

**The Habit of Giving**  
Acts 10:1-6 2, Cor 9:6-8

Friends, this week-end marks a year since I started to exercise on a regular basis. And a year ago when I first went into the Rec Center and told them I wanted to buy a gym membership so I could start exercising and loose weight – they immediately helped me loose weight by taking my money and making my wallet lighter - and then they sat me down with a personal trainer who asked me what my goals were.

So I told him that I wanted to loose my belly fat and get back into shape and based on those goals he took me around and showed me what exercises I could do in order to reach my goals.

And so I began to go to the gym, do my exercises and work out – and I was motivated to go because I really wanted to achieve my goals. So I went two, three, sometimes four times a week every week and before long it became a habit. I was now one of those guys who “went to the gym”

And the initial results were encouraging – I felt better, slept better, had more energy - when Ginger got out and went running after the deer I could run after her and not be so out of breath afterwards, it was good.

But then I seemed to hit a plateau – working out didn’t energize me like it used to, I was feeling tired, I pulled a shoulder muscle once, and another time after pushing myself to complete a set of dead-lifts I got sick to my stomach.

So I went back to my trainer and got some more advice and learned that there were some more habits that I had to adopt in order to make my work-out more effective. One of them was eating. I needed to eat more!

This seemed to be counter-intuitive because I was trying to loose fat so I had cut way back on my calorie intake – but I was actually shortchanging myself on the fuel I needed to do my exercises and the material my muscles needed in order to rebuild and repair themselves.

So once I started being more generous with my eating my workouts started to improve again, and when I started to make sure I was giving my body enough protein I started to see muscle gain that I never had before!

And friends its amazing how similar things work for our spiritual life.

You know once the Holy Spirit breaks through our unbelief and doubt and our faith in Christ starts to grow we may realize that we've got some things we need to work on.

We've got some bad habits we'd like to get rid of, maybe anger issues or a bad temper, perhaps we lie – not outright but we've been know to embellish things now and then.

Maybe there are things we want to understand in the bible, maybe we want to pray more or pray better.

Maybe you want to do something to help others, try to make a difference in the world or take the blessings that God has given you and be the best steward you can be with them.

Friends if the Holy Spirit is working in your life and you have faith in Jesus Christ then I'm pretty sure that there is something that you have as a goal – some way in which you want to grow spiritually.

And maybe you've experienced something similar to what I did with my working out.

You decided to get working on your spiritual goals and so you got involved in church, you go to worship and you start volunteering in some way – and now you're someone who "goes to church"

And initially it's great – you feel wonderful, inspired, and really spiritual. But time goes by and all your church activity starts to make you feel worn out, run down, and you're feeling things and are thinking things which you know are definitely not very spiritual!

Friends just like I discovered that there were specific habits I needed to develop in order to make my workouts more effective so I could achieve my goals, there are specific habits

which the scriptures encourage us to develop which will make our Christian lives more effective so we can reach our goals.

Now we all know what habits are right? It's something we sort of automatically do without really thinking too much about it.

Like getting a double-double every morning on the way to work, like using the same locker at the gym, cooking chicken for dinner every Tuesday night, adding salt to whatever is on our plate, flossing twice a day, or checking our blind spot before we change lanes – these are habits.

Some habits are good, some are bad – bad habits are hard to break and good ones seem hard to start.

Habits are part of human behavior and human behavior is rarely a simple thing – it's a mixture of beliefs and feelings, nature and nurture, consequences, and convictions.

Additionally the bible reveals to us that sin is an underlying factor which actually controls our behavior – and thus our habits.

However, the bible also reveals to us that the power of sin in our lives has been broken by Christ's death and resurrection and that the Holy Spirit has been given to us to be a transforming influence on our behavior and our habits.

2 Timothy 1:7 says *“For the Spirit which God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”*

Power, love and self-discipline – these are the things we can use to form good habits, habits which will make our Christian life more effective, habits which will help us become highly effective stewards, and these habits are giving, studying, serving and worshiping.

And in Acts 10 we find the story of Cornelius and his story is a great example of how being a habitual giver makes you a more effective steward.

Now I keep using the term steward – because a steward is someone who takes care of things for someone else. And friends we always need to remember that everything we have... Our children, our talents and abilities, our money, our

possessions, our homes, our jobs, all of it – it all belongs to God first and He has given it to us to steward, to care for and develop and oversee on His behalf.

And while being stewardly means that we don't want to waste or be frivolous with what God has entrusted us with, it also means that are not allowed to be stingy with it either.

To quote that old Canadian tire commercial we must save like Scrooge but give like Santa – that's what it means to be generous.

So... back to our friend Cornelius, whose story is specifically included in the scripture because of his habit of being generous.

Now we might also say that he had a habit of praying – and that's true but I think the habit of giving underlies all the other habits because in order to practice them you have to *give* of your time, your treasure and your talents.

So the story of Cornelius is a story about generosity. He was generous towards the poor and he was generous in the time he gave to praying to God, so much so that He was known as a devout man.

Now this is an amazing thing – that this Roman Army officer, who lived in the city that was known for being the Roman political center of the province – would be considered devout and God-fearing by the Jews.

So first thing we learn here is that practicing the habit of giving – being generous, can overcome extreme prejudices. And friends we Christians need that today more than ever.

Our faith is increasingly being perceived as narrow-minded and intolerant, but if we practice the habit of giving, especially to those who do not accept us - we may just earn the respect of those who otherwise are opposed to what we stand for.

That's why Jesus says in Matt 5: 16 *“let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

And Cornelius' story shows us that the law of giving which we read in 2 Corinthians 9:6 is true.

The law of giving states that you will get out what you put in, sow sparingly reap sparingly, sow generously – reap generously – and Cornelius is about to find out just how much he is going to reap from the amount of time and resources he has been sowing.

God sends an angel to visit him and instructs Cornelius to send for the apostle Peter, and when Peter comes to visit - God blesses Cornelius with the message of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit! That's like a thousand-fold return on his givings!

What a reward for practicing the habit of giving!

Now let me be clear here – I'm not saying, and neither is this passage teaching that someone can be such a good person, do so many good deeds that God will reward them with salvation.

We know this because when Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius he says "*All the prophets* testify about him that

everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Cornelius was able to be generous because one of God's chosen people had been generous with Him. Someone had shared how God had been generous by initiating a covenant relationship with Israel and how by living in grateful response according to the Law of Moses – which included taking care of the widows and the poor - anyone could be included in this generous covenant.

When Peter shares the gospel with Cornelius he is letting him know how God has fulfilled the Mosaic covenant in Jesus Christ, something that God had intended to do all along – as the prophets had foretold.

Now Gentile and Jew were equally included in the family of God – and both received the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the sign someone belongs to God.

Cornelius didn't earn his salvation; it was the result of God's generosity coming full-circle.

So, what we can take away from this? Friends that you get out what you put in with regards to your relationship with God.

If, as a result of your relationship with Christ- you are habitually generous with money, the time, the possessions which God has given you – you will receive back from God more than you know what to do with.

In the past God expressed this promise to Israel like this - He says in Micah 3:10 *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.*

And once the Mosaic covenant had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ God updates this promise to what we read in 2 Corinthians 6...where it says *“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”*

Now you think that with this law of generosity being so amazing, and with the story of Cornelius showing us how it can work out that we’d be all over the habit of being generous right?

But friends, the fact is that a good habit like being generous is hard to practice isn’t it? Our sinful nature makes us want to be tight-fisted, selfish, and greedy – and even when Christ frees us from these sinful attitudes... there is still our fear.

We’re afraid that if we are habitually generous – there won’t be enough.

We may look around at those who have an abundance of wealth and extra resources and we might think “well they can afford to be generous, they have extra which they don’t need and so they can give out of their abundance, but I’ve got financial commitments, I need to make what I have last, I’ve got kids who are going to college...”

Friends there are a thousand different reasons we can think of as to why we only have just enough for ourselves, why we can't afford to be habitually generous.

But friends, think about this carefully – if its true that we only get out what we put in, especially in regards to how we handle our money and possession is connected to our relationship with Christ, the question is not can we afford to be generous, but can we afford **not** to be habitually generous?

This was something Jesus wanted to make sure his disciples – and therefore us, understood well.

So once, when they were at the temple in Jerusalem, watching all the wealthy people give large sums of money in support of the Temple, Jesus pointed out a poor widow who had only put two small copper coins into the offering box, and he said this...

*All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:4)*

This widow knew how generous God was and she gave all she had back to him.

Friends, can we afford **not** to be habitually generous with what God has entrusted to us?

Can we afford not to be generous with our money, with our time, with our talents?

I think we know the answer...we need to practice the habit of giving

And God will fulfill the promise He makes in 2 Corinthians 9:6 and you will be blessed abundantly, and in all things at all times you will have all that you need to do every good work!

Amen.