

Set Free From Stuff (Part 3) Generosity: entering into God's Grace and Joy

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, everything I have is yours. Everything I have is a gracious gift from you. Your Son Jesus gave up his riches in heaven, so that through his poverty, I might become rich. You have promised that you will always give me (and my family) enough to be generous at all times. Please help me by the power of your Holy Spirit to give you first priority, in my life and my budget. Fill me with the joy of sharing in your grace – your generosity. Amen.

Opening:

Share with the group a time when you found joy in giving rather than getting.

Getting into God's Word

The Tendrils of Stuff

Read Matthew 13:23-25. What does Jesus say are the 'thorns' that can choke out the Word of God in a person's life and make the Word unfruitful?

How have you seen 'the worries of life' and 'the deceitfulness of wealth' at work in your own life? Or to put it another way, how do the 'tendrils of stuff' wind around various parts of your life?

Read Mark 10:17-27. What was Jesus' prescription for the young man who was trapped by the tendrils of stuff?

Throughout the Bible, both OT and NT, God gives his people instructions on the use of material blessings and resources, particularly the use of money. Wealth can either be a blessing or a curse. God wants his people to be free from the tendrils of stuff, not to be enslaved. One of the ways God provides for our freedom is by inviting us to share in his GENEROSITY, by giving freely and graciously to others out of what he has provided for us. Generosity refers to not just money, but also our time and our gifts and talents. However, this study will focus more on generosity with our money – on Christian giving.

2 Corinthians chapter 8-9 gives us a complete theology and practice of Christian giving. Please read through this passage in its entirety before continuing with the study.

This passage shows us that God is first generous with us – he is the source of all we have, and all that we call our own is a gift from him. Four aspects of Christian generosity and giving come out. This study helps us examine and internalise those four aspects.

1. Christian Generosity is Joyful and Liberating.

Christian giving should always be *joyful and liberating*. *It should never become coercive or guilt-inducing*. God wants our freedom from the tendrils of stuff, not a new law to tie us down.

Read the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-9.

Did Jesus tell Zacchaeus what he 'should' do with his money or how much to give?

Do you get the sense that Zacchaeus was grudging or joyful about his giving? Why? Why did Zacchaeus decide to give so generously?

What are God's promises associated with sharing the grace of generosity in the following verses? Write down or discuss in your small group.

Luke 6:38

Acts 20:35

Matthew 6:31-33

Proverbs 11:25

2 Corinthians 9:10-14

Why is Christian generosity such a joyful and liberating experience? How does it help us fear, love, and trust God above all else? Then how does it help us become more fully human?

How does it help us enter into the Gracious and Generous nature of God?

This leads us into the next

2. Christian Generosity is Responsive.

Christian generosity is *responsive* – we give in response to God's grace.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. What is the grace of God?

How have you become rich?

How rich have you become? Why?

What is the basis for Christian giving?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

What was the Macedonians' situation?

How did they feel about giving?

The Greek of 8:1 says, more literally,

'For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the Macedonian churches, that in many trials and testings, their joy overflowed and their deep poverty abounded in the richness of their generosity.'

What was the grace of God that was given to the Macedonians? Was it only 'the grace of forgiveness' or some other kind of grace?

What did the Macedonians do in response to this grace? Did they do this with fear or joy?_

From verse 5, what is *the most important aspect* of Christian giving? Why do you think this is so important?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:7.

What is Paul's instruction to the Corinthians?

(Note the Greek of this verse concludes 'In order that you also overflow in *this grace*' – ie the grace of giving generously that was given to the Macedonians (8:1).

Christian giving is a grace-gift of God. Generosity is a gift of God's grace, just as much as God's forgiveness which comes through Jesus. God has made us rich – he has given his only Son for us. Christian giving is responsive. We give in response to God's grace, not for any other reason.

So, the basic question as Christians will not be :*How much will I give to God?* But: *How can I respond to God's grace?*

God wants us to acknowledge him as the Giver of all that we have. He invites us to do this by setting aside, *as a first priority, a proportion of all that he gives us.*

In doing this, God invites us to share in the joy of generosity, and the joy of discovering that he is more generous with us than we can ever be with others! To give to God from our first and best is his plan for Christians.

This leads us to the next aspect of Christian giving.

3. Christian Generosity is Proportional.

The principle of proportionality is that we give in proportion to what God has blessed us with. God has given us 100% of all that we have, both in terms of our material blessings and also in terms of the skills, abilities, employment, and opportunities to earn or receive material blessings.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

Read 2 Cor 8:11-12.

What does God's word teach about Christian giving in these two passages?

How much should I give?

The New Testament never mentions *tithing* as something that Christians should practice. God does not specify in the New Testament that a tenth of all our income must go back to him. Instead, God consistently instructs Christians to return to him a *proportion* – a percentage of what he gives us. This is worked out between God and the person. It is 'what someone had *decided in their heart*' to give.

The question with proportional giving becomes then

'Of all that God has given me by his grace, what proportion will I use, in response, for his work through the church ?

What proportion for generosity towards others (charity and justice)?

What proportion for my family's needs?

What proportion for my own needs and saving for the future?'

Note that with proportional giving, if our income goes down, the amount we give also goes down! If our income goes up, the *amount* goes up too. But the *proportion* does not change.

This brings us to the next aspect of Christian giving.

4. Christian Generosity is Planned.

Many of God's people simply have not received clear teaching and the tools they need to plan their giving and generosity. Many Christians give haphazardly, from week to week, rather than 'deciding in their hearts' how to use the material gifts God has blessed them with. Unfortunately, this means that many Christians are missing out on the joy, liberation and grace which entering into God's generosity can bring.

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Read 2 Corinthians 9:7

What do these two verses say about Christian giving and generosity?

There are two complementary aspects of generosity with our possessions (not just our money). One is giving cheerfully to God's work of spreading the gospel through the church. The other is giving generously to God's poor through charity.

Read Hebrews 13:16, Romans 12:13, Matthew 25:40. What do these verses say about our responsibility to give to the poor out of what God has given us?

What does Jesus say about such an act in Matthew 25:40?

God calls us to share in his generosity with those who have so little that they struggle to survive.

How does this aspect of Christian giving and generosity help to *set others free* from the tendrils of stuff?

How does it help to *make others more fully human*?

Putting it into practice: The Proportional Giving Pledge

On the attached page you will a 'Proportional Giving Pledge' form. This is a tool designed to help each of us be intentional about generosity and about entering into the generous character of our gracious God. It is a way of entering into a planned, personal, prayerful, proportional commitment to share in God's grace of giving.

Please note the sealed pledge is only a tool, not a legalism. It is a tool to help God's people put God as the first priority in their budgets, and so find freedom from the bondage of consumerism (which says 'it's all about me'). Entering into God's generosity by freely and cheerfully giving, as we have been given freely, brings joy and liberation, by helping us put our trust in God alone, and not in our material possessions.

Please work through this form, and as you do, be willing to let God speak to you and work in you with the grace of sharing his generosity.

In accordance with 2 Corinthians 9:7, if you cannot commit to giving a certain proportion cheerfully (hilariously), please don't! Please be honest with God about this. It is better to return an empty pledge envelope than to commit to giving out of guilt or obligation. But also continue to pray and ask God to let you share in his joy, his grace of giving. This brings us to the fourth aspect of Christian giving and generosity.

Conclusion: *In this study, what is God saying to you? What are you going to do about it?*

Close in prayer. *You might like to pray for yourself and others to enter into the joy of God's generosity.*

Privately after the study, please work through the attached pledge form. Place it in a stamped, self-addressed envelope on the offering plate, and it will be returned to you in a few weeks'time. It will not be opened – it is just between yourself and God!

Proportional Giving Pledge

You are invited to fill in this slip after completing the Bible study. You can place it in a sealed, self-addressed envelope (not the offering envelope), and present it before God in the offering plate. The envelope will not be opened. It will be kept, sealed, in a safe place, and returned to you in a few weeks' time.

The contents of this pledge are between you and God, by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

1) Giving to God's Work through the church

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, please grant me the grace of generosity and the joy of sharing in your gracious giving. Please show me what proportion (percentage) of what you have given me, you want me to set aside for your work through the church, as the equal first priority in my budget. Amen.

I (my family) hereby pledge to set aside _____% of my (our) total income, for God's work through the church.

I (we) will do this through

- Offering envelopes/offering plate weekly (putting aside for Sundays I'm not able to be at worship)
- Regular Electronic Giving (you can ask your treasurer for details of how to use REG to give regularly and anonymously to God's work through the church)
- Giving to specific Christian mission projects

(At our current income level, this percentage works out to be \$_____per week/fortnight. I/We acknowledge that this *amount* may change with changing income levels.)

2) Giving to God's poor through charity

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you have blessed me richly with material wealth, and many people in this world are in desperate need. Please show me what proportion (percentage) of what you have given me, you want me to set aside for giving to your poor through charity, as equal first priority in my budget. Amen.

I (my family) hereby pledge to set aside _____% of my (our) total income for God's poor through charity.

I (we) will give this proportion through the following charities.

(At our current income level, this proportion for charity works out to be \$_____ per year.)

Prayer: **Heavenly Father, please accept these pledges for Jesus' sake. By your Holy Spirit, lead me to carry them out. Lead me deeper into the joy of giving by grace. Amen.**

Signed:

Date: