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Generous Disciples: Grateful

Joshua 24:11-15

We are in the middle of a short series on stewardship, and specifically, what it means to be a generous disciple. Two weeks ago, Pastor Mark spoke from Nehemiah 3 about how giving is our opportunity to participate in God's work, and last week Pastor Larry spoke about setting our priorities by how we give intentionally. The point is, we were created by a generous God, and we were created to give generously, not for God's benefit—but for ours. Today we continue to look at what it means to be a generous disciple with a focus on gratitude, and specifically, how a grateful heart in response to God's generosity shapes our choices and our lives.

Today we are in Joshua 24. As you recall, Joshua was Moses' successor... it was Joshua who led the Israelites across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Joshua was an effective military leader, and the first part of the book of Joshua, beginning with the defeat of Jericho, is an account of how God faithfully delivered the Israelites through a series of military victories as they came to occupy the Promised Land.

Now, at this point in the book, Joshua is old and coming to his end; he is standing before the Israelites and passionately reminding the people of the amazing things that God had done to bring them to the Promised Land. The book of Joshua culminates with a very powerful and familiar passage in Joshua 24:11-15. Joshua is imploring the Israelites, to serve the Lord only and to set aside once and for all, all idols past and present

'Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

This passage is about making the critical choice of whom you will serve. I can't say I have much connection to Bob Dylan's music but I am aware of who he is. As you might know, in the late 1970's Dylan professed to have accepted Christ.

Subsequently, he attended Bible school, recorded two contemporary Christian gospel albums, stopped playing his earlier secular music during concerts and made public professions of faith from the stage. In fact, in 1979, Bob Dylan wrote a song that relates to our text today from Joshua. The song is called *Gotta Serve Somebody*, and Dylan won a Grammy award for it. This song was about finding meaning in life through serving God. The lyrics go: "You're gonna have to serve somebody/Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord/But you're gonna have to serve somebody." Dylan's Christianity was unpopular with some fans and musicians. John Lennon said that Dylan's declaration in *Gotta Serve Somebody* was "embarrassing," and in response Lennon recorded a song called "Serve Yourself." Lennon's song criticized Dylan's "preaching" and the lyrics asserted: "You gotta serve yourself/Ain't nobody gonna do it for you."

While these two artists disagreed on the answer, they both understood the question that Joshua was asking in our text. The question of course is: "Whom will you serve?" Both Dylan and Lennon knew that everyone serves someone, and these two songs outline the choice that Joshua poses to the Israelites in this passage. And we each face the same choice: are you going to serve the Lord or are you going to serve something or someone else—perhaps even yourself? There is no in-between, and if you haven't chosen to serve one you have, in fact, chosen the other. Who you choose to serve defines your discipleship.

I love Joshua's statement in verse 15, "...But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." I can't think of a stronger statement of what it means to be a disciple than to be able to proclaim, "I will serve the Lord." I think we would all aspire to confidently proclaim that as our choice as well. We all make lots of choices—some big and some small—and some choices are life defining, while others lack commitment. For example, I love ice cream. I eat a bowl every single night, and about once every two or three weeks I tell my wife I am going to start eating less ice cream, but I never do. My heart isn't in it; there is no conviction. I know I should eat less ice cream, but I am not committed to that choice at all. However, when we are answering the question and making the choice of whom we will serve—unlike my ice cream example—this isn't one of those choices to make lightly, with mere words and intellectual acknowledgement. Rather, the choice Joshua is calling for of whom will you serve is a serious and life defining choice.

So, I have been considering how we answer the question "Whom will I serve?" in such a way that it is more than mere intellectual agreement—but a deep and life defining conviction. How do you make this choice in such a way so you can stand up to the pressure and withstand the heat of the battle and not waver from that choice? In this passage, we find an answer: gratitude. A grateful heart was the

basis for Joshua's choice. Today we are going to look at how making a choice to serve the Lord is grounded in a grateful heart.

If you looked up the definition of gratitude, you would see that it is two things: 1) showing appreciation for something, and 2) to return kindness. I want to use this definition as a framework for two principals regarding what it means to be a generous disciple.

The first principle I want to focus on is this: A generous disciple is grateful, and gratitude begins with recognizing God's faithfulness. As Joshua was addressing the people, he was speaking words directly from God. Joshua 24:2 begins, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says... and then Joshua proceeds to recount the facts of Israel's history—specifically how faithful, active and loving God had been to them over the years. Notice the pronouns in these two verses, how many times the Lord, through Joshua says "I" did this. Joshua 24:11-13:

- I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and gave him many descendants,
- I sent Moses and Aaron,
- I afflicted the Egyptians,
- I brought you to the land of the Amorites,
- I gave them into your hands,
- I gave you the land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build.

Notice how God is the subject to the verb; God is the initiator, the provider. God gets the credit; all these actions are attributed to God. Joshua is reminding the people that all they have is from God, and God alone is their provider. Joshua's choice to serve the Lord was rooted in remembering, recognizing and being grateful for God's generosity. This is the first step in developing a heart of gratitude.

Like the Israelites, we all have many ways that God has been generous in our lives. Can you look back in your life and see God's faithfulness? I know I can:

- I remember God's hand 28 years ago bringing my wife Kim and me together and how He has blessed us over what is now nearly 25 years of marriage.
- Although medicine and science said it wouldn't happen, God said it could and He blessed Kim and me with two miracle babies that are now 15 years old.
- And I have seen His faithful hand in my career. God guided me through a very difficult decision 2 years ago when I was asked by the CEO of my company to make a job change. When the voices of this world said to move to Denver and take what would be a big promotion, I heard God call me not to go but rather to courageously stay and serve Him in this community. He provided me a new job opportunity, and my family and I have been so blessed because of God's clear call to stay.

These are just a few of the many areas where I recognize God's generous and kind hand in my life. While I remember and am grateful for God's faithfulness in these

areas of my life, most importantly, I am eternally grateful for God saving grace in my life.

I want to pause for a moment and ask you to consider a few questions:

- When was the last time you really paused to remember God's faithfulness to you?
- As you think about your past do you view it as a result of your own hard work, your good decisions and your effort? Or do you see the generous, kind hand of God in all you enjoy.
- Are you truly grateful?

If you were Joshua and you were telling your people of God's provision and generosity to you, what would you say?

What I have found is that when we recognize God's faithfulness in our lives—give Him credit for what we have and understand his generosity to us—we gain perspective. Think about the Israelites and how, in spite of God's amazing faithfulness to them in bringing them out of slavery to the Promised Land, they were prone to grumble and complain. When the tough times came, the Israelites were prone to grumble, to look inward and their hearts were prone to wander. God was so faithful to the Israelites, how could they forget His kindness? How they could complain? Joshua was speaking to a people who seemed to judge God's love for them not based on the facts of his faithfulness but rather by their circumstances and how they were feeling. When they were not grateful, they lost perspective.

Unfortunately, too often we are like the Israelites. Often when we face a challenge we find ourselves looking inward, we focus on the storm and take our eyes off of Jesus, and we lose perspective. I have found that when I am not grateful, I am susceptible to falling into the same trap as the Israelites, and that is to define God's love for me not by His faithfulness and His generosity but rather by my circumstances and how I feel about things. This is why being aware of and remembering God's generosity is so important. God's love for us is based on facts; it is unchanging. It is not defined by our circumstances, our comfort, our bank account or how we are feeling in a certain moment.

All throughout scripture, the Bible tells us that man should not and cannot trust his own understanding, thoughts and emotions,

- Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, "The heart is deceitful above all things," and
- Proverbs 3:5 we are warned to "not lean on our own understanding."

David understood this idea. Let's look at Psalm 13. In these verses it is clear that David was in a tough spot—he is crying out, he feels forgotten, he feels alone, overwhelmed and in despair.

Psalm 13:1-2: *"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"*

David didn't deny that times were difficult, and he was very aware of the challenge he was facing. However, while David is honest with his emotions, we see in verses 5 and 6 that in the midst of his challenge, he is also holding tightly to the truth. He remembers God's generosity, and his heart is full of gratitude. (V5, 6) *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me."* I like the way this is phrased in The Message where it says *"I'm singing at the top of my lungs, I am so full of answered prayers."* In these two verses, this chapter turns sharply. David chose not to focus on his circumstances, as tough as they were; instead he was grateful and focused on God's faithfulness—he chose to remember. David rejoiced in who God is. In doing so he was full of gratitude, and he held firm to his choice to serve the Lord. It is this gratitude that allowed David, in spite of difficult circumstances, to acknowledge what he knew to be true as he declared his trust in God's love, the joy of his salvation and God's faithful provision. David was a man after God's own heart and David's heart was full of gratitude.

So, choosing to serve the Lord begins with recognition of God's faithfulness in our lives, as our definition says, "a readiness to show appreciation for" and cultivating a heart of gratitude that is based on the facts of God's love for you not on your circumstances.

The second principle is: A generous disciple's gratitude is reflected in serving and giving. Gratitude is not just about showing appreciation is also about "returning kindness." Joshua is not only giving account of God's generosity, he is calling the people to make a choice and to take action through their service. In our scripture, the word "serve" appears six times in verses fourteen and fifteen. Joshua 24:14-15.

In Mark 10:45 we read how God has modeled serving and giving to us: *"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* This verse is the ultimate statement of God's generosity, and as generous disciples, this provides a model for us. Christ paid the price for us and demonstrated to us that true service has a cost: *"he gave his life as a ransom for many."* There is no greater picture of serving others than Christ's work on the cross. True service always involves taking action. It always involves giving—giving willingly and sacrificially.

As I raise my kids, I often think about how the choices that Kim and I make are shaping their lives. This was certainly true for Kim and me in our childhoods. My parents taught me at a very early age to give back to the Lord. I can still remember at the age of 12 or 13 I had a paper route and how my parents encouraged and taught me to willingly give the first 10% of each paycheck to the Lord to our local church. And my wife, Kim tells a story of how as a little girl she was aware of how

her grandparents, who were living in near poverty, faithfully gave to their church even though they could barely afford to feed themselves. I am struck how our experiences from 30-40 years ago helped Kim and me understand what serving and giving looks like.

While both Kim and I were blessed to have families that modeled serving and giving, as Joshua says in our text, Kim and I each had to choose for ourselves whom we would serve. Kim and I got married soon after we graduated from college; Kim went into teaching and was the first to land a job. Soon after, I was blessed to find a glamorous job in banking. I remember making a salary of less than what Kim was earning as a first year elementary school teacher and having a makeshift desk that was literally a small table next to the copy machine in the supply room—in fact, I remember the noise from the copy machine being a major distraction. Kim and I didn't start with much, but we recognized God's generosity, and we knew we were blessed. We knew how generous God was to us, and together we made the commitment—we chose for ourselves to always give the first 10% of our income to our church. In Matthew, Jesus said, *"where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* In other words, your heart follows your investment.

It is interesting how both Kim and I have childhood memories of the choices that our families made in regard to serving and giving—and you do as well. Parents and grandparents: this should serve as both an encouragement and a warning. How will your choices to give and serve be remembered, and what influence will that have on your kids and grandkids in 20, 30 40 years?

I want to close by going back to our text: *"So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."*

This passage isn't only about God's kindness to the Israelites; it is about His kindness to all of us. God instituted the principle of stewardship in creation when He gave man the task of exercising dominion over the earth He created. Ever since then, all people have been tasked with managing their God-given resources for the purpose of advancing God's kingdom. This is a principle that is easy to forget, because we like to think in terms of our paychecks, properties, investments, energy and time as our own—and we tend to think about what we have as coming from our efforts. Yet in Psalm 24: 1, it says, *"the earth is the Lord's and everything in it."* So everything to which we attach our name and regard as our own, ultimately belongs to God.

I hope you believe that God's kindness brought you to this place. This is the key point in cultivating a heart of gratitude. So remember God's faithfulness, hold onto this perspective as you face life's trials and as generous disciples with grateful hearts, joyfully give back to Him.

**8-POINT CULTIVATING
GENEROSITY LADDER**

