

# MONDAY

## As If for the Very First Time

“. . . I do want you to experience the blessing that issues from generosity.”

— *Philippians 4:15, The Message*

The practice of *generosity* describes the Christian’s un-selfish willingness to give in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ. *Extravagant Generosity* describes practices of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extend to unexpected measures. It describes lavish sharing, sacrifice, and giving in service to God and neighbor.

Charles Frazier, in his novel of the American Civil War, *Cold Mountain*, introduces a minor character, a fiddler whose life is changed through an incident that causes him to look at his musical talents in a whole new way.

The fiddler is a drunk, who knows only six songs. His military unit camps near a house where there’s a powerful explosion. A young girl is severely burned and is near death, and her father sends for a fiddler to help ease her way to heaven. The fiddler enters the dark cabin where the young girl suffers in excruciating pain. From her deathbed, she says, “Play me something.” He plays a tune. “Play me another.” The fiddler plays his drinking tunes slowly, thinking it more appropriate to the circumstances. Soon he has exhausted his small repertoire. “Play me another,” she says as she struggles against the pain. “Don’t know no more,” he says. “That’s pitiful,” she says, “what kind of a fiddler are you? Make me up a tune then.” He marvels at such a strange request. But he has a go at it. Soon the girl passes away. Her father thanks the fiddler for lifting her to heaven with his fiddle.

A transformation takes place, and the author writes, “Time and time again during the walk back to camp the fiddler stopped and looked at his fiddle as if for the very first time. He had never before thought of trying to improve his playing, but now it seemed worthwhile to go at every tune. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, he never tired of trying to improve his playing, and he went into taverns of every kind to study the sounds and methods of other musicians. “From that day . . . on, music came more and more into his mind. . . . His playing was as easy as a man drawing breath, yet with utter conviction in its centrality to a life worth claiming.”<sup>2</sup>

Imagine the difference he made in the lives of people and the meaning that was added to his own life. That ordinary fiddle and the simple gift of music, when used for higher purposes, became sacred. When the fiddler discovered the gift he had been given, and the power of that gift to influence the world for good, he was changed. His ordinary talent became beautiful, a source of joy and meaning.

We find something similar through the practice of Extravagant Generosity. Giving causes life. Before, our giving may have been arbitrary, perfunctory, haphazard, a little here and there. But when we discover the great difference generosity makes; place it in service to God; and use our resources to relieve suffering, strengthen communities, and restore relationships, then we look at giving entirely differently. We look at our giving, and see it as if for the very first time. We want to improve on our generosity at every turn until it becomes as easy as drawing breath.

Through our generosity, God can do extraordinary things. Through our giving, God changes lives, and in changing them, transforms us.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 231–232.

<sup>2</sup> Frazier, 232, 234

- When was a time you felt God transformed your life because you gave?
- What ways will you improve your generosity?

## TUESDAY

# Whitewater World!

*“Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way . . .”*  
— **Hebrews 12:2, The Message**

Ever wonder why rafters and canoeists paddle while going downstream?

I’ve spent much time canoeing and kayaking over the years, but I learned about currents, rapids, and whitewater in Central America. While studying Spanish in Costa Rica, my sons and I took a weekend break and joined a raft trip on the Pacuare River. The rapids were posted as Level Three, but the river was swollen, and the ratings didn’t match U.S. measurements. Once we got on the water it felt like we were heading over Niagara Falls, over and over again, hour after hour, frequently finding ourselves flung out of the raft and struggling for our lives in the deep and dangerous currents. I don’t wish to repeat the experience anytime soon. The T-shirt my boys bought afterward read, “Remar o Morir!” Paddle or Die!

The guide sat at the back of the raft calling out instructions about which side to paddle on, and how intensely to do so. During a period of relative calm, as the river was propelling us down toward the next deathtrap, the guide told us to paddle gently but steadily. My son asked, “Why do we have to paddle when the river is pushing us downstream anyway?” He smiled and said, “The only way we have any control over the direction we are going is for us to be moving just a little faster than the current below us. So we have to paddle constantly, or else we just get pushed along out of control.” If we want to navigate with purpose and to control our direction rather than becoming a victim to forces beyond our control, we have to keep paddling. “Remar o Morir!”

We live in a whitewater world. Things change so rapidly—communications systems, the makeup of our communities, the tastes and habits of new generations, the expectations and values of congregations, the competing claims of a secular society for our hearts and minds. This is true in our personal and family lives as well—the phases and steps of a marriage, the transitions of our children, the heartbreaks and hopes, deaths and births, losses and gains, brokenness and reconciliation. Unceasing motion. We live fast-forward lives.

Life pushes us along, and sometimes there seems little we can do; we feel like victims, vulnerable and powerless. But we can’t stop paddling. We can’t stop learning, growing, changing, adapting, and giving our best. It’s by rethinking things, praying anew each day, and by constantly recommitting to the right things that we embrace God’s will for us so that we are able to navigate through the whitewater world. It’s by depending upon friends, knowing the water, and repeatedly practicing the disciplines that keep us connected to God that we remain strong. Life requires an agility of spirit, forward movement, effort, vision, and a keen awareness of the forces at work around us and how to use them for the purposes of Christ rather than become overwhelmed by them.

Keep paddling!

- What are the pressures and currents of your whitewater world?
- How do you learn, adapt, grow, and change spiritually so the currents don’t overwhelm and destroy you?

## WEDNESDAY

# What Happens to God's Love?

*"If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear. My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality."*

**— 1 John 3:17-19, The Message**

A downtown congregation in a moderately-sized community had occasional homeless persons who would ask for handouts. Sometimes street people would be found sleeping on the front steps. The staff developed rules, guidelines, and policies for how to help or where to refer those who asked for help. They had many discussions about the pros and cons of giving cash, vouchers, and addresses of other social agencies.

As the pastor was leaving the church one afternoon, he noticed the part-time custodian carrying out the garbage to the large trash bin in the alley. There was a homeless person sprawled out beside the bin, barely conscious. As the custodian approached the trash bin, he set down the garbage bag he was carrying, pulled out his wallet, and removed a few dollar bills. Without being asked, he walked over to the homeless man and gave him the money, said something, then continued his work and returned to the church. The pastor was amazed and humbled by this extraordinary display of generosity. The part-time janitor who earned less than anyone else on staff gave generously without even being asked, while the staff had spent hours trying to figure out policies and procedures.

The pastor asked the custodian why he gave the money and pressed him about whether he thought the homeless person might misuse the money for alcohol or drugs. "I always do what I can," the janitor answered. "I give them a little money and say, God bless you, because I figure that they are some mother's son, some father's child, and so I give them something. What they do with the money—well, they have to answer to God about that. I have to answer to God about what I do with mine."

- Have you ever witnessed an extraordinary and unexpected act of generosity?
- How has another person's generosity influenced your own practice of giving?
- Who is learning from your examples of generosity?

# THURSDAY

## Ownership

*“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”*

*— James 1:17, NIV*

Fundamentally, we either consider the material things in our life—our money, house, property—as owned by God and belonging to God, and we manage them for God’s purposes, or we view them as owned by us. If they are owned by God, then our tithes and offerings represent our returning to God what belongs to God already. What we keep also belongs to God, and we feel obligated to spend it wisely and not frivolously, and to invest it in ways that do not dishonor God’s purposes. We try not to waste money or to live more lavishly than we should. We spend responsibly, allowing our relationship with God to form our minds. We manage God’s resources as faithfully as we can.

But if we believe that our material resources fundamentally belong to us and that we entirely possess them ourselves, then we can do whatever we please with what we own, and our tithes and offerings are giving something that belongs to us, to God. God should be grateful for our generosity in giving a percentage for God’s purposes rather than our feeling grateful for the privilege of using what belongs to God.

Think about the possession of land. Suppose we hold legal title and own land according to civil authorities. In the larger span of the earth’s history, does our patch of soil actually belong to us, or are we temporary stewards? The land didn’t begin with us and doesn’t end with us. The land we claim to own has existed for millions of years, was used by humans for millennia before us, and will remain for eons more after we are gone. For the ordering of civil life, we rightly say we own the property and it belongs to us. But our mortality assures that we are only the temporary stewards, managers, and keepers. At our dying, what will the things we own mean to us? Whose will they be? People live and perish, but purposes are eternal. With that understanding comes a profound and humble sense of responsibility about how we use the land. It’s temporarily ours to enjoy, but we do so with respect and awe, because ultimately everything belongs to God, and not to us.

This concrete example applies to all of the temporal elements of our lives—our possessions, our wealth, even our bodies and minds. Which perspective is truer, more ethically sound, more aligned with reality? That it all belongs to us and we can do whatever we want? Or that we are the temporary beneficiaries, and we find meaning in using what God has entrusted to us to the highest purposes? Which perspective fosters better decisions and deepens a spiritually grounded sense of community and responsibility? The wisdom revealed in Scripture and tradition for more than three thousand years is that those who practice from the perspective of a steward find greater happiness.

- Which of these two views do you hold?
- How does this belief shape your actions? Your giving?

**FRIDAY**

## **Robust Ministries**

*“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

*— Matthew 6:33, NIV*

It is through giving of ourselves as God has given to us that we help the body of Christ flourish. Offering our material resources to God is a fundamental activity that is so critical to the church’s mission that failure to perform it in an exemplary way leads to the decline of the church. Churches that nurture proportional giving and tithing among their members thrive. They accomplish great things for Christ, offer robust and confident ministry, and they prosper for the purposes of Christ and make a difference in the lives of people.

Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every Communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church van that has taken us to camp, every church camp cabin where we have slept—all are the fruit of someone’s Extravagant Generosity.

We have been the recipients of grace upon grace. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the same to generations to come. We have worshiped in sanctuaries that we did not build, so to us falls the privilege of building sanctuaries where we shall never worship.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity pray for their congregations to flourish in the ministry of Christ for children, youth, adults, members, and strangers near and far. They serve the church, offering their best efforts. They push the church to offer bold and vital ministries that transform the world, relieving suffering, deepening justice, encouraging love. And they give—regularly, generously, sacrificially, faithfully, and humbly.

Extravagant Generosity is not just about the church’s need to receive, but about the Christian’s need to give. Generosity is an essential quality of spiritual maturity and growth. The practice of Extravagant Generosity changes churches.

- How have you been the recipient of another person’s Extravagant Generosity?
- Have you been the recipient of a congregation’s Extravagant Generosity? Of God’s?

## SATURDAY

# All the Good You Can

*“You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us—in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.”*

**— 2 Corinthians 8:9, The Message**

Where God’s Spirit is present, people give. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote:

Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.

John Wesley taught extensively about the use of money, the danger of riches, and the importance of giving. For Wesley, all things belong to God. This changes how we perceive the manner by which we *earn* money and *save* money, causing us to do so in appropriate ways. And it changes how we *spend* money, making us more responsible, and shapes how we *give* money. Wesley valued industrious and productive work, but he believed that acquiring money does not provide a profound enough life purpose to sustain the human spirit. When he wrote, “Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can,” he drew an unbreakable link between acquisition and generosity, inviting us to use our material wealth to deepen our relationship with God and to increase our positive impact for God’s purposes.

No stories from Scripture tell of people living the God-related spiritual life while fostering a greedy, self-centered, self-serving attitude. Knowing God leads to generosity.

- How does generosity and giving change the values that guide your earning, saving, and spending habits?
- How does your relationship to God affect how you earn your money? How you invest it? How you spend it? Have you ever changed how you earn, invest, or spend because of your desire to follow Christ more truly?

# SUNDAY

## First Things First

*“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

— **Matthew 6:33, NIV**

When asked how much money they would need to earn to be happy, people of all different incomes answer the same. If they could only earn about twenty percent more than they presently do, they would finally arrive at a satisfying happiness. Persons earning \$10,000 dream of reaching \$12,000; those earning \$100,000 believe that with just \$20,000 more per year they will be happy; and people earning \$500,000 believe that when they earn \$100,000 more they will finally arrive. We pursue a receding goal. This is a prescription for never-ending unhappiness. We can never possess enough to satiate the appetite for more. Single-minded pursuit of lifestyles highlighted by pop culture keeps us stuck on the surface of existence, captured in the material world, unhappy with what we possess, and blind to the real riches.

When we accept unreflectively the myths of money, we suffer from a self-created, culturally-fostered discontent. Forty-year-olds feel like failures because they are not millionaires; families buy houses beyond their capacity to afford; people pine for what they cannot possess. We wallow in abundance while suffering from a self-proclaimed scarcity. Despite the fact that we live in better houses, earn more money, drive nicer cars, spend more on entertainment, and enjoy greater conveniences than ninety percent of the world’s population, or than we ourselves enjoyed thirty years ago, we never have enough.

We are surrounded by inducements that make us acutely and painfully aware of what we lack, more so than of what we have. Without beliefs and intentional practices that counterbalance the influences of culture, we feel discontent no matter how much we have.

Extravagant giving is a means of putting God first, a method for declaring to God and to ourselves the rightful order of priorities. When we practice it, we live with a more relaxed posture about money, less panicked and reactive. We take possession instead of being possessed. Money becomes a servant rather than our master. By provoking us to give, God is not trying to take something from us; God is seeking to give something to us. Every time we spend money, we make a statement about what we value. All inducements to spend money (advertising, social expectation, seeking to impress people) are attempts to shape our values. When we fail to conscientiously decide what we value and align our spending habits accordingly, a thousand other inducements and voices stand ready to define our values instead. Giving provides a spiritually healthy detachment from the most harmful influences of a materialist society, an emotional distance that is otherwise unattainable. Giving protects us from the pangs of greed.

The practice of generosity opens us to deeper reflection and conversation about wealth and how it relates to purpose and happiness. Serious giving leads us to ask, What is our family’s definition of success? How wealthy do we hope we, or our children, will be, and why? What motivates us as a household, and what matters most to our happiness? What will become of the wealth we accumulate?

How much do we give, and why? What difference do we want to make in the world? How does giving influence our relationship with God? What does Extravagant Generosity mean for us? For God? These and other questions can only be asked with authenticity when they are supported by the practice of giving. Giving fosters intentionality.

- How does your family talk about money and what makes for true happiness?
- How wealthy do you hope your children become, and why?