

Vision Series 2017

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 0 0] Good evening, all. We're in our third week of journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem. I've got a service sheet that hopefully you pick one of those up on the way. There's a few more copies over the back there if you need one of those. I'll give you an idea in terms of following with me in the sermon tonight. As we know from the first message, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die for the sins of humanity. What Jesus calls is he calls his disciples to come follow him, but he demands a high level of commitment from those who would follow him. This is not a superficial commitment in any sense. Luke 9, 23, 24 is very, very clear.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, follow me, for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever will lose his life for me will save it.

And as I've said consistently for the last three weeks is that when Jesus set his face to walk the Calvary road, he was not merely taking our place, he was setting our pattern. That is, he was both our substitute and our pace setter for the life of discipleship.

And so that's why we are calling this series Radical. What does it look like to be a radical, sold out disciple of the Lord Jesus? Now, I'd originally thought about calling this series Radical Generosity rather than just simply Radical. Unfortunately, as soon as we hear the words generosity attached to anything, you just automatically think, well, this is a whole sermon series about money, which we will have one day. Don't worry about that. It'll come.

But of course, radical generosity in the Bible is not less than what we do with our money, our wealth, our resources, but it is so much more than just about money. Let's take, for instance, last week, the Pharisee and tax collector, Luke 18, as an example. We saw that this Pharisee, standing in the temple courts, looks down at the tax collector with a great deal of scorn, and yet we're told in the same text, he gives away a tenth of all that he gets. See, this guy, you know, tithes his tomato plants and everything. That is, what we learn is that it's possible to technically be generous with your money, and yet not at all radically generous in your heart towards other people. The American pastor, theologian, A.W. Tozer wrote that the Pharisee, the religious person, is easy on themselves, but hard on everyone else. They look down their noses at everyone else.

[2 : 5 3] They disdain others. They criticize others. They demonize others. They put others into categories and boxes. That is, they are not relationally generous with other people.

People are not given the benefit of the doubt. There's no forgiveness. And so it's possible to give away money in great proportions and yet to be profoundly selfish and ungenerous in other areas of life. That is, happy to write a check, but I don't want to be emotionally involved with those people and those particular issues. In other words, my money is not as important to me as my emotional energy. I value my emotional energy more, and therefore I'll give my money, but I refuse to give that. Refuse to give my emotional energy to people. Happy to write a check, for instance, but I won't give my time because my time is my own. I value my privacy. I value my individual retreats. In other words, my time is the most precious thing for me, and I'll be radically generous with my finances, but I will not be radically generous with my time. And so to be radically generous biblically is to be generous down to the root of our hearts. It means to be pervasively generous in all areas of life. That's what radical generosity is. It means to be characterized by a spirit of unselfish service and generosity in every aspect of life, which is basically what this whole series is. What does it mean to be a radical disciple of Jesus? It means to be radically generous in everything in life. At least that's one description of it. The Lord Jesus did not hold anything back from us, and we don't hold anything back from him or from others. We take up our cross, we die to ourselves in every area of life.

And that is a decision that too many who sit in pews, who lead churches and other things are just not willing to do. But that's the sort of church that we're working to be. That's the sort of church we want to desire to be in increasing measure. And so my focus today with the text in front of us of Luke 17 is how do we grow in radical relational generosity?

There is a general form of relational generosity. And you see that with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

You know the scenario? He's just before he's arrested. He's in the Garden of Gethsemane with the disciples, and he says, guys, I'm going to go for a walk up here, and I'm going to take Peter, James, and John with me, and I'm going to pray. You guys stay here, keep watch, and pray.

[6 : 02] So Jesus goes up, agonizes, comes back, they're asleep. And he does it three times, comes back, and they're asleep each time. And Jesus says to them, you rotten, rotten individuals, how dare you?

No, he didn't do that, did he? He said to them, the flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing. He says, yes, there's a certain element of laziness attached to what I've just asked you to do, and you didn't do it. Yes, your flesh is weak, but the intention was there. The spirit is willing, I understand. So he cuts them a bit of slack. That's a general sense of relational generosity, prepared to cut me a little bit of slack. But there's a very specific form of relational generosity that must characterize every Christian without question, and it is forgiveness.

This would have to be one of the most important characteristics of the Christian. And so that's our focus tonight, this specific characterization of Christians, radical relational generosity as is expressed in forgiveness. So firstly, let's take a look at the difficulty of forgiveness. Every single one of us have people out there, that's because we live in a sinful world. Every single one of us have people out there who owe us in some way because of how they've treated us. And we tend to hold it over them relationally. We might be more demanding of them, or we might just keep our, you know, it bottled up inside and we choose not to speak about it.

But in the end, that's not being particularly generous. Being generous means that you actually release it. It means that you let it go. It means that you forgive. Does that sound really difficult to do? You think of what people have done to you, think it's really difficult to do? Well, the disciples thought so too. You see, when Jesus started talking about forgiveness, what is the first response of the disciples in this text? It's the emphatic, increase our faith.

It's another way of saying, Jesus, what? Serious? That is impossible.

[8 : 33] And so in verse 4, we see the enormity of the challenge that Jesus puts before his first disciples, puts before us. He says here that if your brother sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times he comes to you repentant, you must forgive. Now, Jesus is not encouraging in any sense for us to calculate the number of sins committed against us. He isn't saying or making any sort of suggestion, ah, eighth time. Sorry, dude. All over now. You know, no need to forgive now. It's the eighth time.

You see, the number seven was symbolic for Jewish people. It's why Jesus uses the number seven here. It's the number that means completeness or fullness or perfection and beyond which you could not imagine anything else. In other words, it's kind of like being invited over to someone's place in first century Palestine and they say to you, I hope you eat, you know, seven basketfuls of bread. He's not actually expecting you're going to eat seven basketfuls of bread, but he's hoping that from this feast that you are going to feel satisfied, complete, filled up. So what that means is that what Jesus is saying here is far worse than we think it is. Someone's put it like this.

If a person would wrong you as completely and as fully as any person could wrong another human being, you must forgive them. Imagine the worst thing that anybody could possibly do to you.

Something so bad that nothing beyond it is possible. Jesus says that if we are his disciples, if we are on the Calvary Road with him, we must forgive. We must take up our cross and die to self a little more.

David and Marika Ackerman were pretty core members of a church in South Africa, St. James Kenilworth.

[10 : 53] Both were involved in vital ministries of the church over a number of years. And on the 25th of July in 1993, a thousand people had gathered for a service at St. James Kenilworth.

When three young men burst into the church service, firing semi-automatic weapons and lobbing hand grenades into the congregation. And the hand grenades had long nails glued to the outside of them in order to maximize damage. Moments after the carnage, there was 11 people were murdered.

50 people were severely maimed, losing limbs and many other vital functions. Hundreds sustained various degrees of shrapnel wounds and many hundreds psychological damage.

Right near the front door, as you walked in, was seating. Marika Ackerman was seated. She had sat with a bunch of visitors who had just came to church that night and wanted to get them settled into church. She was fatally wounded. One of the first people shot. Fatally wounded in the attack.

In all the chaos, Davi made it to his dying wife and her head was cradled in his lap as he waited for the paramedics to arrive to attend to the injuries that she would shortly die from. And in that moment, while his wife was close to death, a TV crew brazenly stuck a microphone under Davi's chin.

[12 : 38] It's chaos. And with the camera rolling, the news reporter asked Davi how he felt towards the perpetrators of this evil. Without any chance to be coached in what to say or to rehearse his answer, Davi looked at the camera, paused and simply but quite profoundly said, I will love my enemies. I will pray for my enemies. I will never, ever give into revenge.

In the latter court hearings for his wife murderers, he looked at the three men and asked them to look at him and he says, I forgive you unconditionally. Jesus has unconditionally forgiven me. I forgive you unconditionally.

And that's why the disciples say here to Jesus, increase our faith, Jesus. This is impossible, Jesus. Jesus. It's an enormous challenge, but it's one that we cannot shrink back from.

We cannot say, this is ridiculous, Jesus, and just pull back from it. We can't shrink back because there's too much at stake if we do. There's an enormous danger here if we do.

There's this little phrase which is so easy to ignore. Just read straight past it. And in verse 3, it sets up this whole section for us. And it's simply, watch yourselves.

- [14 : 23] We're called to watch ourselves when someone sins against us. That's not what we would normally do. When someone wrongs us, we normally pay an enormous amount of attention to the person who's wronged us.

Think about how much they've wronged us and replaying it over our heads, how much they've hurt us. And Jesus says here, you pay attention to yourself. You pay attention to your own heart. Why?

I'll tell you why. Last week, I mentioned the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. And as I said last week, he had a somewhat overinflated view of himself.

I'd imagine he couldn't have been easy to live with. Turns out he wasn't. He was married to Sonia. And on the eve of their wedding, he gave her, as a gift if you like, his diaries to read.

And in his diaries, he had recorded in detail his many sexual experiences, including with one of his servants who worked with him and still work with him, to whom he was the father of their child.

- [15 : 42] And apparently, early on in their marriage, it was relatively happy. Later on, though, Sonia was known to launch into jealous tirades on a regular basis.

And when she was 80 years old, she was writing in her own journal very, very bitterly about what she had read decades before. One historian wrote this about it.

Hebrews 12, 15 says, See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up, causing trouble and defiling many.

That's why Jesus says here, watch yourself. Watch yourself. Watch yourself, because our anger, when someone wrongs us, our anger will always tell us, I'm not actually angry.

Anger will always tell us that it's justified, it's truth, it's righteous. But if you keep hold of it, it will defile you.

- [16 : 56] It's interesting that there are four words in the English language that all have the same root word, same core word.

Wrath, which is rage, fury, anger. Wreath, which is the thing that you twist together with flowers and vines and branches to make that round thing.

Writhe, which is to be bent out of shape and contorted and jerking movements. And wraith, which is a ghost-like image of someone just before or just after they have died.

They're all connected. We mustn't kid ourselves. When we stay angry with people, we hold a grudge, we stay resentful, we become distorted and we become twisted by the anger.

We become a person who is afraid of trusting other people. We become people who are joyless, people who are suspicious of others. We demonize and box people. We become ultimately a hard person.

- [18 : 03] And so what Jesus says here is if someone wrongs you, put yourself on high alert. Watch your heart because their wronging of you is the least of your problem.

It's the least of your problem. So then how do we go about it? How do we forgive? How can we practice forgiveness?

When we are angry for what people have done. There are at least three things we can do. Plenty more, but I just want to focus on three things. In fact, I say we need to do this if we are to avoid becoming twisted and distorted and destroyed by bitterness.

The first thing is that we must refuse to caricature the wrongdoer by... But instead, we need to identify with them. So instead of characterizing them, we need to identify with them.

If someone wrongs us, the first thing we do is we tend to emphasize their faults and their failings. And so Jesus is making a very significant point here when he says, If your brother sins.

[19 : 19] He's talking here about Christians wronging Christians. And he's reminding us that you have a common family. When our temptation, which it always is in the midst of difficulty like this, our temptation is to highlight the differences.

Jesus says here, don't forget to emphasize the unity in whose you are. Of course, the Bible doesn't just say that Christians are to forgive Christians. Mark 11, 25 says, When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Hear that? Anyone. The principle is the same. We must stress what we have in common. That is, with all people, we share a common humanity in the image of God.

Every human being is a complex person made in God's image with great dignity and great worth. And our normal practice when someone wrongs us is to reduce them from that status of dignity down to what they have done.

And so someone tells you a lie. And what you do is you're so offended by that. They've lied against you or lied to you or something like that. And you go, you are a liar. And so we define them by their action.

[20 : 46] I'm a human being offended and you're a cartoon villain. We also, and this is crucial, we also share a common sinfulness with all people.

It is impossible to stay angry with someone unless we feel superior to them. You cannot stay angry with someone unless you feel superior to them.

When we say things like, I would never, ever do that, we elevate ourselves over others in a way that makes us feel morally superior. We might not sin in exactly the same way, but we are all just as sinful.

And instead of characterizing the enemy, we must identify with them. We must bring ourselves down to their level and we must lift them up. So the second thing we need to do is we need to inwardly surrender the right to repayment and to pay the debt ourselves.

The word for forgive here that Jesus uses in this passage is a very specific word that means to release a person from a financial debt. Now when a bank releases you from a financial debt, not that they ever do, but if they do, the bank in that moment chooses to absorb the debt.

[22 : 13] They make the choice to absorb the debt. The debt doesn't just disappear, someone has to pay. And so they absorb the debt. And that's what we need to do. How do we forgive?

We can only forgive if inwardly we forego seeking repayment. And that is the opposite of our default setting.

This is the opposite of how I have acted in so many occasions. And especially with the people who I'm the closest with. There was a time when my relationship with my parents, some of you will know this, was so bad that I had nothing to do with them for over a decade.

And on so many occasions in those years, I did not practice with them the forgiveness that I had received from Jesus. I traded hurt for hurt.

I specifically traded the hurt of being rejected with the hurt of rejecting. Although I was able to do it so righteously. On a number of occasions, I believed and repeated a story about them that in fact severely tarnished their reputation.

[23 : 30] It's the sort of story that no son should believe, let alone repeat. But I did. When I wasn't being treated like a son, I chose to not treat them like my parents.

It's never justified. My anger was never righteous. And just this week, I realized that the source of my deepest pain was in fact the pain that I inflicted on them.

Now, I knew that I was responsible many years ago for my contribution. But it's taken 20 years. Now, I'm slow on some uptake and stuff. 20 years for me to realize what I suspect to be the deepest level of hurt that I inflicted on them was in fact the deepest level of hurt that I'd experienced.

We trade hurt for hurt. And so the cycle of warfare just keeps going, going, going, and going. Isn't that all we do?

If someone makes us unhappy, we make them unhappy. If someone rejects us, we reject them. If someone destroys our reputation, we destroy their reputation. And we are so good at it in the church sometimes. We, you know, we're careful not to be labeled as gossip.

[24 : 58] So we share prayer points. I want you to pray about this issue. I've got a problem with so-and-so. Let me tell you the issue. We trade hurt for hurt and it just spirals out and out of control. We might do it directly with them.

We might tell them off and make them feel really bad. Or we might do it behind their backs about gossiping about them and ruining their reputation. We take a word that we get from someone else and we replay that word but with extra emphasis.

With a different tone than it was received. The less obvious way that we do it is we inwardly nurture the hurt. We replay the hurt again and again and again over in our minds in order to stay angry with them.

Whichever way we do it, whichever way we do it, we are attempting to extract payment. But instead of extracting a repayment for the debt, what we're actually doing is robbing our life of joy and peace and contentment.

That's actually what we're doing. We become harder and bitter and twisted. A lack of relational generosity destroys us over the long term and for eternity.

[26 : 17] It really hurts us. Relational generosity might hurt in the short term as we take up our cross. Because we refuse to repay, to extract payment.

But instead we choose to absorb the debt. And it leads to joy and peace and freedom. The third thing we must do to practice forgiveness is verse 3. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them.

That is, it's not loving to allow someone to do anything they want. Any way they want. Now we need to be really careful about reading this verse.

I'll be honest with you, I've always found it much easier to rebuke someone when I'm particularly angry with them. I want to give them a piece of my mind. The words just sort of flow a lot better in that way. And you find it much easier to do.

But the purpose of the rebuke here is not to put the other person down. It is in fact to lift them up. That's the purpose of it. It's not to win an argument.

[27 : 22] It is according to Matthew 18, to win your brother over. To restore relationship. That is the goal of the rebuke.

Restored relationship, not a further breaking of the relationship. And if that's the case, then it's not just what we say.

It is how we say it and the motivation of why we are saying it. The truth must be spoken in love for the other person. And if we had not inwardly forgiven the other person before we rebuke them, then you've got to ask the question, why are we rebuking them?

Is it for vengeance? Is it to extract repayment? Or is it to help them? Interestingly, in the Bible, I would suggest that forgiveness is granted before it's felt.

Forgiveness is granted before it's felt. That is, you give forgiveness. And then over here, you work on your heart for forgiveness.

[28 : 33] You work on your feeling of forgiveness. You stop replaying the issues over your mind. The only way to do that is to keep the cross close. In other words, we need to inwardly forgive, then rebuke in order to reconcile.

We must seek the good and will the good of the person we have perceived to have wronged us. We need to will the good of the other. And that means you can never say, I forgive you, but I want nothing more to do with you.

Because that statement means that you might not be seeking vengeance on them, but you're not seeking their good either. You're not seeking a restored relationship.

If we don't seek their good, then we haven't forgiven them, and so watch yourselves. Now, my assumption here is that if you've been listening, and even if you've got someone or some circumstances in the front of your mind, you might be feeling this, and we are back to the plea of the apostles, increase my faith, Jesus.

I need you to increase my faith. This is hard work. This is very hard. Where is the power to live like this? And fortunately, Jesus has given us a good answer in what follows on from verse 5.

[29 : 57] In those verses, we have a parable, and we have a metaphor. The parable starts in verse 7. And the parable is this. Suppose you're a lord, you're the master, the owner of a property, and you've had these people out there plowing your paddocks and looking after the livestock.

And at the end of the day, the question is, would you say to them, Hey guys, it's time to finish up. Come on in. I've prepared dinner for you. Come on in. Put your feet up. Would you say that?

And to the apostles hearing this word from Jesus, they would say, first century Palestine, in their culture, they would say, No, we would never say that.

The service job is to, when they're finished out there, plowing the paddocks and tending the sheep and the dogs and the sheep, whatever else, they come in and they prepare your meal. And once you're fed, then they go and do their own food.

You see, as modern people, we don't think like that because we think, you know, nine to five, these are employees. But these servants here, first of all, are not slaves traded in the marketplace who have no rights, but they're also not employees.

[31 : 12] That's not who's referred to here. These were people who fell into debt, who became financially bankrupt, and instead of being thrown into prison to rot, as you see in Luke 16, they are working for the person to whom they owe the money, in order to work off the debt.

And according to Jewish law, that could be up to a maximum time of seven years that you would work for the person to whom you were bankrupt to. So this servant here is never off duty until that debt is paid, until they've been released from it.

The master of the house wouldn't thank them for helping out so much or only doing their duty. And so Jesus here got the apostles to imagine themselves as the masters, helping them to see that it would be inappropriate for a servant here in this scenario to demand thanks from their masters, especially when this master in this story has been gracious enough not to throw them into prison, but instead giving them an opportunity to work off their debt so they can be released.

And then in verse 10, Jesus flips it unexpectedly. He says, So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should you say we are unworthy servants?

We have only done our duty. When you've done everything you were told to do, including forgive, you should simply say, I am doing my duty.

[33 : 05] Now, we saw last week in the Pharisee, in Luke 18, that the self-righteous, the moralistic, religious person says, God, I've done my duty, you owe me.

And what the Pharisee there, if you get that story and this story and put them together, the Pharisee in that moment is a servant acting like the master. A servant acting like the king.

Jesus is saying here, that when we refuse to forgive, we are forgetting who we actually are. We owe God everything. He sustains every minute of the day for us.

And if we are Christian, we also know that he has redeemed us and he has forgiven us of an incalculable debt. He is the king. We are the servant.

And when we say, I'm not going to forgive you for that. We are putting ourselves in the judgment seat, the king seat, and we are playing God.

[34 : 23] We think that we know what people deserve, when in fact we hardly know what they've been through in their life, what they've done, or even what their motives are, but we think we do.

And Jesus helps us further with this in how we could possibly do it by attaching a metaphor to this to see how we can live the forgiving life.

Verse 6, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, this big mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you.

Now, Jesus doesn't mean faith in general here. He means specifically faith in him. And what Jesus is saying, that if you have even the smallest understanding of what has been done for you, if you have even the slightest, the tiniest understanding that we are sinners saved by grace, and we've been forgiven of an incalculable debt against God, if we have an understanding of the good news of the gospel that is even the smallest amount, you'll be able to forgive.

If you have any idea what Jesus has done for you, you'll be able to forgive. See what he's saying? The only way to get out of the behavior and the attitude of being the servant, acting like I'm the king and the judge of all humanity, is to marvel at the king who became a servant.

[35 : 59] It's the only way. To marvel at the king who became a servant, we will never be long-suffering until we marvel at him who suffered on the cross for our sin.

We will never be able to forgive other people's tiny debts towards us until we marvel at Jesus dying on the cross for our incalculable debt.

Jesus is the judge of the universe who left the judgment seat, stepped into my servant's shoes and got judged for my sin.

How is it possible that I could ever act as judge of another? How is it possible, having received that, that I could ever say, I won't forgive you for that?

It means I don't understand even the tiniest thing about the Christian gospel. To understand the Christian gospel, even in its smallest mustard seed amount, is enough to change us.

[37 : 17] Even a mustard seed portion of the gospel of grace can turn us into a person who forgives radically and lives relationally generously.

Thank you.