

## Liberal Love —By Brenda Billingsy

Heavenly Father, we thank You so much for being a generous Giver in sending Your Son to us. Now, help us in return to be generous in our giving. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

We often hear people say, "You should put your money where your mouth is!" I would like to rephrase that sentence by saying, "You should put your money where your *heart* is." Human love often asks, "How can I *get*?" Divine love, however, often will ask, "What can I give?"

Giving should be an outward demonstration of love. The Bible declares, "For God so loved. . ." not "just loved." He *so* loved that He had to find something to demonstrate that love, and the best gift He could find was His only begotten son. Love finds expression in giving.

From the beginning of time, God modeled liberal love and liberal giving, and everything He created was created to give! Light was created to give clear vision by dispelling the darkness. Firmament was created to give much-needed division of the water above from the water below. Seas tightened up to *give* space for dry land. Earth had to give something; it brought forth grass, herbs, trees, given as food for us. Two great lights were created. They gave us day and night, signs and seasons. Birds, fish, beasts—they all gave living creatures to populate the earth. And man was created, and given, as earth's caretaker. God *gave* man of His own breath, and man became a living soul.

Giving, however, was not just an external expression; God also made it a part of our *internal* design. To ensure that we are never short of breath, we are given a special circulatory system, where there is give and take of blood flow from the heart to the organs and then back to the heart again. Now, if the heart ever stops beating and the breath is gone, a physician then attempts to do CPR in an effort to jumpstart the heartbeat. Similarly, our church is described as a spiritual body with a spiritual circulatory system of give and take. And giving of our time, talents, and treasure is like the lifeblood that flows from the heart in appreciation for the love we receive.

It is difficult, however, to constantly give in a circulatory system of the church when there is no heartthrob, no love relationship. If the circulatory system shuts down, pastors, like doctors, spend a lot of time attempting spiritual CPR to jumpstart the spiritual heartbeat in the church in hopes of generating a flow of giving. But it was never God's desire to have a doctor-patient relationship with us. He never meant for the pastor, the spiritual physician, to perform CPR, resuscitating members from week to week, reviving a heartbeat just long enough for them to put one dollar in the offering plate. No, no, no! The Lord desires a different relationship. One that is more intimate. One that can be classified as "best friends." One in which He can walk with you and talk with you as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden, in the cool of the day.

Listen as He shares His heart. In John 15:13-15 (NKJV) He says, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.'" And who might that be? It's *you!* "You are my friends,'" He says, "if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.'" There's that act of giving again. "You did not choose Me,'" He says, "but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.'" And then He commands us that we "love one another.'"

Best friends! Best friends have no problem giving and sharing liberally, sacrificially with each other, because of the common bond of love that they share. For almost 40 years, I had the awesome privilege of experiencing such a bond of love with my best friend, Jackie. We began our friendship as teenagers, giving our trust and our loyalty to each other in our shared secrets and dreams. For a few years she actually lived in my parents' house, establishing a bond of sisterhood that was stronger than blood ties. We went to college together. We developed boyfriend relationships at the same time. We got married on the same day of the same year. And even though she eventually moved to Canada, we kept such a strong connection that we spoke at least twice a day. We had children around the same time. And during those 40-odd years, neither of us ever had to verbalize or confess, "I'm struggling financially," or "I'm struggling physically," or "I'm struggling spiritually." No, we could make that assessment just by the tone of our voices on the phone. And depending on the need, we would do whatever was necessary to see that the need was met. Ours was a love that was bound by cords that *could not be broken*.

We would try to visit each other at least once a year, and when we got together, time was irrelevant. We would talk way into the night, giving and receiving much-needed support. She was there for every important step in my ministry, helping me transition through turbulent waters, until one day she experienced some turbulent waters of her own. Stage 4 cancer invaded her body in 2006. We struggled through the next two years, giving as much love and encouragement to each other as we possibly could. I remember well the last week we spent together. She called me in her sickroom and *gave me* the most precious gift of all—her Bible. And yes, you guessed it, we had the identical study Bible! She said to me, “Brenda, you are my best friend, and I would only give this gift to *you*. I’m so grateful for our friendship through the years. Thank you for helping me study and understand the Word.”

I hugged her Bible, realizing she had given me her very best gift. My heart was overwhelmed with love and gratitude. And as I was preaching her eulogy, I decided to do something special. As they lowered her casket in the earth, I decided to give her my last, best gift. So I laid my Bible on top of her casket. Best friends forever! Hearts of love, giving to the end.

Such liberal giving in our relationship often reminded me of my favorite story in the Bible—David and his best friend, Jonathan. I have always marveled at the mutual love and liberality demonstrated in their friendship. 1 Samuel 18:1 says that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David” (NKJV). He loved him as himself. Jonathan stripped himself of his robe that was on him, his best gift, and he gave it to David with his armor, his sword, his bow, and his belt. And chapter 20:15 says they made a covenant. And it was this: “You shall not cut off your lovingkindness from my house forever, not even when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth’ ” (NASB). David was so eternally grateful for the generosity of his friend that even years later, after Jonathan’s death, he was still determined to find *someone* from Jonathan’s household to show favor, kindness, and give a very special gift. And in 2 Samuel 9 we see that David found his best friend’s son, crippled in both feet. And with lovingkindness, he stripped himself of priceless real estate, servants, produce, and position to show kindness and gratitude to Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth.

Best friends usually share a love and a heart connection that causes them to give liberally and sacrificially. Just as Jackie and I shared, and just as David and Jonathan shared, in a similar way God wants to share and participate in a best friend relationship with you! Therefore, like Jonathan, He initiated the process. In John 3:16 we are told that “For God so loved the world”—so loved *you*—“that He gave His only begotten Son” —sacrificially, liberally—“that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,

but have everlasting life" (KJV). These were not just words. It was actually put into action when Jesus unselfishly stripped Himself of His position. He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, and then accepted the cross, just for you. And if we appreciate the sacrifice of our best Friend, Jesus, then we are encouraged to "let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5, KJV). We should then give back to Him sacrificially and liberally—which is good stewardship.

Our liberal giving is really a love gesture. It's a token of appreciation of all that we continually receive from God. And like David, we should make a covenant with God to ensure the continuation of the loving, giving cycle. Now, many people are scared or skeptical about engaging in the cycle of giving for fear that they may not have enough to take care of themselves. But God graciously provides us with a promise that ensures our survival when we give back to Him sacrificially and liberally. Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house" (NKJV). Food for others! In other words, you are blessed to be a blessing to someone else. When you give, God then promises that He will open up for you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing until it *overflows*. So really, you lose nothing. Even your produce will be protected from the devourer. And since we're not farmers, I equate produce with the fruit of your labor—your paycheck. The money you sacrifice will be returned to you liberally. It's literal giving, liberal receiving, so that there can be more liberal giving to make room for more liberal receiving.

And the cycle goes on and on and on. See, it's not really about *paying* tithe. That's the doctor-patient relationship I described a little earlier, where there is no love connection. You just pay someone for services rendered. Instead, what we have described here is a love-based, life-sustaining system of giving and receiving that ensures a continuous cycle of grateful love between best friends.

So, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38, NIV). And please note this line (from the same verse): "For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return" (NASB). That is an important concept. In other words, if you give a little, you can expect a little. If you give much, you can expect much. If you're stingy and decide to give nothing, oh well! I can only urge you never to let the condition of your heart cause you to forfeit your blessing. When you give of money and of resources to bless and uplift your fellow man, you relieve poverty, suffering, starvation. When you give to build the kingdom of God, in return you are assured that all of your needs will be met.

Rabbi Lapin, in his book, *Thou Shall Prosper*, describes a Jewish tradition called *Havdalah*. It strongly establishes a principle that each person should not just make his or her needs the only concern in life. Giving is a responsible action of love flowing from a heart full of gratitude. As the Sabbath ebbs away, each Saturday night Jewish families prepare for the productive work week ahead by singing and participating in the joyful *Havdalah* service. They ask God to increase their family's offspring, their wealth, and the work of their hands. The *Havdalah* is recited over a cup of wine that runs over into the saucer beneath. [*Havdalah* is such an interesting process that I wanted you to actually see this overflow.]

The wine is poured into the cup, and this cup represents all of your needs. God provides for it and continues to provide. And look what happens! There is an overflow—the overflow that goes to help and to bless and to give to someone else. The cup symbolizes the intention to receive during the week ahead, not only sufficient to fill your cup, but it gives the excess that will overflow for the benefit of others.

Now, I don't know the words of the *Havdalah*, but I love this chorus that we used to sing in the offering time at church: "You can't beat God's giving, no matter how you try. The more you give, the more He gives to you, so just keep on giving, because it's really true that you can't beat God's giving, no matter how you try."

David eventually lost his best friend, Jonathan. I eventually lost my best friend, Jackie. And you may have lost a loved one, too. Don't let that discourage you. We can praise God that *all* of us still have a best Friend in Jesus, and He promises never to leave us and never to forsake us. He *will stick closer* than a brother. How do I know this is true? I listen to David's testimony in Psalm 23 (KJV) where he reminds us that God will always take care of His children.

"The Lord is my shepherd." That's relationship. "I shall not want." That's supply. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." That's rest. "He restoreth my soul." That's healing. "He leadeth me in a paths of righteousness." That's guidance. "For his name's sake." That's purpose. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." That's testing. "I will fear no evil." That's protection. "For thou art with me." That's faithfulness. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." That's discipline. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." That's hope. "Thou anointest my head with oil." That's

consecration. "My cup runneth over." That's abundance. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." That's blessing! "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord." That's security. "For ever." That's eternity.

With such a *liberal, loving, sacrificial, giving* best Friend, let us covenant today to show our love and our gratitude by continuing the cycle of liberal giving. Oh, but I must warn you, if you get involved in the love cycle, just be prepared to receive even more blessings of love from your best Friend in return. Liberal giving and liberal receiving only continue the cycle of liberal giving and liberal receiving. So what's love got to do with stewardship? *Everything!* May God continue to bless you as you continue to give liberally, out of a heart *filled* with love. God bless you!