

Hespeler, 11 October, 2020 © Scott McAndless – Thanksgiving
Deuteronomy 8:7-18, Psalm 65, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Luke 17:11-19

Have you heard the story of the Irish American billionaire Chuck Feeney? Over four decades ago, he was one of the richest men in the United States – a billionaire. But he did an extraordinary thing. We all know what most billionaires do. They take their fortune and their influence and use it to get richer. The most famous example of this is, of course, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, whose fortune will likely soon make him the world's first trillionaire.

But Chuck Feeney set himself a very different goal. He decided that he wanted to die poor. He wanted to give away his entire fortune. Do you know how hard it was for Feeney to do that? It took 38 years of hard work. For 38 years, he only had one job and that was to give his money away. He actually only finished a couple of weeks ago and has now settled down in a modest retirement. 38 years! And in that time, he gave away eight billion dollars.

And I know that a few people have lauded Feeney for what he has done, but you know very well that most people struggle to understand him. For most people the goal of their lives is exactly the opposite of giving things away. This is maybe understandable for people who don't have a lot, of course. But it is also true of most people who, like Feeney, actually have much more money than they could possibly spend for the rest of their entire life. (Because, let me tell you, if it takes 38 years of hard work to give away your fortune, you can do nothing and very comfortably live on it for much more than the span of your life.) Most people who have lots of money come to believe that they need more. And, of course, the more money you have the easier it is, generally speaking, to get even more of it. So, once people get in that billionaire category, they tend to only go up.

And let's just pause and think about that for a minute. Does that really make sense? If you already have more money than you could spend in your lifetime, so much that it would take four decades to give it away, why would you possibly need any more? What would be the practical use of having more? None. You are no more secure with two billion dollars than you are with one.

But, of course, it's not actually about the money or the spending power. It's not even about the security. It's mostly about keeping score. The number one reason why most people want more money is so that they can have more than the other people around them.

For most people, it doesn't actually matter how much money you have, it matters that you have more than the other people in your life. If you don't, that's when you feel poor.

This all springs from a basic assumption that we have about



prosperity. We work under the assumption that prosperity is a limited commodity. There is only so much of it to go around. And that means that the only way to be truly prosperous is to take it from someone else. If someone else has more than you, that means that you cannot have true prosperity. So we are all stuck in this endless game of trying to get more than everyone else – a game that ultimately only one person can win. In such a world, Jeff Bezos is the obvious winner and Chuck Feeney is simply incomprehensible.

And what does that mean when we gather to celebrate Thanksgiving? Thanksgiving is the festival of abundance, a cornucopia overflowing with bounty. **“You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness,”** the psalm says, and that is what it is supposed to be about. So how are we supposed to celebrate that when we are not prosperous, at least not in the way that the world defines it, because we’re not richer than everyone else.

And, of course, that question is all the more difficult this year when things are feeling very lean. People are out of work, people are struggling to pay their rents or to keep their businesses afloat, people are afraid of what the future might hold and so they are more acutely aware of what they don’t have than thankful for what they do.

The tendency when we feel like that is not to celebrate prosperity but rather to tighten our belts – to hold on to whatever we have for dear life for fear that it will not be enough to get us through whatever might be ahead of us. That is what a lot of people are doing in the midst of this crisis. They are tightening up – not spending, not hiring, not investing. This is not just because they don’t have anything to spend on (what with restaurants and vacation destinations shut down) but more because they are scared and facing an uncertain future.

And yet it is Thanksgiving and, even if it weren’t, doesn’t the Bible tell us that we ought to be thankful at all times and in all circumstances? How can we celebrate abundance today? Well here is a Bible promise about abundance: **“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”** There you see that the Bible has a very different definition of abundance than the one that our world uses. It says that God does provide blessing in abundance, but in the very same breath we are told that this is about us having *enough*. The Bible doesn’t define abundance or wealth in terms of having more than anybody else. It is rather about you and what is enough for you in your circumstances. That is the first thing to know.

Secondly, it is something that God can and does provide. It is not a way of keeping score, but it is a sign of God’s overwhelming grace and goodness. And, what’s more, it is something that is given so that we might share, so that we might allow others to enjoy that abundance as well.

And that brings us to the main theme of this passage that we read from Paul’s letter, which has to do with generosity. Here is the principle that Paul offers us: **“the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one**

who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” The main point that Paul seems to be making is that we will not experience God’s abundance if we do not learn to practice generosity. And so he offers what seems to be a nonsensical piece of advice: in order to enjoy abundance you basically need to give more away.

Now, as I tackle this saying of Paul, I have an immediate warning flag that I need to send up. This is a verse that has been severely misused and abused in a number of Christian circles. There are preachers out there who have used this verse in the Bible and others like it to develop a prosperity Gospel that primarily benefits the preachers themselves. There are preachers who will read this verse, **“the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully,”** and who will say that, because that is in the Bible and it is true, that what you, the listener, need to do, is immediately put a large amount of money in an envelope and send it directly to the preacher.

In fact, they will say, they are not even asking you to give what you can *afford* to give, but that you should give way more than that. Why, you should even go out and borrow the money from your friends or wherever you can get it and just send it in because, when you do, God will respond by making you incredibly wealthy.

My friends, I am sad to say that there are Christian preachers out there who will misuse this passage in that way and, sadly, they will have disciples who will believe them and do what they say. But, I want to be very clear, this is not what Paul is saying in this passage. It is a self-serving interpretation that serves only those who preach it and not those who listen to them.

No, what Paul says here is more like something that Princess Leia says to Governor Tarkin in the movie Star wars: “The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers.” Wealth and prosperity are like the star systems in that scene from the movie or like, say, a handful of dry sand. The more tightly you hold on to it, the more quickly it seems to escape. Remember what I said about that tendency that we have when we feel like we’re going through some hard economic times? We tend to grasp whatever wealth we feel we do have close to us. We avoid spending and we avoid giving because it doesn’t feel safe to do so. It is an understandable response, of course, but Paul is saying that it actually doesn’t work that way.

And Paul’s wisdom has been borne out again and again. Throughout history, the number one cause of severe economic depressions and recessions have stemmed from people holding on too tightly to their wealth. When people stop circulating whatever wealth they have, that is the very thing that causes economic crashes because money, which is the lifeblood of the economy, stops circulating. That leads to more job losses and more business closures which makes even more people feel fragile and apt to hold onto their wealth and so the crisis tends to spiral on and get worse and worse.

And so Paul says that if you want to experience true prosperity and true abundance, you cannot hold on too tightly to what you possess. And I clearly think that this is wisdom that we need to be listening to right now. It is my belief that it is God's desire for you and for me and for all of us that we experience God's bounty in this world. But what Paul is saying is that we will not experience that if we are seeking to rely for our security on holding onto what we have as tightly as possible. We need to learn to hold these things loosely.

In this moment, one key thing that a person of faith can do is spend. We need to find ways to spend what we have. And I'm not talking about spending in frivolous or foolish ways, but I know that people, in fear, have been hesitating to make necessary or helpful expenses. People have been hesitating to pay a little more to the people who work for them or, say, serve them at a table. This is a time when we can actually express our faith in God that God will provide by spending especially, as much as possible, in local businesses. And we have God's promise that that will bring blessings to us. And I wouldn't hesitate to say that such blessings include a stronger economy for all.

Of course, the other way that Paul is saying we can hold loosely to our wealth is by finding ways to give generously. And I do not say this in order to tell people that they must give in particular ways to the church. Obviously all such gifts are greatly appreciated and well used, but that is not the point of what Paul is saying. What he is saying is that, if you want to experience God's abundance, you need to find a particular outlet for generosity. I do not care what that outlet is, but, if you do not find it, you will find yourself a servant to your wealth and not its master and that is not experiencing the bounty that God has promised to his people.

I believe that the reason why Chuck Feeney decided to give away his fortune was so that he might experience that freedom and that bounty. From everything he has said, he is happy and relieved and feels truly blessed. As for those wealthiest people in the world who find themselves in an endless battle to get more money for themselves so that they do not feel poor because they have less than someone else, they have no idea what bounty and prosperity actually are.