

A Generous Christmas
Best Christmas Ever: Week 2
12/6/15

[How the Grinch stole Christmas returning of gifts and heart enlarging]

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week 2 of our Christmas series we're calling "the Best Christmas Ever"
the Grinch helping us out here this week as his heart grows 3 sizes that day
and becomes a generous giver

The idea for this series is that Christmas comes pre-loaded with a whole set of
traditions and experiences that most all of us participate in, even if you're not a
Jesus person

Decorating the house, getting together with family, giving gifts, etc.

And what we're doing over these next couple of weeks is taking those things that
we're already doing or going to do

And connecting the dots between the stuff we do around Christmas time and the
God that we as Christians celebrate during this time

And our hope is that as we take normal Christmas stuff and fill it out and connect it
to who God is and what God has made us to be

That we'll meet God himself who waits for us at every turn—and as we do that, we
discover joy.

Last week we talked about the decorating experience, how God is in his very nature
a creative God and he makes us in his image to create beauty

Next week we'll be talking about celebrating and feasting, one of my favorite parts of
the Christmas experience!

And the week after that we'll be talking about family

for so many of us the holidays are loaded up with family and it seems like for
many of us in almost every direction that's a mixed bag of good and bad for a variety
of reasons

And then on Christmas Eve, we'll bring it all together for the Best Christmas Eve
ever

and this year as Chris said, we'll be in an old new location
we've been down at the Pittsboro Roadhouse for several years, it's a very fun
venue, but we've outgrown it, which is a good problem to have, so we'll be doing it
here! Looking forward to that!

But for this week's topic we're talking about gift-giving and specifically about generosity in gift-giving, and specifically about the HEART of generosity

The Grinch's small heart grew 3 sizes that day and moved him towards being much more generous.

My hope and prayer is that all our hearts might grow 2-3 sizes today, not at all implying that we're all Grinches!

But generous gift giving IS all about the heart, it's about being moved in our hearts to meet the people around us with a generous response.

And of course when you're a kid, getting great and generous gifts is what stands out about Christmas!

How many of you have a childhood memory of a Christmas morning where you got a gift that you would describe as a shock and awe gift? Something you really wanted or that really surprised you?

Then you get to be adults, the Christmas season is a time when we're SUPPOSED to be generous at least to people that you were related to or worked with—you have to be on the giving end of things!

But our culture spends 11 months out of the year telling you it's all about you, that you need to get everything you possibly can for yourself and look out for yourself and get, get, get

And then we take this sharp turn at Christmas time and suddenly we're encouraged and even shamed into trying to be generous

When the reality is what we've habituated for most of our lives is hoarding, not generosity. And some of us have a hard time switching gears!

So there's this expectation and maybe some of you even feel like it's a pressure to be a generous gift-giver this time of year

For some of us, this is totally in our wheel-house, we love to give gifts, it's one of the primary ways that we express our love for other people
some of us are naturally generous by disposition and temperament.

But for some of us, this time of year and the pressure and expectation is really difficult for us.

Some of us just struggle to feel generous or free with gifts

we know generosity of any sort is going to cost us something—could be money, could be time, could be energy or expertise

For some of us, we don't mind being generous to people that we like, but there are certain people that we struggle with

One person in my small group said, "I'll tell you who I have a hard time being generous with—the people who have given me rotten gifts in the past!"

Others of us we'd like to be generous, we just aren't in a place where financially we can do what we'd like to do

We're going to look at a passage of Scripture today where the apostle Paul celebrates generosity and generous gift-giving
he's going to try to encourage a church he's writing to have their own hearts grow by 3 sizes that day

And today what we're going to see is there's this invitation for all of us to step into this whole season of generous gift-giving with extra-large, extra-generous hearts because God himself has been and continually is generous towards us.

And the Scriptures say that this generosity is most fully and finally expressed in the gift of Jesus.

It is God's nature to be generous, so much so that he gives his one and only Son to rescue us
and his generosity towards us generates real heart growth which compels us into a life of generous-hearted living

Today, we're going to connect the dots between the gifts we're going to give this Christmas season
and the God who can only be described as a generous, life-giving, rewarding, extravagantly superabundant God.

If you've got a Bible you can turn with me to 2 Corinthians 9, if you don't it'll be on the screen behind me

Some quick background to what's happening as we drop in on this letter—the Corinthian church is a church that Paul helped to start within a few years of the death and resurrection of Jesus

They have a famously difficult relationship with Paul and with each other, they are perhaps the most dysfunctional church that we know of in the Bible

And Paul writes at least two letters to them, there's probably a third letter that we don't have a copy of

And in these letters he's alternately encouraging them and chastising them and teaching and instructing them

While at this same time there's a famine happening in Jerusalem.

And what Paul does in response to this famine is to start a big financial collection from all the network of churches that he's helped to start over the years

To give that money to the church in Jerusalem so that the people can eat especially because the early Christians mostly came from the poorest parts of society and so they were the most likely to be the hardest hit

So while Paul is dealing with all these theological and ethical issues he's also encouraging them as he does for all the churches he works with to give financially to help their brothers and sisters in Christ

So we drop in here in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he's encouraging them to give generously just like many of us here during the holidays are encouraged to give generously:

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

Okay, so a common agricultural metaphor, right? I'm not much of a farmer, but I do know this much

If you till a whole field, you don't just drop 1 or 2 seeds and expect a field full of cumquats.

In fact, especially in ancient times before pesticides and such, you had to sow way, way, way more seeds than would ever sprout. so if you wanted a bountiful harvest, you had to sow generously

All of you know this and all of you have experienced this in some place in your life that has nothing to do with farming:

When you sow generously into your marriage or your work place or your studies, you get more out of it

I was talking with a couple this past week who have been going to the marriage course that we've been running on Sunday afternoons

And one of the things they talked about was how great the course had been for them

What had happened in the context of the 6 weeks was they had been having these deep, honest, real conversations that were bearing tremendous fruit in their lives

Their before and after picture was seismically different because they had taken the time to sow generously into their marriage

And as issues and challenges came up, they decided to continue to be generous to one another and sow generously into their marriage

When you sow generously, by and large and barring unforeseen consequences, you're much more likely to reap generously

Paul is applying this principle to the Corinthian church as he's encouraging them towards generosity

Then he goes on to bring us right into the tension that many of us feel when we talk about this topic of giving generously:

7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Okay, so here's the rub, right? We SHOULD give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, God LOVES a cheerful giver!

That's what we SHOULD do. But many of us struggle here. For many of us, should's and ought's over-run our lives and stress us out

In fact, for some of you, you've given up or burnt out on organized religion because it always only felt like piling up more and more should's and oughts in your life
And who needs more of those, right?

Here's the thing, the Bible is FULL of should's and oughts, no doubt about it.

But in the Scriptures, ***there is never a should or an ought without a Why and/or a How.***

This is so huge, and maybe this is the reason why you're here this morning, to get this:

In the Bible, there are tons of should's and ought's, but they are NEVER divorced from a Why and/or a How

There are no naked commands in the Bible.

Every command in the Scriptures is rooted in a larger why and how.
Every single one.

And if you've been exposed to a Christianity that's ONLY talked about the shoulds and the oughts without giving you the why and the how

then all you've gotten is a bunch of rules without any of the energy or the hope or the joy

And if that's your experience it's no wonder that you didn't want too much to do with it

The why and the how are the energy and the framework, the foundation, the fuel for doing the things that the Scriptures call us to do

So Paul here gives a "should"—you should give willingly, without compulsion or reluctantly, not grumpily!

BECAUSE God loves a cheerful giver! This is a heart posture that you can't fake!

I mean of course you can fake cheerfulness, but in that case you're not actually being a cheerful giver, you're being a fake cheerful giver!

The call here is not just to an OUTWARD generosity in action but a generosity in HEART and a generosity of SPIRIT

Because generosity at its core actually has VERY LITTLE to do with which tax bracket you're in.

I've known people who were EXTREMELY wealthy who were miserably selfish

And conversely, I've known people who were rather under-resourced, some might even be called poor, who had the most generous hearts and spirits that I have ever met

Many years ago I got to know a man at the church we were attending who was about ten years older than me

he was woefully under-employed in a job that didn't pay much and that he didn't particularly care for

But he endured it because it wasn't too demanding and didn't take up too much of his life, because he loved to pray and to study

And this man was one of the wisest and most generous-hearted men I have ever met.

And ever few weeks we'd get lunch, and in retrospect I should have paid for it because he probably couldn't afford to eat out all that much

And he would generously share his wisdom, ask me questions, there were a couple conversations where God put him in my life for such a time as this to help me steer through some rough waters.

This was a generosity of spirit that had nothing to do with money.

Paul is telling us that we should give generously

but if we stop there, then it's just a should or an ought, it's just a burden put upon us from the outside that we have to figure out how to carry

And heart change only happens when we get to the why or the how, that's the power and the energy to be able to do that and that's what we get next:

⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Why should we be generous? How can we be generous-hearted with our time, energies, money, or gifts when we live in a world of scarce resources?

Because God. Because God is able to bless you abundantly. Because God himself is an abundant giver, a generous giver, who gives to us generously

Because God provides us with our needs to equip us to do this: abound in every good work

WHY? SO THAT we can be generous on every occasion.

If you got a Christianity or any sort of religious experience that only gave you the God of should's and oughts, then here's what happens

We get a picture of God who is a demanding law-giver. And all he is is a law-giver.

And if all he is is a demanding law-giver who tells us what to do and then sits back and waits to see us screw it all up

then we're getting all these laws without any additional resources to actually do what the rules are telling us we should be doing

We've got high demand on us morally, spiritually, and ethically but our supply is just whatever we can muster in our own strength

That puts us in a place where scarcity is our only option. Because if we're honest with ourselves, we can't measure up to all these shoulds and oughts

How many of us have ever felt bad or remorseful for even just ONE thing that we've said or done?

See, we don't even live up to our OWN standards of should's and ought's much less God's perfect standards!

So this whole situation of should's and ought's without any why or how leaves us with a scarcity mentality, striving, scared:

there's not enough of US to go around, not enough of our own goodness, not enough in our character, not enough in us to meet all these demands

And so we end up emotionally and spiritually and psychologically burned out and exhausted and in scarcity mode

BUT, if we can receive the should's and ought's situated exactly where they're supposed to be

as a part of a larger whole and as an intentional but natural outworking of the why and the how of who God is and what God has done

That changes everything.

We are called to give willingly and cheerfully because we are not striving on the edge of exhaustion and barely hanging on

We are called to give willingly and cheerfully, to discover the freedom of effortless giving because we have been and are in an ongoing way abundantly resourced by God.

Paul says when our souls find their right place in the infinitely good generosity of God, then our souls move from striving and grasping and anxious to relaxing and flourishing

We move from clenched fists to open hands

and we are invited to fill those open hands with good gifts to give to those around us

And all of this is because our understanding and experience of who God is and the truth of who God is is not this angry, law-giving, arms crossed rule-giver.

The why and the how of the Jesus story, the Christmas Story answers the most important question in the cosmos: "who is God?"

with an emphatic and true description of his nature: GOD is GENEROUS!

Okay, so here's the thing, Paul is writing to these Corinthians and saying, "You've experienced God's generosity, you have been enriched in every way, God is a generous God

so now God is at work being generous towards the people of Jerusalem and he's inviting you to go to work with him!"

God is not only been busy being generous to the Corinthians in this text, he's already busy being generous to the Jerusalemites. How? THROUGH THEM!

So as the Corinthians go about the work of being generous, they are invited and we are invited to have eyes wide open to meet God
who is always at work before we got there being generous to his people!

Kelly's family has an extended family reunion every summer down at Ocean Isle, we love it down there, nice and quiet

And we've got some college friends who got married named Don and Anya who have a family beach house down at Ocean Isle as well

And some years before we go down to the beach for the reunion we'll check in to see if Don and Anya and their family will be there that same week so we can connect

But last summer things got busy and we didn't think to check in with them before we went down to Ocean Isle to see if they'd be there

But one morning about mid-week, Kelly was on a run on the beach and she saw someone that looked from afar like Don

So she texted over to his wife Anya and sure enough they were there, so we connected on the beach later that day and had a great time with them and their kids

We visited a place where our friends habitually visited and where they have a beach house
which created the opportunity to connect with them in a surprising and fun way

God lives in the land of generosity, he is always at work looking to give generously to the people that you love and that he loves.

And so when you and I go shopping this Christmas for our families or friends, we are invited to do so not in the land of compulsion or obligation or guilt
or shoulds our oughts but freely, with cheerful hearts

Because whenever you and I plunge into the land of generosity, we are in God's territory, he owns all that land

Generosity was HIS idea and he is already there, already at work, already laboring ceaselessly to find ways to be generous to his people

And he says "Welcome! So glad you could join me!

I have given you gifts, provided for you, so that you could partner with me in my intent to bless that person right there on your Christmas list.

So let's go to work together being generous together so that they might be blessed but ultimately so that they might know that there is a good God who loves to give them good gifts."

Someone in my small group this week described it as God's dance of generosity—he's doing this dance and we're all invited to join in

God gives generously, we experience that provision and our hearts grow in freedom and joy and love

we then give generously knowing that the God who provided for us in the past will also provide for us in the future

The people who receive it are blessed

and in Paul's case particularly these folks know that God is the one moving them to give

so their praise goes up to God giving thanks to God for the gifts given from the Corinthians

There's this movement of resources freely given and freely exchanged that results in joy and provision for everyone

That kind of joy is not found when we hoarding resources

giving is like sowing a joy seed—real joy cannot be experienced when we cling to the seed, it is only experienced as we let it go, put it in the ground, and then step back and let God be the force multiplier

Joy is only discovered as the resources freely given to us are continually on the move, as we all enter the dance

As we join in God's happy dance of generosity, it not only changes our actions outwardly, but it also enlarges our hearts

As we are generously supplied from God, we are called to continue to find ways to give it away

we are never to be cul-de-sacs for blessing, we are always to be conduits of blessing

11 You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

So what does this mean for us as we go Christmas shopping over the next couple of weeks?

If we've been enriched in every way so that we can be generous on every occasion, how does that affect how we go about doing this work of buying presents for folks?

A couple of practical applications: **[Most Generous Christmas Ever]**

1. First, pray for our hearts to be enlarged by the generosity of God

The way that the Scriptures think about it, OUR generosity is secondary or derivative, God's generosity is first

And so we start by asking God to help our hearts to hear and receive and know at deep levels His generosity towards us

Some of you are religious people who have mostly heard the rules but never received the power and the joy of the generosity of God

Merry Christmas a few weeks early!

I pray that this great news of a generous God might pierce through all those rules and situate them in a larger frame and give you new energy to join in the dance of our generous God

Others of you, you're not so religious, you're maybe not anything, maybe you're not sure you buy any of this—so glad that you're here

This morning we want to invite you to seriously consider the possibility that there is a generous God over all the universe

who loved you and all of us so much that he sent his son on that first Christmas morning to rescue and ransom us from death and reconcile us to himself

We're going to talk more about that in just a minute

2. Name and pray for help to overcome obstacles to being generous-hearted

Most of us have some sort of block somewhere when it comes to being generous.-hearted

In my life, I'm glad to be generous when I think about it or when I see the need or opportunity.

But often, I'm just so busy or just so in my own world that I don't realize that there's an opportunity to be generous

And so sometimes I miss out on some place or situation where the Lord would have me to be generous

So I'm praying this week to overcome that obstacle. For eyes to see opportunities to meet someone with a generous heart and a generous spirit.

For some of us, we have a hard time being generous to someone we don't think deserves it

But if we'd done that first step of fully recognizing God's generosity towards us, we realize that we didn't deserve it, either.

Others of us feel the scarcity—we feel like we lack resources of time, energy, money, lack love for others

Some of that might be real! You might not have much time, energy, money or love!

So the Scriptures invite us to go to God with those specifics and ask for wisdom and help to deal with those obstacles to reflecting his generosity

3. Look for God in the land of Generosity

If you're visiting the land of generosity this Christmas, just know that's God's land, generosity is his idea
and he's already been at work being generous to whoever you've got on your list

So as you do your shopping, I want to invite you into the infinitely more fun and joyful experience of having a sense of partnering with God in expressing rich generosity to people that he loves far more than you ever will

I want to invite you to go on a Christmas shopping trip with God!

Whether you love shopping or you hate it, whether you're on-line or in a mall or baking cookies and making homemade gifts

God loves to be generous to his people and is already doing it
he would love to have you join him in this work
and help you to enjoy what he enjoys: which is communicating real love to the people that he loves!

God loves to enrich people with all kinds of good so that they can then serve and bless others

This Christmas, he wants to invite you to be a part of the front-end of that experience:
you're blessing others generously in part that they might know the freedom and rest in their soul of a generous God who then also calls them to join in the dance in the land of generosity

4. Look for opportunities to be creatively generous this Christmas

God is a generous giver, he invites us to draw from his abundant provision in the past, to lean into his abundant provision in the future by faith

And he invites us to know his pleasure over us as we give generously to others. To know the joy and the freedom of being generous-hearted people

For some of us this Christmas, that means giving more thought to gifts—a great gift says to the person who receives it “I know you and I love you”

And remember, generosity is not just about stuff. Stuff is one way to express it and for some of us we need to be more willing to spend on other people

But there are other ways to be generous this Christmas.

In my small group this week people were sharing how they had experienced other people’s generosity in ways that had nothing to do with money

One woman shared how when she was a teen a woman in her church invested in her and a few other girls in the church by having them over to bake cookies and developing them into a small choir

Another woman talked about how children spell love T-I-M-E.

And she talked about how she tried to be intentional when she had kids at home with spending plenty of time just with them, finding creative ways to do things together and spend time together

Generous-hearted people, cheerful-giver people, has nothing to do with what tax bracket you’re in

and everything to do with your posture towards the Lord and towards the people around you

Look for creative ways to express a generous heart and spirit this Christmas

5. Be generous with what you’ve got, not with what you’ve not

All of us have SOME resources of some type, none of us has unlimited resources.

If you’re struggling financially, do NOT go and put a ton of stuff on the credit card that you’ll be paying off for the whole next year

That’s not being generous with what God’s given to you

that’s using someone else’s resources to get yourself in a bunch of trouble that you will be paying for for a long time!

Start with God’s generosity to you, ask him to remove any barriers you’ve got in your heart, and then look for ways to be creatively generous to the people around you

Using the resources God has actually provided you with!

God gives us a constellation of resources—finances, skillsets, time—and then he sets people or needs around us

and he invites to be generous with what he’s given to us and offer it freely

As Paul closes this section of his letter to the Corinthians, he closes with this:

15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This is the gift of the first Christmas, the gift of God's own son, the gift that we celebrate as we move into communion here this morning.

If you've been around for a while you've probably heard some story about my brother—there he is now, Dr. James Robert Daniel Kirk.

Daniel is 16 months younger than me. We are both weird religious guys.

He is a seminary professor, and he writes and gets invited to cool places like New Zealand to speak at conferences

My brother and I had been very close through high school and were relatively close through college as well

But when we graduated from college, and we both started doing our religious stuff, some quiet tensions started to arise between us.

It would take too long to go into the details
suffice to say that we had some disagreement over nerdy theological stuff
that no normal people would ever care about
Mixed in with ample degree of sibling rivalry.

Which leads us to one weekend we're both home with the parents and we have these two or three really barbed and hard conversations.

Afterwards we both immediately go home and write these 'what's your problem/what was that all about' emails that literally cross paths in cyberspace.

And as we both hit send only to look up and see that the other has written almost the exact same email to the other frustrated by the perceived injustice

Daniel immediately sends a follow-up that reads, "Dude, we've got problems."

And so a couple of weeks later it's my birthday, and I get a manila envelope in the mail from my brother.

And inside the manila envelope is the best present I've ever gotten from anyone.
It was a month-at-a-glance calendars and a note.

And on the calendar he had marked off every other week for the rest of the year.

And in the note he said that his gift to me was this: he was committing to calling me every other week for the rest of the year in order to re-build our relationship.

And that is exactly what he did.

He called me every other week for the rest of that year, if he missed me, he called back and called back and called back until he got me.

And that year ended and we just kept calling. And we've been calling ever since.

He is my best and most consistent friend.

And that calendar was the greatest and best gift anyone's ever given to me: he gave me the gift of himself

See my brother and I had a problem. And the problem wasn't out there, it was with us, within each of us and between us.

And so the situation demanded something that we couldn't buy. We couldn't buy something to fix what was broken

It was a relational problem that demanded a self-giving, relational solution.

With that calendar, Daniel promised me the gift of himself. The gift of commitment to a reconciled relationship.

It was the greatest gift anyone has ever given to me as a present in part because the gift of ourselves is the greatest gift we have to offer to anyone.

What we're talking about here this morning, what Christmas is all about, is the same thing: God gives the greatest gift he can possibly give you as he gives the gift of himself.

The story of Christmas is the story of God giving us the generous gift of himself to his kids who were lost without him

And that's what we celebrate here at this table

on the first Sunday of each month we join with literally billions of Christians throughout the centuries who have celebrated the Lord's Supper

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he was in a small room with a small group of his closest friends and he took ordinary bread and he broke it and he said:

"take this bread, and eat it. This is my body, broken for you eat. Eat this in remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup, and he said to his friends, "This cup is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this in remembrance of me."

The Christian story and the Christian assertion is that the real and true God is the single most generous being in the cosmos

So generous, he gives himself to reconcile us to himself. He gives the greatest and most generous gift in all of history: his life, for ours.

It is the story that has captured imaginations ever since and changed more lives than any other movement or philosophy or religion in all of history

And today, in this meal, he calls us to join in his dance of generosity
to take this cup and this bread, and to eat and drink, and to experience and know in our bodies the generosity of this God

This table is Jesus's table. If you belong to him, this table belongs to you. If you're not yet a Christ-follower, we'd ask that you'd abstain from taking this meal

And instead we invite you to consider the generous offer that comes to you. We're going to pass these elements this morning in part to communicate that this is God's generous gift that comes rushing towards us

And if you're here this morning and you're not yet a part of this generous dance but you'd like to be, there will be prayer ministers in the back.

They'd love to pray with you and usher you into this meal with a simple prayer of accepting the generosity on offer from God to you this morning.

Actually, the prayer ministers in the back will be available for anyone who needs a touch of God's generosity in their lives, anyone who needs a sense of God's goodness in a hard place

We're going to pass out the elements now as we sing a song of God's generosity—the bread is gluten free, the cup is grape juice, and we ask that you HOLD the elements until we're all served and then we'll take and eat together

PRAYER ROOM OPEN AFTER THE SERVICE!