

Series: **BRIDGE TO NOWHERE** - February 1, 2009

IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE
Acts 20:35

I. INTRO

A. ***How did I get from there...to here?*** OJ Simpson was born in poverty and contracted rickets—a disease caused by malnutrition. But he worked hard—and became the best-known athlete in North America. And now he's in jail—probably for the rest of his life. And I'm sure he must ask himself the question, ***How did I get from there...to there...to here?***

1. A lesser known person named Richard Stearns found himself there. He tells about his strenuous quest for meaning—how it took him through a ***lot*** of searching—and culminated in a decision to follow Jesus. He says, “I knew this—nothing would ever be the quite the same again, because I had made a decision to follow Jesus Christ—***no matter what!***”

-Several months later, Richard became engaged to Renee—the girl who had deeply influenced him to follow Jesus. As they planned the wedding, she suggested that they go to a local department store and register for china, crystal and silver. He writes, “My self-righteous response was an indication of just how my newfound faith was integrating into my life: ***As long as there are children starving in the world, we are not going to own fine china, crystal, and silver!***”

2. Flash forward two decades. As irony would have it, Richard Stearns had become CEO and President of Lenox. Anyone know what Lenox sells? Lenox is America's premier manufacturer and seller of fine tableware—fine china, crystal, and silver. ***How did I get from there to here?***

B. Sometimes we start a journey toward making a difference in the world. We're usually quite idealistic—and judgmental of others. “Why can't you be as big-hearted as ***I*** am? How can you be so self-pre-occupied and passive?” ***Flash forward a few years...***

-What we find is that making a difference is ***upstream***—in a downstream world. Passion is great—but you can't run on it for the rest of your life.

1. Let me narrow this down. Most of us admire generosity—greatly. Most of us deeply, ***deeply*** appreciate it when others are generous with us. Stories of extreme generosity deeply move us. Like the story of Oseola McCarty who chose to live in poverty—going other people's laundry—so she could give \$150,000 in scholarship money to the University of Southern Mississippi to help girls just like her. Everyone thinks, ***I would like to be like HER!***

2. The problem with being generous is that you can't do it without actually ***giving***. Not leftovers—but the money and time and resources you're afraid you ***might*** need for your own life. We think, ***Someday I'll do that...!*** Flash forward...

3. Jesus said, ***It is MORE blessed to give...than to receive.*** He said, “Go ahead—***do it! You’ll be just fine!***” But that takes faith; if you ***really*** believe Jesus was right—you have to actually ***live*** it!

II. SO, DEFINE ***BLESSED!***

- A. Jesus introduces the word, ***blessed***, in his most famous teaching--now called **The Sermon on the Mount**.

-In that culture, when someone said, “I’m blessed!” It simply meant, “I’m a ***fortunate, lucky, happy*** person.” In our world, we tend to reserve the words, ***fortunate, lucky, happy*** for people who’ve just won the lottery, gotten the big shiny new job, have kids who made them proud. Blessed means ***everything seems to be heading up and to the right*** in life.

1. But Jesus blesses people you and I would never describe as blessed. He says that being ***blessed*** goes way deeper than externals—like good health, pay raises, and having great neighbors...etc.

-Being ***blessed*** is this unmovable foundation of the goodness of God under everything that happens. It’s happiness—but deeper than that. Joy would be a better word. Maybe the best way to describe it is the word ***shalom***—an incredibly rich Jewish word, which means peace—but includes a sense of contentment, well-being. “I have my moments—but my ***Father*** loves me—and He’s in charge of ***everything!***”

2. Let me try to explain it like this. Lori and I went through a crisis of wanting children—and not being able to have them. Then, after 6 years, there came the day when Lori started mysteriously getting sick. I could hear her losing her supper—and I wanted to ***smile*** and jump up and down. Know why? Cause what we’d longed for and prayed for had happened. We had been ***blessed*** Even though the nausea of pregnancy makes you ***feel*** quite unblessed! People say, “You glow! You look radiant!” When the truth is, you can’t see your feet and your back aches. But you’re ***blessed!***

-Then came labor and delivery. How do you spell ***pain?*** Lori squeezed my hand during a contraction--and brought me to my knees. ***“UNCLE!!!”*** But underneath all the pain and worry and work—***blessed!*** Why? Because there’s new life—and God is ***good!***

-Then, of course, you have to ***raise*** that child. The next 30, 40 or so years are going to be messy, challenging, humbling—did I mention, expensive? They’ll ***take you to your knees!*** But...you’re ***blessed!***

3. Being ***blessed*** includes the individual experiences—but it’s something deeper, more profound—that carries you through pain and loss. When you feel ***blessed***, things feel ***right***; you feel God’s smile; you sense that God is way, way, ***way*** bigger than the experience you’re in.

4. Now. This is really, **really** important to understand. There is no one thing in this life that **blesses** you forever. We fantasize about it—think that if our dream comes true—meeting Mr. Right, success, winning **American Idol**, catching a 50 pound lake trout—will permanently put us in the category of the happy, blessed people of this planet. But it **DOESN'T!** It **can't!**

-But there is a **path**—a **life** that God blesses. It's being an **active** part of this **Kingdom** life Jesus gave his life to inaugurate—and offer freely to us.

That's what Jesus was talking about when He told us not to make money the focus of our lives—either through greed or fear—but said:

“So don't worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’ These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. (Matthew 6:31-33 NLT)

5. Here's the deal; it's possible to attend church, receive the gift of life Jesus offers—and **never** walk the path God blesses. Trusting Jesus is not a one time decision we make about receiving the gift of eternal life Jesus provided; it's **believing that Jesus was right about EVERYTHING**—forgiveness, sex, marriage, humility, love—and **giving**. Believing that Jesus was right about everything—and **living** that way—is the path God blesses—detours **not** included!
- B. And Jesus, in this particular saying used by Paul, this early church leader is—**It's more blessed to GIVE...than to receive**. We all know that receiving is fun, right? Receiving is getting a paycheck, having people compliment you, getting a great tax refund, catching your limit on a great fishing trip—and catching **bigger** fish than everyone else. Receiving is having a cashier say to you in a crowded supermarket, “Can I help you over here?” –and getting there **first!** We **all** know what receiving is!

-What about **giving**? What would the people Jesus was talking to have understood when He used this word?

1. There's a massive amount of history behind this whole concept of giving. Giving started in the first chapters of the Bible with two brothers; Cain and Abel. Worship is proclaiming God's worth by giving him your best. Abel gave his first and best and found God's blessing. Cain apparently gave something less than his best—and **didn't** receive God's blessing. So, he murdered Abel. It's clear—God **deserves** our first and best as an act of **worth-ship**.
2. The concept of giving a **tithe** or a tenth comes up in Abraham's life. He acquires a lot of stuff by defeating the king's who'd captured his nephew, Lot. Abraham then gave a tenth to God through a priest named Melchisedek. Giving a tenth was a way of saying to God, “I'm **clear** on this; I know that **ALL** I have comes from You—and **belongs** to you.”

-When Moses is forming the nation of Israel under God's supervision, the **tithe** became a regular part of their worship. God's command was: **“You must set**

aside a tithe of your crops—one-tenth of all the crops you harvest each year. Bring this tithe to the designated place of worship—the place the LORD your God chooses for his name to be honored—and eat it there in his presence. This applies to your tithes of grain, new wine, olive oil, and the firstborn males of your flocks and herds. Doing this will teach you always to fear the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 14:22-23 NLT)

-In addition to that, they were taught how to care for those in need.

“But if there are any poor Israelites in your towns when you arrive in the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward them. Instead, be generous and lend them whatever they need. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8 NLT)

3. The story of what happened from that point on is not a nice one. **Prosperity** became their god instead of the Lord. In their obsessions with prosperity—they would do anything—**anything** to get it, including worshipping the fertility gods of other nations. Of course, this is **totally** stupid, right? Nobody worships the gods of prosperity in our culture, right? **Right?**

-But they took it further than that. To prosper, they began ripping off the poor and the disadvantaged—and God was **furious**. Nobody does that today, right? They thought they could do that stuff—and gloss over it by bringing God **lots** of sacrifices. And God’s response, through Micah, was:

No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8 NLT)

4. Finally, as a last resort, God allowed them to be hauled off into captivity to Assyria and then Babylon. But the **same old stuff** kept coming up; throwing God leftovers—expecting God to bless that—and refusing to honor God with the tithe. God challenges them to stop cheating Him. He says, “Why don’t you at least **test** the path of blessing and see what happens?”

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test! (Malachi 3:10 NLT)

5. When Jesus said, **It’s more blessed to give than to receive**—that’s what people would’ve been thinking. When I **tithe**—I am honoring God with the first and best—making it clear to me and to Him that He owns **everything!** When I **give** back to God—and help those who have been hammered by life—it is an act of worship to the God who loves them. God’s call is **simple**: To do what is just and right; to do what is good—and to walk humbly with Him in everything I do.
- C. Some people say that tithing is an **Old Testament law** thing—abolished and fulfilled by Jesus. And people think, “Wow—**that’s** cool! Now I only need to give what I **feel**

like giving!” Jesus actually did criticize the way the Pharisees and Teacher’s of the law tithed. He called them **hypocrites** and said:

For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. (Matthew 23:23 NLT)

-Jesus was not saying, “Don’t tithe.” He was dealing with this ugly attitude behind it that made sure God didn’t get **more** than He deserved! Giving—tithing—was intended to be an act of love and respect for God. For them, tithing had become the tax you paid to **get God off your back!**

1. And we can do that too. Sometimes, when faith degrades into religion, people see their relationship with God as **transactional**.

-Let me explain that. We have a **transactional** relationship with Revenue Canada. How many of you pay your taxes out of love for Canada? You **gladly** send in your taxes—and a little more because of the joy you feel in it all? NO? I’m **surprised!!!** When we think of taxes, we don’t think of love—we think of some nerdy, pointy nosed Revenue Canada guy with a pencil and a calculator—just **waiting** for you to screw up!

-A transactional relationship—this **accounting** relationship is not love; it’s a scoreboard run by a grumpy accountant. What Jesus revealed about love through his relationship with the Father and the Spirit is that it’s this ongoing, loving, self-giving relationship where no one keeps score.

-By the way, if a close friendship or a marriage goes transactional, “Wow, you washed both cars! She **owes** you, Dude!”—that relationship is in trouble. Love is **way** different.

2. The Bible makes it clear that God’s relationship with us is based on love. **“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NLT)**

-See, Jesus said...and lived...over and over: Love **gives**—because **God gives!** He’s a giver **not** a taker! HE loves you—and will care for you.

You can sell your possessions and give to the poor and **not be afraid!** Look around you—everything is a gift! At the core, our calling is to be like Jesus. Jesus didn’t just talk profoundly about love—He **gave**; He **served**. Ultimately, he poured out his life for others.

-Here’s the deal; **love** is at the core of the operating system of life. And, according to everything we see, **love gives**. Can **anyone** tell me where you can love—but you don’t have to give? Without generosity—giving—love and kindness get stuck and growth stops. And when growth stops, that affects joy and peace—which are at the **core** of blessing. You and I **cannot** become the

people God has created us to be without giving. There is **no** blessing in life without giving. See, we were created in the image of God—and God is a **giver**, not a **taker**.

3. The **tithe** was never intended as this legalistic tax you pay to God. It was intended to get people off dead center when it comes to faith—and giving. When God doesn't get the first and best—we begin to believe, "**I** deserve the first and the best!" Pleasing God is about loving God—and loving others. And we **can't** do that without learning to give. Period.

-Next week we're going to be talking about Jesus' story of **The Good Samaritan**. In that story—what does **love** look like? Well, it looks like time and inconvenience and oil and bandages and money.

-Sometimes we think compassionate and noble thoughts and shed a tear or two. We can fool ourselves into believing that we're really quite loving. But **feelings** are not the same as love. John, a disciple and one of Jesus' closest friends says:

We know what real love is because Jesus GAVE up his life for us. So we also ought to GIVE up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. (1 John 3:16-18 NLT).

Question: Is it **true** love if you never engage, never sacrifice, never serve, and never give? Let me answer it with another question: Is it **true** love for your family if you think nice thoughts about them—but never provide for them, serve them, engage with them, or sacrifice for them? No. That's not called love.

-If you want to be like Jesus; if you want the character of God formed in your heart—that will mean becoming a **Giver**—just like Him. If you want to walk the path of blessing through this life—and the next, it involves learning to **give**. Not leftovers scraped off the plate of your life—but giving your best. Giving when it hurts—when it's scary—and when it's inconvenient.

III. FAITH THAT ACTUALLY WORKS!

- A. I want to do an experiment in posture this morning. Are you up for that? Let's divide this room in half. Well, **almost** in half. If you're on **my** left, use your bodies to express the **giving** posture. Take your hands, like his, palms up—and hold them like that. This is what it means to let go. To not clutch or grab or cling to things. It's saying with your body, "Okay, God, I'm going to just let it go—whatever it is."
 - While you're doing that—those of you who are on **my** right use the **taker** posture. You clutch your fingers together, make a little fist with your hands—and keep doing that. This is the symbol of hanging on, gotta have it, gotta protect it, gotta keep it—cause it's mine, mine, **mine!**

1. Now, look at each other and notice how this positions you relationally. On my left, the symbolism of what you're doing shows openness, caring. Maybe you're next to someone you love—and you want to pat them on that back, or put your arm around them. Maybe you're next to someone you don't know—but they're kinda cute—and you'd **like** to...no, don't do that.

-Those of you on my right—how are you positioned relationally? It kinda looks like you're making a fist. What do people do with their fists?

-Jesus, when he says, "It's more blessed to give than to receive" is saying, "It's more blessed to live like his—hands open—than like this—fists clenched."

2. What Jesus said about giving isn't only true—it **works** in real life. All the studies are consistent. High school students were chosen at random from a group who were below average in reading to tutor younger students—and giving that time changed their lives. They were 12X more likely to finish high school, attend university, vote—and less likely to do drugs. Why? **It's more blessed to GIVE than to receive.**

-Giving could save your life! Studies in people over 80 showed that those gave of themselves to help school-age children were better off in every way—emotionally and mentally—and lived longer than those who didn't. Why? Because, Jesus said, "Giving will fill up your heart; it is **more** blessed, it's a better, more fulfilling way to do life than receiving! **Will you at least TRY it?**

3. How many of you want to change lives, make a difference—leave a legacy in this world? You can't do that without giving. Generosity is one of the most powerful qualities you can develop in your life. If you've ever been touched by generosity—you know how powerful it is. Not just in this life; but forever.

-In a community like this—**we get a chance, by simply giving, to join God in his plan to make every square inch of this planet right—and heal people's souls for eternity!**

-God's secret force in this world is common, ordinary, flawed, weak people—with generous hearts. People who are scared, feel weak and inadequate—whose hands shake as they give—but do it **anyway!** And when we do, God smiles, Heaven cheers—and the world becomes a **better** place!

- B. Here's the bottom line question: Do *I* believe—**really** believe that Jesus is **right about everything**—and that it is more blessed...way, way, **way** more blessed to give than to receive? Do I really believe that as I give—I will be transformed—and so will others?

-See, truth about me is that sometimes I've found a gap between what I **say** I believe—and how I actually **live**. Jesus unveiled two motives that kill generosity. One is fear, and the other is greed. In other words, **MORE--PROSPERITY...**is my god. After my house, my accounts, my basement, my cottage is stuffed with **more**, THEN maybe I'll give. Because **MORE** is the point of my life."

-Honestly, though, as I interact with you and get to know you—greed isn't what I usually see. It's **fear**. Look across this group, that's not what I see. I see **fear**. Especially these days. "I'd love to be a generous person and give, but **what if...?**"

1. Michael Novak, in his book, **Belief and Unbelief** talks about three different kinds of convictions. The first kind are our **public convictions**. These are the things I believe for PR purposes. These are the things I publicly affirm as values because it makes me look more noble, wiser, more spiritual—or **saves my scrawny neck**. Someone very close to me asks, "Do these pants make my hips look big?" I say, "Of course not! I didn't even notice that you **had** hips!"

-But we also have **private convictions**. These are things I **think** I believe until circumstances change—and show me that I **don't** actually believe them. A few years ago, America's Funniest Videos showed a guy who was going skydiving for the first time. He was all brave and everything—until it came time to jump. He was crying, yelling—and cowering in the corner, "**NO-O-O!** I won't go! **I won't go!**" He privately believed he would skydive—until there was an open door, and a 10,000 feet of open sky.

Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, told everyone he would never forsake Jesus in his darkest hour—but within hours, he **did**.

-Then there are our **core convictions**. Our **core convictions** are revealed, not by what we **say**, but by what we actually **do**. Novak says that everyone has this mental map about the **way things really are**—and you never violate this map. For example, one of my core convictions is that hot stuff burns. I never **knowingly** violate this. I don't need to remind myself when I'm making fudge that this bubbling stuff in the pot will do nasty stuff to my hands. I'm never tempted to step off a 10-storey building—thinking maybe **this** time gravity will be wrong. **I'm a believer**.

-My public convictions might be an act; my private convictions might be fickle—but I **never** violate my core convictions—because **that's** what I believe about the way things really are.

2. Which of these convictions do you think Jesus came to change: our **public** convictions, our **private** convictions, or our **core** convictions? **Core convictions**. Jesus was the **only** person whose public, private and core convictions matched perfectly.

-So. I want to call you out; do you **really** believe that Jesus was right? Do you believe that He was dead on when He said that it is **more** blessed to give than to receive? And would people be able to see that this is a **core** conviction of yours by looking at the transactions of your life—your bank records; the records of how you use your time and spend your money?

-If that's not of you, things will never change unless you come to a defining moment where you **choose** to make this a core conviction. And, in doing that, there comes this scary moment when you have to take this scary step into new territory and just **give**—and trust that God will back you up. unless you **choose** to make this a **core** conviction—part of your map of the **way life is**--and

actually **jump**--take this scary step into new territory. If you don't, generosity will be this interesting, thought-provoking idea that never made from your mind to your heart to your hands. And one day realize what **might** have been.

3. Giving requires **faith**. In fact, there are times in life when faith demands 100% commitment—even when you don't have 100% certainty.

-Abraham is the Father of faith. After waiting until he's almost 100, God finally keeps his promise that he and Sarah, his 90 year old wife, will have a son. They name him **Isaac**, or **laughter**. People could hear them cackling in their tents at the craziness of two old geezers chasing this toddler--who is the **delight** of their lives! Fast forward...

-One day God asked Abraham to do the unthinkable; take Isaac to a distant mountain—and offer him as a sacrifice. True to **who** he is, Abraham leaves the next morning. There's this verbal snapshot of He and Isaac walking up the mountain with the fire, the wood and the rope. Isaac, in his little boy innocence, asks "Where's the sacrifice, Dad?" Abraham is evasive. "God will provide." Fast forward...

-Isaac is tied up, laid on the wood, and Abraham has the knife raised, tears running into his beard—when God stops him and says, "Now I know that you respect me and love me more than my gifts. And these words, **"You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son."** (Genesis 22:12 NLT)

And **that** day, God revealed himself as Yahweh Jireh. **God will provide.**

-Middle East Legend tells us that this specific mountain Abraham went to is located outside the walls of Jerusalem—now called Golgotha. It represents another day, when another Father walked his Son up the hill—summarized by these words, **For God so loved the world...He GAVE His Son.** True love is more than words; love **gives**.

4. Today, I want to call you to a **new** place; to faith. To do what God challenges **all** his followers to do when it comes to giving. To make the **tithe** your starting place. In God's own words: **Try it! Put me to the test! (Malachi 3:10 NLT)** See, if you don't—it won't be easier next month, next year or any other time.

-The alternative to faith is to back away from the edge of generosity, build a little cottage—and **die there**. And if you do that—the difference you could've made, the person you could've become, the blessing you could've known will all get packed in mothballs. See, everybody actually **does** believe something and act on it. Some people believe that **more** is the path to blessing—and jump; others believe that generosity is the path God has blessed and jump. Everybody believes—and everyone jumps.

It takes faith. It's scary. You have to **jump**. But the alternative—of **missing** the chance to make a difference—of **not** becoming the person you were meant to be—is not a good one. Not when you have **one** life.

5. Remember Richard Stearns? Want to hear the rest of his story? Right at the peak of his career in Lennox, World Vision asked him if he would consider working for them. He didn't want to. He pled with God, "Send someone else—like Mother Theresa!" His defining moment came in a hut in Uganda—ground zero for the AIDS crisis in the world. He was talking to a 13 year old boy, also named Richard. Outside the hut were two graves—this boys Mom and Dad. And now he was left as the **adolescent** parent of two siblings—in a tiny house with no running water, no electricity and no beds. But still, he wanted to be a doctor to grow up and help people with the disease.
- To make conversation, Stearns asked Richard if he had a Bible—and if he could read it. His eyes shining, this boy ran to the other room and brought out his prized possession—a Bible. He said, "I love to read the book of John, because it says that Jesus loves the children."

-And that was Richard Stearns defining moment. He remembered the words he'd said so self-righteously to his wife—that they would never own fine china as long as children were starving. He says, "...My tears started to flow. "Forgive me Lord. I **didn't** know..." For the past 10 years Richard Stearns has found his core calling—as President of World Vision, USA. He had received a **lot**. But now he knows, "It is **more** blessed to give—than to receive.

IV. PARADE OF TRUTH

- A. We live in a **tough** world. It's a world that **needs** generous people—who actually **believe** what Jesus said. That it's **more** blessed to give than to receive. I've thought about that a lot. And I fully intended to **show** you that in all the ways people's lives are changed when you give at The Olive Branch; how thirsty people get pure water; how orphans are cared for and the hungry are fed. How homeless people and teens at risk—and people who've been warehoused are loved and helped. I'd love to show you pictures of how our children are given a different and better foundation for life—other than **MORE!** How teens are growing big hearts and how people far from God are coming home—and those who have **lost** hope are **finding** hope.
- Giving makes a **huge** difference. But giving has to go deeper than getting **bang for your buck**. Giving is an act of worship. Giving is a prostitute coming to Jesus, sobbing, breaking her only possession, a clay of perfume, and spilling it at Jesus' feet. Giving is the poor widow who came to the temple treasury—and, as an act of worship to the God she loved—gave the last two copper coins she had to live on. Jesus stood up, pointed her out, and said, "She gave more than any else. All the others gave their leftovers—she gave **all** she had to live on!" **It's more blessed to give than to receive.**
- B. Today, you stand on the thresh-hold of what you **really** believe about Jesus' words. Is it more blessed to give...or to receive. Your choice on what you believe—and what you **do** about it will change your life and your world for better—or for worse. Hands open—or closed. I want to encourage you—right in the middle of the financial chaos of our world—to make the best decision of your life. To be a **giver!**