

Parable of the Cheetos

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My wife Kristina and I have been married 33 years, 2 months, and 3 days. Not that I'm counting. It's actually been mostly blissful. We're balanced. She's rational and reasonable where I'm emotional and, well, unreasonable.

We have a really good working partnership. We've hardly ever had a fight. Hardly ever. Not often. Nothing too serious. Not very serious. Nothing life-threatening.

But then came the Cheetos.

Our daughter Lydia Charlotte. She'll be heading to New York City, to acting school, in November. She's the last of our children, she's our baby.

Natalie is 30, living in Arizona. Kristofer is 29, living in North Carolina.

And then there's Lydia Charlotte, who's 18 — living proof that the elderly can conceive; so be careful, old-timers.

Lydia Charlotte was the surprise bonus child.

I remember standing in line in a baby furniture store in New Hampshire, looking around at all these very, very young parents and parents-to-be, and then looking at Kristina — I was 46, she was 42 — and I said to her, "Do you realize that together, we're 88 years old? What are we doing here?"

But Lydia Charlotte has been a joy to us.

Natalie and Kristofer will both tell you that they were the experimental children. We were learning to be parents. Then, after you do parenting a couple of times and then you go on hiatus for 11 years and you think you're done, and then you come back to it, you're sooooo relaxed.

It's a miracle Lydia Charlotte made it to 18, because there was little or no guidance.

I was just not gonna go through all those rules and all that *enforcement* again. I'm too old for that stuff; I don't have the energy for it.

So Lydia Charlotte and I have gotten along *great*, all these years.

She went into theatre, into acting; I was a theatre guy, an actor. We could relate to each other. Similar temperaments. No real friction, to speak of.

Until the Cheetos.

I brought home Cheetos from Market Basket.

I do most of the grocery shopping for our family. My wife, the honors student in Literature at the University of Massachusetts, doesn't appreciate the social interaction opportunities that present themselves when you go grocery shopping at Market Basket.

To me, the Market Basket in Rowley is the Ipswich community center. *Hi! Hi!* All my friends are here! Kristina's like — *mask, sunglasses, hat down over the face, don't make eye contact, somebody God forbid might say hello.*

So I'm at Market Basket, I know my daughter loves Cheetos, they're not on the family grocery list, of course, but I bring them home — as sort of a surprise free bonus gift — for the child who was sort of a surprise free bonus gift to us, 18 years ago.

And I don't buy a little bag. Not one of those school-lunch-snack-sized bags.

I buy the biggest, fattest bag of Cheetos that Market Basket offers.

This is one advantage of doing the family grocery shopping instead of my wife doing it, because Kristina would *never* sanction such an extravagance.

I mean, who knew they sold Cheetos by the pound?

So that evening, as often happens, we three find ourselves standing in the kitchen, talking about our day.

And Lydia Charlotte has the enormous bag of Cheetos in her arms, and she's munching.

And I reach out to stick my hand in the bag and grab a handful of Cheetos.

Now in retrospect, I would have to say, this is a mistake, on multiple levels.

First of all, I've been calorie-counting for the past 5 years, and a typical "serving" is considered not 10 but 21 Cheetos, which is 120 calories.

If you're trying to get through the day on 1300 calories like I am, a handful of Cheetos is 10% of your daily allowance — for food! All food!

On the other hand, look, when you have a teenager standing there in front of you chowing down on an enormous bag of Cheetos — and you LOVE Cheetos — you have fond memories of Cheetos, from the days before calorie-counting — it is really hard to resist taking at least one handful.

So I don't care. I'm going to have a handful of Cheetos, in a casual moment with my family, standing there in the kitchen, while we're chatting.

And this is where it happens. This is the moment.

I reach out for the Cheetos — and *Lydia Charlotte pulls them away.*

She didn't say anything, but the message I got was:

Mine. You can't have any Cheetos. They're mine.

And I am embarrassed to tell you, I went ballistic. I was inflamed. Totally irrational.

Because I bought those Cheetos. I will keep buying Cheetos for her if she wants Cheetos.

But the key is, *they are sharable.*

This is a snack food. It's not sustenance.

This is an enormous bag of "crunchy, cheese-flavored, puffed corn products containing basically no real ingredients"!

It's for fun! And you won't share the fun! With the one who provided the fun!

I went off so bad, Kristina erupted too — not at Lydia Charlotte! At me! She flew into a rage at me.

I didn't know she even knew words like that.

She was protecting her baby.

And then I went off on her too.

It turned out to be the ugliest fight we've had in, like, 10 years, maybe 20 years. About *Cheetos.*

Our family survived. I apologized to my wife and my daughter. It was totally stupid of me to explode like that.

The marriage survived. Lydia Charlotte was probably not damaged for life. We get along fine now.

We laugh about the Cheetos.

But there is a lingering truth here. There is a takeaway, I think. A larger lesson.

Because in our lives, we get all these blessings, these gifts, these resources.

My money. My possessions.

We don't just magically manufacture the stuff we enjoy in our lives.

We're not exclusively responsible for producing all these good things.

Someone has helped us.

God is involved.

Or maybe you're a liberal, and you don't like to think of God has a person, or a personality. But this isn't that debate.

Even if you want God to be a force, or you want to think in terms of "the universe" acting on people's behalf — however you prefer to characterize this higher power that I call God—

God is involved.

For thousands of years, people have realized this.

Deuteronomy 8:

17 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant....

His "covenant" is a promise. He promises to provide for us, and he does.

I think I got my job myself, but all the components of it came from God:

It was God who gave me what we call "good luck" on the day I interviewed — I didn't get hit by a truck or fall down and break my leg on my way to the interview.

It's God who gives me health and energy each day to get to work, he gives me a functioning brain so I can bring ideas to my job, he is involved in the lives of people around me so he's organizing my life to keep distractions away that might undermine my work on the job, this list could go on and on.

God is involved. He's the one providing for me.

2 Corinthians 9:8 ...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

God is providing me all these resources. One way we say it is, God is blessing me.

And he has promised to keep blessing me. Keep providing for me.

God brings home the Cheetos.

For us, it's important. It seems critical. It's life support. It's my money. It's my stuff.

But for God, it's easy. It's Cheetos. He can make more.

What Lydia Charlotte wasn't thinking about, in that moment of *No! Mine!*, was that I could buy her all the Cheetos she wanted.

I could buy her more Cheetos than she could ever eat.

I could fill her dorm room so full of Cheetos that she couldn't even get in the room.

I'm going to provide whatever she needs.

Why? Because I love her.

Likewise: God loves me. He doesn't beat up on me because I'm a "sinner." God is a God of grace.

Look! God gives me all these Cheetos. All these blessings! *So much stuff. So many resources.* I can share them.

I can give. I can be lavish in my giving.

Lydia Charlotte can hand me that whole bag of Cheetos.

Here, Dad. Enjoy.

Because she knows, there's more where that came from.

More Cheetos, if that's what she needs. Or more healthy food. More clothing. More education.

Whatever.

She has a provider.

I have a provider.

I don't have to withhold my resources.

I can give.

I'm not talking about your generosity as a church.

You've been more than generous in supporting our New Thing ministry in Belarus.

I'm talking about our daily lives as individuals, when we have an opportunity to give, to be generous.

I think we in New England have a tendency to overthink this.

We have a historic tendency to be extra-careful about *expenditures*.

Let's not be foolish. Let's not be extravagant.

I appreciate this. There's wisdom in this.

But where is the line between foolishness — and generosity?

Do we tell ourselves "Well, I'm not gonna be foolish" when actually what we're saying is "Well, I'm not gonna be generous"?

Hold out your hand.

Look how it opens.

Your hand is designed to be open.

Now close it. Squeeze it hard. Imagine there's \$100 bill in there. Don't let somebody take it.

You can't keep clutching forever. It hurts. It's exhausting.

Pretty soon, you have to open your hand.

That's how God designed your hand.

If I want to give you \$100 — or a bag of Cheetos — what do you do?

You open your hand.

If you want to give me something, what do you do?

You open your hand.

It's only when I keep my hand closed that the process is shut down.

I can't give — but I also can't receive.

When I stop giving, I stop receiving.

This isn't just about money, but it's about money too.

Isn't it interesting how squirmy and uneasy we get, thinking about this?

Some of us are kind of chuckling uneasily; some of us are sitting in stony silence.

Why is this?

Why are we so instinctively uptight about our money?

I'll just tell you why I am: it's because *I don't have enough of it*.

I do not have enough money.

My wife is a bookkeeper by background and by temperament.

And she will confirm it: I do not have enough money.

I will have to make more money tomorrow, and more next week, and more next month, and more next year.

And somehow, I will need to have money flowing into my life continuously, until the day I die.

I need money so I can pay for stuff. Rent, utilities. House, wheels, clothes, education for the surprise bonus child.

Money is one of the fundamental commodities of our human existence.

Fortunately, I have a supplier.

God is actually interested in getting me what I need of this commodity.

He is committed to helping me.

Over and over again, he says to me,

“Doug, relax, I’ll provide for you. I’ll get you what you need. I’ll make sure you have adequate stuff. I’ll make sure you get enough money. Don’t freak on me, buddy.”

This is not a literal translation, but it’s pretty close.

The Bible says in Nahum 1:7, “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.”

So what’s the problem, then?

I don’t trust it.

I don’t trust God.

I say I trust God, but when it comes to my money — eh, not really.

What’s happening here?

I’m clutching my Cheetos.

God has wired me to receive what I need, freely, comfortably, a continuous flow of his provision.

And he has also wired me to give what I have. Freely, comfortably, a continuous flow of his provision.

It’s a perfectly balanced system.

Now God doesn’t work this system directly.

I mean, I don’t know about you, but God has never personally signed my paycheck.

Here’s the missing element for most of us:

In God’s perfectly balanced system, I am designed to receive from God, but *through* other people — and I’m equally hard-wired to *give to* God, but *through other people*.

I am not in danger of going treasureless, because God has promised to keep providing for me.

But if I clutch my treasure, I close off, I cut off the flow of God’s provision into my life.

I am not designed to hoard the Cheetos.

I am designed to share the Cheetos.

I am designed to give as I receive. I am designed for what we call generosity.

The lifestyle of the open hand.

This is why 1 Peter 4:10 says, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

You know the story Jesus tells in Luke 12, where there’s this rich farmer.

Huge landowner, acres and acres. He’s already rich, but then one year he has *sensational* crops.

So what’s on his mind? Here’s what he says to himself: “Woof! I’ll tear down my barns and build huge warehouses, so I can store not only all my grain there, but all this other stuff I own too!”

So that’s what he does. Bulldozers come, level the old buildings. Contractors come in, earth-moving equipment, cranes. New buildings go up. Fill those new state-of-the-art grain elevators till they’re bulging. Stores his art collection in a special area. Parks his Rolls-Royces and his Lamborghini in the garage area. Gets the whole thing arranged, just like he dreamed it.

But God’s shaking his head, going, “Oh, bummer. You don’t have a clue, guy. Your time is already up. You’re scheduled to have a massive, fatal heart attack — tonight.”

And is God glad? No. God’s heartbroken. Here’s what he says:

“Now who’s gonna get all this stuff that you thought you were preparing *for yourself?*”

And if that’s not strong enough medicine, here’s what Jesus tells the crowd *listening* to him tell this story:

“Watch out! Be on your guard ...

A man’s life does not consist of the *abundance of his possessions*” (Luke 12:15).

In this pandemic economy today, I’ve seen people withdrawing from the very idea of giving.

Pandemic. Can’t give, sorry.

And yes, a lot of us have been hit hard. People have lost their jobs. People have had their hours cut. Our elder daughter Natalie spent years in school to learn one type of work; now the economy has collapsed in that entire industry, and she has to pursue something radically different.

But what changed, in God’s universe, when COVID hit?

God’s design for our lives is still fundamentally intact.

Proverbs 11:25 still says, “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”

Maybe today, since COVID, I have a smaller bag of Cheetos than I had before.

But here’s the enduring question:

Can I share some portion of the Cheetos you have?

To the extent that God has given you something, give something.

Trust God to keep providing for you.

Be generous. See what happens.

2 Corinthians 9:6 still says, “...Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”

This isn’t just about giving to your church, or giving to my ministry in Belarus, or giving to your favorite charitable cause.

This is about everything. This is about a lifestyle, a worldview, a way of looking at life.

The next time you have an opportunity to give.

Is there a way I could give? Rather than: Is this giving opportunity a threat to me?

Lydia Charlotte, share the Cheetos. Trust your dad to keep giving you more.

Christ-follower, give generously. Trust your Father to keep giving you more.