

ACTIVATE THE GREATNESS OF GIVING

Week #5 of a 6-Week Series, "Ignite Your Spirit: An Inner Journey"

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So, how many people have ever been in a rut, stuck, and feeling like your life wasn't moving or improving as you'd like? Anybody ever have to have a time like that? And how many people have at least one area in your life you wish would be going and flowing a little smoother and easier right now? You know, sometimes I think we all wonder why our lives aren't working as well as we'd like; why they aren't going better.

It kind of reminds me of this really bad joke of this drunk man who reeked of alcohol and on a subway sat right next to a priest. And the man's tie was stained. His face was smudged with red lipstick. He had half an empty bottle of gin sticking out of his torn coat pocket. And he sat there and he started reading. After a couple of minutes of reading his newspaper, he turned to the priest and he said, "Say, Father, do you know what causes arthritis?"

And the priest says, "Well, my son, it is caused by loose living -- by associating with wild women, drinking too much and having no consideration for your fellow man."

And the drunk guy muttered to himself, "Well, I'll be damned." And he keeps reading for a while.

And then the priest feels kind of guilty with the way he was so rude and came on so strongly to the drunk guy. So, he leaned over and he said, "You know, I'm really sorry. That was rude. You know, I didn't mean to speak that way. That was just unkind. So, tell me, how long have you had arthritis?"

And the drunk guy said, "Oh, Father, I don't have arthritis at all. I was just reading here that the Pope does." [Congregants laugh]

So, we are in Week #5 of our six-week series for this year's theme, which is "Ignite Your Spirit: An Inner Journey." And it's inspired by the fact that we light the candle on Christmas Eve to light the light of the Christ in us; to light the light of God that dwells in us. And sometimes -- like with resolutions at the beginning of the year -- they fade fast and we forget them quick and we stop working on them.

And this year, we're choosing to have an individual and collective spiritual resolution that will not fade that we will focus on for the year, which is to ignite our spirit. In Week #1, it was "Awaken the Spark within You." Week #2 was "Fuel the Flames of Forgiveness." Week #3 was "Direct Your Power, Purpose and Passion." Week #4 last week was "Put Your Heart into It" -- about love. Rev. Michele did that one for me.

And today we're going to talk about giving ... and the power of giving. You know, giving doesn't exactly sound like a super spiritual power. Giving doesn't sound like something that's going to make our lives greater or better, but in fact it does. It is a power, powerful, powerful spiritual practice. And so today we are looking at four ways to activate the greatness of giving.

And so the first thing we need to do is to **DEVELOP THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF GIVING**. Jesus expresses the law of giving powerfully in the book of Luke, Chapter 6, Verse 38 and 39, when he said, "Give and it will be given to you: A good measure pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing will be poured into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you will receive."

And what Jesus is saying is that the universe operates through a dynamic exchange of giving and receiving. And that giving is actually the activating agent to increase the flow of goodness and

abundance in our lives. It is our own willingness to give that has a great impact on what it is that we receive and attract in our lives.

You know, giving is not just an occasional act. It is a consciousness. It is a mindset in the way that we see the world; the way that we interact with the world; and particularly the way we see and interact with ourselves and others.

2 Corinthians 9 says, *“Whosoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whosoever sows generously will also reap generously. For each of you must give as you have decided to give in your heart; not reluctantly, not under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

And so, the message is clear. **Give and you shall receive. This is a dynamic spiritual law of life.** That, if life is stuck, if we are stagnating, if things are feeling like they're limited and we are experiencing lack, that it is through giving that activates and initiates and moves the creative energies of the universe to bring forth greater things.

And so if we're stuck, one of the greatest things we can do is: What can I give? How can I give?

One of my favorite stories is the story of Jim Henson, who created the Muppets. And he was really struggling at the beginning trying to sell and promote them. Nobody was buying. Nobody was interested. And then he heard a sermon by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote “The Power of Positive Thinking.” And the sermon was entitled “Give First.” And so he started focusing on just giving free shows -- whether it was parties, at festivals. He was doing these -- introducing these puppets, introducing these new creative ideas that nobody was buying initially -- but he started getting more exposure. He started meeting new people. New doors started opening up. He started attracting more people. Some were moving away and out of their lives, and things began to shake up. Things began to move. And it took one whole year. And then the phone rang, and he got a call to join the show “Sesame Street,” which literally, as they say -- the rest is history of how amazing that was.

And it was his willingness to give, his willingness to share, his willingness to put some energy out there and get energy that was stuck and inactive and stagnant moving. And things began to move and transform in his life.

You know, giving in all of his forms begins to open the pathway of possibilities for new ideas, new inspiration, new relationships, new connections, new synchronicities. And it's not just in one area; it's *all* areas of our lives. As we give, so too shall we receive.

So, think about in your job. If it's as you give, so too shall we receive. Are there ways you can give more and start receiving something and attracting different things in your work?

Or what about your relationship? How much are you giving into your relationship? And can you give more so that you can receive and experience even greater things?

Or what about your level of health? How much are you giving to that?

How much are you giving to your spiritual life? And can you give more to increase the circulation of new and better things into your life?

How many people would say you believe in the power and the Law of Giving and the Law of Circulation and Increase?

We absolutely do. And yet, in some strange way, when we hear the word “give,” we freeze. You know, it kind of triggers fear and anxiety and doubt and reluctance and apprehension. We think that, when we give, that we're losing; that we're depleting; that we're giving things away; that things are being taken away from us by giving.

You know, we think this mindset when we hear that you've got to give, give, give, and, you know, it'll increase the flow. We think, *"Well, I want to get, but you're telling me I should give? How am I going to get if I have to give more?"*

And it's counterintuitive to us in some respects. We're afraid of the giving, because we are trying to get and we think it's taking us in the opposite direction. And what we start doing is creating excuses why not to give in our lives.

Give blood. *"What? I like my blood inside my body. And I don't like needles. I'm not giving blood."*

Give your time. *"I don't have enough time already for myself. I can't give time."*

Give a helping hand. *"Give a helping hand? I could use a helping hand!"*

Give more love. *"Well, if I give more, so much love, you know, I might get hurt. I might be too vulnerable and put it out there. So I'm going to save my love for the really important person in my life."*

Or give some advice and guidance. *"Well, I would, but suppose it goes wrong and they get mad at me. Or suppose I give them my secrets and then they advance over me. So, I shouldn't give that."*

How about giving money? *"Well, I can't afford it myself. How am I going to give money?"*

I mean, give a smile and give a warm welcome to everyone you meet. *"Yeah, but they'll think I'm a weirdo if I just keep smiling and saying hi to everyone. So maybe I shouldn't give that either."*

What about giving service and volunteering? *"Oh, that's a hassle. And they have things; maybe I don't want to enjoy what they want me to do and it'll take so much time to coordinate. So I won't bother giving in that way either."*

We have so many excuses for why we won't give; so many reasons why we would rather not. And yet what it does: it robs us. It robs us of the inner gifts within ourselves. It robs us and limits our ability to experience greater abundance and greater joy. It limits our ability to ignite our spirits and to let our light shine.

Proverbs 11:24 has my absolute favorite Scriptural line about giving and its consequences. And it says this" *"One person gives freely yet gains even more. Another withholds unduly, but only comes to poverty."*

It's saying giving gains good, and withholding withdraws or depletes or limits the very good that we actually desire. You know, giving is the thing that activates the flow. And as we get into the consciousness ... if we're stuck in life and want our lives to move, we've got to give. Giving helps increase the circulation. It increases the goodness and the flows of possibilities in all areas of our lives.

You know, if we want to ignite our spirit, we've got to choose to be a conscious giver and develop a consciousness of giving.

As Norman Vincent Peale says, *"Give first, for as we give, so shall we receive."*

"I have a consciousness of giving."

Together: [with congregants] *"I have a consciousness of giving."*

"As I give, so too shall I receive."

[With congregants:] *"As I give, so too shall I receive." Amen.*

And the second way to activate the greatness of giving is to then **BE A CHEERFUL GIVER**. Albert Schweitzer says, *"I don't know what your destiny is, but I know one thing: the only ones among you that will truly be happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."*

There is a huge correlation between those who have found the joy of serving and health and happiness. Study after study after study shows that, as we reach out to help people in whatever forms -- whether it's serving, whether it's volunteering, whether it's helping; whatever it may be -- that it absolutely uplifts the individual giving; the one receiving; and those who are observing.

As we get older and more mature, there are physical benefits and there are cognitive benefits to serving, to volunteering, and stepping into greater levels of service. For when we give, it feels good. When we give, it attracts more good into our lives and opens more opportunities.

One of the cool things about giving and serving in whatever form: there's a sense of belonging and a sense of connection that's built. A connect that *"I am here, a part of something greater than myself."* Friendships are developed because, as we get older, we tend to lose friends. They're powerful and important aspects that serve us, so many wonderful levels, by being in service; by being a cheerful giver; and discovering the joy of serving.

Do you know children who grow up in an environment of serving and volunteer become more empathetic, more compassionate, and feel more socially responsible? Children who participate in different levels of service: they learn teamwork; they learn leadership; they learn patience. It strengthens family bonds when they do it together, and their regular involvement actually fosters a sense of being proactive, caring, and a more positive attitude and being more compassionate citizens.

Service is a powerful path -- a powerful spiritual path -- to deepen our oneness and connection with Spirit and a oneness with ourselves and others, and to discover the power of caring and being there for one another.

And there's all kinds of ways you can help. You can just be walking down the street and help somebody, you know, packing their groceries. You can let someone in in traffic. You can help anyone at any time informally. And it all does this wonderful good of feeling connected and feeling fulfilled.

Studies show that -- whether you know the person or don't know the person or you spend some money on them or you don't spend some money on them -- that no matter what different form of helping someone out, it all absolutely makes a positive difference in our lives.

And we can do it more formally. I know somebody who drives Meals on Wheels and delivers meals. I know somebody who works at the Senior Center who helps seniors with their IT with stuff and questions on the phone. There were people today who volunteered to bake baked goods for Uniteen and YOU ... and thank you to all of you for volunteering and doing that to help them raise money.

At church, you can be an usher; you can be a greeter. All these ways welcome and create greater connections in our lives and in our community, and support us to build the wonderful community that we are trying to achieve.

You know, I used to tell myself, *"Oh, I don't have enough time. I'm a busy minister already serving. I don't have enough time."* And that was just not true. And I think I've told you many years ago, one of the things I did that I loved the most -- it took was four hour shifts -- was I was a baby cuddler at a women's shelter. And I cuddled babies for four hours. I thought I wouldn't have enough time. I always had enough time! And I not only had enough time, but it raised my level of joy getting to cuddle those little cuties for four hours. How cool was that?

I love theater, so I became an usher. I volunteered as an usher at Phoenix Theater. And they used to make you wear these red golf shirts with the little logo there, and I was there just welcoming people as a concierge and asking questions, and someone came up to me and said, "Rev. Maraj? You work here too?" [Congregants laugh]

I volunteered at a the homeless campus to do different things. I've mentored different ministers. I've been on the South Regional Board for Unity for the regional ministers in Arizona and California and Las Vegas. I am now still. I went on for a second run at it. I said I would do this second run as long as I was not the treasurer. And so, I got there, and they said, "We need a treasurer." I said, "Okay; I'll be the treasurer." [Congregants laugh] And so ...

But here's one of my favorites. When we were in seminary, we had to do some volunteering at a senior place. And there was a classmate of mine named Nancy, and she played the piano and sang. I read the "Daily Word" and led a little meditation. And these seniors were not really responsive. You know, sometimes they would make some noise, but they really weren't that attentive. But we thought -- and their director thought -- it was a good and important thing.

So once Nancy couldn't do it, and she taught me how to do the chords a little bit and I was going to sing and do the piano as well as the meditation of the "Daily Word." So, I started with "Jesus Loves Me." And so I was doing that, and then sometimes people would make little noises here and there, but this one woman started screaming out, "Stop! Stop!"

And I'm thinking, "Jesus loves me." [Congregants laugh] I figure she just wasn't aware. And "Jesus loves me."

She goes, "Stop! Stop! Jesus doesn't love you when you're torturing people." [Congregants laugh] And that's a true story, for real. [Congregants laugh] But I just want you to know: I was a cheerful giver and I did it with a joyful heart. [Congregants laugh]

There are all kinds of different ways is the point I'm trying to make. There are all kinds of ways. But what it does, you know: it connects human beings. It connects our hearts. It doesn't matter what the various type of activities are. That's what it's all about. We're here to love one another, serve one another, support one another, care for one another. Whether we know them or not, whether there's money involved or not, whether it's for one hour or four hours; it doesn't matter. That's why we are here.

Albert Schweitzer is right. If you want to be happy, find some way to serve.

And I encourage you to think -- if you didn't get to sign up last week -- think of some area you'd like to serve and share your gift and time and talents with others.

You know, I saw a study the other day and it said that it is not just a number of people that you're close to in your life that creates a happy life. It's even simple touches of just saying "Hi" to the doorman or "Hi" to the cashier. All those little ways of contacting people every day absolutely fights isolation and loneliness, but it also builds up us feeling connected and closer to other people.

"I am a cheerful giver."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a cheerful giver."*

"I give in love because I love to give."

[With congregants:] *"I give in love because I love to give."*

"I am a cheerful giver."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a cheerful giver."* All right.

So, the next one we're going to talk about is **BE A THANKFUL TITHER**. And here's the big frog. Because money scares us. Money intimidates us. *"You talk about this giving thing; yeah, that's one thing. But now you're talking about my money!"*

And it's an important, important spiritual thing I'm going to talk about. Here, let's look at Malachi 3.10. It says, *"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so there may be food in my house. And put me to the test," says the Lord, 'and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down an overflowing blessing.'"*

And what it is saying here: that there is a principle of taking one tenth of what you receive and circulating it to where you are spiritually fed so that it will increase the flow of good in your life and in our world. And the reason the money thing ... the serving thing we can kind of get to, but when it gets to the money, it scares us, because it scares us right at the core of our own survival. *"Will I have enough? Will I survive?" Will I be able to do and provide for all the things I need to?"*

And it scares us, but I tell you, it's a powerful, powerful practice of giving, because it expands our faith in knowing that there's more. And it expands our awareness that *"I am so blessed and so grateful to have what I have that I want to share it; that I want to circulate it."*

I've always thought it's an interesting thing that we get stressed about 10%. And yet, you know, if somebody serves us food and brings it to us, we give them 15% or 18% or 20% -- whatever waitstaff is -- and God is still at 10! I think it's a smoking deal! [Congregants laugh] God is the Source that provides 100% of the good in my life. I get to keep 90% of it. And I share 10 to increase that flow of good in my life, in my church, in my community, and in my world.

I think it is a powerful and important thing for us to look at. And even if you decide 5%, I encourage you: do it consistently. Let the consistency of that flow start working magic in your life.

And you know the first thing we like to say: *"Well, when I get money, I'll do it. When I get it, I'll do it."* We say that all the time. Anybody know who John D. Rockefeller was? One of the richest men in history. He and Sir John Templeton and all the other wealthy people, William Colgate, Kraft, Hines ... all of those guys. One of the things they all had in common: they started tithing from day one. John D. Rockefeller said, *"I would have never been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed on my first salary, which was \$1.50."*

Ten percent is 10%; Five percent is 5% -- to do it and to do it with commitment. They're saying that's the reason their wealth grew. That's the reason they had opportunity after opportunity come into their life and their lives were blessed.

As we give -- and give with consistency in that flow -- it increases our faith and our confidence.

I love to give. It brings me a level of incredible joy to know that I'm doing good in the world and that it is increasing and doing me a greater good in the world, as well.

"I am a thankful tither."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a thankful tither."*

"I give in love because I love to give."

[With congregants:] *"I give in love because I love to give."*

"I am a thankful tither."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a thankful tither."*

And I love how God says here, *"Put me to the test."* And it's an encouragement to say give this a try for your own good. Even if it's 5%, I would encourage you to do it on a consistent and regular basis and see how the flow of God's abundant good moves in your life.

There were two men who were shipwrecked and they were stranded. And one kept screaming, *"We're gonna die! We're gonna die! There's no food, there's no water, we're gonna die!"*

The second man propped himself against a palm tree and was relaxed and calm as ever. And the first guy says, *"Don't you understand? We're gonna die! We're stranded here; we're gonna die!"*

And then the second guy said, *"Don't you understand? I make \$150,000 a week."*

And the first man looked and said, *"What difference does that make out here? It doesn't matter at all. We've got no food. We've got no water. We're going to die."*

And the second man says, *"Don't you get it? I make \$150,000 a week. And then I tithe 10% of that to my church, that \$150,000 a week."*

"So, what difference does that make?"

And the second guy said, *"My pastor will find me."* [Congregants laugh]

It's hard to get a funny tithe joke, let me just tell you right now.

Last one ... Last last one to activate the greatness of giving. Here's just the deal. You've got to **LEARN TO BE A GRATEFUL RECEIVER.** How many people ever have a hard time receiving? Have a hard time receiving -- easier time giving; hard time receiving? And that limits and blocks the flow. You've got to be a good receiver.

When it says *"It's the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom,"* it means God is not withholding anything from you, but delights to give you -- how much? As much as you're willing to receive. And the question is, how much are you willing to receive? How much love are you willing to open your heart to receive? How much joy? How much success? How much prosperity? Because that's the limiting factor. It's not that God wouldn't give. The question is: How much are you willing to receive? And how worthy do you feel to live as prosperously as you would like?

And we're kind of conditioned to limit our ability to receive. You ever hear, *"It is better to give than to receive?"* You're giving -- It's selfless. It's thoughtful. It's generous. It's loving. It's kind. We're receiving -- seems needy or greedy or weak or passive, or that you're a taker or selfish. It's just not true! It's just not true.

And because we've been conditioned that way -- to not be greedy -- we have a hard time accepting even little things. Like somebody ever give you a compliment? *"Oh, that food was so delicious." "Oh, that, I just threw that together."*

"Oh, I love that outfit of yours." "Oh, this old thing?"

We've got all kinds of different ways. You know, someone says, *"Can I help you all?" "Oh, no, no, no; I'm good. I got it. I can take care of it myself."*

You get a gift ... *"Oh, you really shouldn't have given me this gift. No, no, no; that's too much. I can't accept that gift."*

We say we want all this abundance and prosperity, and we can't accept a gift! We can't accept a compliment? We keep saying to the universe, *"No, thanks. I've got it."* That we're willing to give, but we aren't willing to receive. And that's the part that keeps the circulation moving; the circulation flowing.

Anybody ever cheap with yourself? You can afford it, but you buy the cheapest ticket. You buy a cheap outfit when you know you really wanted the other one. Even if you can afford it, sometimes we still cheap out on ourselves. It is an amazing thing how we limit our own good.

And that's the greatness of giving. It keeps that flow and gives us the opportunity, but we have to be willing to welcome and receive and accept all the abundant good that's in our lives ... and including accepting those little things now.

Someone says you look beautiful. Say, *"Thank you. I appreciate that."*

Someone buys you a gift. *"Oh, that was very thoughtful. Thank you."*

"Want a hand?" "Sure! I will accept that. Thank you. That's very helpful of you or kind of you."

I mean, accept those little things and train ourselves to accept to keep that circulation of giving and receiving and abundance in our lives.

Mary Kupferle, in her book, *"God Never Fails,"* says, *"It is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. Nothing delights God as the willingness of his children to receive. Nothing pleases the giver more than to find an open and receptive channel through which to pour his blessings."*

Gay Hendricks says we all suffer from the same problem -- It's called a ULP: an upper limit problem. We all have a glass ceiling in some area of how much we think we deserve: how much money, how much love, how much success, how much happiness.

And we need to raise our upper limit for two reasons. One: you are so worthy. You are worthy! You are God's beloved child! You are worthy of the very best of life and all your goals and dreams. So, raise your upper limit of being willing to accept all the good and the blessings you desire and that are available.

And the second thing is that it's your responsibility to be a greater light in this world; to bring more light and love and happiness and goodness ... not just for yourself, but for your family and your friends in this world. The world needs you to be a good receiver to bring forth more light in and through you.

"I am a grateful receiver."

Together: [with congregants] *"I am a grateful receiver."*

So, if you're feeling stuck anywhere in your life, remember the greatness of giving. It's the way to start moving that energy and circulating it in your life.

Develop a consciousness of giving, for as we give, so too shall we receive. Be a cheerful giver and discover the joy of giving and sharing and serving others. Become a thankful tither, realizing that your faith and the flow will increase the more you give and trust at that high level with giving money. And finally, be a grateful full receiver. Be an appreciative one who accepts all the good and the blessings of life.

You know, these are the major steps so we can ignite our spirits by activating the greatness of giving. God bless you all.