

Advent Conspiracy: Love All

Philippians 2:1-11

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Jesus was always coming across people in great need. One time, when He was heading to Jerusalem and as He was crossing the border between Samaria and Galilee He came across ten men who had leprosy.¹ Leprosy was the AIDS of the first century and resulted in a person being total ostracized by neighbours, friends and even family.

As a result lepers were forced to fend for themselves outside the city as they awaited an agonizing and grotesque death.

Jesus had healed lepers before, and good news travels fast, so when these men recognized Him they respectfully kept their distance, but called out “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

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Not once did Jesus turn someone down who came to Him in need.

And so Jesus had pity and sent the ten to the priests, which was what lepers were supposed to do if they got better. And as they went they were all healed – all ten of them.

But the pivot in the story comes next and that is that one man – a Samaritan, and Samaritans didn’t get along with the Jews – when he saw he was cured, returned to praise God and throw himself at Jesus’ feet.

But where were the other nine?

While you wouldn’t imagine it possible, as quickly as their healing took place the other nine seem to have forgotten what Jesus had done and just got on with living as though they had never been lepers at all.

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If you have been with us over the last three weeks you know that we have been in a series called Advent Conspiracy. Advent Conspiracy was started in 2006 by three pastors who had been impacted by the fact that 2000 years ago Christmas changed the world as God hand delivered the gift of His presence to humanity – a gift that changed human history.

And as these pastors pondered the implications of this gift they wondered if Christmas still had the power change the world today. And they asked: How might the world be different if Christians in North America, the richest people in the world, remembered what God had done for them and in thankfulness turned the blessings they’d received over to those around them? And the Conspiracy

¹ Luke 17:11-19

was born, a plot to counter-culturally oppose the blatant, selfish, consumeristic gluttony that has become central to Christmas in Canada, and instead act out the generosity of God by giving ourselves like He gave Christ.

On the first Sunday of Advent we looked at Mary and her choice to worship fully in spite of the fact that it cost her everything. Mary was able to do this because she recognized that **the greatest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with God in what He is doing**, and she recognized this blessing was worth way more than social acceptance.

Next we looked at the story Jesus told of the man who built bigger barns to hold all his stuff, and we saw that the only difference between him and most North Americans is that perhaps we have more stuff and bigger barns. But while the world around us believes “he who dies with the most toys wins”, we saw that the biblical precedent is for us to spend less on ourselves, and even save less for our futures in order to free ourselves up to be rich towards God and **partner with Him in what He is doing**.

And then last week we looked at Joseph who, like Mary, put his entire life on hold to become Jesus’ step dad. This decision cost him everything, even such that while Mary has been considered blessed by all generations Joseph disappeared into obscurity after Jesus’ childhood.

That’s a huge sacrifice and Joseph was only able to make it because he got a glimpse of the Gospel, the good news that God was coming to live among humanity and save us from sin. And Joseph realized that what was being given was so great that he didn’t need to seek his own glory, he could give his life to partner with God in what He was doing.

And today we are in the final week before Christmas and the last sermon in this series and we are going to draw everything together under the theme “Love All”. Ultimately, the greatest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with God in what He is doing, and that means loving all like He does.

Come with me to Philippians chapter 2, to a text we have referred to in each of our three previous sermons. This text is one of my favorites because in it we are walked through what following Jesus is all about in 11 verses. Indecently I preached on this text in January so along with it being a conclusion to this series it is also a book end to everything we’ve talked about this year.

Here is the progression we are going to see today:

God gave up His riches => out of love for the poor => which made the poor rich => so that we could give up our riches => out of love for the poor => pointing them towards the riches of Christ.

This is the Gospel, this is what Christmas is all about, this is what it means to be a Christian, and this is what we see in this text.

So look with me first at verse 5, which is the introduction to one of the greatest Christ-hymns in the Bible, as we get a picture of **God giving up His riches =>**

[Read Philippians 2:5-7a]

In these couple verses we are taken up to heaven and back in time to what theologians call “the pre-existent glory of Christ.”

What this means is that before humanity needed a Saviour, before sin entered the picture, even before the world began Jesus was in very nature God – in other words Jesus shared God’s essence, everything that God was Jesus was.

The disciple John refers to Jesus as the Word and tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

Jesus held all the glory and riches and majesty and wealth of God in His hand – there was nothing He didn’t have or own, and there is nothing that has come into existence without Him.

That is a picture of worth and wealth beyond measure. And all of this was at Jesus’ disposal.

And so when sin entered the picture and humanity fell and the relationship between Creator and creature was separated by the infinite space between perfection and imperfection the only hope for humanity was that the Word would cross that chasm in grace. But would He? Why would He do that?

Everything in the universe held its breath as Jesus considered whether the sacrifice of the incarnation was going to be worth it – whether Christmas would happen.

And verse 6 tells us what Jesus concluded, and that was that equality with God was not something He needed to “grasp” at or use to His own advantage.

While Jesus was equal with God in every way, He decided that this didn’t mean He was going to spend His resources on Himself. Instead Jesus decided that having all the resources of God at His disposal meant that He could make Himself nothing.

And this action that Jesus did separates Christianity from every other world religion. No other god, not Zeus or Shiva or Allah ever gave up what was rightfully theirs to become nothing for us.

The hymn goes on. Let's pick up at verse 7

[Read Philippians 2:7-8]

This is what God did instead of sitting back and enjoying the wealth of who He was. God gave up His riches, and He did this **Out of love for the poor =>**

When God became a man He became a servant – verse 7 says He took the “very nature” of a servant. Which is the same word used in verse 6 where it says Jesus was in the “very nature God.”

So Jesus didn't just look like a servant, nor did He just do what a servant does; Jesus actually has the *essence* of a servant.

All Christians of all time have agreed that Jesus was both God and man; this is one of the non-debatable, fundamental truths of the faith. But the picture here isn't just that God became man but that God became servant – and that is absolutely mind-numbing to fathom.

The richest being in the universe, making Bill Gates look like a pauper, became as poor as possible. From the heights of heaven to the bottom of the social ladder, this is the journey that Jesus took at Christmas 2000 years ago.

But why did Jesus become poor? Why not come as a king or a powerful warrior, or really why not just come as God and cause everyone to fall at His feet like He deserves? The answer we get throughout Scripture is that by becoming a poor man God showed that He loves all, even the poor – perhaps especially the poor. Isaiah the prophet wrote:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion (Isaiah 61:1-3)

It is the poor, the broken hearted, the captives, the prisoners and those who mourn who get the good news from God. God goes out of His way to show His love to the poor.

Elsewhere we read:

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. (Psalm 140:12)

And

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. (Isaiah 25:4)

And these are only a few of many texts I could have chosen. Really it is safe to say that if you read the Bible you will see that God loves the poor in a special way.

Author Scott Bessenecher says “the very first statement that Jesus ever voiced about His concern for the poor... was when He cried out as one of them - eyes tight, mouth open wide, wailing, kicking. It was one of the most profound acts of solidarity with the poor He could make. When God voted with His birth, He voted for the poor.²

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God loves the poor.

But when God reaches down in love He never leaves us where He finds us.

God gave up His riches => out of love for the poor => which made the poor rich =>

Jesus' brother James wrote:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?
(James 2:5)

And Jesus says:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

Now if you've been sleeping wake up for this next part because it is really important. If you have received salvation by grace through faith you have done it from a position of spiritual poverty. You recognized your poverty; you recognized you had nothing to give, and you came to Christ seeking underserved mercy and grace.

² Scott Bessenecker “The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 2006), 59-60

You see there will be no one in heaven who came to Jesus to do Him a favor. There will be no one in heaven who came to Jesus but was a good person who didn't really need Him to save them from their sin. There will be no one in heaven who tacked Jesus on to their already good life in order to take them from 80% saved to 100% saved.

The only people who will be with Jesus in heaven are those who recognize that in His grace Jesus has given them something they do not deserve; Jesus came to them when they were dead in their sins, totally depraved, and totally in rebellion to God. And Jesus, by His grace forgave their sin and covered them with His righteousness. If you are saved today it is because you recognized you were poor and needed God.

And ultimately when the Bible talks about God's love for the poor it is the poor in spirit that it is talking about. But there is a connection between the spiritually poor and the financially poor and that is that those without the means to take care of themselves are prone to recognizing they need God. The rich can be poor in spirit too, but the Bible says it is way harder for us because we are prone to thinking we can take care of ourselves – actually the Bible says it is impossible without grace.

If you are saved today it is because you recognize your spiritual poverty before God. But if you are saved your poverty has been turned to wealth. Friends, if you have Jesus you are rich!

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Now throughout this series we have been talking about how we in North America are the richest people in the world – by this we mean not spiritually rich, but financially rich. The reality is that if your household brings in \$1000 a month, which is not very much by Canadian standards, you are richer than 90% of everyone on earth. And if you bring in \$50,000 a year you have joined Bill Gates among the richest 1% of people alive. To say the people sitting here have a lot of money is a gross understatement.

And yet most of us don't feel rich. And to a large part that is due to all the advertising we consume that tells us what we don't have as well as the fact that instead of giving our money away – which would remind us how rich we are – we spend it on ourselves as soon as we get it, or often sooner than we get it. Or we feel compelled to stockpile it for when we retire.

But when we bemoan our financial burdens the rest of the world looks at us with incredulous eyes and can't believe it.

Have you every thrown out food you found in the back of your refrigerator? Have you every woken up and realized you left the lights on in the basement all night? Has your toilet ever run for hours without anyone noticing or going without water?

The vast majority of people alive would answer “no” to all those questions.
Friend, we are financially rich!

But many of us here are especially rich because we have both financial riches and spiritual riches. But as we have seen over the last 3 weeks all our riches, financial and spiritual, are not blessings for us to enjoy, they are responsibilities for us to invest partnering with God in what He is doing.

God made us rich **so that we could give up our riches =>**

Look back with me at Philippians 2 starting in verse 1.

[Read Philippians 2:1-2]

Here Paul says, “Are you are someone who is thankful that you’ve been united with Christ, are you are comforted by the love you have received from Him, is the Holy Spirit’s tenderness and compassion at work within you – in other words, are you are someone who understands how much God has given you?”

If your answer is “yes” then act out your thankfulness to the people around you: be like-minded, have the same love and be in one spirit.

In the story of the 10 lepers all ten were happy with the healing they received, but only one man was thankful.

And he proved his thankfulness by returning to Jesus and proclaiming praise to God. And in doing this He partnered with what Jesus was about by expanding God’s glory – he worshipped fully by giving up his pride and falling at Jesus’ feet.

In the same way if we are thankful for what we have received we must give away what we’ve been given to partner with what God is doing.

Thankfulness isn’t something mental, it isn’t something we say or think; it is something we prove by the way we treat those around us.

Acts tells us this is the way the early church lived:

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...
And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. (Acts 4:32-34)

The evidence of thankfulness is generosity. But it isn’t just generosity towards each other, verse five says it is generosity inline with the mindset of Christ. And Jesus gave the gift of His presence to people who had not aligned themselves with Him.

The greatest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with God in what He is doing. And that means that we do what Jesus did, we worship fully, and we do that by not claiming any of our possessions are our own, and instead giving to the needs around us.

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God gave up His riches => out of love for the poor => which made the poor rich => so that we could give up our riches => out of love for the poor =>

Throughout this series and as I was looking at this text this week I have to confess that I have been really convicted that I have not loved the poor like God does.

I'm judgmental, I think I'm superior, and I prove this by restricting my help to those I determine deserved it. Do you know what I'm talking about?... But that's not the way God saved me. He didn't wait until I got my life together to give up the riches of heaven and put on skin.

Romans tells us:

God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And so I've been praying "God put your heart in me. Don't leave me to my own devices, because on my own I've proved that I can grow complacent. Like the nine lepers I can take what You've given me and get on with my life like I wasn't poor to start with. Don't leave me here. Instead break my heart with the things that break Yours. Cause me to love who and what and where You love. Help me to look like Jesus."

How about you? Where do you find yourself this Christmas? Have you been touched by the extreme generosity of God's gift of presence? And has this touch resulted in a recognition that what you have is not your own?

God gave up His riches => out of love for the poor => which made the poor rich => so that we could give up our riches => out of love for the poor => pointing them towards the riches of Christ.

The final stanza of the hymn in Philippians 2 starts in verse 9. Let's pick up there.

[Read Philippians 2:9-11]

The biggest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with God in what He is doing. That means expanding His kingdom here on earth, and ultimately that means exalting Christ and bringing glory to the Father as we read here.

Last week we talked about how non-believers can do good things – they can give billions – but they can't give in a way that hurts because they have no hope beyond this life. In contrast to that Christians are called to give sacrificially because God gave sacrificially in Christ. And when we give this way we point to a reality beyond the world we see with our eyes. We point to the riches of the glory of Christ.

Friends, ultimately every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, but God wants the wicked to repent so He can share Himself with them. And when we want what He wants we give up our resources, like He gave up His, to accomplish this.

2000 years ago God gave humanity a gift that flipped the world right side up for the first time since creation. And we are the people who have received this, we've had the enormous debt of our sins forgiven and we enjoy the freedom of approaching Heaven's throne in confidence.

And the evidence that this has happened is that we thankfully worship fully, spend less on ourselves and our future; give more to those in need; and do this because Christ has put His heart within us and we love all like He does.

Friends, there is a 2000 year old conspiracy powered by God's gift of presence. And the world today is still changing because of it – because Christians are seeing afresh that partnering with God in what He is doing is worth investing what we've been given. Are you in?