

# “Radical Generosity”

## Acts 4:32-37

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 30, 2016 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Acts chapter 4.
- Early Christianity spread like wildfire across the Roman Empire, particularly among the poor and the slaves. It transformed the very structure and values of society, so much so that within a few hundred years more than 50% of the Roman Empire was Christian.
  - What was it that kindled this small flame into a great fire?
- History points to a few major factors but these factors are all like spokes on a wheel, moving out of one hub and that hub is the transforming message of the gospel. The gospel, that is, the good news of what God has done on behalf of sinners in Jesus Christ, radically transformed the lives of those who accepted it and one of the greatest areas it affected was people’s attitudes and use of money.
  - Upon receiving the grace of Jesus, those first Christians immediately began to practice what can only be called ‘radical generosity.’
    - They gave away money in such vast and sacrificial proportions to help others and promote the church’s ministry that the materialistic society around them took notice.
- In verse 32 we read, **READ 32** - *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.*
  - In Acts 2 we read, **READ 45** - *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*
    - This radical generosity made an impact on the surrounding culture as we read in verse 47, **READ 47** - *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*
- The message of Christianity spread over the whole empire in part because the radical generosity of those early Christians backed up the message they spoke.
  - A sarcastic Greek historian named Lucian despised Christians but in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century he wrote, *“It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their head that they are brethren.”*<sup>1</sup>
- In 252 A.D. a plague broke out in the city of Carthage, a city that had severely persecuted its Christians. Every day thousands of people died. The fear of getting the plague was so great that infected people were simply abandoned and dead people left unburied. People fled the city in droves.
  - But Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, called all the Christians together. He reminded them of the gospel, that Christ who though he was rich became poor for our sake, and he called them to stay in the city, to use all their wealth and abilities to care of Christian and non-Christian alike. Those who bore the marks on their bodies from torture, daily exposed themselves to danger in order to help their enemies. Such examples of self-sacrifice and love amazed the people and many were converted.<sup>2</sup>
    - So you see the world took notice and listened to the message of the gospel because of the radical generosity of those early believers.
- This fall we are talking about our proposed five-year vision, which is to be a church that is **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** renewing our community through the gospel. For this vision to succeed many things must take place, one of which, is that we must be a people who delight to use our money to see God’s kingdom go forward in Victoria.
  - If God works this morning as he did in the book of Acts, you will not leave here feeling like your fist has been pried open from around your money. No, by God’s grace you will willingly loosen

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.earlychurch.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5 (Hendrickson) “The life and passion of Cyprian, Bishop, and Martyr”, 1.3-4, 268.

your grip on your money and you will be filled with joy at the idea of giving to see our community renewed through the gospel.

- So here is today's thesis: **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** We must saturate our lives in the gospel because the gospel empowers radical generosity. Let's develop that in three parts.

## THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS A RADICALLY GENEROUS ATTITUDE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** First, we must saturate our lives in the gospel, because the gospel empowers a radically generous attitude.
  - It is most critical that we get this connection between gospel and money. If you look closely at verses 32-37 it is obvious that the theme is radical generosity. But then stuck right into this description is verse 33. **READ 33** - *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* This verse seems out of place. Aren't we talking about their generosity? Isn't Luke a little off topic here? Not at all.
    - It is precisely the message of what Jesus has done for them that transforms their attitude towards their possessions. These people were enraptured by what God had done for them in Christ.
- This good news is so good that it has completely changed their attitude toward money. Jesus Christ became so precious that money lost its allure.
  - Look at verse 32. **READ 32** - *no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.*
    - They still owned houses and had private property but they gladly sold some of them and liquidated other assets to help the church's mission. Note, it was all about attitude.
- You see, if you haven't experienced grace you will feel agitated or upset when someone asks you for money or preaches a sermon on generosity. Why? Because your dominant mindset is, **"I worked hard for it. It's my money."** But when a person has experienced grace their attitude changes. Their tight grip on their wealth is loosened by the gospel. Even when they cannot give they wish they could. Why this shift in attitude?
  - When you see how much grace God has poured out on you in Christ and how undeserving you are of it – when you see that rather than leave you to death and hell, God set his love on you, that Jesus gave up all his privileges as God and was mocked, beaten, and crucified that you might go free it changes you.

## A CHRISTMAS CAROL

- A great illustration of how grace changes our attitude toward money is Charles Dickens's great story, *"A Christmas Carol."* You remember how Mr. Scrooge is a tight-fisted, grumpy old man. In that first chapter some men come around to his office on Christmas Eve saying, *"a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?"* *'Nothing!'* Scrooge replied. *'You wish to be anonymous?'* *'I wish to be left alone,'* said Scrooge."<sup>3</sup>
  - And when Bob Cratchit, his secretary asks if he can have Christmas Day off since it is only once a year Scrooge replies, *"A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!"* said Scrooge, buttoning his great-coat to the chin. *"But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning."*
- But you remember the spirits take him and show him his greed. They show him that he is doomed and in that final scene he sees his life after he has died and everyone is miserable because of his greed. He

---

<sup>3</sup> All Dickens quotes taken from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm>

then falls into his grave thinking he is dead. But he is not dead. He wakes up on Christmas morning and still has all his money.

- Do you remember what happens next? His attitude completely changes. He calls out to a boy to go and buy the biggest turkey in town. ***“I’ll send it to Bob Cratchit’s!” whispered Scrooge, rubbing his hands, and splitting with a laugh. ‘He sha’n’t know who sends it. It’s twice the size of Tiny Tim’...The chuckle with which he said this, and the chuckle with which he paid for the Turkey, and the chuckle with which he paid for the cab, and the chuckle with which he recompensed the boy, were only to be exceeded by the chuckle with which he sat down breathless in his chair again, and chuckled till he cried.”***
  - His attitude toward money has completely changed. Why? He has experienced grace. He has a second chance. As a result his attitude toward money is changed. The grace-transformed Scrooge is released from the grip that money had around his throat and he becomes radically generous.

## THE POWER OF THE REAL CHRISTMAS CAROL

- You see friends, money can grip us by the throat and cut off our generosity. In both plenty and want, the power it has comes from an attitude, an attitude that says, ***“This is mine.”*** But the gospel is the power to break that grip. You must call to mind again the goodness of the gospel for as one pastor points out, unlike Scrooge’s story, the gospel is not just one more chance for you to get it right. The gospel is not, ***“Jesus has forgiven your past and given you a second chance, now it is up to you to do it right. You get a second chance to be like Jesus.”***
  - That would be terrible news. Do you see why? If all I get is a second chance to be like Jesus, I am doomed because I could be given a million chances and I will never love like Jesus. No one ever loved like he did. No one was generous like him. A Scrooge-like second chance then is only a recipe for my failure.
- But in the gospel, the real Christmas Carol, Jesus does not just give me a second chance, he credits my life with his perfect record. He died the death I should have died and lived the life I should have lived. His acts of love are credited to me so that I always stand perfect before God.
  - So now, in a way far greater than Scrooge I am free – free from having to gain God’s approval through better performance. I am completely approved before Him because of Jesus. And when I grasp this grace that God has poured out on me, it frees me and melts away my possessiveness.
- So what is your attitude toward money these days? Does your anxiety lead to possessiveness? Do your fears cause you to grip tightly to what is yours?
  - The only way to be released is to saturate your life in the gospel, to have your heart awestruck by the generosity of God to you, to see that Jesus went through the greatest poverty of all to give you everything. When you see how rich you are in him your possessive attitude falls away.

## THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS RADICALLY GENEROUS ACTIONS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Second we must saturate our lives in the gospel because the gospel empowers radically generous action.
  - This new attitude demonstrates itself in radical generosity.
- What a statement in verses 34. **READ 34** - ***There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.***
  - This fulfills the law of Deut 15:4 which says, ***“there should be no poor among you.”*** How did they practically do this? **READ 34b-35** - ***for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.***
    - This radical generosity is then illustrated with in the case of Barnabas. The way that they did this was that the wealthy in the church brought proceeds to the community leaders who oversaw distribution.

- Now note carefully again that in both cases the selling was voluntary and sporadic as the need for funds arose.
  - I repeat this again because I want you to see clearly that Christians giving is not motivated out of a sense of duty but out of a sense of grace that transforms attitude.
    - Duty bound giving will always be done begrudgingly and will always be sparing. Grace-giving is filled with joy and is generous.
- You can tell then if your life is saturated in the gospel by examining the bottom line of your life. It is often difficult to evaluate how patient or forgiving you are but it is very easy to quantify how generous you are. Do your actions proclaim, ***“I am overwhelmed by the gospel, by what He has done and I desperately want to give”?***
  - Tim Keller writes this, **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** ***“If we do not give away our money in remarkable proportions, we have not grasped (or we are not currently remembering) Christ’s generosity in saving us. Let’s put it more starkly: You will always give effortlessly to that which is your salvation, to those things that give your life meaning. If Jesus is the One who saved you, your money flows out easily into His work, his people, His causes. If, however, your real religion is your appearance, your social status, or your pleasure, your money flows most easily into those items and symbols.”***
    - Then he says if you see your salvation in clothes, looks, status, security, you will hold onto your money because it is your god. How you spend your money tells you what religion you follow. If giving away great sums of money to the church or poor seems like a burden then it shows you where you believe your salvation lies.
- It is like the before and after Scrooge. Before we experience grace we are passive and sporadic in our giving. Like Scrooge we give but only as people ask. We give only what we feel we can give that day without seriously inconveniencing ourselves. If someone pulls our heartstrings enough or we feel sufficiently guilty we will give.
  - But as grace transforms us we are not passive – we, like Scrooge, are active and intentional. We don’t give just to get a tax credit. We give out of sheer joy. We scheme and say, ***“How much can I give while still being responsible?”*** When you see how rich you are in Christ, money becomes less valuable.
    - But once again, the only way you can get this kind of action is to have a change of attitude because action flows from attitude. Saturate your life in the gospel.

## THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS RADICALLY GENEROUS APPLICATIONS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Third we must saturate our lives in the gospel because the gospel empowers radically generous applications.
  - Let’s get practical now on what this looks like. How you respond to this last part gives you a good picture of where your heart is at. You see if you are a passive, duty giver, all of this will rub you wrong. You will be irritated by it and the reason is because your money has you by the throat.
    - But if you are a grace giver, if the gospel has released you, then you will want some guidelines on how to give. So let me give you two biblical guidelines for giving.
- First, people often ask, ***“How much should I give?”*** To be honest, I cannot answer that. Radical generosity isn’t looking for a law to follow. The one who is transformed by grace asks, ***“how much can I give while still responsibly caring for all the other things God has put in my life like family, school, paying my mortgage?”***
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** In the OT the guideline was the tithe. The tithe was the first 10% of the fruit of their crops. The principle was pay God first and then learn to live on the rest. But some have said the tithe does not apply today because the New Testament does not command believers to tithe. True, but what does it say? It says we are to ***“give as Christ gave.”*** It is therefore inconceivable that we have received far more grace than the Old Testament people should give less than the 10% required of them. The tithe then is a minimum guideline.



- We are proposing some increases to the budget. They will push us a bit but the board believes it is possible. Will you consider giving generously?

## **CONCLUSION**

- Our greatest need is to see that Jesus is our greatest treasure. Once he becomes our greatest treasure all other treasures become unappealing and we are released from their bondage.
  - Once Jesus is our greatest treasure we gain all and are freed to be radically generous. We must saturate our lives in the gospel because the gospel empowers radical generosity.