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Title: Look Up - "Look Up for Equity"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-24

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One of the phrases that you'll undoubtedly hear a little bit this time of year is about Christmas spirit. And I don't know how you hear that phrase or how you experienced that phrase, but usually when that phrase is thrown around, it's in the context of some kind of a movie where somebody who had a big job in a big town got stuck in a small town in a blizzard and fell in love with the spirit of Christmas at a tree lighting or eggnog tasting kind of moment.

Or there's the sense that you say Christmas spirit is the revelry and joy of having family and friends and enjoying gift-giving. Or maybe, even in a deeper sense, saying it's about being kind and generous and full of peace and goodwill. And so, we put aside maybe some other petty differences that one time of year for Christmas spirit.

Again, I don't know how you see that, but the idea actually has some basis in the Scripture. You heard part of Second Corinthians eight read, and we're in a series working through the book of Second Corinthians. First Corinthians was the letter that Paul wrote to the Church of Corinth to correct it. Second Corinthians was written to encourage the church to be part of bringing transformation to their world.

And here he writes about this idea of giving. In fact, when I heard the Scripture, you heard the scripture, chances are few of us said this is about Christmas. Most of us said this seemed odd for this day. And again, this is part of the challenge. Second Corinthians eight follows seven. So, this is why we're doing this today.

But here's what we see in verse nine, and this is Christmas in a sentence. Here's what it says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." So Paul, the Apostle Paul, writing to the Church of Corinth, says I want you to excel at the grace of giving. And then he talks about Jesus giving up his wealth and becoming poor so that those who are poor can become rich. It's a statement of the incarnation of Christmas.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, tells the story that depicts the incarnation. He says there was once a prince who had great wealth, great power, great renown, and there was a woman in the land that he appreciated and wanted to get to know. But he was concerned that if he approached her with his crown and his wealth, she would only love him for the crown and the wealth. And so, he forsook his crown, put aside his wealth, moved to the village next to her, and began working and finding ways to connect to her until she fell in love with him, not knowing about his wealth or riches. And then he revealed his riches and his wealth.

Soren Kirkegaard in telling about this says he did it in a sense so that he would know that she actually loved him and not his money or wealth. And then he says but Jesus knows your heart. And so, it isn't for him to know, but it's so that you know. One of the reasons Jesus came as a baby in poverty was so that you could come to say I embrace this Jesus without everything that is necessarily obvious about his crown and about his wealth. And Christmas is

Jesus voluntarily giving up his place, in a sense, and becoming human and living in poverty. In fact, the word that's used here in the original language for poverty is a word that literally means to live through begging. Jesus became poor so that people might become rich.

Now, in the Bible, it uses the word poor. It uses it in a couple of ways. It uses it for material poverty, but also for spiritual poverty. And when the Bible here uses the word riches, it's, I don't believe simply saying that because Jesus came to Earth, any of Jesus' followers will be rich as much as it's saying there will be spiritual riches that will be true riches.

In fact, what I'd like to do today is just talk about some of the implications of this summary of Christmas that Paul draws out in these verses. And the first is this, and that is Christmas means that the greatest treasure is available because of Jesus' poverty. And here what I'm referring to is the Kingdom of God, Jesus. In Matthew five, what's known as the Sermon on the Mount, verse three says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

So, what does he say? That when you recognize your poverty, that's when you get the kingdom. That's the greatest riches. Jesus brings that to our realm of possibility because of what He does. But sometimes what people think is that the way that they get the Kingdom of God is through their performance, their behavior, their almsgiving, and their goodness.

But the teaching of Scripture over and over is it's Jesus' poverty that Jesus went to the cross, that Jesus did what we can't do. This is why Ephesians two says that it is by grace that we're saved through faith. It's not our works. It's not our riches. It's not what we bring. It's what Jesus brings. The way that we come to share these riches is by admitting our need, believing in Jesus, and confessing who Jesus is. And here we see just this summary of Christmas saying this is what Jesus has done.

But there's something else, and that is we see that Christmas compels. What I'm going to say is equity. Now I recognize that this word in our current environment may make some people uncomfortable. But I want you to see that this is the word that the Apostle Paul uses here. Here's where we see this in verse 13. "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality." Some translations say fairness. The word means equity. That there's fairness in the way in which people use their resources. And then it's repeated in verse 14. The goal is equality.

Now what does that mean? Because some people would say, well, poverty is material, poverty is an issue. And sometimes what we do is we go into our political camps, and we simply say that poverty is a result of choices, bad choices. And if people would make good choices, then they wouldn't be poor. Or we go into the other political camp and say poverty is a result of systems that are broken and people being in oppressive systems.

But, you know, the Bible doesn't let us simply go to one end of the political spectrum or the other. It causes us to have to have a little more nuance in the way that we see things. And the reason I say this is because the Bible says very clearly that if somebody won't work, they shouldn't eat. The implication is if you're capable and can work, therefore you should. Otherwise, you shouldn't eat. You can make choices. But some people are products of a system.

In the Old Testament, there were four groups that God had a special heart for - widows, orphans, foreigners, some would say immigrants, migrants, and prisoners. Those are the people who live on the margins. And God and his people were to have a special heart for those people. And that was, in a sense, God saying, I care about the systems and the people who have systems that keep them down. And so, equity means that in part, people with lots say how can I give to people who don't have as much?

Now you may say well, we don't live in the same time frame as the Corinthians, and that is true. We have taxes and you are compelled to participate in social programs whether you want to or not, that help people. And so there are some differences. But here is what I think. Paul is driving at. The Macedonians, the church, if you read through the beginning of chapter eight, said that they gave to their ability and beyond. And that was a poorer region. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan, wealthy city. And the people in Corinth, he's urging to give, and they were giving this relief to the church in Jerusalem. And what was happening, I think, is he was saying you have a lot, you haven't given, and yet these people who have a whole lot less have given sacrificially.

And here's what I think is probably going on in a sense. The Corinthian church is probably a lot like the American church. And what happens is we often have this mindset that says I earn money, I have money for what I need, and then I give a little bit of money out of my resources as I feel compelled. In fact, the average statistics about how much money churchgoing people of faith, Catholic and Protestant, give in the United States is well under 2% of their income to all charity, not just to the church, to all charity. And what that means is there's a whole lot of people saying, yes, Jesus has become poor so I can become rich. Now I've got money, and I'm going to give just a little bit out here. Do you see the lack of equity?

Now, what I think he's driving at is probably, this is also American Christian, is that we would say, here's some money for me that I need, and then there is money for need. And when we say there's money for need, that pot is as big as the need. And this pot is for what I actually need. But that isn't how we like to think about it because the truth is this is a lot more comfortable than this, but equity means that you say, if I can help, then I will help because that reflects the heart of Jesus.

Now, I'm not advocating that you don't say there are ways that I give and those are substantial. In fact, I believe if you pay your taxes and participate in a church like Orchard Hill that has things that say we care for the least in our society, the people who are hurt by the structures, you could make a case that you've done what you need to do. Here at Orchard Hill, we have five different times during the year when we do projects to help care for our community. We collect food for the North Hills Community Food Bank in the spring, and our Butler campus does it for the Butler Food Bank and distributes Food there for people in need. We have our Haiti project in the summer. We do the backpack drive in the fall. We were part of a million-meal distribution in November where we packed and funded 100,000 meals in our community. And then there's the tree that happens here at Christmas.

Beyond that, there's the structural stuff that goes on week in, week out, every week. We as a church pay for one of the meals at Light of Life, and Light of Life makes it available for anybody to eat in our community every day. Not only that, but our funding also helps Light of

Life with its program to help people transition from needing food to being able to keep a job and have fun things for themselves to get out of addiction and on their feet.

We also fund things in Haiti, churches there that are in need to help alleviate not just spiritual poverty, but to alleviate some actual poverty materially in the poorest hemisphere of our nation. This year, one of the things we're doing with our year-end campaign, which we do every year at Orchard Hill to help fund the physical needs of our campuses, is we're taking some of the resources that are given, and we're going to fund the building of a ministry center at Hope Baptist Church in Cap-Haitien, Haiti. That will be a training school for pastors who will go into the poorest villages all over the nation of Haiti and help churches. And with our funding, we will help resource some of the people in those places. My point is you could say if you come to Orchard Hill, probably another church like Orchard Hill, if you give, you pay your taxes, you've helped with the equity thing.

But there's another implication here. And this I'm just going to say is Christmas compels generosity. Here's where we see this. In verse 14 of Second Corinthians eight it says, "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality..." So, he says here again, it's about equality, it's about equity. But it's your plenty that supplies what other people need. This is this idea right here you're going to give to the needs that exist. In verse three, this is what I was referring to earlier about the Macedonian church. It says this, "For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own..." It wasn't compelled. Verse two says, "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

Now again, notice what Paul does here, he says this is how they gave. And then he says, you all excel in the grace of giving. And then he talks about Jesus. Jesus became poor so that you could be rich. So how could you not want to see other people experience that either through saying I give materially to make it a reality or into spiritual need?

And what we need to understand is that generosity means that we don't always just prioritize our own standard of living. It has been said that John Wesley, who was one of the founders of the Methodist Church when he started his ministry, made a salary of £30 and he lived on 28. And then when he made £60, he continued to live on 28. When he made £120, he continued to live on 28. And when he was making £1400, he lived on 28. Now, I'm not advocating that. There's inflation. Your kids grow up, and they're more expensive than when they're little. I mean, I get that. But generosity means, at least in part, you ask the question and don't simply say when I make more, I spend more on myself.

And Jesus even taught something very similar. When Jesus was teaching, he told the story of the Good Samaritan. When we hear that story, we often think, it's told in Luke 10, that this is about somebody crossing an ethnic divide, a socioeconomic divide. And that is true in this story. But when Jesus told the story, he talked about the man who was robbed. And there's actually a couple of different perspectives. The robber saw this as what's yours is mine, and I'm going to take it. Sometimes exploitation is masked in our own world, and concern for justice and equity means not being part of an exploitative system. And then came the priest. And the priest walks by on the other side, and we're told that the priest couldn't be bothered with it. And his attitude is, what's mine is mine, and I'm going to keep it. And then it was the

Good Samaritan, the unlikely hero who comes and stops and says what's mine is yours, and I'm going to give it.

See, generosity, a lot of times, is very personal. You can say, I'm going to care about systems, and I'm going to give into structures. But every now and then, there's an opportunity where somebody in front of you is hurting and you have a chance, maybe not just in money, but in time, expertise, and different ways to shower them with generosity. And if you read through the story in Luke 10, what you'll see is that when the Samaritan left there, he said to the innkeeper here's enough for now. When I come back, I will settle whatever else it costs you. Do you know what that is? That's a blank check. I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of an open tab. And here he was saying, I'll do whatever it takes.

Now, it's possible to just be generous and say I'm just being generous. Christmas Spirit. It's kind of the idea of our day and age. You go into a store, and somebody says hey, it's the season, would you like to round up for...? And then they fill in the costs. You know what I'm talking about. You know, there are sick children, and you can round up to help sick children. I mean, what are you going to say? No, I don't want to round up to help sick children, especially when you're buying a bunch of stuff for yourself. But that isn't really generosity as much as it's shame-based, like a compulsion to give. And some of you probably say oh, I just don't do it. I just say no. I get it. But generosity means that there is a time when you see a genuine need and you say even if this cost me, I'm going to give. Sometimes we can be generous so that people will see us as generous, but the way to give in Jesus' name is to say, I'm compelled because of what Jesus has done for me, and that's why I'm doing this for you. And if you add that little piece, what will happen is you will bring the name of Jesus into the places where you're generous.

There's one other thing, and that is Christmas compels trust. Here's where we see this. This is in verse 15. It says, "...as it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.'" This is a reference to Exodus 16, which in the Old Testament was when the people of Israel, God's chosen people in the Old Testament, had left Egypt and were journeying to the Promised Land, and they were in the desert and didn't know where their next meal would come from. And so, God supplied them with manna so that they would have enough to eat.

And when God supplied them with manna, some people went out and they took too much. And when they took enough for themselves, God provided the next day. But when they took too much, it spoiled. And it was God's way of saying I've got this now. I can't totally relate to not knowing where my next meal is coming from. Being in the desert, I'm guessing that I would have been a lot like the Israelites who took too much saying I need more. Paul takes this verse, and he says here's the thing, your equity, your generosity needs to be rooted in the idea that God will provide, that future community will provide, that there will be enough.

And if I were to use this picture again, what it means is if I give to a need, it means that I've given so much that I have less in it, and it's maybe threatened my own security in some way. In fact, how much would some of us have to give to actually threaten our own security? But what he says is that when that happens, then you can know that God will supply your need, that there is going to be plenty. But that's hard. It's hard to believe, it's hard to practice, and it's hard to put ourselves in that place. But if we understand how Jesus has given to us, then

what will happen is we won't simply say well, I think I should do this, maybe I could do better, but there will be a desire to say this is a way to share the love of God tangibly with hurting people. Maybe God's put some people right in your midst.

I do want to say this. If you're here today and you're under water, you're hurting, and as I've talked, you felt like you're talking to people with plenty, but I'm the one on the margins, as a church, we want to be there for you. And so, if you approach the leadership at your campus, we would be happy to talk about ways to help. In fact, as a church, people have given to our Eleos fund over the years, and there is money available to help. And so, we want to invite you not to go through a hard time and not say anything. Now we do ask people after we've helped them once to go through financial peace and to meet with a financial counselor to say what changes can you make to the structure.

There's an old book called *When Helping Hurts*. And the idea of the book was to say sometimes by helping people, you're not actually helping them. And this doesn't come from the book. But it was the idea that if you can teach someone to fish, but you keep giving them a fish instead of teaching them to fish, you may not be helping them. And so, what we try to do is say we'll help, but then we want to help you get on the right path. We aren't saying that we'll fund risk or bad choices as much as we would love to help anybody who's hurting. And if you're here and you have plenty, then maybe just praying about how God could open you to say who could I give to? Certainly, the church, the church that you go to, if it's not this church, other ministries, people, the opportunities to just simply say, I want to respond with the spirit of what God has done with generosity, is part of what I think the Christmas spirit is implied.

And here's again just how Paul says it. Second Corinthians eight, verse seven, "But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." Christmas is something that says I get what I don't deserve, and when that becomes real, then it isn't that I need to, but it's I am overflowing with the reality of what God has done and able to give.

Let's pray. God, I ask today that you would help none of us to miss true riches because we think we don't need it. But you would help us to be humble in spirit and acknowledge our need and what Jesus has done and share in true riches. And I pray that you would help us to see the needs around us and not simply turn our eyes to our own situations but see ways that we can step into those. And God, for those among us today who are hurting, who are wondering how they're going to make it work this season, I pray for your provision and abundance in their lives as well. And we pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great day.