

Generous God, Generous People



A series of daily Bible readings on
the theme of Christian giving

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INTRODUCTION

This is a five week set of Bible readings for your personal devotions. The theme is 'generous God, generous people', or more simply, our calling as stewards of all that God has given us.

Each week tackles one aspect of the overall theme. Each day follows the same simple format of a reading, the main verse, a brief reflection followed by a response to consider, a passage for further study and a simple prayer. You might want to have a notebook with you to record your own reflections and responses to the questions and actions.

The five themes are:

Generous God

Generous people

Generous giving

Generosity towards others

Principles for generous people to live by

At the end of each week you might want to spend a little time reflecting on what you have learned.

- Which themes or issues made a special impact on you?
- What challenged you and perhaps made you uncomfortable?
- What excited you?
- What will you do as a result of this?
- How does this affect your attitude to your faith, the church, those around you?

This is a brief introduction to get us thinking about how we can be responsible and faithful disciples in a challenging world.

Enjoy your reading and prayer and may God richly bless you.

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WEEK 1: GENEROUS GOD

It's obvious when you think about it. We love God because He first loved us and we give because God first gave to us. Our whole lives are a response to a loving, generous God.

So we start our five weeks of study on the theme of giving with the character of God. It is only as we immerse ourselves in the character of God that we realise that all we are and all we have comes from the generous God who is our provider and sustainer.

During the week we will look at the amazing love of God revealed in Jesus, God's generous daily provision such that we lack nothing and the values that God sets for the world.



DAY 1: AMAZING LOVE

Reading: John 3:11-21

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son' v16

Where else could we start? As Christians we worship a loving and generous God, whose nature is to give, freely and without measure, to the whole world. Jesus is His love gift to the world. If we measure the value of God's love by the value of the gift then it could not be greater. He could not have loved more.

So the familiar verses from John's gospel come to us as a reminder that while we might try to reach God through our efforts, it is God who reaches out to us through His Son.

He gave Jesus to the world that through him we might have eternal life and to have eternal life is to know God in a way that without Jesus it would not be possible. So, as we meditate on who God is and on His character, the call to be like our heavenly Father challenges us to emulate his generosity. Such love knows no boundaries and will challenge us as much as it will challenge and bless those around us.

For further study: Psalm 103 - the love of God.

Response: As you set out on the course of Bible study what do you hope to gain from it?

Prayer: Almighty God, whose generous love transforms all people, create in me a heart to seek your will, that formed in the image of your Son I may give myself and my possessions in response to your call. Amen.

DAY 2: **NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD**

Reading: Romans 8:31-39

‘He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all’ v32

Returning to our theme from yesterday, we reflect on the loving God who did not withhold his own Son. Our starting point is to reflect on our relationship with God. As children of God we are in a family relationship with our loving, heavenly Father who did not spare anything so that a saving relationship could be established. Therefore as Paul says ‘will he not give us everything else?’ Our generous God will open the heavens to bless us. It is not a case of giving because we are compelled to; rather we give because we love God.

The context is our relationship with God and how He will bless us with every spiritual blessing (see Ephesians 1). In the earlier part of the chapter, Paul reminds us that we may find ourselves in exceptionally testing situations, but even so, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Indeed the deeper the testing, the closer we could be drawn to God.

For further study: Isaiah 54:4-10 - God's unshakeable love, even when we face difficulties.

Response: What testing times have you experienced? How did you respond? When you emerged from that time how did it change your relationship with God?

Prayer: Loving God, nothing can separate me from your love. Help me to respond each day to the prompting of the Holy Spirit that in all things I may exercise a generous spirit to all. Amen.

DAY 3: OBEDIENT CHILDREN

Reading: Deuteronomy 8:5-20

‘walking in obedience to him and revering him.’ v6

As the children of Israel approached the promised land, they were reminded that they had to walk obediently with God. Yes, there was a wonderful land for them but it came with conditional promises. They were not to forget the Lord their God, what He had done or His commandments. Neither were they to sit in fine houses and think that they could do anything by their own strength.

There will be times when we stray from God’s chosen path and He will discipline us, just as a parent disciplines a child. It is on those occasions that we are reminded by the words in this passage to remember God and not to forget His ways.

The experience of the wilderness was that God provided at all times. The pattern follows for us today. It is the Lord who provides for us and all that we have is God’s. So our calling as Christians is to live as responsible stewards of all that God has given us. The more that we are blessed materially, the more we can use ‘our’ possessions for the work of God, recognising that all that we have is not ours anyway, it belongs to God.

For further study: Hebrews 12:1-11 - God’s love in discipline.

Response: What does it mean to walk obediently before the Lord your God?

Prayer: Lord God, all that I am and all that I have comes from you; help me to hold less closely the things of this world, that I may trust in your generous provision. Amen.

DAY 4: GOD THE PROVIDER

Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

‘your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.’ v32 (NRSV)

We live in a materialistic world where, at every turn, we are encouraged to buy things whether we need them or not. Indeed for many of us, our lives are so cluttered with ‘stuff’ that we now have to hire storage pods to cope with the overflow. We may look around and contemplate all the things we think we need. There is a difference between what we want and what we need and God knows the difference! So in this passage we are encouraged to set out our priorities and put God first.

To make the point that God is our provider, Jesus reminded his hearers of the birds of the field and how God looked after them. It is easy to say ‘don’t worry about food’ when we have a full cupboard, but we are encouraged to recognise that it is God who is providing for us. This does require faith on our part, to be able to trust with ‘simple, childlike faith’ that our heavenly father really does know what is needed. Worrying won’t get us anywhere. Rather than being anxious about these things, we could be resting in the love and provision of God.

This is one of the most challenging things that we, as Christians, face. We can trust God for the unseen ‘spiritual things’. However, to trust God for our daily requirements is much more tangible. It really is a test of our faith.

For further study: Hebrews 10:32-39 – the confidence the writer of Hebrews had in God’s provision.

Response: What purchases are you expecting to make over the next month? How many are essential? What impression are you giving to other people by your recent purchases?

Prayer: Father God, help me to rest in you and know that you are my provider. Help me to resist the temptations of the adverts and to think carefully about how I use the money that you have provided. Amen.

DAY 5: ALL THINGS COME FROM GOD

Reading: I Chronicles 29:10-20

‘for everything in heaven and earth is yours.’ v11

For Anglicans these are some of the most familiar verses in the Bible. Many of us hear them Sunday by Sunday at the offertory during Holy Communion. They are a powerful reminder to us that even when we offer up the fruit of our hands, the provision is from God.

In an echo of Psalm 145 David praises God for who He is, recognising that God’s kingdom (rule) was and is over all things. The almighty God, who is all powerful, does give good gifts to us all. Can we, like David, recognise this generosity in the things around us?

By acknowledging an awareness of God’s nature and purpose we too, like David, will come to a fresh awareness of ourselves and our actions. David set an example to all those around him by giving out of his personal wealth.

Having sufficient for today (as we saw yesterday) is what God promises us. Perhaps an abundance of riches is a supreme test of the uprightness of our hearts (v17). Would we really be able to cope?

For further study: Psalm 104:1-26 - whole of creation is sustained by God.

Response: When you hear these words on a Sunday, how does it affect your attitude to money and possessions?

Prayer: Lord God, all things come from you and of your own do I give you. Release in me that generosity of spirit that comes from you. Amen.

DAY 6: NOTHING SHALL I LACK

Reading: Psalm 34:1-22

‘those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.’ v10

We are beginning to see a pattern emerge from our readings. We are children of our heavenly Father, who is a caring God who provides for His children. He calls us to seek His will. As we do so then other aspects of discipleship fall into place. It won't be easy. It is only as we experience the testing that we learn to trust God and seek His face. Such trust is rewarded by God, who is faithful towards his people.

The young lions suffer want and hunger. Perhaps this is because they are wilful and wander off, rather than using the wisdom of their elders? As we grow in our faith, so we become more aware of the abundant provision of God, sufficient for our needs. The promise of God is that we will lack no good thing. He doesn't promise that we will all be millionaires. Would you want that responsibility?

The Psalm is about our daily walk with God. Starting with our daily worship of God, as we give ourselves to Him, so we become more like our heavenly Father. As we are shaped by Him so we will not only learn to trust Him for each day, but we will become mindful of those around us and reach out to them.

For further study: Jeremiah 39 - Jeremiah's trust rewarded (especially v17-18).

Response: What holds you back from trusting God for your daily provision?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me this day to trust you more, to be shaped by you and aware of those around me who are in need. Amen.

DAY 7: A RIGHT WAY UP WORLD

Reading: Isaiah 55:6-11

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.’ v8

So we finish the week having reflected on the greatness, the generosity and the goodness of God. The One who provides for us, who calls us to trust him and be content in all we do. At this point as we reflect both on the past few days and prepare for those to come, let us ask the Holy Spirit to search our lives, to reveal all that is not of God and to call us back to His ways.

Like yesterday’s reading, today’s passage starts by calling us to seek God. Not a search for that which is lost, but a diligence in seeking out God and His will for us. As we do so we will forsake all that would hinder us in our growth as disciples. As penitent sinners who experience grace in the pardon from God, we can rejoice that, as in all things, God acts differently to the way of the world. We also know that when dealing with money, God’s economics are not those of the world. It is our trust in Him that means that money can expand or contract and yet still be sufficient for our needs.

As Christians, our approach to life, including money and possessions, will run counter to the prevailing culture of the day. It is sometimes asked, ‘If people didn’t know you were a Christian, would they see enough evidence through your actions and lifestyle to be convinced?’

For further study: Psalm 112 - God’s delight in those who behave well (with money v5 & 9).

Response: Have there been occasions when you have seen the truth of verses 8 and 9 in your life?

Prayer: Lord God, I know in part that your ways are different from mine, may I come to know and experience this truth more in my life. Amen.

WEEK 2: GENEROUS PEOPLE

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus says 'you must always act like your Father in heaven'. So the generous loving God calls us to be shaped in His image. Hence we are a generous people.

That generosity is prompted by the way God is at work within us. Every facet of our lives is about the response to God. It is not about the 'ought' of life, rather, the freewill offering of ourselves.



DAY 8: OFFER YOURSELVES TO GOD

Reading: Romans 11:33-12:8

‘offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.’ v12:1

We continue the theme of our relationship with God. Without a relationship with God, all that we do is worthless. As followers of Jesus we will come to an understanding of who we are in Christ. In doing so, we will recognise God for who He is, a generous God, whose ways are so far above ours. A relationship with God is not good unless we are transformed people, so in the words of John Stott ‘duty is linked with devotion and belief with behaviour.’

Paul calls on his readers to offer themselves as living sacrifices. In a world where they would have seen animals being sacrificed on a daily basis they would have known something of what this might mean. As we offer ourselves to God, our whole life becomes worship; we become renewed and shaped into the image of God, no longer conforming to the pressures that the world puts upon us. God’s values shape every aspect of our lives, not just an attitude to money but to the whole of our lives including how we live in relationship with those around us. Instead of being squeezed into the world’s mould, let us become Christ shaped in all we do.

For further study: Philippians 4:4-9 - Paul's practical advice on being holy.

Response: What things in your life are shaped by worldly pressures rather than the will of God? How might you change this?

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit and fill me with a desire to offer myself as a living sacrifice, that transformed I may no longer be squeezed into the ways of the world and instead be conformed to the will of God. Amen.

DAY 9: THE PURSE WITH HOLES

Reading: Haggai 1:1-11

‘You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it’ v6

It was the year 520BC. The exiles had returned from Babylon to rebuild the Temple, but somehow other legitimate priorities had taken over, such as the need to house families. However, instead of basic accommodation people had started to create fine houses with panelled walls. They had fields with poor crops, houses and clothes but they weren't warm and they were facing rampant inflation. Haggai describes it as 'earning wages to put into a bag with holes'. As they failed to give to the work of God, so their money didn't stretch far enough. Literally they were experiencing the discipline of God (v10).

Haggai calls on the people to consider or reflect on their situation. He then says that the problem is all down to wrong priorities. Instead of putting God first, they had put their own personal comfort at the top of the list. So the two brief chapters of Haggai are about righting wrong priorities, and putting God first. When they did that there was a change in circumstances and they received the promise from God that He would bless them.

In order to set the right priorities for our lives we start by seeking the help of God.

For further study: Haggai 2:6-9 - It all belongs to God.

Response: Have there been times when you have set the wrong priorities for your life? What brought you to the point of realisation that things were amiss? What did you do to change the situation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to be mindful of the priorities that you set for my life. Make me aware of your loving discipline and correction that in all things I may put you first. Amen.

DAY 10: GOD'S ECONOMICS

Reading: Proverbs 11:24-28

'One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.' v24

This could be our theme throughout the next few weeks. It seems that the more we give, the more we are blessed and our needs are met. That is not why we give but it seems to be the consequence of our response to God. The writer here reflects on what happens when people give freely, they seem to be richer. Our bank balance may not grow, although as we saw last week our needs will be met. Also our sense of well-being and peace with God will grow, for if we are generous then the by-product is that we are enriched. As we give money back to God and to good causes so we are enriched. We know that it is not just our obedience but also that God will use the gift to bless others.

We don't give to gain from God, but He is not in debt to anyone. Our giving is in response to God's love and generosity and is linked with right living. So integrity is rewarded. Perhaps, as in the reading from Haggai, if we withhold things from God then we will find that our money doesn't stretch as far as we would like.

For further study: 1 Samuel 25:1b-35 - meanness nearly causes disaster, which is averted by generosity.

Response: How have you seen verse 24 reflected in your own life? How has it helped you establish principles for a life of obedient discipleship?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have revealed the Father's love through your life and death. May I respond with open hands to all that you call me to. Amen.

DAY 11: WHAT ARE YOU SAVING FOR?

Reading: Matthew 6: 19-24

‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’ v21

This is a passage that is unambiguously about money. What’s the point of saving up everything and not using it? It is prudent to save, to invest and to prepare for old age. The likelihood is that most of us do not save enough. However, sometimes we gather so much to ourselves that we have moved from basic needs to squandering things. So here the words of Jesus are a challenge to our bank balance and our investments.

Here are Jesus’ words about divided loyalties, for as Christians we either serve God, with a single generous open-hearted manner, or we serve ‘mammon’, a false god which corrupts our heart.

Put simply, are we trusting God, or are we gathering things to prop us up? Whatever we have set our hearts upon is our treasure. To put it another way, whatever we have set our eye upon will betray where our heart is. And when we have done that we see who we really serve. It is not just loving God over and above money, but also building a sense of daily dependence upon God that will help us to establish the principles of generous living. The farmer was not wrong to gather his produce into barns or even to plan for the future. It was only when he ceased to recognise his dependence on God that things went wrong.

For further study: Psalm 73:25-26 - true contentment is found in God.

Response: How are you ordering your finances for today and into the future? What new priorities are you setting yourself for how you handle worldly goods?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to set priorities for daily living and to be mindful of the need to save for the future. May I truly be dependent upon you and wise in my saving. Amen.

DAY 12: GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

Reading: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

‘Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.’ v6

Sowing seed in the allotment can be very interesting. Sometimes counting out seeds one at a time means that the harvest is very poor. On other occasions sowing more than we need results in an abundance of plants growing so there are plenty to give away. Paul reminds us that if we are mean in our sowing then the harvest will be poor.

It is God's grace that produces in us a generosity of spirit. God's generosity is without measure and we who have received it respond without measure or calculating the cost.

But it is important to recognise that whatever we give to God is not a result of compulsion. It is the freewill offering of a generous spirit. As we give, so God blesses. We don't give to gain the blessing of God, that is the by product of living in the Spirit. Indeed it will not be just financial giving, it will affect every dimension of life for we will want to be generous and open handed in how we give.

For further study: Acts 10:1-6 - Cornelius's generosity results in an angelic visitor.

Response: To what extent have you caught the generosity of spirit? Today look for a generous action from another and thank God for it. Make one new generous act of your own today.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, may your generosity of spirit so inhabit my mind and actions that it is second nature today and all the days of my life. Amen.

DAY 13: THE LOVE OF MONEY

Reading: I Timothy 6: 6-10, 17-19

‘the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith’ v10 (NRSV)

Oh that we could reach that point of godliness with contentment. Do we strive after things? The next car, set of clothes, house, job or pay rise? All things which in themselves may not be wrong, but do show a restless spirit that is not content with where God has placed us? As Christians we are called to blossom where we are planted and to be content in all things. Paul warns against desiring to be rich, for it is the way of temptation. The love of money can lead us astray. It is a reminder of the need to set our heart on God and on serving Him. As we do so we will find that contentment which comes from godliness, from being shaped in the image of our heavenly Father.

Some of the harshest words in scripture are for those who have the blessing of riches, for if they hold on to those things then they harm their spirit. So we rejoice in all that God has provided for our enjoyment and seek to do good with it. The by-product will be that we are laying a foundation for spiritual growth.

For further study: Psalm 49 - further thoughts on the perils of wealth.

Response: What things can get in the way of you gaining godliness with contentment? What are you doing to change things?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in a materialistic world it is difficult to be content with my lot. Help me to trust and rest in you. Amen.

DAY 14: ONE PERSON'S SMALL GIFT IS EVERYTHING THEY HAVE

Reading: Mark 12:41-44

'but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.'
v44

Size matters? Well no, it was not the size of the gift that was noted. It was the totality of it. The widow gave everything she had. We will often hear in church circles of the 'widow's mite' meaning someone who might be on a low income and can only afford to give a few pounds. But Jesus was looking at the whole gift. If you read the preceding paragraph it condemns the Pharisees who had seized the houses belonging to widows. Avarice meant they had neglected the principle of caring for the widow.

In this story, as the rich very openly and pointedly gave ostentatious gifts, the widow sneaked in and put in two small coins. To the grand scheme of collections in the Temple treasury it would have meant little. But to God, who saw the heart of the giver, He recognised the generosity of spirit that inspired her to contribute her last two coins.

God honours both the gift and the giver. He measures not what we give but what we retain.

For further study: 1 Kings 17:7-24 - the widow gave beyond her means which resulted in blessing

Response: When you have read this story, how often have you focused on the size of the gift instead of the heart of the giver? If you were in a similar situation would you be able to offer your last penny?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, who looks at the heart of the giver, inspire me to be ready to give my all. Amen.

WEEK 3: GENEROUS GIVING

If we are a generous people, what principles do we use to guide us?

During the week we will look at regular and proportional giving and how we set priorities for what we give and what we retain.



DAY 15: TRUST GOD

Reading: Proverbs 3:5-12

'Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops'
v9

No doubt this is a passage that many people will have encountered on more than one occasion. It starts with the call to trust God and rely on Him and not our understanding. For true wisdom lies in knowing the will of God and not relying on our own or a worldly understanding of things. Part of trusting God is to set apart from our own income a gift that will honour Him. In the Old Testament world this amounted to a tenth of all things. What we set apart will be something that we prayerfully decide and over time this may change. Does what we give honour God? One way to judge this might be to ask the question, 'if you received back what you gave to the work of God would it make a difference to your life?' In other words would you feel honoured and blessed by the gift?

The wisdom writer adds a rider, 'then your barns will be filled with plenty'. This is not the prosperity gospel that some espouse, but the simple promise that as we are faithful to God, He is faithful towards His children and honours their childlike trust in Him.

Even so, true wealth is not to be found in earthly riches but in the wisdom of God and a life spent serving Him.

For further study: Micah 6:6-8 - what does God require?

Response: What are you setting apart each week or month for the Lord's work? Does that gift honour the Lord?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I know that true riches are found in your wisdom. Help me to always seek your wisdom and place my trust in you. Amen.

DAY 16: REGULAR AND PROPORTIONAL GIVING

Reading: I Corinthians 16:1-4

‘On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income’ v2

For Christians seeking to develop their discipleship, the act of disciplined giving is part of our normal worshipping life. Paul instructs all in the church in Corinth, regardless of their affluence to take part in the regular and systematic setting aside of money for the work of God.

Many people are now paid on a monthly basis but the principle still stands of setting aside a proportion of our income for God's work. There is much to be said for looking at our finances on a monthly basis and not only having a fixed amount that is set aside but also praying about additional sums of money that might be given freely and generously towards specific projects.

The collection in Corinth was for the church in Jerusalem that was experiencing famine. Each month we may well receive several invitations to give towards the work of mission agencies. By looking realistically at what we have received and what we spend, we may feel prompted to give to these appeals. One way to prepare for this is to have a special fund of money that we have set aside for appeals. We know it's there and ring-fenced for specific but spontaneous giving.

For further study: Luke 14:12-14 - giving to those who cannot repay.

Response: How do we deal with those special appeals from mission agencies? If you don't have a fixed way of dealing with them would setting aside a regular amount be helpful?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are times when the regular appeals from mission agencies threaten to overwhelm me. Help me to be realistic and generous in my giving to these causes. Amen.

DAY 17: SET APART FOR GOD

Reading: Deuteronomy 14:22-29

'set apart a tithe' v22 (NRSV)

The imperative for the Hebrews was to tithe. The faithful people were to set aside a tenth of their crop for the Lord. It was a powerful reminder that all that they had came from God. Yes, they had worked hard on the land but it was God who gave the increase and therefore they were to acknowledge Him. The best quality food was to be taken to the sanctuary and eaten there in the presence of God and in remembrance of Him. Even in this setting there was special provision for those with no land or family, and so in the third year the tithe would be deposited in the town and used to help the less fortunate.

The setting aside of a tithe was important in reminding people that they were part of a community dependent upon the faithful God who did provide and care for them. The giving back to God was a way of remembering this.

Today, there are many Christians who still believe that it is important to set aside a tenth of their income for the work of God. It is something that many in the early church would have been familiar with and it is a useful guide as we think about regular and proportionate giving.

For further study: Nehemiah 10:32-39 - re-affirmation of giving in Nehemiah's time.

Response: The Church of England guidance on personal giving is 5% of take home pay to the work of the local church and a further 5% for other charities. How do you set your level of giving? What level have you set for your giving this year?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to examine my finances, to recognise that all that I have comes from you and to respond in a generous way. Amen.

DAY 18: WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

Reading: Matthew 23:1-23

‘you give a tenth... but you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.’ v23

The problem with guidelines is that eventually someone will convert them into an unbreakable law which has to be slavishly followed. In this passage, the generous spirit became consumed by a legalistic, mean-spirited nature. Jesus sets his face against some very devout and religious people. It seems that some of them had missed the point of religious observance. So instead of liberating the spirit, it was enslaving it.

The passage exposes the hypocrisy of some who did not practise what they preached. Their enthusiasm was misdirected. They knew that they had to tithe their produce but took it to the extreme and in so doing had lost sight of justice and mercy. As we open up our wallets, purses and bank accounts to the Holy Spirit may we not seek to draw a line based on a legal precept, rather let us allow the wind of the Spirit to blow where He will.

As we respond to the generous God who loved us and gave Himself for us, so we respond with open hands and wallet. Even more than that, we respond by loving justice and mercy.

For further study: Jeremiah 8:4-12 - Jeremiah rebukes those who don't properly apply the laws of God.

Response: How do you stop yourself becoming fixated on the minutiae of giving and focus instead on the big issues?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, may I never succumb to the meanness of heart that gives out of duty. May I always be moved out of love and compassion to give generously towards your work. Amen.

DAY 19: RICH GENEROSITY

Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

‘see that you also excel in this grace of giving.’ v7

Even under the pressure and affliction of persecution and poverty due to exploitation by the Romans, the church in Macedonia responded to the needs of others, because they had been shaped by God. They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to Paul and his companions. As a result they abounded in joy and demonstrated the grace they had received from God by exercising a generosity towards others. They even begged for the privilege of sharing financially in Paul’s ministry. Can you imagine your church begging to participate financially in the mission and ministry of others?

Paul saw a contrast between the Macedonians and the Corinthians, who had been blessed with many gifts and seemed to excel in them, but perhaps he thought that up until now they had failed to demonstrate generosity as one of those gifts? So he calls upon them to excel in the grace of giving.

Could we pray such a prayer for ourselves? We pray to excel in other gifts, so why not also the grace of giving? The ungenerous Christian is far from complete. In our desire to be shaped by God we must model that generosity of spirit to be found in Jesus, who, though He was rich, became poor, that we might live.

For further study: Luke 19:1-10 - Zacchaeus's generosity is unlocked.

Response: What steps do you need to take to excel in the grace of giving?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, may I daily grow in the grace of giving, that like the Christians in Corinth I may excel in it. Amen.

DAY 20: ROBBING GOD

Reading: Malachi 3:8-10

‘Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me!’ v8 (NRSV)

This always sounds harsh. Are we really robbing God? Should we really be putting God to the test? Yet that is what Malachi says. If we know what God has called us to give and, in an ungenerous spirit, we seek to keep it to ourselves then we are robbing God. The practice of giving a tenth to God, which would also benefit others, was long established in the Old Testament.

Some commentators say that if we seek to withhold from God what is his, then it will disappear anyway. Look at Haggai 1, where the money didn’t stretch far enough because the people of God had put their own pleasures first and the work of God second. So God challenges His people who say that they only have a small amount of money, or that they couldn’t possibly give anything more. He says, ‘Put me to the test, be open-handed and generous and see what I do.’

So God calls us to give regularly, proportionally and with a generosity of spirit based on all that He has done for us.

For further study: Malachi 1:6-14 - Further examples of robbing God.

Response: What would you do if you thought you were withholding your regular giving from God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are times when I fail to acknowledge you joyfully with my whole offering. Please forgive me and help me to seek that generosity of spirit that is the hallmark of your people. Amen.

DAY 21: STEWARDS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Reading: Psalm 24:1-10

'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' v1

This psalm was probably used as part of the liturgy, an entrance psalm calling people to worship, perhaps at harvest time. It reminds us that everything is the Lord's. The Lord God is the creator and sustainer of this wonderful world in which we live. In Genesis we are told that humankind is to work in partnership with God as stewards of the earth, responsible for the whole created order. Formed in His image, we have to take responsibility, not just for the created order, but for what we consume by using scarce resources. What we put back into the world is an important dimension of stewardship.

What we use and how we use resources can have an impact on other people. In particular, a major impact on people in other countries. So cutting our consumption of vital resources, reusing and recycling, is as much part of our call to be a disciple as the creative and generous use of our financial resources.

So, as Christians, it is important to develop a holistic approach to how we live and use all that God has entrusted us with.

For further study: Jeremiah 12:1-13 - God's concern that human sin impacts the earth, plants and animals.

Response: What steps will you take to adjust your life so it does not have an adverse impact on the world and other people?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have made us stewards of the created order, help me to be mindful of this responsibility as I pursue my daily life. Amen.

WEEK 4: GENEROSITY TOWARDS OTHERS

We have a responsibility to set apart some of our giving to fund the mission and ministry of our local church. However, as disciples of Jesus we are also called to care for those who are less fortunate than ourselves and those who have been pushed to the margins of society.

During week four we will look at our responsibilities and attitudes to others and how we might use some of the resources God has given us to meet their needs.



DAY 22: RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Reading: Deuteronomy 24:10-22

'Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy' v14

The images here may well be alien to us but we can quickly discern the principles at work. There is guidance here about loans, employment practice and caring for the poor. Either we are exacting every last penny from a situation or we are open-handed and mindful of the needs of others. Do we grasp everything and hold on to it, or do we sit light on goods and possessions?

The setting of the passage is an agricultural community. The farmers are encouraged to leave something for those who have to come in and glean, literally to find the last bit of food in a field because they are the poor and on the margins of society. A generous God encourages his people to be open-handed and generous.

Although this is a passage that focuses on the poor it contains vital guidance for how we should live in society as responsible citizens. So, if we are employers, then we have a duty of care to our employees, ensuring that we pay them regularly and that they do not slip into poverty. All of us as Christians have a responsibility to care for those who are less well off than ourselves, especially those who, for whatever reason have been pushed to the margins of society.

For further study: Proverbs 19:17 - a good attitude towards the poor.

Response: Instead of giving money to a charity, what practical actions can you take that would be helpful?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you always demonstrated your love and care for people by practical deeds as well as words. Help me to see what I can do to fulfil my responsibility to those around me. Amen.

DAY 23: LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Reading: 1 John 3: 1-23

'If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?'

v17

Right at the beginning of this set of readings we reflected on the character of God, the one who is generous and loving. As we seek to be like our Father, so we recognise the call to love one another. Jesus laid down his life for us and that is the high calling that we follow. We live in a world where we can have pictures of every crisis in the world beamed into our homes 24/7. So as Christians how do we respond to all these needs?

It is the experience of God's love that motivates us. When we see others in need and we recognise their situation then God's love is at work. If we hold back then how can we say that we love as God loves? Yet the need is greater than our bank account. So in setting our level of giving before God, we recognise that we will have to be selective. Just as we allocate some of our giving to the local church, so too we will allocate some to the wider church, both in long-term support and also in crisis support. As the Spirit moves us and as situations arise, so we may well be moved to give generously out of our abundance, over and above what we had planned to give.

For further study: Luke 3:10-14 - John the Baptist encouraging generous behaviour.

Response: What guides you in giving to good causes?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I could become overwhelmed by the size and complexity of all the problems in the world. Guide me as I seek to support mission agencies, both on a regular basis and as a response to emergency relief. Amen.

DAY 24: PURE AND UNDEFILED RELIGION

Reading: James 1:19-27

'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress' v27

Our words must match our deeds, or more particularly our deeds must live up to our words. While Luther may not have thought much of the letter of James, it contains some very strong words about how we conduct ourselves as Christians.

To simply listen to the word of God and let it pass over us means that we are deceiving ourselves. So as we see need, we are expected to respond to it. Developing a caring ministry is as important in our desire to become disciples as controlling our desires and our tongues. This is always easier said than done but, as the writer records, 'religion that is pure and undefiled is to care for the orphans and widows and those in distress'. As we care for those around us, we are expressing externally and in a practical way what God has done in our lives. So may the love of God flow out through our lives and into the lives of others through our generous and loving response.

For further study: Luke 10:25-37 - Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan.

Response: On what occasions during the past few weeks have you responded in a practical way to someone's need? What did you do?

Prayer: May the love of God flow through me so that my words and actions match up. Amen.

DAY 25: DO NOT BE HARD-HEARTED OR TIGHT-FISTED

Reading: Deuteronomy 15:7-11

'I command you to be openhanded towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.' v11

This passage comes in a section on the law of Jubilee, a way in which debts were wiped out in the seventh year. It is unlikely that this was ever practised in a wide-scale manner. The provisions of the passage are there because, although there are generous people, there are also those who are selfish and greedy, who will subvert God's economy. While the passage has a cultural context, we can look beyond it to how those on low incomes are able to access credit and what we might do to aid the situation. Indeed we are called to put ourselves in the shoes of the poor.

Our attitude to those who are poor should be warm and generous. It is more than exercising the letter of the law; it is about the Spirit of God at work within us, so that we identify with those around us. People were reminded that if God had blessed them then they too should be ready to bless those who, for whatever reason, were poor and needy neighbours. As we consider this passage, we too could think about how we might challenge some of the unjust ways of dealing with loans. Those on low incomes frequently have problems obtaining credit. The work of credit unions has been much in the news recently as a way of challenging loan companies that charge very high rates of interest.

For further study: Exodus 22:25-27 - God's desire for our attitude towards those who struggle.

Response: How do you obtain credit? What do you think about the problems of those who cannot get credit from a bank? Have you considered joining a credit union?

Prayer: Merciful Father, help me to understand more of the situation of those who have difficulty managing their finances and obtaining credit when times are tough. Amen.

DAY 26: THE RESULTS OF INJUSTICE

Reading: Amos 5:6-15

'Hate evil, love good; maintain justice' v15

In the time of Amos, there were many who abused their positions and crushed the poor. They weren't too keen on those who pointed out the error of their ways either. So for Amos it was a tough time. He made it clear that by denying the poor grain, they were trampling on them and that there would be a day of reckoning. So he called upon all those who would listen to seek the Lord and find life. He makes the call several times. Then at the end of the passage he calls on people to seek justice, because to seek justice is to do the will of God. If people seek good and hate evil, God is with them.

As Christians, part of our stewardship of our time and talents is to seek justice for those who are pushed to the margins of society. It may mean giving money but it could also mean lifting our voices in support of the cause of justice. To do so is to be obedient to the call of God on our lives and we will find life and freedom.

For further study: 1 Kings 21:1-19 - God's anger at Ahab's murder and theft of Naboth's vineyard.

Response: What is your reaction when you hear or read about issues of injustice in your local community? What practical steps can you take to address such issues?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, shine the searchlight of your Spirit upon the issues of the day. Keep me sensitive to the needs of others and aware of what practical steps I might take to love good and hate evil and to seek justice for all. Amen.

DAY 27: INVEST WISELY

Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

‘a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.’ v14

Some parables are easier to understand than others! This is a parable about being faithful. A talent was a large sum of money. Though in the light of this passage we can see that Jesus was calling His followers to be faithful and to act responsibly in the light of their opportunities. As Christians we should be willing to invest, not just for a return for ourselves but also in a way in which others can be helped.

In the parable the three servants were entrusted with large sums of money and it is clear from the end of the story that they were expected to do something with the money. Two invested wisely and therefore the pot grew, while one went for security and retaining what he had been given. In the end the two were commended as faithful servants and duly rewarded.

As Christians we should think about what we are investing and where. The term ethical investment can mean lots of different things, but as Christians there are many things that we might find incompatible with our faith.

For further study: Luke 8:1-3 - Jesus supported by wealthy women.

Response: What principles would you use to guide you as you seek to invest any money that you have?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, guide me in my investments that I may look at the whole return on capital and not just the financial gain that I might make. Amen.

DAY 28: CARING FOR ALL

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' v40

One of the great images of the twentieth century is that of Martin Luther King preaching on this passage. His oratory swept people along and they could imagine that they were there at the great day of judgement with the words of Jesus ringing in their ears, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

At the centre of the parable is the message that we are accountable for our actions and will, one day be judged. Our compassion as Christians is not restrained by colour, or religion, or borders. Filled with the love of God we reach out and minister to everyone because that is part of the ministry that Jesus had on earth and to which He calls His followers. We love and serve others because God first loved and served us. Yet, as we serve those around us, we can so often provoke within them a response of 'why do you do this?' Which then gives us the opportunity to share something of the love of God.

Let us look beyond the issues which bring people to us and see Jesus in them.

For further study: Hebrews 6:9-12 - the author's encouragement to help others - God sees and will remember.

Response: At the end of this week when we have looked at the way in which we care for those around us, what one practical action will you make your priority for the coming days?

Prayer: Compassionate God, who cares for all of your creation, fill my heart with a desire to serve my sisters and brothers around me, regardless of colour or race or creed. Help me to see in them the light of your face. Amen.

WEEK 5: PRINCIPLES FOR GENEROUS PEOPLE TO LIVE BY

We draw together our five weeks by establishing some principles to guide our approach to stewardship of all that God has entrusted to us, that we might become fruitful and faithful disciples.



DAY 29: HOW SHALL I EARN MY MONEY?

Reading: Luke 16:1-14

‘whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much’ v10 (NRSV)

One of the problems many Christians have is recognising that their day job is what God has called them to. For some, only things to do with church are seen as ministry. Yet our daily work (or non-work) provides us with a place to exercise our discipleship. So we should aim to think theologically about what we do and to seek to witness to God’s saving love. (Theology is not just the preserve of the clergy; it is the study of God and His actions in this world. As Christians we are called to think and act in a Christian manner, guided by scripture.)

Yes, we earn a wage and we are responsible for the stewardship of that money, but we are called to be faithful in our place of work. Being trustworthy and hardworking are the hallmarks of a Christian. Part of our calling is to be the best employee that we possibly can.

When the steward recognised that he had been found out, he compounded his dishonesty by drawing others into his crimes. His god was wealth, whereas we serve the living God. So our possessions are for this life and, if we are faithful in small things, then God will entrust more to us, not for ourselves but for His kingdom.

For further study: Colossians 3:22-25 - part of Paul's theology of work.

Response: How do you seek to exercise your calling as a disciple of Christ in your place of work?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to exercise my discipleship by being the best worker or volunteer in my place of work. Amen.

DAY 30: SPENDING PRIORITIES

Reading: Luke 12:16-21

‘So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.’ v21 ^(NRSV)

What a contrast between the farmer and the birds of the air. In itself the farmer's desire to have big barns and to store his crop was not wrong. He was taking thought for and providing for the future. But it was his desire to sit back and be self-congratulatory about things, using his wealth only for himself that caused him to err. As we have seen throughout the past few weeks, we are responsible for how we exercise our stewardship over the money and goods God has entrusted to us. He failed to be ‘rich towards God’.

We have a bigger vision and longer term goals than creating an earthly fund to carry us through to the grave. As creatures of God's eternal kingdom we look to use the values of the Kingdom of God as a guide to how we spend our money; setting priorities for all that we do.

So people will be able to see what our real values are by finding what we have set our heart on, for where our heart is, so too is our treasure.

For further study: Philippians 3:12-21 - striving towards things of God.

Response: If someone asked you what was your heart's desire, would they see Jesus?

Prayer: Help me Lord, to always set Godly priorities for all my spending plans. Amen.

DAY 31: CITIZENS OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ v21 ^(NRSV)

Taxation is always a contentious issue. If the Pharisees thought they could catch Jesus out by a simple question about taxation, they got it wrong. In his poverty, Jesus calls for a coin with the emperor’s head on it. As he showed them the coin he exposed their hypocrisy. The coin was used to pay for the roads and the peace that the people enjoyed. It is right that as Christians we pay our lawful dues to society. Yes, we can seek to minimise that by lawful means, but we must never avoid paying what belongs to the state. This calls into question practices such as not putting payments through the books by asking for cash. Should we collude in this? We must take responsibility for ourselves and ensure that our payments are made in the right way. Then the state can use the money for the good of all of society. But we must never withhold from God what is rightly His, namely the whole of our life and money.

As with so many stories, Jesus goes beyond the original question. In the world of his time, the cult of linking the emperor with deities was strong. The fear was that by using the coin it colluded with this belief. Jesus breaks that and effectively says ‘that as you are made in the image of God, give back to God what is His, namely yourself.’

For further study: Romans 13:1-7 - Paul on being loyal subjects and paying tax.

Response: How do you feel about paying taxes? If you are a taxpayer do you use Gift Aid to add value to your gifts to the work of God?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a responsible citizen of heaven and earth, active in my community and willing to pay my taxes for the benefit of the wider society. Amen.

DAY 32: GENEROUS GIVING

Reading: Acts 4:32-37

'All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.' v32

Whenever we hear the cry 'we must return to New Testament Christianity', does the speaker include this passage? The early believers were so caught up in love for God and one another, not to mention a belief that Jesus would come again any day, that they held everything in common. It is likely that goods remained in their possession until such time as needed. Such communal living had a dramatic impact. To start with, there were no needy people among the early Christians: they looked after one another. This seems to be a fulfilment of Deuteronomy 15:4.

Barnabas was one of those encouraging people who felt he had no need of his possessions and so laid them at the apostle's feet. There was no command that he had to do so. He could have sold the field and legitimately kept back some of the proceeds. But no, he needed to give everything. What a contrast with Ananias and Sapphira, who made great show of claiming to give the total proceeds of a sale to the apostles when they had actually held back some of it. Thankfully, church discipline is not quite so immediate and final these days!

For further study: Nehemiah 4:7-18 - people of Jerusalem share out the tasks and so succeed.

Response: What could you own in partnership with others that would enable you to exercise communal living and better stewardship of your resources?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to see beyond this story to practical actions for communal living. Amen.

DAY 33: SAVING FOR THE FUTURE

Reading: Proverbs 21:1-8

'The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.'
v5

Here is the contrast between those who take the long-term view and those who look for 'get rich quick schemes'. The saying goes that 'if a scheme looks too good to be true, then it probably is', so beware. As Christians, it is right to save and plan for the future. Whether that is saving towards major purchases and thereby not taking on burdensome debt, or to prepare for the day when we cease to earn our living. It should not be the defining aspect of our lives. If we recognise that all that we have comes from God, then He has entrusted us with a level of riches that He knows we can cope with, one in which we can find contentment and enjoyment.

The aim, as wise stewards of all that God has given us, is to spend less than we earn and invest that income. That is not always possible, especially in an era when wages are frozen or reduced and costs continue to rise. But what we can do is avoid trusting in foolish speculation, or anything that is poor stewardship of all that God has gifted and entrusted to us.

For further study: Proverbs 30:7-9 - the writer's prayer about money.

Response: As you review your personal and household budget, what could be saved each month if you adjusted your spending?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to be content with the situation I am in, yet mindful of the need to plan for the future. May I be a wise steward of all that you have given me. Amen.

DAY 34: A GODLY LIFE

Reading: Hebrews 13:5-6, 15-16

'Keep your lives free from the love of money' v5

'Do not neglect to do good' v16 ^(NRSV)

We share a common heritage with the first century world in which this letter is set. No doubt the message has been true in every generation, how can we remain pure in a materialistic world? It is easy to say 'let us sit light to our possessions'. It is always harder to do. The writer to the Hebrews encourages his listeners to keep themselves free from the love of money. Even in the first century world I'm sure that was more difficult to do than it sounds.

As we work hard, give generously, and are not covetous of other people and what they may own, so we begin to put into practice the godliness that comes through contentment in and with God and His provision. We have seen over the past few weeks, God cares for us in a way that we will never be able to fully comprehend. Echoing the passage from Romans 12 it is through offering ourselves in worship that we become a renewed people. Transformed by the saving love expressed in Jesus we can respond with the warm, loving generous response that comes from experiencing God's love.

For further study: Colossians 3:1-14 - Paul's instructions for holy living.

Response: As you think about how you might serve God, what is your goal?

Prayer: Lord, keep me free from a love of material possessions by an awareness of how I might use them to benefit others. Amen.

DAY 35: GOOD STEWARDS

Reading: I Peter 4:7-11

‘Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.’ v10

Being a good steward is not just about money. It is about our whole life: time, talents and treasure. God has gifted us with time (though with all the demands upon it there may only be a small part for specific church-based activity); talents, each of us has gifts and we should look for the opportunities to use those gifts; and treasure, our worldly goods.

In this passage we see how as Christians we can use all that God has gifted us with to strengthen the church. Being a steward is not only about what we can do in a church setting. As Christians we are called to live in the world and therefore it is how we exercise our Christian discipleship in work, in the community, in our family as well as in church, that will count.

As good stewards, we will not hide what God has gifted us, but use it for the benefit of others. Being a faithful steward is not easy, but we are filled with the Holy Spirit and He will equip us to live to the glory of God, which is our goal.

For further study: Psalm 51 - a prayer that we might be renewed.

Response: At the end of five weeks of study, what practical actions are you going to take?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have called me to follow you. Equip me to be a faithful steward in all that I do, that I may glorify your name. Amen.

BIBLE REFERENCES

Day	Reference	Theme
5	1 Chronicles 29:10-20	<i>All things come from God</i>
16	1 Corinthians 16:1-4	<i>Regular and proportional giving</i>
23	1 John 3:11-23	<i>Love one another</i>
35	1 Peter 4:7-11	<i>Good stewards</i>
13	1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19	<i>The love of money</i>
19	2 Corinthians 8:1-15	<i>Rich generosity</i>
12	2 Corinthians 9:6-15	<i>God loves a cheerful giver</i>
32	Acts 4:32-37	<i>Generous giving</i>
26	Amos 5:6-15	<i>The results of injustice</i>
3	Deuteronomy 8:5-20	<i>Obedient children</i>
17	Deuteronomy 14:22-29	<i>Set apart for God</i>
25	Deuteronomy 15:7-11	<i>Do not be hard-hearted</i>
22	Deuteronomy 24:10-22	<i>Rights and responsibilities</i>
9	Haggai 1:1-11	<i>The purse with holes</i>
34	Hebrews 13:5-6, 15-16	<i>A godly life</i>
7	Isaiah 55:6-11	<i>A right way up world</i>
24	James 1:19-27	<i>Pure and undefiled religion</i>
1	John 3:11-21	<i>Amazing love</i>
30	Luke 12:16-21	<i>Spending priorities</i>
29	Luke 16:1-14	<i>How shall I earn my money?</i>
20	Malachi 3:8-10	<i>Robbing God</i>
14	Mark 12:41-44	<i>One person's small gift is everything they have</i>

BIBLE REFERENCES

11	Matthew 6:19-24	<i>What are you saving for?</i>
4	Matthew 6:25-34	<i>God the provider</i>
31	Matthew 22:15-22	<i>Citizens of heaven and earth</i>
18	Matthew 23:1-23	<i>What is important?</i>
27	Matthew 25:14-30	<i>Invest wisely</i>
28	Matthew 25:31-46	<i>Caring for all</i>
15	Proverbs 3:5-12	<i>Trust God</i>
10	Proverbs 11:24-28	<i>God's economics</i>
33	Proverbs 21:1-8	<i>Saving for the future</i>
21	Psalms 24:1-10	<i>Stewards of the environment</i>
6	Psalms 34:1-22	<i>Nothing shall I lack</i>
2	Romans 8:31-39	<i>Nothing can separate us from the love of God</i>
8	Romans 11:33-12:8	<i>Offer yourselves to God</i>

The Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

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