

MONDAY

The Joy of Giving

*“How can I repay the LORD
for all his goodness to me?”
— Psalm 116:12, NIV*

Scripture is replete with examples and teachings that focus on possessions, wealth, giving, gifts, generosity, offerings, charity, and sacrifice. Christians give because they serve a giving God—the giver of every good gift, the source of life and love.

Jesus’ teachings abound with tales of rich and poor, generous and shrewd, givers and takers, charitable and selfish, faithful and fearful. He commends the poor widow putting her two coins in the treasury; giving out of her poverty, she “put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:1-4). The story upsets expectations by pointing to proportion rather than amount as the measure of extravagance.

Jesus’ unexpected love for Zacchaeus so radically changes the tax collector that he gives his wealth to the poor and to those whom he has wronged. Giving serves justice and is a fruit of Christ’s transforming grace (Luke 19:1-10).

The story of the good Samaritan highlights extraordinary generosity. The Samaritan not only binds up the wounds of the stranger left to die in the road, but he takes the stranger to an inn, pays for the stranger’s care, and commits himself to provide for the long-term well-being of the stranger (Luke 10:35). The Samaritan’s generosity, like Christ’s compassion, knows no bounds.

And beyond all the teachings and parables, the followers of Jesus see in the gracious and costly gift of his sacrifice and death the ultimate self-revelation of God. The most memorized Scripture of the New Testament expresses the infinite nature of God’s gracious love revealed in the gift we have received in Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).

In these Scriptures above—the widow giving all she had, Zacchaeus in his transformation, the Samaritan with his compassion, and God’s self-giving in Christ—giving is always *extravagant*, life changing, and joyous.

God uses our practice of giving to reconfigure our interior life. By giving, we craft a different inner desire as the driving element of life. Our motivations change.

People give because generosity helps them achieve God’s purposes in *themselves*. By giving, we develop the inner qualities of generosity. Generosity is not a spiritual attribute someone acquires apart from the practice of giving. It becomes discernable only through visible behavior. We cannot become generous and hold on to everything we have for ourselves without letting go. The opposite of generosity is greediness, selfishness. These are not the qualities that lead to life, and so by our giving we cultivate a different nature inside ourselves.

- How does God use your giving to change you?
- Have you ever experienced a time when you felt led by God to increase your giving?

TUESDAY

Aligned With God's Purposes

"They . . . gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints."

— 2 Corinthians 8:3-4

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul commends the generosity of communities of faith, especially those who remain surprisingly extravagant in their giving during difficult travails. Writing of the churches of Macedonia, he says "for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (2 Corinthians 8:2). The notion that stewardship rightly focuses on the Christian's need to give rather than the church's need to receive is a spiritually powerful truth. The practice of tithing blesses and benefits the giver as much as it strengthens the mission and ministry of the church.

Still we wonder, does our giving really make a difference? What does our generosity have to do with our spiritual lives?

One reason many people give is simply because they love their church and they want the life-changing ministries of their congregation to prosper. They are themselves the beneficiaries of the church's ministries and they do their share to pay for the bills, the salaries, the facilities, and the costs so that the church can offer outreach, children's ministries, worship, and mission. They support the church so that others can receive what they have received. The fruit of this giving is tangible and visible; it is both immediate and long-term. Churches with generous members offer more ministry, work with greater confidence, have less conflict, and make a greater impact on their communities and on the world. Responsibility and hope for the church motivate the giver. People want their congregations to thrive.

People also give because their contribution aligns with the purposes God wants them to fulfill in the world. Helping people, relieving suffering, teaching the spiritual life, reaching young people—when we sense God's call to make a difference, we can contribute our time or become personally involved in the day-to-day ministry. Another way to make a difference is through giving, contributing the resources that make possible the work that we feel called to support. We please God by making the difference God wants us to make.

- How does God use your generosity to help your congregation to thrive?
- What's the largest gift you have ever given? What motivated you? What resulted from the gift? How were you affected?

WEDNESDAY

How Much Do We Need?

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

— **Luke 12:15**

Tolstoy, in “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” writes about a man, Pakhom, who farms the land given to him by his father. He wants more, so he saves and sacrifices until he expands his acreage, and even this is not enough. He hears about another region where more land can be bought with less money, so he sells his farm and moves his family across the country to the larger spread. Still, he is dissatisfied. Finally, he hears about a place where the king is offering an extraordinary deal. If you give the king all your money, you may take possession of all the land you can personally encompass by walking around it in a single day. Pakhom imagines how far he could walk in a day, and all the land he could own. He sells all his property and pays the king in exchange for his chance to walk the perimeters of the land that will be his.

A stake is hammered into the ground before sunrise. Pakhom must return to the stake before sunset, and all the land that he circles before that time will be his. As the day dawns, he runs at full speed in order to cover as much territory as possible. As the day heats up, he slows down and begins to circle back, but he sees lush pastures that he must possess, so he extends his path to include them. As the sun moves lower, he realizes that he has miscalculated, and he fears that he may not return to his starting place in time. He runs harder to reach the stake before sunset, pushing himself beyond exhaustion. He comes within view of his destination with only minutes to go. Pushing dangerously beyond his body’s capacity to continue, he collapses and dies within reach of the stake.

How much land does a person need? Tolstoy ends his short story by saying that “six feet from head to heel” was all he needed.¹ Why are we discontent with what we have?

Giving puts us in a healthier relationship with our possessions, and with the material world in which we live. We like making money, but we enjoy other things as well, such as the love of our family; belonging to community; a sense of meaning, accomplishment, contribution, and service. We enjoy making a positive difference in the lives of other people. But how do we maintain balance and perspective? How can we appropriately secure the basic needs of food, shelter, education, and health while also living with purpose? How do we avoid too much preoccupation with the things that do not ultimately satisfy, and cultivate those things that do? The intentional practice of generosity helps us keep our priorities straight.

Giving reflects the nature of God. We give because we are made in the image of God, whose essential nature is giving. We are created with God’s nature imprinted on our souls; we are hard-wired to be social, compassionate, connected, loving, and generous. God’s extravagant generosity is part of our essential nature as well. But we are anxious and fearful, influenced by a culture that makes us believe we never have enough. God sent Jesus Christ to bring us back to ourselves, and back to God. As we “*have in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus,*” we become free.

Growing in the grace of giving is part of the Christian journey of faith, a response Christian disciples offer to God’s call to make a difference in the world. Generosity enlarges the soul, realigns priorities, connects people to the body of Christ, and strengthens congregations to fulfill Christ’s ministries.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *How Much Land Does a Man Need? and Other Stories* (Penguin, 1993), 110.

- Do you sometimes feel that your life consists in the abundance of your possessions?
- How can practicing generosity counteract greed and begin to balance the priorities of your life?

THURSDAY

I Have Learned to Be Content

“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. . . . I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

— **Philippians 4:11-13**

Generosity derives from a profound reorientation in our thinking about how we find contentment in life. Paul writes, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” but Paul was not a slacker, lacking in initiative! He was industrious, competitive, and ambitious for the work of God. Paul realized how seductive our activity and our appetite for more could become. We begin to believe that happiness depends upon outward circumstance and material comforts rather than deriving from inner spiritual qualities—love, peace, compassion, self-control, gentleness, prayerfulness. Possessing greater wealth does not mean that we experience contentedness. We can still feel panic, emptiness, striving, and isolation. We feel needy, and our appetites become insatiable. Surrounded by water, we are dying of thirst.

Breaking the cycle of conditioned discontent requires courageous soul work. Abundant living derives from generative relationships, from mutual support, and from knowing how to love and be loved. Contentment arises from seeking that which satisfies.

Contentedness comes from personal integrity, a life aligned with high values, depth of spirit and of mind, growth in grace and peace. These grant release from agitation, from unhealthy striving, and from continual dissatisfaction. Founded on these, we may value many of the things our culture induces us to seek, but without the harmful, destructive intensity. We want to improve our conditions and standing, but we don’t embrace these objectives with the panicked intensity our society would have us do.

Primarily, contentedness is formed in us by the practice of generosity. Contentedness is learning to be happy with what we have rather than feeling distressed by what we lack. In our voluntarily giving away part of our wealth and earnings, we are saying, “I can spend all of this on myself, but I choose not to.” In that simple act, repeated and deepened with frequency and intentionality, we break the bonds of self-destructive acquisitiveness.

Second, contentedness results from a deep, cultivated sense of gratitude. Generous people are thankful. They give thanks in all things, and their gratefulness sharpens their awareness of the deeper sources of happiness and from the spiritual awareness that God has already provided us everything we need to flourish. All is grace upon grace.

Finally, contentedness comes from persistent interior work and cooperation with the Holy Spirit to develop the personal habits that keep us from surrendering our sense of well-being, identity, and purpose to materialist measures. Living fruitfully is not merely a matter of having something to live on, but something to live for. Purpose, connection, love, service, friendship, family, generosity—these sustain contentedness.

- What causes you to feel content? How do you avoid a self-destructive acquisitiveness?
- What personal habits help to keep you grounded in Christ?

FRIDAY

The God-related Life

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

— **Mark 10:25, NIV**

We cannot “pay” our way to a closer relationship with God; whether giving aids us in our relationship with God or not depends upon our inner attitude. However, an unrestrained appetite for wealth or clinging too tightly to what we possess can hold us back and cause us paralysis in our following of Christ.

Scripture reminds us that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10), and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25, NIV). The rich young ruler cannot relinquish his wealth and so he forfeits life with Christ (Luke 18:18-25), the farmer builds bigger barns to store his possessions while avoiding eternal priorities and he loses his soul (12:16-21), the wealthy person ignores the sufferings of Lazarus at his doorstep and finds himself separated from God (16:19-31), the servant buries his talents instead of using them for his master and receives condemnation (19:12-26), and Ananias and Sapphira perish for their deceit that was motivated by their desire to keep their money (Acts 5:1-10).

Our clinging and coveting and hungering for wealth can obstruct our pathway to God and to the life God would have us enjoy. When unrestrained desire for material riches occupies the soul, there is little room left for God. Like Paul’s assistant, Demas, we fall too much “in love with this present world,” and we abandon Jesus’ mission (2 Timothy 4:10). Greed impedes growth in Christ.

On the other hand, by giving generously, our beliefs and trust in God rise to tangible form. We become doers of the word and not hearers only. Giving makes following God real. We can live a God-related life or we can live without attention to God’s presence and will. The God-related life means our relationship with God influences all we do. When we seek to do the things God would have us do, including giving, our practice intensifies our love for the things God loves. Then the material possessions that can serve as a distraction or impediment to following Christ become an instrument for our serving Christ. Our material goods, consecrated to God, nourish our desire to serve God. Generosity feeds our love for God.

- How does the practice of generosity affect your relationship with God?
- In terms of wealth and generosity, what does living a “God-related life” mean to you?

SATURDAY

Tithing Is a Life Choice

“Test me in this and see if I don’t open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams.”

— **Malachi 3:10, The Message**

The practice of tithing provides a concrete way for us to take the words we speak, “God is Lord of my life,” and put them into practice. Our commitment becomes tangible; our giving becomes a way of putting God first, an outward sign of an inner spiritual alignment.

Tithing provides a consistent and universal baseline, a theologically and biblically faithful standard, that is nominal enough to allow people of nearly any income to meet without imposing great hardship and yet large enough to stretch us and to cause us to do the necessary reordering of our priorities that spiritually reconfigures our values.

Tithing challenges us to ask ourselves, Is my giving generous? Or merely expedient? Do I give for practical reasons to help the church, or for spiritual reasons to nourish my spirit?

The practice of tithing is not merely about what God wants us to do, but about the kind of person God wants us to become. Does the giving I now practice help me develop a Christ-like heart?

Tithing alone is not sufficient to fully meet what the gift and demand of God’s grace requires of Jesus’ followers. The voices of the prophets ring the warning that people cannot expect material sacrifices alone to please God but that God’s reign requires justice, righteousness, and faithfulness (Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:8). People of God are to practice justice and compassion without neglecting the tithe (Matthew 23:23-24).

Tithing requires honest prayer. What would God have me do? Are there things God would want me to give up in order to tithe? The practice causes us to adapt our behaviors to someone else’s will: God’s. No one tithes accidentally. Extravagant Generosity requires focused soul work, deep conviction, a mature spirit, learning, practice, and extraordinary intentionality. Tithing is not merely a financial decision; it is a life choice that rearranges all the furniture of our interior lives. That’s why we do it. Tithing blesses us.

- Have you practiced the tithe, regularly offering ten percent of income to God? If not, what keeps you from doing so? Do you desire to do so? How do you think it would affect your spiritual life?

SUNDAY

Practicing Generosity

“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.”

— 2 Corinthians 9:11

The practice of Extravagant Generosity stretches us to offer our utmost and highest to God rather than to give in a manner that is haphazard, unplanned, reactive, minimalist, mediocre, or mechanical. Extravagant does not correspond with giving that is merely dutiful, required, burdensome, mandated, or simply doing one's part. Extravagant denotes a style and attitude of giving that is unexpectedly joyous, without predetermined limits, from the heart.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity change their lives in order to become more generous. They become rich in giving. They do not wait to be asked. When they see a need, they step forward to meet it, offering their resources as a means of help. They look at difficult financial times through the eyes of faith rather than of fear. They persist in doing good. They give in all seasons.

They enjoy giving. They pray and hope and dream about the good they accomplish through their gifts. They consecrate their giving to God. They delight in generosity. They give expecting nothing in return.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity learn to enjoy things without possessing them, to moderate their acquisitiveness, and to find satisfaction in simpler things. They avoid personal debt as much as possible. They save. They avoid overindulgence and waste. Their possessions do not rule them. They aspire, like Paul, to know the secret of being content with what they have. They give thanks in all circumstances. Love is a gift, and life is grace.

People who practice Extravagant Generosity change lives. Their giving knows no bounds. They are rich toward God.

- What obstacles prevent you from giving extravagantly? How would the practice of greater generosity change you?
- When was a time you felt God's Spirit move you to give resources beyond what you had previously practiced? How does your giving to God influence other aspects of your life?