

## Heaven's Secrets: Generosity

Which type of gift receiver do you most often turn out to be? One of those who do a little bookkeeping as you tear into the gift wrapping wondering if what's inside is a 'fair gift?' Or one of those who just receive a gift with a great big 'thank you!' before you even carefully peel away the wrapping. Let me show you an example of the first way we approach gifts: (Lucy and Charlie Brown video)

"All I want is what's coming to me. All I want is just my fair share." Ah yes. That is never any of us though, right? Unless it is one those years when you think you have been a stupendously sacrificial spouse or child. Then you might approach Christmas like Lucy: 'There had better be something that sparkles or gets me on an airplane in this package!'

What exasperates Charlie Brown so much is that Lucy, like all of the other kids, just fails to recognize that Christmas is not about getting gifts but about giving thanks for the Gift of Jesus Christ. In our best moments we become like Charlie Brown; in most of our moments we are 'little Lucys'. At least I am.

This is all just to say, in our striving to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven we have a lot of work to do! The kingdom of heaven is not about geography, at least not in the first instance. The kingdom exists in the hearts and

minds of everyone who welcomes the Spirit of God into their lives and makes a commitment to being transformed by the Spirit to become more and more like Jesus.

You are likely familiar with the little prayer, “Thy kingdom come.” Prayed that a thousand times, right? What exactly are you praying for? The kingdom of God is visible in the world, this earth, when King Jesus’ subjects submit themselves to becoming the good and merciful people whose every action is motivated by a love of God and neighbor.

Look at the teaching of our Catechism (SLIDE):

**Q. What does the second petition mean?**

**A. “Your kingdom come” means: Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you.**

Notice that this is not a prayer about a future time when Jesus returns. It is about today, a prayer that in this life and on this earth God would work in the lives of his children so powerfully that we would be transformed and transforming disciples of Jesus. This story Jesus tells is about another characteristic the Spirit is working to spark to life within us so that we reflect to the world kingdom values.

Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is like an owner of a vineyard who needs his grapes picked, so he goes to the local employment agency to find workers.

The owner (who we should understand to be God in this story) gets out there and strikes a deal with the first group of workers: say, \$15 per hour for 12 hours work (6 a.m.-6p.m.). He goes back about 9 a.m. and sees more workers without employment, so he hires them too, this time telling them, "I will pay you whatever is right." Just happy to have work, the promise of pay, group 2 heads out. The sun rises and the heat is overwhelming, but the first and second group keep on doing the hard work in the vineyard. And then, at 5 p.m., the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, the owner, seeing others standing at the agency without work, says "You also go and work in my vineyard." No mention of any pay is made. The 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers just go, grateful that they have been called.

Everyone gets paid at 6 p.m. The last group, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers, walk up and get \$180! They are stunned! What is this? And they head home to tell their families, look what the owner did for us today! Well, the first workers, they figure, quickly doing the math, that they should now get something over \$2,000! They get up there, hands out, and they get...\$180, just what they were promised.

“Wait a minute!” So the argument ensues... “this is not fair” is the charge. But the owner says, ‘You made a bargain and I met my part of the bargain? You are upset not because I was unfair, but because I am a generous man!’



We hear this story, of course, as if we are the ones who worked all day, not like we are the ones who got hired for one hour of work and got a full-day’s pay.

Let’s try another approach. Here’s another story, and I wonder who you think of yourself as in this true story told by Denise Banderman. Denise was in college and it was finals week. She was preparing for the final exam in Youth Ministry, and she had worked hard in preparation. Of course, some of the students worked less hard and seemed to be cramming in the last minutes before the exam started. She describes the exam this way:

“Finally it was time to take the test. ‘Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I’ll tell you to start,’ our professor, Dr. Tom Hufty, instructed.

“When we turned them over, to my astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. My name was even written on the exam in red ink. The bottom of the last page said: ‘This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because

the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced grace.'

Dr. Hufty then went around the room and asked each student individually, 'What is your grade? Do you deserve the grade you are receiving? How much did all your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?'

Then he said, ... 'You've just experienced grace. One hundred years from now, if you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your name will be written down in a book, and you will have had nothing to do with writing it there. That will be the ultimate grace experience.'"

Would you have been upset that the Professor gave everyone an A because, well, you are an overachiever and work for every A, and you want to be rewarded for your hard work? Or are you a last-minute crammer, always hoping the test is just 'pass-fail'? Wouldn't you agree that the difference in reaction is based on what you thought you deserved? If you thought you had earned an A and all of the slackers had earned C's you might be upset with the whole idea of grace. But if you are one of the students who knew you didn't deserve the A, then you *get* grace.

The point that Jesus wants to make is this: God is generous. God lavishes grace upon us from God's never-ending supply. When it comes to our relationship with God, we are all the last minutes hires who get paid in full; we are all the last-minute crammers who get an undeserved A on the final exam.

Why? Because God is both just and full of grace. God doesn't give Lucy what she has coming to her; he gives her what something so much better. God is unconditionally forgiving and generous beyond measure with God's grace. We love to know that is what it is like in the kingdom of heaven.

Are we generous with our love, or do we demand that our love be earned, by our friends, our parents, our spouses, our children, especially when they become teenagers? Right?

Do we offer God's love through ourselves to only those who work alongside us in church, or do we include the newcomers to the faith, especially those who are different from ourselves?

That is the sort of tough transformation that the Spirit is going to put us through. Teaching us to be completely forgiving, overflowingly generous citizens of this spirit-based kingdom of heaven.

If you serve God with time or tithes, do so because you want to be generous toward God in your gratitude, not miserly in your labor, as if you are doing God a favor. Our motivation is not to get an “A” for life. Life is not a competition to gain a greater reward than someone else. No, we have one goal, to glorify God alone in a life lived in overflowing thanksgiving for the Cross which guarantees we will receive divine generosity.

When we realize how much we have been gifted, then we are transformed into being motivated to be generous with our careers, relationships, talents, resources, time. We engage in generous living.

What is generous living? Try living out Jesus’ command to love your enemies by praying for them and by witnessing to them God’s amazing, generous grace in your life with them. And what if, after a time, that person walked up here and professed their faith in Jesus Christ? Would that make generous forgiveness and radical love worth not putting yourself in first place?

Here is today’s big idea: Citizens of the kingdom of heaven strive to be transformed into the kind of people who show their neighbors the generous grace that God demonstrated in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

How can I say thanks? How can we as a church say thanks for that amazing outpouring of generous grace? By recognizing that we are the people most in need of God's generosity, and that as recipients of it, we want to be generous in showing grace and love to everyone we meet.



One last word to those who are waiting to respond to the Owner's invitation to come into the Vineyard. It is not too late. God still is providing free transportation to the Vineyard. You will be offered the greatest work there is, serving the most generous Owner in the world. And you will be rewarded with the most undeserved gift imaginable, life everlasting.