

Advent Conspiracy: Give More
Delivered December 16, 2012

If you are at all like me, you're probably going to feel that there is some logical tension between last week's message and this week's message. Last week we talked about spending less, and then I challenged each of us to consciously not spend money this week on Christmas gifts. I don't know about you, but that was a huge challenge for me, especially considering that we're less than 2 weeks from Christmas. This week we're talking about giving more, and in my mind those two don't go together. My mind works on the equation that spending more = giving more, and spending less = giving less.

I don't know if you like algebra when you were in school, but I did, and in some respects figuring this out will feel as challenging as a tough algebra equation to an 8th grader. I'm probably going to mess up my algebra explanation, but I'm going to do my best to at least get my Christmas equation right for us this morning. In algebra terms, we have a problem with two separate variables that don't match up, no matter how much we want them to. The only way to solve the equation is to figure out the relationship between the two, or somehow put one in terms of the other – the variable has to change.

On the one hand we have our variable for spending, which we relate to dollars and cents because that's what we spend on our gifts and giving at Christmas. On the other hand, when it comes to our giving we tend to think that we are giving joy through the gifts we give, but if we're honest, we usually end up just giving stuff that costs money, and doesn't

always bring a great deal of joy to us or the people we're giving to.

None of us really wants to give less this Christmas season. We may want to spend less than we did last year, but we don't want to give any less to the people we love. That's why last week wasn't entirely fair, because we needed the second part of the equation explained to make the first part mean more. We are stuck in an equation that doesn't work, and we are as frustrated with our inability to solve it as we ever were by any algebra equations in school.

We can't seem to get x to relate to y , and so we spend more dollars hoping that it will magically transform into giving more happiness, joy, peace and fulfillment to our loved ones, but we find that it doesn't work. If you need evidence of this, simply go to a store on the couple of days after Christmas and stand anywhere near the returns aisle or the customer service center. You will find scores of people returning things that someone spent money on that don't make them happy. You will find your gifts come with gift receipts that will allow you to get cash or credit for what you don't want so you can go buy what you do want. Or, if your relatives are really smart, you'll get gift cards with the dollar amount printed right on them just to make sure you know how much it cost. We keep solving happiness and joy of giving in terms of dollars spent, and it never works.

We forget that what we love about Christmas, what we enjoy about this season from the beginning, is never measured in dollars and cents. The greatest gifts you've ever been given were probably not the most expensive ones. Your favorite memories of Christmases past are not necessarily the ones

where you had or spent the most money. In fact, sometimes those years feel like the least joyful years because sometimes the more money we spend, the less joy we give.

So this morning we need to try to figure out a way to solve these variables and make sense of the whole equation. The only way to do that is to change our terms, change the way we are measuring both our spending and our giving. We are going to look at just one verse in Luke chapter 6, but I want to walk us into that verse with just a brief overview of what comes before it in the chapter.

Luke 6 has quite a bit in common with Matthew 5-7, commonly known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Those three chapters, along with this one, are all about a reversal of expectations, and the overturning of our normal way of viewing the world. From verse 27 on you find Jesus making statements that tell us our algebra is off. He says that we are supposed to love our enemies and do good for those who mistreat us. He says that when someone takes something from us we are supposed to go ahead and give them more, rather than going after them to take it back. He says that we are supposed to give to the ones who will never be able to give back to us, lend to those who cannot repay us, and love those who don't love us in return. Our way of thinking of all of those things is totally opposite of Jesus' Kingdom point of view.

Verse 37, which immediately precedes our verse this morning, establishes this idea that our judging, condemning, and even forgiving are reciprocal somehow. The way we approach each of those is how we will be approached in those respects because the way we treat others reveals

exactly how we would like to be treated, even if we say differently. The well known Golden Rule tells us that the best way to reveal how we want to be treated is to look at how we treat others.

So in that light, Jesus makes his statement in verse 38 about giving. He tells us that if we give, we will find that our giving comes right back to us. Our immediate response is to look at that as a kind of karmic statement, where if we give apples, then apples will be returned to us at some point in the future. But I suspect that Jesus is after something more than just that simple one for one kind of giving.

It is more about what happens when we give that Jesus is concerned with. When we give, we open ourselves up to receive back from God who is ultimately the source of all that we receive. The more we give, the more room we have to receive in our lives because our hands are open, rather than grasping and closed around all that we have. This is how God gave, and how he expects us to give in response to him.

We learn that all we have isn't really ours to begin with, because it all belongs to God. Our time, our energy, our gifts and talents, even our money – all of it is borrowed. And as we learn that, we learn not to expect God to give back in exactly the same way we have given. That changes the terms of the equation, which is what we desperately need to have happen for us. Think about how you respond when your kids learn the lesson of generosity as they give to someone else in need. Your response is not necessarily to go buy them something else that they don't need. No your response is to praise them, encourage the choices that they

have made, and help them celebrate their moment of clarity about the way they are supposed to live in the world. You don't make a dollar for dollar equation, because you know that it doesn't work that way.

When we give generously we find that God gives back to us in an open handed, generous kind of way. In fact, the way Jesus says it here, God gives back to us pressed down, shaken together, and running over the top in a good measure to us. God is not stingy with us when we are not stingy with ourselves. When we learn to give more, then we find that God will pour back into us much more than we can possibly contain so that what he gives of his goodness will run over, which will put us back in the same position we were before, of giving out of the overflow of his goodness to someone else. The trust required to give generously is generously rewarded by God's generosity to us, which builds momentum for us and pushes us to keep giving more than we thought possible.

But the point of all this giving shouldn't get lost in the shuffle. It's not that we are giving just for the sake of giving. And it's definitely not that we are giving so that we can get something in return from God, as if we could somehow manipulate him into doing something for us that he doesn't want to do. Rather the purpose of the giving is to reframe our desires to be more like God's, and our hearts to be more aligned with the generosity that is at the heart of a God who gives freely and abundantly.

In particular it is about changing the measure we use when it comes to our giving. The changing of our measure is not just about changing the quantity with which we give, but the

quality of what we give – the substance of our giving has to change. That has much more to do with how we become aligned with God’s heart and generosity. He is the God who generously gave his only son to the world because of his great love for human beings. He gave a gift that cannot possibly be measured in terms of money, no matter how costly we might consider it. His gift is priceless because he gave of himself, and that is the kind of giving he wants from us.

In his famous summation of the gospel, John said that because God loved the world that he gave his only son. His call is that we would so love that we would give of ourselves as well, hopefully with a different measure than we are accustomed to using. What if we thought of our giving in different terms than just the dollars and cents? What if the giving we are being called to – the kind that brings true joy – is more about our time, energy, and self than it is about the amount of money we spend on gifts? We can give more and change the measure we use so that we give better. Jesus didn’t give less, but he gave more of himself – he gave presence over presents, and that was more significant than anything else he could have given.

What if you decided that while you were spending less, you were going to change the measure for your giving? What if you decided to give like Jesus, and go with presence over presents? This week, as you prepare for your Christmas celebrations I want you to take some time to consider how you will invest your presence into the lives of your loved ones. As you consider that, I hope you will consider how God’s presence and generosity to you will flow through you into those relationships, because that has the potential for a

much longer term impact. Presence transforms, presents just accumulate and eventually are thrown away.

Can we commit this week to working towards a new equation? We want to spend less money, and give more presence, believing that as we do that, we will actually give more joy, peace, and love into our relationships than we ever have done in the past.