

# Why you Cannot Make Disciples apart from Generosity



GENEROUSCHURCH

GenerousChurch is committed to helping churches in a couple of ways. First of all, we want to empower you to carry out the mission that God has placed before you. We want to help you make disciples. Second, we want you to understand that it is impossible to make disciples apart from having the mind of Christ on Money (Mammon).

So, we want you to think through this with us. Why is it important for church leaders to understand the connection between generosity and discipleship?

## A Personal Perspective on Generous Discipleship



There have been certain points in my life where God wrecked me. By the way, my name is John. I am one of the voices of GenerousChurch.

I thought it would be good for you to hear how I got to this place. Maybe my personal story will help you understand why I see such a distinct connection between generosity and discipleship.

So, back to my story...

As I said, I can identify a few points in my life where God absolutely wrecked me. There have been moments when my world was turned upside down as I caught a new glimpse, or a new understanding of God. Do you know what I'm talking about? I think God does this to all people at one time or another. He shows us something that changes the way we think. He opens our eyes to a part of His character or His work that initiates a u-turn in our lives.

Repentance.

A new direction in life.

I'm not talking about repentance because I've done something that I knew was wrong. Actually, I am talking about repentance – u-turning away from – things that I thought were non-issues. There are those moments when God wrecks me and I say, "How have I missed this for so long?"

One of those unforgettable moments in my life happened when I was serving as the pastor of a small, rural church. I was only a year or two out of seminary and I was still trying to figure out how the church-world functioned.

In preparation for a sermon series, I started reading a book called *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Honestly, I never would have picked this book up if it had not been listed as "The Most Influential Christian Book of the Year" by Christianity Today. But, with an endorsement like that, I thought it was worth my time.

I really don't think it is any coincidence that I started reading that book while God was stirring up a lot of questions in my life. I was starting to wonder if my values really matched the values of God. I was questioning the money that I had spent on some nice "church clothes." I was starting to ask questions like, "Does the American Dream match God's dream? Why do I have a deep, hidden desire to invest in high dollar cars and spacious homes?" I was wondering if God was really pleased with the way that I was investing my resources.

So, as I started reading *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, God had me right where He wanted me. He had me on His potter's wheel and He was beginning to press me into a new mold. He was crushing some of my ideologies and

supplanting them with traces of His generosity. He was wrecking my old way of life and replacing it with something new.

Isn't that the way discipleship works? God stirs something within us that drives us to be more like Him. He gives us glimpses of His greatness and invites us to imitate His ways.

What I learned during that particular "wreck" of life was that God is radically generous. He is always giving. Sometimes He is opening His hand to extend grace and forgiveness; other times He's offering material provisions or spiritual gifts...but He's always giving. He gave up the riches of heaven for the weight of a broken world. Then, He makes it possible for us to inherit a portion of His eternal riches. He tells us that it is His good pleasure to give us His kingdom (Luke 12:32).

Additionally, during this "wreck," I was beginning to grasp how deeply concerned God is about people who are suffering. He is acutely aware of starving children and the forgotten elderly. He values people; not things. And His values do not always match up with the Main Street values of America.

With all of those things bubbling up in my life, I started to understand that if I wanted to be a disciple – an imitator of God – I needed to start living generously. If I wanted to pattern my world after the world of God, generosity had to be a subject of emphasis.

So, I have a hard time seeing any daylight between these two subjects. To me, they are as intimately connected as the head and the neck. It requires skilled surgery to separate one from the other.

Now that you know my story, why don't you go a little further on this journey with the

GenerousChurch team. *(In other words, keep reading. This is important stuff!)*



## A Theological Pattern

A number of years ago, Dr. E. V. Hill preached a remarkable sermon called, "God at His Best." During this one-hour sermon, Dr. Hill almost literally walked through the entirety of Scripture. He started by asking the question, "When was God at His best?"

Working through that question, Dr. Hill pondered the creation of the world. He talked about the wonders of creation and noted that "the sun has never needed repair and the moon has never needed an electrician." After expounding on some of the more incredible aspects of the created world, Dr. Hill said, "Surely that was God at His best." Then...after a weighted pause...he went on to say, "No. That was pretty good, but I don't think that was God *at His best.*"

Next, he moved on to day six of the creation story. He talked about the creation of man and the awesomeness of this part of God's creation. He mentioned that God gave man more intelligence than anything else in the world: intelligence enough to perform heart transplants, invent airplanes, develop medicines, play instruments and sing God's praises. But, again, he concluded that this was not God at His best.

Taking one subject after the next, Dr. Hill examined the miracles of God, the incarnation of Jesus, the cross, the resurrection and God's

forgiveness of our sins. Each time, he went on to say that while those were amazing acts of God, they do not represent God at His best.

Finally, Dr. Hill closes the sermon by saying that God was at His best at a time not even recorded in the Bible. He says that God's greatest work was an act of recent history. In the words of E. V. Hill, God was at His best,

...when he saved me. When He – the great God of the universe – came all the way down and got into the heart and spirit of an 11-year-old boy.

He's here tonight ready to do it again, over and over. Every time he saves a lost soul, that's God at his best. Not the moon and stars. Not the hills and mountains. Not the trees and valleys. Not the rivers and lakes and oceans. But God picking up a drunkard and making him a preacher, picking up a prostitute and making her a singer, picking up people down and out and putting them on their feet, causing us to stand and say, "Glory, he saved me. I'm saved." That's God, the Savior, at his best.

Do you hear the amazing heartbeat of that message? Whether or not you agree with Dr. Hill's final conclusion, each of his points demonstrate that the greatest acts of God come in the form of generosity.

- When He creates, He is *giving* life.
- When He performs miracles, He's breaking through the laws of the

universe to give us a glimpse of "His will being done on earth as it is in heaven."

- When He wraps Himself in flesh and takes on the form of an infant, He is *giving* us the gift of His presence.
- When Jesus dies on the cross, He is generously taking the punishment that we deserve.
- When He rises from the dead, He is giving us the gift of abundant life.
- When He forgives, He is giving us a clean slate.
- When He offers salvation, He is giving us what we can never attain on our own.

That's generosity.

And that's God at His best.



If that's God at His best...if generosity is one of the overriding characteristics of God's goodness...how can we join Him in this work?

There is a lot of talk these days about what it means to be a disciple. And rightfully so. Discipleship is the process where we join God in His work. It is the pathway for us to join God in His greatest works.

Right now, discipleship is a hot topic. New resources are developed weekly that help us understand the process of becoming disciples and give us tools to effectively make disciples. New (or newly polished) terms like "missional"

and “incarnational” are buzzwords for the disciple-making movement.

As the Church re-evaluates the process of discipleship, it is critical for us to remember that at its core, discipleship is imitation. A disciple is a “person who is a pupil or an adherent of the doctrines of another; a follower” (www.dictionary.com). A disciple is someone who decides to pattern his or her life after that of a select teacher.

In ancient Israel, many well-known teachers and rabbis had disciples. John the Baptist had disciples. Paul had disciples. Rabbis like Hillel had disciples. It was not unusual to see these rabbis around the cities and towns with their disciples in tow.

Rabbis were highly respected leaders in ancient Israel. As a result, their disciples wanted to learn everything they possibly could from the rabbi’s way of life. They would leave their homes and families behind to follow every step of the rabbi for a few years. They would join their rabbi for times of prayer and study. They would participate as the rabbi interacted with the community. Some reports go so far as to mention that each time the rabbi went to the restroom, the disciple followed him in.

By learning the practices, the characteristics and the habits of the rabbi, the disciple could learn to echo his behaviors – and even his thoughts to some degree. He could become a remarkable impersonator.

In some of His final instructions before the resurrection, Jesus told the believers to go into the world and make disciples, by training people to follow His teachings and His ways (Matthew 28:19-20). In other words, He asked the believers to help other people understand

and mimic the practices, characteristics and habits of God.

How is that possible apart from generosity? If God is as radically generous as we stated above, how can we ignore this characteristic when we try to impersonate Him?

Saying that generosity and discipleship are not connected is on par with saying the ocean has nothing to do with water. You cannot make disciples of Jesus apart from teaching and modeling generosity, just as you cannot have an ocean – an all of its glories – apart from water.



## Consuming with Diligence

One factor that plays into how we make disciples today is our culture of consumerism. Spending, inheriting, gaining and “storing up” are all widely accepted aspects of our culture. We go so far as to call it our culture’s “Dream” – the American Dream. We embrace the idea that we are free to pursue Money as a lifestyle and spend it extravagantly to capture our dreams of houses, cars, designer clothes and shoes. Consumerism affects all of us.

In the United States, we are more consumer-driven than we have ever been before. That truth directly influences how we make (and become) disciples. Since consumerism is one of the most widely accepted aspects of our culture, it is also one of the greatest barriers to spiritual growth.

Think through some of the statistics related to consumerism in the United States:

- In the U.S., the average family currently makes about \$50,000 a year.<sup>i</sup>
- The average U.S. family is carrying about \$75,000 in debt<sup>ii</sup>, including almost \$16,000 in credit card debt for those who hold credit cards.<sup>iii</sup>
- US Americans spend approximately 450 billion dollars during the Christmas season each year.<sup>iv</sup> (That's an average of over \$1400 spent per person in the US.)
- In 1950, Americans consumed an average of 144 pounds of meat and poultry per person. By 2007, that number had risen to 222 pounds per person.<sup>v</sup>
- In 1950, there were approximately 53 million cars in operation in the United States (1 car for every 50 people). Today, that number is closer to 300 million (1 car for every 12 individuals).<sup>vi</sup>

Regardless of your take on these numbers (seeing them as signs of a growing economy or conversely, as an embarrassment to the United States), they all point to one fact: our society is becoming more and more consumer driven. Our appetites are growing. And for many families, their money appetite has already eclipsed their money making ability.

Not only is extensive consumerism dangerous to families, it is the silent killer of spiritual lives. Consumerism is the blood clot of Western spirituality; it is the cancer cell in the bones of the Church.

Can you imagine what life would look like if God were more of a consumer than a giver? What

if, one day, God decided to stop giving and start taking?

No more seeds for the crops...God's wants to enjoy a feast of His own.

No more rain in its season...God wants to stockpile it for future emergencies.

No more trees...no more oxygen replacement. When it's gone it's gone. After all, He doesn't need oxygen to survive.

No more forgiveness...God's tired of the "if you'll only get me out of this one" lines.

Can you imagine how quickly the world would perish if God traded in His generosity for a consumer mentality?

Scary.

Now let me ask you another question. Can you imagine what would happen if the Body of Christ – the Church – was more compelled by consumerism than it was by generosity?

We're stumbling along a very slippery slope in the Church. We want God to be the Great Giver while we enjoy the role of great consumer; we want His generosity to remain firm and unchanging while we applaud on the sidelines.

If we are interpreting these things correctly, it seems that there is a significant wave of the Church that prefers the way of the Rich Young Ruler to the Way of God. Like that young ruler, we want eternal life. And like him, we want it on our terms. As we hold firmly to our material possessions, we ask God to bless us further. But, Jesus wants something different for us.



## Discipleship

The ancient practice of impersonating a good Teacher is exactly what Jesus wants for us today. But, the call to mimic Jesus is much more intense than many church members understand.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls people to an unwavering form of discipleship. He shows them there is nothing more important than the pursuit of God's kingdom. When potential followers question Him about the demands of discipleship, Jesus speaks clearly and authoritatively. He says things like;

- Sell everything you have, give to the poor...then, come follow me (Mark 10:21).
- Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:60).
- No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).
- If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23).

(Side note: I wonder if Jesus made this same offer to people before the twelve. I wonder if others turned Him down before Matthew walked away from his business. I wonder if other fishermen laughed before James and John left their father sitting in the boat. Either way, His emphasis on what it meant to be a disciple never wavered during His earthly ministry.)

When Jesus spoke about discipleship, He did not mince words. He made it very clear discipleship is spiritually vital, while it is also physically (and materially) demanding. Being a disciple necessitates that we become last in this world, while it offers the indescribable reward of being first in the world of God's kingdom. It costs us everything, but somehow it gives even more in return. Discipleship today – just like the discipleship in ancient Israel – requires disciples to leave everything behind as they follow the Master. It pushes us to the extreme of faith and it looks contrary to everything else in this world. *But, it is always worth it.*

Discipleship = high demands + extravagant rewards.

So, how can the Church shape people into disciples who are willing to forsake-it-all and become people who pursue the way of Christ? Is that even a reality? Is it possible to make disciples like those who initially followed Jesus, or should we settle for a more watered down version?



## Our Teaching Methods

For the church to make disciples in the way that Jesus made disciples, we have to teach the things that He taught. We have to focus on the subjects that He gravitated towards.

As I am sure you recognize by now, Jesus gravitated toward the subject of money. He taught more on this issue than any subject except for the kingdom of God. He talked

directly about money in almost one third of His parables. He told His disciples that if someone demanded their cloak, they should hand over their tunic (undergarment) as well. He told them to lend to their enemies without expecting to get anything back. And ultimately, He told them the reason for all of this was discipleship. When you live this way, Jesus said, “your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:35).

People will know you are following in the footsteps of the Most High when you are radically generous. Your generosity will show the world that you are an imitator of God...a disciple.

Further, Jesus taught His disciples that money is not a neutral item in life. He said that money is equivalent to a god. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus taught often and authoritatively about money. He taught against a consumer-driven lifestyle. And He said that the way we handle money directly influences the way that we relate to God.

Why should our standards be any lower?

In related teachings, Jesus taught that generosity and discipleship go hand-in-hand. They are intimately bound together. Think about what Jesus said to Zacchaeus. After Zacchaeus said he would pay back all those he had cheated and give half of his possessions to the poor, Jesus replied, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

Another time, when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with almost a pound of expensive perfume (this perfume probably served as her emergency savings plan), Jesus praised her generosity. This act was done on faith and out of love. And Jesus defended her action as that of a disciple.

Ironically, the only one of the twelve disciples who never really caught this generous spirit was Judas.

He complained about “careless” uses of money.

He never fully bought into Jesus’s message of giving.

He essentially sold his soul for thirty silver coins.

And in the end, Judas took his own life. He threw the silver coins onto the grounds of the Temple and found a field where he could hang himself. Only a short time after buying into the lies of Mammon, he realized that money could never compare to the riches of the kingdom.

Don’t misunderstand us at this point. We are not saying that generosity is the only aspect of discipleship. We are not saying that any more than we are saying that generosity is the only characteristic of God. We are not saying that generosity is the door to salvation. The Bible clearly affirms that salvation is a gift of God that comes by grace through faith.

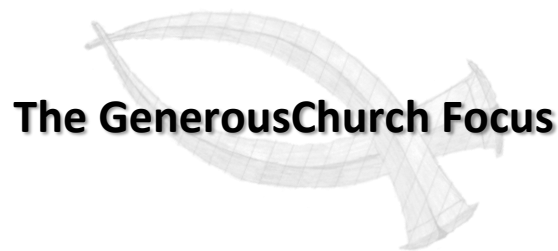
There are additional characteristics of God that must be imitated by all disciples. But, having the mind of Christ on Money is essential to proper spiritual growth. It cannot be overlooked; we cannot acquiesce to a set of cultural norms and still claim to follow the ways of Jesus.



Generosity was a crucial characteristic of those who followed Jesus in the Gospels. And it is just as imperative for those of us who follow Him today.

There is no daylight between discipleship and generosity.

But, there is great opportunity in this culture, to leverage generosity for the purpose of making disciples.



## The GenerousChurch Focus

At GenerousChurch, this message is our heartbeat. Discipleship and generosity are the things that we are desperately passionate about. We want you and your church...

to understand,

to teach

and to model

the mind of Christ on Money. And the reason that we want you to do that is because Biblical generosity plays such a crucial role in our formation as disciples.

We are not looking to dilute your church with products and resources. We just want to help you unleash generous disciples. We want to empower you to do the work that God has called you to do.

As part of that process, resources inevitably play a role. So, we have many free resources that may help you. We have other ePapers, videos, sermon transcripts and much more.

These are products that we give away. *They're free.* Additionally, we have some resources like books and Assessments that we wish we could hand out freely. For these resources that we cannot give away, we price them nominally above our cost. Our motivation is to help churches and church leaders unleash generous disciples. *We want the Church to have the mind of Christ about Money.*

Until we – as the Church – get this right, we will not develop disciples that impersonate the Living God.

So, what about you? Are you ready to jump into the generosity conversation and follow in these footsteps of Jesus?

We want to hear from you! Join the conversation at <http://www.generouschurch.com>.

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<sup>i</sup> Wikipedia.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Household\\_income\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Household_income_in_the_United_States), As viewed on November 14, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Riley, Charles for CNN Money.  
[http://money.cnn.com/2011/03/24/pf/financial\\_crisis\\_outcome/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2011/03/24/pf/financial_crisis_outcome/index.htm), As viewed on November 14, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> CNN Money.  
<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/mon-ey101/lesson9/index.htm>, As viewed on November 15, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> Advent Conspiracy.  
<http://www.adventconspiracy.org/>, As viewed on November 14, 2012.

<sup>v</sup> Marinho, Flavia, "Consumerism Stats" Infographic.  
<http://www.famousbloggers.net/consumerism-stats-infographic.html>. As viewed on November 14, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid