

Living Generously (Gratia Dei)

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Preacher: Joe Riffe

[0 : 0 0] Hey, Table Church. It is really good to be worshiping with you all today. My name is Joe. I'm a part of the preaching team here at the Table Church, and my family and I have been going to the church for about two, two, three years, two and a half years, let's say. Yeah, it's great to be here today with you all.

So I grew up in a small town in Oklahoma, and whenever I was a teenager, I was a part of a local youth group at a local church, and there were a handful of adults who volunteered with the youth group, and my memory of those adults is that they always genuinely loved and cared for me and the other teenagers in the church. But one time, one of the adults who was a volunteer, as a sermon or Bible study illustration, he decided it would be a good idea to come to church and bring a gun with him. So he brought a revolver with him to the church. He came up to the front of our youth group room, and he put a blank into the pistol, which is something that makes a loud noise but isn't actually dangerous, and he had volunteers come up and spin the revolver, point it at the ceiling, and pull the trigger. He was trying to make some kind of point. I don't exactly remember what the point was, but I would argue that he wasn't making that point very thoughtfully. We're in a sermon series that we're calling Thoughtfully and Authentically, and Thoughtfully and Authentically is a phrase from the Table Church's vision statement. So the full statement says this, the table exists to call people to become authentic and thoughtful followers of Jesus and to join God in the renewal of all things. So like Pastor Anthony said a couple of weeks ago, we use words like thoughtful because many of us have experienced ways of following Jesus that were not so thoughtful, like my experience in youth group. One of the ways that Christians and

Christian leaders are sometimes known for especially being not thoughtful is in the area of money and generosity. My guess is that a lot of you who are watching this have a story about a negative experience of how Christian leaders have talked about money and generosity. And if you don't have a personal story, you probably know some stories about how churches or Christians have handled money badly. Those stories aren't very hard to find. Some of you may have been taught in subtle and maybe not so subtle ways that if you're generous, if you give your money to church and to Christian causes, then God will reward you. So you were taught that you needed to sacrificially give your money and time to church and Christian causes, and you're taught that if you did that, God would somehow literally pay you back. You may have been taught that God would reward you with material things or raises or job opportunities or maybe even actual money. So you were taught that generosity was almost like an investment.

Others of you may have learned that you needed to be generous out of fear. You were taught that giving would somehow get God to protect you, maybe get God to protect you from financial disaster or something like that. And some of you who are watching may have learned a more subtle version of this. You may have learned that God would guide or bless your career or that God would give you fulfillment in life if you were generous. And I know that there's studies out there that show that generous people actually do experience greater levels of happiness. And I know that being generous with our money and our time can make us feel good. Volunteering can make us feel good. And that might even be something that God kind of through evolution, like, worked into creation. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about how some of you were taught to be generous out of fear or you were taught to be generous because you thought God would somehow pay you back in this life, in your career, or finances, or whatever.

Some others of you might be at a place of near life. All this teaching about how God rewards us for generosity, that might have led you to feeling almost disappointed in God because you haven't been rewarded for all your sacrifice and your time. So that's one group of us. We've experienced kind of this not great teaching and learning from church about generosity and money. Others of us have had difficult experiences around money or generosity that actually have nothing to do with church or faith.

[4 : 55] You might have grown up in a family where money was tight or money might be really tight for you right now. So talking about money and generosity actually might feel like a really sensitive subject for you.

For many of us, the coronavirus pandemic actually makes this subject even harder. Your income might have been impacted because of the pandemic. You might have lost your job or had your hours cut or had your salary cut or you may have had to leave your job because of health concerns. Many of us love Jesus and want to follow Jesus, but some of us aren't sure how money and generosity fits into our spiritual lives.

So I want to look together at a scripture passage that could help us rethink about what it means to live generously. So go with me to Acts chapter 4 verses 32 through 35. And it'll also be on the screen.

So this is what it says, Acts chapter 4. All the believers were in one heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. From time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to everyone who had need. So this story is from the very beginnings of the Christian church. And I don't think it would be fair to look at this passage as some sort of model that we're supposed to follow exactly. There are amazing, incredible things that happen in the early church and in the book of Acts. But the early church wasn't perfect.

And just because they did something one way doesn't mean we are supposed to do it the exact same way. They were still learning, just like we are. But with that said, there was something really powerful happening in this church, in this community in Acts. And we can learn from that. So the key part of this passage that I want to look at are verses 33 and 34. So I want to read those again for you.

[7 : 11] It says, And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. So this was an imperfect church, but God was working in their community to the extent that no one had needs in their community. And they were sacrificially giving to make sure no one had needs.

So there's some background to this passage. In Deuteronomy, so in the Old Testament, there was this law about how the Israelites were supposed to cancel debts for one another every seven years. And I don't want to make any simplistic comparisons of that law to the present day, but the whole point and the goal of the law was to prevent poverty. So in Deuteronomy, after explaining this law, this is what it says. It says, There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess, as your inheritance he will richly bless you. So this is really similar wording to the wording that the passage uses in Acts. Acts says there were no needy persons among them. So Acts, intentionally borrows language from Deuteronomy, and it's trying to tell us something. So most Bible scholars think that there probably wasn't ever a time in the Israelites' history when they put this law into action. So God's dream is that no one would experience poverty, but it never seemed to happen.

So fast forward to Acts, and the story in Acts is saying that God's dream that no one would experience poverty was finally becoming a reality. The thing that God wanted to happen was finally happening, at least on a small scale in this church in Acts.

So this is what I think was happening with this group of Christians. This community believed that another world was possible because of Jesus.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, they believed that God's world, where no one experiences poverty, God's world was breaking into their world. So these Christians started to be generous to be part of making that world a reality. They were generous so that they could partner with God in making that world a reality. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God's world of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, and justice is breaking into our broken world, and that's what this community believes.

[9 : 58] And in God's world, no one experiences poverty. In God's world, people sacrificially care for one another. So in Acts, this community of the very first Christians decided that they were going to partner with God in making that world a reality. And one of the ways that they did that was by living generously. So those first Christians in Acts had just experienced like the ultimate source of hope, right? Jesus had just risen from the dead. Some of them had experienced that. Some of them had met Jesus. And so they saw in this really tangible way that God's world was really breaking into their broken world. God had just brought life out of death. So if God can bring life out of death, then God must be able to bring life to and redeem all the other broken things in the world.

So it was natural for them to start living generously because they had hope that the world could be different. They had hope that God was redeeming all the broken things in the world, and they wanted to partner with God in seeing that come about. When we have hope that the world can be different, when we believe that change is actually possible, generosity is actually kind of natural.

It actually feels natural to give our money and our time when we believe that change can happen. So living with hope leads us to living generously. So just a quick example. A couple of years ago, there was a lot of stuff on the news about the war in Syria and people fleeing from that war. So people were leaving Syria as refugees to get away from all the violence. And a lot of the time, people were having a hard time finding a place they could go to. A lot of countries wouldn't let them in.

So there were these horrific photos that came out around that time of people who had died and of kids who died while they were trying to get to a better country where they could build a better, safer life.

And a lot of the stories that I heard back then and that were all over the news were heartbreaking and overwhelming. So I wanted to do something about the problem. So I found an organization that was serving refugees and that organization kind of gave me a sense of hope. I realized like, I don't have to just sit back and feel like depressed about this. I can actually do something about these terrible things. So I started giving to this organization because I wanted to be part of the solution. So having hope can lead us to living generously. Through the resurrected power of Jesus, God's world is breaking into our broken world. And we're invited to partner with God in making that world a reality. And generosity is one of the ways that we can do that.

[13 : 03] Now, some of us might not feel very hopeful right now. It's 2020, which may be all I need to say, but it's 2020. There is a coronavirus. I know that some of you feel a sense of hopelessness about the national political scene right now. And I know that many of us feel a sense of hopelessness because of racial injustice that we're seeing all over the place. Some people have said that racism is America's original sin, which just means that racism was like embedded in the founding of the country. And it's been with us ever since. So it's not like this is new. But also, Breonna Taylor was murdered this past spring.

And we just found out this past week that justice was denied to her. And I know that the denial of justice leads many of us to feeling hopeless. And I can like stand up here and say that we believe in a God who brings life out of death. And that might actually be encouraging for some of you. But I know that for a lot of you, me saying that is not going to make you feel hopeful.

And I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that it should make you feel hopeful. This whole situation feels hopeless for a lot of you. And I know that for some of you, it even feels traumatizing.

Touch the microphone. Forgot about that. So if you're in that place of feeling hopeless or even traumatized, you might not be ready to hear some sermon about hope and generosity.

So I want to just say, like, that's okay. If that's you, that's okay. You might need to focus on caring for yourself right now. So know if that's you, that God cares for you. God mourns with you.

[15 : 02] And God wants you to know God's love. Black lives matter to God. A lot of us think of hope as basically an emotion. We think of hope as this feeling of possibility and optimism. So we think of hope as a feeling.

But hope in the biblical sense is more of an expectation. Hope is looking forward to something with confidence that it will happen. That's what the word literally means in the New Testament that we translate as hope.

In the New Testament, the word that we translate as hope means looking forward to something with confidence that it will happen. So hope isn't a feeling. Hope is our confidence in God, and it produces action in us. We respond. Hope is our gritty, persevering belief that God is faithful and that God does keep God's promises. So hope is a persevering faith that God is at work right now to bring life where it seems like there is only death. Hope leads us to action. And hope can lead us to act even when we don't have those emotions of optimism and possibility. So despite the realities of injustice and inequality and the coronavirus and the reality of racism and discrimination and sickness and death, despite all of that, hope is confidence in God who brings life out of death.

Jesus' resurrection means that even though death and brokenness and injustice are real, they don't win because God is at work even right now to bring life out of death.

And one of the ways that we can choose to live with hope, one of the ways that we can choose to live with that gritty, persevering kind of hope, is by living generously.

[17:17] Living with hope leads us to generosity. Now I know that some of you have been told that you're supposed to be generous because of the wrong kinds of hope. You've been taught that if you're generous, God will like you more. If you're generous, you'll keep God from being angry at you. So I want to just say that that's not the kind of hope that we're talking about. We're called, we're not called to live generously out of a misplaced hope that God will like us more or that God will bless us more because of our generosity. God fully and unconditionally loves you and wants the best for you, whether you're generous or whether you're not generous. So whether you're currently being generous, or if you used to be generous, or if you want to be generous but can't, or if you don't want to be generous, God's message for you is that you're fully loved right now and God wants the best for you whether you're generous or not.

Generosity isn't a way to earn something from God. Generosity is an expression of our persevering hope and faith that God's good and just world is breaking into our world. And it's a way of partnering with God in God's redemption of the world. So I want to offer you all just two reflection questions for you to think and pray about this week.

So first question is this, when you look at the world, where do you need God's hope? And like I was saying a couple minutes ago, I know that some of you feel a sense of hopelessness right now, and you might be at a place where you like just need Jesus. You need Jesus to give you hope, you need Jesus to give you faith, and you need to know that Jesus is hurting and mourning with you.

So I kind of propose this question as an opportunity to recognize where you're at with God and to meet God there. So when you look at the world, where do you need God's hope? And I want to propose an idea here, and you can kind of take or leave this idea. You might want to consider and pray about being generous in an area of your life where you need hope. So for example, if you're feeling hopeless about the coronavirus, you might want to consider giving or volunteering with an organization that's doing something to help people who are impacted by the coronavirus. So for some of you, it might be a helpful exercise to practice living generously as a way of cultivating hope in yourself.

And by the way, one of the reasons that I give to this church, I don't work for the church, so maybe I can say this, but one of the reasons that I give to this church is that it gives me hope, and it builds in me the confidence that God is at work. I can see God working through the church, and it makes me want to give. So that's one of the reasons, anyway, that I give.

[20:11] So when you look at the world, where do you need God's hope? Here's a second question. How has your past impacted how you think about generosity? And how might God be inviting you to change your relationship with generosity? So what I'm really trying to get at with this question is, how could God want to heal you of your negative experiences around generosity and money?

There may have been some Christians that were hurtful to you in the way that they talked about generosity. Or maybe your past experiences with your family or your experiences as an adult has had some sort of negative impact on you in the area of money and generosity. Or maybe you've had really positive experiences with money and generosity, and that's something to thank God for.

So with this question, I want to invite you to prayerfully think about your past with money and generosity, and to think about how your past is affecting you today. So how have your past experiences impacted how you think about generosity, generosity, and how might God be inviting you to change your relationship with generosity?

So I hope those two questions are helpful for you as you grow in hope and as you grow in living generously. Dolemn We