



# Cheerful

## Week 2: Giving Everywhere

Brian Mattson - 10/11/2026

In a mere 20 days, some of us will celebrate a jubilant holiday, filled with memories of years past. The last day of this month, October 31st, is always a date people look forward to observing. I'm not talking about the holiday most of you are imagining right now—Halloween. I'm talking about Reformation Day, of course. Paul and Jennifer Baker might be the only good Lutherans in the room who have an idea of what I'm talking about, but this year is the 509th anniversary of Martin Luther posting his *95 Theses* on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenburg, Germany.

Some of the story has grown into folklore over the years, but October 31st, 1517, is widely recognized as the start of the Reformation—the great schism of the Roman Catholic Church. Afterwards, there was the Catholic church and the newly formed Lutheran church. This great rift didn't begin because of Luther's issues with the Pope—though there were some. It didn't even begin because somebody said *bless you* instead of *gesundheit* to Mr. Luther after a sneeze—a real travesty in the late Middle Ages. No, it mostly boiled down to money.

I've always been fascinated by history. It was probably my favorite subject in high school. During my sophomore year World History class—and you might remember this as well—we spent time learning about the Protestant Reformation and its effects on religion, politics, and culture in Europe. The

beginning of this dustup can be attributed to indulgences, and the selling thereof. I remember first reading about the practice and my only thought was *ick*. It seemed like Catholic churches and some leaders around Europe were selling these indulgences to make people feel better about purgatory and the afterlife, then keeping some of the proceeds to enrich themselves or fund pet projects.

What are indulgences, you ask? Well, they have a long history in the Catholic church, and since this is not a Catholic church, I won't bore you with too many details. The simplest traditional definition I found is this: **An indulgence is the remission by the Church, on specified conditions, of the whole or a part of the debt of satisfaction remaining due for sin.**

Basically, in my not-Catholic understanding of how indulgences work, people sin, repent, ask for forgiveness, then, to remove the effects of that sin, they would seek out an indulgence to be assured the slate was clean. Like I said, I'm not Catholic, so check me on this if you are taking notes. To receive the indulgence, the recipient would offer a specific set of prayers, do certain good works, or even visit holy sites on pilgrimage. This common Catholic practice was rife with corruption and exploitation as the amount of money exchanged grew and grew. An entire economy developed around the practice with professional pardoners going around raising money by selling indulgences.

Long before Martin Luther, the funds raised from indulgences financed cathedrals, crusades, hospitals, and schools. But the practice got out of hand, leading Pope Boniface IX to write a letter to another Bishop in Italy, condemning the practice of leaders of some religious orders who falsely claimed that they were authorized by the pope to forgive all sorts of sins, and obtained money from the "simple-minded faithful by promising them perpetual happiness in this world and eternal glory in the next."

Just over 100 years after the Pope's letter, the practice had only gotten worse when Martin Luther presented his *95 Theses*, criticizing church leaders for exploiting people and hoarding money. Luther was part of a long line of people calling out this type of offense. It's a tale as old as time. Way back in Micah, the prophet declares:

**Here is God's Message to the prophets, the preachers who lie to my people: "For as long as they're well paid and well fed, the prophets preach, 'Isn't life wonderful! Peace to all!' But if you don't pay up and jump on their bandwagon, their 'God bless you' turns into 'God forsake you.'**

**- Micah 3:5**

Jesus continued the trend. He cleared the temple of money changers who were exploiting people in the name of God. He condemned the religious hypocrites of the day in front of crowds.

**With everybody listening, Jesus spoke to his disciples. "Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preen in the radiance of public flattery, bask in prominent positions, sit at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."**

**- Luke 20:45-47**

And if you think the problems ended thanks to Mr. Luther, I would invite you to turn on the TV and search for nearly any televangelist on the screen. These people sell products and promises aimed at desperate believers looking for a miracle. The *ick* I got back in high school while learning about the selling of indulgences is alive and well. Many of these TV preachers live in mansions, fly in private planes, and cherry pick scripture to convince people that God wants them to be rich, powerful, and healthy. All the viewers need to do is send in some "seed money" and the blessings will flow. The passage where

we get our series title from can even be used this way when read outside of scripture's larger themes and context:

**He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us, for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.**

**- 2 Corinthians 9:10-12**

That sure sounds like a little God-style quid pro quo, doesn't it? Because of your great generosity, God can enrich you. Actually, how a lot of these verses get presented is not that God *can* enrich you, but *will* enrich you. *Must* enrich you. These prosperity gospel preachers deliver their message as if God was a genie in a lamp, and to make your wishes come true a little extra generosity is all it takes. That's not how God works. That's not the goal of our faith. There's no equation to salvation where you say some words, throw in some good works and a few dollars, and the riddle is solved. Life becomes easy. Salvation sealed.

While that seems like a preferable outcome, faith is not a math problem to be solved. It sure would be easier to be able to dictate the outcome, but that's because we revert back our human need for assurance, control, and results. But our generosity—both with our finances and our actions—is a reflection of an internal transformation. It's about giving away our lives in honor of God and in service to others.

In Luke 6, Jesus comes down from a mountain after just calling his 12 disciples. At the bottom of the mountain, there's a crowd of people from all over the region. He delivers a sermon, to the crowd and to the newly chosen 12 disciples, about what it really means to follow him—the characteristics of the Kingdom of God. In Luke, this is known as the Sermon on the Plain and it

is quite similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but each one captures a different side of the same coin.

In Matthew, the longer sermon spends more time on the spiritual side of life. Jesus describes how to practice faith through prayer, fasting, and piety. In Luke, Jesus exhorts the crowd to put faith into action by reversing cultural norms and reflecting God's generous spirit to all we encounter. Yes, Jesus is concerned with our inward, spiritual transformation, but the results of which are manifested with real, practical actions. We go the extra mile without being asked. We treat our enemies with compassion. We serve and give to the outcast and destitute without regard for reciprocity, recognition, or status. Groundbreaking stuff in the ancient near-East, and it still is today.

**There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular. To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more payback. Live generously.**

**- Luke 6:26-30**

How we live matters. How we give matters. Jesus continues this theme just a few verses later in what may be my favorite translation from The Message:

**Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not**

**getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”**

**- Luke 6:38 MSG**

I mentioned this last week, but the rewards we reap are immaterial. Our spirits are lifted, our eyes opened, our hearts warmed. This is what happens when we are generous. This is what an eternal life looks like. I think it can be pretty easy to spot these people out in the real world. You know them. They are the people who Jesus was talking about at the end of this Sermon on the Plain in Luke. He says that each tree is known by its fruit. It's summed up in The Message this way:

**You don't get wormy apples off a healthy tree, nor good apples off a diseased tree. The health of the apple tells the health of the tree. You must begin with your own life-giving lives. It's who you are, not what you say and do, that counts. Your true being brims over into true words and deeds.**

**- Luke 6:43-45 MSG**

We are lucky to have a lot of non-wormy apples around here. People who give of themselves with their whole lives. One of those people is Mark Sponsler.

*<MARK SPONSLER VIDEO>*

It's easy to look at how we give of our time and resources as checking off boxes on some spirituality inventory. But that's not the goal of generosity. It's something that oozes up out of you. I'll admit, I'm guilty of just being generous at times because that's what I'm "supposed to do." But the times I do it proactively are when I feel the best. There's no *ick* about it. I know people who are generous with their lives. It's not just their money or their time, their skills or their voices. It's their entire lives.

I'm sure many of you get that same *ick* feeling when you see or read about financial improprieties in churches or religious institutions. I get it too, not only because I am a public representation of Christianity at large, but

because of the damage it does to poor, vulnerable, and desperate people. It does damage to those who *want* to be generous to churches and religious organizations, but their trust has deteriorated because of the actions of some. And it does damage to those who are curious about the abundant life Jesus offers, but that *ick* feeling is a major public relations issue and barrier. So how do we get over it?

The first thing I would say is that the church is not the only place you can be generous. There are innumerable nonprofits and organizations that do Kingdom work, whether it's called that or not. Give there. Serve there.

The second way we try to help counteract the ick is that we take transparency in our finances very seriously. If you'd like to see our financial statements for the last decade, we can get you those. If you want to know how much money the church pays me, stay for the Charge Conference after worship today. My entire salary package will be printed out for anyone who wants it, and it will be formally voted on by the church board.

The last thing I'd mention about having a healthier relationship with giving in the church is that generosity is a byproduct of an *inner* transformation. You can't give or serve or volunteer yourself into an abundant life or the process of salvation. Indulgences, Big Tent Revival charlatans, televangelists, prosperity gospel preachers... They are all selling the same thing: the idea that we should control/fix/improve what's outside rather than what's inside. That if we could just get our finances right, our health stable, or have immense wealth, God and other people would find us acceptable. Or at the very least, we could avoid punishment. But Jesus, and the apostles who wrote the New Testament, don't seem so concerned with one thing or the other. They are concerned that we are new things altogether. They have learned that grace is the pathway into connection with God, not bargaining done with our behavior. **Live generously. Give away your life. Generosity begets generosity.**