

The Generosity of God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's a great, great pleasure to be with you in your new church, even though I'm suffering from vertigo, I think, at the moment, at the great distance I seem to be up here. However, no doubt I shall survive. Well, we're going to be looking at God's great generosity, and I've got a wonderful text for you this morning, and if you've got a Bible, you may like to turn to Luke chapter 11, verses 11 to 13. Which of you, it's rather suitable, really, for Father's Day, this, I think. Which of you fathers, so I'm addressing you fathers this morning in particular. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Well, what a question to put to you fathers this morning. Just imagine the absurd situation. Mother and Dad are in the kitchen, and it's

Christmas time. Mother says, Dad, I'm very busy preparing the food. Would you go down to the shops, please, and get those little extra presents that I want for the children? You know what we want for Jamie. He's been in mourning for his dead goldfish for a week. It would be nice if he would go to the pet shop and get him another goldfish. And Annie, well, she's have been admiring those little painted eggs in the shop in the high street, and it would be nice to get one of those. It could go at the bottom of her stocking. Two hours later, Dad returns triumphant. No goldfish left, he said, at the pet shop. But look what I found in this little plastic container, there's a small baby snake. Yes, and the owner says it's got quite a nasty bite. It'll mean at least two days in bed if we can get the doctor soon enough. There were no painted eggs either in the high street, but while I was in the pet shop, I was managed to get something for Annie for the bottom of her stocking. In this egg-shaped cardboard box, if you open it, out like a flash will come a scorpion. It's got a very nasty sting. That'll teach her.

Well, that's a ludicrous picture. What father here would do that? Incidentally, if you would do that, I think you'd better see somebody senior in the church this morning and get a counselor. But I take it that we're all absolutely sure that Jesus never talks nonsense.

I need hardly say that. So presumably there is some purpose in this extraordinary illustration which father of you. And in fact, if you know your Luke's Gospel, it's a method that Jesus quite often uses. Normally to condemn his opponents out of their own mouths, but sometimes to make a point to his followers. You remember in Luke 15, where he'd been bitterly criticized for talking to the riffraff? His reply, it's a very famous one, don't you go in search when one of your animals gets lost? It's valuable to you. You'd be out of business if you didn't. You go and get it back.

Well, I too go in search of those who wandered away from God. They're far more valuable than many sheep, and I want them back. And you remember Luke 14? By the way, what a horrible crowd they were, weren't there, those religious fanatics, peering through some lattice in the synagogue, watching to see if he's going to heal a man who's very sick. And Jesus uses this same method. When a son or an ox of yours falls into a pit on a Sabbath, I notice that you leave everything immediately, despite the law, and immediately go and rescue it. May I not do the same to this man? It's his only chance this day that I'm here. And I like particularly in chapter 14, verse 6, after that, that they could say to him nothing. So here, with this stunning follow-on to the little story of the snake and the scorpion, if you then, though you are evil, don't you like that? If you then, though you're evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father and have him given the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? In other words, there you are, sinful people. You give good gifts to your children, but the father give even better. You're sinful people, but you wouldn't give gifts that harm anybody to your children. Nor will your heavenly father give gifts to you that harm you.

[5 : 17] So let's look at this gift of the father's generosity. You'll notice here in the text that it's not just a gift. Of course, the father gives many gifts to all of us. I guess as you look back, those of you who are older Christians can think of gift after gift that God has given you. I certainly can.

But you'll notice it's not a gift here that he gives, but the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is God, and therefore what he is giving is himself. Now, many times here in this church, you will have been considering the gift of his son to save us from the wrath of God. Here, as well, is the gift of his spirit to indwell us so that we may have his strength in our lifetime's journey. Incidentally, this solves something that was a difficulty for me one day. I was speaking to a sixth form, and I must have been talking about intercessory prayer. I must have been telling the young people to ask, and God would give.

Because when we got back to the headmaster's study, he gave me some refreshment, and then walked up and down the study looking very troubled. He didn't disapprove, I think, of my talk, but he said, ought we to say that? Ought we to say that young people can just ask anything of God? Can God mean that? It seems to be a *carte blanche*. It seems very unwise. And so on. You're walking up and down the study. Well, I wish I'd thought of this particular verse at that moment, but so often you think of these things afterwards. But there's no doubt in the context that Jesus is telling people to ask and seek and knock. But notice that with the gifts, he gives the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit remakes us. He transforms our ambitions. So what we begin to want is what he wants. We begin to ask for what he wants to give. And of course, we had a list of that, didn't we, in the prayer, the Lord's prayer. And all of those are desires that we begin to have once we're Christians. That God's name be hallowed, his kingdom extended, and so on. So that would have been the answer, wouldn't it? God gives gifts, but at the same time, the greatest of all gifts is the gift that transforms my heart and makes me desire what he desires.

Well, now let's turn this morning to this great gift of his Spirit. It's a gift that's been very highly celebrated, I think, in live churches in recent years, and rightly, it's been high on the agenda. But to be more practical, I've been thinking this morning, what would we have achieved at the Young Ministers' Conference without the gift of the Holy Spirit? It was lovely, by the way, to be able to use this building. People enjoyed it enormously. And I want to say a special word of thanks to the energetic people who fed us and did all sorts of things to make it such a happy and good time. But we all know that without the Holy Spirit being present last week, that Young Ministers' Conference would have been a total failure. Despite all the good food, despite all the friends there, despite all that happened, a total failure. We thank God's praises, but only the Holy Spirit can make that worship. We searched the Word of God. It was one of my duties to teach the Word of God. But without the Holy Spirit, it's all empty. It means nothing. We enjoyed tremendous fellowship from very different backgrounds. But what united us together, and therefore made it such a deep time? Well, obviously the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 10] So the point of this passage is that this is God's great gift to us today. It makes the Christian life possible. But it is unthinkable, isn't it, that God would harm us by giving this gift. And yet I'm going to suggest to you this morning that people are apprehensive about this gift, even Christian people. So let me explain with illustrations, quite briefly. I want to get you thinking that though God is a generous God and this gift is a wonderful gift, they're sometimes apprehensive.

First, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of holiness. Are you all agreed about that? I'm sure you are. And so the result of his indwelling, well, I'm not going to describe it. I'm going to let the Bible describe it. This is what the Bible says. When God gives me the Holy Spirit and he indwells my heart, and he is a Spirit of holiness. Galatians 5 verse 16. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They're in conflict with each other. So that you do not do what you want. In other words, when God gives me the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of holiness, the result is in a conflict.

Not a sense of peace within very often, but sometimes a war and a bitter one. Verse 25 says, I'm to keep in step with the Spirit. But we often find ourselves out of step with the Spirit, and it's very, very painful to get back in step and back in line.

Of course, that's not just a negative matter, that the Spirit declares war on my sinful nature, and my sinful habits and deeds. But it's a positive thing as well. He aims to produce the fruit of the Spirit.

And verse 22 says, that's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He aims to produce that. That's his ambition for me, and that's his ambition for you as a Christian. Sometimes we rather wish he didn't have such high expectations.

This gift is not just for the individual, of course, is it? This gift is for the church corporate. I'm sure I've been reading about your General Assembly, and I'm pretty sure, though I wasn't there, that what happened there at the beginning is what happens at the beginning at any big assembly of clergy, as with our Church of England Synod, for example. I would guess that someone opened affairs with a prayer, wouldn't you? And I would think possibly that the chief moderator, or whoever he was, asked God to guide their deliberations and give them the Holy Spirit.

[12:20] Well, that's a risky thing to do, isn't it? Turning back to that passage in Galatians 5, it says, the acts of the sinful nature against which the Holy Spirit is at war are obvious.

Well, if they're obvious, they ought to be obvious to the General Assembly. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious, sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery. And he goes on, idolatry and sorcery. So apparently, sexual immorality is on the same level as idolatry.

And the Spirit of God, according to Galatians, is at war with that, and the church corporate. And if the church corporate is to keep in step with the Spirit, then these things will have to be outlawed. Albert says, a church leader, come on, let's be practical. To outlaw all immorality. That will divide the church.

That will cause immense problems. Yes, yes, I see, says the ordinary believer, rather sad. I'd forgotten. Opening prayers are a formality, aren't they? Not a reality.

[13:34] To pray to keep in step with the Spirit is one thing, but to do it is quite another. So the Spirit of holiness is a wonderful gift, but I'm a bit apprehensive about it, and so is the church.

The Spirit of God is also a spirit of missionary zeal. Well, you'll agree with that. Remember the day of Pentecost. Who can forget it? They'll tell that very day to be witnesses to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and the Artemis parts of the earth, and thank God they obeyed.

Otherwise we wouldn't be here, and we wouldn't have heard. But actually, even before they left Jerusalem, they had trouble. Fortunately, the disciples, by my reading, did not retreat into their bunkers, as we in churches are so much tempted to do.

I found your bookstall this week very attractive and very tempting. In fact, I've decided the sooner I get back to London, the better it'll be from my wallet. And amongst the two or three books that I bought was this delightful book called *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, *The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson*, who's none other, of course, than the father of Don Carson.

He and a couple of pals, when they were young, decided to set up little churches in Quebec, French-speaking Canada.

[15:07] And my, in those days, it was a really tough mission field. Don says that, and he was brought up in it as a boy, he says that there was medieval Catholicism which possessed the land in those days, the 20s and 30s and so on, the 40s and 50s.

So lots of opposition to young Tom and his two friends as they knocked on the door. The police car would stop and harass them, and there'd be plenty of hate letters on the mat in the morning.

I thought you'd like me to read one of them, just a little bit of it. This is 1945. Dear Pastor, that's to Tom. Several days ago, I asked my wife why the pastor had abruptly stopped visiting us.

She replied in an angry voice that you had indeed come to the door, but that she'd not let you in and had given you back the book you'd given us. Then she blew up in a violent scene over my prospective change of religion, warning me that if I was converted, that would be the end of the marriage.

So I must apologize to you for this strange and incomprehensible attitude my wife has adopted. If I'm to live in peace, you will understand that I'm obliged to bend to her will.

[16:25] I'll always be grateful to you for the several hours of instruction you've kindly gave me, yours sincerely. Well, it was God's Spirit, of course, the missionary Spirit that drove them out door-knocking.

That was a good gift from the Heavenly Father. But it had a sting in the tail, didn't it? One or two of those early door-knockers and missionaries went to a jail for a few weeks for their trouble.

Just one more example. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of holiness. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of missionary zeal.

But the Holy Spirit is also the spirit of truth. Now this week we were studying the pastoral epistles, that's the letters to Timothy and Titus.

And apparently in the house churches in Ephesus, a great deal of error was being spread by certain men. And Paul tells Timothy that he's got to stay there and do something about it.

[17 : 25] Timothy had to put things right, and he's ordered to fight the good fight of faith. We found it interesting this week, a balance, that though he's told to fight for the faith, he's also told to avoid stupid quarrels about words, things that don't matter.

I thought that was a useful balance for all of us. Yes, we do have to fight for the faith, but we do have to avoid that kind of bickering that sometimes Christians are very good at, about minutiae. Well anyhow, Timothy found it very hard going, and that comes out of his letter, of the letters especially to Timothy. And it was particularly hard when he taught some people the truth and they turned their backs on him, preferring myths and fairy tales.

I think it's very hard when a congregation walks out on you when you've done all that hard work in the beginning, and it must have been hard work, mustn't it, in that part of the world, in that wealthy capital of Roman Asia.

Well, my dear friends, times haven't really changed, have they? Still, people prefer the unbelievable to the truth.

[18 : 35] And if you want proof of that, I suggest you go along Buchanan Street and walk into Borders, and you'll find that the number one best-selling paperback at the moment is Angels and Demons, which is the follow-up, of course, to the Da Vinci Code.

The Da Vinci Code was translated into 40 languages. It grossed 750 million at the box office, and it earned its author trillions of dollars, according to the report.

I read the film review of it this week. I thought it was quite interesting. It begins with this sentence.

The film of Dan Brown's bestseller, Angels and Demons, is pure hokum.

The last sentence of the film review is this, because the attack, of course, in the book is not just against Christianity, but against the Roman Catholic Church in particular. This still leaves the question of quite how much damage Brown's work has done to Catholicism.

I'm sure Catholicism is old enough and strong enough to take care of itself, says the reviewer, but if I were a member of that church, I think I'd be furious of the way in which one cheap-jack author of pot-boilers has managed to make a fortune by appealing to those who are equally ready to believe that the moon landing was filmed in a Hollywood studio, or that the late Queen Mother was in fact a giant lizard.

[20 : 05] He finishes with this delightful sentence. Beware, such people walk among us still. Yes, you'll find them in Borders in Buchanan Street today. I guess the shop's doing rather well, actually, from those sales.

If one of the people who bought that paperback today asked God this evening for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth would blow all that hokum and nonsense out of their minds in 24 hours, wouldn't he?

But it would be uncomfortable to tell your friends that you'd believe that nonsense, but now your heart and mind have been changed. So yes, this is the point of the little paragraph that I read to you.

The Heavenly Father does give good gifts. Every child of God knows that. He even gives us himself, his Holy Spirit, and that's a very great and a very good gift.

But at the same time, this gift does upset a lot of people too. Understandably, they think the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Church today does a lot of harm.

[21 : 17] Let's put it like this as we close. If the Spirit hurts sometimes, and he does, it's only in order to heal.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, there you are, evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

Well, let's ask him. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we come to ask you.

We are sometimes a little afraid to ask. We fear that you may take our request too seriously. We know your Spirit is a Spirit of holiness.

We know that he's a Spirit of missionary zeal. And it makes us tremble to think what he might do in us and with us and through us. We know too that he's a Spirit of truth.

[22 : 36] And we cry to you for us today. We cry for the churches in this city, in this country, in this land. I pray for the churches from which I come.

And I pray, we pray, that you will give to those churches, that you will give to us this Holy Spirit, this good gift to those who ask you.

And that he may do that wonderful work amongst us for your glory and for our good. We ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen. Amen.