

Series: Graced to Give

“The Call to a Generous Life”

1 Kings 17:8-16

This morning we are concluding our sermon series called “Graced to Give”. All throughout this series we have been reminded that God has blessed us greatly, but these blessings are not intended to be hoarded. We have been graced to give and we have been blessed to be a blessing. Many get offended at the thought of discussing our money; however, this isn’t so much about our money. This is about our lives. This is about us surrendering all that we have and all that we are to God. This is about us declaring Jesus as Lord over every area of our life. When Jesus is truly the Lord of our life, we will cheerfully, willingly, and even sacrificially give of all that we have – our time, our talents, our treasures, and even our things – for the glory of God and for the good of others. To live like Christ is to live a life fully devoted to the will of the Father. Jesus gave generously of Himself and, as He gave to us, He calls us to give to others for His glory. **1 John 3:16-18**, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” Please notice that God showed His love for us by generously giving us His own Son so that we would be saved and have eternal life. Then He clearly shows us that if we have received Jesus as our Savior then we, too, should practice generosity by giving for His glory and the good of others. I am convinced that we are never more like Jesus than when we are cheerfully, willingly, and sacrificially giving for the glory of God and the good of others.

Throughout the course of our study we have learned several key principles of generosity:

1. What we give and how we give on this earth matters in eternity.
2. Our generosity should be “a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God”.
3. In generosity, we reap proportionately to what we have sown.
4. Generosity demonstrates our love for God and our love for others.
5. Generosity is God’s means of partnership in His work.
6. Generosity is God’s means of provision in our lives.
7. Our generosity points others to God.

There are many other lessons that we have learned, but these are the primary ones that we have seen. As we conclude this series, I felt it best to end with a practical illustration of the many points that we have learned. There are literally hundreds of illustrations all throughout the Bible which teach us about generosity and, truthfully, we could never find a better example than Jesus. But, there is a very unfamiliar illustration of generosity that is given to us in 1 Kings 17. I believe this passage perfectly illustrates many of the principles that we’ve learned in this series, but it also highlights some of the difficulties that we, too, face when we begin to heed the call of generosity.

State Title and Read Text.

The passage that we read this morning is very uncommon to most Christians. There are two main characters – Elijah, who was a prophet of God, and a lady that we simply know as a widow. It is important for us to understand the background of this text. Early on in Israel's history, God had established a covenant with them. In His covenant, God promised to bless them if they obeyed Him and honored Him. However, if they disobeyed and dishonored Him God promised to judge them. There would be many blessings for their obedience, but there would be many consequences for their disobedience. One of the main consequences is that God declared that in their disobedience He would turn the heavens to bronze and the earth to iron. This was a clear indication that if they turned away from Him, God would withhold the rain and thus there would be drought and hardship on the land. In 1 Kings 17 that is exactly what is happening. God raised up Elijah to go to Ahab to declare that there would be no rain on the land for many years until God led him to say otherwise. The message may not have seemed serious at the moment, but it truly was. The consequences would be devastating to an entire nation. The Jewish people depended on the seasonal rains for the success of their crops. If there was no rain, there'd be no crops. If there were no crops, then there'd be a famine in the land and many would die. God raised up Elijah to tell the sobering news to Ahab, and then God did something amazing. He miraculously provided for Elijah. He led him to a brook called Cherith where God hid him and provided for him. Most scholars believe that he was there for almost two years. So, while much of the land was experiencing great famine, God was taking care of His servant for two years. Then, due to the drought the brook dried up. What was Elijah to do? He simply looked to the Lord. God had a plan for him. It is in watching God's plan play out that we learn the call to generosity.

I. The Command of Generosity (vs. 8-9)

Where does generosity begin? It begins with God. God knew exactly what He was doing in Elijah's life. God knew when the brook would dry up and He had already made provisions for Elijah to be taken care of. Elijah didn't know every detail, but God certainly did. When the brook dried up, God spoke to Elijah and said, "Get up and go to Zeraphath." Something you will see throughout this passage and throughout our lives is that sometimes God's will doesn't make much sense to us. Zeraphath would've been the most unlikely place to go for food. The whole Phoenician region depended on Israel for most of its food supply. They weren't known for their own crops and agricultural prowess. But, when God speaks and God sends, we must simply obey and leave the rest up to Him. We must never forget that wherever God tells us to go, He is already there at work and He will take care of us. So, Elijah obeys God and makes his way to Zeraphath.

As the Lord gives Elijah some clarity, He tells us something specific. He says "I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." This is often how God works. To accomplish His will, He had already commanded someone specifically what to do. He had already gone before Elijah to make sure that his needs were met. Again, though, this seems strange. A widow was the most unlikely person for Elijah to be sent to. Surely, there was someone else that God could use. There were definitely some other candidates who would have had more resources and means to

bless God's servant. In our mind, it doesn't seem that the widow had much to offer. However, it really didn't matter what she did or didn't have. What mattered is that God had a plan and purpose. He had already talked to this widow about meeting Elijah's needs when He got to town. Please notice that the word is "commanded". In other words, God was not giving a suggestion or saying what He hoped that she would do. He is saying clearly that in His authority He had commanded her to take care of him. We don't know how He told her or when He did so, but the fact is that the word "commanded" is in the past tense, so we know that the communication had already occurred. This was definitely a command of generosity. Obedience to God's command would affect her finances, her resources, her time, her home, and her family. God was calling her to give generously to bless His servant. God was calling her to take all that she had – her time, talents, treasures, and things – and surrender them to Him so that He would be glorified.

We, too, have moments like this. There are times in our lives when God puts specific things on our heart that He calls us to do. There are times when He makes us aware of specific needs and opportunities. These are things that we often need to pray through. However, there are many things about generosity that we don't need to pray about. When God clearly commands us to do something in His Word, we needn't pray about it. Someone told me a while back, "Pastor, I am praying about whether or not I should share the gospel with a family member." At that point I informed him that he didn't need to pray about what God has already revealed in His Word that it His will for him to share. He simply needed to pray for boldness and for the Holy Spirit to move. There are some things God has already declared that we simply need to do. Listen to God's commands about our giving and generosity. **Malachi 3:10**, " 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,' says the Lord of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.' " **1 Corinthians 16:1-2**, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." **In Luke 10:30-37** Jesus described the Good Samaritan who used his time to help a man in need, used his things to carry the man to safety and bandage his wounds, and used his treasures to pay for the man's continued care. Jesus then clearly commanded in **Luke 10:37**, "Go and do the same." Jesus further commanded in **Luke 12:33-34**, "Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." God has given us clear commands of giving and generosity, and He certainly did the same with the widow.

A. God Provided What Was Needed for Obedience.

At first glance it would seem as harsh to some that God would give such a command to a widow. She has enough to bear and didn't really need an extra burden. But, what I want us to clearly see this morning is that God had already provided her with everything that was needed to obey His command. God is not harsh or cruel. He always equips us to do what He calls us to do. God's command seems simple. He commanded her to provide for Elijah. His most basic needs would have been food, clothes (which he already had on his

back), and lodging. God had provided the widow with all of this. She had some flour and some oil for food. She likely had a garment or two from her deceased husband. And she had a place to stay. She didn't have much. She certainly wasn't living luxuriously. Anything that she could offer seemed like nothing compared to what others could give, but remember that little is much when God is in it. ****ILL**: When the lad brought his five loaves and two fish, Jesus multiplied it to feed over 5,000. When the waiters brought six empty water pots to Jesus at the wedding celebration, Jesus commanded they be filled with water and then He turned it to wine. The point is that it isn't about the amount we have in our hand. It's about us trusting God and obeying Him with all that He puts in our hands. The widow didn't have much, but she could give what she had. It is important for us to realize that God doesn't ask us to give what we don't have. He simply calls us to give of what we do have. Remember in **2 Corinthians 8:3** the Macedonian believers gave of their ability and beyond their ability. It doesn't matter what they didn't have, but what they did have they gave willingly and sacrificially to the Lord.

B. God Positioned Her for Obedience

So, Elijah headed off to Zeraphath without asking God another question. Elijah didn't know who the widow was. He had no way of knowing who God had been speaking to. Elijah was simply going to meet people, ask questions, and see where God was at work. Apparently, God wasted no time in showing Elijah who He had been talking to. As soon as Elijah got to Zeraphath and came to the city gate he saw this widow gathering sticks. Now, this is not the place that most would go to pick up sticks. The fact that she was picking them up at the city gate suggests that she was likely very poor and likely very weak physically. Most would go out of the city gates, but she stayed close by. Regardless of the reason she was there, one thing is certain: God is sovereign over all things. There are many reasons from our perspective that she was at the city gate, but from heaven's perspective God put her right where He wanted her to be. So, here she is diligently laboring to pick up sticks to go prepare a meal for her small, struggling family. From her perspective she was just in her normal, everyday routine. But from God's perspective He was placing her there for a divine purpose. God had called her to be generous. Now He had placed her right where she needed to be to meet Elijah and provide for his needs.

C. God Pointed Her to the Need

I love this lady's heart to be generous. Remember she likely didn't know who Elijah was and she certainly didn't know when he would arrive to Zeraphath. It seems from the series of events here that she didn't even know all that God was asking of her. She simply knew that she had been commanded by God to take care of one of His servants. So, as she is working diligently to get everything ready to prepare a meal for her son, suddenly there is an interruption. I imagine that none of us enjoy interruptions, especially when dinner time is near. Elijah interrupted her work and called to her saying, "Please get me a little water in a jar that I may drink." This was the first need that God made her aware of. Elijah was thirsty, which we can understand because he had travelled close to 100 miles to get from the brook Cherith to Zarephath. Remember, God had commanded her to

provide for His servant. So, though the timing was less than ideal, she sought to obey God. She didn't give a single excuse to meeting this need. She could've said, "Well, I'm very weary and weak, I can't do this for you." She could have given him directions on where he could go to find water. She could've complained about the famine and how difficult it was to find water. She didn't talk about all that she had going on. She didn't act as if she didn't have time for this stranger. Instead, she gave of herself, her time, and her precious water. There was absolutely no hesitation. Perhaps she responded so quickly because the task was simple. Though there was a famine, she could still find water and put it in a small jar. It would require some time and energy, but it would not be of great cost. What I want us to see here is that God made her first aware of a simple, practical, physical need. But the greatest need in the story was not what God was doing to meeting Elijah's needs, but what God was doing to meet her needs. To accomplish this, God gives her this first small task of getting water to test her and see if she would be obedient to His command. So, as soon as she goes to get the water, Elijah calls out again, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." This second request leads us to the second point of the message.

II. The Conflict of Generosity (vs. 12-13a)

As the scene progresses, we see a great conflict occurring. Originally God had commanded her to provide for Elijah. Initially it appeared that all he needed was water. This required little sacrifice on her part, so she was quite willing and ready to provide the water. But, this second request took things a step further. It would be easy here to get mad at Elijah. We could think, "What a jerk! Who does this guy think he is?" But remember, Elijah is a prophet of God. God led him to the widow and God even guided his words and actions. Verse 16 shows us that the Lord was speaking through Elijah. This request for bread struck a cord with this lady. And, if we are honest, I think God's call to generosity strikes the same cord in our own lives. The conflict is seen in four ways:

A. The Difficulty She Faced

As soon as Elijah requests the bread, there was a change in her action and a change in her tone. We see it in the word "but". She was willing to give what cost nothing, but to provide bread, this was too great a sacrifice for her to make. She explained to Elijah, "I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar." She was in a very difficult situation. She's in a place where she literally has almost nothing to give. She had a few meager ingredients to prepare for a meal. She has likely already sold all that she could and done all that she could to provide for her and her son. Now the food is almost all gone, the cupboard is bare, and she has enough flour and oil to make a single piece of bread. Remember, she would've been the most unlikely person to go to if you were looking for your needs to be met. But, even her time of difficulty wasn't an excuse to disobey God. Her state of poverty didn't matter. God had a plan for her. Even though she was down to a handful of flour, God called her to give it away. He was calling her to be generous even when it seemed she had nothing to give. It reminds me of the

Macedonian believers from **2 Corinthians 8:2** who gave in “a great ordeal of affliction” and “deep poverty”.

We must be careful that we don't allow our perception of our resources to hinder our obedience to give generously for the glory of God and the good of others. It is often difficult to give because we may feel that we have nothing to give. Maybe we've sold all that we can and we feel that we've done all that we can. But, God still calls us to be generous. If He had a plan and purpose for the handful of flour and oil, then surely He has a plan for things that we possess and can bring to Him!

B. The Discouragement She Felt

As we read the latter part of verse 12, our hearts are gripped with heartache for this widow. She has lost her husband. She has done all that she can to provide for her son. Perhaps she did well for a season, but now she is throwing in the towel. She is in a place of deep despair. She tells Elijah that she didn't have bread, only some flour and oil. She explained that she was gathering sticks so that she could go home and cook up this little bread, but that was it. It's as if she is saying, “This is all I have. I will fix it, we will eat it, and then there'll be nothing else to eat. We will die.” She wasn't saying that their death would be immediate, but that they would eventually starve to death. Few of us can fully grasp the desperation of this mother. She has lovingly taken care of her son and has done all she knows. Now she's literally down to her last crumbs. In her discouragement, she concludes that the outcome is inevitable. There was nothing that anyone could do to change the situation. All she saw was the physical, the immediate, the here-and-now. All she saw was that she had little left and God desired that she give it away.

When it comes to generosity, we, too, often allow our discouragement to hinder us. We determine the outcome of things before they even happen. Satan is great at planting lies in our mind that cause us to see only the immediate here-and-now, while ignoring the fact that God's promises are true and He always provides for those who honor Him.

C. The Doubt She Felt

Please understand that this widow didn't know all the things about God that we know today. She didn't understand initially that God would promise to meet her needs. She didn't know that God would promise to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. She knew clearly what God was calling her to do, but she doubted God. Why did she doubt Him? Because she didn't know Him. She told Elijah that God was His God. She was a Gentile woman. She didn't know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As a result, she doubted whether or not He could be trusted. She couldn't understand that if God would provide for Elijah that He would also provide for her. Perhaps she thought she was unworthy or of little value to God. Perhaps she thought God would never care about her and her son's personal needs and provisions. Perhaps she thought she just wasn't as valuable to God as was Elijah. We don't know all of the reasons, but we see clearly that she doubted God. This is why when Elijah responded to her answer his first words were, “Do not fear.” She was walking in

fear because she was living by her own understanding. God wanted her to walk in faith and experience the miracle of His provision.

So often we are the same way. God leads us to do something, but we refuse to obey because we worry about the future. We can't see how it is all going to work out. I want to remind you this morning that the future is in God's hands. He knows what will happen in your life and, if you are living for Him, He will give you the provision and the grace that you need no matter what may happen tomorrow.

D. The Dilemma She Faced

Notice what transpired next. Elijah commanded, "Do as you have said, but **make me a little bread cake from it first** and bring it out to me." As I think of what this lady must have been feeling, I begin to empathize with her. She had so little left that she felt she was going to soon starve to death. And then God commands her to give away what little she had left. While it may sound like God was being harsh, we must understand that God was bringing her to a crisis of belief. He was bringing her to a point where she must make a decision about God – to trust Him and believe or doubt Him and reject. She was at a crossroads. She didn't know all the end results, but literally, her life and the life of her son was hanging in the balance. To believe God and obey would mean life and blessing, to disobey and reject Him would certainly mean death. It was all black and white. But, she must make a decision and respond to God's leading. It is important for us to realize God's command to her wasn't really about money, nor was it truly about her resources and possessions. The whole ordeal was about her experiencing God. God's command to her was His invitation to experience Him personally. And how do we experience Him? By FAITH! To answer God's call and fulfill His will would require great faith on her part. **Hebrews 11:6** says it well, "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

Do we recognize that God knew exactly what He was asking of her? Do we recognize and believe that God had a plan in all of this? Do you think that God was actually surprised by the amount of flour she had? After all, wasn't it God who had actually provided her with all she had anyway? And couldn't He have provided more if He chose to do so? So, Elijah says, "Bake the bread and give it to me first." I can hear it now, "He's just an unreasonable preacher asking for more. Some nerve this guy has!" Elijah, though, was simply expressing the will and desire of God which God had already made known to the widow. Obeying God required faith because she had to believe that Elijah's God was capable of taking care of her and her son. Obeying God also required sacrifice because this was literally all that she had. God didn't look at her and say, "Well, I understand your poor state. I understand that you are weary and weak. I understand that this is all you have, so don't worry about it." Through Elijah, God was saying, "Don't be afraid. Believe in Me. Trust in Me and give to Me first."

For us. This is what tithing is all about. It's giving God the first-fruits in our life. It is showing that HE is first in our lives. We should give to Him first and then with the leftovers we should provide for our families and bless others. Instead, we often do all that

we want with our families and perhaps will bless others, and if God is lucky we give Him what little is left over. God says, “Give to me first.” Her dilemma was clear. It was a crisis of belief.

III. The Certainty of Generosity (vs. 13-14)

What do we do when we face uncertainty? What should we do when we face the crisis of belief like this widow? We cling to the promises of God. We look to Him who never changes. We look to His Word and listen for His voice.

A. The Promise: God never forgets those who have given to Him.

God has spoken through Elijah and has requested her to take her little bit of flour and oil to make him a small bread cake. There was only enough for one small piece. This wasn't even enough to feed a person and God wanted it for Elijah first. I'm sure she understood, logically, that if she did what he was asking, then there would be nothing left for her and her son. But, God's message didn't end there. Elijah continued, “After you have prepared a bread cake for me, you will have enough to make one for you and your son.” In other words, God has now tripled the offering. She had enough for one bread cake, but once she gave it in obedience to God first, He would multiply it and see to it that she would have enough for her and her son. God's promises, though, continued. He said, “The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.” What an amazing promise! She has next to nothing, but God promises that if she will believe Him and obey Him then He would meet her needs. Please understand, God is calling her to act in faith. Remember that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) God is calling this woman to live according to His promises, not according to her circumstance. He is calling her to look beyond the physical and to focus on the things unseen. He is calling her to live generously in spite of her poverty. If she would obey, God promised to take care of her. He promises the same to us in **Matthew 6:33**: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

B. The Provision: When we surrender to the Lord, He provides us with all we need.

The widow was at a crisis of belief and had to make a decision. She chose wisely. Even though she didn't understand it all, she heard the promise of God and believed His Word. “So she went and did according to the word of Elijah.” When in faith she obeyed God, she soon discovered that God is real and His promises are true. God's provisions became overwhelmingly clear when she stepped out in faith and obeyed His will. This dear lady fully surrendered to the will of God and gave all she had to feed God's minister. She didn't know every detail of what would occur and she didn't know how it would occur, but she had faith that God was powerful enough to do what He said He would do. She had to surrender to God before she experienced the promise.

Unfortunately, we usually try to bargain with God and say, “If you'll do this, then I'll do this.” What God desires and deserves is our total surrender first. Then, as we surrender to

Him, we can watch Him do amazing things in and through our life for His glory. What is God calling you to do? How is God leading you to use your time for Him? How is God leading you to use your talents and gifts for His glory and for others? How is God leading you to give your treasures to Him? What things in your life could be impacting others for the Kingdom? Look beyond your own limitations and trust God and His Word. Surely if he could take the flour and oil of a widow and multiply it greatly to accomplish His purposes, then He can do even greater things with all that we surrender to Him as well.

C. The Purpose: As we trust God with our resources, He will multiply them for His glory and our good.

We need to be reminded this morning that this whole encounter had a purpose. God always has a purpose when He calls us to do something. As I close this message, I'd like to ask you a simple question. Knowing all that we know now, in this passage of Scripture who needed the gift of the bread the most? Did God need the bread? Of course not. He owns everything and could've easily found another source. Did Elijah really need the bread? The fact that this lady had only enough flour and oil suggests that this one biscuit wasn't going to go very far anyway. God had just provided for Elijah for 2 years by putting him beside a brook and by ordering the ravens to take him food. The person who needed the giving of the gift the most was the widow. God didn't really need it and Elijah didn't really need it. The widow needed to give the gift because in doing so she learned to trust in God and, as a result, she came to experience Him and know Him. And in the end, who received the most? The Lord led her to give everything she had and in return He multiplied it over and over again, for over a year until he sent rain on the earth. If God can do that with a handful of flour, there is no telling what God can do with the time, talents, treasures, and things that He's entrusted to us. Some of us will never know what God can do with these things because we refuse to trust Him, refuse to surrender, and refuse to obey. But some of us, by His grace and mercy, will witness time and time again the amazing power, the firm promises, and the constant provision of God.

For some of us today, that starts with a call to first experience God. It starts with a relationship with Him. But, for others who already have that relationship, it starts with a call to generosity when we demonstrate His Lordship by generously giving our time, talents, treasures, and things for the glory of God and the good of others. Will you answer the call?