

Hurts So Good: The Heart of Radical Generosity
Luke 18:9-17

For the next three weeks I am going to preach through a short series on generosity. Now, before you get all worked up and assume that I'm gunning for your wallet, please know that is simply not the case. One of our core values here at Colonial is "Love Generously," and every now and then I like to take time to revisit our values because they are an essential part of our DNA as a congregation. It's also the season when generosity is a common theme, so it seemed fitting for me to address this particular value as we come into Thanksgiving and Christmas.

So...before we even get started, I'm going to give you the bottom line, and it's a very simple concept: The Gospel leads us to radical generosity that is costly. Now, the Gospel oriented concept of radical generosity is quite different from what immediately comes to mind when we think of generosity. For the most part, we think of generosity in terms of giving money, and that is not incorrect, because being generous means no less than giving our money...but it means so much more. Radical generosity is a heart change that affects all the various currencies of life including hospitality, our personal space, our time, our independence, our relational economy, and wealth. In other words, the radical grace of God leads us to be radically generous with those things we consider to be of the highest value in every aspect of our lives, and it's always costly. This morning we will begin by defining the source and nature of radical generosity. We will then zoom in to see how that radical generosity applies to the various currencies in life over the next few weeks.

To get started, let us look first to Luke 18:9-17. Please stand for the reading of God's Word.
9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) What Generosity is Not; 2) Seeing Ourselves Accurately; and 3) God's Radical Grace.

I. What Generosity is Not

When it comes to biblical generosity, we actually find lots of stories that illustrate what NOT to do! From the man who decided to tear down his old barns to build new and bigger barns to store his abundant surplus, to the unforgiving servant who condemned his co-worker to life in prison shortly after being forgiven an unthinkable debt, to the older brother who scorned his father for welcoming home his wayward sibling, we find story after story in the New Testament about what generosity is not. Our text for this morning is one such story, and probably the most obvious story in the NT about what generosity is not.

As we look to the text, Luke's introduction is important. He writes in vs. 9 "Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt."

Jesus had a particular audience in mind for this parable. This parable was for the good, tithing, religiously conservative, moral and conscientious people who believed they were on the right track due to their moral and religious superiority. In other words, this parable is for people who attend evangelical conservative churches...like our church! Many of us, whether we admit it or not, are those who are fairly confident of our own righteousness, at least as we compare ourselves to others. If I asked you if you were generous, many of you would say "Well, more generous than a lot of people I know." If I asked you if you were moral, you would say, "Well, nobody's perfect, but I'm generally a good person as compared to others." If I asked why you believe that God will welcome you into heaven, you will point to your profession of faith, your church attendance, your giving, and all the horrible things you have resisted doing...unlike those other people you know who are heathens and scoundrels. If any of this sounds even remotely familiar, then please know that Jesus taught this parable for people like you...and me...people who knowingly or unknowingly trust in themselves and think of others with contempt.

In the parable, Jesus describes two people who come to the temple to pray. The two men are on the opposite ends of the moral/religious scale in first century Judea. On the positive side of the scale is the Pharisee. The Pharisee was the evangelical conservative of the first century. He loved the Word of God and set out to abide by the letter of the law...at least as that law was interpreted by the Senior Pastors known as scribes or "teachers of the law." The Pharisees were the most devout, the most respected, and the most admired religious people in first century Judea.

On the other hand, we have the dreaded tax-collector. As most of you know, the tax-collector was a Jewish man who agreed to collect taxes for the Roman occupiers. As payment for his treachery, the Romans allowed the Jewish tax-collector to enrich himself by overcharging his own countrymen as long as the Romans got their share. No one was despised more by the first century Jews than the tax-collectors.

As Jesus sets up this story, the ancient audience is allowed to hear the Pharisee's prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; and I give tithes of all that I get." Notice that the Pharisee does not thank God for what God has done; he thanks God for what he as a Pharisee has done. He does not thank God for who God is; he thanks God for who he is and that he is fortunate enough to NOT be like one of those sinners...especially that nasty tax collector over there.

Now, notice: the Pharisee is technically "generous" in that he gives a tithe of all that he gets. He is also extraordinarily devout because he fasts not once, but twice a week! He is certainly to be admired in the mind of the ancient reader...he certainly does "stand by himself." Nobody in the ancient crowd would think to compete with this Pharisee in terms of morality and devotion.

On the other hand, the dreaded tax-collector is distraught before the presence of God. He stands “far off”...for he dare not draw close to the altar. He is so covered up in his sin that he will not even lift up his eyes to heaven. In self-loathing, with complete earnestness, the man beats his chest and cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Now, I think it’s fair to assume that many of those righteous Jews in the first century audience were thinking the same thing that many of us are thinking right now, “The scoundrel doesn’t deserve God’s mercy. Look at his career choices. Look at his lifestyle. Look at his treason. He deserves condemnation.”

But listen to Jesus, who sits as one who hears the prayers of both men and then renders His judgment: “I tell you,” says Jesus, “the tax-collector went down to his house justified, rather than the Pharisee.” Why? How did Jesus come to that judgment? Here’s the ruling: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Do you find the judgment of Jesus surprising? Do you find that offensive? I hope so. That was the point...we all need to wake up to our condition.

That leads to our second subheading:

II. Seeing Ourselves Accurately

Now, you may be wondering, “What does this story have to do with radical generosity?” Who is the model of radical generosity in this story? Well, certainly not the Pharisee, right? He is technically generous, but he lacks heartfelt, radical generosity. How do we know? Because he looks down on others. He exalts himself. He thanks God for how great he is, not how great God is. He thanks God that he’s not like those “sinners” who are sexually immoral or thieves...or worse, Dolphins’ fans. The Pharisee is technically “good” compared to others...he is technically “generous” compared to others. But Jesus makes it clear—this man is NOT justified in the judgment of God.

Church, we have all become too familiar with this story, so we are way too quick to assume that we are not like that Pharisee. But let’s face it: many of us are just like the Pharisee, right? We really do believe that we are good people. We believe that we are righteous people. We believe that we are generous people...and our basis for justifying ourselves is our comparison to others. Based on that sliding scale, we’re looking pretty good compared to those people we hold in contempt.

By the way, it’s not only the religiously good people who have this problem. In case you are here today and you are proudly secular and feeling really good that you are not some religious prig, please know that there are two ways to be self-congratulating...to think of yourself as your own savior and lord: 1) being very good; and 2) being very indulgent. Both the religious and the

secular elites look down on others, and it's impossible to be radically generous when you think so highly of yourself and hold others in contempt.

Now, how about the lamenting tax-collector in our story...is he a model of radical generosity? No, at least, not yet. But there is hope for the repentant tax-collector. Why? Because he sees himself accurately. He sees his situation accurately. And most importantly, he sees God accurately. He sees God as the only source of radical grace that could save a hopeless sinner like him.

Now, you might be interested to know that the story of Zacchaeus the tax-collector comes up in the next chapter, and there we find a story of radical generosity, right? Zacchaeus humbles himself by climbing a tree because he wants to see Jesus. Jesus invites himself to dinner at the tax-collector's house. And because of the radical grace of Jesus, Zacchaeus declares that he is giving half of his goods to the poor and restoring fourfold whatever he may have defrauded his countrymen. The radical grace of Jesus leads to the radical generosity of a grateful soul.

Church, those who are radically generous are those who have been transformed by God's radical grace, and only those who are truly repentant, who have no guile, no self-justification, no trust in themselves, and therefore no contempt for others will receive radical grace. We will never receive radical grace if we don't think that we need it. And that's the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector.

Here's the problem: good people don't know that they're sick. People who believe themselves to be "healthy" don't seek the medicine of the doctor, right? You know who else can't seem to accurately diagnose their situation? Rich people. Jesus said it's harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to fit through the eye of needle. In story after story, Jesus reveals how the good people (usually the Pharisees) and the rich people (the rich young ruler, the successful farmer, the rich man who ignored Lazarus, etc.) are those who are condemned. Now listen: the good people are not condemned for being good, and the rich people are not condemned for being wealthy. They are condemned because they trust in their own goodness and their riches to justify themselves. They can't see their condition accurately. They don't see the sickness of their souls, so they don't ask for or receive God's radical mercy. And without God's radical mercy, there is no way that we can be justified...and there is no chance of us becoming radically generous.

Are you offended yet? Are you uncomfortable? Take a look around. By and large, this room is filled with 'good' people who are, by any reasonable global standard, rich people. Which means, if we're not careful, we are also condemned people according to the teachings of Jesus. We should be uncomfortable and a bit offended because Jesus is absolutely trying to get our attention with these parables. Jesus loved the "good people"; Jesus loved the rich people; and Jesus loves every person here. But hear the Word of the Lord, Church, the Gospel is clear: humble people are in, proud people are out. Those who throw themselves at the feet of God's radical grace are in; those who trust in their own resources and treat others with contempt are out. We need God's radical grace...all of us do.

III. God's Radical Grace

In our story this morning, Jesus declares that the repentant tax-collector returned to his home "justified." What does that mean? The Greek verb here literally means that he was acquitted...that he was pronounced righteous. The Complete Jewish Bible translation correctly reads, "this man went down to his home right with God."

Think about that for a minute. The Pharisee stood proudly before God and presented his resume for justification, but Jesus declared that he was not justified. The tax-collector cowered before God, confessing his sinful condition and begging for God's mercy, and Jesus declared the man to be justified. How does that work?

The key to understanding this moment is in the word used by the repentant tax-collector when he cried out to God. He cries out for mercy using the imperative form of the Greek verb *ilaskomai*. This verb *ilaskomai* does imply "have mercy"...but it's more specific than that. It literally means to propitiate and/or to expiate. To propitiate means to satisfy the wrath of God; and to expiate means to atone for. So, in begging for mercy, the tax-collector pleads that God will satisfy His own wrath by making atonement for the condemned man. The tax-collector has completely abandoned any hope of saving himself. He has thrown himself wholly upon the mercy of God, understanding that some great sacrifice of atonement will need to be made by God if he has any hope of being forgiven by God.

And this points us right back to Jesus...the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. Jesus Christ crucified, the atonement for our sin, the propitiation for our sin, so that we might be declared righteous. So that we, who have no resume...who have no hope of saving ourselves...might be justified through the unmerited, radical grace of a God who gave us His only Son so that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but inherit eternal life. Do you see God's radical generosity towards us? It is costly...it is sacrificial...it is an act of selfless love...and it is the only means by which we can be saved.

We are justified by God's radical, atoning, propitiation, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. If you truly believe that...and you know your sin and your hopeless condition apart from God's mercy, it will change you--it will make you a radically generous person.

Let's wrap up with one last story in the Luke's Gospel. In Luke 7 we read:

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon

answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Church, the level of our generosity in every aspect of our lives will correspond with how we understand and experience the radical grace of God. If we think we have been forgiven little because we are generally good religious people, we may attempt to look generous to bolster our resume, but we will never be radically generous with our whole lives. Radical generosity looks a lot like this woman who kneels before Jesus. Her generosity is an act of worship, an act of thanksgiving, and an expression of joy because of the radical grace she has received in Christ.

So, if we are interested in becoming a truly generous person, it begins with seeing ourselves accurately as those who are sinners without hope apart from the radical grace of God, and then remembering every day that we have been saved from God’s wrath through the atonement made by Jesus, the Lamb of God, who died in our place so that we might be justified...declared forgiven and innocent...because His innocent and perfect blood made us righteous. When that truth makes it into our hearts, we won’t be inclined to hold others in contempt, nor will we walk around with our religious resume. We will step into every day as a grateful sinner saved by grace, and that perspective will change the way we think about wealth, time, our homes, our independence, and every other currency of life. We will dig deeper into what that looks like in the various aspects our lives in the weeks to come.

Let us pray.