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## A HERD OF GAZELLES Hebrews 13:16

You all know that a group of sheep or geese are called a flock. A bunch of fish are called a school. Many cattle make up a herd. No news there, but I have a quiz for you on some other animals. What is a group of bears called? It's a sleuth. How about a bunch of crows? They make up a "murder" of crows. A crowd of rhinos is known as a "crash." A large group of eagles is called a "convocation." A bunch of owls is a parliament. A bunch of finches or hummingbirds are a "charm." If you run into a group of frogs you've encountered an "army." One of the most interesting ones is alligators. A group of gators makes up a "congregation." What does that say about somebody's views on the church? I have no doubt some beleaguered pastor somewhere came up with that name.

There are several animals who when grouped together are known as a herd. One of them is gazelles. Today I want you to learn about have a herd mentality. This church should be a herd of gazelles. Hopefully you'll see what I mean at the end of this sermon. We are thinking about what gifts we can put under the tree for God at Christmas. We've seen that God desires that we become living sacrifices and that we give him praise. Today we're going to see one more gift and it is mentioned in Hebrews 13:16.

### GOD WANTS US TO DO GOOD DEEDS

Hebrews 13:16 tells us that God desires that we give him the "sacrifice" of doing good and sharing with others. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." God desires that we do good things that others can see. Such actions will bring glory to God. In 1 Timothy 6:18 we read that in fact God wants us to be "rich in good deeds."

In Matthew 25:34 says on Judgment Day the Lord invites people into his kingdom and says to them in verses 35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." In verses 37-39 the puzzled righteous people ask, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in?" They say, "we don't remember ever doing that for you." He answered in verse 40,

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Jesus said the heavenly Father sees us as treating him with compassion and concern when we treat other people with compassion and concern. When we do good for people he views it as doing good to him. In Titus 2:14 Paul said that Jesus Christ, “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Jesus died on a cross to redeem us so that we could be his and that we would be eager to do good deeds.

Wow, what a shock. What you’re saying is God wants us to do good deeds? Who knew? Obviously this is not exactly a news flash, but it is easy for Christians to fall into the trap of thinking that their faith is only about them being safe and happy. It is a lot more than that. Our faith should impact the kind of people we are. It should transform us and make us into people who continually bless others and do good to them.

Maybe at this point you are thinking, “Oh, boy, this sermon is going to be one long guilt trip.” This is not about guilt. The point of this sermon is not that you should come away feeling you are worthless and you’d better put it in high gear and start moving. Rather the goal today is to inspire you, to give you a vision for the kind of person God wants you to be. It is to help you express love to God and experience more joy in life.

### WHY DOES GOD WANT US TO DO GOOD DEEDS?

First, remember *it is not to earn our way into his kingdom*. The default human thinking is that we earn acceptance by our efforts to be good. This is how the whole world works. We have been operating in that system at nearly every point in our lives since as far back as we can remember. So as soon as we read that God wants us to do good works we instantly go to that as the way we are accepted by God into his kingdom. That is an almost irresistible knee jerk reaction.

However, the gospel of grace is a divine thing that is totally at odds with the default thinking of human beings. It is so different that we have trouble actually incorporating it into our lives. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

We are not saved by works. In other words, we are not saved by trying harder and being better. We don't get God to love us by improving ourselves. We are not accepted into God's kingdom because of our good deeds. If we were then we could boast, because our works gained approval for us while other people are not good enough.

Paul took it as a given that if we could be saved by works then we would boast about it. I don't think he meant that we would become trash talking braggarts. But he knew human nature. Assume God's system was to evaluate everyone's character and works and that was the test for getting into his kingdom. If one person made it in and some of his acquaintances didn't make the cut he might not go around crowing and rubbing their noses in it. But you can bet he would mentally be congratulating himself and thinking of his failed colleagues, "I really knew it all along. I could see they didn't have it in them." That's human nature.

But God has removed that possibility by pointing out that he has indeed evaluated every single human's character and actions and discovered that we all, universally, earned a big fat F. Then he said, "One person earned an A plus. That was my Son, Jesus. I'm going to offer you a deal. You can have his grade assigned to you just because he's really kind and I'm really merciful. Or you can go with your own score." If you accept what Jesus did, what do you have to be proud of? Not much. "Hey, I earned an F and you only got an F minus."

My senior year of college I had one last math class to take in order to fulfill the requirements for my degree in math. I had to pass this class to graduate, which initially didn't seem like a problem. The first half of the semester I breezed through. But then the material started getting harder and harder. I found myself totally lost. Our last exam before the final was only a couple of weeks from the end of the semester. The test only had 4 problems on it. As I looked at the problems the day of the test I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I had a sense of how to attack 2 of them, but I had only a vague idea at best what to do with the other 2. I started on the 2 I knew something about. It took me the entire hour of the class to work those two problems. I didn't have time to even attempt the other 2, which I probably couldn't have solved anyway. I came out of the test knowing if I did all my work perfectly on the problems I had finished, which was unlikely, the best score I could get was a 50%. In other words, if I had a really good day I earned an F. I had 2 good buddies in the class, both of whom were better math students than me. I talked to them about the test and my dismay deepened. They had both done all 4 problems, so grading on the curve wouldn't help me. Our next class we got our test results back. Sure enough I had scored a blazing hot 43, the worst grade I

ever got on a test in school. I looked at my buddies and could see stricken looks on their faces. I found out one had a 35 and the other got a 29! Do you suppose I was proud of my impressive 43? Do you think I taunted them because I had done so much better than they had? No way. We all tried to cover our scores so no one could see how bad they were, tucked our tails between our legs and slinked back to our dorms. When you fail badly you have nothing to boast about, even if someone else failed worse. By the way, one of those guys went on to play a couple of years of professional baseball, then he left that and went on to get his Ph. D in biostatistics. And I did pass that class with a good grade. That's a story for another day, but it was a near miraculous answer to prayer.

We are invited into God's kingdom because God has offered to put Jesus' grade down for us and we accepted that gift, and for no other reason. When we do that it produces a boat load of gratitude. The inevitable result of receiving God's grace is a desire to respond to it. Just as if someone gives us a terribly costly gift that we do not deserve, the natural response is to thank them and want to give back, so we want to give back to God. When he says, "Fine, if you'd like to give back, what I'd enjoy is for you to do some good deeds for some others." Our good deeds are not the cause of God's acceptance, approval and love, they are the result and evidence of it. If a person has no interest in responding to God's grace and giving back to him, it is because he has never really accepted that grace to begin with.

Let's be clear that nothing we do can affect how much God loves us. In our worst moments God loves us and continues to love us as much as it is possible to love. In our best moments he loves us exactly the same.

### ***Because God loves people***

One of the most familiar verses in the Bible is John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." He loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. That's the measure of how much he loves. Suppose you see a painting that just captivates you. You have the perfect place to hang it in your house and you can envision how terrific it would look in that room. It would complete the room. The more you look at it the more you love it. So you ask how much the painting costs. Later, after you have gotten out of the hospital where you went because of the coronary event induced by the stratospherically high price, you can't get that painting out of your mind. You keep going back to look at it and drool over it. Finally, you can't help yourself. You know it is absurd to pay that much money, you really can't afford it, but you decide you will cut back and do whatever is necessary to come up with the money to buy that painting. You love it

that much. Your willingness to sacrifice and the price you choose to pay is the measure of how much you love that painting. The price God paid for the world was his beloved, perfect Son. That is a price that is beyond calculation. That means that the measure of God's love for the world, his love for us, is also beyond calculation.

If you have children, what would you sacrifice them for? For what purpose would you be willing to see them nailed to a cross to be tortured and killed? I can't even think about that question. This week for the first time Laurie and I held our first grandchild, Leilani. She is so precious, so beautiful and she caused such an upwelling of love in our hearts we can't even describe it. Laurie helped take care of that little girl on Thursday. Late in the day, thinking she might be tired I texted her and asked, "How are you?" She replied, "I'm in heaven." So what do you think we would sacrifice Leilani for? I'm sorry, but the thought of it is too ugly, too painful for me to even entertain the question. Do you think I love her more than God loves his Son? No. He loves his Son infinitely more, and that tells you how unfathomably God loves the world.

God doesn't just love the mass of humanity. He's not like that person who says he loves humanity, but he can't stand the actual people he has to deal with. God so loved the world he means that God so loved each and every individual human being that he gave his one and only Son. Your annoying neighbor, the person who waits on you at the restaurant, your co-workers, your fellow students, your boss, your mother-in-law, the irritating telemarketer who calls you at dinner time, all of them are loved by God, each and every one of them individually, more than you can imagine.

Some of you have gone way out of your way to graciously do good for all of our kids. That was in part because you love them. But we are very aware that it is also in part because you love us. When you show love to them, we feel your love for us.

Acts 17:25 quotes Paul saying of God, "he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else." God doesn't need our money. He doesn't need our talents or our charisma. He doesn't need even our efforts to serve him. So when we want to express love to him how can we do that? According to Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40 we can express love to him by loving the people he loves! Just like I feel loved when my friend does good to my children, so God feels loved when we do good to those whom he loves.

The church is often referred to in the New Testament as the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” One point of that is that we make up one body. It is about unity. But another significance of that illustration is that we are the way that God touches lives in this world. If someone needs money how does God give it to them? It is through his body. It is through us. If someone needs physical help God provides through his church.

Sometimes it feels to me like my younger days were in the stone age. There were no computers, no Internet, no cell phones, no Amazon. Neither Apple nor Microsoft existed. There were no remotes for televisions. Life was difficult. If you wanted to research something you actually went to the library and read books and magazines. It was positively Neanderthal. I was kind of a dumb kid in some ways. I recall seeing ads for florists in which they encouraged you to buy a flower arrangement through them for someone in another city. I remember being puzzled about how that worked. How did they keep that arrangement in shape when they had to ship it across the country? And they promised to get it there in one day. How could they do that? I told you I was kind of dumb. It was quite a revelation when I learned that the local florist didn’t make up the arrangement and ship it to the intended recipient across the country. They simply called a florist in the area of the recipient and told them what to make and they delivered the arrangement.

That’s a little like how God often expresses love to people. He taps one of his children on the shoulder and gives them the assignment of delivering love to that hurting human being whom God cares about. This frees us from being controlled by another person’s behavior. What if a person is a 100% Grade A jerk, someone totally undeserving of love? You can still do good to that person and deliver love to them because it is a way of expressing your love to God, and he is utterly deserving of all of our love.

### ***Because we are to be a reflection of him***

God’s purpose in our lives according to Romans 8:29 is that we be conformed to the image of his Son. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says, “and we all, who with unveiled faces behold the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory.”

God’s purpose for us is that we would become little pictures of him walking around in this world. That’s why he is working to transform us into his image. God knows that human beings have a hard time envisioning what God is like. That is

part of the reason why Jesus came into this world. He wanted to give a tangible, visible picture of his character.

Jesus told his disciples as the Father had sent him so he was sending them. The Father sent Jesus to be a living demonstration of what he is like. And so now are to follow in Jesus what steps. He wants us to also depict for the world what God is like. That's why Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:1 that we are to be imitators of God.

But if we are going to depict for the world what God is like then they will need to be able to see God's goodness and love through us. God is glorified when we make known his character through our character and our actions. Jesus alluded to this in Matthew 5:16 when he instructed us to let our good deeds be made known to men was the result that they would glorify God.

The character of God is good to its very core. Psalm 34:8 says "Taste and see that the Lord is good." One of the ironies of life but I have noted in our family is at this point I am probably, no unquestionably, the most discriminating eater in our entire family. I recall those days when there were so many things that our young children would turn their noses up at. And yet today while they have their preferences they happily eat a broad range of foods and refuse very few things. I am looking forward to the arrival of Leilani in our family for many reasons, but one of them is maybe she will take over the title of pickiest eater at least for a while. So the question is, how did it happen that those people who not all that many years ago would foment a total mutiny in our house if Laurie served tuna noodle casserole for dinner now eat just about everything including, I must add, cilantro? The process involved them tasting things that they either thought they didn't like or were dubious about and finding that they were good. We actually saw that happen a few years ago at our Thanksgiving meal. Toby had always expressed great disgust and disdain at the very idea of the stuffing that we would have as part of our Thanksgiving feast. To him it looked like some kind of beige mush that he wanted no part of. But then came the day when he said, reflecting his adult maturity, "I guess I ought to try some of that." When he did he exclaimed, "Hey, this is really good!" He tasted and saw that it was good.

If you taste anything of God you will find that he is good. Everything about him is good. It is his nature at every moment and in every way to do good to others. In his book, *The Existence And Attributes of God*, the great Puritan Stephen Charnock said that God is infinitely good, he is perfectly good, and he is immutably good, meaning his goodness never changes. He says that he is good in his essence. His

goodness is defined as, “his inclination to deal well and bountifully with his creatures.” He is the source of all that is good.

In his book, *Wide Awake*, Erwin McManus wrote, “God designed you to be an expression of his goodness. Every time you perform a loving act; every time you choose an act of mercy, kindness, and servitude; every time you alleviate human suffering and bring hope and joy into a person’s life, you’ve expanded the good and increased the honor God receives for creating human his image.”

***Because it is what we were created to do***

We were originally created in the image of God according to Genesis 1:26. Though that image has been desperately distorted as a result of what happened in the garden of Eden, our original design was to have some things in common with God. Being in his image meant that there is a lot about us that is derived from the very character of God.

We are created in that image. Because of that we will never feel truly human, truly fulfilled, and truly joyful until we are becoming good like him. In the words of Charnock we will only find what we were meant to be and truly experience life when we also are inclined to continually deal well and bountifully with other people just like God.

As a result of the distortion that is happened in human beings there is something within us that wants to make everything about ourselves. I can remember so very well when I was a kid and our parents wanted to take us Christmas shopping. I hated shopping. I didn’t want to go. But there was one thing that could change my mind. Very often we would go to the department store downtown in Bakersfield. The name of the store was Brock’s. Like any department store it was full of clothing and household items that had exactly zero appeal for me. So if we were going to go wander through that store looking at those items I wanted no part of it. But there was also a toy section. If I recall correctly it was in the basement. But what a magnificent display it was. In the opening scene of the movie *A Christmas Story* Ralphie and his friends are staring in the window of at department store that had a dazzling display of toys. Their eyes are all alight. I was that kid, and the display at Brock’s was just like the display depicted at Higbee’s in Cleveland in that movie. So if the shopping included going to the toy department and looking for things that I want then I was good. If the shopping was about me and what I wanted then I approved of it. In other words, I thought it was all about me getting stuff I wanted.



Jesus wasn't just making stuff up what he said it is better to give than to receive. Personally I think receiving is a really good thing. I like it. But Jesus claimed that giving was even better. It's true. It's weird but I find myself this time of year way more excited about what I might be able to give to those I love than I am about whatever I might get from them at Christmas. Now maybe that's because I don't get toys anymore like I did when I was young, but I like to think it's because I've grown up and I've learned the truth the giving truly is better than receiving. It is what we were designed to do!

I told the story recently of something happened when we were on vacation a few months ago. Last year at this time Laurie had sent a small gift to a woman we met in a store while we were on vacation. The woman was pregnant and so at Christmas time last year Laurie sent a very small gift to her for her new child. When we were in that same place just a few months ago we went into that store and saw that woman again. When realized it was Laurie who had sent her that gift she broke down crying. It was a little bit unusual to be standing there in that store with the order of the store in tears like that, but it was pretty cool. It was one of those times when you find yourself thinking, "this is really what I want to do in life. I really want to touch people's lives. I want to bless them I want to do good to them." When you actually affect someone else by giving to them, by doing good to them like that you experience real joy in real life.

Real meaning and joy in life are not found in living a life utterly consumed with self. I cannot emphasize this enough, living for self is the formula for death. To the degree that you pursue self you are destroying your own life. Real life and joy are found in living as God originally designed us to live, which means like him living to bountifully do good to others and to bless them and everything we do.

## APPLICATION

### BE GOD'S AGENT OF GOOD

Consider Toby and Anna's dog Doc. Doc is a miniature Australian Shepherd. He has as sweet a temperament as a dog could have. He loves people. He wants nothing more than to just have your attention and your love. However, he can also be one of the most annoying dogs I have ever known. That's because his motor never stops. He has so much energy that he drives you crazy.

The problem with Doc is that he was bred to be a work dog. He's a shepherd dog. His nature is to have a meaningful task to do. He was meant to live on a farm and spend his days herding animals around a pasture. And now he lives in a two-bedroom condo with no meaningful job. So he runs around like a whirling dervish

desperately trying to do something that at least in his mind is somehow meaningful. That misguided energy ends up being quite negative and annoying.

I've got some bad news for you. You're a lot like Doc. Oh, you may not have the energy that he has, but you were created to do a job. You were created to give to others, to bless them. Unfortunately if you are not doing that job continually you will channel that energy into other avenues, self-oriented ones. And sadly you may well end up being kind of annoying like Doc. Like him you will pursue "jobs" that don't actually mean anything. God wants you to reflect his goodness. He wants you to be an example of his goodness and his bounty poured out on other people. That's the task you were created for. You are to be like a secret agent who's working in this world for purpose others are not aware of. Your purpose is to do good to them no matter what they do to you.

This is a revolutionary way to live. Perhaps you are married. Probably you got married because of something your spouse could do for you. You probably married that person because of how they made you feel, because they loved you. But what we are talking about today changes the whole relationship. Now you realize that the reason you're married is to do good for your spouse. You are in that relationship to bless this person you're married to in every situation. That is your call every single day of your life. Of course it's not just your spouse it's every person that you encounter. You are to be thinking in every situation how can I bless this person? How can I do good to this person? That is how God lives. And it is what he longs to see from us as well

Ephesians 2:10 says, "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do." The Greek word translated handiwork and that verse is *poiema*. It's the word that we get our word poem from. In other words, you're not just God's handiwork you are his work of art. And the purpose that God has for you is that you would do good works. God has those good works all prepared for you to do long before you ever encounter them. When we get up in the morning God says, "I've got an agenda for you today. I have good works for you lined up all day long. All you need to do is carry them out." All we need to do is keep our ear tuned to the Spirit of Jesus who lives within us, and keep our eyes open to the myriad opportunities that will be presented to us in any given day.

## **BLESS IN EVERY WAY**

There are so many ways we can do good. We can do good spiritually. In Romans 1:11 Paul said, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to

make you strong.” We can help make other people strong just by encouraging them in their face. We can use whatever gifts we have to actually minister to other people as a way both to serve and bless them and to serve as an encouragement for others. When people serve in our children’s ministry helping out with the kids, or when they plan an event that we all enjoy, or they make sure the sound is running properly on a Sunday morning, or they serve as a greeter at the door, or they just pick up signs put them out, the list goes on infinitely, we are imparting a spiritual gift to others. We are blessing them.

We can bless other people emotionally. In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul issues a stirring appeal and light of the possibility that Jesus Christ might return at any moment to stand firm in the faith. And then he says in verse 11, “therefore encourage one another.” All around us are people deeply in need of just some encouragement. In his book, *The Rhythm of Life*, Matthew Kelly wrote that billions of people go to bed every night longing for someone to affirm them. He says, “the truth is, most people believe that everything within them is worthless and embarrassing.” They are desperate for someone to affirm them and encourage them.

In his book, *Love Does*, Bob Goff at one point recalled when he was playing Little League baseball. He said he had a big drawback. He closed his eyes when he swung the bat. Generally that’s a certain guarantee of missing the ball. So the best outcome he could hope for was that because he was bigger than anybody else on his team the opposing pitcher might fear him, lose control and hit him. He went through the entire season only reaching base by getting hit by pitches. His team made the playoffs. They were tied late in the game when at a critical point it was Bob’s turn to bat. His team’s fans groaned. But deciding he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory on one pitch he closed his eyes and swung with all his might. He felt an odd sensation. The bat actually hit the ball. To the wonder of all the ball soared over center field, hit the top of the fence and bounced over for a home run! His team ended up losing that game anyway, but a week later he got something in the mail. This was surprising because he never got anything in the mail. It was a card. On it his coach had written, “Wow, what a hit, Bob! You’re a real ball player. Love, Coach.” That happened over 40 years ago, and he still remembers that card. Those words still ring powerfully in his ears and he can remember how he felt when he read those encouraging words.

There are also an awful lot of lonely people who are longing for someone to just include them, to make them feel like they matter. You can do good to people in a powerful way just by making sure that they know you love having them as a friend.

Obviously we can do good for others physically. Laurie and I were at a small party for some of our neighbors last week. One of our neighbors was born and lived his earliest years in Communist Romania. He was born very premature and had some congenital defects as a result. His dad was a professional athlete in Romania and through his connections learned there was one place in the world that might be able to help his son. It was an institute in Philadelphia. He was able to get permission from the government to take his son to that institute for treatment. My neighbor told me that before the third trip to Philadelphia for his treatment the government informed them that after that only one parent would be allowed to go with their son to Philly. His dad knew what he had to do. He secretly made plans to leave Romania with his family and never go back. When they were in the US they applied for political asylum. They were granted asylum and allowed to stay. But how could they survive? My neighbor told me that a family they didn't even know invited them to come live with them. For 6 months they lived with that family, then another family they had met invited them to come live with them in Los Angeles. They stayed with them even longer. And the dad in that family offered my neighbor's dad a job working in his company. My neighbor actually got a bit teary-eyed and shook his head in wonder as he told the story. Many years later he still marvels at the fact that people they didn't even know took them in when they were in need and gave generously to them so they could survive. His whole family was impacted by people unselfishly doing good for them when they had nothing to gain from it.

We never know how some good that we seek to do to some other person is going to impact them. In Acts 9:36 there is a description of a woman named Tabatha. Her name meant Gazelle. That verse says that she was, "always doing good and helping the poor." She was God's secret agent always doing good to people. God wants us all to be gazelles like that. Our church should be a herd of gazelles. Hebrews 10:24 says, "let us consider how we can spur one another on to love and good deeds." The best way we can spur one another on is by example. So let's be people who show the way to love and good deeds.