

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life

Series for June 26: Why be generous?

June 14, 2011

When Zacchaeus heard Jesus was coming, the “vertically challenged” man felt compelled to perform any feat necessary to see the Messiah. Jesus spotted the earnest disciple and immediately showed interest in building a relationship with Zacchaeus through table fellowship (Luke 19:5-6).

Jesus’ actions, however, proved offensive to some. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus was considered a traitor to his people. For a Jew to help the Roman oppressors take away the money of God’s people proved horrendous in the eyes of the Israelites. Further, most tax collectors also charged the Jewish citizens extra and placed the surplus cash in their own wallets. Thieves and traitors should be the last people invited to dine with the Messiah, but Jesus offered the social outcast a chance for redemption.

Zacchaeus proved so grateful for Jesus’ response that he promised to redistribute the wealth he had stolen. He pledged to return fourfold and give half of his possessions to the poor. Healing and redemption had spawned more actions of healing and redemption. The former outcast risked bankrupting himself to have others experience the riches of restored relationships and relief from suffering.

Generosity with possessions and money should rise from the joy of salvation. When one experiences an authentic encounter with the divine, the entire person is transformed. Money, people and relationships all look different. God empowers believers to see their resources as tools for kingdom work rather than simply blessings for themselves alone.

Zacchaeus proved able and willing to release his death grip on money for the sake of the world around him. Modern believers should share his enthusiasm.

Thanks to the work of Christ, we can know love. 1 John 3 explains believers should mimic the love of the Savior who placed the needs of others so high he died for their sake. John asks the ultimate question of generosity: If the Master was willing to lay down his own life for the sake of love, how could the believer see others in need and not provide aid? How can one filled with Christ's love not show love when the situation demands it?

If one is truly being transformed into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18), one must react to people's needs in the same manner as did Jesus. The Christian is required to ask how Jesus would treat a hungry child in an impoverished country or what Jesus would do for a family struggling to pay their bills after the breadwinner has been laid off, or how would Jesus help a homeless man freezing on the street?

We naturally restrain from giving too much of our finances or possessions for fear of the consequences. The beauty of salvation is its freedom from such fear and from attachment to material wealth. We begin to feel what God feels and love what God loves. Our values and priorities align with the Savior's, or we don't truly belong to him.

A servant is not greater than the master (John 13:16). If Jesus was not exempt from sacrificing for the sake of others, neither are his followers. Rather than ask what will happen if we give, perhaps we should question what will happen to others if we don't.

In 2 Corinthians 8, the Apostle Paul described a wonderful display of generosity by the church of Macedonia. Even though the church consisted of individuals living in poverty, the members graciously gave to the cause of the Jerusalem church that also was dealing with financial struggle. The

Jerusalem church was overwhelmed with members of the community struggling to survive, and Paul sought aid from other churches in order to bring about unity and relieve the people of Jerusalem from suffering. After all, Christians from all around the globe are united in their work in the kingdom and should provide aid to one another when needed (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

By sacrificing their money for the sake of others, the Macedonian church was blessed with the opportunity to share in the work of God's people, even ones far away and whom they may never meet. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to mimic the smaller church's attitude and see the needs of the kingdom as more important than their own.

The world around us screams for restoration. Poverty, hunger and pain can be found both in our backyards and around the world. Christians are called to use their resources to meet the spiritual, emotional and physical needs that surround them. The manner in which a local church uses its resources may differ based on the leading of God and the limitations of the congregation. However, churches always must exercise generosity with the financial and material blessings God has allowed. Funding missions, giving food to the hungry, housing the homeless and many other ministries all serve as part of continuing the ministry of Jesus who forfeited the riches of his heavenly throne in order to enrich others (2 Corinthians 8:9).

May we share in the blessings of mimicking Christ's generosity. May our encounter with divine love and redemption compel us to share love and redemption with others. May we see our resources as opportunities to advance the kingdom. May we see the needs of people in the same manner as Jesus.

Questions for discussion

- How do you express the joy of your salvation? Does it involve financial sacrifice? Why? Why not?
- How can you and your church give generously to meet needs around you and around the world?
- What obstacles prevent you from giving as did Jesus?