

# Generosity: The Fruit of Gratitude

## Stewardship Sunday 2019 overview



### Introduction

For Stewardship Sunday 2019, we chose Luke 7:36-50. This passage contrasts a Pharisee and a woman, focusing on their displays of gratitude and generosity. The passage ties together forgiveness, grace, love, gratitude and generosity in a powerful way, through the actions of a sinful woman, the response of a Pharisee and one of Jesus' captivating stories about a benevolent moneylender. The text is rich, with multiple areas for focus.

Below you will find a call to worship, children's story, sermon, offertory prayer and sending blessing. They are examples to use or adapt. Although you could read them verbatim, we expect you will want to add, delete or change to make them your own.

In working with this text, you might notice it could be divided into three sermons:

- Debtors one and all: Who will love more?
- The transforming power of acceptance.
- Go in peace.

We have been given many gifts by our God and Creator. Being good stewards of these gifts is a biblical mandate. As you prepare for Stewardship Sunday, may the Holy Spirit guide you and prepare the hearts of your congregation to hear the message of biblical stewardship, gratitude and generosity.

### Call to worship\*

Friends, we gather together this morning to proclaim the ways in which God is working in our midst.

**We have been blessed by God!**

We gather together to give thanks for the ways in which God is working in our midst.

**We are being blessed by God!**

We gather together to open our eyes to the ways God is using us to work within our midst.

**We will continue to be blessed by God!**

*\* Created by Sarah E. Weaver, (c) 2014*



**Everence**®

Dear ones, God has given us so much and is very much alive, at work and still speaking among us. We are called to give back.

**We are called to be good stewards; good stewards of our time, of our resources and of our money.**

Let us give thanks to our God of blessings and affirm our commitment to the ministry God is calling us into.

**Let us give thanks to God!**

**Let us proclaim our faith in God!**

**Let us worship God!**

## Children's story

As the children come forward, have them sit down and thank them for coming. Pull out a basket full of candy and tell the children that you would like to give them a piece of candy. But not to eat it yet! They can each choose one piece and then have a seat.

After all the children have had a chance to get a piece, tell them that this candy isn't for them – it is to give to someone else. Pause for a moment to let this sink in. Then ask, "How does it make you feel that I asked you to give this candy to someone else?"

If they need some help to get started, you may want to note that it probably feels pretty bad because they thought the candy was for them. Maybe they feel tricked. Maybe they didn't really want the candy anyway. Who knows how they might respond? Now, give them another piece of candy. Now, they have one piece for themselves and one to give away. Ask, "How does it feel to have a second piece that you can keep?"

You may then want to say something like, "You notice that when you have something to be grateful for, it is often easier to give the other piece away. Too often, we don't even realize all that we have to be grateful for, and when that is the case, it makes it a lot harder to be generous and care for others.

"This week, you may want to practice gratitude as a family. As you get up or when you go to bed, consider making lists or drawing pictures of all the things you are grateful for: feeling supported, cared for and protected ... keep all these lists and pictures and look at them again at the end of the week with your family.

"As you notice all you have, consider how God might be inviting you to be generous with others. You might even want to pray, together with your family, 'God, help us to see how you might use our gifts for your work in this world.' Then, pay attention to the invitations or nudges you sense to care for all of God's creation."

## Scripture reading: Luke 7:36-50

### Sermon outline

For Jesus, a parable was less about telling a good story and much more about opening the eyes and minds of his listeners to something new or unseen. Repeatedly, his parables tug at human hearts, shake us from our slumber, and when needed, offer us a swift kick in the pants. This is the point of a parable – to grab our attention and bring God’s reality into focus.

In Luke 7, the parable of the moneylender serves just such a purpose. Spoken to a gathering of people from different backgrounds and experiences, Jesus’ story confronts each of them – and all of us – with how we will respond when grace comes our way.

### Background

Among the Gospels, Luke draws our attention to the deeply compassionate and distinctly prophetic ministry of Jesus. We repeatedly find Jesus caring for the poor, standing with the oppressed and moving toward the marginalized of that culture, including Samaritans, Gentiles and women.

At the same time, Jesus is a bold prophet, rooted in the Hebrew tradition. In his teachings, miracles and confrontations with the powers that seek to contend with God – sin, tradition, Caesar, selfishness – Jesus offers an alternative vision and path for life. To the Gentile readers of Luke’s gospel, the message of mercy coupled with the powerful news of God’s reign must have been especially compelling and liberating.

Though religious leaders could be threatened by and suspicious of Jesus, many are still drawn to him. In Luke 7, Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus to attend a dinner in his home. A gathering like this might be a semi-public event. Small houses with open doors and windows allowed others to lean in and listen to the conversation. Though not explicitly stated in the text, the poor and those living on the margins of society were often allowed in after others had gone home to collect the leftovers from the banquet table. It was a social custom enabling the community to provide a minimum of care for those in need.

The host’s plan for a pleasant dinner conversation among invited guests is upset. One of the people who was expected to stay quiet and remain on the periphery decides to take center stage. A woman, known by Simon and others as a “sinner,” approaches Jesus.

The text does not reveal the reason she is known this way. In this culture, being labeled a “sinner” could be a matter of unrighteous behavior, but the same label was also given to someone with a medical problem, a mental disorder or the simple fact she/he was a Gentile. What we do know is that she is known within her community (v. 37) and that her sins were many (v. 47).

Using a vial of concentrated perfume that women often carried with them, this woman pours it out upon Jesus’ feet. Overcome with emotion, her tears mingle with the expensive fragrance to create a lavish and intimate gift of hospitality and

devotion. Surprisingly, and somewhat scandalously, she wipes her master's feet with her hair and kisses them continuously.

Simon the host is horrified and disgusted. His plans and program had been ruined. This woman – a woman! – dared to interrupt and violate the acceptable social customs of the day. As a Pharisee, he was one “set apart or separated” to be used by God. By the same token, this sinful woman was supposed to remain separate and set apart – as she is beyond the reach of God's love and meant to be kept at a distance from “acceptable society.”

In his disgust and anger, Simon turns on Jesus. Unlike the other Gospels, where the crowd grumbles out loud in response to this outrage, Simon thinks to himself that Jesus is clearly no prophet. If he was, “he would know the kind of woman that was touching him.”

But Jesus demonstrates his prophetic power and perception by discerning Simon's unspoken thoughts. Jesus knows the character of the one who is touching him, just as he knows the thoughts of the one now judging him. In this case, Simon's heart reveals self-centeredness, self-satisfaction and contempt. Whether or not the Pharisee truly knows this woman, his evaluation of her is shaped only by her past. How he sees her, or whether he actually sees her at all, is brought into question by Jesus.

The centerpiece of the story emerges in the parable Jesus poses to Simon. A money lender is owed two substantial debts. Assuming a denarius equaled a day's wage for an unskilled worker, the two debts were burdensome, if not impossible, to repay. In this case, both borrowers were trapped – with no means to make payment and forever beholden to the lender.

In a surprising twist, the moneylender acts with unmerited favor toward the debtors. With no strings attached, the debts are completely forgiven. The two are set free from their burdens and afforded the opportunity to start their lives afresh.

No doubt, Simon is growing increasingly uncomfortable as he listens to the tale. When he finishes the story, Jesus turns to Simon and asks simply, “Which of the two forgiven debtors will love the moneylender more?”

“I suppose,” Simon says, “the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” From that point on, Jesus brings other truths to light. He confronts Simon with the presence of the woman before him. Did he actually “see her?” Before him was a child of God, a human being, just like him in many ways. Could he not perceive that – or was he overlooking her? Turning his back on her?

We also find out that Simon had failed to offer even minimal hospitality when Jesus, his invited guest, arrived at his home. Had he forgotten? Was he so focused on the program surrounding the dinner that he put it above the needs of his guests? Is it possible he purposely withheld hospitality from Jesus, as a way of disrespecting him or trying to exert his own power as a religious leader? Either way, Jesus contrasts his miserly hospitality with the effusive generosity and lavish expression of love (worship) by the woman.

The story ends with Jesus forgiving the many sins of the woman. Her faith, the active trust reflected in her spontaneous and intimate devotion to Jesus in that moment, evidences the fact of her salvation. Set free, Jesus sends her away in peace.

### **Debtors one and all: Who will love more?**

At the heart of the parable of the moneylender, we see the remarkable nature of grace. One who is owed an overwhelming amount of money decides to completely forgive those in debt. It is an unexpected kindness that hints at God's graciousness toward humanity and powerful willingness to forgive.

The parable also intimates that everyone carries a burden of debt. What one owes may seem or be larger than others – but all of us live under the crushing weight of a debt we have no way of repaying.

Simon had been given many things in his life. He was a man – one with power, position, prestige. Unfortunately, as he is depicted in the story, he seems blind to his blessings and no longer mindful of his own spiritual poverty. In the coziness of his religious traditions and sense of spiritual superiority over others, God's grace may have become just a little bit too familiar and routine. He is self-sufficient and appears to neither need nor want anything from Jesus. Lacking gratitude for his many privileges, he acts in miserly ways, showing no hospitality, little regard for others, and with arrogant judgment.

The woman offers a sharp contrast. She is wide-eyed and full of wonder over how much she has been given. Jesus' willingness to welcome and accept her, despite what others think of her and what she likely believes about herself, causes her heart to burst with love. Whatever guilt, shame, or sense of inferiority she has carried around gets released in Jesus' presence. Overcome by how much she had been forgiven and by the overwhelming compassion of Jesus, the woman spontaneously responds with unrestrained love and the sacrificial generosity.

### **Reflection questions**

- How often do I consider just how much I have been given? Forgiven?
- When was the last time I was moved to act with unreserved devotion and/or exceeding generosity? Do my actions in worship reflect how I really feel toward God?
- What can I/we do to keep God's grace from feeling routine or too familiar?

### **The transforming power of acceptance**

The two religious leaders in the story – Simon the Pharisee and Jesus the Rabbi – offer contrasting images of generosity toward others who are different than us. As we think about stewardship, these examples push us to consider hospitality and the transforming power of God that can come when we welcome others.

Simon is a good Pharisee. He is set apart and committed to remain separate from those who would cause him to become "unclean." Contamination was one of the problems of associating with sinners. Their very presence could impact one's standing with God. Like a person with a communicable disease, the safe and sane response was to stay as far away as possible, to remain healthy/clean.

Jesus, of course, was consistently associating with sinners and outsiders – left out and forgotten. Much to the chagrin of the religious leadership, he ate with them, walked and talked with them, and generally seemed to be at home with them. Repeatedly, Jesus sees people whom others choose to ignore, overlook, turn their backs on. He is overwhelmingly generous in sharing God's love, while others set very strict limits on when, how and whether such grace could be offered.

In the story, Jesus accepts the woman immediately. In doing so, she begins to act not as a "sinner" but as a true and devoted follower. By her actions, she appears no longer trapped by the sin and shame of her past, but as one liberated by the healing power of forgiveness.

In Simon's world, where no one can get close enough to contaminate us, the woman was unlikely to ever know the transformational grace that comes from being accepted. In Jesus' world, she finds complete forgiveness at the feet of the Lord, who receives her with open arms.

Theologian Paul Tillich offered a simple but radical definition of faith as "accepting our acceptance." This means coming face to face with the fact that God has declared us loved and forgiven through Jesus Christ. It includes receiving the powerful, healing energy available to make us whole. It means living into the grace, courage and animating strength of the Holy Spirit. Instead of living in fear – in a mad attempt to earn God's favor or avoid God's wrath – we are transformed by and devoted to the One who lovingly accepts us.

As stewards of God's grace, we have the opportunity and responsibility to continue Jesus' work in the world. At the end of letter to the church in Rome, Paul admonishes us to take this seriously as a way of making God known:

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. – Romans 15:5-7*

### Reflection questions

- Who are the people I most struggle to accept? Why? Am I willing to pray for added generosity of spirit to become a better steward of God's grace?
- As a fellowship, how do we create a space where anyone can come in their brokenness and find the healing power of Christ's love?
- As a community of faith, how do we celebrate the stories of transformation happening among us?

### Go in peace

A single story of generosity and worship may inspire us to act in a similar fashion. We are encouraged by the example of the woman who is so expressive in her devotion to Christ and so generous in her giving as she responds to grace.

But the story does not intend to simply encourage random and isolated acts of gratitude. Rather, we are called into a life and community of ongoing generosity. As Jesus announces to the party guests that the woman's faith had saved her, he turns to her saying, "Go in peace."

Unlike the cliché blessing sometimes used today, these words were pregnant with meaning. Jesus sends her out into the world with an invitation to a brand-new reality. To "go in peace" is to walk in wholeness, in right-relation with God and others. It is a call to embrace the "enough-ness" of God and his grace. This peace suggests continuing to live into the spirit of liberation and freedom, courageous faith, radical fidelity to Christ, and generosity toward others.

The peace she found in that moment was not to end there. Instead, the effusive love and sacrificial giving she so willingly demonstrated at the feet of Jesus were to be fleshed out in the rest of the mundane and marvelous moments of her life. "Going in peace" is a journey as much as it is a destination.

The story was written many years after it occurred, at a time when the church was still forming. The unspoken assumption in the text is that this woman will find a new home and family within the Beloved Community – where this kind of peace, faith, service and generosity is nurtured and reinforced. In the midst of a conflicted and miserly world, this fellowship would become the laboratory and training ground for her life-long journey from sinner to saint.

The Apostle Paul helps us imagine this community in his words from 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. He does so by reminding them "to not squander one bit of the marvelous life God has given us." (6:1)

*Dear, dear Corinthians, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively! – 6:11-13 (The Message)*

Unlike the woman, Simon the Pharisee receives no such blessing or invitation from Jesus. In the face of his own lack of generosity and faith, there is only silence. Clearly, Jesus longs for this man to know the same peace. Unfortunately, the smallness of his experience of grace and closed-off perception of God's love keeps Simon from entering the spacious peace of Christ and his beloved community.

#### **Reflection questions:**

- How do we encourage and intentionally cultivate gratitude and generosity as a way of life within our fellowship?
- What practices, disciplines, resources would help us better live into the fullness of Christ's peace as individuals, as a community, and through our witness to the world?

## Conclusion

Grace, when it is truly experienced, transforms every aspect of who we are and how we live. It releases us from a debt we cannot pay and frees us to gratefully share in the debt of love to God and one another (Romans 13:8).

Remembering all we have been given and forgiven has the power to move us toward lavish, unrestrained love. By re-experiencing God's overwhelming grace and acceptance, we find ourselves compelled to exuberant generosity in giving and radical hospitality for others. And in a world so desperately in need of God's grace, our ability and willingness to nurture and share this transforming life with others is an essential matter of stewardship.

Grace. Gratitude. Generosity. When the seed of grace bursts forth into new life, it has a way of cracking open our closed hearts. Gratitude swells within us, flowering into outward expressions of thanks. Best of all, as it is nurtured and encouraged, we begin to bear the fruit of generosity – gladly sharing all we have and all that we are with others – as stewards of God's goodness.

## Offering prayer

Loving God, you have given us life and freedom. Everything we have and everything that we are is a gift from you. You call us to be stewards of this gift. As caretakers of all that you have provided, we offer these gifts as expressions of gratitude. We dedicate these gifts to you. Bless these tithes and offerings. Help us to always use your gifts, the ones we keep and the ones we share, wisely. May our faithful stewardship show Christ to others. We pray these things in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

## Sending blessing

L: Go in peace

**C: As we have heard this morning, "Going in Peace" means going into the world as a whole person, forgiven, smothered in God's grace, ready to show generosity because of our gratitude, and ready to be good stewards of God's grace toward others.**

L: Go in peace



Everence helps individuals, organizations and congregations integrate finances with faith through a national team of advisors and representatives. Everence offers banking, insurance and financial services with community benefits and stewardship education. Everence is a ministry of Mennonite Church USA and other churches.

**Everence**  
1110 N. Main St.  
P.O. Box 483  
Goshen, IN 46527  
(800) 348-7468  
(574) 533-9511

[everence.com](http://everence.com)

Everence offers credit union services that are federally insured by NCUA. We also offer securities and other products that are not federally insured and are subject to loss of principal. All products not available in all states.