

The Generous God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. A warm welcome to you if you're visiting this morning or if you're a newcomer recently to St. John's. We're in the third week of a sermon series exploring the character of God based on the video series Life Explored.

This video series is something that many of our home group Bible studies are doing during the spring term. It's an evangelistic course designed to introduce the gospel to the growing large number of folks who have absolutely no exposure to Christianity or the Bible.

And so it takes a creative approach to evangelism. So, for example, rather than exploring sin as breaking God's law, the course explores sin as idolatry, helping each of us to pinpoint what we love most in the world.

Idolatry is much more than just venerating golden statues. No, in the 21st century, we become much more sophisticated idolaters. Fitting into the perfect athletic wear.

Being invited by the boss to attend a managers-only meeting. Seeing our daughter selected for the provincial team. Being asked by Dan Gifford to join the prayer ministry.

[1 : 2 8] These are just some examples. Idolatry is simply loving anything more than you love the Lord God. And what's the result?

One of the presenters of Life Explored says it well. Demanding idols or demanding gods produce demanding people. Demanding gods produce demanding people.

And we do live in a demanding world today, don't we? This week, the trial for NXIVM began. NXIVM and its high-profile cult leader, Keith Renier, is accused, among many other worst things, of demanding over \$5,000 a month from clients in exchange for fraudulent career help.

And the thing that's most surprising that's been revealed is that the majority of NXIVM clients were very wealthy, professional, successful men and women.

Hollywood actresses. Heiresses to large companies and huge fortunes. But still, they were people desperate to find more business success, more personal fulfillment.

[2 : 4 8] Desperate because of the endless demands placed on them by the idols they loved most. Money and power and influence. They became willing to sacrifice their body or their bank account for false promises.

And what about the God of the Bible? Do you ever find yourself accusing Him of being too demanding? Demanding your tithe money.

Demanding you obey His Ten Commandments. Demanding you evangelize everyone you meet. Demanding you give up beautiful Sundays for church. You give up cursing when you're angry.

Give up a little hard-earned selfishness every now and then. If you're new to this whole Christian thing, it's very natural to ask these sorts of questions.

But friends, even if you've been a Christian for a while, it's not uncommon for us to have these thoughts. But when we turn to Scripture, we discover, or rediscover as it may be for some of us, that we have a God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is overwhelmingly generous.

[4 : 07] And we have before us this morning a startling true story of the beautiful generosity of God poured out into the life of this man named Zacchaeus.

So let's take a closer look at Luke 19.10 under three headings. First, generous grace. Generous grace, verses 1-5. Second, generous repentance, verses 6-8.

And thirdly, generous salvation, verses 9-10. Beginning with generous grace. Have a look at verse 1 with me. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. So what sort of man is Zac? He is the most hated man in town. The most hated man in town.

BC is getting a lot of heat this weekend as a haven for money. Not that kind of heat. No, the wrong kind of heat. As a haven for money laundering.

[5 : 09] Apparently, much of it done through buying real estate. These real estate purchases are driving up housing prices for regular folks and contributing to the Vancouver housing crisis.

Well, Zacchaeus is this type of criminal. He's a money launderer. A crook. Whose wealth. His wealth comes from making others suffer.

At the cost of everyone else in the community. He so disliked that in verse 3, he's unable to get close to Jesus because of the crowd. As he was seeking to see who Jesus was, on account of the crowd, he could not.

Because he was small in stature. It's much stronger in the Greek here. The crowd is deliberately preventing Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus.

In verse 4, he goes to desperate lengths. He climbs a tree just to get a glimpse at this famous teacher. And let's not romanticize tree climbing.

[6 : 14] There's no hint of faith here. There's no plan to talk to Jesus as far as we can tell. No plan from the top of the sycamore to proclaim his repentance to the world and ask for forgiveness.

It's just curiosity. It's just desperate curiosity. However, God's generous grace is already at work nonetheless.

So in verse 5, And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down, for I must stay at your house today.

A few things to note here. First of all, there's a fun little wordplay going on with sight words in this story. So in verse 3, we learned that Zacchaeus was seeking to see Jesus.

But he couldn't see him, so he climbed up a tree again to see him. Zacchaeus is supposed to be the one seeing Jesus. But now suddenly, in verse 5, it's Jesus who is seeing Zacchaeus.

[7 : 18] That's how God's generous grace works, friends. Sometimes we're already curious about Jesus, but many times we don't even know his name. And suddenly I discover that he sees me, that all along he has been seeking me out, and most shocking of all, he already knows my name.

Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down. And then he imposes himself onto Zacchaeus. He says, insisting on hospitality, I must stay at your house today. How is this generous? If I come up to you after church today, I warn you, I'll be pretty hungry.

And I say to you, I must come to your house for lunch today. Is that being generous? But remember that Zacchaeus is a sinner.

That he's a social outcast. That he's the most hated man in town. And so Jesus opens himself up to all that ridicule and shame from the whole entire crowd to extend the radical generosity of God to one single man.

Grace is the free gift of salvation for a sinner who possesses no hope of redemption on his or her own. While we were yet sinners, Christ Jesus died for us.

[8 : 40] And this is how God demonstrates his gracious love. But look with me at how the crowd responds in verse 7. Look at verse 7. And when they saw it, they all grumbled.

He has gone in to be a guest of a man who is a sinner. In this grumbling word, it only appears one other time in the whole New Testament, also in Luke, in chapter 15, verse 2, right before Jesus presents his three parables of the lost and found.

It reads like this. It was the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling, saying, This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is a complaining of the righteous.

Or maybe better, the self-righteous. A complaining in response to this radical generosity of Jesus Christ. They can hardly bear it.

You know, if you've known Jesus for a while, I know that you have experienced this generosity firsthand. You know something of the grace of God. However, there's always a temptation to turn away from the generous God and prefer a demanding God.

[9 : 50] Now you're asking, why would I ever want to prefer a demanding God? Well, because hard work feels good. Because working hard means I'm in control.

Working hard means I'm owed something by God so that his blessings and salvation are given to me in exchange for my hard work. That is the natural way for the human heart.

But our story also has many echoes back to that chapter 15, those three parables, and in particular, the parable of the two sons. And I want to read for you what the older brother says, the one who always obeyed his father.

What he says to his father when his prodigal younger brother returns home. Listen to these words. Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command.

Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.

[11 : 00] Do you hear the bitterness in his voice? He has certainly been obedient, yes, but towards the wrong God. He has silently served a demanding God, not his loving Heavenly Father.

And so what is our Father's response to us when we forget his generosity? The parable continues. Son, son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.

All that is mine. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. All that is mine is yours. Why do you resist the generous grace of God?

If you do not yet know Jesus, this word from God is an invitation to you to accept his generous grace of salvation in Christ Jesus.

And if you are a Christian, but you have been pushing God away, pushing away his generosity, this word is an invocation to turn back to his generous grace.

[12 : 10] J.C. Ryle wrote, the door of hope which the gospel reveals to sinners is wide open. Let us not shut it. Let's move on to our second point, generous repentance.

Generous repentance. A couple of years ago, a friend showed me a video of a dairy cow, a fully grown dairy cow, a huge creature, in a very tiny barn.

She had spent her whole life chained up with nothing but a trough in front of her and a large cow on her left and a large cow on her right in a milking line with nothing else to do.

And this video simply showed a man unchaining this cow, freeing her from her bondage, and then leading her out to her new home in a large outdoor enclosure.

And the cow's response is just amazing. She runs and dances. Yes, I said dances. She dances, kicking and turning in circles after circle.

[13 : 23] And you know what? I have seen Dan Gifford do this in our office when he is full of joy. I have seen him do the very same thing. Generous grace produces a joyful response, generous repentance.

Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name and look at his response in verse 6. So Zacchaeus hurried and came down and received Jesus joyfully. I think that this is the first moment of repentance for Zacchaeus.

This is the moment of transformation in his heart. In response to this free gift of Jesus' unexpected and undeserved love, Zac surrenders his life to a new master in joyful obedience.

He's rescued from his bondage to demanding idols of money and power and Zac joyfully dances down from that tree and leads Jesus to his home. And the most important thing, don't miss it.

This is what I was trying to get through to the children and to all of you this morning, was the surprising, the shocking, the very significant order of the story.

[14 : 31] That it is the radical, generous grace of God revealed in Jesus that comes first. Comes first for Zacchaeus and comes first for us. Sometimes we don't even recognize it. And it is right and good that the response is this generous repentance.

If like that crook in the story I told, if he, if Zacchaeus had got himself all ready and lined up with the crowd and been all ready to tell Jesus his prepared speech, it wouldn't have been the same.

It wouldn't have been the same. Because he would have been earning. He would have been earning that repentance. He would have been earning that salvation. Zacchaeus, come down.

I'm coming to your house. And I take verse 8 most naturally to signify a shift now into Zacchaeus' home. So we move from the street under the tree into Zac's home.

And without any prompting or demands from Jesus, he stands up, probably during supper, and he says to the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.

[15 : 41] And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold. First, Zac is speaking here directly to Jesus.

He's not bragging about his charitable donations to his friends and family and all those people that were grumbling in the street. That's not his primary audience here. His repentance is for his Lord and Savior to hear.

We're eavesdropping on that. And second, the if, in if I have defrauded anyone, in the English, it sounds like, you know, maybe I haven't, but if I have, well, no, it's much clearer in the Greek.

Zacchaeus is saying, yes, I have. The answer is, yes, I have defrauded. Yes, I have literally extorted lots of people, and I intend to pay them back above and beyond what Jewish law or Roman law requires.

It's very noteworthy here that Zacchaeus' repentance is targeting, targeting the very heart of his deepest idolatry or his love, in this case, for money and for power.

[16 : 52] That is the first area that he brings to his Lord. And friends, for you and I, with the help of the Holy Spirit, our own repentance must inevitably target those darkest parts.

It has to, if we're ever to be freed from our bondage to those demanding false gods that we previously serve. we cannot keep, we cannot hold a part, a part back.

We can't hide it away. It must come into the light. And one final comment. I was riding the bus this week and I looked up and I saw an advertisement from BC Transplant.

And it read like this, reasons to register as an organ donor. Positives. Save a life. Warm, fuzzy feelings. Nice thing to do.

Negatives. We couldn't think of any. That's very good advertising. And many acts of generosity that you and I will do, they come with immediate benefits, don't they?

[18 : 06] So that our charitable donations give us tax credits. When we give financial help to our children or grandchildren, we find that they visit more often.

But surely organ donation is the ultimate altruism. There's nothing in it for me. Not so fast.

This bus ad nails it. Positives. Warm, fuzzy feelings. Even our best efforts at pure generosity always end up motivated at the very least by that rush, that rush of warm, fuzzy feelings we experience when doing a good deed.

Don't you love that feeling? And why am I telling you this? Because neither Zacchaeus' nor yours nor my generosity can ever rely on those kind of worldly motivations.

The good news, though, is that in the mercy of God, generous repentance and all Christian generosity of all shapes and sizes that comes in our life in Christ is sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 13] it becomes a pleasing sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to our triune God. In other words, while we, none of us, are ever truly capable of performing a selfless act in this life, united with Christ, we do become instruments and multipliers of his contagious generosity for the glory of Jesus' name.

But grace must come first. And that brings us finally, and very briefly, to our third point, generous salvation. Generous salvation.

Verses 9 and 10. Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house since he also is a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost.

Verse 10 is Jesus' mission statement for his whole ministry. He is the son of man whose purpose in becoming a human being, in taking on flesh and blood, in dying in our place on the cross, was to seek us out, to pursue each one of us with the generosity of God, so that he might save or rescue the lost.

And let me tell you, this is truly generous salvation because lost here is not simply that our GPS isn't working quite right, and we're having trouble finding the closest Starbucks.

[20 : 39] No, lost in Luke's gospel means dead. Lost means my son was dead but now he's alive. My son was lost but now he's found.

Lost means rebellion. Openly loving other gods more than Jesus. Lost means hopelessly lost. Crushed under the weight of demanding idols.

Too weak to break free and too stubborn to call out for help. And into this circumstance, our heavenly father sent his only son, Jesus, to win us generous salvation so that together with Zacchaeus we might be called sons and daughters of Abraham, children of the kingdom of heaven by repentance and faith.

That is grace. Friends, demanding gods produce demanding people. demanding gods produce joyless people.

But the holy God, the living God is a generous God who offers himself as our eternal delight and reward. Jesus is calling you by name.

[21 : 47] Come down and receive him joyfully. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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