

## “Breaking Free”

October 16, 2016

*Defying Gravity* series

Perhaps you already know about the pull of earth’s gravity on you. (Show **SLIDE**) We feel it every day. Our weight is gravity’s effect on our mass. Now we know that the more mass we have, the more we’ll weigh. There’s no getting around that, but it matters where we are. 100 pounds on Earth would only weigh about 38 pounds on Mars. If you go to Jupiter, a planet much larger than earth, your weight will increase because the gravitational pull increases.

Gravity is a powerful force, and last week I introduced the term *financial gravity* - a force that’s working around us, generated by the culture and economy we live in, and necessary for our existence. Remember that it’s all about keeping the balance so that financial gravity isn’t so strong that it begins to control us. It’s knowing the difference between needs and wants - and prioritizing our lives so that needs are met, but wants aren’t a given. It’s about “letting go” of what we don’t really need like the guy in the video holding onto his amplifier.

Last week we focused on a man who met Jesus and asked what to do to gain eternal life, and Jesus’ answer fell flat for him. When Jesus told him to make sure that his relationship with God and others was number one in his life instead of his relationship to his wealth, he was grieved.

Today we hear a story that Jesus told - just as powerful. This younger son’s relationship to money wasn’t in the right balance. He feels financial gravity with such force that he goes to his father and asks for his inheritance early. You can imagine how the family would react. You don’t ask for your inheritance early! It comes when the person who’s giving it to you has died. I’m sure that his father was both angry and even more - deeply hurt.

This young man was living fully in the “kingdom of self.” Think of how great he must have felt as he set off for a distant land. He has spent his life at home, and now he’d begin a great adventure. What he didn’t know was that he was about to be sucked into a black hole.

A *black hole* is a place in space where the gravity is so great that nothing can escape its pull, not even light. Black holes can be felt, but not seen. Once something enters the gravitational field of a black hole, the effect is dramatic. Tom Berlin says that the “kingdom of self” is full of black holes.

Money and stuff can produce a level of gravity from which we simply cannot escape. We see it here - when this inheritance, which we assume was large sum of

money, is put in the hands of this younger son, a person with low spiritual and emotional maturity. It's predictable - he blows it all!

Perhaps we can relate. He's anxious to be independent, but he's immature, and immature people have trouble handling money. His vision is limited to the next moment. He's not thinking too far ahead. His impulse control is so weak that every option on how to spend his inheritance looks inviting. He lives fast and large until it's all gone, and then stumbles away filled with regret when a famine gets his last coin.

Berlin says, "Have you ever noticed how a large sum of money seems like a granite boulder that will withstand time, until you discover it's more like sand on a barrier island that's quickly removed by tides or washed out overnight by a nor'easter?"

The younger son who was rich is now very poor, and he returns home. He's ready to feel his father's wrath. He's hungry and desperate and decides to ask his dad for a job on the estate. As he's walking the familiar road home, he's amazed to see his father running to him. And, by the way, it was undignified for an older man in Israel to run anywhere, much less toward a son who had brought shame on him and his family!

Perhaps the son thought his father's running was a sign of anger. Maybe he was ready for self-defense, but I'm sure he wasn't ready for the incredible display of his father's grace - open arms and a welcome home.

And so the story goes. The younger son learns that his father is generous. The son is brought back into the household with joy - and a new ring and robe. He is shown kindness he doesn't deserve, forgiveness he doesn't merit, and love that he doesn't anticipate. His father's generosity gives him new life.

And though we don't hear anymore from him, think of how this younger son must have changed. Perhaps he grew in generosity and thought about others more than himself. Perhaps he enjoyed and appreciated his father. Maybe he was kinder and more gracious. Tom Berlin also offers a powerful insight: maybe this younger son realized that *he could participate in generosity rather than simply receiving it.*

The pull of financial gravity was evident in this son's life, and it pulls us, too. I invite you to see this video called "Stuff People Say." I'll confess that when I first watched it, I was convicted. It's easy for me to complain about the smallest, most insignificant, and frankly petty things. **PLAY** "Stuff People Say"

I know I've said, "I'm hungry, but I'm not hungry." I know I've looked at a closet full of clothes and thought I had nothing to wear or said, "There's nothing good to watch" while I have everything available to me. Even as I watched and laughed, I found myself challenged to think about how I view my life, how I speak, and how I react.

How do we break free from the pull of financial gravity - from feelings of entitlement and instead cultivate thankfulness, contentment, and generosity? Perhaps we can start with our prayer life.

Most of the time, we pray about things we hope to receive: guidance to make decisions, good health and recovery from illness, comfort for the bereaved, jobs and money to pay bills, healing in relationships, and more. These are important things. Our desire, even with good intentions, is often to receive from God rather than to serve God.

How many times do we pray in private or with small groups about how we can reach those who feel alienated, feed the hungry, comfort those who mourn, assist the physically or mentally ill, house the homeless, visit prisoners, or provide needed services in our community? The ratio of “receive” prayers to “serve” prayers is high.

And yet we strive to build the Kingdom of God. Just like this younger son, we’re challenged to realize that we don’t just benefit from the Kingdom of God; we’re called to participate in it.

Last week, we talked about the “kingdom of self.” It’s a part of our lives - what we manage. And yet we can make it **the** world and ignore God’s Kingdom - just like the younger son. But when you allow your kingdom of self to be under control of the kingdom of God, it’s life-altering.

That’s when generosity becomes a part of our identity. 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 will get.

The word we use is *steward*. A steward is a person who manages another person’s property. Stewards have power over how that property is handled, but primarily they are servants, looking not to their own self-interest, but to the welfare of the owner.

When we follow Jesus Christ, we are stewards of the gifts given to us by God—unique strengths, talents, abilities, and resources to use in ways guided by the Holy Spirit that lives within us so we can honor and glorify God - the giver of the gift.

Now I’ll confess: this is a struggle for many of us. Financial gravity pulls us into thinking that we own what we possess and that we can use it however we choose. We can make decisions free of the control and or even the consideration of others. We think we don’t have to submit to anyone when financial gravity controls us. Let’s be honest - our culture affirms it. We can live like owners of all we have: “It’s mine, and I can do what I want.”

In their book *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson review the data and find 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 book also shares data that Smith collected over a five-year, multi-disciplinary Science of Generosity Initiative, which was released in 2010. This survey of 2,000 Americans included in-depth interviews and offers new insights.

Here are some statistics: 44.8% of (remember 2,000 Americans) reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose - not to Scouts, school fundraisers, non-profits, Salvation Army kettle, United Way drive at work, or church offering. Nothing!

Another 41.3% gave less than 2% of their income away to any charitable purpose. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15% of the population that's willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income.

Maybe you're thinking, "*But at least people gave their time, and time is valuable.*" Yes, that's true. Offering time and service is extremely important to charitable organizations. And yet, more than 76% of the people self-reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That's 3 out of 4 people. A pretty high number! So what's it all about?

A lack of generosity is not about a lack of resources; it's about identity. Go back to stewardship. Stewards understand that they are managers of what they have always with the owner in mind. When we get sucked in by financial gravity, we don't see ourselves as stewards, and we miss the call to generosity.

If we want to be a steward of financial resources, we have to accept the challenge to set aside an amount of money to invest in the work of God's kingdom. Many of us, as a way to show our desire to participate in God's work, pursue generosity through proportional giving to our income with a tithe as the goal. A tithe is one-tenth of our income, and it comes from a biblical base of giving the first and best of what we have to God. We don't wait to give what we have left over; we give to God first.

It's a discipline that helps us to expand God's Kingdom. As we give, we become more faithful servants. Through generosity, we gain a sense of identity. The practice of proportional giving calls us to offer our best for God's Kingdom as a way to live into our identity as stewards. And generosity changes us. We learn to let go more and more. We move from being a recipient of God's grace to being a participant in God's Kingdom.

Acts of generosity and compassion may seem small to us, but they are the building blocks of the Kingdom of God in our midst. We receive God's grace because God is generous, and we respond with acts that share God's grace in our world. We've been the recipients of others' acts of generosity -a meal when we needed it, a gift

unsolicited, help with a project, an afternoon of childcare, a ride to an appointment, a listening ear, a compassionate presence in the midst of grief, a card in the mail or call on the phone, or a number of other small acts that matter.

As we seek to build the Kingdom of God here and now, we're all invited to do something special today. Today you'll receive a Kingdom assignment. Each of us will receive an envelope with a \$5.00 bill, instructions, and a small business card. We're entrusted with this gift in the hope that we'll give it away as an investment in building the Kingdom of God by using our gifts to grow this money to benefit people in some way and make the world a better place. This is an opportunity for all of us to learn about generosity and share about it, too.

Don't worry, we've included ideas, but we hope that you'll be creative. You can take a picture or a video of what you do. The church business card is a way for us to share that we're doing this as a part of this congregation. You'll see a few questions for reflection on one side on the instruction sheet, and my hope is that some of us will share about this assignment next month - November 20.

My prayer is that this assignment is life-giving. May God help us as we seek first the Kingdom of God, break free from what holds us back, and strive to be generous.

Thanks be to God! Amen.