Dear Lexie,

He's Been Faithful

The first eleven years of my ministry, spent serving in New York, were extremely transformative for me. There is a certain vibe that comes with living in New York that I'm sure cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the United States. As the words to the theme song for the film, "New York, New York" say, "If you can make it there, (there being New York) you can make it anywhere; especially if anywhere is Brooklyn."

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The Giving Tree of Life

Did you know that a recent Harvard study showed that simply contemplating generosity boosts your immune system? In addition, the study concluded that giving money to someone...
else lifted the giver's happiness more than spending it on themselves (surprisingly, the study participants' generally predicted that spending on themselves would make them happier). It turns out, giving actually makes us feel happy! When people give, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust. A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better physical and mental health. Individuals who provided practical help or gave emotional support had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn't. Interestingly, receiving is not linked to reduced health risks.

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A Prayer for Fresh Strength

We come with a sense of helplessness. We hear yet again Rachel weeping for her children and only comfort of heaven will console her. Her cries come from Peshawar, Pakistan, from the refugee camps in Syria, from the suburbs of Sandy Hook. Mothers and fathers are in fresh and remembered grief!

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The first eleven years of my ministry, spent serving in New York, were extremely transformative for me. There is a certain vibe that comes with living in New York that I'm sure cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the United States. As the words to the theme song for the film, “New York, New York” say, “If you can make it there, (there being New York) you can make it anywhere; especially if anywhere is Brooklyn.”

Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not putting down New York in any way. I have a lot of great memories for having lived there for so many years. The people whom I had the privilege of serving will always be forever etched in my mind. But one of the greatest memories I have of New York was when my wife and I had the opportunity to hear the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir live! As a matter of fact, their church at the time was less than fifteen minutes from where I pastored in Brooklyn. If you are not familiar with this Grammy award winning 260 voice choir you have truly missed a blessing. Time and space will not permit me to share with you the unbelievable story of this tremendous choir and its church, but it is one worth hearing.

One of the songs that the choir sings which was actually written by its director Carol Cymbala, who by the way is also the wife of the senior pastor Jim Cymbala, is titled, He’s Been Faithful. I encourage you to watch the inspirational video and hear it for yourself. To this very day, my wife still tears up each time she hears it. The words to the chorus go something like this:

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He’s Been Faithful, Faithful To Me
Looking Back, His Love And Mercy I See
Though In My Heart I Have Questioned
even Failed To Believe He’s Been Faithful, Faithful To Me
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As we have reached the threshold of a brand new year, it would behoove each of us to look back over 2014 and acknowledge just how faithful God has been in our lives. But when you think about it, is it really not the faithfulness of God that is in question here? In Luke 18 Jesus shares the parable of the persistent widow as a way to encourage his followers to “pray and not give up.” But Jesus ends the parable by asking the poignant question, “But when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” And this is the question that each of us needs to ask ourselves as will look back over 2014; have we been found faithful? If not, then how can we begin to restore it before 2014 has come to an end? Because if we are willing to be brutally honest with ourselves, whenever the issue of faithfulness is in question it is always with us and never with God.

(by Charles A Tapp)
The Giving Tree of Life

Jamie Jean

"Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done." (Proverbs 19:17; NIV)

Did you know that a recent Harvard study showed that simply contemplating generosity boosts your immune system? In addition, the study concluded that giving money to someone else lifted the giver’s happiness more than spending it on themselves (surprisingly, the study participants’ generally predicted that spending on themselves would make them happier). It turns out, giving actually makes us feel happy! When people give, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust. A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better physical and mental health. Individuals who provided practical help or gave emotional support had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn’t. Interestingly, receiving is not linked to reduced health risks.

Researchers suggest that one reason giving may improve physical health and longevity is that it helps decrease stress, which is in turn associated with a variety of health problems.

“A cheerful heart is good medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22)

As evidenced by the benefits to our physical and mental wellbeing resulting from giving, God, in His infinite wisdom, designed us to be generous. Furthermore, the benefits extend into an important realm: our spiritual health.

“Money has great value, because it can do great good. In the hands of God’s children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.” (Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons, pp. 351, 352)

We often focus on the dangers of money, greed, and financial idolatry. For good reasons, we are cautioned to store up treasures in Heaven and not on earth. But money itself is not bad. There’s nothing wrong with having money. Money is not evil. It is merely a tool. Money can be a powerful instrument for good when put to proper use.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23; NIV)

The problem actually lies in our own hearts and how we relate to money. It doesn’t matter whether we are rich or poor, but rather whether material wealth occupies a priority above our duty to God and His will. Fortunately for us, God built a spiritual safeguard through the gifts of giving and service to others. And He offers this gift freely to those who seek to reflect His character. By serving the Lord through sharing His blessings with others, we put our trust in Him to magnify the positive impact that money can produce when invested in God’s purposes. When we give, we open our hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and it’s actually good for our health. When we keep our earthly blessings to ourselves, King Solomon put it best:
"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;  
I refused my heart no pleasure.  
My heart took delight in all my labor,  
and this was the reward for all my toil.  
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun.”

(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; NIV)

Whereas the Bible offers us eternal blessings when we give freely from what we have.

“Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:33-34; NIV)

“The poor man who has faith and confidence in God, who trusts in His love and care, and who abounds in good works, judiciously using the little he has in blessing others with his means, is rich toward God. He feels that his neighbor has claims upon him that he cannot disregard and yet obey the commandment of God: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2)

Ten days symbolizes a test period in the Bible. The benefits from practicing the gift of giving is something we can assess fairly easily, so I challenge you to give with a generous and trusting heart this holiday season—as well as ALL seasons and see how it improves your spiritual and physical wellbeing. You can start with just ten days and see what happens...

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6:38; NIV)

Please share your personal experiences with giving and the benefits or blessings you’ve received as a result in the comments section below. I look forward to hearing your stories!
We come with a sense of helplessness. We hear yet again Rachel weeping for her children and only comfort of heaven will console her. Her cries come from Peshawar, Pakistan, from the refugee camps in Syria, from the suburbs of Sandy Hook. Mothers and fathers are in fresh and remembered grief!

So we come to you who came as a baby, who knew the comfort of a mother’s arm, whose earthly parents knew fret-filled times to come bring heavenly repose to our troubled hearts. The loss of innocence by unspeakable violence makes us look heavenwards and say how long!

O Holy Comforter, bring a special peace to each heavy heart.
Our care goes out to those who may miss the headlines, those who are quiet but need your encouragement and those who are cold and without cheer. Bring a heavenly peace and the warmth of home and school. May the generosity of the Advent season give tangible momentum to hope.

Remind us again that you are our fortress and may we be strong models of courage during these challenging days.

Amen.

(by Chris Daley & Dawn Reynolds)