

Advent Conspiracy: Give More

Matthew 1:18-25

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As you know, while Santa Claus represents the secularization of Christmas today, the jolly elf had a Christian origin. In 270 AD Nikolaos of Myra was born to wealthy parents. Unfortunately when Nikolaos was only a child, both his parents were killed by a plague that decimated Rome and he went to live with his uncle who was the Bishop of Patara – in what is modern day Turkey.

While Nikolaos was born to fortune, over the years he gave everything he owned to the poor and to other children orphaned by the plagues. He literally lowered himself from the position of his birthright, becoming the servant of the oppressed around him, ultimately he lived his life mirroring Christ who:

though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Philippians 2:6-7 ESV)

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Our series this Christmas has been following the Advent Conspiracy theme. Advent Conspiracy started in 2006 and in the years since has spread to thousands of churches across the States and Canada. The idea behind it is that 2000 years ago God put on skin and scarified everything to give us the gift of His presence. And Advent Conspiracy says that like Nikolaos, because Christ lives in us, we too can transform the world today by giving of ourselves to those God has placed around us.

Two weeks ago we set the foundation by saying that Advent is about receiving God's gift and responding by worshipping fully. And our model for this was Mary who realized that, in spite of what it was going to cost her, **the biggest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with what God is doing** – and partnering with God in what He is doing is what it means to live a life of worship.

Then last week we looked at the rich man who built bigger barns to store his stuff and our tendency in North America to be either spenders or savers. Here we saw that **spending less on ourselves, and even storing less for our future enables us to partner with what God is doing by freeing us up to be rich towards God.**

And today our topic is the other side of the same coin and we are going to look at what it means to give more. And my thesis today is that **when Christians give sacrificially it is the evidence that we have partnered with God in what He is doing.**

If you have your Bibles please open them to Matthew chapter 1, and we are going to look at the words of the angel to Joseph: Matthew chapter 1 beginning in verse 18.

[Read Matthew 1:18-19]

Mary wasn't the only one whose life was "inconvenienced" by what God was doing. When God causes His Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in Heaven He doesn't ask us whether His plans are acceptable or not, He invites us to participate. And He does this because He knows the biggest blessing anyone can have is the opportunity to partner with Him in what He is doing, and He wants to extend this blessing to us.

But He also knows that unless we sacrifice to be part of what He is doing we will not understand what a blessing it is.

And so, while partnering with God gains us the infinite reward of getting God, it costs everything we have. It means taking up our crosses and following Jesus, forsaking our kingdoms to expand His, putting the desires of our flesh second, or crucifying them, and instead putting His will first in our lives.

And quite frankly all that seems a bit crazy! Who would pay that much? Who would lose themselves to follow Jesus?

The short answer is "no one – no one who hasn't received the power of the Gospel."

And the Gospel is what Joseph encounters face to face in this story. But here we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In verses 18 and 19 Joseph's kingdom comes crashing into conflict with God's kingdom. Of course Joseph isn't aware that this is what is going on which is why he starts out acting very normally. Joseph is a good guy. The text tells us he is both compassionate and law abiding. And that means that while he can't conceive of marrying a woman who had just cheated on him – who would – he plans to divorce her quietly rather than bring her infidelity to public knowledge.

Now here I should note a cultural difference between life in the first century and life in modern Canada.

Unlike today, in the first century engagement was the point in which a marriage became legal. At betrothal the dowry would be exchanged and the wedding confirmed. And so, while the couple would not live together or consummate their marriage for around a year, the only way out of a betrothal was divorce.

And divorce was a big deal, at least for the woman, and especially if infidelity was in question.

A divorced woman would likely never marry because she would be considered “damaged goods”. Nor would she be allowed back into her parents’ house because of the shame associated with her actions. So divorce meant a woman was caught between being refused by her husband’s family and rejected by her own. Divorce meant she was alone.

And being on your own as a woman in the first century was a death sentence. Without the social networks that we enjoy today the only alternative to starvation was prostitution – and that was best case scenario. On the other hand if a woman’s infidelity was exposed publically it meant death by stoning at the hands of her own family.

And taking all this into consideration Joseph decides to divorce her quietly. He’s not going to take her to be his wife, but he’s willing to give her the fighting chance at life as a prostitute. And that was generous on his part because it could come back to bite him.

People who haven’t encountered the Gospel can be generous. They can act charitably, they can be kind – within reason.

You may have heard of “The Giving Pledge” set up by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. It started in 2010 with just the two of them pledging to give away most of their money to charity. But it changed as they decided to go public with their plans and invite other billionaires to join the pledge. I was on their web page this week and found that 122 billionaires have pledged to give over half of their resources to charity over the course of their lives or at their death. That’s a lot of money going towards good things because of Bill and Warren and their billionaire buddies.

Now of course giving away half of \$72 billion dollars – which is what Gates is worth¹ – isn’t going to put him in the poor house, but the point here is that the vast majority of these billionaires are not Christians – specifically Gates and Buffett do not profess to follow Jesus, and yet they are using their resources to do good things.

Non-Christians can do good things. People who haven’t encountered God’s self-revelation in Jesus can be generous and charitable but their goodness and charity is always within reason. And this is where Joseph is at in this story. He is a good guy who is planning on acting within reason – he still is going to divorce Mary – but he will do it in the least hurtful way he can think of.

And then Joseph encounters the Gospel. Let’s continue, picking up in verse 20.

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/profile/bill-gates/> (Accessed Dec 14, 2013)

[Read Matthew 1:20-25]

Two verses earlier the nice guy, Joseph, was considering the alternatives of having Mary stoned to death by her family or exiled to a life of prostitution, and now he takes her home to be his wife and raises Jesus as his own son.

Something happened here. Something insanely huge happened here that turned Joseph's world right side up. What was it?

It wasn't just that an angel appeared to him in a dream – that could have been the result of too much pizza before bed. It was because of what that angel said that Joseph responded like he did. And we get that message in verses 21-23.

[Read Matthew 1:21-23]

Immanuel happened – God with us! Christians call this “the incarnation” and it is the absolutely scandalous and unbelievable idea that God would become one of us. He would put on skin to meet us where we are – face to face.

And the power of this message changed Joseph from thinking compassion meant leaving Mary to a life of prostitution to joyfully taking her home as his wife.

So what happened? The Gospel happened. The good news that God was making a way for sinners like us, sinners like Joseph, to appear before God as holy happened.

And when people get the Gospel it changes them. And Joseph got this.

Now, to be sure Joseph didn't understand how the whole story would pan out, but he got that God was on the move and that God's kingdom was coming close – so close he was actually going to be able to kiss It. And the result was Joseph gave up his own plans and willingly submitted to becoming Jesus' step dad.

Ok, now what makes this move any different from generosity like what Bill Gates and Warren Buffett started?

The difference, very simply, is that Joseph's action meant God's plan had become number one while his own plans no longer mattered. The giving pledge, as noble as it is, only amounts to very rich people giving a portion of their richness away – billions to be sure, but God owns it all and He's not impressed with billions.

In Luke we read:

As Jesus looked up, He saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. “Truly I tell you,” He said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4)

Jesus is only impressed when our giving reflects His, and that kind of giving only happens when we understand what He gave. But when people understand what God has given them they give away anything to partner with what He is doing.

So what exactly did Joseph give away when he encountered the Gospel?

Ultimately, like Mary, Joseph chose partnering with God in what He was doing above social and even family acceptance. Joseph would have lived scorned for bringing this kind of woman home.

In fact, only a few months later when Joseph found himself required by Rome to do just that – to bring Mary home to Bethlehem – he experienced this rejection first hand as no one would give him a place to stay.

Two years ago we looked in depth at the cultural context surrounding the idea that there was “no room in the inn” for Mary and Joseph. So you may remember how we saw that while inns existed in the first century they weren’t what we think of today – they were public party-houses along the road where travelers could avoid being eaten by wild animals, but not of places people would stay if they actually arrived at their destination like Mary and Joseph had. Instead we saw how the word “inn” can also be translated “guest room” which is much more likely.

In Palestinian cultures today, like Israelite culture then, every family had a guest room available for people to stay in – usually situated on top their flat roofed houses. And culture stipulated that no one was allowed to turn away guests, especially if they were family. And yet, despite the fact Bethlehem was Joseph’s home town none of these rooms were available.

Now I grew up thinking that the reason there was no room for them was because they showed up late, but the text doesn’t actually say that – in fact it implies that they had been in Bethlehem some time before Jesus was actually born. Luke tells us:

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born (Luke 2:6)

That’s very different from “The night they arrived Mary was in labour and Jesus was born.” That’s the way our pageants depict it, but that’s not what the text says. It wasn’t because they showed up late that they were excluded, it was because Joseph’s family would have nothing to do with them that they were excluded.

Joseph gave up his family to become Jesus' step dad. That's the price he paid. And the only reason he didn't consider this price too great was because he had encountered the Gospel.

This is what happens when people encounter the Gospel. When people see how much God gave for them they can't help but give in return. The gift of God's presence, God's forgiveness and God's acceptance results in generosity from everyone who receives it. And that's why **when Christians give sacrificially it is the evidence that we have partnered with God in what He is doing.**

Let me say this the opposite way. Had Joseph told the angel, I get what God is trying to do here, but I'm not interested in being a part of it – if he had refused to pay the price, to give up his plans in order to partner with God, it would have been evidence that he didn't really understand what God was doing.

But that's not what happened, Joseph got it and so he gave. And this is what always happens when people get the Gospel.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells an interesting story about someone who thought they got the Gospel but actually hadn't. He said:

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. (Jesus often talked about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven and when He did this He was talking about what the Gospel looked like.² Jesus goes on...) As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him (that's like a billion dollars). Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. (the cultural reality was that if you fell into debt with someone they could come and have you jailed or possibly even killed or enslave you and your family – and the result was that for generations one family would end up serving another because of the debt their father or grandfather racked up.)

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' (Here the servant is asking for the master's patience to just enslave his family rather than kill them. But look what the master does.) The servant's master took pity on him (the word 'pity' means he felt gut churning compassion – and so he), canceled the debt and let him go. (Now at this point everyone Jesus was talking to was hooked – this was not what they were expecting – what kind of master would do this. But as it turns out the story isn't about the master's generosity, it is about the servant's lack of understanding about what has just happened. The story continues).

² See Mark 1:14 for the words "Gospel" and "Kingdom of God" being used interchangeably.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins (that’s like a bag full of dimes). He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ (The same words he had used).

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. (now he was entitled to do this by law, but the sheer ridiculousness of the situation was blatantly obvious. If this guy understood the debt that he had been forgiven then he would not be acting this way. Instead, his actions prove that he has no idea what his master had done for him. And so the story continues and you know how it ends).

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. (Matthew 18:23-34)

And Jesus says this story is what the kingdom of heaven is like – this is what the Gospel looks like when it is encountered. Anyone who receives what God has done for them, and turns around and doesn’t treat the people God has placed around them with generous grace, hasn’t actually understood what God did for them. Alternatively, anyone who gets what God has done for them gives like God gave.

This is the Gospel – God gave humanity the gift of His presence, and this gift was one He hand delivered. And the result of this gift is that sinners like you and me can commune with God – we can come into His presence now; we can approach the very throne of God in confidence, not because we are righteous, but because Jesus is righteous and His righteousness covers us. Friends that is the good news, that is the Gospel.

And because Christians have received this they have changed the world with their giving in a way Bill Gates and his billionaire buddies can’t touch.

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I’m not certain that this is how St. Nikolaos’ parent’s died, but we know that around when he was born two major plagues swept through Rome killing large portions of the population – cities were hit particularly hard. And while everyone else was fleeing, forsaking their sick family members to save their lives,

thousands of Christians stayed behind to care for the sick because Jesus told them to love their neighbours. And they did this in spite of the fact that it cost most of them their lives.³

But because they gave like Jesus had the Roman empire was flipped right side up, and by the time Constantine came to power in 306AD the few thousand Christians that the Apostles converted had grown to over 6 million because no one could deny that their giving was out of this world.

When Christians give sacrificially it is the evidence that they have partnered with what God is doing. So what does it mean to give like God gave?

While there is much that could be said here I just want to bring out one idea, and that is that giving like God means partnering with Him in sacrifice.

When Christ came to earth He gave up the extremes of wealth – which is a gross understatement – to embrace humanity's poverty. He could have come to earth as a king or a wealthy business man, but he chose to be born in a manger, the son of a peasant carpenter.

But Jesus' birth-means were only the beginning of His sacrifice – from here He used His power not for His own pleasure, but to heal the sick, give sight to the blind and raise the dead. Jesus said:

The Son of Man came not to be served but to be a servant – to offer His life as a ransom for others. (Mark 10:45 TVNT)

And of course this service extended to the point that Jesus took our place on the cross dying for the sins we have committed, taking the punishment we rightfully deserve, and giving us His own righteousness so that now when God looks at those who have chosen to follow Him He sees Jesus and receives us.

So giving like God gave means realizing that the purpose of our lives and the wealth we've been lent is not for our comfort, but to be used to impact the world around us for Christ and His kingdom.

So practically, how much are we supposed to give in order to give like Jesus gave?

C.S. Lewis, one of my favorite theologians and the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our

³ See Rodney Stark's "The Rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal, Jesus movement became the dominant religious force." (San Francisco: Harper Collins Pub), 1997.

expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.⁴

This is a radical thing to say. It is something well beyond what Gates and Buffet challenged each other or the Giving Pledge group to do. No one in their right mind gives so much it hurts them. And yet people who have been touched by the Gospel, who understand what God gave to save them, give like this every day. And **their sacrifice giving is the evidence that they have partnered with what God is doing.**

Friends, is this where you are at today? Most of us are generous people, but is your generosity similar to Bill Gate's and Warren Buffett who give out of their wealth? Or is your generosity other worldly, like Joseph's or Nikolaos' who saw the glory of what God had done for them and considered everything they had nothing in comparison to partnering with what God was doing.

Each week I've highlighted one potential opportunity to give and this week I'd like to draw your attention not to the ends of the earth, but to our own doorstep. Most of you know about the Crisis Pregnancy Centre here in town and the work they do supporting young moms and working to keep unwanted pregnancies from being aborted.

As it stands there are about 30 abortions to every 100 babies born in Canada. That totals around 100,000 a year – about 300 a day. On top of this, while most abortions in Canada happen during the first trimester, Canada is one of the only developed countries in the world to have no laws restricting abortions so it is legal for babies to be aborted up to the day they are born.⁵

The Crisis Pregnancy Centre works to help educate women to the alternatives to abortion as well as support them in making this choice. Why not give more this Christmas by partnering with the Crisis Pregnancy Centre to save the lives of thousands of unborn children, hundreds of whom come from this city.

Two thousand years ago Christmas transformed the world as God gave the gift of His presence to humanity. There is a conspiracy aloft for Christians to use Christmas to flip the world right side up again. Are you in?

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 86.

⁵ Stats for this paragraph come from the University of Ottawa website http://www.med.uottawa.ca/sim/data/Abortion_e.htm and the National Post <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/12/07/graphic-abortion-in-canada-almost-100000-documented-terminations-in-2009/> (both accessed Dec 13, 2013)