

LIVE A BLESSED LIFE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Do you realize that none of us were born generous? Spend an hour with an infant and you'll be convinced! We all must learn to be generous.

Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35). That may seem counter-intuitive, but it's true!

I grumbled a little last week about how expensive it is to buy myself a latte. But I don't grumble at all about it when I get to buy one for someone else. It just feels different!

How about the cost of a tank of gasoline?!? But it feels great to fill up the tank of someone else who can't afford it for themselves.

Today I want to talk with you about how to live a blessed life.

I've been speaking this month about going green—not environmentally, but economically. I see a lot of people struggling over money, and some going broke. That is *not* God's plan for your life! His plan is to bless you, to give you a future and a hope.

So I want to talk about living life God's way, living in His blessing and finding financial freedom.

Larry Burkett wrote: "Most Christians would never 'refuse' to do God's will; it's just that the timing is not right. When God calls us, He wants obedience first and worldly wisdom last. We allow the urgent things of our society to overshadow the important things. That is not unique to our generation. In fact, Christ experienced it in His walk on earth and predicted it. He told a parable (about God) calling men to follow Him. They were invited to a dinner, but most were too busy to attend. They wanted to be a part of what was happening, but had too many responsibilities."

What is it that keeps you from doing what God asks?

Intentionally and diligently applying the principles of Scripture, while praying the promises of Scripture is the way—the only way—to find the blessed life. And that's the best possible way to live!

I believe there are three major elements to this fruitful life.

#1- Live Within Your Means

The word “blessed” means *enviously happy*. When Jesus said, “*Blessed are the merciful...*” (Matthew 5:7). He was saying, “*Oh, how happy—enviously happy—are the merciful!*”

A person who doesn’t live within their means isn’t happy. You may feel happy in the moment, but when you go on vacation, courtesy of VISA, and later have to pay the piper, you are NOT going to feel happy.

Have you been on such a vacation, and during a lovely dinner, wondered inside how you were going to pay for it?

Have you filled up the back of your car with Christmas presents, while thinking, “How long is it going to take me to pay for all this stuff?”

“He who loves only fun will become a poor man” (Proverbs 21:17).

A wise person knows his limitations, and lives within his means.

If you’re married—and you want to stay that way—live within your means. 80% of couples who divorce identify financial pressure as a key factor in the demise of their marriage.

Last week I mentioned a new study group that aims to help you regain control of your finances. It’s called “I Was Broke, Now I’m Not.” We’re launching the group this Spring, because we want to help you become free financially. You can sign up to receive details about the group by using the response slip inserted in your bulletin today.

We want to see you get out from under debt, and save for your future, and invest in the eternal kingdom of God. That’s something we can do for you.

But the next part you’re going to have to do for yourself.

#2- Learn To Be Content

Have you ever compared yourself to someone else? Raise your hand if you’ve ever compared yourself to someone else. How did that work for you? Did you come out even? No, that’s not the way it works.

Compare yourself to someone when you're doing better than they are, and you'll think, “Loser!”

Compare yourself to someone else when they're doing better than you are, and you'll think, "Lord, I'm not even fit to be called a human being!"

Comparisons will either fill you with pride or fill you with shame. It's a game that's impossible to win!

God's desire, instead, is for us to be thankful. You can't be thankful when you're trying to keep up with or measure up to someone else.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain." (1 Timothy 6:6)

If you have trouble thinking of things to be thankful for, I have a suggestion. Psalm 136 offers 12 reasons to be thankful to God. It begins with, *"Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! His faithful love endures forever."* So, if you can think of nothing else, at least the Bible gives you a dozen reasons to get you started thanking God.

God wants to bless your life. That's in His heart. It's the very nature of the relationship He extends to us through Jesus Christ.

He said to Abraham, *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing"* (Genesis 12:2). That's His aim.

God has put Trinity Community Church here to extend His blessing to the Marin community.

We do that by introducing people to Jesus Christ.

We do that by helping people who have become unchurched find their way back into the fold.

We do that by planting the Scriptures in the hearts and minds of young people.

We do that by teaching people how to understand and apply the Word of God to their lives.

We do that by baptizing converts in water.

We do that by teaching people how to pray.

We do that by discipling Christians according to the words and ways of the Lord.

We do that by strengthening family relations.

We do that by helping families get enough food to eat.

We do that by helping men and women break their addictions.

We do that by volunteering in our schools and communities.

We do that by supporting missionaries as they win the lost, plant churches, train pastors, drill wells, build worship centers, provide medical assistance, and establish schools.

We do that by responding to disasters around the world with emergency supplies, and recovery and rebuilding operations.

And so much more...!

As you look around the room today, you may wonder how could we possibly do so much, reach so far. And we have not been subsidized by another church or organization. It has just been God's people, giving of themselves, walking in His blessing to be a blessing to others.

If you have given to this church, if you have helped to underwrite the multiple ministries of Trinity, you can really rejoice!

Now, let me be frank: If you've never given a nickel to this church, never volunteered to serve, never joined a prayer group, you can be happy for us, but you can't really *rejoice* with us. You just can't, because the fruit is not yours. You didn't invest. It's not the same.

But I want to encourage you today, that you have the opportunity to change that. You have an opportunity to use and invest what God has given you so that you can celebrate with us in the future.

And I believe that begins with the third element.

#3- Put God First Financially

I believe that a major key to living a blessed life is giving God the tithe. I believe it for this reason: if we don't give God the tithe, all of our wealth is under a curse. I know that's strong language, but I didn't dream it up; listen to what the Bible says:

Malachi 3:8-12

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

God promises to bless—super bless—the person who honors Him with the tithe.

Now, tithing isn't just giving—you know, putting \$5 in the offering each time you're here—it is taking the first 10% of all I earn and giving it back to God. Not "give it to God," but give it *back* to God, because the tithe actually belongs to Him.

When I give the first 10% back to Him, He blesses the 90% that remains and makes it go farther than the 100% could.

I have the option of keeping the 100%—you have the option of keeping the 100%—but then the 100% is under a curse, and it will never be enough.

Moses reminded the Israelites, *“During the 40 years that the Lord your God led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did your feet swell”* (Deuteronomy 8:4).

God has the ability to make tires last longer, to make engines go farther, to make vacations cost less, to make homes sell more quickly. How is that? Because when we put God first, He promises to bless what we have—in fact, to pour out a blessing so great that we won’t have room to contain it.

The Bible makes no such promise to the person who does not put God first. You may read the Bible all day long, but until you begin to do what the Bible says it will not really help you.

Obedience is what separates the “fans” of Jesus, who just like to hear what Jesus says, from the followers of Jesus, who hear what He says and do it.

Here’s what the curse of the 100% looks like:

The invading Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem—laying it waste—and the people were taken captive to Babylon. After 70 years, Babylon was taken by Cyrus of Persia, who issued a decree to release the Jews to return and rebuild the Temple.

About 50,000 returned to clear the rubble, replace the altar for sacrifices, and lay the foundations. Then, hostility from neighboring tribes caused the work to cease. The people turned to their own affairs, and became accustomed to worshipping among the remaining ruins.

Fifteen years passed; desire to rebuild had died out. Then, God sent Haggai with a message to stir the people to action again.

Haggai 1:2-11

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: The people are saying, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.’ ”

Then the LORD sent this message through the prophet Haggai: “Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: Look at what’s happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: Look at what’s happening to you! Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you

brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, while all of you are busy building your own fine houses. It's because of you that the heavens withhold the dew and the earth produces no crops. I have called for a drought on your fields and hills—a drought to wither the grain and grapes and olive trees and all your other crops, a drought to starve you and your livestock and to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get.”

Haggai 2:15-17

“Look at what was happening to you before you began to lay the foundation of the LORD's Temple. When you hoped for a twenty-bushel crop, you harvested only ten. When you expected to draw fifty gallons from the winepress, you found only twenty. I sent blight and mildew and hail to destroy everything you worked so hard to produce. Even so, you refused to return to me,” says the LORD.

I make it, I spend it, but it never seems to be enough. Why? Because it doesn't have the blessing of God on it.

God said, *“Try it. Put Me to the test.”* The Bible tells us *not* to test God except in this one area of giving, where He promises to bless our faithfulness.

Now, here's where the rubber meets the road: when you actually decide to do it, and put God to the test.

Here's what I suggest: take a 90-day tithe challenge. Take God at His word and put Him to the test., and see for yourself if what He said is true. For the next 90 days, give God the full tithe, the full 10%, and watch Him bless the 90% more than you thought possible.

If you're ready to do that today, to take a step of faith with your finances and see what God can do in three months' time, there is a response slip in your bulletin. On one side, it simply says, *“Go Green!”* On the other side, you can place a check mark next to *“Take the 90-Day Tithe Challenge”* and let us know that you're going to stretch your faith toward God financially.

If you choose to take the challenge and return that slip to one of our ushers, I will do several things.

First, I am going to commit to pray for you to discover God's blessing in ways you haven't imagined.

Second, I am going to send you a copy of this book, *The Treasure Principle*, which will encourage you, as Randy Alcorn describes how our giving actually furthers our relationship with God.

Third, I'm going to keep in touch with you by email or letter to help you along the 90-day journey. You can do this! Put God to the test with the tithe and reap a wonderful blessing. I am excited to hear what God will do!

My son, Steve, wandered from the Lord during his teen years—just living for himself and doing his own thing. But marriage and a son on the way nudged him in another direction, and he re-committed his life to Jesus Christ five years ago. When he did, without any prompting from me or his mother, he also began to return the tithe to the Lord. When other mortgage companies were turned upside down, Steve's opportunities only improved. He continued to tithe and to give God thanks. At the end of the year, when he received his contribution statement from the church, he sent me an email. I could sense he was startled—in a good way—when he asked, "Does this mean I can deduct my giving from my taxes?! Wow, that's great!"

Check it out for yourself. When you do your taxes for 2013, plug in a hypothetical contribution to the church equivalent to 10% of your gross wages, and see what difference it makes. You may even find that it moves you into another tax bracket and significantly reduces what you have to pay Uncle Sam.

Now, that's not a reason to start bringing the tithe, but it is a real perk.

God wants you to live a blessed life. I have tasted it. Others have tasted it. Do you want to receive it?

Will you give God the 10% and ask Him to bless the 90%, or will you hold on to the 100% that's cursed?

God wants you to live a blessed life. He wants you to be free—free from greed, free from pride, and free from want—to live the kind of life He wants you to live, to have the wherewithal to be a blessing to others.

Make a faith-covenant with Him today.