December 5/6, 2020

A Christmas Full of Generosity

Hope-Filled Christmas Series

Matthew 6:24-33

Pastor Ryan Harmon

Isn't it amazing to have the orchestra here? I love their presence with us because it reminds us that the season we're walking through is different; we're not in a kind of normal church year. Now we're in Advent. It's a different time of year, and so it's a visual reminder of all the different giftings that are present. I'm so thankful for it. It ties into what we began talking about last week. How do we walk through this season differently? What does it look like to walk through Advent intentionally?

As I was thinking about that over this past week, I ran across a quote that I found to be pretty striking, striking in its accuracy. We'll see if you agree. It says this: "Twenty-five years ago Christmas was not the burden that it is now. There was less haggling and weighing, less fatigue of body, less wearing and weariness of soul, and most of all, there was less loading up with trash." How's that for a positive quote? Now, I love this season, but I do know that often by the time January comes, I am exhausted. So I was struck by this quote and it's accuracy, even as much as I love Christmas. As I got to the end of the quote, here's what I was shocked by: The person who spoke this quote, said it in 1904. Imagine what they would think now. This was a hundred and sixteen years ago.

If I could sum up what Christmas is like in America, if I could grab one word that kind of captures it, I think the word I'd offer would be "*More*". We need more; you need more; I need more. More of what? More of everything! But if that wasn't accurate enough, or if we wanted to use two words, the second word I might use would be "*Better*". *More* and *Better*. It's not just that I need more stuff. It's that the stuff I have is no longer good enough. I need better stuff. Version 2.0 or 12.0. That's a challenging message to hear day in and day out, and it's kind of on steroids during this season, isn't it?

Last week we were asked to slow down and reflect on what this season really is about. It's about *wonder*. It's about *worship*. We were asked to turn off all the noise and try to walk through these days differently. So a good question is, "Did we do it?" There's still time. It's early. One of the messages I took away last week was that we are called to be countercultural people. We're called to walk through this time and all times differently. If the world is stuck on bickering, let us be people of peace. If the world is stuck on self-worship, let us worship our Creator and our King.

And now, as we come to this week—where we think about generosity—the world is stuck on consuming and telling you that we need more. What if we would be countercultural people and would instead say we are going to be people of generosity? We're going to be people who say to the culture, "No, we don't need more. Consuming does not define us." I think we'd all agree that's a good thing. We could all agree it would be good to be more generous. The question I'd like to consider with you this morning is, "How do we become more generous? What's the key to a more generous life?"

In order to look at that we're going to look at some of Jesus' words. So, if you have your Bibles, open with me to Matthew, Chapter 6. This is the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' most famous and longest sermon. We're jumping in right in the middle of chapter six, so it's going to be a bit of a cold start here. We're going to start in chapter 6, verse 24, and you'll catch the theme really quickly. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus says this:

> **"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."** (*NASB, Matthew 6:24)

Maybe some of your translations say, "You cannot serve God and money." Last week we reflected on the fact that we were made to worship. We were made to wonder. That's the way we were created, going all the way back to Genesis when God made man and woman. That's what we are made for. So the question isn't so much whether we will worship, the question is what we will worship. Worship is our default position. We are lovers; we are worshipers. That's who we are as people.

Jesus, here, gives us kind of a choice. He poses a choice for us of whether or not we will allow wealth or money to serve as the ultimate point of importance for us, or whether we will reserve that space for God alone. We have a choice to make, He says. I think this passage and this statement of Jesus is saying something about worship, but I think, more interestingly and more importantly, I think it's saying something about us as people. I think it's saying something quite profound about us actually, and what it's saying is that we are not the kind of people that are capable of worshipping multiple things at once. It's just not possible. We can't do it. We are apt to think that I can hold a number of things in the top tier of my life. I can look at wealth or I can look at my career or I can look at my popularity, or whatever, and I can hold all of that in tension while saying, "God is as important as this stuff." Or I can make sure I can pursue those things at the same time. But Jesus is saying, "Can't do it. You can't do it." We have to make a choice. The question is, "Where will we give our allegiance?" I think it's interesting and important that Jesus doesn't say you shouldn't worship God and money, as if it's possible but not permissible. He says you **cannot** do it. It is a reality that that is an impossibility for us. So we have a choice.

I think we would all say we know the right choice. The choice is to say, "I'm going to worship God." But I think that if we are honest with ourselves, a certain amount of insecurity creeps in when we say that. If I'm honest with myself, there's a little part of me that says, "If I give up the chasing after stuff, or after wealth, or after a good life, according to the world's terms, will I be okay? If I don't make that a first priority in my life, will life turn out in a blessed way, in a way that I want it to? If I don't look out for number one, will I really be cared for and looked out for?" I think that's a natural question. Jesus addressed it in verse 25:

> **"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, *as to* what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, *as to* what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather crops into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?"** (Vs. 25-26)

So, if we reject the consuming draw of wealth, if we reject the cultural narrative—the habit of thinking it's my job to secure everything for myself—who will take care of us? Answer? Our Father! My Father! Your Father! Our God, who is in heaven, will provide for us! Jesus, I think, is inciting some humor; I think He's actually being a little funny here. You can imagine Him sitting on this Galilean hillside and looking around and seeing the birds, and He makes a comparison, but the comparison assumes an answer. Of course God cares about people more than He cares about birds! And yet, look how easy and carefree a bird's life is. God provides, so will He not much more provide for you and for me?

Other places in the Gospels, Jesus follows up with a question I'd love to ask you. I think it's tongue-in-cheek, but it serves a purpose. He says, "So how many birds is your life worth?" Church, if you had to weigh your life in birds, how many birds would it be? Is it two sparrows, a cockatoo, a pelican? The point of course is that no amount of birds measures up to the worth and the value and the love and the care that God has for you. You are worth much more than the birds. And that's why we have the chance to no longer bow down to the dollar, no longer participate in the frantic running after securing our own wealth, our own popularity, our reputation. We can reject that because we stand in the strong assurance that we have a God that will provide for us. We have a God that loves us more than anything else in the world.

How do we live a countercultural life in the midst of this world? We grow in our belief that God will provide for us. Now, of course we can do that. We can grow in that belief just by reflecting on who God is. We can think about His character and His immensity. We can grow in it by reading His Word, of course, and looking at the way over time He has cared for His people over and over again. If you're so inclined, you can study the birds and look at the way God cares for nature and just say, "Boy, He does that for me as well." One of the things I found helpful, at this point, is to admit to God that I struggle to believe this. "Lord, I struggle to believe that if I let go, You really will provide all that I need. Help my unbelief." Sometimes faith grows because we ask for it. "God, help me to believe this." In verse 27, Jesus is going to give us another reason to reject worry:

> **"And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life?"**

So, the logic here is simple. Worrying doesn't change a thing. Have you ever thought of anything in your life that's come to pass because you worried about it, and worry was the thing that caused it to happen? And the answer is, "Of course not. That never happens." Worry just makes no sense, does it? But we do it. I'm a bit of a born worrier; that's a little bit of an admission to you. As a kid I worried about the silliest things. I tried to think of some of the things that I worried about, and then I thought, "What could I tell you that I worried about that wouldn't make you think I'm too crazy?" I grew up in Omaha. I was terrified of tarantulas. I thought I was going to get bitten by a tarantula. There are no tarantulas in Omaha. What an illogical, silly worry. But it consumed me. I'd have dreams about it. I didn't get bit by a tarantula. There was no mass breakout at Henry Doorly Zoo that threatened my life. But the reason I didn't get bit is because I worried about it, right? Worrying doesn't change a thing. It makes no sense, and yet we live in an age of worry. Our countercultural posture is that we can put that off. We can let go of that. We no longer need to think that we can secure our wealth or secure our future according to the pursuit of money, the pursuit of worry, or the embrace of worry. That's where we get to stand. Continuing in verse 28:

> **"And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will* He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!"** (Vs. 28-30)

I love paying attention to when **much more** occurs in Scripture. You see it a lot. God cares for you "*much more*". And then He uses this phrase, "**You of little faith**." Sometimes I think that can sound almost derogatory, but I think it's a statement of fact. They are *small in faith*. It's a bit of a favorite term Jesus uses to chide his disciples. Often it comes up when they're struggling to believe that He can do something in the physical world that seems impossible. Calm a storm? He said, "You of little faith." And that's kind of who we are. We are "little faiths". We ask that our faith would grow. Then, as Jesus continues here, what He's doing is building a compelling case for why those who are alive in God's kingdom, alive to God, no longer need to live as the world does. We don't need to live anxiously, running to and fro, fretting over our life, and scurrying about trying to secure our end. He showed us how God's provision is sufficient for the birds. He's made it obvious to us that God loves us much more than the birds. He's showing us that worry makes no sense. Let's put it away! And then He points to the flowers on the hillside as well. He reminds us that our God is not just a provider, but He also is this incredible beauty creator. He is a Creator King, and in the flowers, He has granted some glory, this wonder, His goodness to these flowers. That's who God is, and He'll care for us much, much more.

Last week we were reminded to turn things off. Don't look for beauty on Facebook. Instead, maybe go out and see a sunset or watch a sunrise. Go out on a walk or walk around a lake. I'm sure some of you can resonate that there is a refreshment that comes when we're out in nature. Part of the reason for that is because when we are in nature, we see God's will being done in a certain kind of way. We see His kingdom being made manifest in a certain kind of way. We see the kind of God we have. We have a God that creates all this. We have a God that oversees all this. There's an incredible increase in our faith that can occur if we look at that and say, "This same God loves me. This same God cares for me. Look how powerful He is. Look how creative He is. Look at the beauty He creates." It's part of the reason it's so refreshing to go out in nature. There's a profound confidence that comes in seeing how God works in one area and then, coming to grips with the reality that He extends the same grace to me. Jesus says, "Hey, look at the birds; study the birds; study the lilies. Let your faith grow because God will do the same for you." Verse 31:

> **"Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or, 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."** (Vs. 31-32)

Here's how one commentator I read unpacked these verses, along with the tone of this part of the sermon. He says, "We have no reason ever to be anxious. This world, this present world, is a perfectly safe place to be." But if you're like me, you want to say, "Jesus, are You paying attention? Have you seen the world we're living in right now? It doesn't seem like a safe place to be." And the truth is, if we place our confidence in this world, it is *not* a safe place to be. We'd be crazy to say so. But Jesus, of course, was living with His confidence on a different realm. He was seeing God at work. He saw God's kingdom; He placed His confidence in God's ability to oversee

everything. His trust was placed on things that you cannot see. He was grounded in the reality that even as bad things happen, we have a God that we know will make it okay in the end for His children. Jesus even said in John, in His closing remarks to His disciples, "Hey, in the world you'll have trouble, but don't fear. I have overcome the world." The place where Jesus placed His confidence—in God and God alone—enabled Him to live a life free of angst, and worry, and fear, and frantic running after more and more, better and better.

We can live there with Him if we place our faith where He placed His—in God and in His kingdom. If I really think the world is only going to turn out okay for me if I care for myself, if I look out for number one, then I'd better put money and wealth on a pedestal. I better worship it, if that's my job. If that's my job, then it better become the most important thing in the world to me. But Jesus says, "*That's the way the Gentiles live."* Gentiles is just another way of saying "*those who live apart from God"*. It's the way those who live apart from God live. That's the way the world lives. But we—you and I—we have this incredible opportunity to live differently. We get to live in the assurance, the reality, that our God cares for us, and He will provide for us. As this passage or this part of the sermon comes to a close, Jesus sums up the way He's been approaching the entire theme in verse 33:

> **"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."**

Throughout this short passage, Jesus has made it very, very clear to us that we can live a life that is countercultural. We can live a life that is markedly different from the world. We can live a life that is abundantly secure and confident. We will be okay because we have a Father that cares for us. Therefore, we can reject the ways of the world. We can reject consuming. We can reject hoarding up wealth for ourselves. Why can we reject it? We can reject it because we have a God who has given us absolutely all that we need. He tells us where to set our eyes. He says to set our eyes on God and on **His kingdom** and on **His righteousness**. His righteousness is another way of saying His faithfulness to us. God is faithful. He will supply for us. And as we set our focus there, our attention there, our confidence there, then this promise that comes at the end of verse 33 can be a reality for us. It says, "**All these things will be added to you."** What are *all these things*? They're the things that we need. All that we need **will be added to you**. That sounds good, doesn't it? I love this passage. I especially love Matthew 6:33. They're the kind of words, the kind of verses, that you're tempted to put on the side of your kitchen wall. It's a nice stencil. Or we put it above a fireplace. But the question for us is, "Do we believe it…do we believe it?"

The second question, as it relates to our theme today is, "What does this have to do with generosity?" Well, I could read a number of verses to you that make a command to us. Whether it be from Jesus, or Peter, or Paul, or James, these verses make a command to us to be generous. Brad read 1Timothy to us earlier in the service—1Timothy 6—where we are called to be generous people. That's exactly right. We need to listen to those commands. They're imperative. They're urging us to live a certain way. But I think so often what we do is, we hear those commands and our inclination is to say, "What I need to go do, is to try really, really hard to be generous." We grit our teeth and tighten our grip, and we get white knuckles, and we say, "I'm going to be generous this year." Church, that's a recipe for burnout. When we see these commands, the questions we should ask ourselves are, "How might I become a generous person? How might I be

the kind of person from whom generosity flows?" And the answer, of course, is to have my heart transformed, and to be transformed by the knowledge that God has given me everything I need. I stand in a place of absolute sufficiency. Therefore, I can loosen my grip.

So, imagine this with me for a minute. If I really believe Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing," if I believe that, will my inclination, when needs arise, be to hold on to stuff or to let it go? If I really believe that I lack nothing, that I have everything I need, that my God will provide all my needs as He cares for me much more than the lilies and the birds, then I am standing in a place of absolute freedom—freedom to be generous, freedom to let go, freedom to give away.

The great irony of these days of Advent in our culture is that the time when we are supposed to be most filled with wonder and worship, is the time where our sense of wellbeing is most threatened actually: You don't have enough. Your family's not good enough. If you just buy those flannel pajamas, and all sit around the tree together in beanies, maybe you'd have the bliss that is on this commercial. They're only $9.99. Buy those two trucks, those matching trucks, and your marriage will be really good. *(laughter)* You know the commercials. What they're threatening is our sense of wellbeing during a time where we're supposed to be filled with wonder and with worship. You almost might say there is a devious plan that is trying to rob us of the very thing these days are supposed to be about.

Now, we have some kids in the crowd. I want to assure you that I'm not saying don't buy gifts. Okay? But I don't think it's the joy of giving that is driving one trillion dollars' worth of spending. I think what's driving that is a need to feel like my life is okay, like I measure up, like I'm blessed. I think so often we spend, and we spend way beyond our means because, ultimately, we're looking for some sense of security and some sense that, "I measure up."

And Jesus says, "*That's the way the Gentiles live.*" That's the way the world is and, Church, we no longer need to live that way. And so, what if this Christmas, we would be grounded in the reality that our God provides for us? He loves us. He has given us everything we need. We lack nothing. We stand secure. Grounded in that reality, we would embrace a heart of generosity knowing that we are okay. We can give away freely because our God will provide for us. What would it look like if we as a people would say we're going to embrace intentionality and intentional generosity, not out of some compulsion, but because we know our God gives us everything we need? That's who He is. We are sufficiently supplied for. What if we made Christmas lists, not out of a sense of lack or scarcity, but out of a sense of fullness? What if we decided to purchase a gift, not according to dollars spent, but according to time spent or thought given? What might it look like for us to walk through these days differently?

For each one of us, that's going to look a little different. I'm trusting that God's Spirit is going to prompt in you the way that you might walk through these days intentionally, in embracing intentional generosity. We did put a few ideas in this little handout, I will call it. If you are watching online, you can get this online. But there are some practical ideas of ways to enact generosity, ways to be intentional during this season. I wanted to highlight two ideas.

The first is just to be intentional with your spending. And of course, step one on that is just to make a budget and then stick to it. (That's a second thing.) But the one thing I thought about spending

during this year, that I thought might be relevant for us to talk about, especially because of COVID and all that's transpired, is: What if this year, instead of blessing big box stores, and Amazon, and Walmart, and all these big national retailers, what if we said, "You know, our community is hurting"? What if this year we said, "I'm going to buy a gift that is local? I'm going to bless those around me." You're going to bless the people that are right here in our midst, because this has been a hard year and that's one of the ways I'm going to walk intentionally with my spending this year. It might be something God might prompt you to do.

The other thing I want to draw attention to is the fact that, as we're reading this passage, one thing that is really clear is that there are places in the world where there are people that don't know where the next meal is going to come from. That's one reason we partnered with *Compassion* in Nicaragua and we work with *Hope Venture* in Africa and in South Asia. Part of the reason for that is because we know that one of the ways that God might provide for them is through us giving generously. Out of our abundance, we then can help others, and God might fulfill His promise to take care of them through us. So something we wanted to challenge you with is, to just think about that. Outside in the hallway are wood kiosks that have giving opportunities that will bless people in the world that really are lacking. We are not lacking, but there are people who are, and so how might we be used by God to provide for them? Just a few things to consider. But of course, the grounding for all of this, is our incredible abundant sufficiency because of who our God is and how He loves us.

As we close, will you humor me for a moment? I wanted to show you a family video. It's a video of my daughter three years ago, Lucia. She was three years old and of all the gifts we've ever given her, this gift is actually the one that is the most memorable to me. You'll see why; it's kind of funny to me, in just a moment. But let's watch Lucia opening some of her gifts three years ago.

(Video playing. Lucia talking about her gifts.)

If you were having a hard time understanding her, it's okay. It took us time to learn three-year-old Lucia language. But if you didn't get that the gift was goldfish—a snack pack of goldfish. Not just any goldfish. *Extra cheddar* goldfish, which is a hard three words to put together if you're three. But we might as well have given her a pony. "The most amazing thing, oh my gosh, extra cheddar goldfish," is what she said. It's the joy of giving; the joy of receiving. But you know what else I love about that video? I asked Lucia the other day whether she would still do this, and the answer was, "No." She's six now, and she's wised up to the ways of the world. She got a second one and what did she think? "I should give this to Sam." I think Lucia knew that there was more where that came from. Mom and Dad are not lacking extra cheddar goldfish, so I can give one away. I'm okay.

"There's more where that came from," transforms your ability to be generous. What if in these days, we would be grounded in the reality that we have a Father for whom we can say there is more where that came from? He can richly supply for you and for me. We stand in a secure position, and the position is we are lacking for nothing. He will care for us. And because of that, our heart can start to be at rest. We can start to live in abundant generosity because of His goodness to us. Let's walk through these days growing in our belief that we have a God that supplies all that we need. Let's pray:

Our Father, we thank You that You are our abundant provider, that we lack nothing, that we stand secure. And, Lord, we say to You, there are times where we struggle to believe this. So help our belief. Secure our hearts in that truth, and, because of it, God, help us to live in a way where we let go. We let go and we look to bless the world around us through generosity inspired by You and Your abundant generosity to us. Amen.

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