JOYFUL GENEROSITY

What the Bible Says About Giving

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This book is dedicated to the faithful members of Sovereign Grace Churches who have given generously to their churches and our shared mission.

John Wesley, the great 18th century hymn-writer and preacher, recalled a life-changing moment while at Oxford. He had just purchased several paintings to brighten up his walls when he saw a chambermaid shivering in an atrium with nothing to warm her but a thin linen garment. He reached into his pocket and found he had nothing to give her. Wesley thought to himself, "Will thy master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward?' Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold."

From that point on, he determined that he would keep only what he needed to live on. The rest he would give away for the advance of the gospel and the care of God's people. At first, the amount he was able to give was relatively small. But as his income increased, he never spent any more on his own comforts, but instead gave more and more and more. His fruitfulness—and joy—in ministry is well-documented.

Wesley once famously quipped, "What should rise is not the Christian standard of living, but the standard of giving."[1]

Maybe you're tempted to think, "Wesley had the luxury of possessing means far beyond his basic living expenses as he progressed along in his ministry." We must remember that as Jesus observed the offering in the temple in Mark 12, it *wasn't* the large gifts of the wealthy that caught his attention. It was the widow. Even though she gave a mere couple of dollars in today's terms, she gave what she had—*all* she had. She offered up 100% of her monetary assets. The heart behind the willingness of her incredible sacrifice is what Jesus sees. Her example speaks loudest among the cloud of witnesses testifying to the goodness of giving.

If the Holy Spirit hadn't moved upon the Gospel authors to record this incident, the widow would have been forgotten to the pages of history. But such is the case with almost all generous givers. The grace that God supplies very rarely takes the form of fame or notoriety. The grace he gives looks and feels like joy, contentment, and very often the *gospel-fruit of salvation.*

The fact that you are reading this book is evidence of God's grace in you. Perhaps you've already begun to grow and desire to learn more about generosity. Or maybe you've freshly felt the welcome sting of the Holy Spirit's conviction to abound in generosity. There is good news for you: God's Word has a lot to say about generosity. And this information, far from an academic exercise, is aimed at our joy. God loves a cheerful giver, and he wants to instill in us the joy of giving that he feels in his own heart.

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1. John Cortines and Gregory Baumer, *True Riches: What Jesus Really Said About Riches and Your Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 72.

In what follows, we will walk through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. These theological principles on giving unfold in the storyline of Scripture:

1. God is revealed from the beginning as a generous God.
2. God commands his people to be generous.
3. Jesus is the preeminent display of God's generosity.
4. Jesus warns of the danger of the love of money.
5. The early church was marked by joyful generosity.
6. Christians are commanded to be generous to the poor and their pastors.
7. Christians are expected to give with sacrificial cheerfulness.
8. Christians are blessed for their generosity.
9. Christians are generous in extra-local partnership.

Many of these principles have radical relevance to our giving today. Here are a few of the questions we will answer:

- Does God still demand that Christians tithe?
- How does Christian generosity differ from secular philanthropy?
- Is it unbiblical to be wealthy?
- How much of my giving should be directed to local church and denominational opportunities?
- Is generosity ultimately altruistic and self-denying?

Our hope is that your knowledge of Scripture is deepened and your joy in giving is expanded as you see God's generosity in Christ and his gracious will for his people.

1. God is revealed from the beginning as a generous God.

The story of generosity does not start with us; it begins with the remarkable revelation of a God who is shockingly generous: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Out of nothing, with nothing needed in return for his gift, the Father, Son, and Spirit spoke creation into being (John 1:1-3; Gen. 1). And as God created, he did so willingly and cheerfully. Five times we hear his voice declaring "it was good" (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25), twice blessing it (Gen. 1:22, 28), and once more proclaiming over his completed creation, "it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Many a mythology has conjured a god who depends upon the gifts, sacrifices, and praises of his worshipers. But God is no Zeus. He needs no gift, no praise, no creature—nothing but himself to be utterly contented, breathtakingly wonderful, and all-powerful. That such a God would choose to give is positively mind-bending to comprehend. And yet it is blessedly true (our joyful confusion notwithstanding!). He is rich in grace and delights to share his goodness with his creatures through lavish generosity. "God is full and he makes full."[2]

Yet, as extravagant as this is, God's grace is not limited to the act of creation: he created us for the purpose of knowing him. He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:8), pursued them when they sinned (Gen. 3:9), raised up a family of worshipers through Abraham, and revealed himself through his prophets and law—all that he might be known by his people, despite their sin. What an incredibly generous God!

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2. Kelly Kapic and Justin Borger, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 26.

Though generosity begins with God, it does include us as well. God pauses in his royal march of creation to form mankind with a unique connection to himself and intention for their lives: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26, 27). As those made in the image of God, we have the loftiest of earthly purposes. We exist to represent and reflect God's generosity and other qualities in his world.[3] We were made to reflect the cheerful generosity of the God we worship.

If we're honest, the call to give can sound far more like a duty than a delight. It's a part of the cost of being a Christian, and it has a rather unpleasant ring to it. Though generosity does require sacrifice, it isn't merely something we have to do, it's something we were made to do. When we give generously, we are living closest to the intention behind our very being—we are reflecting the greater generosity of God.

Practical Considerations: How does Christian generosity differ from philanthropy in general?

What passes for generosity among secular philanthropists often amounts to little more than a calculated transaction. Though common grace can allow unbelievers to genuinely love to give, many give for a necessary tax break, to flex their financial might, or to pacify the guilt of their extravagant living. Christian generosity is rooted in the generosity of God most powerfully displayed in Christ and empowered by the Spirit. Christians don't give to get back; they give to

3. See John Kilner's *Dignity and Destiny* for an in-depth treatment of the image of God.

reflect their God's greater generosity. In fact, all that we own is God's. Rather than only giving out of our abundance (as many secular philanthropists do), Christians can even give out of their poverty, knowing that everything belongs to God.

2. God commands his people to be generous.

Created to reflect the generosity of God, mankind instead greedily sought to become like God by eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6). Through this tragic failure, sin spread through all mankind and the curse of death permeated all of creation (Gen. 3:17-18; Rom. 8:19-22). God in his grace did form many among his people who excelled in generosity despite the presence of sin. Consider Job's frequent offerings (Job 1:1-5), the people's generosity towards the tabernacle (Exod. 25:1, 4-9, 36:6), Boaz's treatment of Ruth (Ruth 2:12-16), and David's lavish giving towards the building of the temple (1 Chron. 22:14-19). Not only did these people give, but they were also filled with incredible joy in giving (1 Chron. 29:9, 17-18).

These rays of light are sadly eclipsed by an overall story of generosity-failure in the Old Testament. God in his grace called the elderly pagan Abram out of a faraway city and raised up a family through him against all natural odds. He formed a nation out of bondage in Egypt and paid the price of their redemption: sacrificial blood. Ultimately, we now know the sacrificial lambs foreshadowed the price paid by Jesus, the Lamb of God. But the message of Israel's redemption was clear from the start: Israel existed by grace; a redeeming grace that

came at the price of blood (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22).[4]

Most of us have been the recipient of a gift or two that really amazed us. Perhaps you were even speechless. All you could do was joyfully say, "Thank you!" And your excitement grew as an opportunity arose to return that act of generosity. How could Israel not respond in worship with joyful, grateful generosity to God?

Israel was appropriately commanded to care for the poor and needy,[5] provide for the temple workers (Num. 18:21-28; Deut. 18:1-8), and give a tithe in addition to abundant offerings—all as a joyful response to God's deliverance (Lev. 27:30-34; Deut. 12:5-7; 15:7-11). These commands were not given to limit Israel's joy. Rather, God wanted to bless his people. Their generosity would lead to God spiritually blessing them with special peace and affirmation and renewed material provision (e.g. Prov. 11:24-25; 14:21, 31; 19:6, 17; 25:21-22; 28:8, 27). These commands were for their good and joy.

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4. Israel's redemption was always intended to be a redemption through judgment (Exod. 6:6) and to culminate in the killing of Egypt's firstborn sons (Exod. 4:22-23). Yet the signs themselves, though serving to magnify God's glory, were not the Exodus' focus. It was the institution of the Passover meal and the symbolic painting of blood on the lintel that most gloriously symbolized the generosity of God (Exod. 12:1-28). Though it was hidden from their sight, as the nation of Israel sacrificed the Passover lamb in the cool of night, they were displaying the incredible cost of their final redemption (Rom. 3:20-25).

5. The gleaning laws are a great example of this. Israel was not to harvest the edge of their fields, and every seventh year they were not to harvest at all so that the poor and needy could eat (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19; Exod. 23:10-11).

Shockingly, Israel scandalously exploited the poor (Amos 8:4-7) and failed to bring in the full tithe (Mal. 3:8-10).[6] Israel was like an angry teen refusing to do household chores in a house they did not buy, eating bread they did not bake. Instead of trusting God for provision and experiencing the joy of generosity, they audaciously chose to hoard their own possessions.

Solomon's reign is one example of Israel's greed. His story is one of bright promise giving way to tragic apostasy. At the beginning of his reign, God speaks to Solomon in a dream. His question provides Solomon with a remarkable opportunity, "Ask what I shall give you" (1 Kings 3:5). With all of the riches of the world available upon his request, Solomon instead asks for an understanding and discerning mind that he might rule well. God specifically commends him for not asking for riches among other earthly things. He had resisted the temptation of greed and seemed poised for a future of kingly wisdom and righteousness.

And yet, Solomon may have passed this momentary test that night in Gibeon, but he ultimately failed the test of life. God greatly blessed Solomon with wealth because of the wise way that he ruled. Though the law anticipated the need for a king to govern Israel, it placed specific limitations on a king's personal wealth. He should not acquire many horses, or many wives, "lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold" (Deut. 17:16-17). Solomon, the wise king, became the fool, directly disobeying the

6. Another example of this type of greed was displayed when Israel focused first on their own needs and dwellings before participating in the rebuilding of the temple (Hag. 1:4-8).

commands of the Torah. He accumulated unprecedented wealth: 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, and 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of whom were foreign (1 Kings 10:14-11:8). Solomon's greed was the chisel that cracked the unity and witness of Israel and ultimately led to the nation abandoning their God. The story of the Old Testament is that the people of God failed to be as generous as their God.

Practical Considerations: Must Christians be generous, or is this an optional extra to the Christian faith that only some thrive in?

The Old Testament is filled with commands that the people of God be generous with their possessions. They were called to support the needs of the temple and the poor, provide sacrifices, and give other offerings as worship. Israel not only failed to be generous, but they also exploited the poor and needy. They were meant to be a nation that reflected God's generosity to the world, and their scandalous greed was one of the reasons for God's punishment of them in exile. You simply cannot read the Old Testament without the impression that God demands generosity from his people.

God's generosity to us is not meant to end with us. As Miroslav Volf beautifully pictures it, "We are not the final destinations in the flow of God's gifts. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow from us."[7] God demands that his people give, a joyful calling that Israel tragically refused. But happily, the fount of God's

7. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 50.

generosity never runs dry. In response to his people's greed, God opened the storehouses of heaven in gracious generosity; he gave his own heart!

3. Jesus is the preeminent display of God's generosity.

God's generosity is powerfully displayed in creation, mercifully displayed in his redeeming grace, and undergirds all of the blessings of the law. Yet, as brilliant as this display of generosity is, what occurred in the incarnation is even more glorious. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who dwelled forever beside the heart of the Father. And he became flesh and dwelled among us to unite us to God (John 1:1-18, especially v. 18). His coming has no parallel; his generosity has no equal! Jesus displayed radical selflessness that was driven by a love for his Father and others (Phil. 2:7). We simply must sing with Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Luke 1:46-48).

Yet, it was on the cross that God most powerfully proved his generosity. God gave his precious only Son (John 3:16), and crushed him in our place to make us his children (Isa. 53:10). And in full harmony with his Father, Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Heb. 12:2). Joy and sorrow wed in the marvelous generosity of the cross! God's wrath removed, sinner's guilt expunged, shame's barrier broken—all in the generosity of the cross! And on the third day, he rose in triumph over the curse of death, vindicated in the sight of God and man. Jesus took far more than the punishment of a

mere few, his blood was "poured out for many" (Matt. 26:26-28), and he will be surrounded by countless worshipers from every nation for all eternity (Rev. 7:9).

Practical Considerations: Does challenging Christians to abound in generosity create a works-based mind-set? Does this encourage us to give in order to get things from God, instead of giving as an offering of worship?

It is true that abounding in generosity can open Christians to the temptation towards pride in giving and inappropriate expectations of God's provision in response to their giving. But God's preeminent generosity in Christ forbids any sense of working for our salvation. What are our gifts compared to Christ? "Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" has been deposited into our spiritual bank accounts! (Eph. 1:3)

Recalling that God created us out of no need, and saves us with incomparable generosity creates the appropriate heart posture in our giving: pure thanksgiving and joy. We outdo one another in showing honor, eagerly turn the other cheek when we are harmed, pray and sing louder than all the rest, and give out of our extreme poverty—not so that we can stand out and gain recognition but because our God has done incredible things for us in Christ.

4. Jesus warns of the danger of the love of money.

What is the topic that Jesus most often addresses in the Gospels? Of the recorded words of Christ's teachings, money tops the list. What was his emphasis? Jesus warns of the danger of wealth. Riches can be a barrier to entering the kingdom of God (Mark 10:23; Luke 18:22-24) and often deceive others and choke out God's Word (Mark 4:18-19). He warns the rich that their lavish lifestyle may conceal a deep spiritual bankruptcy (Luke 16:19-31).

Those who live in the 21st century as first-world Christians are living in unprecedented luxury. Even people from third-world areas regularly have access to smartphones! Jesus warns everyone who would follow him, "Take care and be on your guard against covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). We are no better than Judas, who walked with Jesus for three years but still failed to resist the powerful pull of the love of money (John 12:6; Matt. 26:14-16). We are no better than the Pharisees (Luke 16:14), or those who sought to make a profit in the temple (Matt. 21:12-13). Only grace will make us different. And so we must analyze our own hearts and consider if we have truly counted the cost of following Jesus.

> *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26)*

Following Jesus may very well mean the loss of our earthly possessions. The call to follow Jesus means nothing short of dying to our own selfish desires for our life. There is no person consumed with becoming rich and also consumed with following Jesus. Jesus claims the entirety of our lives when we trust in him for salvation. Though we likely retain wealth, we must steward it as if it belongs to Jesus. The hands of those saved by grace hold finances loosely, knowing that all we have truly belongs in the hands that bear the marks of nails.

Practical Considerations: Is it ungodly to be wealthy?
Did Jesus preach a message akin to a Bolshevik revolution? Is each member of the redeemed community necessarily equal in finances and power? Is any wealth an indicator of corruption? The answer to these questions is a definitive no. Jesus's frequent warnings of the danger of riches makes a ton of sense when we remember how he summarized the law: wholehearted love for God and others (Mark 12:29-31; cf. Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18). The issue with money was not wealth in and of itself but rather the way our hearts are tempted to worship it. The failure to thrive in generosity is a failure to love God and others more than our possessions. Jesus warns, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"(Matt. 6:21). Like the rich young ruler, money and possessions are often the last thing that we want to give to Christ (Mark 10:17-27). When we gain more possessions, we are tempted to treasure them in bigger barns rather than respond in generosity (Luke 12:15-21). "One can be rich and a disciple of Christ but must have a free attitude towards

possessions. The overarching paradigm is generous giving and not 'godly materialism.'"[8]

The presence of wealth is not automatically a reason for guilt and the needed repentance, but the absence of generosity is. To any who God has kindly blessed with an abundance of possessions (most in the Western world), the proper response is thankful generosity with the expectation that God very well may continue to bless you as you excel in giving. Indeed, Jesus's teaching on God's kingdom indicates that all who follow him are the recipients of incredible generosity. Our God sacrifices the fattened calf (Luke 15:22-24), promises to restore a hundredfold all that we have lost (Matt. 19:28-30), prepares an immense wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-8), and promises his kingdom is a far more priceless treasure than anything this world has to offer (Matt. 26:6-13).

The sacrifice of Jesus and the kingdom that he offers frees the wealthy to be abundantly generous with their possessions. In light of this teaching, it is actually a wise investment to be generous and foolish to be greedy (Matt. 6:9-21; Luke 12:215-21; 28-34).

5. The early church was marked by joyful generosity.

As Jesus taught and promised, an even more immediate help descended upon his people as they waited after his ascension. The Helper, the Holy Spirit, descended onto the disciples in the upper room, and Peter was filled with power to proclaim

8. Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 146.

the good news of Jesus Christ. Three thousand Jews from all over the world repented of their sins and received salvation. The first cries of life of the newborn church are absolutely beautiful. The Spirit caused their community to rapidly grow in number and flower in beauty.

> *"And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people." (Acts 2:45-47)*

What a gloriously unified people! What marked their unity? They were joyful, particularly delighting in sacrificial giving. In the Spirit, God came to abide within his people. "How great a God is He who gives God!"[9] The unity of the early church testified to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Christ had given them his happy, benevolent heart and the world looked on in wonder. God was in them and God was using them to pour out his unending generosity.

But would this be like the offerings for the temple (1 Chron. 29:7-18), a mere flash-in-the-pan of joyful generosity quickly followed by generosity-failure? No. Generosity remained a salient feature of the early church. "No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." "Great grace was upon them all" and they excelled in generosity to the degree that there was "not

9. Augustine, "On the Trinity," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 224.

a needy person among them" (Acts 4:32-34). Certainly there were many poor in their midst, but marvelously none had need because of their cheerful giving.

One highlighted example of this generosity was when Barnabas sold his field and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:36-37).[10] This beautiful sacrifice is contrasted with the scandalous deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, who claimed a similar degree of sacrifice but withheld part of the proceeds dishonestly.

We squirm a bit as we see their immediate death for their joyless and dishonest giving (Acts 5:5, 10). Though rightly terrifying, the point for us today can be actually encouraging: the Spirit of God will continue to empower us to abound in generosity and will expose counterfeit displays of veiled greed. Unlike the old covenant, the Spirit of God will cause the people of God to be transformed, from the heart to the hands, to abound in cheerful generosity.

When we observe faithful believers abounding in generosity, we don't have to suspiciously question their authenticity. We should expect to encounter many cheerful givers because of the power of the Spirit. Sin still remains, and though its power has been broken (Rom. 6:1-11), we will encounter believers backsliding into greed, false professions of faith, and false prosperity-gospel preachers. But the Spirit of God *will* purify and transform his community to reflect the cheerful heart of Christ. And that is reason for great joy! If you long to grow in generosity, if you have found your heart filled with

10. Also, the attention given to the care of the Hellenistic widows in Acts 6 illustrates the fact that generosity remained a crucial issue for the early church.

joy as you give, you are experiencing the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

6. Christians are commanded to be generous to the poor and their pastors.

The narrative of Acts shifts from Peter and Jerusalem to Paul and the nations as Cornelius is converted and the full implications of the gospel begin to dawn on the early church. It's in the context of the church planting that extended the gospel to the nations that the Epistles were written. Most of us love these books as they speak most closely to our own context in our local churches. The New Testament letters are a treasury of teaching on generosity.

Though the Epistles say much about a general pattern of generosity (more on that later), there are two particular areas where Christians are commanded to give: to the poor and to their pastors. James unfolds a vision of God as the one "who gives generously to all without reproach" and indicates that "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:15, 17).[11] In light of God's generosity and ownership of all, James calls Christians to hold their financial status loosely (James 2:1-13; 4:13).[12] Whether you are wealthy or poor compared to your Christian friends, all are leveled by the gospel; all that we have flows from God.

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11. It is in these initial stages of gospel expansion that the Epistle of James was written. "The Epistles," Crossway, accessed September 28, 2023, http://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-45-epistles/.

12. The pagan rich of the world are also condemned for the wealth they gained through exploiting the poor (James 5:1-6).

Jesus's words to the rich young ruler include a command to give to the poor:

> *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)*

This was a command given to a young man consumed with possessions and not to the church in general, but the same heart for the poor continues to burst from the pages of the Epistles.

James claims that care for the poor is one work that evidences saving faith (James 2:14-17). As he defends his ministry to the cantankerous Galatians, Paul mentions that James, Cephas, and John supported him with only one request: "Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Gal. 2:10).[13] The Apostles were in lock-step in their deep longing that the poor remain the recipient of the generosity of the church. Paul also urges the generosity of the churches to those who were in need. He urges those who had once been thieves to work honestly with the expressed purpose that they "share with anyone in need" (Eph. 4:28). He wanted the greediest grumblers to be exemplary in joyful generosity. All things can be enjoyed if received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4-5), but we must remain always ready to give as opportunities arise.

Though this generosity should be displayed in care and concern for all those in need, Christians are called to especially

13. This parallels the conscientious concern for those in prison that the writer of Hebrews emphasizes (Heb. 13:3).

care for those in our local churches. It's through the local church that the poor should be cared for. We should be eager to do good to all, but "especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). This is why Paul also gives directions to Timothy to organize care for widows who were truly in need. He wanted their needs to be met through the local church (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

Even more clearly, Christians are commanded by God to give financially to their local church to support their pastors. After calling the Galatians to "share all good things with the one who teaches" he warns them that their failure to do so was evidence of dangerous greed (Gal. 6:6-8).[14] Paul encourages Timothy to push through any discomfort and challenge the believers in Ephesus to give double honor to elders who rule well and especially those who teach (1 Tim. 5:17).[15] Any pastor who has taught on these texts knows the discomfort of expounding these truths. But God's voice is clear regardless of our awkwardness: a church's faithfulness to support their pastors is an issue of obedience to the Word. If we add to this the glowing joy that Paul speaks of the Philippians' support of his ministry, we see that the normal relationship between a pastor and his flock should be joyful support (Phil. 1:5; 4:15; cf. 2:25-30).

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14. This is not to say that bi-vocational pastoral ministry is unbiblical, especially in certain poor areas or areas of a high cost of living.

15. He also supports Jesus's previous words, "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14; cf. Matt. 10:10). Hebrews 13:17 also hints at the same principle, "Let [your leaders] do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

We might think that Paul spent a lot of time demanding his people's support, but ironically, he often chose to withhold his right to payment. As he wrote to the Thessalonians, he did this to challenge the often idle believers to work for their own living. In a Roman patronage system that trained poor people to depend on the gifts of the wealthy, these believers especially needed this word. As Paul labored for their joy without demanding payment, he urged them to adopt his work ethic and labor for their own living (1 Thess. 4:12; 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-12).[16] Logically, contented labor is the necessary fertile ground from which cheerful generosity can abound.

It's important that we don't conclude from Paul's sacrificial generosity that pastors are not entitled to support. Instead, we should be challenged to follow in his example of joyful sacrifice as we support our own local pastors. Our financial support of the church may not exactly be carrying the church's annual budget. But no matter how small our contribution, God desires all of his people to work for their own living and give generously. With Augustine, our prayer should be, "Give what you command, and then command whatever you will!"[17]

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16. He also does this with the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:1-23; 2 Cor. 12:15). His words here are a helpful balance to our previous principle. Though Christians should seek to meet the needs of the poor—especially those in their local church—poor believers should not overly depend upon the wealthy of their church.

17. Augustine, "The Confessions," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edward Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 263.

Practical Considerations: Are Christians required to tithe?

To tithe means to give a tenth.[18] If you search the New Testament, you won't find any commands to tithe. Some Christians discover this and conclude that financial giving is not required in the new covenant. They think, "Just give as your heart leads you," or "It's pretty legalistic to tell people they should tithe." It is true that the tithe is only commanded in the Old Testament, but (as we have seen so far) joyful generosity is everywhere expected, even in poverty (2 Cor. 8:2).[19] The question of the tithe apparently isn't one that the New Testament is interested in answering, but it does emphatically answer this question: *"How can I thrive in giving joyfully in sacrificial ways, even beyond my means?"*

That's the heart and life that God desires for us. He desires not merely a required tithe, but a life of abundant generosity. Randy Alcorn helpfully pushes us to think beyond what is required to what God desires in our lives:

"There's a timeless truth behind the concept of giving God our firstfruits. Whether or not the tithe is still a minimal measure of those firstfruits, I ask myself, Does God expect His New Covenant children to give less or more? Jesus raised

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18. It should be noted that in the Old Testament, only property owners tithed and that their tithe was far beyond 10%, rising to 23.3% (See Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:8-32; Deut. 14:22-29; 26:12-15). However, the experience of most in the West is akin to the most wealthy among Israel. Kelly Kapic and Justin Borger, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 195-196.

19. The tithe is also never directly abolished as a practice of the church.

the spiritual bar; He never lowered it (Matthew 5:27-28)."[20]

So, are Christians still required to tithe? In light of all we have been given in Christ, it's likely better to think of the tithe as the starting place for Christian generosity, rather than the required amount we give. Better than meeting a certain percentage, we should examine our use of finances and ask ourselves if we are giving in sacrificial ways. "Conformity to Christ is our calling as Christians. Thus, the biblical standard for giving is ultimately a person, not just a percentage."[21] On a practical level, if our local churches are going to facilitate the care of the needy, adequately support their leaders, and engage in mission, it's challenging to imagine this happening in a setting where Christians are not at least tithing.

7. Christians are expected to give with sacrificial cheerfulness.

On his third missionary journey, Paul wrote again to the Corinthians in a repeated appeal that they raise money for the saints in need in Jerusalem.[22] A large famine had pressed the Christians there to the point of desperation. But despite the urgent need and the Corinthian's wealth (2 Cor. 9:13-14), Paul does not mandate their contribution. Why doesn't Paul just flex his apostolic authority and demand the gift?

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20. Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Unlocking the Secret of Joyful Giving* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2017), 63.

21. Kelly Kapic and Justin Borger, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 195.

22. His earlier appeal came in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

He was after something far more glorious than that. Paul wanted these Christians to display the heart of their savior who had given up his glory for their salvation. He wanted them to cheerfully and willingly give. Paul first turned to the example of generosity from the church in Macedonia, not only praising their gift made out of "extreme poverty," "in a severe test of affliction," but also their "abundance of joy" (2 Cor. 8:1-6). This was a generous and joyful church!

As compelling as that example was, Paul rooted his argument in the generosity of the cross. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).[23] But Paul wasn't done. He finally comes out and states what he is after: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).[24]

Don't get this backwards. Here Paul doesn't limit the call to give but rather enhances it. The heart that has been saved by the work of Jesus Christ will be so amazed at the riches they have received that they will cheerfully give beyond their means with the full expectation that God will abundantly provide. This is the Spirit-given heart of the new covenant that yearns

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23. It should be noted that Paul's framing of the work of Christ in financial terminology is not unique. Redemption, inheritance, and offerings are all financial terminology that are used to describe Jesus' work. It is here that he most directly connects the gospel to generosity, but the inference is obvious in many other places of Scripture. Additionally, the ubiquitous language of grace creates an atmosphere of giving throughout the New Testament.

24. This emphasis is also present in how Paul does not command Philemon to free Onesimus, but desires him to freely do so (Philem. 1:14).

to do the will of God (Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; Jer. 31:33). When we are full of this joy of generosity, our song will truly be "take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold."[25]

Practical Considerations: Should Christians be specially honored for giving large gifts?

Many park benches, building projects, and even a few church sanctuaries are given the name of Christian benefactors. What should we make of this practice? In one sense, we are called to "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10). Honoring the sacrificial giving of Christians is biblical and a part of how we express the ongoing love and fellowship of our union in Christ. Paul takes public honoring to a whole new dimension by capturing the generosity of the Macedonian Christians in the inspired Scriptures.

On the other hand, Jesus warns us of the danger of giving for the sake of recognition. He tells a parable of a Pharisee and tax collector journeying to the temple to pray. The Pharisee lauds his generosity, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). In contrast, Jesus proclaimed the tax collector justified because of his humble faith.

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25. Frances R. Havergal and Ira Sankey, "Take My Life, and Let It Be," Hymnary.org, accessed May 5, 2023, https://hymnary.org/text/take_my_life_and_let_it_be.

The temptation towards pride in possessions and generosity is great (1 Tim. 6:5-10).[26] Because of this, it seems wise to be selective and careful in the public recognition of generosity among Christians. In private, encouragement and honor are vitally important, but the corrupting power of money ought to make us cautious of tempting people to pride. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus calls believers to let their light shine before others in good works, but just a chapter later he warns of trumpeting our gifts for public recognition (Matt. 6:1-4).

Jesus cares more about why we publicly give than whether we publicly give. Our hearts must be aimed at the glory of God and not our own. With prayer, some may choose to give more publicly in order to encourage others to also abound in giving[27] but general practices of recognition as a reward for giving should be discouraged in churches. It's also not wrong to tell stories about the generosity of others (as we've done in this book) if the motive is to stir others to give generously, and to give God glory. For example, ministries like Generous Giving do this well as a means to cultivate generosity among God's people. [28]

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26. An example of this is in Revelation 3:16, where Jesus condemns Laodicea for their self-sufficient affluence.

27. Lydia is a great example of a person who apparently chose to display her generosity publicly (Acts 16:11-15, 40), though Paul's immediate needs and the Roman patronage system likely made it more challenging for her to give in secret. Churches often depended on wealthy members for hosting and providing the needs of their gatherings.

28. www.generousgiving.org

8. Christians are blessed for their generosity.

Before moving on to the rest of the New Testament, Paul includes another motivator for giving that is worth its own heading. Generosity is surprisingly self-beneficial!

> *"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written,*
>
> > *"He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;*
> > *his righteousness endures forever."*
>
> *He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God" (2 Cor. 9:6-11).*

Why should the Corinthians give? Why should we give? One God-ordained motivator is that we will benefit. Given that the One we worship is the Father of lights, who needed nothing, yet created all, who could have judged us, but gave his Son, it shouldn't surprise us that he delights to bless us for our joyful generosity. Here in 2 Corinthians 9, Paul parallels a concept in the law (Lev. 26:3-5, 9-10; Deut. 11:26-32; 28:1-14; 30:11-20; Josh. 8:30-35) and wisdom of the Old Testament (Ps. 112;

128; Prov. 3:9-10; 19:17): God delights to bless his people for their faithful obedience. Though the blessings he promises are rooted in spiritual dimensions, God is eager to bless his generous people in every way. The Christian can give sacrificially knowing that God will provide his needs and reward him beyond what he deserves. We will be blessed immediately when we give, but even more in the life to come. We detect a joyful challenge in these words. It's as if God's saying, "Go ahead and try me! You cannot out give the giver of life!"[29]

Practical Considerations: Is generosity ultimately altruistic and self-denying?

God created us for his glory. "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). And yet, our God is most glorified in the redeemed when we are most satisfied in him.[30] "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). When we can truly agree with Paul and claim that all our joy and satisfaction is bound up in Christ as our greatest treasure, that is when we most glorify him. Likewise, our joy is only fullest when it is basking in the glory of Jesus Christ. Given that our joy and God's glory are not mutually exclusive, but are rather integrally connected, we should be unsurprised that God delights to reward us for our faithfulness. When we abound

29. This is the same confident generosity that God expressed to Israel (Mal. 3:10-12).

30. Read almost any book by John Piper and you'll hear this powerfully presented. *Desiring God* is perhaps the best explanation and defense of his position which he credits to Jonathan Edwards. Chapter 7 is on money and giving.

in generosity, we are obeying his commands and reflecting his own heart. Thus, God loves to bless us with temporary material blessings that give way to even greater eternal ones.

Christian generosity, then, is not altruistic. It is for our joy and happiness. The priority of God's glory is important. God does not exist for our joy. We exist to rejoice in his glory. Yet, it is nonetheless true that God created us to bless us with glory and reward. Ultimately, a failure to be generous is a terrible choice in investments.

9. Christians are generous in extra-local partnership.

The cheerful generosity that supported the needy and the local leadership through the church also overflowed in extra-local generosity in the New Testament. As the gospel began to spread and churches engaged in prayer and generosity in partnership, the famine and persecution in Jerusalem worsened. The disciples decided to send relief through Paul and Barnabas, and so over a 10-year period, Paul sought to raise relief for Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

It is this need that necessitated his urgent appeal to the Corinthians to participate in the grace of generosity. We've already looked at the principles from his motivating words in this letter, but here notice that the giving he desires is extra-local in focus. As the Philippians had supported him in his labors in Thessalonica and Corinth, Paul was asking the Corinthians to support their Christian brethren in Judea (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:13-14).[31]

31. Paul also references this collection in Romans 15:30-31.

The partnership between the churches of Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem is a beautiful example of how God not only ignites cheerful generosity in the individual Christian but also in whole congregations. The generosity of the Jerusalem church sent Paul to Antioch. The generosity of the Macedonian church propelled the giving of Corinth in Achaia, which in turn inspired the giving of the cheerful Macedonians all the more. The same DNA of sacrificial giving that marked Paul's ministry in withholding his right to financial support was now also true of the churches in the different regions where he had worked. "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Cor. 12:15).[32]

Later on, Paul wrote a letter to the Philippians, the exemplary Macedonian Christians he mentions in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Here we learn that these Macedonians had uniquely entered into financial partnership from the first day that they were formed (Phil. 1:5; 4:15; cf. 2:25-30). This was extra-local generosity because Paul spent little time physically with this church. But it was their support that allowed him to refuse his right of payment from Thessalonica.[33]

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32. Paul's personal generosity is also evident in his correspondence with Philemon. He offers to pay any outstanding debt that Onesimus (the runaway slave) had incurred personally (Philem. 1:18).

33. Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 96. (See Phil. 4:16.)

It is significant that Paul calls this financial support "a partnership in the gospel."[34] This was not merely a gift but one that stemmed from a heart that was saved by grace and yearned to see others hear and grow in the gospel. In their gifts and prayers, the Philippians were with Paul in his journeys for the gospel. Even as he reflects on their generosity, he reminds them, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit" (Phil. 4:17). More than the financial provision, Paul rejoiced in the fruit of God's grace that was evident in this church's happy giving. We too are co-laborers with those that we pray for and financially support in extra-local partnership.

One final way that the Bible calls Christians to thrive in extra-local generosity is in the sending of missionaries. Paul was sent from Antioch on several missionary journeys, but he also worked through other churches support throughout his ministry.[35] As Paul neared the end of his ministry, he aimed to pioneer a new work among the unreached people of Spain, which was considered the ends of the earth at that point. Paul

34. Schnabel describes this phrase in the following way in *Early Christian Mission*, "The phrase εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον describes "an active participation of the congregation, their involvement in the gospel, their cooperation in the preaching of the gospel" in the sense of "a direct participation in preaching, a passing on of the gospel that they had accepted" besides the financial support (Phil 4:15-16) and the prayers (Phil 1:19) of the Philippian Christians. Since Paul refers in Phil 1:12 to the "advance of the gospel" (προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου), the "fellowship of the gospel" is centrally connected with this "progress": the believers in Philippi contribute to the "progress of the gospel" through their financial support of the apostle and through their own missionary activity in Philippi." Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1460.

35. He spends a great deal of time in Corinth (1.5 years) and Ephesus (3 years) as well.

directly expresses his hope to be helped along his way when he visits them. Raising support for this mission was part of the reason for the writing of his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:13; 15:24). Here we see that the ongoing support of missionaries and one-time gifts are the expectation of local churches in the New Testament.[36] How could a community saved by the lavish generosity of Christ not overflow with generosity when missionaries sought their aid?

John's third epistle also provides a strong commendation for Christians to support missionaries.

> *"Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth." (3 John 5-8)*

Once again, as in Philippi, we are encouraged to consider ourselves fellow workers for the gospel with the missionaries that we support—even those that are strangers. What amazing joy and opportunity is present in extra-local partnership!

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36. Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 136-137. (See Rom. 15:24; 2 Cor. 8-9; Phil. 4:18.)

Practical Considerations: "How much of my giving should be directed to my local church and denominational opportunities?

Maybe you're wondering, "Is this when you are going to tell me that I have to give all of my money to my church and Sovereign Grace?" Not at all. There is great freedom and joy in giving as God moves our hearts towards particular opportunities. One person may eagerly give towards a crisis pregnancy center, while another gives towards clean water in an impoverished area. There are many worthy opportunities for generosity, and particular Christians will have specific passions.

Yet, even while we enjoy the diversity of opportunities, we must preserve the priority of the local church and extra-local partnership. The church is the means by which God is bringing about the fullness of his purposes in this world. How could anything excite our hearts towards giving more than the local church? Christians are commanded to give locally, and extra-local opportunities are primarily met through extra-local partnership between churches. As such, we should be eager to give at least a tithe to our local church. When we move beyond local giving, we should consider the opportunities and needs in our denomination. These are the primary places that the Scriptures point us to enjoy the grace of generosity.

What does generosity look like in your life?

In the Christian life, there's a gulf that exists between knowledge and action (James 1:23). To cross that gulf requires the grace of God. But to even arrive at accurate knowledge and understanding requires no less grace.

You've made it this far in this book. You've read and learned and, we hope, you have been affected by God's heart for the generosity of his people. This in itself is an evidence of God's grace at work in your life. But what does this look like applied in your life? How might you respond to what you've learned and pursue the joy that God holds forth to you through the act of giving?

To help you answer these questions, what better way than to give you an example of another person from history who experienced tremendous joy through sacrificial generosity? Our aim here is to show you the grace of God in others in order that you might be confident that God has made the same grace available to you.

In his book, *Gospel Patrons*, John Rinehart refers to three men God used to be massive movers in modern salvation history. One of them is William Tyndale, whom God used to translate the New Testament into English, paving the way of the Reformation into the English-speaking world.

But Rinehart shines the spotlight away from Tyndale and toward a man who stood in the darkness behind him: Humphrey Monmouth. Monmouth first met Tyndale in a pub and listened to Tyndale's passion for his project of the incredibly dangerous work of translating the Latin Vulgate into English—a project for which he was eventually burned at the stake. As Tyndale spoke, Monmouth realized that Tyndale was running out of money to continue his work.

So Monmouth, a local small business owner, offered to fund Tyndale in perpetuity until the project was complete. Though Monmouth spent over a year in prison and Tyndale died a martyr's death, Tyndale's English New Testament opened

the door for the Reformation and the recovery of Scripture to the common person in the English-speaking world. This would never have happened if Monmouth hadn't offered to generously fund Tyndale's lifework.

God rarely moves salvation history forward apart from generous benefactors of the Church. But history rarely remembers these gracious supporters.

Interestingly, this is not so in the world of secular philanthropy. Periodicals and books lift high the corporate and individual charitable superstars of the day. For example, *Forbes* publishes an annual issue highlighting the contributions of "The Titans of Philanthropy." [37] For some, the joy in giving comes from the notoriety that comes with it.

But as Christians, we have a greater joy—a sustained joy. John Rinehart remarks that the titans of philanthropy "will be remembered for giving to good causes; Gospel Patrons [Christians who give toward the advance of the Gospel] will be remembered for giving to eternal ones. Where philanthropists aim to nourish people's bodies and train their minds, Gospel Patrons prioritize peoples' souls. Gospel Patrons treat symptoms, but ultimately they go after the disease." [38]

Additionally, Christian givers go after the glory of the disease-healer. Our greatest example of giving is God the Father. His own testimony of generosity through the gift of

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37. Rachel Sandler, "The Forbes Philanthropy Score 2022: How Charitable Are The Richest Americans?" *Forbes*, September 27, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2022/09/27/the-forbes-philanthropy-score-2022-how-charitable-are-the-richest-americans/?sh=71bo5ab098.

38. John Rinehart, *Gospel Patrons* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014), 23.

His Son is the theme of this book.

We give glory and honor and praise to the Great Benefactor of our souls when we extend generosity to others because of the generosity that we've been shown. Through this, God amplifies our joy.

Aside from being a Sovereign Grace pastor, I (Kyle Houlton) am a vocational fundraiser for a Christian Rescue Mission in California. I supervise about 10 other frontline fundraisers and together, we have an annual goal of raising $23 million. I tell my staff, "At the end of the day, you're not asking people for money. You're coming alongside people to help them discover the joy of giving." I remind them constantly that they're appealing to peoples' love for Jesus, their desire to make the Gospel known, and their desire to see gospel transformation in the lives of the least, the last and the lost. Over time, my team has come to understand that they're helping donors to see the role that God has ordained for them to play in the fulfillment of those desires through giving.

And guess what? The donors I personally have the pleasure of working with are some of the most joyful people I know. And the most generous among them are 1) typically not the wealthiest and 2) have what I call "giving momentum." "Giving momentum" is the strange phenomenon where *generosity begets generosity*. In other words, these people give generously and sacrificially to their local churches and also to the Rescue Mission and also the missionary couple they know and so on and so on.

The point is that giving doesn't create a begrudging heart. Rather, it creates the opposite. And as people experience the joy of giving, they want more of that joy and so they give

more. And more. And more. And God gives them more and more and more joy.

You probably know many of these kinds of givers, people with serious giving momentum. Many of them are probably your fellow church members. Look around your church. Who are the pillars of generosity? Let me ask you a question: "Are they sad, unhappy people?" You've probably met very few unhappy generous people. These are the most immediate examples of God's grace at work through giving in our lives. Imitate them.

So, having seen the grace God has made evident in others and the grace God has made available to you through his Son, where do *you* go from here?

May we make a suggestion? Give generously! Give beyond what would otherwise be comfortable and "easy" for you. Reflect the generosity of God the Father and become more like His Son, Jesus Christ. It's not about the amount. It's about the heart—like the widow's heart. As you give, believe that God will write a chapter of salvation history (even if only in the life of one of your unbelieving neighbors) through your giving. Give to the one great eternal cause of the advance of the gospel. Whether it's generous giving to your local church or your local church *and* your denomination *and* a missionary family *and* … well, you get the point! Give. And discover multiplied joy until that day when you stand face to face with Jesus Christ, your eternal reward.

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