

Why Are We Here? Practice Extravagant Generosity

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Good morning! I want you guys to note the contrast that is Pastor John and I this morning. He all but skipped up here and skipped down! And I'm pretty sure he was saying, "All I have to do is the announcements!" Every Sunday all I have to do is the announcements, and I'm thinking, "When will I get to preach?" And here I am on my Sunday to preach and I'm going, "Oh Lord, what have I got myself into?"

This morning we're going to be in Luke, chapter 21, verses 1 through 6. Today's sermon is the last in a series entitled: Why Are We Here? We learned that we are here to practice radical hospitality. We learned that we are here to practice passionate worship. We learned that we are here to make disciples. We learned that we are here to practice risk-taking service and missions. And today we're going to look at extravagant generosity. And what we're going to find is that extravagant giving isn't a percentage, but it's a paradigm. Please stand with me, if you can, as we read from God's Word: Luke 21, verses 1 through 6.

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on."

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

I was 24 years old when I went to the Police Academy in Oregon State. I had already been to Basic Training for the Army. I had already done my ROTC Officer Training. And to be honest, I was not excited about having to go to another training where somebody was going to inspect the corners of my bed! I had been sent by the Stanfield Police Department, a little tiny police department just south of Hermiston. And if you know anything about it, you will know that it has the reputation of a speed trap. The judge there was actually my counselor at Community College. I got two tickets there while he was my counselor, and I had to stand in front of him both times. And that reputation was known at the Academy even before I got there, and I embraced it. We had to write the paperwork for everything that we did. If we were learning shooting, we had to do "Use of Force" reports. If we were learning how to drive our police cars and we crashed, we had to do crash reports. And every single time, I made sure that my report started with the most minor traffic infractions I could find. And while that was easy in some cases, it was challenging in others. My evaluators would get the report and say, "So, let me understand this, Stanfield. You were in the bank, wrestling with a bank robber, because his license plate had expired, and he drove through the teller window?" "That is how it started. Absolutely!" But it was rough training. Every morning we were up, and we were doing physical training. Every evening we were up late at night studying. And two of the most challenging tests were the traffic laws and the criminal law tests. It turns out if you're going to take action as a police officer, you have to know the letter of the law so that you can articulate why it was, and why it is, what it is that you're doing. And we

were focused. And every day we would get closer as a class, and they would say, "Stanfield, way to go!" "Nice job. Stanfield!" "Stanfield, are you going to be in our study group tonight?" I'd say, "Yep. Yes, I will."

Did I mention that simultaneously I was trying to get the attention of the young lady that I was convinced I was going to marry? She wanted nothing to do with a police officer, and she wanted nothing to do with a part-time soldier. So, I was working hard just to get her to notice me. The weekend just before our criminal law test, they gave us the weekend to prepare. They tested us on Monday so that we could have the weekend to prepare. And the weekend just before the criminal law test I had managed to convince this young lady to go to a movie. Did I also mention that she was five-and-a-half hours from the police academy? I don't know how I pulled it off, but I convinced her, and she agreed to squeeze me in on Sunday night. As I was leaving the campus, a couple of friends caught me, and one of them said, "Stanfield, do you know what you are doing? We have a big test on Monday!" Another contributed, "He has to go. Haven't you heard? He has it bad for this girl!" I replied, "Of course I know what I'm doing. I've got this!" So, I packed up my stuff and made the drive. Sunday rolled around and, as the time approached for the movie, I made the phone call. No joy. It turned out several of her high school girlfriends were in town and they were going to be going out for ice cream. She hadn't seen them in years. Surely I would understand. In her defense, she had already informed me that we were just going to be friends. But I was discouraged, to say the least. It was late by the time I rolled back onto campus. And that's not accurate. In fact, I had stopped at a friend's house along the way, and it would be more accurate to say it was early when I rolled in. My friends met me on their way to class and they could tell right away that the weekend had not gone the way I had hoped. "Oh, Stanfield, you look like a wreck. We had better get you some coffee. The first thing we need to do is get you through that test."

Have you ever loved someone so much there wasn't anything you wouldn't do to get that person's attention? Have you ever wanted to be loved that much? The reality is these kinds of stories, stories of extravagant demonstrations of love, are so common. Epics, poems, and movies have been written and made about them. They have sparked the love of lifetimes, and even on occasion been the cause of war and bloodshed. If you haven't been lucky to be the object of one, or driven mad by the necessity to demonstrate one, then chances are you are still longing for this kind of love to be lavished on you. Extravagant love and extravagant giving are so synonymous as to be indistinguishable.

Our passage is set against the backdrop of Jesus's triumphal entry in which Jesus enters Jerusalem as a king. Almost immediately his authority is challenged by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the city in the temple. "What gives you the right to the challenge and who do you think you are?" Jesus responds with the parable of the wicked tenants, in which he implies that he is none other than the son of the man who planted the very vineyard he was talking about. The weighty implication, when taken in its full conclusion, is that Jesus is claiming to be none other than the Son of God, the expected Messiah. In turn, the Pharisees step up with another challenge, followed by the Sadducees. The Pharisees would test Jesus's loyalty to Israel, and the Sadducees would test his understanding of the resurrection. It's a blow-by-blow battle between the Son of God and the religious authorities of that day, in which their misunderstanding of who the Messiah was would become evident. In both cases, Jesus rebuked their understanding of the Scriptures to remind them that God is both higher and set apart

from Rome, and that the eternal resurrection is real. Just before warning his listeners to beware of the religious leaders of his day, he asks them plainly about their understanding of the Messiah to come. Jesus reminds them that the Messiah, the expected Son of David, would be called "Lord" by that very same David. He was and is and is to come, adding additional weight to the already weighty implications of Jesus's arguments. Jesus, the expected Messiah, was claiming to be the very God involved in creation. He finishes his rebuke by warning the people and telling them not to be like the scribes, the scribes who devour widows and then conceal their unrighteousness in public displays of sanctity.

At this moment, as if on cue, Jesus looks up and sees one of those very widows whom the scribes were devouring. She was placing two small copper coins into the offering box, two leptons. And, depending on your translation, you're going to find the widow giving two copper coins, two small copper coins, two mites, two leptons, and in some cases, in an attempt to bring it into our own vernacular, two pennies. And what can a penny really buy? Even if she gave only one of her two pennies, what could the remaining penny really buy? She might as well put in both pennies, because the two pennies can't buy anything useful. But that's not what's happening here. The lepton was a very small copper or brass coin equal to half a quadrans or an eighth of an assarian. In reality, what this lepton equaled was one 128th of a day's wage. According to today's minimum wage, the lepton would be worth 94 cents or about one dollar. According to the median individual income of Richland, that same lepton would be worth a dollar and a quarter. But it is significant because this widow then could have given one of her coins to the temple, and with the other she could buy a corndog, a hostess fruit pie, or some finger sticks. Now, when I was first putting this sermon together, those came to my mind because I was driving my daughter out past some places where I used to go duck, pheasant and quail hunting with my dad. And I knew for lunch on a duck and quail and pheasant day, I was going to get either a corndog or a hostess fruit pie or some finger sticks, and so it was on my mind when I was writing my sermon. But when I was a poor college student, McDonald's put their cheeseburgers on sale for a quarter each. So, we used to buy as many as we could afford and then freeze them, because we were poor. This widow could buy four or five of those cheeseburgers. Also, while I was a poor college student, I once found acorn squash for ten cents each. My roommate and I got really tired of acorn squash, but we were poor. That's ten or twelve acorn squashes for this widow.

My point is: We need to understand that there was some purchasing power in these two copper coins, not a lot by any stretch of the imagination, but more than two of today's pennies. It would have been reasonable for this widow to give one and then use the purchasing power of the other to improve her situation, however remote. And I might even point out that if she gave one lepton and then kept the other, she was still well above the ten percent tithing requirement. This seems a very reasonable course of action. So why didn't she do that? Well, it turns out the answer is in the Pharisaic devouring of the widows. This was in fact a widow that was in the process of being devoured by the Pharisees. The treasury or offering box of that day wasn't the actual Treasury where they kept the money. It's not unlike the giving boxes that we have out in our Sanctuary. That's not where we keep the money, everyone! We move it from there to somewhere else, and this was what was going on in this location. Where the widow was giving the money was not where the money was stored. And because it cost to move the money from where it was being given to where it was being stored, the Pharisees deemed that one lepton wasn't worth it. Their own law and their own tradition

required that you give more than one lepton. Imagine that! This woman could not put one coin in because, even though it would be handled with the rest of the cash, it was considered not worth moving. According to the Pharisaic law of the time, this poor widow was not allowed to give one copper coin. She was left with the option of giving everything or giving nothing.

So, what does that tell us about extravagant giving? It tells us three specific things: An extravagant gift is a gift that goes against justification. You know that young man who made the five-hour, one-way trip on the hope of a date with the young lady that he was convinced he was going to marry? Do you know that that young man could have made a very convincing argument that it would have been better to stay and prepare for that test? But he could not be stopped! I wonder why? (That's rhetorical, so I'm glad some of you laughed. Because it should be obvious, right?) Likewise, this poor widow could make a very reasonable argument against not giving a hundred percent of her income or even fifty percent of her income. She could have made a reasonable argument that she needed it. An extravagant gift is a gift that is not only unwarranted, but a strong argument against giving the gift at all could be made. Number two: An extravagant gift is a gift that reveals... (And hold on, before I reveal what it reveals. These last two are so close, in the last week I've switched them about seven times in the order that I want to give them to you. Keep that in mind!) An extravagant gift is the gift that reveals the heart of the giver. That young man who made the five-hour, one-way trip on the hope of a date with that young lady, that young man's interest and love for this young lady meant that he would not be dissuaded. You couldn't have made an argument for him that would have convinced him that he didn't need to go. He could not be stopped. Likewise, the widow was not going to be dissuaded. The Pharisees said she could not give just one copper coin. Fine. She will give two. Her love for God compelled her to give.

And number three: An extravagant gift is the gift of the giver, giving of who they are. It would be hard to argue that this woman of poverty was not giving, and Jesus says it, she gave her of her poverty. That was the number one description of who she was: poor. She was giving of herself, all of herself. And again, we have to be careful not to consider this as a matter of percentage, because the religious rulers of the day were pretending to be devout, a devoutness that supposedly came from a love for God. But in reality, they were using their discretionary funds to purchase the appearance of devoutness, an appearance that gained them much admiration. They were pretending to be the very thing that this widow was. What this woman was putting in that offering box was her own very heart: so much more valuable than the one hundred percent that we might ascribe to this act. Extravagant giving isn't a percentage; it's a paradigm. In the very condemnation of the religious rulers of his day, Jesus was revealing who he was, and hinting at what the Messiah was going to give. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Your destruction at the hands of God is justified. That you have a gift of salvation extended to you is testimony to the heart of God. The gift is the gift of God Himself. That's the paradigm that is extravagant giving. God told the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah that they would not be redeemed with money. God took that option off the table and became the extravagant gift of our salvation. His love for you compelled Him to the cross because that is who He is. He was and is His love for you, and He would not be dissuaded. There was nothing that could stop Him, and there was no argument that could be made that was going to convince Him otherwise.

Extravagant giving isn't a percentage; it's a paradigm. And it is the paradigm of Christ; it is the paradigm of the Messiah. We give extravagantly because He gave extravagantly. What paradigm does our giving present, then? Does our giving testify of our love for God? Does our gift reflect the love that we have for the receiver? Are we giving of ourselves? Jesus said, "You have heard that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Do we give in such a way that even our enemies know our love for them? Do we give in such a way that the love of Christ is evident to them? We, you, me, Central United Protestant Church, are here to be extravagant givers. It's not a percentage; it's a paradigm. Let's pray.

Lord, we stand in awe of the gift that You have given us. The law taught that our destruction, our judgment at Your hands, was warranted, and that there was nothing that we could do to bring ourselves out from underneath that judgment. And yet, You would not be stopped. You sent Your Son, in the most extravagant of gifts, to be the judgment that we deserve. The miracle is that the gift that we offer to this world is that same extravagant gift. Lord, I just pray that this paradigm informs all of the giving that we do, that we might be effective for Your Kingdom here at Central United Protestant Church. In Jesus's name, amen.