

Copyright October 20 & 21, 2018. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

Title: Breaking Free

Date: October 20 & 21, 2018

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)

Text: [Luke 15:11-32](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



What's your black hole? It's an interesting question to kick around given its origin. Albert Einstein first predicted black holes in 1916 with his general theory of relativity but the term "black hole" wasn't coined until 1967. Astronomer John Wheeler named it and discovered the first one in 1971. Black holes are some of the strangest and

most fascinating objects in outer space. Lurking at the center of nearly every galaxy, there is a hungry black hole. Their strong gravitation field allows them to engulf planets, gas and stars, to a point of no return. Not even light can escape it.

Of course, that is about astronomy but my question isn't about the universe of stars. It is about your universe, your world, your life. What's your black hole? You know that expression, don't you? Not too long after its discovery, it started being used to describe the behavior of people. The first use was "running a single small newspaper ad to launch a major campaign is useless; it amounts to throwing our money into a black hole." A black hole is something that consumes a resource continually. Its gravitation pull is so strong that it eats up and consumes money to a point of no return. What's your black hole? ¹

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised when asking that question this week, in our community around the Geist reservoir, that the first answer was "my boat." Then, he followed up with the added the classic expression, "A boat is a hole in the water into which one pours money." All of the boat owners in the room agreed. I heard about other black holes where financial gravity consumes resources. See if yours is on the list of the things I heard. Golf clubs, shoes, credit cards, Apple products, eating out, tools, college tuition debt, and wine cellar. For many people, perhaps all of us, money and the things it buys can produce a level of gravity from which they simply cannot escape.

Last week we began a series titled Defying Gravity. We are looking at the financial gravity that everyone experiences. Since Adam and Eve left the garden, there has been the financial gravity of needs, a gravitational pull to provide for the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. Like gravity, there is a goldilocks zone where the right amount of gravity leads to a healthy lifestyle. But we live in a society that constantly telling us that we will be better off with more. There is a gravitational pull to move well beyond the zone of our needs into the zone of wants and it threatens our health and well-being.

As an example, we pointed to the rich young man who experienced so much financial gravity that he could not bear to break free and accept Jesus' invitation to be a disciple. Our take away was this. Our many possessions pull on us, encouraging us to accumulate more and more. When we do, we create a barrier to experiencing the kingdom of God. Discovering financial gravity, owning and claiming this force in your life is an important first step for spiritual growth.

Today we consider another rich young man who appears in Luke and he is so familiar to you that you may need to work to discover new insight from his story. He is a character in a parable that Jesus tells. He feels financial gravity with such force that like a black hole, it sucks him in and he loses himself in it. It is one of the best known stories in the Bible and begins, "There was a man who had two sons."

To understand the gravitational pull that is working on the two sons you need to understand what they experienced growing up with their father. He wasn't just well off. On first century standards, he was extremely wealthy. He has herds of cows and goats, a house with servants and slaves large enough to host a massive banquet. He can serve his guests a sumptuous meal of fatted calve and hire professional musicians and dancers for his parties. He clearly has the respect of the community because everyone wants to attend. He has amassed a serious estate and such, the huge mass has a gravitational pull.

The youngest son feels this pull and probably had most of his life. But it becomes so enticing, it makes him sick. Like lottery fever which is clearly all around us, he has inheritance fever so he does the unthinkable. He goes to his father and says, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." (Luke 15:12b) In traditional Middle Eastern culture, this is the equivalent to saying, "Father, I am eager for you to die!" If the father was a traditional father, he would strike the boy across the face and drive him out of the house.²

But this man with two sons isn't a traditional father. Those listening to Jesus tell the story would have been shocked to hear what he does. He not only gives him his inheritance, which as the younger son would have been one-third of his sizeable estate, he gives him permission to sell the livestock and land, to liquidate the asset and turn it into cash. This father is generous beyond imagination granting these two things.

The community observing this behavior would have been astonished by what the man did and would have been appalled at the young man's need to convert the property in to cold hard cash. In a matter of days, he sells the very farm that his father is still farming, even though Jewish law did not permit this. He didn't care. The gravitation pull is too strong. He wants the money so he offers the property and livestock to the community likely as a fire sale because, "A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country..." (Luke 15:13a) He didn't realize that in that distant country, he was about to be sucked into a black hole.

This shouldn't surprise anyone. One of the worst things in the world to do is to place a large sum of money into the hands of someone with low spiritual and emotional maturity. The younger son clearly demonstrates both by breaking the Jewish traditions and law and turning his back on his father and family. So it isn't surprising at what he does, "...he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. (Luke 15:13b CEB). He lived fast and large until it was all gone, and then, things got worse. There was a famine. He needed a job.

He tries to get one twice. First, he "...hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs" but "no one gave him anything."(Luke 15:15,16b) In other words, he was working for food only. Having failed at his first attempt at work, he decided to go home and ask his dad for a job on the estate. This seems logical given the way our world operates. Kids often return . But in the first century Jewish world, it wasn't an option.

From the Dead Sea scrolls and the Jerusalem Talmud, we know that Jews of the time of Jesus had a strict prohibition against losing a family inheritance to Gentiles. It was so severe that they actually created a shunning ceremony to anyone who did so. It was called the "qetsatsah ceremony." The villagers would bring a large earthenware jar, filled with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the guilty individual and together shout "So-and-so is cut off from his people." From that point on, no one would have anything to do with him; he was shunned and cut off from any contact.³ His black hole had truly created a point of no-return.

Still, the once-rich, now poor young man decides to return home. It is a remarkable moment in the story, even if it was a decision made out of the desperation of being sucked into the black hole. But it is not the most remarkable moment because for a third time, the father is going to break the mold of Middle Eastern father. In doing so, he remarkably demonstrates to his sons the meaning of stewardship and generosity. Somehow, he senses his return. "While his son was still far away" he takes the bottom edge of his long robe and runs to welcome his pig-herding son. Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. To do so is deeply humiliating. Nevertheless, this father runs. He falls on his neck and kisses him before hearing his son's prepared speech. His generous act is not in response to his son's confession. Rather, it is an expression of his character and his generous spirit.

You know of course what happens next. He restores him to the household by placing a signet ring on his finger. He dresses him in a new robe. And he throws a lavish party for the entire community, inviting the very people who were preparing for the shunning "qetsatsah" ceremony. Now, they are witnesses to the remarkable kindness the young man did not deserve, the forgiveness he did not merit, and the love that he did not anticipate. His father's generosity gave him a new life, breaking him free of the black hole that sucked him in, took his inheritance and cut him off from family and community.

It is a generous example of kindness, forgiveness and love; but, more than those things, it is example of stewardship. The father was at the core of his being a steward, a caretaker of both life and property. His very character was about "doing good, being rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...taking hold of the life that really is life." (1 Timothy 6:18, 19b) As a steward, he understood that all he had, including his sons, weren't his but rather, gifts given to him by God, gifts for which he had to care. Somewhere along the way in his very successful life, he broke free from financial gravity that says whatever I have is mine and embraced the idea that all that he had, his family, his money and property, even his life belonged to God. He was a steward.

A steward is a person who manages another's property. Stewards have broad discretionary powers over how things are run, but they know that primarily they are servants, looking not to their self-interest but to the welfare of the owner. As followers of Jesus we are to understand that we are stewards of what God has given us. Our life, talents, ability and resources and the way we use our life, talents, ability and resources is to honor and please the giver of the gift, to honor and please God.⁴

Sadly, most Christians do not truly act as God's stewards, and there is a reason for it. Financial gravity pulls us toward a belief that we are the sole owners of what we possess and that we can use it to support the lifestyle we desire. Being an owner means we can make decisions free of the control and even the consideration of others. We submit to no one when financial gravity pulls on us.

Most people in the United States live like owners. In their book *The Paradox of Generosity*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson review the data and find that "very large numbers of Americans, despite wanting to enjoy happy, healthy, purposeful lives, fail to practice the kinds of generosity that actually leads to happiness, health, and purpose in life. Something gets in their way"⁵ Why do they say that? Because their survey, which included in-depth interviews, found that 44.8 percent of Americans reported that they gave \$0 of their income to any charitable purpose. Zero. Not one dollar. Stop and let that sink in.

Nearly half of us gave away zip, nada, squat, zilch. Nothing at all. These people turned down Girl Scouts, refused high school band collections, did not slow the offering plate at church, ignored the cancer research drive, told the Salvation Army they had no change at Christmas. I'm not accusing them of this. This is what people self-reported.

The report went on to say this: Another 41.3 percent gave less than 2 percent of their income away. This means that the vast majority of financial generosity in the U.S. is offered by about 15 percent of the population that is willing to give away more than 2 percent of their income.⁶

You may be thinking: But at least people gave their time, and time is valuable. Yes, time is valuable. Volunteerism is extremely important to charitable organizations. In the same study, more than 76 percent of the people self-reported that they gave no volunteer hours to any organization. That is three out of four people, a remarkable number. It seems there is a generosity famine afoot. How can that be? It is an issue of identity. They weren't stewards.

Lack of generosity is not about time or money; it is about identity. Stewards understand that they are custodial agents of whatever they have, including their lives, the lives of their children and family. They manage money and life in a way that is pleasing to the true owner.

Becoming a steward of financial resources requires discipline. Through the centuries, Christians who are serious about stewardship have used proportional percentage giving with a tithe as the goal. A tithe is one-tenth

of one's income. It's not something made up by pastors trying to fund ministry. It was a practice given God to manage an inheritance. You find it in the book of Deuteronomy. When God gave Israel the Promised Land, we find these instructions. "But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance...there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD." (Deuteronomy 12:10a, 11a) The tithe was a tool used to manage an inheritance. The money from the tithe supported the worship life of Israel and took care of the most vulnerable people in the society. Why would God ask them to do this? God doesn't need the money. God doesn't need a tithe. They needed to tithe as a tool to care for their inheritance. A tithe is for our sake, not God's. A tithe is a way to manage the black hole of financial gravity.

It seems clear that the tithe is intended to be a discipline that enables people to help manage their wealth and at the same time, expand God's kingdom. As they give their tithe, they become God's servants. Through their generosity, they gain a sense of identity as stewards.

Imagine what a difference it might have made to the young man if he'd used this practice to manage his inheritance. Without the discipline, he found himself pulled into a black hole that consumed his resources. The discipline of a tithe would have helped him understand who actually owned his inheritance and encouraged him to become a steward. And, it would have helped him experience the kind of joy that his father demonstrated when he returned home, to celebrate and rejoice when what was lost, that what he hadn't been able to care for, was found, and he could steward again.

God gives us a way to gain that joy but it requires practice. The practice of letting go rather than holding on, the practice of seeing your inheritance as belonging to God, the practice of proportional giving which leads to a tithe. Learning this, doing this, experiencing won't just bring joy. It is the way to break free from the force of that hungry black hole that is lurking around everyone one of us.

¹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms by Christine Ammer. Copyright © 2003, 1997 by The Christine Ammer 1992 Trust. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

² BAILEY, K. E. The Pursuing Father: What we need to know about this often misunderstood Middle Eastern parable. **Christianity Today**, 26 out. 1998. v. 42, n. 12, p. 34–40.

³ Bailey, K.E.

⁴ Berlin, T. The following is a reworking from his Defying Gravity resource sermon, Breaking Free.

⁵ Paradox, page 99.

⁶ Paradox, page 103