

What's going on everyone. If you have to bibles go ahead and turn with me to Acts 4. We'll start at verse 32 here shortly. If I haven't had a chance to meet you yet, my name is Marcus Williamson and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. Specifically, I'm one of the lay pastors here. Now I'm sure that's not a word you hear often, but basically what that means is that while I do help out in various areas here at City Church, my full-time job is actually working on UT's campus as one of their senior graphic designers. So, especially if you're a college student, I would love to meet you and hear your story some time in the future, either after church sometime or on campus.

Now before we dive in, I wanted to ask if we can do something moving forward. It's been a while since I've asked this but for a little background I grew up in a predominately black church where interaction between whoever is teaching and congregation, that's you, was commonplace. So if you hear something that resonates with you, or something that is true, def hit us with an amen. And here's why I ask that, for starters, when the Spirit is prompting you I believe it's a natural thing to do, to agree with the Spirit, and two, because when you say amen, you're saying to those who might not follow Jesus or who are following Jesus but not saying amen, to be like, hey everyone, what this man is speaking is facts. You can trust what he's saying. Now back in my day, we use to hit'em with the dad grunt, mmmph, or the uh huhs, so feel free to do that too. I'll even take the snapping. You would be surprised but getting feedback from the fam is much appreciated by myself and others who teach. So if the Spirit is prompting, please by all means, don't quiet the Spirit, agree with him instead. Now, like we use to say back in my day, and the church said...amen.

With all of that, if you are new to catch you up we are in a series called In Knoxville As It Is In Heaven and the big idea for this series is taking and considering aspects of heaven, and figuring out ways for us as followers of Jesus to live in light of those realities in the here and now.

Today we're covering how we do that when it comes to generosity. So can I let yall in on a little someth'n. I'm pretty excited to help teach in this series for you. And I'm just as equally excited to learn from today's teaching. One of the beautiful aspects of being one of your pastors is that we get to come up here and teach from the scriptures and then apply things just like everyone listening. So I'm excited to do just that on today's topic of generosity.

Now in light of how we've been setting up each week in this series, you might be asking 'how will there be generosity in heaven?' Well let's put that Revelation passage we just read back on the screen...

15 Therefore, "they [or followers of Jesus] are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. [and here's where our generosity connects] 16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

There are a lot of beautiful things in this passage we just read. But the one I want us to focus in on is right there in verse 16: "Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat..."

This may not connect with a lot of us in the room, especially if you grew up here in America, and were more middle to middle-upper class, but keep in mind John is talking to a group of people for whom hunger and thirst were often daily realities. There were days where many people would go hungry. Where they would go thirsty. Where they did not have the resources they needed.

And even though you and I may not think about it much, those are daily realities in our world today. For our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan. For plenty of places in the world. And plenty of places right here in the U.S. and right here in Knoxville, just maybe not in our particular income bracket or neck of the woods.

But John says that on the day Jesus returns—in the new heavens and the new earth—*everyone* will have what they need. Hunger and thirst will be a thing of the past. People not having the resources they need will never again be the case. In the coming kingdom of God, everybody has what they need.

And as we've done for this series, what does it look like to bring this picture of heaven down to earth. What does it look like to display this beautiful picture of no one being needy and no one thirsting in our church family, in the larger church, in our communities. Well if you turn with me to [Acts 4:32-35](#) this will be our verse that gets us started. It says this:

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. [if you like to underline or highlight you might want to do that for this next section] And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses

sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

So this is a picture of the early followers of Jesus, in the time immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection. And one thing it mentions is this: there were no needy persons among them. No one was in need. Now that's a remarkable statement in and of itself. But it gets even crazier when you consider that the early followers of Jesus, by and large, were not wealthy people. There were some exceptions to be sure, but for the most part, they were blue collar, lower working class, hand-to-mouth sort of people. So for there to be none of them in need tells us that the early Church was doing an unbelievable job generously meeting the needs of any who had them.

You see, the early followers of Jesus were practicing for heaven. They knew that the ultimate goal, the ultimate destination, was that no one will be without. That no one will have to go without food, resources, money that they need. And because that was their *future*, they saw it as their role and responsibility to get as close as they could to that day, *now*. And that led them to sell whatever they could sell, to see to it that no one among them had to be in need or without resources. To the point that they were selling "land and houses" to make that happen. Like, who sells their house and says you know what I'm good for, I don't need this house or piece of land. Here, if this helps other followers of Jesus, if this helps people in the community who are in need, let's do that instead. This is the early Church practicing for heaven.

Now how cool would it be if this was the M.O. for us? What if no one in our church family had to go without a vehicle who needed one because we were like "oh, here I have a vehicle you can use." What if nobody went without resources they needed, because as soon as we noticed that happening, we just said "oh how much do you need? Here..." What if nobody had to go without counseling to work through difficult things in their life because their LifeGroup said "oh, you're having trouble paying for it? How much? Okay, we'll take care of it together." This is the heart of a generous community. So it's worth asking, how does one get to a point where they are doing this? Well ground zero is...

By God's Grace

So all we need to do to answer our question is check out what's right before verse 34. It says God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all...that there were no needy persons among them. God's grace in their lives was so powerfully at work in them that it enabled them to make sure everyone was taken care of. To the point where they didn't claim their possessions as their own but they shared everything. Not just some of their stuff, everything. Everything was on the table to be shared. They took our idea of fridge rights, where people have access to your fridge without asking, and said hold my beer,

I'll do you one better. If you come through you have house rights. If you really need it, anything in this house is up for grabs.

Now here's what's interesting. The Greek word for "grace" here in this passage (where it says "God's *grace* was so powerfully at work among them") is literally the Greek word "charis." As in, where we get the word "charity" that we use to mean giving away our money. So that verse in Acts *could* be translated, "the *generosity* of God was so powerfully at work among them that there were no needy persons among them." So notice that the focus in the Acts passage doesn't start with how awesome the early Christians were, or how awesome their generosity was. It starts with how the grace and generosity of **God** was at work within **them**. That's an important distinction.

And do you know where else that word pops up? One of the best passages on grace in all the bible. [Ephesians 2:8–9](#). It says this:

8 For it is by [what church fam?] grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

God's grace was given to us freely. He didn't have to show us any kind of grace. He could have left us in our sin, but instead was generous to us. And as followers of Jesus who believe that God was unbelievably generous to them, that is what should fuel us to be generous towards others. That's what should give us purpose and desire to be generous to others in and outside of our community.

But what exactly has God done so that we get to be this generous?

Well there are plenty of spots we can check out in the scriptures but let's check out [Romans 8:32](#)

He [meaning God] who did not spare his own Son [Jesus] but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

In the scriptures when sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, God took it upon himself to restore humanity and from then on the story pointed to a savior who would do just that. He would come down from heaven, live amongst us, teach us what heaven looks like, and then eventually die for our sins to be forgiven for eternity, so that we would be with God once again and motivate us to live as he lived. And we do that by bringing pieces of heaven to earth in a lot of different ways, but specifically through generosity.

Have you ever been in need of something? I remember when I was trying to make it on my own as a freelance designer and if you know anything about freelance artists, it's that money somehow is an elusive dream that we have, but in real life we spend hours upon hours doing incredible work for little to no money. Now just think I did that while also living in a house where I had to pay rent with all of my freelance money. I remember on a few occasions when freelance wasn't booming and I would be sweating bullets trying to figure out how to pay for rent. And by God's grace working in one of my roommates, he would be like, hey fam, we good this month. That was one of my first experiences of seeing a tangible picture of generosity in this way. Who pays for someone's rent when they also have rent due. And not just that, but doesn't hang it over their head or bring it up ever again. Who? Someone whom the grace of God was powerfully at work within...that's who. Someone who understood that they were recipients of God's incredible generosity, and therefore were invited into a God-like pattern of generosity.

Now if you've ever been in need, like truly in need, and someone does something for you that exceeds what you could ever imagine, the emotions that come with said generosity can range from being overjoyed to ugly tears streaming down your face. But you know what it also can do, it tends to soften your heart towards others and to look for opportunities to give as well. When you see God's grace on display in this way, it makes you also want to give in that way.

One of the joys about pastoring this church is that I get to stand up here and say that this type of heart is in our church family. Now just like anything we can continue to grow in all areas that move us closer to being like Jesus, but time and time again I see you guys giving generously. I've seen people sell their car so that when people in their LifeGroup were in need they could easily give. On a similar note, I've seen people buy cars for other people because the need arose. In my own LifeGroup we've had people pay for counseling time and time again because the need was there. We've shared our houses when people needed places to stay. And not just overnight but for weeks, months, and years on end. So we've seen God's grace powerfully at work in our church family. Because hear me say, this just doesn't happen. Maybe someone will drop a couple-a-dollars out of generosity, but to do it consistently is another thing. And not only have I seen the consistency in my own LifeGroup, I've heard about it in others. So I would love to thank the Spirit at work in you and also you for listening to the Spirit.

But how, practically, do we as followers of Jesus continue to stay this way? Well in no particular order, I think we need to **look out for pitfalls**, **remember the source**, and then **make it happen**. First up...

Look Out For Pitfalls

Like anything there will always be something that will impede you trying to bring heaven down to earth. Both our sinful natures and Satan are at war with God and for us we need to recognize that we will not naturally be generous people, unless by the grace of God, but realistically speaking we will need to fight against certain habits that may have been taught to us or something we picked up along the way. And two things that I think will get in the way of generosity for us specifically as Americans are Greed and Materialism.

Now we've talked about greed and materialism before in other sermons, so I won't harp too much on it, but these are two things that will slowly and surely eat away at our desire to do so. Greed is the belief that my quality of life is directly related to how much money I have." While "materialism is similar but with possessions: my quality of life is directly proportional to how much stuff and how much nice stuff I have. They both push us to rely on something outside of God to satisfy us.

Greed is when we hear about that job offer making a few K more than we make now, and convince ourselves that we will be miserable until we take it. Materialism is convincing ourselves that the reason we're not happy is because our house or our apartment isn't quite as cool as that other person. Greed is when our level of peace or anxiety is directly tied to the balance we see when we pull up our bank account. Materialism is when we look to a brand, or a store, or a purchase, to try to fix what is broken and hurting in our souls.

And here's where that comes from: I think deep down, we are discontent with what we have, because we're discontent with who we are. Let me say that one again, I think deep down, we are discontent with what we have, because we are discontent with who we are. And there is part of us that believes that buying and having more stuff will fix that discontentment. That it will somehow quiet that part of our brain. And hear me say, I think most of us would agree, buying new stuff feels good. It's like a drug. Especially if it's something you've had your eye on for a hot minute. "Retail therapy" is a real thing.

I remember growing up hearing the phrase, "when you look good, meaning the freshness of your clothes or shoes, then you will also feel good." That you will have this confidence and air about you. I mean it's the first day of class right. Let me roll up to school with my clean Air Force Ones on up in this place. Got my new Rick and Morty bookbag on. Maaaaaannnnnn you can't tell me noth'n. **While it's not an all the time thing, I do believe that for many of us, when we get something new, we feel like we are making ourselves new.** And Jesus would say to that: You got it partly right. We all need to be made new, yes. That feeling you are feeling is correct. But we are wrong in

thinking that money and possessions will accomplish that. We can't fix ourselves no matter how hard we try. No matter how fresh we look. No matter how cute or instagrammy our house looks. Fam I'm here to tell you only Jesus can make us new. Only he can give us life. Money and possessions, at best, are a cheap substitute.

As a church that gives generously and is looking to give more and more, we need to be watchful of greed and materialism in our lives. We need to give the people in our lives a window into our lives so they can spot whether this is a potential pattern in our lives. Because if you lean towards those two pitfalls I believe it will hinder your ability to give. Matter fact I know it will hinder your ability to give.

So what do we do once we've scanned our life for those pitfalls? We, #2...

Remember the Source

When you get paid, have you ever stopped to thank the Lord for his provision for you? Yah, me neither. I get that direct deposit and most times I don't even remember that I've gotten paid. I just trust that the money will be there. I work and therefore I get paid. America. Man. We got it made huh.

Let me tell you another freelance story. I remember when I didn't get that direct deposit life and I was always scrap'n for jobs and waiting on clients to send money. This was before Venmo was popular. I remember so many times that I would be praying for provision. I would be praying for clients and when the Lord provided I would be so thankful. It would help pay for any bills that I needed paid. Would provide food on the table. And other needs and even wants. God was generous to me in moments where I probably should have gotten a 9-5. This is a whack story but you know something, as I was writing this, I don't think I ever intentionally thought, because God blessed me I need to be a blessing to others. And now that I get that direct deposit I think the idea of not being thankful for provision can creep in alongside not remembering that we are blessed to be a blessing to others. Do I bless others and does the Holy Spirit remind me to bless others, sure, but proactively do I remember this. Not so much.

Anyone else feel any of that in the room? I think for many of us, we need to continually remember the source of our blessings. We need to soak in the scriptures. We need to be in prayer and remember that as followers of Jesus we are blessed to be a blessing. We are not blessed to keep our blessing. We are each richly blessed, some with money, some with time on our hands, others with resources, we are each blessed. And when we remember God's grace truly, his generosity in our lives, like the early church did, it will fuel you to...

Make it Happen

You know if you're coming through City Church we gonna get practical eventually. Just remembering the source will not be enough to fight against greed and materialism; there need to be some sort of action step to move away from it. If you're like "thank you so much God for everything you've given me, and I know I should give, but this Nintendo Switch is not gonna buy itself... When we remember how much the Lord has blessed us, when we remember his generosity, I think at some point you will need to actually act on what the Spirit is prompting you to do. So what are ways we can do that?

Budget...

For some of us in the room, we need to learn how to budget so we can know what we can actually give away and what we need to pay our bills. It's hard to be generous if you don't actually know what's coming in and out of your bank account. I know for me when I didn't budget, there would be this pressure of, can I actually give because I got this or that coming down the line. Whereas if you knew exactly what money was coming in and going out you would have way more flexibility and ease of mind to give to your heart's content.

and then Give

I believe one of the ways we can be generous to others is by giving back to the local church. Throughout the scriptures, and even in our passage, followers of Jesus have given back to the church. It said that the people in the church took the money from selling their land and houses and they gave it to the leaders of the church, and trusted them to use it and distribute it in a way that benefited the church and met specific needs within the church.

I think that can look several ways, one of them being giving 10% of what the Lord has given you back as a tithe. Again there are other sermons where we can talk on this more but if you are living off 100% of what God has given you and not giving something back that might not be a good look.

Another way to give might look like sharing the resources the Lord has given you. Maybe you have stuff at your house that can be borrowed pretty easily so maybe for you it's sharing said resource with people in need.

1 John specifically teaches us to do this when it comes to other followers of Jesus. Let's put that on the screen:

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Lastly, if you don't have money or feel like you don't have much money to make a dent (still be faithful and give even if it's 10 cents) but giving your time can be a huge asset to other people. Whether that's inside the fam or outside in regards to mission. We'll get into this in the next sermon but giving 10% of your time or more in many ways in our generation can be more sacrificial than giving away money.

Outro

So what is your next step in bringing heaven down when it comes to generosity? Do you need to reflect on God's grace for you. Do you need people in your life to speak gospel truth over your heart so it turns from a heart that doesn't lean towards generosity to one that does. Maybe you feel like you do give but maybe you could give a percentage more this year. You're living off 90% and giving 10%, so maybe you budget to live off 89% and give 11%. Some of you in the room are like, what's a budget fam. So maybe that's you, maybe for you to actually know what you are giving you need to budget for it so you can be a better steward of the resources the Lord has given you. Some of us needs to give more of our time away. We need to invest and disciple others in the room. We need to help babysit for a mom and or dad who hasn't had a night out in a long time. Wherever you are in this walk, my hope is that through it all you remember that the Lord has placed people around you to help you walk through this. All you need to do is ask. Take that first step and ask for help in this, especially if you don't know what next step you need to take in regards to generosity. And make no mistake about it, no matter how much you give, you can always grow more in generosity. Ask the Spirit to help guide you. Ask other followers of Jesus to help. Ask your LifeGroup to help. If you have the opportunity to continue to bring heaven down don't let that slip away.

Let's pray