

Give to the Needy But... Week 3 The Helping Paradox

By Derek Steinacher

In 1989, the movie Honey, I Shrunk the Kids came out, where a struggling inventor, Wayne Selenski, accidentally shrinks his and the neighbor's kids down to a quarter of an inch. Then they accidentally get thrown out with the trash and have to venture back across their backyard through all sorts of insects and other common obstacles that are now way huge.

And this setup here reminds me of that. These big popcorn strings and these big ornaments remind me of the moon movie Honey, I Shrunk the Kids. And while the ornaments are cool and the popcorn strings are cool, if there was an insect that was blown up proportionately, as big as those are, I think we'd all be terrified right now.

Or if a pet is like a dog or a cat, and any cat owners out there, The thing you have to remember about your cat is that if it was big enough, it would eat you. That's not the same for dogs. But if your cat was big enough, it would eat you. So if we proportionately blew up your cat the size of these ornaments, it wasn't really bigger than life.

But we used to have a life-sized Santa that looked very realistic. And so we loved getting to hide it around corners, and just kind of people would jump whenever that thing was around. You could also take it, and you could condense the top of it over its legs for storage. But this also made it so you could set it in a chair, and it looked like it was just a person sitting there next to you.

And so we would take it and put it in the passenger seat of a car or one time we put it on the toilets here at church and the pastor walked in at the time, and he was like, You guys have to get that Santa out of here. We're in the Advent season. And here at Horizon's, we've been spending the Advent season in a series called The Helping Paradox, The Helping Paradox Week.

In this series, Pastor Mandy talked about loads versus burdens. Last week, she talked about specks in eyes versus logs and eyes. Today, we're talking about giving to the needy, but with a catch. And next week we'll wrap up the series. It's a great series for this time of year because this is an extremely generous time of year across the nation.

A third of all annual giving occurs in the month of December. But helping others isn't always as easy as it seems, right? It can be incredibly complicated. And so in this Advent series, traditionally, the weeks of Advent were one week ahead of some churches because Christmas Eve is a Sunday this year, and so you either celebrate week four of Advent on Sunday morning and have the shortest week ever as Christmas Eve services or in the afternoon or you bump it all up in churches have gone both ways.

We went ahead and bumped it up. So we're in week three of Advent, but week one of Advent is traditionally about hope. And then that's what each of these candles represents: one of these themes. Week one is about hope. Week two is about peace. Week three that we're on. Today is about joy; Week Four is on love and Week Five.

Christmas is Christ's arrival and isn't when we close service. Today, the advent reading is going to be based on Luke's writings, and it was shortly after Jesus was born out in the fields nearby where he had been born. There was a group of shepherds, and they were watching over their flocks. It was dark, and it was nighttime.

And Luke says an angel appeared to them, and they freaked out, rightfully so, because they were in the middle of nowhere in the dark. Right? The shepherds could have been like, Why don't we try this on you angels? Like, I don't know if angels are ever in the dark, but if they were, if a shepherd just showed up with their shepherd staff on a group of angels in the dark, it would be.

It would freak you out. Right? So this is what Luke says. Luke says. But the angels said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. The good news of great joy for all the people. And the question today is, does Jesus's arrival still bring joy today? And maybe more specifically, it's Jesus's followers, people whose actions are influenced by Jesus.

Does Christianity still bring joy? Or, one more way to put it, does Christianity do more harm or good? Pastor John and I sat down and discussed this topic, and there are certainly a lot of times that Christianity has caused harm. You can look, there's more than I could list, but you look back at slavery, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem Witch trials, and it's clear, and one thing Pastor John pointed out is that all too often, the church doesn't repent of the harm that we've caused until decades later, when it's lost a lot of the meaning.

But we also pointed out that the world would be a mess without Christianity. Christianity has done so much good. Colleges have been started. Hospitals have been started. Missions to help the poor. We could go on and on here, too. There's an author and historian named John Dixon, and he said this. He said, Being a historian, I already knew there were dark moments in church history.

But increasingly, I found that people who aren't connected with the church think that Christianity has only damaged the world. He said there was a large public debate in Sydney, Australia, in 2008, and the debate motion was we'd be better off without religion. Christianity was the main focus of this debate. And so there are three academics arguing for the motion that we'd be better off without Christianity.

Three academics argue against it. And there are 1200 people in the audience, and it's being televised across all of Australia. So, the stakes were extremely high. Before the debate, there's an entrance poll asking everybody their opinion on this. And then again, after the debate, there's another poll of the audience. And John Dixon says he was sorry to say that this group of Australians sat overwhelmingly in both polls that we would be better off without Christianity.

Things have been trending this way in Australia for a while, and now the U.S. is trending the same way. 40% of people in the U.S. feel Christianity has done more harm than good. Our wider secular culture has changed. People used to argue that Christianity is too moral. Now, more commonly, people think Christianity is bad, it's bigoted, it's hateful, it's only damaged the world.

And so this idea of St John Dixon on this ten-year search through church history to look at all the worst parts of what the church has done. But along the way, of course, he discovered the beautiful things that Christianity has brought to the world as well. And so the question for us today is, is Jesus's birth? Is Jesus's birth today still good news of great joy for all people?

You might know the famous Gandhi quote that says, I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ. Christians haven't always acted in a way that lifts Christ up in our behaviors. Each one of our behaviors makes a big difference. I don't know about you, but I think at least one of the goals of gathering here each Sunday should be to help ourselves look a little bit more like Jesus.

Oftentimes, unfortunately, it seems like it's religious people who end up looking the least like Jesus. Today, we're going to look at one of Jesus's most famous sermons, the Sermon on the Mount. In this Sermon, Jesus has a large crowd of people around him. The disciples are around him. And so he goes up the mountainside and starts to preach to the disciples and to everyone else gathered there.

We're going to be in Matthew 6 if you'd like to follow along. It's Jesus talking here. And he says this: Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your father, who is in heaven. Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets.

So they may get praise from people. I assure you that's the only reward they'll get. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your father, who sees what you do in secret, will reward you. At this time, there would have been three great pillars on which a good life was built.

For one, it was almsgiving, giving to the poor or people; number two was prayer, and number three was fasting. Those were the three pillars. And what troubled Jesus is that all too often, the finest things in life could be done with the wrong motives. And so he addresses each of these things. Almsgiving prayer and fasting, kind of with this same message here in the Sermon on the Mount.

Don't do it to bring glory to yourself. Examine your motives on why you're really doing it. When these things were done with the sole intention of bringing glory to the person who did them, they by far lost the most important part of their value. We all know it's possible. Maybe, unfortunately, it is even sometimes common for someone to practice good works to win the praise of other people, to increase their own prestige, and to show the world how good they, as the giver are, and doing that does receive a certain kind of reward.

Right? Jesus points that out. Jesus says, Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. The Greek word here is a pitch in, and it's a business word for having received a payment in full. So what Jesus is saying here is that if your motive is to demonstrate your own generosity for others to see, you will receive the admiration of others.

But that's all you will ever get. That's your payment in full. If you pray, if you fast, but do it for the glory of yourself. That's your payment in full. Our three-year-old daughter always takes our phones and sugar into the camera app, and usually, she ends up taking a lot of close-up pictures of something that may just fill your camera roll with a million close-up pictures of a pillow or something.

And so you go through and delete them all. One day, she took my phone and took it into a different room and had it there for a while. And by the time I found it, it was pointed at the floor, and it was 20 minutes into just recording nothing. And then it had this series of photos that she had taken.

And so I was going through deleting them, and luckily, I stopped. There was a third, there was like a 22nd video on there, and I was like, I'm going to watch this. And I clicked play, and she had gone behind the couch between the wall and the couch somewhere that she could fit. I would not be able to sit there.

And she looked down at the phone, and she said, Dear God, thank you for Jesus. And then she took the phone and said like one other thing and stopped it. And that's how Jesus is telling us we're supposed to

pray. Maybe, not recording ourselves while we do it, but Jesus says, Go into somewhere secret to pray and really pray for that intention not to bring the glory to yourself.

It would be a sadly short-sighted vision to grasp the rewards of time and let the rewards of eternity go. In this passage, it's important to highlight that Jesus is emphasizing the dignity of others. Rabbis at this time would have thought this same thing: The person who gives to others in secret is even greater than Moses. They would say.

Or they would say it's better to give someone nothing than to give them something and put them to shame. The best almsgiving is when the recipient doesn't know from whom they've received it and when the giver doesn't know to whom they give it. There is a great custom in the temple at this time. In the temple, there was a room called the Chamber of Silent, and people who wished to make an atonement for one of their sins could place money in this room.

Then, poor people were secretly helped by the contributions. But as with many things, this practice fell short of its intention. Too often, the giver would give in such a way that it drew all the attention to themselves. Everybody else in the room would know that they were giving. They gave more glory to themselves rather than bringing help to someone else.

There was also a custom in ancient days to give water to those in need in the East; water was so scarce that sometimes it had to be bought, and when a person wanted to do a good act and bring a blessing to their family, they would find a water carrier, and they instructed them to give the thirsty a drink.

Then the water carrier would fill a skin of water and take it to the marketplace and they'd say, Oh, thirsty one's come and grab a drink. The problem was the giver would be standing right next to them, whoever gave this gift. And as people would come up for the water, they would say, Bless me, who gave you this drink?

And this is the exact thing that Jesus condemns. He talks about hypocrites in this passage, right? The Greek word is Hippocrates. It's very similar. It means actor people who put on the act of giving only designed to glorify themselves. There are lots of motives for giving. One person talks about this mixed-up view that the poor in this world to allow others to carry out their giving, and then the others can acquire approval from God.

This is kind of further explained by the author Catherine Carswell. She talks about how, in her learning of the poor, there were these ideas that really shouldn't have been there, and they really centered around superiority and condescension. Giving was taught to her with this smug pleasure for the person who gave the city she grew up in was a really drunken city and so on.

On Saturday nights, it was drunken. So, every Sunday afternoon, her father would go to the jail, and he drew around the cells to see if there was anyone that he could help bail out. He would pay their bail, and they would sign a pledge saying they would pay him back after they were able to return to work on Monday.

But Catherine Carswell talks about it never felt quite right, she said. She said he would do it with a smug eminence of respectability. It was like he was trying to get his own fame or recognition, and he'd always include a moral lecture to the person giving. She said He clearly fell into a different moral category than those to whom he gave.

One thing that is said of someone who thinks they are superior is that with all they're giving, they never give themselves. And if you never give yourself, your giving is incomplete. If you're wondering if your giving is for your own prestige or not, the thing you can ask is if there was no publicity tied to this at all, would you still give?

But of course, we can't always give a complete secret, right? If we always only gave a complete secret, we'd miss opportunities to give as well. And Jesus acknowledges this. Just a couple minutes earlier, in the same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, in Matthew 5:14, You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden.

Neither Do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead? They put it on top of a lamp stand, and it shines on all who are in the house in the same way. Let your light shine before people so they can see the good things you do, and praise your father, who is in heaven. It's kind of a tension, right?

On the one side, Jesus is saying everything good that you do. Let it be seen. Let it be like a lamp on a lampstand so people can praise their Father in heaven. And on this side, he's saying, Don't even let your full self know what you're doing. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand has done, right?

So it's either where a lamp is on a lampstand, or it's so secretive, and it's this tension that's kind of pulling back and forth. Right. But this tension really causes us to examine our intentions because on neither side of what Jesus is teaching is the glory ever supposed to be about us right over here. If you let your light shine so that people can praise their Father in heaven, that's the tension.

Christianity should be humble, always be humble. There's a humility to Jesus being born in a small beginnings in Bethlehem. And so the question we have to ask ourselves is, is it about myself or is it about Jesus who is my audience? Our joy should come from knowing that God has seen what we have done. And the point here is to match the outgoing, spontaneous generosity of God himself.

A manual means God with us, the God who gave his son's life for us. Last week, Pastor Mandy introduced 3 to 1 concept. The idea is that each of us, at the end of each day, reflect back on that day. And if you miss a day, you don't have to go back.

It's just every evening that you can remember to reflect back on your day and go through this practice. The first thing is, what are three things you're grateful for from that day? As you look back through your day, it's just a great practice. Having gratitude is just a great practice. What are three things you're grateful for?

And as we do that, we honor God. Second, what are two things you did today to hinder yourself from being the best version of yourself and from helping others? What are the logs in your own eye that are getting in the way before you even need to worry about anything else? And last, who is one person you help today?

Pastor Mandy said as she's been doing this, this one can actually be pretty hard. Who is one person you help today? In my encouragement to you and my extra challenge to you, it would be at least some of the time, who is one person that you helped in complete secret? They have no idea that it was you. Fifteen years ago, my friend Chris Berger and I bought a 1981 Ford Coachman and a big camper, and we toured around to help different vacation Bible schools around Lincoln or around Nebraska and Kansas.

The thing is, we toured in the summer, so it was already hot, hot. However, they're saying they made him in 1981. It was just like whatever the mechanics were under the floor radiated heat up, so we had to crank down the windows, and it was just hot. I remember one time it was so hot in there. Chris took just a bucket of ice and dumped it on the carpet, on the carpet floor.

This thing is just to cool it down, right? It was it was \$5,000 to buy this thing. A friend of ours loaned us some money to do it. Then, we started fundraising to pay it off. And so we had just been in Kansas City helping with a VBS down there. We came back to Lincoln. We were busier.

We were busy all weekend long, and then we were getting on the road to head out to Hastings or Saint Paul, Nebraska, or somewhere like that, to start their VBS on Monday morning at 8 a.m. And so it's late at night, and it's storming, and we're carrying, you know, we just had been busier than we wanted to be. We're heading out to this VBS, and we haven't even fully paid for this thing.

We're still fundraising. And Chris's mom called us and she said, I have somebody on the other end of the phone. They were wondering how much you owed for the R.V., And so we passed on whatever the total was; a good portion of it was still due. And later, she called us back and said, I talked to the person, and they want to pay that in full.

We never heard their voice. We don't know who to give credit to to this day for paying for that R.V. just in secret. They paid it off in full. And I remember the relief that that was the kind of new energy that brought to leading another week of VBS. That next morning, there was a horizon family just this week that approached us about how they make it a practice to find a few families in their life to give a gift to in the month of December.

They approached us because they wanted to make sure that they were not known at all to whom they were giving. There was a bishop in the early Christian church around the year 272 340 A.D. He was a Christian bishop of Greek descent from Myra in Asia Minor during the time of the Roman Empire. In one of the earliest and most attested incidents from his life, he is said to have rescued three girls from being forced into prostitution.

He did this by throwing a sack of gold coins through their window because at the time, if your parents didn't have the money to pay a dowry for marriage, most likely your trajectory of life was prostitution. And so this bishop of the church secretly threw the money in the window three nights in a row so their parents could pay the dowry.

Bishop Nicholas of Myra is now called Saint Nicholas. Santa was inspired by Saint Nicholas, who is inspired by Jesus's teachings Here. Of course, giving doesn't always have to be a complete secret, right? If it's always an incomplete secret, we'll miss the opportunity to inspire others or will miss just the opportunity to give. But giving should never be about ourselves.

There was a girl we went to high school with. Her name was Molly, and she went on one of the earliest trips with Horizons to Project Hope. Um, to visit Sister Jessie. And she said it definitely inspired her path of life to travel in her path of service. She said Horizons played a big role in that, and a little while later, she said Horizons has blessed so many.

But then, nine years after high school, her path was inspired a little more when her close friend Kayla Mueller was killed in Syria by ISIS. At this point, she shifted her focus entirely to specifically helping

refugees. She's married and has a baby now, and she runs a grassroots initiative that brings mental health resources to refugees, genocide survivors, and aid workers within these communities.

It's a volunteer-driven organization called the Yoga Mandala Project. But she shared this update from her work. She called it Thoughts from the Clouds. She said, We packed our bags and walked to the bus station in northern Greece, baby luggage and lots of snacks to get us through to full days of travel in town. My heart was open as I had the thought that our time with those impacted by war and violence had come to an end for this trip, and I was preparing myself for the integration phase.

We loaded our bags in the space below the bus and listened to the loud announcements in Greek. We didn't understand, but someone knew we were visiting and ensured we understood. I noticed two guys speaking Arabic and clearly confused about what was going on. No one came to make sure they understood. The station overbooked the bus and needed to shift all of us to a larger bus.

I smiled at the men as they looked frantic and unsure of what was going on as the bus began to be unloaded. They shyly approached us yet gave our baby the sweetest smile. We're from Gaza. My heart sank as thoughts of their reality sunk in. It was as if life was happening in slow motion as I absorbed, swallowed my emotions, and shared what was going on.

In simple English words and body language, we have been in Greece for two months. We have no contact with our family now. I don't know if they are dead or alive, hearts crashing out, our faces showing solidarity. My friend only speaks Arabic. How can he get to the airport? He looks for farm work on Samos. Our family no longer is able to send us the money to survive here.

Contact is cut completely. We shared more dialog passively, receiving all this meaning clearly needed to get off his chest. I've been reflecting on this since reflecting on the silence for much of my community: the uncertainty, the messaging, the shaming, and those not speaking out. As I sat on this flight, crossing the ocean on the way back to the U.S., I received a very difficult message about the health of someone I loved dearly.

It has sent me into a whirlwind of process holding personal grief and also the collective differing. My dear friends, I write this as a simple reminder to always put compassion first. Some of us are merely surviving, holding on by a thread. We have different roles to play at different times of our lives. Remember, we are all doing our best.

Gaza deserves better. Sudan deserves better. Romania deserves better. We all deserve better. And that starts with each of us right here, right now. Share a smile, patience, understanding. And you never know the ripples of loving care you may be sending out into the world. There has never been a ripple of loving care greater than the one that Jesus sent into the world.

But each of us also gets a chance to throw a ripple into this world. The question is, are we sending the same type of selfless, others-focused love that Jesus demonstrated? We have the perfect pattern of giving in Jesus. Paul would describe it this way. He said, You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for year six so that you could become rich through his poverty.

You may have seen headlines this week that Christmas celebrations are canceled in Bethlehem this year. Bethlehem is the same distance from Gaza as we are from Omaha, like 45 miles. It's like six miles. It's

like here to Hickman, to Israel. And so one article said how you might be asking, how can we celebrate Christmas here in the U.S. at a time of such terrible war?

The Reverend Mother Isaac is the pastor of the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, as well as the academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College. He said this to that question. He urged us to romanticize Christmas, and then he reminded us that Jesus was born under a ruthless regime. He survived the massacre of children. He had to flee to Egypt.

God came to God, came to unsettle the empires of the world. God came to unsettle the empires of the world. Christianity, unfortunately, has also, at times, caused great harm. But this harm in the world is exactly what Jesus came to stop through sending Jesus. God sought to change the kingdoms of this world. This would be such a good news.

But the ball is in our court now. Do we, as followers of Jesus, continue to bring Jesus's good news to the world? We have to work to make sure our giving isn't from a place of self-righteousness, a sense of elevating ourselves above others, trying to seek prestige for ourselves. Our giving has to come from an outflow of a loving heart.

We must give as Jesus gave himself to us. And when we center ourselves back on the teachings of Jesus and when we get it right, Jesus, His birth continues to ripple into the world as the good news of great joy for all people. Let's pray

God. We thank you. We thank you for sending a savior into this world. The birth of the Messiah, the birth of our Lord, who brought us hope and peace and joy and love.

And if we're honest with ourselves, it's far too often that we don't bring those same things into the world. And so today, we center ourselves back on you. We humbly ask that we could be part of bringing that to the world, a world that so desperately needs more.

And so today, we just ask that you help us set ourselves aside, that when it's tempting to take the reward of today, we just push that to the side and take the reward of eternity instead with our audience being you and with the people being that we serve, being everyone on this planet, we're thankful for you. We're thankful for a messiah. King that was born to us this Christmas season. Amen.

We light the third Advent candle, symbolizing joy. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid for behold. I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all the people. For today in the city of David, there has been born for you a Savior who is Christ delivered. Amidst the hustle and bustle, we kindled the flame of joy, recognizing the gift of God's Son, the source of true and lasting joy.

In this season of Advent, we light the candles of eternal hope, just peace and boundless joy, celebrating the arrival of our Savior who brings joy to the world.