

The God who ALWAYS GIVES

Jenny was a beautiful young woman: friendly, competent, self-confident, and attractive. When the topic of marriage and family came up, Jenny said, “I would *love* to meet someone and be in a committed relationship that might lead to marriage. That would be wonderful, if it happened, but I seriously doubt that it ever will.”

When she was asked why she felt that way, she said, “I’ve dated a lot of men, and I’ve come to the conclusion that all men can be put into one of two categories: the givers and the takers. So far, all I’ve met are the takers, and I have no intentions of spending my life with a taker.”

Sometimes people feel the same way about God. I’ve known people who just will not place their trust in Jesus. They think of God as One who takes freedom, money, time, whatever from them. God has lots of rules, they think, and He forbids a lot of fun. The reasoning is just like Jenny’s: “Who wants to spend life with a taker?”

God has given us so much that I find it difficult to understand why anyone would not want Him in their life. I’m so aware of how gracious God is, that it catches me off guard when somebody informs me that they’re simply not interested.

Tonight I want to speak to you about the God who ALWAYS GIVES. And I need to be honest with you that trying to prove that God is a Giver is sort of like trying to prove that the pope is Catholic, or like trying to prove that the Cleveland Browns probably don’t have a good shot at being in the Super Bowl this year. It should be so obvious that no discussion is needed. It should be obvious that God is a giver.

However, like Jenny, we can be wary of hooking up with a taker. So tonight, I want to look at God’s generosity – and we’ll see that God’s generosity is WONDERFUL and IT CONTINUES ON INTO ETERNITY. And then I want to look at how God wants to change us to be more and more like Himself.

GOD'S GENEROSITY IS WONDERFUL. Ephesians 1:6 says, ***"Now all praise to God for His wonderful kindness."*** It doesn't say "minimal kindness." The Bible isn't suggesting that God's kindness will do in a pinch if no other kindness is available. Instead, !! God delights in lavish giving!!

When people receive a thoughtful gift, they are moved. When they encounter God's unsparing and abundant gift, they are left breathless and amazed. They say, "What a God! What an outlandishly generous God!"

When Sue and I were first married, I was a student, and in those days, Sue would pack my lunch. Often, she would put little notes in with my lunch. It was great to receive a note from her in the middle of my day.

God does that sort of thing routinely. His notes are everywhere. He paints the autumn leaves for you, and He says, "I love you." He answers prayer, and He says, "I love you." He strengthens you when you're weak, and He says, "I love you." When you worship and you have one of those moments when you really feel His presence, He says, "I love you."

God gives gifts to us with joyful liberality. And according to His promise, we can count on them in the future.

GOD'S GIVING IS CONTINUOUS. By "continuous" I mean that God doesn't run out of generosity. Lamentations 3:23 says God's mercies are ***"new every morning."*** God's kindness is not like a sunset that is brilliant in its intensity, but fading every second. God's generosity keeps coming and coming and coming. When you wake up tomorrow morning, there will be no less generosity to greet you than there was this morning. Ten years from now, God's generosity will still be knocking people over with its lavishness.

The last verse of the hymn "Amazing Grace" says:

**When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.**

One of the most difficult things about life on earth is that almost as soon as something good starts to happen, it's over. You look forward all week long to a visit from some old friends; the next thing you know, they're headed out the door, saying "good-bye." A bride-to-be dreams for months about her wedding – but the ceremony is over in less than an hour. Parents get excited about giving kids their Christmas presents --- but the sounds of the paper tearing and the children squealing with happiness are over before you can find the camera to snap a picture. On earth, as soon as something good starts to happen, it's over.

That's NOT the nature of God's generosity. TEN THOUSAND YEARS after the celebration starts, we won't have used up any time at all!! God's generosity will extend all throughout eternity.

Are you starting to get a grasp of what I'm saying? From the moment you meet the true God, you will discover that He is a GIVER. The more you learn of Him, and the longer you live in a relationship with Him, the more frequently you'll find yourself praising Him, thanking Him for His incredible generosity.

But at some point in your relationship with God, you'll awaken to another realization about Him. **God wants you to become more and more like Him.** He wants to turn you and me into generous people. He wants us to become givers. And that's a tall order for us sometimes.

When my children were little there were many times when they'd get a sliver in the palm of the hand. The splinter hurt, but when Sue or I would get out the tweezers and the NEEDLE to remove it, the tiny fingers would clamp shut

To get the splinter out, sometimes the fingers would have to be pried back while we worked as quickly as possible with the tweezers and needle. If we left the sliver in, the cut would become infected. To heal, we had to get the hand open.

God faces the same dilemma with us. He knows that most of us by nature are tightfisted people. He knows we will experience a deep joy when we open our hands to the needs all around us. He

needs to have us open our hands. Does He pry them open? No! If He doesn't pry our fingers back, then how does He get us to open our hands? Well, let me share with you a case study we have in Luke chapter 19 when Jesus opened the hands of another "clutcher." This clutcher was Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus had an advantage over most clutchers by being a tax collector. In those days, tax collectors had official license to be legal extortionists. They were allowed to charge you the government's going tax rate, PLUS whatever percentage they thought they could get out of you. If you didn't pay the tax as well as their own take, you went to jail.

Zacchaeus sat down to a dinner with Jesus bearing all the signs of a man who had clutched his fist so tightly, that his fingers were practically frozen shut. Yet, before the dinner was over, Zacchaeus had vowed to begin giving half of his earnings to the poor.

We aren't given all the details of what was discussed between Jesus and Zacchaeus. I think perhaps Jesus said something like this: "Hey Zach, your heart and your hands are clasped around the wrong things. Your heart SHOULD be wrapped around loving God and loving others, and your hands should be open to give and receive love. But you're so obsessed with clutching money that the deep longing of your heart can never be met."

Then I think Jesus stunned Zacchaeus with some amazing generosity. Maybe Jesus told Zacchaeus about how He, Himself, would willingly open up His hands – to receive Roman spikes when Jesus would die on the cross in Zacchaeus's place. Maybe Jesus explained how His death would remove a lifetime's worth of wrongs that pricked Zacchaeus's conscience. And then, perhaps, Jesus began talking about the gift that would mean the most to a lonely clutcher.

"After I have given My own body and blood on your account," Jesus might have said, "I am going to adopt you into My family. I will offer Myself as One who will personally see to it that your prayers are answered. And when you die, I'm going to give you a

place in heaven so magnificent that it will make a king's palace look like the shack of your poorest victim."

Just imagine, for a moment, that you are Zacchaeus. Imagine being the man whom everyone hates to see coming their way. People whisper when you walk by. Faces turn red with anger every time you knock on their door. When you turn your back, you hear muffled cursing cast your way.

And then a man tells you He'll not only be your friend, but He'll treat you like a member of His own family. And not only will He meet with you, but He'll do it publicly, even at the risk of alienating His own supporters. And then He'll take your punishment and pay for it Himself.

You know you've done nothing to earn this Man's favor. You know that you've lived in such a way that He would be fully justified to treat you as an enemy, or at least, to ignore you. But He's been so generous with His love. He's been so generous with His time. And He's talking so generously of the future that you're absolutely stunned.

At some point in this conversation, the enormity of Jesus' generosity melts the stubborn heart of Zacchaeus. With a softened heart, his hands begin to open. And soon Zacchaeus is giving generously. His generosity has become a reflection of the God whose generosity is breathtakingly lavish, and whose generosity goes on and on and on.

Zacchaeus's hands were opened. Now what about yours? When you look at your hands, do you like what you see? Or do you wish your hands looked a little bit more like the open hands of Christ?

Don't start wringing your hands just yet. Remember, if God needs to change your hands, He doesn't usually start there. He starts with your heart. And that means that He wants to overwhelm you with His own generosity first. Friends, if you just stop to consider His generosity, His love WILL OVERWHELM you ... GUARANTEED!!

It's God's nature to be generous. He wants it to become ours. The transformation begins to happen when we first open up our hearts to His overwhelming goodness.

God's generosity is wonderful. Not minimal. It is abundant, and lavish, and unsparing.

The Bible says, ***"The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."*** Every time you take a breath; every time you enjoy the taste of a well-prepared meal; every time you smell the glory of a spring morning; every time you bask in the pleasure of a good hearty laugh, or experience the intimacy of a lifelong friendship, ... you don't have to guess where that gift came from. They are all gifts from God. And every gift of His says loud and clear to you, "I love you."

And this will never change. God's generosity continues forever and ever. Undiminished. His gifts never fade. God will never cease giving.

So this Thanksgiving, may you rejoice in The God who always gives. And may you become more and more like Him, so that the opening of your hand to others, in some small way, reflects the love of our amazing God – the God who Always Gives.

Amen.