Merry Christmas! It’s one of my favorite nights of the year when we gather together to give thanks to God for the gift of Jesus Christ. I realize that not everyone who sits in our midst is a believer, and so your take on this holiday may be a bit different from those of us who follow Jesus, but whatever the case, you are most welcome here this evening.

Over the last few weeks here at Colonial, we have been digging into what it means to “love generously.” We’ve been reimagining what loving generously might look like when we invest our lives into the lives of others, particularly those who are hurting or are in some state of need.

As we’ve noted throughout the series, generosity is not something that comes naturally for most of us. We intend to be generous...we don’t actually think of ourselves as greedy...but when push comes to shove, we simply prioritize ourselves and our desires over the needs of others. Many of us are covered up in debt, we have very little margin in terms of our time and our finances, so generosity is a nice concept that regularly gets put the back burner...always with the well-intended assumption that “one day we’ll have the time and resources to give back.” That’s probably the “norm” for most of us. However, Christmas is one of the few times of the year that we intentionally think about the needs of others, and we somehow find a way to be a bit more generous than we were a few months ago. Charitable giving in the United States literally doubles if not triples during the Christmas Season. Now, I realize that many people give during this season due to tax purposes and so one, but I think it is fair to say that there is something about Christmas that leads to a “season of generosity.” In fact, when we talk about “the Christmas spirit,” we are in as much referring to this very notion that we should love generously at Christmas time, right?

Now why is that? What does Christmas point to that demands a response of generosity and compassion?

I would like to answer that question under three subheadings: 1) Christmas points to the Gift; 2) Christmas reminds us of who we are; and 3) Christmas makes room for others.

I. Christmas points to the Gift. When we look carefully at the declaration of Christmas by the angel in Luke 2, we cannot help but observe the excitement and radical joy that accompanies the pronouncement: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”

Christmas points to an unmerited Gift that God gave to all of humanity...the gift of His only Son, Jesus. Because of Jesus, says the angel, we need not fear anymore. Because of the Gift called Jesus, there is now hope and joy for all people. Because of Jesus, death will not win...evil will be conquered, sins will be forgiven, Satan will be banished, souls will be saved, eternal life
will be inherited...because Jesus is The Savior...He is the fulfillment of every promise God ever made to humanity...He is the LORD—and there is none that can defeat Him. The birth of a King, a Deliverer, a Savior, our Champion, is good news indeed. But here’s the part that makes the Gift of Christmas so beautiful, so surprising, so scandalous and yet so powerful: “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

The Gift of God...the Hope of the World...The King of Kings...is lying in a food trough, because there was no room for Him. Can you picture that? The Savior is born into the world of outcasts as an outcast. The Savior of the marginalized and the powerless is born as one who is marginalized and powerless. The One who had everything...the One who held heaven in His Hand and spoke the universe into existence...has set His glory aside to come to us as one of us, humble...poor...wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And why? Because “God so loved the world.”

There is no greater expression of love than One who gives up everything to pursue His beloved. Christmas is exactly that. Jesus cared more about US than His own glory. Jesus cared more about US than all of the universe put together. He became a servant...for us. He made Himself “nothing” for us...He washed our feet; endured torture; and died the death we deserve...because He loved us too much to endure the thought of eternity without us.

And here’s the kicker: The Father gave His Son to us as a FREE GIFT. Our salvation comes through His grace...it is a FREE GIFT...an extravagant gift. Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death; but the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life.”

Christmas points to the FREE GIFT...the gift of Jesus Christ as our Savior...the one so humble and so beautiful that He entered into our cold world as a baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

II. Christmas reminds us of who we are.

Now, let’s turn our attention to our second point, which deal with our identity. I am going to give you a short sentence, and I want you to finish it for me, OK? Here it is: “I am…” Now, how would you finish that sentence? Take a moment and tell your neighbor. There may be several answers, so pick a few and tell your neighbor, “I am...whatever…”

Our sense of identity has a great deal to do with the way we think about generosity. It is no secret that our money and our time follows these two words, “I am…” For example, “I am smart”...so my money goes to books and degrees. “I am pretty”...so my money goes to clothes, make up, and I spend a lot of time at the gym. “I am a fisherman”...so my money goes to a boat and fishing gear, and I spend time fishing because “that’s who I am.” “I am successful”...so my time goes to work, and my money goes to showing the world just how successful I am. You see, money is not an idol...money reveals our idol. Think about where you find it easiest to spend money, and that will reveal your identity and your idolatry. For me, I think of myself as an...
outdoorsman. I find some value and esteem by being successful on the water or in the field, so I spend money easily and frequently on my outdoor hobbies. It’s super easy for me to spend money on those things that prop up my identity, because in my mind, “That’s who I am.” Now, as a Christian, I know my true identity is in Christ, but I have to battle my idolatrous identity…and so do you. Think about it…what do you spend money on without a second thought? Some of you spend money on your kids…ridiculous amounts of money on your kids…and you think that is noble. But why are you spending that much money on your kids? Is it not because you are propping up your idol of being a “great parent” for all the world to see? Some of you work 60-70 hours a week at the expense of your family and your own health, but you justify that time because your identity of being successful demands it. Wherever you spend your time and your money with the greatest of ease will reveal our functional identity.

But let me ask you this question: what does Christmas have to say about who you are?

Christmas says that we are those who are dearly beloved…we are precious…we are invaluable…we are cherished…we are pursued…and we are accepted. And it’s not because we are pretty or successful or popular or skilled with a fishing rod. We discover our value and our identity in the GIFT that we received in Jesus. I’m going to unpack that in a bit, but first, let me tell you a story of something that recently happened in my life. I wasn’t going to share this for a few years simply because I don’t even know what to make of it…but now I know I must share it because it perfectly illustrates this point.

I have a friend named Surrendra. Surrendra served as my translator during my first few trips to India (show pic of Jim and Surrendra). He is a very handsome young man whose energy and smile are infectious. Surrendra’s testimony is amazing. He resisted Jesus well into His college years, but through a series of events, Surrendra came to know that Jesus was for real, and that Jesus is Lord. Early on in his faith journey, someone gave him an English Bible, but Surrendra could not speak or read English though he desperately wanted to. So, for several months, Surrendra would read the words of the Bible out loud, never understanding what he was saying, but always asking God to reveal what the words meant. Then one day, God opened His mind, and he was able to understand what the words meant, even though he had very little instruction in English, having been raised in extreme poverty. Today, Surrendra speaks English better than I do, and he’s an amazing translator. He’s also an amazing Christian man. He still lives in extreme poverty, but he is constantly preaching the gospel, equipping other Christian leaders, and he hosts a ministry for impoverished children at his house (show pic of Surrendra’s childrens ministry).

So, a few weeks ago Surrendra texted me to say “Hi” and to share some pictures of his ministry with the children in his village. He always begins his texts with “Praise the Lord Pastor!” And he always asks me to pray for him. In fact, Surrendra has never asked for anything other than prayer. But on this day, when I saw his pictures, my heart was deeply moved, and I sensed the Lord telling me to send some money as a means of encouraging Surrendra. Note: Surrendra didn’t ask for money, but I sensed the Lord wanted me to send a gift as a way of expressing my
love for Surrendra and as a means of validating all that he is doing to serve the poor and make Jesus known in a hostile culture. Now, I’m embarrassed to say that I didn’t send much…just a couple hundred dollars. At the time, we were struggling a bit financially. I had just taken on some significant debt due to college fees and having to replace our heating and air conditioning units, so I wasn’t feeling financially confident or generous! And it was a pain to get the money to Surrendra, given his context in India. I finally ended up wiring the money, which meant a $40 bank fee…just enough to irritate me. Nonetheless, when Surrendra finally received the money, he was overjoyed. You would have thought I just sent him a $100K. He was incredibly grateful, and he promised to use the money to purchase clothes for the children. Of course, I immediately wished I had sent more, but you know…that $40 fee was just enough to keep me from making another wire transfer…that’s just how pathetic I am on most days!

Now…here is where the story gets crazy. One week after I sent a few hundred dollars to Surrendra, which I didn’t even tell my wife about, I was going through the mail and came upon an envelope from UMB. When I opened it, I discovered a check written to me and Christy for $10,000. The check came from a private trust, and it was given anonymously. The only thing written on the check was this: “Every good and perfect gift comes from above. James 1:17”

I literally sat in my kitchen for 10 minutes staring at the check…utterly speechless. To this day we have absolutely no idea who sent us $10,000, though I am certain it came from God through His faithful servants who heard a similar message to the one I heard when He told me to send a gift to Surrendra. That gift blew our minds. It was grace…pure and simple. We didn’t deserve that money, we didn’t ask for it, we didn’t expect it…it came as a free gift. An extravagant gift…it was a gift that said in no uncertain terms, “You are loved.”

You see where I’m going with this, right? My unexpected gift to Surrendra helped him to remember that he is loved, prayed for, and that his ministry is valid and appreciated. When Christy and I got a check for $10,000, the gift helped us to remember that we are loved and valued, and that our ministry is valid and appreciated.

You see, the unmerited gift…the extravagant gift…speaks to the value of the ones receiving the gift and the love of the Gift-Giver. And that is why Christmas reminds us of who we are. When God sent the Gift of His only begotten Son, He said to all of us in no uncertain terms: You are deeply loved. You are loved without condition and without restraint. And unlike the love of the world around us, God’s love is not predicated on our performance. God’s love is not conditional based upon what God is getting out of the relationship. God’s love is unconditional, sacrificial, and willing to do whatever it takes to pursue us and to save us. That means that we have infinite value.

Christmas reminds us that our value…even our identity…is wrapped up in this one, perfect Gift…Jesus. He is the Gift who purchased US! Every other gift demands payment, but The Gift from God…the Gift of Christmas purchased us. And our value is revealed by the PRICE that He paid for us…the price was His perfect life in exchange for our sinful life. The price was beyond
all the treasures in the world…and that is our value. We are those worth dying for…we are those for whom Christ gave up heaven to save.

Listen: if you could ever come to accept the fact that you have infinite value in Jesus Christ, you would stop trying to prop up your value through your work, your good looks, your entertainment, your intelligence, your libido, your nice home, your possessions, or your hobbies. If you could accept that God thinks you worth dying for, and that your value comes from what Jesus did for you…you would experience a freedom to leverage your time and resources to communicate God’s love for a hurting world instead of trying to prove your value in so many other ways. Look to the baby lying in the manger…the Son of God made flesh to take on the sins of the world so that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. Look to the Christ, and remember who you are…you are infinitely loved, you are eternal, and you are worth dying for.

III. Finally, Christmas makes room for others.

When we make a purchase, we expect the product to serve us in some way. For example, if I purchase a candy bar with my own money, it belongs to me. I bought it because I’m hungry, and I intend to eat it with no thought of others. That’s how consumerism works.

However, if I receive a huge, dark chocolate candy bar with almonds…and it comes as a gift…I’m still inclined to eat of all of it! No, actually, if I receive such a rich gift that I did not purchase and I did not expect…my perspective of that gift is quite different. I am far more likely to share my candy bar with others because it was given to me as a gift…it came into my possession as a result of grace. You see, grace makes room for others.

When Surrendra received my small gift, he was so encouraged that he used the gift to bless other people. When Christy and I received that extravagant gift a few weeks ago, the very first thing we did was send a portion of it to bless some missionaries who were going through a hard time and were in desperate need. Because we had been so blessed, we could not help but share that blessing with others. Generosity begets generosity. When we know that we have received much, we are more likely to give much.

Christmas reminds us that we have all received much! In fact, everything we have is a gift from God. Every minute that we enjoy on planet earth is that which we did not earn. Every person we love is a gift from God, because God is love. Forgiveness and the hope of eternal life is a gift, one purchased for us by our Savior, Jesus Christ. Such is why the Christian is called to make room for others…we are called to share.

Let me ask you a question: do you live your life as though you just received a massive gift that you did not earn? Is your heart full of gratitude for what Jesus did on your behalf? If so, you will not find it hard to be generous with the gift that you have been given. However, if you do not understand who you are, and you do not perceive that you have been given an extravagant gift that you did not merit, you will struggle with generosity.

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You know, one of the most powerful images of God’s love for us that we find in Scripture is the image of adoption. In John 1 we read, “But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

In Galatians 4 Paul writes, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

Christmas reminds us of God’s Son who came to seek and to save spiritual orphans. Christmas reminds us that, as unworthy and broken and unfit as we were, God chose us to be in His family…as believers, we have been adopted. God made room for us, and He calls us to make room for others.

I will close by sharing a story that will move your heart. It is an amazing picture of the Gospel, and I hope you will find yourself in this story. (show “I Like Adoption”)

God so loved the world, He made room for us. Through the gift of His Son, He purchased us…He adopted us into His family. Now…let us go and make room for others. Let us love generously. Let’s pray.