

The God Who Is Generous

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10 NIV).

“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matt 20:15 NIV).

SCARCITY & ABUNDANCE

What do you do when you don’t feel like you have enough? Do you remember the great toilet paper shortage in the spring of 2020? Stores had to put locks on certain items to keep people from hoarding. There were people genuinely in need who went without, because their neighbor who had more than enough imagined what it might feel like to do without and acted in their own self-interest. It’s human nature. Many of us remember getting that second or third bottle of hand sanitizer, that extra-large box of toilet paper—you know, “just in case.” I wonder how many of us had food that spoiled because we had so much stockpiled?

That is a snapshot of what it looks like to live from a condition of scarcity. Think of the game of musical chairs. It looks like what happens when the music stops. Living from paycheck to paycheck is hard enough; but when you have no idea when—or if—your job will start up again, it can be sheer panic.

“Our checking account is limited, and often our money is spent before we earn it. Living from a condition of scarcity, we learn that we must protect what we have. If we give it away, we might end up in dire straits.”¹

You know, that’s not only true when it comes to money. What does it look like spiritually to live from a condition of scarcity? It makes it very hard to love others, or

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good & Beautiful God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), pp. 84-85.

even love yourself, when love seems so scarce. It means forgiveness is scarce; acceptance is scarce. Over the last few years—in every area of our lives—we have witnessed and felt the temptation to be drawn into a condition of scarcity. We give no ground—its winner take all. When you think what you have is yours, and is about to be taken away, we grab, and claw, with tooth, nail, and pitchforks. It’s defense all around. And its winner take all.

But how would we be different—how relaxed would we feel, how open would we be, if we didn’t operate from a condition of scarcity, but rather, from great abundance? What if we had more than we could possibly imagine, and an ever-flowing stream with bread enough and to spare? What if we saw people in terms of God’s greatest hopes rather than our worst fears; what would it look like to be the people of unlimited generosity?

It would look like the kingdom of God.

THE GOD OF ABUNDANCE

Do I even need to remind you that our God is a God of great abundance? The widow of one of the Lord’s prophets found herself in dire straits: she had no money, and the creditors were coming to take her two boys and turn them into slaves to pay the debt. “What do you have?” asked Elisha. “All I have is this small bottle of olive oil” she replied.

“Go ask your neighbors for all of their empty jars. Then go home and start to fill those jars with the olive oil.”

She did that, and the oil didn’t run out until every empty jar was filled, providing enough to pay her creditors and to keep her kids out of their hands (2 Kings 4:1-7).

The people had been following Jesus all day, and now they were hungry. “What do you have?” asked Jesus. “We’ve got 5 loaves of bread, and two small fish.” So Jesus had them sit down in the green pastures. He blesses the bread and hands it out. Then he says, “go get baskets and pick up the leftovers.” They did that, and after everyone there—5000 men—had eaten all they could stand, there were enough fragments to fill 12 baskets.

My God loves to bless, and he loves to bless in abundance. In the kingdom of God, we do not live in a condition of scarcity; no—he prepares a table before me, and our cup “runneth over.”

“Give”, said Jesus, “and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap” (Luke 6:38). “Now to him who

is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20).

When we struggle and are in need of grace, he gives it. And when we ask again, he gives again. And when we think he must be tapped out, given how much I need it, James 4 says “But God gives MORE grace” (James 4:6). “The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase,” writes Paul in Romans 5; “but where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Rom 5:20).

We know that. And we apply it to our business needs or our financial concerns and we trust God will get us over the hump. But don’t you know...don’t you know that God is abundant and generous with his grace and mercy—not only on how much he provides to us, but on how much he provides to *others*.

“We know,” writes Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, “we know that the one who raises the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Cor 4:14-15).

“I want a people,” said Jehovah. And years later, Israel would read those words and think self-righteously that God only had them in mind. Seeing themselves as a cistern—the only repository of the grace of God. But that’s not the story. When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, and made a covenant with him, he promised that his children would outnumber the stars in the sky or the sand on the shoreline. And God specifically had *others* in mind. “I will bless you and make you into a great nation” said the Lord (Gen 12:2). That’s as far as most of them read. But he continues: “I will make your name great so you can be a *blessing to others*”(Gen 12:2). “I will bless those who bless you” says God, and “all the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3). Not a cistern, says the Lord; an aqueduct!

When Solomon dedicates the temple, he prays a prayer of dedication that includes this fantastic line:

“Foreigners will hear about you and your mighty power, and some of them will come to live among your people Israel. If any of them pray toward this temple, listen from your home in heaven and answer their prayers. Then everyone on earth will worship you, just as your own people Israel do, and they will know that I have built this temple in your honor” (2 Chron 6:32-33 CEV).

Not a cistern; an aqueduct!

And if you won't be my aqueduct, I'll just bypass the system myself. Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth one Sabbath day. He read from the prophet Isaiah announcing the one sent by God to give freedom from oppression, sight to the blind, good news to the poor, and to declare “this is the year of the Lords' favor.” What does it look like for God to show up offering freedom, sight, good news, and special favor? Jesus gives two examples. Once there was a drought in the land and lots of widows in Israel were in trouble; but God sent Elijah outside the camp—to a widow in Zarephath near Tyre and Sidon. And leprosy was all the rage; and many men in Israel were in need of healing. But God sent healing to Naaman the Syrian. And the little cistern couldn't stand it. They dragged Jesus to the edge of the cliff to throw him off, for daring to suggest that the day of the Lord's favor might have gentiles in mind.

But God loves all people. He has always wanted to help all people. I want all of my creation. Every one I made. I want my saving grace to extend as far as the curse is found! And one day I will open the floodgates and my people will be found in the Messiah, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; but from the beginning he wanted to bless *all* people.

JONAH

And so we meet Jonah. The man tried to run away from God and was swallowed by a specially prepared giant fish. If he came to Searcy, and we offered him seafood, he'd reply “No thanks. I've been seafood. I respect them.” Jonah wanted to run away because God told him to preach to the worst people on the face of the earth. Told to go to Nineveh, he was. Assyria would later take the children of Israel into captivity. They would stick fish-hooks through the noses of prisoners, and tie the other end of the line to the tail of a horse. These poor guys would be dragged through the streets by their noses. That's what Assyria was known for. That's the kind of people we are talking about. And the capital of Assyria was Nineveh. Jonah's knees couldn't stop knocking, so he ran away. But after three days in the belly of the whale, with the stomach acid working on his skin, and prayer working on his heart, Jonah was being prepared for a whale of a tale. Jonah preached in Nineveh and Nineveh repents.

What could make people like this repent? I guess if I was walking along the beach, and saw a whale spit a guy up onto the land. The guy, stark white from all the stomach acid, dusts himself off, waves to the whale, walks over me and says “Repent!” I think I would! But Nineveh didn't receive any condition in the preaching of Jonah. *Read it twice, you won't find it.* Jonah didn't say “Repent.” He said, “40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” That's what they deserved. That's the message God gave.

But these pagan kings, they don't know any better. They haven't been to preaching training schools and graduate seminaries where all sense of creativity and appreciation for the awesomeness of God just gets sucked out of folks. No, these pagan kings think that God is personal, and maybe—just maybe—if we change our ways and show we are serious, he'll have mercy.

And God looks down and sees their hearts—people made in his image—his children, who have refused to be his children, now crying out for papa—and has mercy! God saves the town from expected annihilation! And the only guy in the entire story who is upset about all of this is God's spokesperson Jonah. You have to laugh when you read it. “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; *and he did not do it*. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry” (Jonah 3:10-4:1)

Can you believe this? But wait, I'm not finished. Chapter 4, verse 2. Read it with me, I'm not making this up: Jonah to Jehovah, I quote: “O Lord! Didn't I tell you this way going to happen? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the very beginning; Because I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” He means this as a criticism! Oh wait, here's the kicker: “Just take my life. It's better for me to die than to live” [implication: “with a God like you.”]

What was Jonah's problem? He didn't just want to preach damnation; he enjoyed it. His world didn't make sense without God's wrath displayed every time it was deserved. But praise God, because of Jesus Christ, God's wrath which we all deserve has been averted!

But sometimes our preaching comes out like we were baptized in lemon juice, with nothing positive to say! It's hard to believe, but for some, they can't stand the idea of God offering salvation to someone who has worked less hard, lived less pure, loved less dearly than I have! So we sit on our hill and wait for the day when God's wrath will take care of our enemies.

And when we do that, we have taken our eyes off of the God we see in the face of Jesus Christ. We hear this carpenter from Nazareth saying, “God did not send me into the world to condemn the world!” That's John 3:17. Its in your Bible! “I came that the world might be saved!”

Hear the Father speak lovingly to the older brother: All that I have is yours. Don't you know that? But I thought your brother was dead, and he's come back to life. Won't you celebrate with me?

When one sheep has gone wayward, won't the good shepherd leave the 99 and go searching for the one? Even so, there is more rejoicing in the presence of the angels over 1 sinner that repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance.

And so the book of Jonah closes with God, teary-eyed, pained-hearted, wanting his servant Jonah to love as he loves: “Is it right for you to be angry?... Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:4, 11)?

LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

His is an upside-down kingdom. And it is marked by abundant generosity.

Peter was baffled by Jesus' teachings on the high calling of God. I mean, he had just suggested that its easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He's nervous; worried. And he says “Remember, we have left everything to be your followers! What will we get?”

Do you recall at the end of John, where Peter is given a great blessing from Jesus, but then he catches a glimpse of John and says to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus has to say “What is that to you? Whatever I do with him is between me and him. You come follow me” (John 21:20-22).

Peter is having another one of those moments. So Jesus assures him, “yes, all of you have become my followers. I promise you, you will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And not only that, let me give some reassurance to anyone who has forsaken all for me—all who have given up home or brothers and sisters or father and mother or children or land for me will be given 100 times as much, and—in the end—eternal life. I want to encourage you in this. I know you love me; I know you are dedicated followers of me. Your future is secure. But I also have hopes—high hopes—for people besides you. For people very unlike you. For people whose track record is not quite like yours. And you need to know this, in my kingdom, many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first” (Matt 19:27-30).

And that sets the scene for an unusual parable, the only parallel I can think of is the story of Jonah. He says the kingdom of heaven is like this:

Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard. After he had agreed to pay them the usual amount for a day's work, he sent them off

to his vineyard. About nine that morning, the man saw some other people standing in the market with nothing to do. He promised to pay them what was fair, if they would work in his vineyard. So they went. At noon and again about three in the afternoon he returned to the market. And each time he made the same agreement with others who were loafing around with nothing to do. Finally, about five in the afternoon the man went back and found some others standing there. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. Then he told them to go work in his vineyard. That evening the owner of the vineyard told the man in charge of the workers to call them in and give them their money. He also told the man to begin with the ones who were hired last. When the workers arrived, the ones who had been hired at five in the afternoon were given a full day's pay.

The workers who had been hired first thought they would be given more than the others. But when they were given the same, they began complaining to the owner of the vineyard. They said, “The ones who were hired last worked for only one hour. But you paid them the same that you did us. And we worked in the hot sun all day long!” The owner answered one of them, “Friend, I didn't cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. Take your money now and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them the same that I paid you? (CEV) Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (NIV; Matt 20:1-15)

Oh Peter, Jesus seems to be saying, I love the full-day workers. I love those church members who tell tales of how their fathers served as elders here, and their father's fathers, and their fathers-fathers-fathers. I love stories of people who were basically born on a pew, have gone on at least one mission trip every year, and have read through the Bible 20 times. I love those who can say with sincerity, “I have kept all the commandment from my youth up. What lack I yet?” I love them. I do. I want them in my kingdom. But I also want that neighbor of yours who has spent the last decade in riotous living. I want the prostitute on the street corner. I want the tax collector who threatened your family this morning. I want the gentiles--your sworn enemy—to have a seat at my table. And some will only hear my voice on their deathbed, and I will grant them every blessing I have to bestow. Will you be angry with me? What would you have me do? The thief comes only to kill and to destroy. But I have come that they may have life—and that they may have it abundantly. Will you celebrate with me?”

Robert Gundry, in his commentary on Matthew, says

“Eternal life will come only to workers—i.e., disciples—but as a gift based on divine generosity, not as a wage based on precise calculation. Those who worked

all day and got exactly what they deserved are merely a foil to those who got far better than they deserved.”²

And, friends, here is the kicker. If only we could actually see—truly see—just who we are in the story...it would change us forever. In the immediate context, the workers in the field who only serve one hour, and they get paid first—those are gentiles. That’s you and me! When Jesus told the Pharisees “there is more rejoicing in the presence of the angels over 1 sinner that repents than 99 just persons who need no repentance,” do you know what is the best antidote to feeling jealous about the lost sheep? To see yourself as that one. Because there are no 99 just persons who need no repentance.

“We all like sheep have gone astray.
Every one to his own way.
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Do you know what was Jonah’s problem? He saw the Ninevites as “them.” When he should have seen them as “us.”

OUR GOD IS GENEROUS

My God is generous. He has opened the floodgates of heaven to offer salvation, pardon, cleansing, peace, forgiveness and those things that come with a relationship—to all who will take it.

Jesus sat down with children in his lap. “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” he said (Mark 8:35). But it seems like John didn’t hear him. “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward” (Mark 8:38-41).

When our focus is on ourselves—our list of accomplishments, our checked-off boxes, our understanding of expectations—it is easy to live in a condition of scarcity. But when our focus is on Him—his desire to bless the whole world, his work outside of my circles, his relentless encouragement of goodness everywhere he finds it—it is easy to live in a condition of abundance.

² Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* [1982], 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 399.

Will we change our mindset out of a condition of scarcity to live in the condition of abundance?

Friends, when you tell people about your story, and lift up the cross of Christ, and watch as Christ draws all men to himself, enjoy the Christ! And let his love change the way you do business. Jesus is in the business of saving the world. He’s in the business of loving fallen people. He’s in the business of chasing down wayward souls. He’s in the business of forgiving our wrongs and giving us more blessings than we can hold.