the series on Christmas Eve. The campus pastors will be providing the message on Dec. 30th, and then I will resume our Believe Series beginning on January 6th. So…that is where we are going. Now, let us turn our attention to this concept that we hold dear at Colonial, and it is our core value called, “Love Generously.”

When the Elders sought the Lord in an effort to articulate our core values here at Colonial, “Love Generously” was right at the top of the list. Here are the words we associated with that value: “We love because God first loved us. We love through tangible expressions of generosity and care that bless people and bring glory to God.” The reason we chose to include “Love Generously” among our core values is because the history of this church…the legacy of our influence over the past 60 years, is one of generosity and love. Over the past 60 years, millions of dollars and millions of hours of service have been generously given to bless our city and the world in Jesus’ name. From funding missions overseas, to feeding the hungry in our city…from teaching children about Jesus to caring for orphans and the most vulnerable, Colonial has loved generously to the glory of God! So…as we begin this series, please hear me say that this value is already a significant reality in our congregation, and as your pastor, I am profoundly blessed and encouraged by the loving generosity I often witness in our church. To all those who have given sacrificially of your lives and resources as an expression of God’s love for a hurting world, I want to say thank you and well done! Jesus predicted what we now know is so perfectly true, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.”

Now, you know and I know that the generosity of a local church is often the product of a relatively few very generous people who serve and who give, and then the rest of us who take corporate credit! That’s called the Pareto Principle, or the 80/20 rule. Now, I know that’s harsh, but it’s true, right? We are “very proud” that our church gave $30,000 to help the hurricane victims, but we didn’t give anything at all. We’re “very proud” that our church serves the hungry every third Saturday with our Harvester’s Food Distribution, but we never actually show up to volunteer. We are very proud of our church for giving over $1 million dollars to local and global missions last year, but we chose not to give because we had other financial priorities that
were more pressing. Look…I get it…I truly do. It’s one thing to be part of a generous church; it’s quite another to be a generous person.

So, this morning I would like to directly address the elephant in the room. We know we should be generous, we know we should be loving, we know we should be giving…but when we look at what we give…particularly in proportion to what we keep for ourselves (be it our time, our money, or our energy)…we would be hard-pressed to say that we are generous. In fact, the truth is that most of us are not generous…instead, we are either careless and indulgent, or we are fearful and miserly. Now…if you are a truly generous person…if you live sacrificially and find great joy in giving all that you are and all that you have to bless people and bring glory to God…then you can just tune out for a minute. But for the rest of us, let’s stop with the self-deception. Let’s stop telling ourselves that we are generous when we are actually not. That’s like telling yourself that you are in shape when you haven’t exercised in 5 years! We don’t get into shape by thinking that we are in shape…we get into shape by embracing a disciplined life, which requires effort, intentionality, and a deep level of conviction that being healthy matters. The same is true when it comes to loving generously. We will never love generously if we deceive ourselves into believing that we are already generous when in fact we’re not. So…if you are not generous…but you wish that you were…and you are honest enough to admit it, please join me by raising your hand! Notice that my hand is raised. I’m not generous…I am actually an authority on what it means to be NOT generous because I’m so good at being not generous! Now…I’m more generous than I was…thanks be to God and the work of the Holy Spirit on my stubborn heart…but I need this series as much as anybody, so please know, I am preaching to myself as we go through this series.

So…to get things started, I will briefly unpack three areas: 1) why generosity is difficult for most people including me; 2) what the Bible tells us about generosity and giving; and 3) reimagining generosity.

I. First, why is generosity so difficult for most people? I will give you several reasons:

1. Generosity is NOT in our DNA. In his book entitled, The Generosity Bet, my good friend Bill High writes, For the majority of us, generosity is not something we wake up thinking about each day. It’s just not in our DNA. If there’s any doubt about that, consider two toddlers in a room full of toys. Even though they may have a hundred choices, they will inevitably fight over one toy while staking claim to it with the valiant word of “MINE!” Our very nature seems to crave stuff almost like a security blanket. Being generous does not come naturally for me or for you. So, if we are going to be generous, if we are ever going to find joy in releasing our stuff to bless people and glorify God, that won’t happen naturally…it must happen supernaturally! Generosity ultimately requires a change of heart.

2. Many of us have a serious case of “affluenza” a term popularized by PBS in 1997. Affluenza is defined as “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.” Many of us operate under the worldview
that more is better, when in fact, more is more…more headaches, more maintenance, more debt, more time required of us,…more is more, but more is not necessarily better.

3. We are living beyond our means due to credit cards. In 2017 the average household credit card debt was about $5,000 with the median debt at more than $16,000. 41% of those polled about their credit card debt acknowledged that their debt was due to unnecessary purchases that they could not afford but decided to purchase anyways! 1/3 of Americans pay only the minimum balance due on their credit cards every month, which is why the average American household spends over $900 a year on credit card interest. It’s very difficult to be generous when we are buried in debt. In fact, I read recently that 8/10 people who give generously to their churches are those with no credit card debt. Which is to say, those who carry credit card debts are far less likely to be givers.

4. Many of us have a “scarcity mentality.” A scarcity mentality leads us to believe that there is not enough to go around, so I have to get MINE while I can. I have to look out after my own interests because nobody else is going to. I have to take care of ME first, and if there’s anything left over, maybe I’ll share with others. For those with a scarcity mentality, there is never “enough;” but generosity, by definition, requires an abundance mentality…one that operates from contentment and a desire to share. My dad spent the first 8 years of his life as an orphan, tossed about from one foster home to the next. One could hardly blame him for having a scarcity mentality…which he did…for much of my childhood. My dad had no problem taking the best and first for himself, and so I grew up thinking it was natural to look out after “number one” and let everybody else fend for themselves. My dad has since been transformed by the Holy Spirit, and I’ll tell you about that in a few minutes. But I will confess that I battle a scarcity mentality…that is still my “default” nature…I think it is for a lot of us.

5. We actually believe that we would be generous if we were rich, but since “we’re not rich,” we’re not generous. That is a lie…a big, fat, hairy lie at that. It is a lie I would like to believe, but it is a lie nonetheless. Let me give you a few statistics.

a. If your average household income is $32,400 or greater, you are in the top 1% of the world’s population in terms of annual earnings. That means you earn more money than 99 out of 100 human beings in the world today. That means…almost all of you are rich in comparison to the rest of the world.

b. Studies show that those with greater wealth are less likely to tithe, and more likely to give a smaller percentage of their income for generous causes. Now…does that make sense? No, it doesn’t, but I find it to be the case more often than not. Peter Marshall, who was chaplain of the US Senate for many years, recalls a man who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. The man said to Marshall, “I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly some years ago, but…but now…I am earning $500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give about $50,000!” Marshall reflected on this wealthy man’s dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said, “I can certainly see your problem. Let’s pray about it.” The man agreed. So Marshall bowed his head and prayed with
boldness and authority, “Heavenly Father, I pray that you would reduce this man’s salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe.” (Hamilton, Enough p. 84) Funny…and sad…but funny, right?

c. Forbes undertook a study of billionaires a few years ago. According to the study, there are around 950 billionaires in the world, yet the majority of the billionaires did not give over 9% of their income to charitable causes. (Ibid, p. 84)

d. Consider that, according to the internet, the median income in Johnson County, KS is just over $90,000; in Jackson County, MO it is $51,000; and in Cass County it is $63,000. Given that most of our church members live in one of these three counties, that gives you some perspective when we talk about wealth. And yet did you know that, according to our records, 37% of those families who attended Colonial last year as members or regular attendees gave less than $500 to their church, and 25% of our families gave nothing at all? The amount we have does not dictate generosity…generosity is ultimately a matter of the heart.

6) We often fail to be generous because we are skeptical and untrusting. In other words, we would be generous, but we’re afraid that our giving will not be used properly. We are concerned that our money won’t actually make it to the orphans we want to support; we are afraid the church will squander our tithe on parking lots and power bills when we really want our dollars to go to missionaries; and we are afraid the homeless person will buy alcohol if we give him cash. We are a skeptical generation, and that often contributes to our lack of generosity.

7) Finally, we often fail to be generous because we don’t FEEL generous. I had a conversation with a friend recently who insisted that biblical giving was always supposed to be cheerful. He felt that my teaching about tithing was guilt inducing and felt like legalism. I get that…I truly do, and if my comments about tithing a few weeks ago made you feel guilty, please forgive me. I don’t mean to make you feel guilty or to lay a heavy burden on your heart. As Christians we no longer live under the legal obligations of the law; we are those who live under grace, and even Paul writes in 1 Cor. 9:7, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” I totally agree that we should all be cheerful givers. There’s only one problem with waiting to feel cheerful about giving: if I wait to give until I feel cheerful about it, I may never give at all. How many of you know what I’m talking about? You see, here’s the truth: When it comes to doing those things that matter the most…those things that are hard and unnatural, it is often the case that feelings do not dictate actions; rather, actions dictate feelings.

Take working out, for example. I am never cheerful about going to the gym. I like to sleep in. I am cheerful about the prospect of sleeping in. I am cheerful about the prospect of doing nothing that would require sweat and induce pain. I would like to feel cheerful about going to the gym…but I don’t EVER feel cheerful about going to the gym. However, if I deny my feelings and go to the gym anyways, I inevitably feel cheerful and very grateful that I did. My actions brought about the desired feeling of cheerfulness; but waiting for the feeling of “cheerfulness” would not have brought about the desired action of working out.
I find that generosity works the same way in my life. I am not a naturally generous person, maybe some of you are… I am not. However, if I will trust God to be generous even when I don’t feel generous, I typically feel more cheerful about being generous as a result… thus I become a cheerful giver because I gave… I don’t give because I’m a cheerful giver. My obedience leads me to be a cheerful giver; not the other way around. Maybe that’s just me, but I suspect that if the feeling of “cheerfulness” is a prerequisite to giving, most of us will not be giving any time soon! Such is why the discipline of tithing is helpful for me…and I suspect it would helpful for many of us were we trust God and give before we feel cheerful about giving.

II. So, what does the Bible say about generosity and giving?

1. We are stewards. A few weeks ago we looked into this concept in greater depth, and so I would encourage you to revisit that message. But please remember: the biblical worldview is that we are not owners, we are stewards. So when it comes to giving, we are not really giving what belongs to us, we are investing that which has been entrusted to us… that which ultimately belongs to God. As David proclaims in 1 Chronicles 29:14: But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

2. Give back to the LORD what belongs to Him FIRST. Proverbs 3:9 states, “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first-fruits of all your produce.” One of my friends describes biblical stewardship and tithing with the analogy of apples. He suggests that every month we get 10 apples. Biblically speaking, God told the Israelites, “You get to live off the 9 apples, but one of those apples belongs to me.” The same could be said for all of us. Jesus says in Matthew 6 that our Father in heaven knows that we need food, clothing, housing, transportation, etc. But Jesus insists, “Seek FIRST the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you.” When it comes to giving and generosity, God expects us to place Him first because He deserves to be first. God told the Israelites that the “first” part of everything that we have is “holy” to Him (Lev. 27). However, what typically happens is that we chew up our 9 apples and we overextend, so we take a bite of God’s apple. And then another bite, and still another. Then, at the end of the month, we give God the apple core. When we give to God what is rightfully His FIRST, we are then challenged to adjust our lifestyles to live off the other 9 nine apples, and we are not tempted to take a bite out of that which is holy to God. Such is why I think beginning to tithe is a helpful tool for retraining our brains to be generous and faithful as God’s stewards. Practice giving back to God FIRST, and watch what happens.

3. God loves a cheerful giver, and God loves to bless those who are faithful in their giving. Proverbs 11:25 we read, “A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” Jesus promises in Luke 6:8: Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. 2 Cor. 9:11: You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to
God. Malachi 3:10: Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. Trust me, I am no prosperity preacher. But ask anyone who is generous...ask those who delight in sharing and giving sacrificially, and they will consistently tell you how richly they have been blessed by God as a result of living a generous life. They didn’t give because they had an abundance, they gave out of gratitude to God and God poured out abundance into their lives in ways they never expected.

4. Generosity and giving should be done with humility. Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:2: Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. One thing that I love about this congregation is the humility by which you demonstrate your generosity. In ten years I’ve not heard one person ask to have their name put on a building or a classroom. On the contrary, I have seen amazing acts of generosity, and without fail people ask to remain anonymous...insisting that all the glory belongs to God. That is as it should be.

5. Finally, giving and generosity should be an expression of love. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 13: If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. When we first started talking about our value of generosity, we considered the phrase, “Give Generously” and then “Live Generously.” But it occurred to our elders that in the end, Jesus calls us to LOVE generously. Our giving should always reflect our love for God and our love for people. Amen?

III. Reimagining Generosity

Now, the Bible says much more about giving and generosity, and we’ll cover more ground on this subject in a few weeks. But for now, I want to challenge you to start reimagining generosity. Let the scriptures fill your mind and challenge you to think about the way you are living and giving…and particularly the way you are loving. In light of God’s Word and what we’ve identified as our problems with being generous, consider this truth: Loving…which always includes gratitude…will ultimately lead to generosity. To be loving is to be generous…and to be generous is to be loving. Let me close with a redneck story that just happened this week which may help to illustrate this point.

As I mentioned earlier, my dad was raised as an orphan and naturally grew up with a scarcity mentality. For most of my childhood, my dad was unapologetically selfish…and I think he would agree with that assessment. Thus I learned to have a scarcity mentality as well. Well, let me tell you, Jesus changed my Dad. He is now one of the most generous people you will ever meet, and he takes delight in being generous. But one particular act of generosity really moved my heart this week, and though this story is remarkably inappropriate for city-slickers, I’m going to share it anyways because it’s real.
As I mentioned last Sunday, my Dad and I had the opportunity to take a few days to go deer hunting, and we ended up harvesting three deer. Being the rednecks that we are, we processed those deer ourselves on Monday morning, which is nothing short of hard work. Now…every hunter knows there are choice cuts of meat that you horde for yourself when you process a deer, specifically the tenderloins. Compared to every other steak that comes off the deer, the loins are by far the most coveted. So, as we are packing up the loins off Dad’s big buck, he looks at me and says, “I want you to label that pack for my friend Jeremy. I’m giving him the tenderloins.” My mouth hit the floor…it’s one thing to share your harvest with friends, it’s quite another to give away the choice cuts. But Dad just looked at me and said, “He saved my life. It’s the least I can do.”

You see, Jeremy was the young man who heard my dad fall off the ladder just two years ago. Jeremy was the one who rushed in and found my dad unconscious with blood pooling under his head. Jeremy rendered first aid and saved my dad’s life…had he not, my Dad would not be on this earth today.

It’s easy to be generous to somebody who saved your life. It’s a no-brainer. Dad tells me all the time that I now have a third brother because he has adopted Jeremy as his fourth son! He loves Jeremy, he is generous with Jeremy, because he is grateful that Jeremy saved his life.

Now…that is a different picture of generosity than most of us carry in our minds…but that is exactly the picture of generosity that the Bible presents. We love because God first loved us, and He showed us his love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus died in our place…He saved our souls…He took on the awful punishment that we deserved so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. How could we NOT be generous in His name? How could we not give Him the best cuts of who we are and all that we have been given? Love…which always includes gratitude…leads to generosity. To love is to be generous…and to be generous is to love. Let’s pray.