

Defying Gravity: Breaking Free

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A ~ Luke 15:11-32

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Last week we began to think about what financial gravity is, and how getting it into the right proportion in our lives is critically important. We looked at a rich man who was unable to break free from his financial weight. The gravity of his possessions held him tightly to his life, and he was not able to freely follow Jesus.

This week we turn our attention to another character from the Gospels, not a person Jesus met, but a character in one of his stories. The story is about a loving father with two sons. The younger of these sons feels a strong pull of financial gravity—he has a deep love affair with living well and having fun. So he asks for his inheritance early, and his father agrees—which, we can guess, did not sit well with the rest of the family.

When Jesus tells this story, he is making sure his listeners understand that this young man was completely living in the Kingdom of self. He is completely self-interested, completely unable to look beyond satisfying his own desires. We can imagine that he is gleeful as he leaves home with his money, ready to take on the world. What he doesn't know is that he is about to find himself in a black hole.

As Tom Berlin writes, "A black hole is a place in space where the gravity is so great that nothing can escape its pull, not even light, which is why black holes can be felt but not seen. Once something enters the gravitational field of a black hole, the effect is dramatic. The kingdom of self is a space full of black holes."¹

The young man heads out into the world completely self-absorbed, interested only in pleasing himself. He has a huge sum of money, and he is not particularly mature—either spiritually or emotionally. This combination creates so much financial gravity that it becomes a black hole from which there is no escape. And that is predictably what happens to the young man. Scripture says:

Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. (Luke 15:13 CEB)

I expect many of us can remember a time when our impulse control was a little bit lacking and we didn't have the ability to see very far into the future. Whether we were caught up in buying concert tickets for our favorite band or that new car we always wanted, we focused on immediate satisfaction.

¹ Tom Berlin, "Sermon 2, Breaking Free," *Defying Gravity Program Tools Flash Drive*, Abingdon Press, 2016.

This young man did the same, and pretty soon, all of daddy's money had vanished, just as a famine hit the land. Destitute and ashamed he returned home, expecting to face his father's wrath. Instead what he found as he came up the road was his father running toward him—and respectable men in ancient Israel didn't run anywhere. The son assumed he was running in anger wanting to punish him....instead the father was running with his generous spirit to embrace his son.

That was a transformative moment for this young man, a resurrection of sorts. He moved from living in the kingdom of self to living in his father's kingdom, a kingdom of extravagant generosity. Perhaps most significantly, the young man now possessed the wisdom and maturity to not only want some of his father's wealth, but to participate in his father's lifestyle of generosity.

Now, I want to take a look at our lives as disciples, and think about what it means to make the kind of transformation the prodigal makes. Think about it in terms of our prayer life. Many of us, and I include myself here, spend time praying for things we want to receive from God—the inheritance we want. Whether it is healing for ourselves or someone we love, jobs and resources to pay the bills, guidance to make good decisions—we pray for what we want God to give us. These aren't bad prayers or wrong prayers—they are just prayers oriented more toward receiving something than prayers oriented toward serving God and living in God's kingdom. At some point there is a shift, and we begin to understand what it is to pray for God to use us each day. We pray for God to help us lead others to Christ. We pray for God to use us as an instrument of justice and peace in the world. Do you see the shift there? We are able to break free from praying for our wants, and begin to pray for our participation in God's desires for the world.

This reorientation from the kingdom of self to the kingdom of God is life changing. As Tom Berlin writes, this reorientation “creates an identity founded in generosity. 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.

[Generous people understand ourselves as] *stewards*. A steward is a person who manages another's property. Stewards have broad discretionary powers over how an account is managed or how a household is run, but they know that primarily they are servants, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. Christ-followers understand they are stewards of a gift given to them by God—a life with unique strengths, talents, abilities, and resources to use in ways guided by God's own Spirit that lives within them, so as to honor and glorify the giver of the gift.”²

² Tom Berlin, “Sermon 2, Breaking Free,” Defying Gravity Program Tools Flash Drive, Abingdon Press, 2016.

This identity as steward that we claim as followers of Jesus is incredibly hard to live in to because we live in a society that is anything but generous. Yes, Americans give to charitable causes. We give a lot. But when you stop and look at how generous we are—and how much more generous we could be—it is apparent that financial gravity has a tight hold on our society.

Most people in our society live like owners rather than stewards, in the kingdom of self, not the kingdom of God. If I am an owner, all that I have is mine. If I am a steward, all that I have is God's and I manage it responsibly and generously.

Christian Smith and Hillary Davidson took a look at our behavior around generosity in a five year study released in 2010. In their accompanying book, *The Paradox of Generosity*, they discovered that

44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose.

You read that correctly. Zero. Nothing. No membership at NPR or Lewis Ginter. No cookies from the Girl Scouts or popcorn from the Boy Scouts. Nothing in the offering at church. No PTA donations, nothing for cancer research. Nearly half of us, according to what people self-reported, giving nothing.

But that isn't the end. The report also says

Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income. [*Paradox*, page 103]

Stop and think about that. Nearly 85% of our society is so consumed by financial gravity that they are unable to live generously.

Now, the next thing we think—and we've all thought it—is, well, they give their time. That's what I do when I can't give money. I give my time. Volunteerism is vital to non-profits and charitable organizations. But in the same study, they found that 76% of people reported they gave no volunteer hours to any cause. Three out of four people gave no time. There is a generosity deficit in our country's spirit.

That generosity deficit emerges not because of a crisis of finances, but because of a crisis of identity. It emerges when we become too engrossed in the kingdom of self, and cannot break free to live as a citizen of God's kingdom. Living as a citizen of God's kingdom takes intentionality and planning. To become a steward of our financial resources we have to intentionally set aside part of our money to give back to God. Many Christians do this by giving a proportion of their income—a set percent—with the tithe, or 10% as the goal. Giving the tithe is a practice first taught in the Old Testament. Back then, 10% of people's income was

given to support worship life in the temple, and to care for those in their culture who were the most vulnerable or at risk.

It's important for us to think about the purpose of the tithe. Does God need our money? No. God exists beyond needs and wants. But God knows that our souls need to give back. God knows that giving the tithe shapes us into stewards, into people who remember that all we have is a gift from God. God knows that giving the tithe helps us break free from financial gravity.

Generosity changes us. It changes our perspective, and it changes our hearts. It helps us break free from the financial gravity that weighs us down. The father's generosity changed the prodigal son's life and made him more generous. Our heavenly Father's generosity has changed our lives. God generously loves us and extravagantly forgives us for the times we have lived in the kingdom of self. I know we all desire to respond to God's generosity. The challenge is how to do it. We are going to talk more about that next week, and to prepare as you leave today you will receive a Financial Worksheet. I want to invite you to take it home, and begin reading and praying over it in preparation for what we will talk about the next couple of weeks—the steps we can take to break free from financial gravity and become more generous disciples.