

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO GENEROSITY

How God Made Us: Are You Living Like a Bucket or a Pipe

A bucket is designed to hold things (liquids, dirt, etc.). A pipe is designed to convey things through it (water, gas, etc.). The bucket holds what it receives, while the pipe passes on what it receives. In regard to the material possessions that God has entrusted to you, are you living like a bucket or a pipe?

Are you living like a bucket or a pipe? This is a rather odd metaphorical question; yet, consider the purpose of each. A bucket is designed to hold things (liquids, dirt, etc.). A pipe is designed to convey things through it (water, gas, etc.). The bucket holds what it receives, while the pipe passes on what it receives. In regard to the material possessions that God has entrusted to you, are you living like a bucket or a pipe? Are you holding on or passing on?

THE WAY OF THE BUCKET (It is easy to live like a bucket.)

#1: We can find ourselves living like a bucket when we ignore the ultimate end of all buckets.

There is a bumper sticker that reads, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” What an accurate way to express the world’s view of life and possessions. This is true if the game of life is all about accumulation. The sad tragedy is that he who dies with the most toys still dies, and then someone else will get to play with all those toys. David reminds us in Psalm 49:16-17 (NIV), *Do not be overawed when others grow rich [when he has a big bucket and it is full], when the splendor of their houses increases; for they will take nothing with him when they die, their splendor will not descend with them.*

God condemns the rich farmer for this very thing: *God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared [what is left in your bucket]? So is the man who stores up treasure for himself [keeps his own bucket full], and is not rich toward God.’* (Luke 12:20-21, NASB). What we keep in our bucket will eventually leak out, be stolen, taxed, evaporate, or spilled out when we “kick the bucket.” This should give us reason to pause as we consider the folly of living life like a bucket.

#2: We can find ourselves living like a bucket when we bestow on ourselves, “Most Important Person” status.

When we want and need to become the center of attention, we will find ourselves living like a bucket. Jesus sternly warns us about the narcissistic attitude that declares us the center of the universe. Again, the parable of the rich farmer is the classic example. The farmer was incredibly successful and had more than his current “bucket” could hold, so he chose to replace his smaller bucket with a larger bucket to hold all the new stuff he had accumulated.

Jesus nails the selfishness of the farmer in Luke 12:15 when He warns, ...*Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.* The farmer was proud of his full and overflowing bucket, but God was not proud of him.

#3: We can find ourselves living like a bucket when we embrace the belief that filling our bucket is the way to real happiness.

John D. Rockefeller honestly admitted, “I have made many millions, but they have brought me no happiness.” Henry Ford confessed after becoming a multi-millionaire, “I was happier doing a mechanic’s job.” However, we still want to believe the lie that “happy is the man whose bucket is full.”

Solomon, who was perhaps the richest man to have ever lived, agonized about the futility of his riches in Ecclesiastes 2:11 (NIV), *Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.* Somehow, we still want to believe that “happy is the man whose bucket is full.” Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 5:13 what happens when people try to keep what is in their bucket for their own selfish enjoyment, *I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners...*

THE WAY OF THE PIPE

Even though our sinful, fallen nature entices us to live life like we are a bucket, it is a cruel fantasy that ultimately leads to disappointment, destruction, and death. But, what about living like a pipe? Let us consider this alternative.

#1: We will find ourselves living like a pipe when we understand God created us to *pass on*, not *hold on*.

In God’s economy, a pipe is infinitely more useful to Him than a bucket! He created us to be conduits and not receptacles of His blessings. What happens if a pipe gets confused and starts thinking it is a bucket? Things gets stuck, the pipe gets clogged, and the only solution is for the pipe to be “roto-rooted” so it can go back to doing what it was made to do—let things flow *through* it, not just to it.

Do you know what happens to the body when its arteries or colon get clogged? When your internal plumbing is not working, your body is going to be greatly hindered in its normal activities. God has created many of us to be high-capacity pipes so we can pump significant amounts through us to support kingdom causes near and dear to His heart. Let us look at what Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 (NASB):

Instruct those who are rich in this present world [high capacity pipes] not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share [let it flow freely],

storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

Nothing produces *life indeed* like doing what God has created us to do. God has positioned us to turn on our spigot and let it flow!

R. G. Letourneau was once asked how he could give ninety percent of his income away each year and still continue to get richer. He smiled and confessed, “I keep shoveling it out and God keeps shoveling it right back in—and He has a bigger shovel!”

#2: We will find ourselves living like a pipe when we really believe that what we are letting flow through us today will ultimately flow back to us later.

There is a great, eternal “payback” for being a pipe. The bucket gets what it gets while it is here, and that is its reward. The pipe receives a different payback. All that has flowed through it for all those years of life are being recorded, and it will all be waiting for us when we relocate to our permanent residence in glory. Malachi 3:16 (ESV) says, *A book of remembrance was written before Him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed His name.* God is monitoring your outflow.

Jesus assures us of this eternal “payback” in multiple places. In Matthew 6:20-21 (NASB), He encourages us, *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. We lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven by what we willingly let flow through us in giving to others in this life.*

In Matthew 19:21, Jesus charged the rich young ruler, *...If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.* Pass it through now and it will be waiting for you in heaven. Jesus was not asking him to give it up; he was just asking him to send it on ahead for later use and enjoyment. Not a bad deal if we keep in mind that this life may last eighty years, but eternity...well, it is a whole lot longer than that!

#3: We will find ourselves living like a pipe when the desires of God’s heart truly become the desires of our heart.

Psalm 37:4 powerfully states, *Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart.* Most people have incorrectly interpreted this verse to read, “You delight yourself in the Lord and then the Lord will give you what you want,” but it more accurately should be understood this way: “Delight yourself in the Lord and then the Lord will give you *His desires* for your heart.” In other words, as we delight ourselves in Him, He will replace our heart’s desires with His heart’s desires, so that we will love what He loves and will have compassion on whom He has compassion. Once God has our heart’s desires aligned with His heart’s desires, we will find ourselves driven to be a high-capacity pipe, allowing as much grace and blessing as possible to fall upon those for whom the Lord wants to touch and care of.

We must not forget the sobering words of our Lord who said, *From everyone who has been given much [high-flow capacity], much [high-flow capacity] will be required...* (Luke 12:48b). Jim Elliot, who was martyred while trying to share Christ with a native tribe in South America, wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” What we accumulate on this earth we cannot keep, and what we accumulate in heaven we cannot lose. Seems like a “no-brainer,” doesn’t it? If God has blessed you to be a high-capacity pipe, I encourage you to freely open your spigot and let God’s blessings and provision pour forth on those who need a blessing from God! In so doing, you will have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. When you reflect on how you are currently living your life, do you see more similarities to living like a bucket or living like a pipe?
2. Which of these three motivations do you most struggle with and how does it show up in your life?
3. Why do so many of us believe that more money for ourselves will make us happier in spite of all the horror stories of the devastation that money wreaks on those who possess it? Why do we so often choose to believe that lie?
4. What is your greatest struggle with the idea of consistently living like a pipe instead of a bucket?
5. From everyone who has been given much (high-flow capacity), much (high-flow capacity) will be required” (Luke 12:48b). As affluent Americans, what should this verse be calling for us to do with our affluence, regardless of how much of it we have?
6. Do you think it would be exciting to live like R.G. Letourneau? Why or why not? What would prevent you from living like that, beginning today?
7. Psalm 37:4 says, “*Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart.*” Why is it so important to understand what David was really saying?
8. In what ways might there be an inconsistency between what Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose”, and how you currently living your Christian life?

9. In Matthew 19:21, Jesus charged the rich, young ruler, “*If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*” Was Jesus asking him to give up his wealth or just postpone his enjoyment of that wealth until later? Why is this so important for us to keep in mind?

10. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?