

Generospitality

The path of loving

Summary: Remember the generospitality of God toward you and us, and be encouraged to generospitality which will transform our community and our neighbours!

Scripture: John 13:1–11, 21–35; Hebrews 12:14–17, 13:1–6¹

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Introduction

How Much Money Makes You Feel Rich?

I know you will tell me afterwards this point is obvious, but new research has revealed “when it comes to actually feeling rich, Americans say a high annual income is key”.² I’m pretty sure, on this point, Australians will not be much different than our American cousins, even as the numbers will skew higher relatively.

According to a CNBC reporter, “When asked how much money they’d need to earn annually in order to feel rich, the majority of Americans said at least \$200,000”, which is the equivalent of \$290,000 AUD. Yet the most popular answer, given by 22% of respondents, was that an annual income of \$1 million or more was needed to feel rich.

Interestingly, it appears how much money you earn right now dictates your perception of how much you need to feel wealthy. According to the original poll summary,

30% of those in households earning \$100K or more say they’d need to earn \$1 million a year to feel rich while just 19% of those in households earning between \$50K–\$100K and 18% of those earning less than \$50K say the same.³

If you earn more, then you want more; if you earn less, you won’t likely feel you need to earn as much to feel comfortable.

Feeling rich is very different to feeling financially comfortable. One feels comfortable when they have all they need.

So, which is it you are striving for? To feel rich or to feel like you and your loved ones have all you need?

Our fallen condition has left us with a mad desperation to secure our basic physiological needs and safety, for we are convinced we need to secure these resources FOR OURSELVES first and BY OURSELVES alone. Yet even when we have enough, we cannot guarantee we will ALWAYS have enough, so we strive for more ... endlessly.

Yet the friend of Jesus has learned this state of mind and being was never our Creator’s intention.

So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the [wicked] eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom

of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.
(Matthew 6:31–33)

We do not have to worry about tomorrow when we learn to trust our Almighty God delights to give us these things, to provide all we need! Once we confidently know we have enough, we are then free to be generous and hospitable to others.

Generosity and hospitality—or, “Generospitality”—are key attributes of the friends of Jesus and the communities we form. As such communities, when they overflow with generospitality, they will naturally attract the last, the least, the lonely, and the lost to the throne from which God dispenses his grace and mercy generously, for he welcomes and is hospitable to all.

Explanation

Even Boomers Are Running From the Church

As we prepare to launch into this new year, I feel a burden to revisit the state of our community’s culture and discipleship because I am constantly inundated with news of alleged friends of Jesus falling away from their faith in him.

Of course, there will always be a rhythm, of sorts, to those joining Christian communities and those leaving their community for various reasons. According to the most recent National Church Life Survey—otherwise known as the NCLS—even our congregation declined by 50% between 2016 and 2021. That’s a significant drop, but there were quite legitimate reasons for those leaving our community during that period of time and we are on increase since then.

It behooves us to be the healthiest, functional, and safe community, with members known for integrity, that we can be! People won’t want to leave then; in fact, we will more than likely have a line-up of people wanting to get in!

While the media seldom provides news of those joining the faith, they seem all too happy to highlight those “deconstructing” and abandoning their faith.

We would expect this of younger people but, interestingly, it is those born after World War II, from 1946 to 1964, those who created the evangelical Christian culture being critiqued today, it is the Boomer generation who are themselves leaving the churches they created.

According to the *2021 Australian Community Survey*, conducted by NCLS Research,

While around two in ten Australians (22%) say they attend religious services at least monthly ... greater proportions of younger people say they attend frequently, compared to older age groups.

In fact, one in 3 young adults aged 18 to 34 (32%) say they attend religious services at least once a month ... This makes young people the most frequent attenders at religious services.

Older age groups have a lower proportion attending monthly, with those aged 65 and over, and those aged 35 to 49, both at 19%. The lowest rate of attendance is in the 50 to 64 age bracket with only 11%, or around one in ten, attending services at least monthly.⁴

It seems if older generations still love Jesus, many have become disenchanted with the local churches they helped create and once attended.

Michael Metzger of the *Clapham Institute* summed it up well:

To date, our legacy as Baby Boomers is indulgence, narcissism, and moralism. If we are to emerge as wise elders, our view of faith, fame and forever ought to migrate from Boomer biases to a more biblical Christianity.⁵

If a Christian community has become unhealthy, dysfunctional, and unsafe, people will fall away; they will renounce their membership; some may transfer; some may even, regrettably, leave the Church and their faith in Jesus altogether.

This process can be quite damaging, which is why, as your pastor, I want to prevent it, as much as I can.

I am especially grieved when people hold God accountable for an unhealthy, dysfunctional, and unsafe local church. The two are not the same. You won't always find 'God in the house'!

The good news is such a broken community can be encouraged and equipped and transformed back to health, functioning, and safety by rediscovering the Way of Love that started the Church in the first place.

The Church Can Be Beautiful

A cursory reading of the Bible will reveal local churches can be beautiful:

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
(Acts 2:44-47)

This is the quintessential picture of an effective and evangelising church!

Understand, there was no Church before Pentecost! The first friends of Jesus were attracted to and inspired by the proclamation of the good news about Jesus, his whole life and ministry, which consisted of remembering his birth, teaching, miracles, then death, resurrection, and ascension. This message, this word, filled them with such hope and conviction, it renewed their worldview and they adapted their lifestyle around it.

The first friends of Jesus naturally banded together and formed communities that would reflect together and apply to their whole lifestyle this good news that made all the difference.

This Acts 2 church is what all local churches aspire to, to capture some of that heart and soul. We too have gathered together, eaten together, sung together and served together. Yet there was something else underneath all Luke captured in this picture. Beyond gathering, eating, singing and serving, the Acts 2 Church pursued one practice above all others.

The Early Church Loved People

I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

The first churches loved people!⁶

Understand, in that time and place, the Way of Love would have been quite revolutionary. The Hebrews earned love; the Greeks treated love as an abstract idea; the Romans mistreated love. For each of those people groups, love was certainly only shared with those ‘on the inside’, to those belonging to their household or tribe, if at all.

It was the first friends of Jesus who perfected love. They demonstrated the love of Jesus lavishly, to all their neighbours, if not sometimes begrudgingly.

The Way of Love made the communities of the friends of Jesus unbelievably attractive to a watching world, such that, “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved”.

The Early Church understood the Way of Love to be more than an idea of how to behave and more than merely words. The first appointed leader of the Church, James, wrote,

If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? In the same way faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. (James 2:15–17)

For the early friends of Jesus, caring for people was more than a bumper sticker or catchy scriptural saying painted on a wall-hanging inspiring visitors to “love God and love others”. The Way of Love manifested itself in two distinct parts. First, love for each other, the insiders, marked by their **generosity**. They gave to all who had a physical need among them.

At the same time, the Church demonstrated love for the stranger, the outsiders, marked by their **hospitality**. They welcomed all from outside of the Church who had a spiritual or temporal need.

Think about this for a moment. Due to the persecutions they faced, the early Church, if any generation of Christians, were a group of people who had every reason to ‘circle the wagons’ and focus on survival. But, after being filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they left the upper room and immediately reached out to those outside of their group.

And they couldn’t help themselves!

Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19–21)

The lost were drawn every day to this new religion, because it was built on **relationship over rules**. The Lord added to the early Church every day because their love was expressed inside the group as generosity and outside the group as hospitality.

It would have been unimaginable for a first-century believer to claim **the name of Jesus** without also proclaiming **the love of Jesus**. This love exploded throughout Jerusalem through their giving—loving the ones they knew—and in their welcoming—loving the ones they did not yet know.

Love for those in the body of Christ, brotherly love, motivated the generous heart of the early Church, found throughout the New Testament writings as the Greek word *philadelphia*. Love for those outside of the Church, literally “love for the stranger”, moved the welcoming arms of the early Church, known to all as the Greek word *philoxenia*.

No Separation

Understand that, for the early Church, the Way of Love was not an either/or: either love the insider or the outsider. This Way required both/and:

Let brotherly love continue. Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:1–2)

The same idea is found in the *Letter to the Romans*:

Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. (Romans 12:13)

The Way of Love was both/and, both love for the insider and love for the outsider. No distinction was made between the two expressions of generosity and hospitality.

In the life of our faith community, generosity promotes hospitality. And similarly, our hospitality proves our generosity. The way we love each person inside our community influences the way we love every person outside of our community. Welcoming with love into our community will set the tone for giving with love around in our neighbourhood.

These two concepts really cannot be separated. It is hard to imagine a church full of selfish people being very welcoming to outsiders. And likewise, it seems impossible that an unfriendly people will ever be very generous with their resources.

An effective and evangelising community of friends of Jesus expresses love through welcoming and giving, through hospitality and generosity. These principles are much more easy to remember when expressed as a single word: *Generospitality*!

Application

Don't Forget

It is much more easy to remember generospitality when we remember the generosity of God's purpose, love, grace, and mercy to us, that he has been hospitable to us, welcoming us into his family and offering us the gift of salvation and new creation.

Our community exists to remind each other of God's goodness, so that we might practice generospitality, for the danger of forgetting is very real.

Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many. (Hebrews 12:15)

We are to encourage and equip each other, as the friends of Jesus, to follow his Way of Love: to love God, love each other, and love our neighbour. This is how we disciple each other.

The modern Church suffers because it has lost its commitment to **discipleship**, being concerned only with **salvation**.

Discipleship builds on the choice—which is salvation—to place one's faith in Jesus and live a Christian lifestyle by "making sure no one falls short of the grace of God". If we are not generous with one another or we are not hospitable with our visitors and neighbours, then "bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many".

It is not mincing words to say those who fall away from their faith because of broken communities have been defiled!

And make sure that there isn't any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for a single meal ... he didn't find any opportunity for repentance. (Hebrews 12:16–17)

The author of *The Book of Hebrews* then cites the example of Esau, who gave away his birthright, the blessing of his father as the firstborn, for a bowl of stew, because he was hungry.

The author then states Esau had no opportunity for repentance. Given that the author was writing to communities of the friends of Jesus, I can't help but think he is making a connection to the responsibility of a faith community to nurture and mature its members, to disciple each other, to show them the error of their ways and to teach them to will and ways of God. Had Esau's community done this for him, maybe he could have turned away from his anger and focus on what he still had and what God could still do through him!

Conclusion

May we take our responsibility to each other serious enough to equip each other to generosity and hospitality, and to encourage each other when we fall away from these ideals. In so doing, we will prevent bitterness and brokenness from defiling us and causing trouble for our community, for the members and friends who call this their spiritual home.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! (Ephesians 2:4–5)

Remember the generosity of God toward you and us, and be encouraged to generosity which will transform our community and our neighbours! Then we will be even more like an Acts 2 church, beautiful, effective and evangelising the lost.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Kamaron McNair, “How much money Americans say they need to make to feel rich”, *CNBC Make It*, 12-Dec-2022, <https://replug.link/6a859830> (accessed 19-Jan-2023).
- 3 Brianna Richardson, “MakeIt: Your Money Results”, *CNBC/Momentive*, 12-Dec-2022, <https://replug.link/9dffc440> (accessed 19-Jan-2023).
- 4 “Young people most frequent attenders at religious services”, *NCLS Research*, Jun-2022, <https://replug.link/94e078e0> (accessed 19-Jan-2023).
- 5 Michelle Van Loon, “Christian Boomers Like Me Want Change Too”, *Christianity Today*, 4-Jan-2023, <https://replug.link/5c9ca360> (accessed 19-Jan-2023), quoting Michael Metzger, “Boomer Legacy?”, *Clapham Institute*, 30-Jul-2022, <https://replug.link/89efa000> (accessed 19-Jan-2023).
- 6 I am indebted to the commentary of Will Mancini in “The Missing Piece of Every Church Growth Model”, *Launch Clarity*, 14-Oct-2019, <https://replug.link/2b019c60> (accessed 20-Jan-2023), for some of these reflections.