GENEROSITY READER

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Brief Overview: The Story of God's Generosity

The God who created a good and perfect world, but whose world turned from him, has brought restoration through *gift*: The Father loved the world and gave the Son, and the Father and the Son pour out the gift of the Spirit into the hearts of humanity, bringing about praise, hope, and new creation. Those united to the Son by the Spirit then find their lives caught up with the glorious gift of God's coming Kingdom.

In other words, the gospel is shaped by giving: God's generosity buys us out of bondage and brings us into all the blessing of belonging to him. But the good news is not only that God has made us to be *recipients* of his grace but also *participants* in the movement of his divine generosity.

Living in God's gifts we are free to give ourselves. And so the cross and resurrection of Christ now come to reshape this new life of faith, hope, and generosity—a life that is best lived not in isolation but as a community. By placing the practice of giving within the larger story of God's generosity, [we are encouraged] not simply to "give more," but to step into the powerful current of God's great gifts to the world.

> Kelly Kapic with Justin Borger, *God So Loved He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity,* (Zondervan, 2010), excerpt taken from front flap.

READINGS

God's Ownership and Our Stewardship

"Chapter One: All Things Belong to God" in Kelly Kapic with Justin Borger, *God So Loved He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity,* (Zondervan, 2010), 15-29.

"Chapter Two: God and Money: A Biblical Theology of Possessions" by Craig Blomberg in Wesley K. Willmer ed., *Revolution in Generosity* (Moody, 2008), 45-60.

"Recognizing God's Ownership" and "Responding to God's Grace" in Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes us Just* (Dutton, 2010), 88-96.

"Chapter Two: Compounding Joy" in Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Multinomah, 2001), 22-35.

Participating in God's Generosity

"Chapter Two: How Should We Give?" in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Zondervan, 2005), 55-64.

"Sharing Possessions: A Challenge to the Church" in Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper Collins, 1996), 464-468.

"Chapter Ten: Following a Crucified Lord" in Kelly Kapic with Justin Borger, *God So Loved He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity,* (Zondervan, 2010), 147-162.

"Chapter Three: Eyes on Eternity" in Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Multinomah, 2001), 36-45.

"Chapter Fourteen: Giving Life Together" in Kelly Kapic with Justin Borger, *God So Loved He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity,* (Zondervan, 2010), 201-210.

"Spirituality of Fund Raising" from an unedited transcription from a talk given by Henri Nouwen to the Marguerite Bourgeoys Family Service Foundation (September 16, 1992).

entering the movement
of **divine generosity**

God So Loved, He Gave

Kelly M. Kapic
with Justin Borger

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Every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself.

John Locke[1]

Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his!

Psalm 100:3

My existence is not something I have or possess. It comes to me, without my having any say about it, from another as a gift. In the strictest sense, I am but do not have my own existence.

Luke Timothy Johnson[2]

As the perfect one, God sheds himself abroad. His perfection is unhindered self-possession and self-enjoyment that includes (but is not exhausted by) infinite generosity.

John Webster[3]

God owns by giving.

M. Douglas Meeks[4]

chapter one

All Things Belong to God

We Belong to the Lord

I remember asking my son, who was five at the time, about his day. Jonathan didn't think very long before he smiled and piped up, "I learned something. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You can't serve two masters."

That made me smile. Clearly that morning his class must have looked at Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

I was impressed with what he learned, and I thought our conversation would move on, but Jonathan asked: "Do you know what a master is?" Intrigued, I wondered what he might say. "Owner" was his simple reply. Satisfied that he had taught me enough for one evening, he returned to his dinner in hopes of getting dessert. But even as he moved on, I found myself taken aback by his simple but deeply insightful answer—okay, he was probably just repeating what he learned in class, but coming from the mouth of a child it felt profound. Was Jonathan right?

In 1563 some ministers produced a catechism in Heidelberg, Germany, to teach the essential truths of the Christian faith. The first question in the catechism moves us to the heart of the matter:

> Question 1: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?
>
> Answer: That I *belong*—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.... (emphasis mine)[5]

But Don't We Own Ourselves?

Our passion to possess, however, jeopardizes this joy of belonging to God. Especially in the affluent West, our sense of self can become so wrapped up with the idea of self-ownership that the thought of belonging to somebody else—including God—looks like a threat and not a hope. Fearing to give, we grasp ever more tightly. We constantly clamor for our "rights" and cling to the impression that we own our bodies, our money, our ideas, our time, our property, and everything else we can manage to slap our name tag on. But more than anything else, we feel sure that we own *ourselves*.

John Locke (1632–1704), the English philosopher and political thinker, helped shape this modern mentality, arguing that self-ownership is an incontestable human right:

> Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself.[6]

The loss of self-ownership, whether to states or to other people, led to all kinds of abuse in Locke's world. Fears of such abuse are woven into the fabric of many contemporary political and social ideals.

In fact, today it seems offensive, maybe even anti-American to be told that there may be a problem with the idea that we own ourselves. After all, how can we ever downplay the great wickedness of slavery in America's past? Without question, this historical evil that darkens our history makes it almost impossible for us to conceive of the idea of being "owned" or having a "master" as a good thing. But is it possible that lives lived under the impression of self-ownership might actually harm both ourselves and others?

There still remains an underlying problem that can be hard for us to recognize, much less admit. We live under the burden and illusion of *self-ownership*. Think of commercials that tell women that at forty-five years old they should still look twenty-eight, and if not, it is their fault for not buying the product. Parents are promised their children's future success if they will only purchase the newest educational video and attend every extracurricular sporting activity. From the clothes we wear to the food we eat, the reality is that convention, society, and a complex of other competing forces own us. We are owned by our possessions; owned by those around us; owned by people we have never met but who exert incredible power over our lives in some of the most subtle and sinister ways.

So we enter into the myth of self-ownership, and we cannot hear the good news. I will never forget when we lived overseas and I spoke with a British friend about his recent visit to New York City. Discussing his time in the States he said, "Americans are funny, because most of them pride themselves on being free, with everyone living just as they want. Yet, the truth is," he continued, "everywhere in New York I went I saw people wearing uniforms. A child of six years old and a man in his fifties looked the same, each wearing baggy Levi's, a t-shirt, and a ball cap." His point was that their freedom was illusory.

The concept of freedom can be deceptive, and in truth pure self-ownership is impossible and a lie, because we are always owned. The question is not *if* you will be owned, but *to whom* will you belong? We are called to choose this day whom we will serve (Josh. 24:14–15). Will you belong to the true Owner or to competing powers? Deep down we sense we are owned and we rage against this, but in the process we end up serving degrading masters rather than the Lord of love.

Embracing God's Ownership as Good News

The great tragedy of this possessive way of thinking about ourselves is that it causes so many to reject the gospel itself, the good news that we are not our own but have been "called to *belong* to Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:6, italics added).[7] The gospel tells us that we have been "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20) and that God has "set his seal of ownership on us" by his Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22 NIV). "The God of Christians," Blaise Pascal once said, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob ... is a God of love and of consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses."[8] But when we think of ourselves as our own personal property, it becomes difficult to embrace God's ownership as good news. After all, how can the gospel be "good news" when it calls us to deny the very thing we see as our ultimate possession? If we are ever going to appreciate this liberating truth of belonging to God, we must first be reminded of God's original relation to creation.

God's Gift of Creation

From the nebulae in outer space to our personal savings accounts—God owns *everything*. As the Dutch statesmen Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920)

famously put it, "there is not a single inch on the whole terrain of our human existence over which Christ ... does not exclaim, 'Mine'!"[9] As we will see, this expansive view of God's ownership is found not merely in a few obscure passages of Scripture, but it is an ever-present assumption throughout the whole Bible.[10] Fundamental to the reality of God's ownership of all things is the truth that he alone is the Creator of everything that exists.

God Created out of Freedom, Not out of Need

We cannot rightly conceive of the gift of creation until we first recognize that God's creative actions are *free*. By definition, gifts are unnecessary. God did not have to create. If we are ever to understand the joy and power of human liberty, we must first gain a better appreciation of God's glorious freedom. It is out of divine freedom that God creates—nothing forced his hand.

Creation was not made in order to perfect something lacking in God.[11] As A. W. Tozer reminds us, "To admit the existence of a need in God is to admit incompleteness in the divine Being. *Need* is a creature-word and cannot be spoken of the Creator. God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made."[12] Acts 17:24–25 confesses this truth:

> The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (NIV)

This does not mean that God is distant or unconcerned, but the exact opposite inference is more fitting. The God who did not need to create, who is eternally complete in himself, is the God who *does* create, who continues to uphold what he created, and who takes a personal interest in each life and molecule of creation.

God Created out of His Triune Love

God's generosity flows out of his love, and thus we must ask a few key questions about his love. Did God need to create in order to experience love? Does God only *become* loving after he creates, when there is something to love? Actually, no.

Scripture affirms that "God *is* love" (1 John 4:9, 16). Love is a perfection of God's being, which means it is not something temporary or accidental to him. All of his being is of love. To speak of God apart from his love is to speak of someone other than God.

How, then, is it possible that God loves before there is a creation? Simply put, the God who creates is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God existing in perfect unity and love in a triune manner. Pope Benedict XVI, reflecting on John's comment that "God is love," says it well:

> Here we find ourselves before the most dazzling revelation of the source of love, the mystery of the Trinity: in God, one and triune, there is an everlasting exchange of love between the persons of the Father and the Son, and this love is not an energy or a sentiment, but it is a person; it is the Holy Spirit.[13]

Here Pope Benedict reflects a long Christian tradition, which sometimes spoke of the Father as the Lover, the Son as the Beloved, and the Spirit as the Love between them.[14]

Although analogies between God's love and our love have significant problems, one thing in Scripture is clear: the eternal God is love. Divine and eternal love is then unfolded and directed toward creation from the Father through the Son in the Spirit.[15] God does not need to create in order to experience love, because the triune God exists in love within himself. He creates as an outworking of that eternal love. C. S. Lewis summarizes the point well: "God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them."[16] God creates out of the overflow of his eternal triune love, and we were made to enjoy and respond to this very love.

God Created for the Purpose of Celebration

Centuries ago theologians claimed that the end or goal of creation was the glory or celebration of God (*gloria* or *celebratio Dei*).[17] Creation's existence is meant both to bring God glory and enable all his creation to enjoy him. All things were made to reflect and express the Creator's beauty and majesty. Consequently, while creation's primary end is God's glory, the secondary end is humanity's good. "Yahweh's good intention," says Walter Brueggemann, "is a place of fruitfulness, abundance, productivity, extravagance—all terms summed up in the word *blessing*."[18]

People were made to love the Creator, partly by taking pleasure in the rest of creation and by faithfully participating in it. Not surprisingly, then, God's first command to the man and woman he creates begins with a call to "be fruitful ..." (Gen 1:28). Humanity was to reproduce, to enjoy and

share the gifts of God in creation, and to live in joyful response to these blessings. The goal of creation was quite simply *celebratio*—celebration; this word was also used in the history of the church to describe a feast or sacred function that people participated in.

Notice that the Bible itself regularly calls people to celebrate God and his work in the world through Sabbaths, festivals, and feasts.[19] In part, these events reminded them of God's goodness as the one who makes all things and from whom all things come (1 Tim. 4:4). This God could be trusted not merely for the past, but for the present and future (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17). Even to this day, there are churches around the world that still have "Harvest Sundays" and the like, which serve as reminders of God's faithful lordship over all things.[20]

Such events serve to bring us back to rightly recognizing the Creator. Many of us have lost that sense of connection between food and the earth. The easy access to grocery stores and restaurants, and our distance from farms and the raising of animals can create the illusion that food and water are guaranteed. We take it as a given that they will be there. In truth, they are "given," but given by the Creator and Sustainer of everything. They are gifts.

The whole of creation was made to celebrate God, to feast on his graciousness, and to return to him in praise.

All That God Created Was Good

Because all things come from God, creation is inherently good (Gen. 1:31). The story of creation in Genesis 1–2 repeatedly makes the assessment that every step and element of God's creation is all good. The light, dirt, and seas were wonderfully good; the vegetation, stars, birds, and animals were delightfully good; humanity, the great climax of creation, was likewise unequivocally proclaimed by God to be good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Although people have sometimes treated aspects of the material world as intrinsically bad, Genesis unflinchingly reminds us of the original wholeness and glory of the earth. In the beginning *everything* was made good, including humans, their bodies, and their relations with God, each other, and the world. We were designed to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

Further, creation is not good merely because it is intricately engineered or beautifully put together, but because it comes from a good God. Creation is a *gift* through which we enjoy the Creator himself (cf. Ps. 19:1–2; 1 Tim. 6:17). Thus, to delight in elements of creation should provoke us to celebrate the creator God. Whether you eat or drink, do all things to his

glory, recognizing his lordship over it all (Eccl. 2:24–26; 1 Cor. 10:31). All that is comes from God, and thus it displays God's generosity. In truth, nothing can be earned nor can demand be made of it—everything points back to the reality of gift. As Walter Brueggemann has explained,

> There is a givenness to be relied on, guaranteed by none other than God. That givenness is here before us, stands over us, endures beyond us, and surrounds us behind and before.... The most foundational experience is the daily experience of *life's regularities*, which are experienced as reliable, equitable and generous.[21]

When this fundamental orientation of praise for God's generosity is forgotten, great tragedy and disillusionment occur.

God's Ownership Confronts and Comforts Us

On the one hand, it would be a lie to suggest that the idea of God's absolute ownership is not somewhat offensive to our modern sensibilities. As James Luther Mays says, "The declaration that the Lord is owner is an intentional denial that anyone else is."[22] That is offensive. Note 1 Corinthians 4:7, where Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not receive it?" That too is offensive and deeply humbling.

On the other hand, God's ownership—or our belonging to God—is deeply comforting. Especially in the face of scarcity, hardship, struggles, and darkness. As Regina Spektor, a thoughtful contemporary musician observes in her powerful song "Laughing With," there is a paradox that happens when we are desperate.[23] Whether we are at a hospital, in the trenches during wartime, or wondering where our next meal is going to come from, in such times we don't find ourselves laughing at God. We long for his care and provision. Yet when things are going well, when laughter fills the air, then we somehow think the idea of God can be hilarious. Spektor has it just right. When we are faced with our vulnerability, with our lack of power and control, with our great need—in those times our hearts often ache with the longing to belong to One who can be trusted, who is truly sovereign and good even in the midst of our fears.

This is why the covenant relationship God shares with his people, combined with the great covenant summary we find repeated throughout the Bible, hinges on the idea of belonging:

> I will take *you* to be my people, and I will be *your* God.[24]

The essence of the covenant is this relationship of his being ours and our being his. Similarly, the great priestly benediction of the Old Testament begins with this blessing of belonging:

> The LORD *bless* you and *keep* you. . . .[25]

Thus, when rightly understood, belonging to God brings, not personal privation, but peace and protection to God's people. As Zacharias Ursinus, coauthor of the sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism, has said: "We are his property; therefore, he watches over us as his own, so that not so much as a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our heavenly Father. Our safety does not lie in our own hands, or strength; for if it did, we should lose it a thousand times every moment."[26] God's ownership cuts both ways, it confronts us even as it comforts (cf. Job 41:11; Ps. 100:3; Isa. 43:1; Ezek. 37:27).

Creation Was a Gift Calling for a Response

God creates and thus owns, not as a tyrannical agent seeking to seize power, but as a benevolent Lord who makes in order to give. In other words, God freely creates out of his delight to share his own goodness with others. God is full and he makes full. Thus, as he creates, he invites us to enjoy the feast and to extend his gracious hospitality and care to others; in this way we are images of our Creator.

Ancient monarchs would often send out images or statues of themselves to the various regions over which they ruled.[27] These images represented the king. When someone saw the image, they were to remember that the land was actually under that monarch's authority. Furthermore, it was the monarch alone who was thought to be made in the god's image—he *alone* represented the god(s). In this respect Scripture highlights a radical, even revolutionary, break from its ancient Near Eastern context. For the Bible makes it clear that not merely the monarch, but every person on the earth exists in God's image: male and female, young and old, rich and poor, Pharaoh and slave.

Thus, all humanity points back to the true King, Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. Yahweh, the creator God, had authority over the entire world and not merely a particular region. Humanity—in its entirety—is to reflect this good God's presence in his world and constantly affirm his ownership of it. Looking into the mirror reminds us to whom we—and the entire world—belong.

Let us not miss an obvious but remarkable implication: from the beginning God entrusts his work into the hands of people. While humanity was

part of the creation itself, God draws near to them and singles them out for the care and nurturing of his world. Humanity was made good and whole, and they were called to respond to their God's gracious invitation to steward his world. Mark Allan Powell captures the surprising nature of this arrangement:

> We own nothing; but manage everything. God trusts us in a way that we are reluctant to trust each other (or ourselves) and places confidence in us beyond anything that our record thus far would seem to warrant.[28]

So man and woman were made in God's image, and our role in the world included nurturing, developing, and protecting the rest of creation. From the beginning God calls his people to participate in his purposes of caring for his world. He invites us to share in his generosity and thus in his work.

God Owns by Giving

God can invite us into this activity because he made this world. He is the potter and we are the clay (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:21). We will discuss in chapter 2 how God's lordship—and thus his ownership—has been denied, how sin has shattered the pottery, and how his creation has been pillaged. Nevertheless, there is but one God who made all things, and so all things ultimately point back to his rightful ownership.

What God Creates He Owns

We confess God's work in creation when we say, "God owns everything." The Psalms also repeat this connection:

- Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his (Ps. 100:3).
- The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters (Ps. 24:1–2).
- The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them. The north and the south, you have created them (Ps. 89:11–12).

When Old Testament writers spoke about creation, they did not merely refer to the origin of the universe. They knew about this origin in the distant past because they knew this God in their present, and therefore they

passionately called God's people to live before this loving Lord as his faithful stewards. Nothing, however insignificant, could be credited to God's creatures without also seeing it as the work of the giving God.[29]

Of course, most of us have an easier time believing that God created the universe in the past than that he has provided us with everything we have in the present. This is especially true when we think of personal paychecks and college diplomas, which God tends to give us after periods of hard work and personal exertion. The Bible teaches that it is never easier to forget about God than after he has richly blessed us. Affluence can produce a spiritual amnesia.[30] While our society teaches us to keep careful catalogues of all our accomplishments, the Bible reminds us that everything on our personal résumé belongs to God, for the power of productivity itself comes from him:

> You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. (Deut. 8:17–18; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7 NIV)

All of creation points back to the one true Lord and Giver of life.

The Dynamic Nature of God's Ownership

The Scriptures present the movement of divine giving and receiving as a cycle: everything comes from God, is sustained through him, and will be given back to him. Few passages in Scripture provide a more breathtaking introduction to the subject of God's ownership than Romans 11:36:

> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

These simple words of praise give an all-encompassing view of the world and its purpose. *All things* come *from* God, are sustained *through* him, and will eventually flow *back to* him as the ultimate Owner of everything. Nothing is excluded.

And yet, the way in which God owns everything is somewhat surprising. Romans 11:36 indicates God's ownership is much more *dynamic* than we might expect. While we often associate the idea of "ownership" with locks and keys, safe deposit boxes, bank accounts, and home security systems, God's ownership is fundamentally different. Unlike us, God does not own by keeping, but by giving.[31] His lordship and ownership is expressed in a life-giving cycle that moves from him, through him, and to him in a beautiful threefold movement that warrants closer attention.[32] This dynamic nature of divine ownership illuminates the relationship between "giving" and "getting."

One mistaken idea is that God simply "gives" out of a calculated desire to "get." In other words, God creates everything merely because he has needs that he wants fulfilled. As we have already shown, this does not reflect the biblical vision of the triune God.

A second mistake argues that God gives without any apparent purpose or goal, with no thought of the gift's reception, use, or concern for return. This comes perhaps from an underlying fear that if God has any expectation of return from his gifts, then their graciousness is lost and his giving seems to merely be a divine economic exchange. While such fears have some legitimacy, the Bible does describe and even expects some sort of genuine response to God's gifts. "We are *not*," as Yale scholar Miroslav Volf has said, "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."[33] In the end all things return "to God." As the early church father Irenaeus (c. 130–202) perceived in the second century, for God to give all things necessarily requires that he be the ultimate Owner of everything:

> For how could there be any *pleroma* [fullness] or principle, or power, or any other God, since it behooves God, as the fullness of all things, to contain and envelop all things, and to be contained and limited by none. For if there is anything beyond Him He is not the fullness of all things, nor does He contain all things.[34]

Ultimately, the comprehensive fullness of God's giving and receiving, as presented in the Scriptures, overcomes all of our fears. Since God did not create to satisfy any inadequacy or need of his own, but out of the fullness of his delight and love, this delight and love flow to the creatures as generosity and back to God as thanksgiving and praise. Creation reflects and therefore shares in—or "beholds"—God's great glory.[35] Our good has by his hand become a means of God's ultimate glory, intrinsically connected (cf. Ezek. 36:22–27).

The nature of this connection is a key to a healthy view of God and ourselves. As God's giving does not impoverish but enriches him, so we, as we offer back to God the gifts he has given and sanctified in us, are enriched in his glory and are satisfied in and through him.[36] Below we will unpack the cycle of "from him, through him, and to him" in more detail to show the relationship between God's giving and his owning.

From Him

We have already explored God's act of creation as the ultimate source of all our good, so here we simply mention a few more texts proclaiming that all things are *from* God.

- Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it (Deut. 10:14).
- You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you (Neh. 9:6).
- Who has first given to me [God], that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine (Job 41:11).
- The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them (Ps. 89:11)

Clearly the idea of God as Originator and Owner was understood from the earliest times in the Hebrew Scriptures and that idea is not lost with the formation of the New Testament. Only now the connection is directly linked to the Lord Jesus, the Christ: "yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6). The triune God shows himself as the One from whom everything comes and through whom everything is sustained.

Through Him

To say that all things are *through* God affirms that God is constantly orchestrating and upholding every infinitesimal detail that swirls around us. From planetary orbits to electrons encircling the nucleus of an atom, he not only sustains but also guides, directs, and rules the entire created world. This shows how different God's ownership is from ours. We easily forget or neglect our possessions; God never does (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17). Botanists, for example, suspect that the oldest living redwoods in California are somewhere between two and three thousand years old—God has been sustaining them ever since they were saplings, since the age of the Parthenon.[37]

Previous generations called this "providence." God did not make the world "very good" to abandon it. He never abandons his creation, as if God wound creation up like a clock and then walked away never to interfere again. Although Bette Midler's lyrics proclaiming "God is watching us ... from a distance" may move us, this distance does not provide much

comfort and hope.[38] The God who creates is also the God who sustains. A merely sympathetic God who is distant, not acting, helping, or promising a future, is not a God worthy of our worship and trust. And that is not the Sustainer God proclaimed in Scripture who says to the waves, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther" (Job 38:11). If God's caretaking activity ever ceased, even for a moment, the universe would instantly collapse. But Yahweh's presence is evidenced by his continued care of creation, often represented in agricultural images:

> You [God] care for the land and water it;
> you enrich it abundantly.
> The streams of God are filled with water
> to provide the people with grain,
> for so you have ordained it.
> You drench its furrows
> and level its ridges;
> you soften it with showers
> and bless its crops. (Ps. 65:9–10 NIV)

Why is it that rather than embracing God as the owner and caretaker of this world, we pit science against theology? We become confused, believing that once we understand the way things tend to work, we can do away with what is then deemed "mythology." Yet is not the God who is the Creator also the Sustainer of this world, ensuring the very repeatability and structure of the universe that scientific observation is completely dependent upon? Science is a beautiful thing, and ethical scientific endeavors actually display God's glorious governance rather than diminish it.[39]

God's providential care also calls for our care of his creation: "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate" (Ps. 104:14 NIV). John Chrysostom, the famed fourth-century preacher, captured the universal nature of God's provision:

> God generously gives all things that are much more necessary than money, such as air, water, fire, the sun—all such things. It is surely not true to say that the rich person enjoys the sun's rays more than the poor person does. It is not correct to say that the rich person takes in a more abundant supply of air than the poor person does. No, all [these] things lie at the equal and common disposition of all.[40]

Sadly, as we will discover in a later chapter, human actions have affected how the poor and rich enjoy the air.[41] However, the aim of creation was

that our activity would reflect and be a means of God's governing. God gives us all our gifts that we might freely give. As Paul told the congregation at Corinth, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Cor. 9:11 NIV).

Behind the call for human effort, however, is always God's lordship and ownership over it all. This is the Lord's land, his animals, his earth. So even when the droughts come, we look to the Creator for renewal. Because the loving Lord of the universe has promised to maintain the ebb and flow of all things through himself, we may trust him in the midst of uncertainty (Hab. 3:17–19).

The life-giving nature of God's ownership should dispel any fear or suspicion we may have about belonging to God. But it doesn't. Why? God's ownership is inseparable from his sustaining providence. To be owned by God does not mean that we are imprisoned and forgotten about; rather, it means we are loved, that we live and move and have our being through him (Acts 17:28).

To Him

Zechariah was one of many prophets who, like Paul, spoke of God's ownership not only in terms of the *beginning*, but also in terms of the *end*. He spoke of a day when all the world's wealth would come rushing back to God as the absolute Owner of everything (Zech. 14:1–21; cf. Rev. 21:24–26). "On that day," wrote Zechariah, "HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells on horses, and the cooking pots in LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the alter. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty" (Zech. 14:20–21 NIV). In the end, just as in the beginning, every element of creation will reflect God's ownership.

Much earlier in Israel's history the same words, "HOLY TO THE LORD," were engraved on the gold plate that the high priest wore as a sign of being exclusively dedicated to God (Ex. 28:36). By saying that the same sacred words would be inscribed on ordinary objects like pots and pans, Zechariah revealed just how far the redemptive reach of God's ownership will ultimately stretch: to every nook and cranny of creation.

But the greatest significance of the words "all things ... to him" in Romans 11:36 lies in the fact that Paul wrote them as an outburst of praise. He had just spent over ten chapters outlining the good news of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought justification and hope. Paul was this excited because he saw the glory of redemption, which we will explore in later chapters. The beginning of the biblical narrative stresses God's ownership of all things. The end of the story also highlights the role of the Master to whom all things are returned. But how this occurs is surprising. By saying that all things are "to him," Paul reminds us that God's ownership is not "a thing of the past," but of the future as well.

Conclusion

When we speak of God's ownership, some people may think that this is just putting a religious spin on the need to donate money. The recognition of God's ownership and Christian stewardship has fallen on hard times. As Randy Alcorn puts it, "To many it is no longer relevant to the day in which we live. To some it's just a religious cliché used to make fund-raising sound spiritual. It conjures up images of large red thermometers on church platforms, measuring how far we are from paying off the mortgage."[12] But the gospel itself shouts to us of God's lordship over all that we are and have. Why does it do that?

This is not about raising money to build a bigger sanctuary, a hospital, or art gallery; it is about knowing and obeying the God we worship. It is about understanding who He is and who we are. Only by affirming that Yahweh is the God of creation, with everything flowing from him, through him, and to him, can we rightly relate to this God.

Of course, the strikingly beautiful idea that all things flow back to God leads us to ask about the fallenness of the world we live in. Does He even want any of this back and are we the ones to give it? Our blessed state of belonging has become a cursed condition of bondage. To answer these questions we must now turn from the fullness and glory of creation to the utter brokenness caused by our sin.

Revolution in GENEROSITY

TRANSFORMING STEWARDS TO BE RICH TOWARD GOD

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MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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Chapter

GOD AND MONEY: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF POSESSIONS

BY CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, *Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary*

As a New Testament scholar who has studied Scripture's teaching on material possessions,[1] I often wonder why Christian ministries that are raising money do not stress the central biblical truths that giving is a part of whole-life transformation, that stewardship and sanctification go together as signs of Christian obedience and maturity, and that God will call us to account for what we do with 100 percent of the possessions He has loaned us. Is it because they would then have to be sure they were modeling these same principles themselves and that their organizations were following suit? Is it because they have tried this approach and it hasn't worked—or does the approach remain unattempted?

I believe that generous giving and wise stewardship are the natural outgrowth of a life devoted to God and Christ, and that it is through God's transformation of a person's heart to reflect the image of Christ that they become generous, as Christ is generous. The focus in raising money, then, should be upon assisting Christians to honor and obey God, not on the needs of the

organization. It is out of this understanding that biblical approaches to funding ministry should seek to transform stewards to be rich toward God in every area of their lives and not just when they are giving to the particular organization seeking the funds. A discussion of God's views of money and possessions as described in the New Testament will allow these biblical principles to provide direction to the giving and asking process of funding ministry.

In my two books on material possessions, I begin in Genesis 1 and proceed, with varying degrees of selectivity, throughout the entire biblical canon.

Space obviously precludes such an approach here. I wish instead to move quickly to the five main overarching themes that emerged from my study and illustrate them in thematic rather than canonical order. I have also chosen to limit my comments, for the most part, to New Testament texts. There is more than enough material on our topic in this Testament alone, and fewer complications emerge for the Christian trying to apply the New Testament to today's world than the Old Testament.[2]

Failure to recognize this is, in fact, what has led to the errors of so much of the so-called "prosperity gospel." The covenant that God made with Israel, accounting particularly for a large part of the cyclical history of good times and bad from Deuteronomy through Nehemiah, promised His people material blessings, long life in the land once called Canaan, safety and security from their enemies, and the like (see, e.g., Deut. 11:26–32; 28:1–14; 30:11–20). What is often ignored is that God did not make any comparable covenants with any of the non-Israelite peoples and that the New Testament nowhere suggests that this aspect of old covenant blessing automatically carries over to the new age of the church of Jesus Christ.[3] Indeed, even in Old Testament times, the covenant never guaranteed prosperity to *individual believers*, contingent on sufficient faith and/or obedience. The Psalms and Proverbs are replete with examples of the pious poor, unjust victims of rich exploiters (e.g., Ps. 37:16–17; Prov. 15:16–17; 16:8). The promise was for the *nation*, and even then it represented a broad generalization that as the people as a whole (and

the *leaders* in particular) followed Yahweh, more often than not they would prosper. Indeed, that prosperity often continued even after years of disobedience, but God's tolerance would eventually come to an end and judgment would ensue, until the next round of corporate repentance occurred, led by the country's judges or kings.[4]

In the New Testament, the closest one ever comes to legitimate support for a promise of prosperity is in 2 Corinthians 9:11, when Paul assures the church: "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."[5] In context, this generosity must include material provision, though it is by no means limited to this arena. But this same context—Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to carry through with their pledge to give for the needier congregations in Judea—demonstrates that this is again a collective promise to the church as a whole. When God's people care enough about their fellow believers to give generously to those in need, if it turns out they have given away too much to continue to meet all of their own needs, they can then count on others in the body to care for them.[6]

This same logic accounts for Jesus' command to seek first God's Kingdom and its righteousness and to count on all the basic material needs of life being provided for us (Matt. 6:33)—that is, through His people if we should accidentally overextend ourselves.[7] So, too, Christ's promise that we will receive back one hundredfold houses and fields when we give them up for the Lord accompanies identical guarantees that we will receive an equal number of family members (Mark 10:29–30 pars.). Those new brothers, sisters, and mothers, of course, refer to fellow Christians, so the additional property must refer to access to the material abundance of the church as a whole, as believers share with those in need.[8] Nothing is implied in any of these texts about some principle whereby our donations to a particular Christian ministry guarantee us a supernaturally bestowed hundredfold material blessing in return! What then *does* the New Testament teach about possessions? We may summarize

our findings under five headings.

A NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF POSSESSIONS

The Goodness of Wealth

Although Christians cannot look simply to Old Testament models of rich believers and conclude that God wants *them* to be rich, too, the New Testament still affirms the God-ordained goodness of material possessions. Unlike many religions and philosophies, neither Judaism nor Christianity, when true to its roots, has affirmed the inherent evil of matter.[9] God created this material world *good* (Genesis 1–2), and only subsequently did human sin corrupt it (Genesis 3). Part of redemption involves re-creation, and the last two chapters of the Bible form a marvelous *inclusio* (or "bookend") with the first two. God's original purposes in creation will not be thwarted. The ultimate Christian hope is not to go to heaven after death; that is a better description of what theologians call the intermediate state. Rather, we look forward to the complete resurrection and re-creation of the body and the dissolution of this current universe, to be replaced by new heavens *and a new earth*, with its garden of earthly delights, now fully sanctified for us to enjoy for an eternity (Revelation 21–22).[10] To use the language of modern secular advertising, "we *can* have it all!" *But only on God's terms and in His timing.* He may choose to bless some of His children in this life materially, but worldwide and throughout church history, only a tiny minority of Christians have been so blessed. It borders on blasphemy to blame the suffering of hundreds of millions of believers who have toiled in grinding poverty on their lack of faith![11]

At the same time, a decent standard of living remains something *good*. If it didn't, why would so many biblical texts encourage the alleviation of poverty? Why would Paul go out of his way in 2 Corinthians 8:13–15 to stress that he is not asking the rich to trade places with the poor but to give out of their surplus? Why would Jesus tell a parable, in the two different forms of the pounds (Luke 19:11–27) and the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), in which the good servants

invest their master's money and make more? Even if his point cannot be limited to material investment, surely a financial application of his story cannot be excluded. Why would Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, present as positive models Christians of considerable means, including Cornelius, the family of John Mark, Sergius Paulus, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Jason, many prominent Greek women in Thessalonica, various Areopagites, Damaris, Aquila and Priscilla, Titius Justus, and Mnason?[12] Why would Jesus Himself adopt an itinerant lifestyle requiring dependence on the charity of wealthy friends, particularly a small group of women, named and described in Luke 8:1–3 as equivalent to what today would be called His "support team"?[13] Why would He elsewhere praise another close female friend and supporter, Mary of Bethany, for her lavishing costly ointment on Him to prepare His body for burial, as it were (Mark 14:9 pars.)? Why would Paul tell Timothy that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17b)?

John Schneider tells the story of enjoying a barbecue on his cedar deck one beautiful summer evening, overlooking his tree-lined backyard, and watching his children play happily in innocence and safety. How horrible, he thought, that some Christians (too many, in his estimation) would criticize his family for enjoying these lovely pleasures of life and enjoin them not to spend nearly so much money on themselves. If we are surrounded by the old-line Calvinists with their sometimes exaggerated, ascetic "Protestant work ethic," unable to relax and enjoy the fruits of their labor, then many of Schneider's emphases in his writings may be just what the doctor is ordering. But in Colorado, and in the other slices of American Christian life I traverse annually in my various speaking engagements, I hardly ever run into such people. Rather, I am far more aware of those who simply take the "luxuries" of large homes, nice neighborhoods, good cars, and ample foodstuffs for granted and never even *ask* the question of whether or not God might be calling them to a simpler lifestyle. For those people, a healthy dose of Ron Sider would seem to be far more needed.[14]

The Seduction of Wealth

Indeed, for every New Testament text that explicitly points to the goodness of wealth, four or five highlight the ways that "mammon" (material possessions as an object of our allegiance or even worship) seduces believers to sin or accounts for why unbelievers remain outside the fold.[15] The seed that falls among the thorns, in the parable of the sower, represents those who "hear the word . . . but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:18b–19 pars.). The parable of the rich fool describes one who is not rich toward God as a person who takes no thought for anyone else when an unexpected bumper crop is harvested from his fields, but instead merely builds additional storage space so as to preserve his own bounty (Luke 12:16–21). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus portrays a man who has never repented as one who feasts sumptuously every day while refusing to give even the crumbs from his table to the dying, crippled beggar on his doorstep (Luke 16:19–31).[16]

Jesus' three temptations, in fact, epitomize all of human seduction to sin in very material terms (what John would later call "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life"—1 John 2:16 KJV/RSV)—providing food for Himself during His fast, gaining all the kingdoms of the world by worshiping Satan, and showing off how God would save His physical body from harm if He jumped off the portico of the temple (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). In other texts, the rich young ruler refuses to give up his wealth for the poor and follow Jesus (Mark 10:17–31 pars.), traveling businesspersons aspiring to affluence make their plans a full year ahead of time without any thought for the Lord's will (James 4:13–17), and wealthy landowners exploit the poor Christian migrant workers who harvest their fields, withholding from them their already meager daily wages (James 5:1–6).[17] Ananias and Sapphira's desire to be perceived as more generous than they really were in the giving of their property led to their sudden deaths (Acts 5:1–11). Simon the magician thought that his wealth could enable him to buy the power of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18–23), and attempts to purchase ecclesiastical office have been called "simony" to this day.

A huge body of sociological literature in recent decades has demonstrated how an inordinate number of the problems afflicting the church in Corinth can be attributed to the handful of wealthy church members who hosted house congregations in their homes, functioned as elders, and thought that they could still "call the shots" (even when violating Christian principles) as they no doubt did as patrons and benefactors in their previously pagan lives.[18] For this reason, Paul refuses to accept any money at all from the Corinthians, sensing that it would come with "strings attached," even as he stresses that it is important for congregations to support those who work in full-time ministry (1 Cor. 9:1–18).[19]

Paul will accept money elsewhere, particularly from the Philippians, but apparently never from the community to whom he is currently ministering. The dangers of false accusations or perceptions of how he used such gifts, along with the peril of genuine mismanagement, provided another rationale for his policy and led him to establish elaborate mechanisms of scrupulous accountability. These served to safeguard his integrity as he traveled around the Roman Empire taking up a collection for the impoverished saints in and around Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:16–24).[20] The deliberate omission of words for "thanks" in his letter to the Philippians (sometimes called his "thankless thank-you") reflects his concern to capture the delicate balance between sounding ungrateful for their support and making him appear inappropriately indebted to them, as though he could not have carried on without them (cf. Phil. 4:10–20).[21]

Church leaders, according to 1 Timothy and 1 Peter, should be neither lovers of money nor pursuing foolish or shameful gain—that is, seeking more than is appropriate in a given setting (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; 1 Peter 5:2).[22] One wonders how often these criteria are seriously scrutinized and applied in the selection of overseers and deacons in local congregations today. We learn precious

little about the false teachers lambasted in 2 Peter and Jude except that they are experts in greed (2 Peter 2:14–15; literally, "well trained in covetousness")! Paul, on the other hand, reminds the Ephesian elders, "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33–35). As I. H. Marshall explains, in context Paul understands Jesus to be saying, "It is better for a person who can do so to give to help others rather than to amass further wealth for himself."[23]

By far the most dramatic picture of the awful potential of riches to lead people away from God comes in Revelation 18. After a chapter that has made it clear that the great, evil, end-times empire of the Antichrist will be both politically influential and religiously idolatrous (Revelation 17), John demonstrates that it will also be the wealthiest superpower of its day.[24] Yet suddenly, in a heartbeat, it is destroyed and all the symbols of its wealth vanish. The laments for the lost cargoes include litanies that read like bills of sale for luxury goods (and staples) imported from the provinces to Rome for the enjoyment of the wealthy there (Rev. 18:11–13). These are enjoyed at the expense of the subjugated peoples who must sell their produce elsewhere in order to make even the barest of livings and who can seldom enjoy the fruit of their own labor.[25] Frightening parallels to contemporary patterns of American self-indulgence at the expense of the Two-Thirds World strike the sensitive reader.[26] Today John might have written that all the real and virtual shopping malls were destroyed, including eBay, and that people lamented that they didn't know how to cope without them!

Generous Giving

How do modern Christians and churches avoid the seductive power of material possessions? How can wealth remain a "good" for their enjoyment rather than

leading them further away from God and the priorities of His Kingdom? The recurring answer of both Testaments is through generous giving to others.

It is a shame that conversations about tithing often distract Christians from their real responsibilities. On the one hand, it appears that an unprecedented number of people today think that the word *tithe* is simply a synonym for "gift" or "offering" and have no idea that the word means to give "one-tenth." On the other hand, there are still far too many people who have read neither Testament carefully enough to recognize that, in the New Testament age, no specific percentage is commanded of believers.[27] Instead, generous, even sacrificial, giving is what is enjoined (2 Cor. 8:1–12). For many middle- and upper-class Christians in this country, giving *only* 10 percent hardly qualifies as a genuine sacrifice—that is, going without something that they would deeply desire for themselves that they could have otherwise had. Nor do they notice that the one triennial and two annual tithes in the Old Testament that the faithful Israelite gave to the Lord's work add up to an average of 23 1/3 percent every year.[28] How many of those Christians who think the Old Testament tithing law remains in force (or that Christians should at least give no less than what Jews did) would be happy to discover what the true standard was?

Fortunately, that percentage doesn't matter.[29] What *does* matter is generous, compassionate, loving concern for those in greater need than ourselves, both spiritually and physically, which leads to practical efforts to meet those needs in ways that will make the best long-term difference. While such efforts often require far more than money, in our thoroughly capitalistic world they seldom involve anything less. All other things being equal (which, of course, they often aren't), the person earning $200,000 a year is not making nearly the sacrifice by giving $20,000 to the Lord's work as is the person earning $20,000 and giving $2000.[30] The slogan often applied in capital campaigns—"not equal giving but equal sacrifice"—when applied to Christian stewardship more generally leads to what Ron Sider calls the "graduated tithe."[31] The more money someone makes, the higher percentage they should give away.

That, at least, is the practice our family has adopted over the past twenty-six years—and, to my astonishment, God has blessed us with the ability to give away approximately 50 percent of our adjusted gross income in each of the last four years, and that without abandoning a lifestyle that surely qualifies as enjoying many good gifts that God has richly provided us.

But to whom does the Bible call us to give? The three Israelite tithes were for the temple and its ministrants (Num. 18:8–32), for the numerous annual festivals that took place there (Deut. 14:22–28), and for the needs of the poor and disenfranchised (Deut. 14:29). In the New Testament we read of collections for the poor (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; 6:1–7; 11:27–30; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9), of supporting one's spiritual leaders—even though Paul voluntarily renounced his right to "cash in" on this privilege (Luke 10:7 par.; 1 Cor. 9:1–18; 1 Tim. 5:18; Gal. 6:6), and of supporting more itinerant Christian evangelists, preachers, and teachers (Rom. 15:24; Phil. 4:10–20). By far the most commonly stressed of these three themes is help for the poor.[32] Probably the most poignant of Jesus' teachings illustrating this priority is the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:16–24, preceded by His shorter warnings against seeking places of honor or inviting only those who can invite one back (vv. 7–11, 12–14). (This passage alone should abolish once and for all the idea that "naming gifts" that promise major donors permanent, public recognition for their donations can be harmonized with Christian motivation.[33]) As a sign of his repentance and commitment to follow Christ, Zaccheus promises not only to restore fourfold that which he has defrauded in his work as a chief tax collector, but also to give half of his goods to the poor (Luke 19:8).[34]

James 2:1–7 warns against Christian deference to the rich at the expense of the poor, doubtless in part because of the donations his audience could extract from the more well-to-do. Indeed, using a rhetorical question with the particular adverb that demanded a negative answer in the Greek language (*mē*), James goes on to ask if the kind of faith that sees dire physical need among fellow Christians, is in a position to help and refuses to do so, can even

save a person (James 2:14–17). The apostle John puts it no less pointedly: "If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17–18). Gary Burge spells out the lesson clearly: "One measure of love is the degree to which people blessed with material wealth distribute that wealth within the community."[35]

Limits on Riches and Poverty

The fourth biblical principle may prove the most controversial, raising what for some is the specter of socialism. But we must remember that even the most recent biblical documents antedate by more than 1,600 years the development of either socialist or capitalist economic philosophy. The principle is simply that there are certain levels of wealth and certain levels of poverty that are inherently immoral.[36] These are never quantified and no doubt change from person to person, place to place, and time to time. But numerous scriptural texts make it clear that there is such a thing as a person having "too much," materially speaking, as well as having too little. Second Corinthians 8:13–15 puts it plainly: "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.'" The word *equality* is probably not the best translation in this context of the Greek *isōtēs*. "Fairness (of treatment)" might be a better rendering.[37]

That this does not represent what would in modern times be promoted in socialist garb is clear from the context of Paul's quotation of Scripture (Ex. 16:18)—the account of the Israelites collecting manna in the wilderness. Different individuals and different families had varying needs and abilities to gather the supernaturally provided bread. Yet God ensured that no one had

"too much" or "too little." Apart from such miracles in the New Testament age, the voluntary sharing of one's surplus goods accomplishes the same thing.[38] The end result is not that all will have the same amount; nor would such complete equality be sustainable even if it could be achieved for one brief moment in the history of the world. Rather, those who have more than an average or median amount of the world's goods generously share with those who have the least, in order to moderate the most extreme disparities between the haves and the have-nots.[39] The Christian vision is one of sharing voluntarily, out of deep compassion.

Spiritual and Material Matters Inextricable

The final principle in our survey involves the way in which spiritual health and material stewardship are intertwined. Jesus heals various people of their spiritual afflictions but typically challenges them to subsequent discipleship. Four times the refrain, "Your faith has saved you," suggests physical and spiritual wholeness simultaneously (Mark 5:34 pars.; 10:52 pars.; Luke 7:50; 17:19).[40] The apostles' encounter with the temple beggar in Acts 3:1–10 proves particularly instructive. Replying to his request for a handout, Peter declares, "Silver or gold I do not have" (v. 6). Strictly speaking, that was false, because in the previous paragraph Luke has highlighted the fledgling church's treasury for the needy. Perhaps Peter means merely that he has no coins with him at that moment, but more likely this is one of the many *relative* contrasts of the Bible couched, in Semitic idiom, as an absolute. Thus, what Peter wanted to give the lame man was far more valuable than money to buy his food for the day; Peter wanted to heal the man of his crippling disease. At the same time, such healing would enable the man to work for a living and support himself. Meanwhile, the healed beggar learns of the spiritual power available to him, as the apostles pronounce his cure "in the name of Jesus Christ." The pronouncement accomplishes its objective as the man accompanies the disciples into the temple courts, "walking and jumping, and praising God" (v. 8).[41] If

this praise led to full-orbed discipleship, and his physical healing enabled employment, then he could go on to steward his resources and help others far more than previously.

Of course the most common manifestation of the intertwining of spiritual health and financial matters appears in the numerous accounts where generous giving or wise stewardship is depicted as the natural outgrowth of a life devoted to God or Christ. One thinks of the enigmatic parable of the unjust steward, who is praised not for his injustice but his shrewdness in his uses of the material goods of this world (Luke 16:1–8). Likewise, Jesus' followers are to use their money to make friends who will welcome them into heaven, presumably because they came to faith or Christian maturity through the giving of previous faithful stewards (v. 9).[42] One recalls Jesus' irrefutable relativizing of earthly possessions when compared with spiritual ones in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:19–34 par.) or His forceful inquiry, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Mark 8:36 pars.). One observes the ways in which Luke praises Dorcas and Cornelius for their exemplary almsgiving (Acts 9:36; 10:2, 31).

Conversely, those who had the ability and opportunity to work and refused to do so, opting instead to "mooch" off the generosity of the church, were forbidden from eating at the daily communal meal among Christians in Thessalonica (2 Thess. 3:10).[43] And the famous but oft-abused passage in 1 Corinthians 11:29 about eating or drinking unworthily at Communion does not refer to people who either feel like or really are unworthy sinners, lest we all be excluded, but bans those who have behaved like some of the rich church members in Corinth did—overeating and overdrinking at the love feast (the original church "potluck"), so that there was very little or nothing left for the poorer members who could not bring as much in the first place.[44] What a revolution it would cause in our churches if pastors regularly explained that, among Christians, those and only those who should refrain from the Lord's Supper are people who are not adequately caring for the poor

and needy in their midst!

A rich diversity of terms for the collection for the saints in Judea appears in 2 Corinthians 8–9, including such words as "fellowship" or "sharing," an "act of grace," "this grace of giving," an "offering," a "liberal gift," and a "service" or "liturgy." All this amply justifies Paul Barnett's conclusion that grace is the theme of this entire two-chapter section. "Christian giving represents a gift from the grace of God, which he enables Christians to exercise."[45] Contrary perhaps to our expectation, but consistent with numerous subsequent examples throughout church history, it was not the richer Christians in Corinth but the poorer ones farther north in the province of Macedonia who proved the most generous. Paul had not even wanted to trouble them in view of their economic plight, but they took the initiative to insist on contributing to the collection. As Ralph Martin puts it, "Normally we think of the fund-raiser as 'begging' the would-be donors. Here it is the donors, who could least afford it, who entreated Paul for the favor of having a part in this enterprise" (2 Cor. 8:1–4).[46]

What is more, the Macedonian believers gave themselves "first of all to the Lord," and then also "by the will of God" to the apostles (2 Cor. 8:5). Their gift formed part of their larger and more fundamental consecration of themselves to God in Christ. The second half of this verse may suggest that they recognized Paul's apostolic authority over them. At any rate, this was no isolated or spontaneous response to some emotional appeal. It was a carefully thought-out request and an outgrowth of a broader understanding of what Christian discipleship demands. The ultimate theological rationale for such behavior appears four verses later: "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 through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).[47] Indeed, we may bring all five of our New Testament themes on possessions together under the rubric of *whole-life transformation*. As we are indwelt by Christ and allow His Spirit to fill us, we will view wealth as a good to be shared to moderate

social disparities, not something merely to be accumulated for ourselves. We will recognize that it is not a case of giving a certain amount to others and then doing anything we want with the rest. All of life will increasingly come under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Sanctification and stewardship go hand in hand.[48]

Conclusion

As I reflect on these themes and this rubric of whole-life transformation, there are many conclusions I could suggest. However, within the focus of this book let me suggest that generous giving is the natural outgrowth of a life devoted to Christ, and above all, any of us who ask for money for ourselves or for others must be good models, and be *known* to be good models, of the principles we seek to teach others—both in our overall stewardship and in our personal giving.

As models of Christ, then, fundraisers need to take a genuine interest in the entire lives of those they contact. Anything less than a concern for the entire spiritual and material well-being of supporters does a disservice to the gospel.[49] The gen-xers and millennials are even more sensitive than baby boomers to those who would exploit them just for their money, even as baby boomers are often catching on faster than the post-War "builders."[50] I get the impression that sincerity and genuine connectedness will be the highest priorities in looking for a fundraiser in the decades ahead.

If we know through a thorough study of Scripture and sense in the depths of our hearts that the causes for which we seek to raise funds please God, further His Kingdom, and meet crucial spiritual and material needs in our world today, and if we can say in all honesty that we treat every gift with utter integrity, then it just remains for us to share our passion and opportunity with others. One of the best gifts we can offer our supporters is an honest assessment of whether our ministry cause best fits their desires of whom to support, and then to assure them that their money will truly be used in that cause.

I suspect that most of us need to study the Bible in more detail, separate biblical from unbiblical practices, seek first God's transformation in our own lives so that prospective supporters can clearly see how our practices differ from secular ones, teach others how giving is essential for them if they are to grow in Christ, renounce every form of manipulation and deception when it comes to how we use their money, and make sure that we are working for organizations that are above any form of legitimate reproach. If we are concerned most about God's ultimate response to our lives on judgment day, then the details will fall into place and we can look forward to Him saying to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23)!

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2. See esp. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
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6. Cf. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93.
7. Cf. further Craig L. Blomberg, "On Wealth and Worry: Matt. 6:19–34—Meaning and Significance," *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (1992), 73–89.

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9. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 181–87.
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11. See Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth* (San Francisco and London: Harper & Row, 1990).
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13. On which, see esp. Ben Witherington III, "On the Road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Other Disciples—Luke 8,1–3," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 70 (1979), 243–48.
14. Cf. esp. his *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and *Completely Pro-Life: Building a Consistent Stance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987).
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29. David Croteau, "A Biblical and Theological Analysis of Tithing within the Framework of the Law-Gospel Relationship" (Ph.D. Diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).
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Chapter

GOD AND GIVING: THE ROAD TO GENEROSITY

BY WALTER B. RUSSELL, *Professor of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University*

The road to generosity is a journey that few Christians successfully complete. Some never get started on the journey. Probably most Christians start on the road, then quickly pull off at a rest stop and just stay there, idling. A few take seriously their Christian faith and choose to travel faithfully, like Bunyan's "Pilgrim,"[1] and complete the journey. They arrive as mature believers and generous stewards.

This book is about a revolution in generosity created by stewards transformed to be rich toward God. At the core of its thesis is the belief that generosity is the natural outcome of God working in individuals so that they are conformed to the image of Christ and become generous, as Christ is generous. As a result of this journey, they will grow in the grace of giving and will take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim. 6:19).

The purpose of this chapter is to break this journey down into understandable pieces, to explain the road to generosity as Christians become rich toward God. Our journey on the road to generous giving (1) starts with faith

ALSO BY TIMOTHY KELLER

The Reason for God
BELIEF IN AN AGE OF SKEPTICISM

The Prodigal God
RECOVERING THE HEART OF
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Counterfeit Gods
THE EMPTY PROMISES OF MONEY,
SEX, AND POWER, AND THE
ONLY HOPE THAT MATTERS

GENEROUS JUSTICE

How God's Grace Makes Us Just

TIMOTHY KELLER

DUTTON

kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. . . .[81]

Recognizing God's Ownership

There is another important way in which the doctrine of creation motivates Christians toward sharing their resources with others. If God is the Creator and author of all things, that means everything we have in life belongs to God.

In Genesis 1, God gives Adam and Eve "dominion" over the creation. This was a call to leadership, but it was also a call to stewardship. God made Adam and Eve "rulers over the works of [God's] hands" (Psalms 8:8) but "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalms 24:1). In other words, God gave humanity authority over the world's resources but not ownership. We have received what we have in the way a fund manager receives other people's money to invest, or as, in ancient times, the steward of an estate received his authority over the estate. The steward of a great estate

lived comfortably and enjoyed the fruits of his labor, but he never made the mistake of thinking that the wealth under his care was all his. He was tasked to manage it in a way that pleased the owner and was fair to his fellow servants.

This concept is counterintuitive for most Americans. We believe that if we have had success in life, it is mainly the result of our own hard work, and we therefore have an absolute right to use our money as we see fit. But while the Bible agrees industriousness or the lack of it is an irreplaceable part of why you are successful or not (Proverbs 6:9–11; 10:4), it is never the main reason. If you had been born on a mountaintop in Tibet in the thirteenth century, instead of a Western country in the twentieth century, then no matter how hard you worked, you wouldn't have had much to show for it. If you have money, power, and status today, it is due to the century and place in which you were born, to your talents and capacities and health, none of which you earned. In short, all your resources are in the end the gift of God. That is why David, the wealthiest man in Israel, prayed:

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. . . . Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all

things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. . . . But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

1 Chronicles 29:11–14

Because David understood this principle—that ultimately all we have is a gift of God—he does not view his wealth as fully his own. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke concludes, after studying both the word *mishpat* and its kindred word *tzadeqah* (righteousness), that in the Old Testament

> the righteous [*tzaddiq*] . . . are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.[82]

Therefore, just men and women see their money as belonging in some ways to the entire human community around them, while the unjust or unrighteous see their money as strictly theirs and no one else's. After all, they earned it, and that's the main reason they have it. That view of life is naïve, as we have seen, and it collides head-on with the Bible. So in Deuteronomy 24 we read:

When you are harvesting your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back and get it. It is for the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow. . . .

Deuteronomy 24:14,17,19

The reference to the harvest was an exhortation to landowners to allow the poor to "glean." If we read this text closely, we see that part of the landowner's harvest was "for" the immigrant and poor. That means that in God's eyes, it was actually *theirs.*[83] We should be careful not to think this means that the land belonged to the poor—it belonged ultimately to God and provisionally to the landowner. In God's view, however, while the poor did not have a right to the ownership of the farmer's land, they had a right to some of its produce. If the owner did not limit his profits and provide the poor with an opportunity to work for their own benefit in the fields, he did not simply deprive the poor of charity but of justice, of their right. Why? A lack of generosity refuses to acknowledge that your assets are not really yours, but God's.

Here is another example. Think of the millions of children and teenagers in this country who have grown up in poverty. They attend failing schools and live in an environment unconducive to reading and learning. By the time they are in their teens many of them are functionally illiterate. This locks them into poverty

or worse. It is estimated that a majority of convicts in prison are illiterate. Who is to blame?

Conservatives may argue that this is the parents' fault. It is due to a failure of moral character and the breakdown of the family. Liberals, however, see it as a failure of government to stem systemic racism and to change unjust social structures. But nobody says that it is the children's fault they were born where they were. Those children are in poverty largely because they were not born into a family like mine. My three sons, just by being born where they were, have a far better chance to have a flourishing, happy life in society. There is an inequitable distribution of both goods and opportunities in this world. Therefore, if you have been assigned the goods of this world by God and you don't share them with others, it isn't just stinginess, it is injustice.

Responding to God's Grace

As important as the doctrine of creation is, the most frequently cited Biblical motivation for doing justice is the grace of God in redemption. This theme does not just begin in the New Testament. In Deuteronomy, Moses said to the people:

> *Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God*

> *is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.*
>
> Deuteronomy 10:16–19

The Israelites had been poor, racial outsiders in Egypt. How then, Moses asks, could they be callous to the poor, racial outsiders in their own midst? Through Moses, God said: "Israel, you were liberated by me. You did not accomplish it—I performed it *for* you, by my grace. Now do the same for others. Untie the yoke, unlock the shackles, feed and clothe them, as I did for you."[84] Of particular interest is Moses's exhortation to "circumcise your hearts" (verse 16). Circumcision was the external sign that a family had come into a covenant relationship with God. Heart circumcision was a passionate commitment to God on the inside. Meeting the needs of the orphan, the widow, and the poor immigrant was a sign that the Israelites' relationship with God was not just formal and external but internal as well.

The logic is clear. If a person has grasped the meaning of God's grace in his heart, he will do justice. If he doesn't live justly, then he may say with his lips that he is grateful for God's grace, but in his heart he is far

from him. If he doesn't care about the poor, it reveals that at best he doesn't understand the grace he has experienced, and at worst he has not really encountered the saving mercy of God. Grace should make you just.

Another example of this reasoning is found in Isaiah 58:2. God sees the Israelites fasting. The only fast commanded by law was for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (Leviticus 23:26–32). All during the year the Israelites were to obey the moral law diligently, but God knew that this was not something that they would ever do satisfactorily or sufficiently. Our sins create a barrier between God and us, but by his grace the Lord makes a provision for sin. So once a year the high priest entered the sanctuary of the tabernacle and offered a blood sacrifice, atoning for the sins of the people. The Day of Atonement meant that God's relationship with his people was based on grace and forgiveness. That was why fasting was an appropriate way to observe Yom Kippur. By abstaining from pleasures, particularly food, they exhibited humility before God and showed they believed in the basic message of Yom Kippur, namely, that we are all sinners saved by grace.

But God was deeply displeased with the Israelites' fasting:

> *Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you*

> *have not noticed?" "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. . . . Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"*
>
> Isaiah 58:3–5

God sees economically comfortable people abstaining from food, "going without" for a day or two, but not being willing to abstain from exploiting their workers. Though they demonstrate the external sign of belief in grace—fasting—their lives reveal that their hearts have not been changed.

> *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*
>
> Isaiah 58:3,5–7

Fasting should be a symbol of a pervasive change across the whole face of one's life. People changed by

grace should go, as it were, on a permanent fast. Self-indulgence and materialism should be given up and replaced by a sacrificial lifestyle of giving to those in need. They should spend not only their money but "themselves" (verse 10) on others. What is this permanent fasting? It is to work against injustice, to share food, clothing, and home with the hungry and the homeless. That is the real proof that you believe your sins have been atoned for, and that you have truly been humbled by that knowledge and are now living a life submitted to God and shaped by knowledge of him. People who fast and pray ritually but still show pride and haughtiness toward the poor and needy reveal that no true humbling has ever penetrated their hearts. If you look down at the poor and stay aloof from their suffering, you have not really understood or experienced God's grace.

It is difficult not to think of the elder brother in Jesus's parable of the prodigal son. The people God addresses, like the elder brother, complain that God is not doing their will, and that they deserve his support since they have been so obedient. But the truth is that their obedience is only formal and external; it is filled with self-righteousness and is motivated by a desire to control God, not actually serve him. Such people show they are complying with religious observances as a way of "getting ahead" with God and others. This deadly spiritual

condition shows itself in a lack of loving service toward others, and particularly an indifference to the poor.

Justification and Justice

Is the reasoning of the New Testament any different? No, not at all. One of the main themes of the writings of Paul is justification by faith. Many religions teach that if you live as you ought, then God will accept and bless you. But Paul taught that if you receive God's acceptance and blessing as a free gift through Jesus Christ, then you can and will live as you ought. During the Reformation, reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin rediscovered and restated this doctrine. Though we deserve the wrath of God and punishment for our sin, Jesus Christ came and stood in our place. He lived the life we should have lived and therefore earned the blessing of salvation that such a perfect life deserves. But at the end he died on the cross and took the curse that our imperfect lives deserve. When we repent and believe in Jesus, all the punishment we are due is taken away, having been borne by him, and all the honor he is due for his righteous life and death is given to us. We are now loved and treated by God as if we had done all the great things that Jesus did.[85] Martin Luther gave this teaching a classic, bold expression in the preface to his commentary on the Galatians:

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The TREASURE PRINCIPLE

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Joy.

Chapter 2

COMPOUNDING JOY

The less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become.

HUDSON TAYLOR

In 1990, I was a pastor of a large church, making a good salary and earning book royalties. I had been a pastor for thirteen years, since the church began. I didn't want to do anything else.

Then something happened that turned my family members' lives upside down. I was on the board of a crisis pregnancy center, and we had opened our home to a pregnant teenager, helping her give up her baby for adoption. We also had the joy of seeing her come to Christ.

I felt an even greater burden for the unborn. After searching Scripture and much prayer, I began participating in peaceful, nonviolent rescues at abortion clinics. For this I

was arrested and sent to jail. An abortion clinic won a court judgment against a group of us. I told a judge that I would pay anything I owed, but I couldn't hand over money to people who would use it to kill babies. (This was a matter of conscience. Understand that I have never failed to pay other debts, nor do I recommend that others avoid paying them.)

Then I discovered that my church was about to receive a writ of garnishment demanding that they surrender one-fourth of my wages each month to the abortion clinic. The church would have to either pay the abortion clinic or defy a court order. To prevent this from happening, I resigned.

That judgment was one of the best things that ever happened to us.

I'd already divested myself of book royalties. The only way I could avoid garnishment was to make no more than minimum wage. Fortunately, our family had been living on only a portion of my church salary, and we had just made our final house payment, so we were out of debt.

Another court judgment followed, involving another abortion clinic. Though our actions had been nonviolent, the clinic was awarded the largest judgment ever against a group of peaceful protestors: $8.2 million. This time it seemed

likely we would lose our house. By all appearances, and certainly by the world's standards, our lives had taken a devastating turn. Right?

Wrong. It was one of the best things that ever happened to us.

What others intended for evil, God intended for good (Genesis 50:20). We began a new ministry. My wife, Nanci, worked at a secretary's salary, supplementing my minimum wage. Her name alone was on all of our assets, including the house. My inability to legally own assets was nothing I sought after and nothing to be congratulated for, but God used it to help me understand what He means by "Everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41:11).

This wasn't the first time God taught me about His ownership. Many years ago, I loaned a new portable stereo to our church's high school group. It came back beat-up and, I admit, it bothered me. But the Lord convicted me, reminding me it wasn't *my* stereo—it was His. And it had been used to help reach young people. Who was I to complain about what was God's?

Back then the material possessions I valued most were my books. My money went toward many great books. Thousands of them. Those books meant a lot to me. I loaned them out, but it troubled me when they weren't returned or came back looking shabby.

Then I sensed God's leading to hand over the books—all of them—to begin a church library. I looked at the names of those who checked them out, sometimes dozens of names per book. I realized that by releasing the books, I had invested in others' lives. Suddenly, the more worn the book, the better. My perspective totally changed.

Fast-forwarding to the early 1990s, God used those court judgments to take my understanding of His ownership to a new level. Scripture really hit home:

- The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. (Psalm 24:1)
- "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the LORD Almighty. (Haggai 2:8)
- Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:18)
- You are not your own; you were bought at a price. (1 Corinthians 6:19–20)

God was teaching me the first of six keys to understanding the Treasure Principle:

God was and is the owner of everything, including books and stereos. He even owns me. God never revoked His ownership, never surrendered His claim to all treasures. He didn't die and leave the earth to me or anyone else.

TREASURE PRINCIPLE KEY #1

God owns everything.
I'm His money manager.

Ironically, I'd written extensively about God's ownership in my book *Money, Possessions and Eternity.* Within a year of its publication, I no longer owned anything. God was teaching me, in the crucible of adversity, the life-changing implications of that truth.

I realized that our house belonged to God, not us. Why worry about whether or not we would keep it if it belonged to Him anyway? He has no shortage of resources. He could easily provide us another place to live.

But understanding ownership was only half of my lesson. If God was the owner, I was the manager. I needed to adopt a steward's mentality toward the assets He had *entrusted*—not *given*—to me.

A steward manages assets for the owner's benefit. The steward carries no sense of entitlement to the assets he manages. It's his job to find out what the owner wants done with his assets, then carry out his will.

JOYFUL GIVING

Jerry Caven had a successful restaurant chain, two banks, a ranch, a farm, and real estate ventures. Now, at age fifty-nine, Jerry was searching for a nice lakeside retirement home. But the Owner had other plans.

"God led us to put our money and time overseas," Jerry says. "It's been exciting. Before, we gave token amounts. Now we put substantial money into missions. We often go to India."

What changed the Cavens' attitude toward giving?

"It was realizing God's ownership," Jerry explains. "Once we understood that we were giving away God's money to do God's work, we discovered a peace and joy we never had back when we thought it was our money!"

Once, a distraught man rode his horse up to John Wesley, shouting, "Mr. Wesley, something terrible happened! Your house burned to the ground!"

Wesley weighed the news, then calmly replied, "No. The *Lord's* house burned to the ground. That means one less responsibility for me."

Wesley's reaction wasn't denial. Rather, it was a bold affirmation of reality—God is the owner of all things, and we are simply His stewards.

Whenever we think like owners, it's a red flag. We should be thinking like stewards, investment managers,

always looking for the best place to invest the Owner's money. At the end of our term of service, we'll undergo a job performance evaluation: "For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.... So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10, 12).

Our name is on God's account. We have unrestricted access to it, a privilege that is subject to abuse. As His money managers, God trusts us to set our own salaries. We draw needed funds from His wealth to pay our living expenses. One of our central spiritual decisions is determining what is a reasonable amount to live on. Whatever that amount is—and it will legitimately vary from person to person—we shouldn't hoard or spend the excess. After all, it's His, not ours. And He has something to say about where to put it.

Every spring my wife and I read through dozens of letters from people in our church who are going on summer missions trips. This year we received forty-five requests asking us to pray and contribute financially. When this time comes each year, I'm like a kid in a candy store—a candy store as big as the world, as big as the heart of God.

Why such excitement?

Because we get to hear the stories and read the e-mails. We see the enthusiasm, the growth, the kingdom-mindedness, the changed priorities. We gain vested interest in more facets of God's work around the world. We pray that those who go—as well as those to whom they go—will never be

the same. And we will have had a part in it!

Recently I was attending a gathering of givers. We went around the room and told our stories. The words *fun, joy, exciting,* and *wonderful* kept surfacing. There were lots of smiles and laughter, along with tears of joy. One older couple eagerly shared how they are always traveling around the world, getting involved in the ministries they're giving to. Meanwhile, their home in the states is becoming run-down. They said, "Our children keep telling us, 'Fix up your house or buy a new one. You can afford it.' We tell them, 'Why would we do that? That's not what excites us!'"

Ray Berryman, CEO for a national municipal services firm, says he and his wife give at least half of their income to God's work each year.

"My joy in giving comes from serving God in a way that I know He's called me to and realizing that what I give is impacting people for Christ," Ray says. "It's exciting to know we're part of evangelizing, discipling, helping, and feeding the needy. It just feels wonderful and fulfilling."

The more we give, the more we delight in our giving—and the more God delights in us. Our giving pleases us. But more importantly, it pleases God.

"God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). This doesn't mean we should give only when we're feeling cheerful. The cheerfulness often comes during and after the act of obedience, not before it. So don't wait until you feel like giving—

it could be a long wait! Just give and watch the joy follow.

God delights in our cheerfulness in giving. He wants us to find joy. He even *commands* us to rejoice (Philippians 4:4). What command could be a greater pleasure to obey than that one? But if we don't give, we're robbed of the source of joy God instructs us to seek!

I know a single man who came to Christ in his twenties, read the Scriptures, and got so excited that he decided to sell his house and give the money to God. But when he shared this plan with older believers in his Bible-study group, something tragic happened: They talked him out of it.

If you ever feel inclined to talk a young believer (including your own child) out of giving, restrain yourself. Don't quench the Spirit of God, and don't rob someone of the present joy and future rewards of giving. Instead, watch and learn. Then lay God's assets on the table, and ask Him what He wants you to give away.

Giving isn't a luxury of the rich. It's a privilege of the poor.

THUNDER, LIGHTNING, AND GRACE

The Macedonian Christians understood the joy of giving: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy

and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Corinthians 8:2).

How do "severe trial," "overflowing joy," "extreme poverty," and "rich generosity" all fit together in one verse? Giving isn't a luxury of the rich. It's a privilege of the poor. I've discovered that impoverished Christians find no greater joy than in giving.

The Macedonians refused to let hard circumstances keep them from joy: "They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints" (v. 4). They had to plead, presumably because Paul and others were telling them that their poverty exempted them from giving.

These early Christians were dirt-poor but came up with every reason they could to give. They begged for the privilege of giving! What a contrast to us, who have so much more than they had but manage to come up with endless justifications for *not* giving!

It's humbling to receive gifts from people in far greater need than you. I've experienced this on missions trips where the poor serve their very best food to visiting Americans and do it with great smiles of joy. They're not pretending that this sacrifice makes them happy. It *really* does.

When the tabernacle was being built, people were so caught up in the excitement they had to be "restrained" from giving more (Exodus 36:5–7). That's what giving will do to you.

David looked at what he and his people were giving to the Lord. It humbled him: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14).

My friend Dixie Fraley told me, "We're most like God when we're giving." Gaze upon Christ long enough, and you'll become more of a giver. Give long enough, and you'll become more like Christ.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:1: "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." How was God's grace demonstrated? By their act of giving to needy Christians. In verse 6, Paul calls the Macedonians' giving to help the hungry in Jerusalem an "act of grace." The same Greek word is used for Christian *giving* as for God's *grace.*

Christ's grace defines, motivates, and puts in perspective our giving: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (v. 9).

Our giving is a reflexive response to the grace of God in our lives. It doesn't come out of our altruism or philanthropy—it comes out of the transforming work of Christ in us. This grace is the action; our giving is the reaction. We give because He first gave to us. The greatest passage

on giving in all Scripture ends not with "Congratulations for your generosity," but "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

As thunder follows lightning, giving follows grace. When God's grace touches you, you can't help but respond with generous giving. And as the Macedonians knew, giving is simply the overflow of joy.

THE FRINGE BENEFITS OF GIVING

Mark, a Kentucky attorney, gives away half of his income each year.

"My pursuit of money drove me away from God," Mark says. "But since I've been giving it to Him, everything's changed. In fact, giving has brought me closer to God than anything else."

In the movie *Chariots of Fire,* Olympian Eric Liddell said, "I believe God made me for a purpose...and when I run, I feel His pleasure." Those who've discovered the Treasure Principle will testify, "When I give, I feel His pleasure."

There have been days when I've lost focus, and then a need arises and God leads me to give. Suddenly I'm infused with energy, purpose, and joy. I feel God's pleasure.

God said, "I give to the Levites as their inheritance the

tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the LORD" (Numbers 18:24). Notice that the people gave their money to God, not the Levites. It may have looked like the people were giving to their spiritual leaders, but they actually gave to God, and it was He who then designated His funds to the Levites. Christians should love their pastors and support them financially (Galatians 6:6), but first and foremost we give to God (2 Corinthians 8:5). Before anything else, giving is an act of worship.

Giving jump-starts our relationship with God. It opens our fists so we can receive what God has for us. When we see what it does for others and for us, we open our fists sooner and wider when the next chance comes.

God says, "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Proverbs 21:13). In Isaiah 58:6–10, God says that His willingness to answer our prayers is directly affected by whether we are caring for the hungry, needy, and oppressed. Want to empower your prayer life? Give.

It was said of Josiah, "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD (Jeremiah 22:16). Caring for the needy flows out of knowing God, and draws us closer to Him.

Businessman Hal Thomas told me, "When I give,

I'm saying, 'I love You, Lord.'" Paul told the Corinthians their financial gift was "overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God" (2 Corinthians 9:12).

Another benefit of giving is freedom. It's a matter of basic physics. The greater the mass, the greater the hold that mass exerts. The more things we own—the greater their total mass—the more they grip us, setting us in orbit around them. Finally, like a black hole, they suck us in.

Giving changes all that. It breaks us out of orbit around our possessions. We escape their gravity, entering a new orbit around our treasures in heaven.

Despite the $8.2 million court judgment eleven years ago, we never lost our house. While paying me a minimum-wage salary, the ministry owned the books I wrote. And suddenly royalties increased. Our ministry has been able to give away about 90 percent of those royalties to missions, famine relief, and pro-life work. In the last three years, by God's grace, we've given more than $5.5 million. Sometimes I think God sells the books just to raise funds for ministries close to His heart!

You couldn't pay me enough not to give.

I don't go to bed at night feeling that I've "sacrificed" that money. I go to bed feeling joy, because there's nothing

like giving. For me, the only feeling that compares is the joy of leading someone to Christ.

Giving infuses life with joy. It interjects an eternal dimension into even the most ordinary day. That's just one reason you couldn't pay me enough not to give.

But hold on—great as it is, our present joy isn't the best part of the Treasure Principle.

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kids or you give your time and energy to help educate a prisoner or lend an ear to an elderly person – that's extraordinary. Why? Because you are giving. Every gift breaks the barrier between the sacred and the mundane and floods the mundane with the sacred. When a gift is given, life becomes extraordinary because God's own gift giving flows through the giver.

Chapter 2

How Should We Give?

There were once two brothers. One was rich and the other poor. The poor one was a peasant and toiled while tilling the land, growing turnips and other vegetables. As it happened, one of his turnips grew so enormous that it took a cart drawn by two oxen to transport it. He didn't want to eat it, and he didn't want to sell it, so he decided to give it as a present to the king. The king marveled at the extraordinary object and suggested the peasant must be very lucky. "Oh, no," said the peasant, "lucky I am certainly not. I am a poor man tilling the earth. I have nothing, and I am forgotten by all." The king pitied him and gave him plenty of gold, land, fields, and flocks.

When his wealthy brother heard what riches his poor sibling had acquired with a single turnip, he envied him and pondered how he might acquire more than his brother did. Instead of a single turnip, the brother presented the king with gold and horses, hoping for a larger gift than his brother's in return. "The king took the present," the fairytale continues, "saying that he could give him in return nothing rarer or better than the huge turnip. So the rich brother had to put his brother's turnip into a cart and have it taken home."[1]

One way to read the story would be to say that the poor brother gave a selfless gift to the king and received a fortune in return. His

older and wealthy sibling wanted to enrich himself by giving a gift and ended up with a more or less worthless object. Alternatively, we could also question the purity of the poor brother's gift. With his extraordinary turnip, he may have tried to ingratiate himself to the king and succeeded. He wasn't giving to honor the king but to manipulate him into giving in return. He was giving as selfishly as his brother but was simply shrewder. Under the guise of giving, they were possibly both trying to get.

We give gifts in many situations and for many purposes, and like the gifts of one or both brothers, many of them aren't gifts at all. For instance, we want to grease the wheels of bureaucratic machinery made rusty by corruption, so we slip an envelope under the table. We want to deliver an insult disguised as kindness, so we act like the cartoon character who sees a sign in a shop window "Things no one wants" and says to a friend, "Let's get her a little something." We are exploiting a person and want to keep on doing it, so we give gifts hoping to mask the truth of the relationship. We want to harm a person and, like Judas, betray him with a kiss. We want to show our superiority, so we throw an extravagant party, the mother of all parties (as in one recent case, where an ice sculpture in the form of Michelangelo's *David* spouted vodka from its male appendage). Or the force of habit just pulls us along, as when we reluctantly exchange gifts for Christmas.

When we give like this, giving has obviously gone bad. But it need not be this way. So how should we give in order to give well? Before we try to answer this question, let's first make some distinctions.

Taking, Getting, Giving

Natalie Davies distinguishes between three basic modes in which we relate to one another: the coercive mode, the sales mode, and the gift mode.[2] The coercive mode refers to various forms of theft. In this mode, we *take* what is not ours and what is not being offered to us. Armed with insider information, we sell our stock before it tumbles down, and the hapless buyers take the loss. Or to use a more innocent example, at work we slip a pen into our pocket and take it home.

The sales mode refers to the market of buying and selling. Here we give something in order to *get* a rough equivalent in exchange. I need a bike, and I pay money to the shop owner in exchange for it. Or instead of giving money for goods, I barter: I swap the skis my son has outgrown for a pair of longer ones.

Finally, the gift mode refers to relations between donors and recipients. Here we *give* favors that we don't owe and the recipients don't deserve. If recipients return favors, they do so unforced, after a time lag, and in a different form. I give a book to a friend for his birthday out of appreciation for his friendship and maybe with the vague thought that he might remember my birthday – though hopefully not by giving me the same book I gave him! In the coercive mode, we take illicitly. In the exchange mode, we acquire legitimately. In the gift mode, we give generously.

We find the same basic categories at work in Scripture. Ephesians 4 shows us how to order our lives, how to live as new selves rather than as old. In the process of contrasting the old life and the new, the text speaks briefly to all three modes mentioned – taking, acquiring or getting, and giving. In particular, verse 28 reads: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy." Thieves illicitly take what is not their own. They violate those from whom they steal, robbing them of their goods and overriding their very personhood.

We sometimes take blatantly. Like Frank Abagnale, a protagonist in the film *Catch Me If You Can*, I might live a life of fraud and illicit gain by pretending to be a Pan Am pilot, a doctor, a lawyer, and a sociology professor, and in the process cash in $2,500,000 in fraudulent checks. But there are also more subtle ways of being a taker. For example, if I refuse to work while still availing myself of what I need – food, shelter, clothing, or even more – I am taking unfairly. Of course, I may be unable to work. Then others are obliged to support me. But if I am able to work and refuse to, I am taking illicitly. Hence the command "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10) – a bit of Holy Scripture that found its

way even into the officially atheist Marxist constitution of the former Soviet Union. Takers, says Ephesians, must become getters.

Getters exchange goods. Most often they give work to their employers, who give them wages in return. That's what honest work means: You get what you put in, no more, no less. If you get less than what you put in, then either you were generous to your employer or your employer was stealing from you. If you get more than what you put in, then either you were stealing from your employer or your employer was generous to you.

Takers should become getters, but getters in turn should become givers. The point of exchanging work for goods or pay, says Ephesians, is not just to satisfy our own needs without having to steal, but to help others in need. One important purpose of work is "to have something to share with the needy". To be a getter and to be a giver are not mutually exclusive alternatives. To the contrary, unless wealth has fallen into our laps, to be givers we must also be getters. It takes work to give, whether what we give is money, useful goods, or our undivided attention.

We give away some of what we have earned, say, 10 percent of our income as the Old Testament law specifies, and hopefully a bit more. Moreover, our work itself can also be a gift. If I volunteer at a soup kitchen or answer calls for the public radio fund drive, I give "sweat equity". Finally, even when they are paid, the best workers give more than just that for which they receive pay. A piano teacher is a wise and witty expert, in love with music and her pupils. She gets paid, maybe even well, but she gives more than her pay compensates.

Why Give?

But why should we make the shift over to being givers in the first place? Aren't we wired to maximize our profits by whatever means society allows? Or why not stop at being getters, working honestly with our own hands and taking care of ourselves without burdening anyone else?

Ephesians' answer to these questions takes us back to the discussion of the old and new selves at the end of chapter 1. The old self is

self-centered; the new self is indwelled by Christ, opened up toward God in faith and toward neighbors in love. Following the apostle Paul in Romans, for this topic I used the metaphor of death and resurrection: The old self has died and a new self was raised (Romans 6:1–11). Ephesians speaks of the old and the new self by using a different metaphor, that of clothing and unclothing: "Put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts," and "clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22–24). The old self is the worn, frayed, and filthy clothing I want to strip off as soon as I get the chance; the new self is the smart, new outfit, fresh from the store, that I can't wait to put on.

The connection between these two rather different metaphors – the metaphor of passage to new life and the metaphor of putting on a new outfit – is this: *Because* we have died to our old selves and live as new selves indwelled by Christ, we *should* take off the old and clothe ourselves with the new. The unspoken assumption is that the old self is not quite yet dead and the new self is not yet fully alive. Taking off the old and putting on the new is an ongoing process of dying and rising.

At the heart of this ongoing process, Ephesians says, is the *imitation of God*. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1–2). Indwelled by Christ, we imitate God in our own way as frail and sinful human beings.

So why does giving become part of our new selves? The first and primary reason is because the God whom we worship and the Christ who dwells in us are neither takers nor getters, but givers. The second and related reason is because God has given to us so that we would share with others. As I explained in chapter 1, we are not just the intended recipients of God's gifts; we are also their channels. Recall Aslan's gifts to the children in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Lucy's cordial, for instance, was for her and her friends: "If you or any of your friends is hurt, a few drops of this will restore them."[3] She was a channel, and so should we be.

Pull apart the idea of being the channel of God's gifts, and you'll see that it involves three intentions on God's part. One concerns us, the givers. Another concerns the gifts themselves. And the third concerns the recipients: our neighbors.

Take, first, God's intention for us. As channels, we exist not just to enjoy things but to pass them on. Our purpose is twofold: to flourish ourselves and to help others flourish. After God called Abraham, God gave him a double promise. The first was: "I will bless you"; the second was: I will make you to "be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1–3). The same double blessing is given to us. If we just enjoy good things without passing them on, if we are blessed without being a blessing, then we fail in our purpose as channels. We *are* givers because we were made that way, and if we don't give, we are at odds with ourselves.

God's second intention concerns the gifts themselves, whether they are material goods (like food or shelter) or immaterial things (like ideas), whether they are skills (like the ability to play music) or capacities (like the brute strength of muscles). To the extent that we are their intended final recipients, we should enjoy them and benefit from them. They are the stuff of God's blessing to us. These gifts are given to us to please us and, in a sense, to do with them as we please.

To the extent that we are channels of gifts, however, we can't just do with them as we please. They come to us with an ultimate name and address other than our own. Though in our hands, they are on their way elsewhere. The acts of enjoying the gifts ourselves while still passing them on often coincide, as when we play music in the company of others or discuss a fascinating issue with friends. We then enjoy what we give. But at other times, we must decide whether we should enjoy *or* give, as when locusts devastate crops in Mauritania and I can either purchase a new bike or give a donation to help relieve a dire need.

Finally, being a channel involves God's intentions for our neighbors. Things I am given are not just mine. Even if they are in my hands, some of them belong to my neighbors in need. I have an obligation to pass them on. If I block the flow of God's gifts, I haven't just failed the giving God; I've also failed the intended recipients.

They have a right to the gifts, and I have the obligation to give. Both their right and my obligation rest on God's giving these things to me to pass them on.

So why give instead of simply enjoying what we have legitimately acquired? One, because we should imitate God the giver, the source of all that we are and have. Two, because we are not just recipients, but also channels of all the gifts God has given us, including our hard-earned pennies.

Imitating God's Generosity

It's a tall order to give as God gives. Can we even do it? It seems just as impossible as giving all the time to everyone who's in need.

In Gotthold E. Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, a play set in Jerusalem at the end of the twelfth century in the midst of the Crusades, there is a dialogue between Nathan, a wealthy and generous Jew, and Al-Hafi, a dervish and a treasurer of Sultan Saladin, the Muslim ruler of Jerusalem. Saladin hates the fact that people have to beg, so much so "that he sets out to get rid of them [the beggars], even if he has to become a beggar himself".[4] With his treasury empty on account of his prodigious generosity, Saladin sent Al-Hafi to borrow from Nathan. In the course of the conversation, the dervish complains to Nathan about the madness of Saladin's giving. He asks rhetorically, "It wouldn't be foolishness to mimic the gentleness of God, who without prejudice spreads himself over good and evil and plain and desert, in sunshine and rain, and not always to have God's full hand? Well? Wouldn't it be arrogance …?" (36). It's foolish and arrogant even for an opulent Sultan to want to give as God gives. Even he doesn't always have "God's full hand". Al-Hafi must borrow so that Saladin can gratify his proud folly of acting divinely generous.

We are not God, so it follows that when we give, we must give differently than God does. For one thing, God is the *first* giver. For centuries, Christian philosophers have spoken of God as the "unmoved mover" and "uncaused cause". We can say, by analogy, that God is a "non-receiving giver". Just as God causes without being caused, God gives without having received. In the language of those

same philosophers, human beings are "moved movers" and "caused causes". Analogously, we are "receiving givers". We give only because we have first received. God gives from what is originally, exclusively, and properly God's own; we give from what is our own because God continually gives to us.

Second, God is the *infinite* giver. God exists without measure and can give without measure. God's resources are never depleted and vitality never sapped. Human beings are finite and can give only in measured ways. Like Saladin's, even the richest human hand empties, and we tire out. And though God gives without ceasing, our own giving must pause; we must rest to revive and replenish.

Third, God is the *utterly loving* giver. God doesn't just love; God *is* love. God bestows goods upon others without any concern for God's own good. True, God jealously guards divine glory. But God's glory is the divinity of God's love, and God's jealousy for God's glory is not so much about God's own good as about the good of the creation. In contrast, human beings are selfish lovers, and are so partly because their own well-being is so fragile. Even when our love is at its purest, we can't avoid somehow seeking ourselves and our own benefit in every gift we bestow.

Derivative, finite, and selfish in all our generosity – that's the kind of givers we are. It seems that we can never give as the primordial, infinite, and utterly loving God gives. And yet, echoing the whole New Testament, Ephesians insists that we "be imitators of God" and "live in love, as Christ loved us" (Ephesians 5:1–2). What can such commands mean? Do they just call attention to our inability and throw us, desperate, into the open arms of God's grace as Luther thought? Yes, but not only that. They also sketch out the way we can actually live when we have crossed the bridge from self-centeredness to generosity.

These commands call us to be similar to, not identical with, God. We are not divine and cannot give exactly the way God does. But we can and should give *similarly* to how God gives. We are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Our new, redeemed self is "created according to the likeness of God" (Ephesians 4:24). We can still

imitate God the giver with goods we have received, to the degree that our finite resources and limited strength allow and without ever acting in total selflessness. And that's what Ephesians, along with the rest of the New Testament, urges us to do.

Of course, the dangers in imitating God are never far away. Wanting to give without measure, we can bring ruin to ourselves and those close to us. In wanting to give without recognizing our need to receive, we can become arrogant and humiliate those to whom we give. Finally, in foolish pride, we self-centered human beings can end up more like a grotesque parody of the utterly loving God than like God's imitators.

To give as God gives, but in a way that is humanly possible, is a fine art. But it's an art that can be learned because the art itself is one of the gifts God offers to humanity. We can learn to give wisely and humbly. In Ephesians, such giving is part of the task of "learn[ing] Christ" (4:20). Recall Luther's bold statement that we are Christs to one another. Christ is living his life through us because he dwells in us. Just as in Ephesians 4, the idea of Christ's indwelling has been transmuted into the injunction to "clothe" ourselves with Christ, so the idea of Christ living his life through us – the idea that we are Christs – has been transmuted into the call to "learn Christ". Through the power of Christ's Spirit, we can learn to give like God in Christ does.

But what *is* it that we need to learn? How does God give and how should we, as God's imitators, give?

God's Freedom

God gives freely. Take creation, for example. God is under no compulsion to create. Before God creates, nothing exists – nothing greater than God, nothing smaller than God, nothing equal to God, nothing at all. That's what Christian theologians mean when they say that God created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, as the Latin phrase goes. It's not that at the beginning there was a strange something called "nothing" that God used when creating. It would be silly for nothing to be nonetheless something. Rather, absolutely everything that is not God owes its existence to God. As creator, God is a

giver, and no person or thing from outside could possibly force the Almighty to create.

Might the compulsion to create come from inside, a critic could press further, from within God's own nature? That's what the great neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus thought. As Étienne Gilson put it, Plotinus's highest principle, which he called the One, "is what he has to be" and "acts as he has to act on account of what he necessarily is".[5] As creator, Plotinus's God would give because God couldn't do otherwise. For Plotinus, God was more like an "It" than an "I", more like a thing than a person. For Christians, it's the other way around, and that makes all the difference. God is more like an "I" than an "It", more like a person than a thing. God wills and decides. And as God wills and decides, God is free in the narrow but important sense of being self-determined.

Being self-determined cannot be the whole story of divine freedom, however. For then God's freedom would be arbitrary. God would decide this rather than that for no other reason than the inscrutability of divine will. If God were free to create in this way, creation would be as arbitrary as if God flipped a coin to decide whether to create or not. There would be no more reason for the fact that there is something instead of nothing than there is reason for why today I chose to write with a black pen instead of a blue one, or to wear a jacket instead of a sweater.

God's giving is not a whim, however. God gives as creator when the plenitude of divine love turns away from itself toward the nothingness of non-being. Out of abundance of that same love, God the redeemer showers a world gone awry with the gifts of eternal life and deliverance from sin. To be moved by oneself in love is to be divinely free. Moved by oneself, one is not compelled; directed by love, one is not whimsical.

Voluntary Gifts

Since God gives freely, we should too. That's how the apostle Paul thought of gift giving; it should be voluntary. He praised believers from Macedonia for giving "voluntarily" to the poor of Jerusalem

(2 Corinthians 8:3). Similarly, he urged that the Corinthians' gift be ready when he came to collect it "as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion" (2 Corinthians 9:5).

Why is freedom in giving so important? Because the gift consists more in the freely undertaken choice to give than in the things given. In this regard, the Apostle might well have agreed with Seneca, the great Stoic writer on gift giving, who said: "For, since in the case of a benefit the chief pleasure of it comes from the intention of the bestower, he who by his very hesitation has shown that he made his bestowal unwillingly has not 'given', but has failed to withstand the effort to extract it."[6] As for Seneca, for the Apostle the "eagerness" of the giver matters more than the magnitude of the gift. God loves "a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 8:12 and 9:7).

And yet we noted earlier that we are obliged to give. God's gifts themselves oblige us, and God's commands reinforce that obligation. Now we see that we are obliged to give freely – and there's the rub. How can we give freely if we are obliged to give? Inversely, how can we be obliged to give if we give freely? Is it possible to be *obliged* to give *freely*?

The apostle Paul thought so. True, he never *commanded* the Corinthians to give, and he underscored this for them (2 Corinthians 8:8). But he exerted enormous pressure on them using some potent rhetorical weapons. He played with their sense of shame: they would humiliate themselves if they didn't give (2 Corinthians 9:4). He had them compete with other donors: the Macedonians gave, so the Corinthians should stick to their promise and give (which is also what he said to the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 9:2). He appealed to their debt to him: he would be humiliated if they didn't give (2 Corinthians 9:4). And he did all this in order to nudge them to give, as he put it, "not reluctantly or under compulsion", but voluntarily (2 Corinthians 9:7)!

Was the Apostle twisting their arm to be free? Some strange freedom this must be! But maybe our sense that to be free is to act under no constraint whatsoever is mistaken. We tend to think that we must be autonomous and spontaneous to act freely. Behind this identification of freedom with autonomous spontaneity lies the notion

of a self-defined and free-floating person. Strip down all the influences of time and place, abstract from culture and nurture, and then you'll come to your authentic core. This core is who you truly are, the thinking goes – unique, unshaped, unconstrained.

But that's more like a caricature of a divine self than an accurate description of a human self. Using the image of the beast, Luther argued that human beings are always ridden by someone, either by God or by the Devil.[7] That's a crude way of putting it, but it's basically right. The point is not that either God or the Devil *compels* us. In that case, our will would turn into, as Luther put it, "unwill". It's rather that, unlike God, we always exercise our will as beings constantly shaped by many factors – by language, parental rearing, culture, media, advertising, and peer pressure, and through all these, we are shaped either by God or by God's adversary. Often we don't perceive ourselves as shaped at all. If we are not visibly and palpably coerced, we think that we act autonomously, spontaneously, and authentically. Yet we are wrong.

Take our preferences for one soft drink over another. I am thirsty, walk into a store, reach for a Pepsi, and walk away, never doubting that I acted autonomously and spontaneously. But why did I choose Pepsi over Coke or just plain water? I may like its taste better. But most likely it's because Pepsi's ads got to me the way Coke's didn't. I don't autonomously and spontaneously choose to be a Pepsi drinker; I'm made into a Pepsi drinker. Yet I freely chose that Pepsi can that is in my hand.

Recall what I said about the old and the new selves. Our old self died, and our new self was raised. It's a self in whom Christ dwells and through whom Christ acts, a self that has put on Christ and "learned" Christ. We *are* these new selves, and that's why we give (though non-Christians can give for many other reasons). We don't give mainly because God or God's messengers command us to. If we did, we would be giving under compulsion, and therefore, reluctantly. Instead, we give because we *are* givers, because Christ living in us is a giver. Informing every seemingly small act of Christian giving is a change in our very being, a transformation of a person from

being one who either illicitly takes or merely legitimately acquires, into being one who beneficently gives. As I will explain in chapter 3, even as such transformed people, we still need to grow into the joy of giving. But the command to give is not compelling us to act against ourselves, even if it often feels like this.

That feeling that the command is against us, a sense of reluctance in giving, is not unfounded. When we have failed to put away our "former way of life", the new self becomes an obligation that butts against the ingrained habits of the old self. Yet as uncomfortable as it may feel, the pressure is not to our detriment, but in our favor. It pushes us to act true to who we most properly are. That's why we can be obliged to give freely: the obligation nudges us to do what the new self would do if the old one didn't stand in the way.

Imagine your life as a piece of music, a Bach cello suite. You've heard it played by a virtuoso. You love it and would like to play it well. But try as you might, you fail – not so much because you've had a bad teacher or haven't practiced enough, but because your left hand has a defect. You make music, but it's nothing like it's supposed to sound. Then you have surgery performed by a magician with a scalpel. Your hand heals. You return to your lessons with new vigor. And then one day, you play the piece nearly perfectly. Full of joy, you exclaim, "Yes! I love it! This is the way the music of my life should sound!" Constrained by the score because you have to follow its notation? Well, yes. But loving every moment of that constraint – and not feeling it as constraint at all – because the very constraint is what makes for the beauty and delight.

Something like this is what it means to be a free giver. God obliges us to give. But it is precisely when we act in accordance with the obligation that we have a sense of unspoiled authenticity and freedom. So in our best moments, we forget the command and just give the way we are supposed to give. We are like a motor-powered sailboat when it's "running", as sailors say: With the wind at the back of a powered boat, all resistance is gone; the boat is always where the wind would push it to be. The same is true of us when we give freely. Living out of our new selves, we are always already where the command would want us to be.

The Good of Another

We can give to bribe, to insult or deceive, to pump ourselves up and deflate others, to hide abuse, or for many other similarly ignoble reasons. And when we do, we don't give as we should. Giving has turned into its very opposite, into injury. Under the pretense of wanting to delight, it manipulates. Under the pretense of helping, it wounds. Under the pretense of generosity, it shamelessly takes.

When God gives, God seeks the good of another. As we have seen in chapter 1, this is the nature of God's giving. God doesn't need anything. That's partly what it means to be God – to lack nothing. If giving were a way of getting, God would not give at all; being in possession of all things, God wouldn't need to get anything and so wouldn't give anything. God doesn't give in order to acquire. God loves without self-seeking; that's at the heart of who God is. God gives for the benefit of others.

So should we. Indeed, to give for others' benefit is what it means to give. When we buy or sell, we give money or goods in order to receive one or the other. We engage in the transaction for our own sake; our own good drives the whole process. The same is true when we lend. As a rule, we lend to benefit ourselves. Lenders usually receive more than they give; they lend for profit. Seneca put it well: "He who gives benefits imitates the gods, he who seeks a return [imitates] money-lenders."[8] Givers renounce gain for themselves and bestow it on others.

When do we rightly give? In one of three primary situations. We give when we *delight* in someone. Lovers express and nourish their love by gift giving – a smile, a rose, a caress, a ring – anything, and even the tiniest thing can become a gift. We also give when others are in *need*. A stranded stranger receives a helping hand; we aid the sick or those who were recently laid off from work get what they need. Finally, we give to *help others give*. We give to people who work for good causes in which we believe – we give to educational institutions (maybe to build and maintain a good library) and churches (perhaps to pay their ministers), to relief organizations (say, to help alleviate the global HIV/AIDS crisis) and arts foundations (maybe to help set up exhibitions for young artists). In all three types of situations, we give because we seek the good of another. In all three, we imitate God.

Eternal Gifts

Consider first delighting in another person as a reason to give. So far, in this and in the previous chapter, I have written about God as the giver in relation to the world. God gives as creator and redeemer, for instance. In the process of examining God's relation to the world, I even claimed that God is *fundamentally* a giver, which points beyond God's relation to the world.

God doesn't have to give to the world at all, I argued earlier. God is free to create or not. But once God has created the world, God will always be a giver who seeks the good of the recipient. Why? Because God isn't a giver the way I'm a biker. I bike when I need exercise, when I'm not torpid and the weather isn't bad. God gives continually and unfailingly, because God *is* essentially a giver just as God *is* love. Luther offered a very vivid "definition" of God: God is "nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love".[9] That's the character of God's being, not just of some of God's actions. So God is a giver more the way ducks are quackers than in the way I'm a biker.

But what, you will ask, was the essential and eternal giver doing before there *was* a world to shower with gifts? Giving has a very simple and stable structure: someone gives something to someone else. Take one of these three away and you no longer have a gift. The consequence is this: you can't give a gift to yourself. Sure, sometimes we say, "I think I'll give myself a treat!" and proceed to pamper ourselves. But the talk of "giving" in this context is just a manner of speaking. When the giver is one with the recipient, nothing is truly given or received. Before God created, God alone existed. If God is fundamentally a giver, then God must give independently of there being anybody or anything else around. But how?

Christians believe that God, who is one and yet beyond numbering, is the Holy Trinity. God is the Speaker, the Word, and the Breath, to use a formulation based on the beginning of the gospel of

John (1:1–3). The more traditional and perhaps more adequate – or rather, least inadequate – way of talking about God as Holy Trinity is based on the end of the gospel of Matthew: God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19). The common name for the three in God is "persons", and it is among the Divine Three that gifts are most originally given. God is a giver apart from creation because God is the Holy Trinity.

Some theologians think of the three divine persons in the way that some ancients thought about the Three Graces of Greco-Roman antiquity – "one for bestowing a benefit, one for receiving it, and a third for returning it".[10] According to this pattern, the Father would give, the Son would receive, and the Holy Spirit would return. It is more likely, however, that each divine person gives, each receives, and each returns. Each loves and glorifies the other two, and each receives love and glory from them. One does not give first, with the result that the others would be indebted, but all give in the eternally moving circle of exchanges. And because they give in this way, they have all things in common except that which distinguishes them from each other. Their eternal bliss is the delight of this loving gift exchange.

In the first chapter, I wrote about the outbound and unidirectional flow of God's gifts. That flow is God's love turned toward the world. It bestows benefits without receiving any back. Gifts flow out. But now we have an image of the perfect circle of God's gift giving that is the very stuff of divine eternal life. Here God bestows benefits and receives them in return. Gifts circulate.

The flow of God's gifts is not aimless spillage. It aims to create human givers and, after they have fallen into sin, to redeem them and finally, to glorify them in perfect communion with God and one another. The flow of gifts is God's arms opened to the world, enabling us to partake of the gift exchange that makes up eternal divine life and supreme divine bliss. This is our best hope for the world to come: to "enjoy God" by receiving divine gifts and to enjoy one another in God in a perfect exchange of gifts with one another.[11] The purpose of the outbound flow of God's gifts is for us to receive

living water from God's eternal source, and to thereby come to mirror among ourselves the loving gift exchange of the Godhead. Throughout all eternity, God's gifts will continue to flow to humanity – not so that God will get any benefits in return, but so that we can enjoy the divine giver, and through that giver, delight in one another.

Lover's Gifts

Occasionally, the wonder of the perfect circular movement of gifts happens in the here and now, and between human beings whose lives are deeply marred by sin.

Lovers can experience this wonder in their amorous embraces. They *can*, I wrote. Often they don't. Often enough, sexual union is more like a violent robbery – illicit taking – than it is like generous giving. For the theft to occur, we need not rape someone, nor even seek to dominate and manipulate them with sex. An egotistical seduction – of the kind described in Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*[12] – in which the body of another is used and then discarded, suffices. Or sex can be like an exchange of goods – each gives to the other, but the object of both is to get what they want, not to give delight to the other. Giving is there, but it exists solely for the sake of getting. In this way, the sexual act is potentially among the most selfish moments in someone's life.

And yet! Sexual union can be a sacrament of love – not just a sacrament of human love, but also a means of expressing and mediating divine love. Pleasure – pleasure of the soul no less than of the body! – given to the other and for the other's sake *is* then a pleasure received. And a pleasure received by the other is, almost paradoxically, a pleasure returned to the giver.

Family and friends, not just sexual partners, can experience among themselves the reality of the divine gift exchange. A good Christmas celebration is an example. True, Christmas gift giving can sometimes degenerate into a caricature of itself. For me, the difficulties begin with shopping. Surrounded by all the glitzy stuff, I can't figure out what I like and what might be appropriate to give, let alone what the other might enjoy. The trouble deepens when the actual

essentially dependent on God. We are what a philosopher might call *ontologically* needy: our very being is in need of the power to be. The redeemer gives, because without God's giving we could not mend our lives ruined by sin. And that's what a theologian might call *soteriologically* needy: Our salvation and our welfare is our need. The consummator gives, because without God's giving we would return to dust and reap eternal ruin. Again in theological terms, we are *eschatologically* needy: Eternal life is our need. The creator gives existence and grounded trust. The redeemer gives salvation and active love. The consummator gives eternal life and living hope. We need these things. God gives them.

Naked need is the occasion for God's giving, not a need adorned with the clean, elegant robes of respectability and good works. In the latter case, God would be giving on account of merit, and gifts would become rewards. But God doesn't cease giving when our need is clad with frayed and filthy rags of demerit. If we fail to let God's gifts flow to others, a trickle may replace the flow, just as if we let God's gifts flow on to others, the flow may become a gush. But God will still give even to those who don't give, sustaining them and offering even more, despite their failure. God's goodness is dishonored if we want to merit its benefits, argued Luther in *The Freedom of the Christian*.[14] Elsewhere he insisted the flip side of this claim: God's goodness "gladly loses its good deed on the unthankful".[15]

Gifts to the Needy

God "scatters abroad" and "gives to the poor" (2 Corinthians 9:9). So should we. Let's return for a moment to Christmas giving. I described it earlier as a feast of mutual delight in exchange of gifts within the circle of family or friends. But there is something very one-sided about celebrating Christmas only by ritually enacting a community of joyous giving and receiving. Though such a loving community is an earthly good on par with any other, in a world of massive and unrelenting need, it's positively sinful for such communities to remain turned inward. The gifts should not just circulate within the community to delight its members. They should also flow to outsiders to alleviate their needs.

Consider the true gift we celebrate at Christmas, God's advent into the world. Here is how the apostle Paul told the story of Christmas: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Son of God did not dwell among humans just to open our vista onto the circle of blissful exchanges within the Godhead. He divested himself of heavenly wealth and became an impoverished child so the fragile flesh of humanity could be taken up into God's embrace. The circle of the Eternal Intimates opened up, and gifts traversed its boundaries to reach those in need. Our gifts shouldn't just travel on a two-way street so givers and receivers can delight in one another; they should travel on a one-way street so that the needy may be helped, being imparted to those who may not be able to give in return.

At Christmas we should celebrate two kinds of gift giving, not just one. Christmas should be a feast of reciprocal giving in a circle of intimates, a provisional enactment of the advent of God's future world. But it should also be a feast of giving to those outside the circle, a small contribution helping to align the world of sin and need with the coming world of love. The advent of the light into the darkness of the world is not the goal; it is part of the *movement* toward the goal. At Christmas we celebrate this movement. Gifts should therefore chiefly flow out to the needy; they shouldn't largely circulate among friends.

Like God, we should give to the needy without any distinction – to stranger and to kin, to undeserving and deserving. Where the needy come from, what the color of their skin is, or how they behave doesn't matter. Their needs matter, as do their incapacities (though if they are able but unwilling to tend to their own needs, they are illicit takers, not legitimate recipients). It is sometimes hard to decide what exactly constitutes a need. For instance, a need in one place (a wealthy Western nation) may be opulence in another (in sub-Saharan Africa). Different givers may assess a need differently. But whatever

the assessment ends up being, when the need is present, a gift should be given, irrespective of whose need it is.

You will recall that in *Nathan the Wise*, Sultan Saladin sought to enlist Al-Hafi, an ascetic and therefore a beggar, as his treasurer, because only a beggar knows how to give to beggars appropriately. To persuade Al-Hafi and to let him know what he expected of him, Saladin disparaged his predecessor: "He gave so ungraciously when he gave; first inquired so vehemently into the situation of the receiver; never satisfied that he was lacking, also wanted to know the cause of the lack, in order to measure the cause stingily against the offering".[16]

For a giver, every need is in a sense like any other need, and the mere fact of its existence is a sufficient reason for attending to it. Only ungracious and reluctant givers inspect the causes of a need and dole out the benefits in proportion to its legitimacy.

Some needy recipients may prove unworthy. They may be ungrateful, they may squander gifts irresponsibly before their genuine need is satisfied, and they may greedily refuse to pass even a crumb from their table to neighbors in more dire need. They clearly need to learn how to both receive and give – though probably not from those who give to them, lest the givers prove to be reluctant and arrogant, and therefore bad givers. Yet if recipients are in need, gifts should be given. Need is the only justification a gift requires.

Giving to All, Giving Everything?

The world's needs are larger than any one person's capacities, though they are not larger than our collective capacities! Our resources are limited, and needs cry to us from all sides. And they all need to be met. But is meeting all needs a responsibility of each person? If that were the case, our responsibility would be nearly infinite and could never be fulfilled. The choice to save one person would be a choice to sacrifice all others![17]

We are finite beings who can't even meet all the needs of a single person, let alone all the needs of all people. There is only "one man" whose gift is meant for all – Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:15–21). My gifts are meant only for some people. God is the primordial and

infinite giver, and it is God's responsibility, not mine, to give to everyone. Each of us is only a single channel, one of many through which God's gifts flow. Our responsibility is to meet needs as we encounter them, as they come to us in the course of our lives, whether they are close at hand, as in the case of the Good Samaritan, or far away, as when the Corinthians helped the Jerusalem poor.

Granted, I am not obliged to give to all people in need. But to those to whom I do give, should I not give everything I have? Or if not everything, then how much? Some philosophers suggest that it contradicts the character of giving to ask that question. Giving, they suggest, should be beyond all calculation – the complete pouring out of the giver. Then the only true gift would be "the gift of death".[18] But God doesn't give only for us to pass it on; God gives so that we ourselves can exist and indeed flourish – and so that we can be flourishing rather than languishing givers.

Some of us will find that God hasn't just given us gifts to enjoy and pass on but also a gift for giving them away. Among many gifts in the body of Christ that "differ according to the grace given to us" – gifts such as leadership, teaching, or prophecy – the apostle Paul mentions the gift of being a giver (Romans 12:6–8). Such givers may give with "generosity" that is unreachable to most of us (v. 8). They renounce possessions and work among the poorest of the poor, they expose themselves to infectious diseases to alleviate suffering, or they risk their own lives, and are often enough slaughtered like animals, to bring the Good News into places where Christ may not yet be named. They give beyond measure, being blessed in blessing others, but sometimes experiencing themselves as "the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:13).

In a fragile and sinful world, we may be required on occasion to give a "gift of death", as Christ died for our salvation or as a lover might literally give his life to save the beloved. But how deeply flawed is the world in which people must give and receive such impossible gifts! The lover should delight in the beloved, not have to sacrifice his life so that the beloved can exist! The beloved will stand in heartbroken awe of her lover's passion, for she'd rather have lost her own life

than to have gained it at the expense of her lover's life! Gifts of death can make sense only if they are surrounded by the hope of return – return of the lover and the beloved to each other in a world where such gifts have been rendered not only unnecessary, but impossible.

We don't need to give our lives to give truly. It suffices to impart to others more than we owe them without expecting return or basking in our moral rectitude. That's a gift – an ordinary gift but a perfectly good one, even with all the ambiguities of gift giving. Nobody has a right to complain when we give such ordinary gifts – not philosophers of the impossible gift and certainly not recipients. Complaint here would be ingratitude turned insolent.

It's these kinds of ordinary gifts to which the apostle Paul urged Corinthian Christians – gifts that are given "according" to one's means and maybe a bit "beyond" them (2 Corinthians 8:3), gifts that don't relieve recipients by unduly burdening givers, gifts that create "a fair balance" between their "present abundance" and the need of recipients (vv. 13–14). How could it be otherwise if the flow of God's gifts to us is meant both for us and for others? We give because God's gifts "flow over" (2 Corinthians 8:2) – they flow over the rim of God's eternal life and over the rim of our own needs.

Giving to Givers

In our finitude, we can't give everything, and we can't give to everybody. What's more, we often can't even deliver what we do have and want to give. We lack skill or time; we can't be in two places at once; our energies are depleted by other things. So we give to those whom we trust will give to the needy. Saladin employed Al-Hafi to do his giving; the Corinthians and the Macedonians pooled their individually insufficient gifts and gave them to Paul and Titus for the Jerusalem poor. Similarly, we employ individuals and organizations to do our giving for us. We give blood to blood banks so it can be distributed when the need arises. We give donations to the Red Cross or World Vision when a major catastrophe strikes. We endow academic chairs so educational institutions can continue their work.

Surprisingly enough, that's how God gives, too – through others, through us. We give through others because we cannot always give directly; we are limited in many ways. God is not limited in any way; God can give directly to all. Yet God does not. Why does God still choose to give through us? Because God hasn't created us to be only receivers, but to be givers as well. Nobody is only a giver, I wrote earlier. Everybody is a receiver too. The inverse is also true. Nobody is only a receiver. Everybody is also a giver.

Earlier I said that insofar as we are the intended recipients of God's gifts, our worthiness is not an issue. God gives because we are needy as well as because God delights in us and in our delight. But is our worthiness an issue insofar as we are intended to be *givers* of God's gifts? It is. If you give what you were given to give, more will be given to you. If you hold onto what you were given to give, less will be given you. Givers "will be enriched in every way for [their] great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:11); hoarders will lose what they have by keeping for themselves what God intended them to pass on. The principle sounds harsh. It isn't. It's the good news to the needy. Only those who want to grab for themselves what God has given for the sake of others will object. Why shouldn't those who take illicitly lose their spoils?

We see the idea of "giving to givers" at work in Paul's apostolic ministry. I've already mentioned his role as a channel of gifts to the Jerusalem poor. But he was also given the gift of heralding the gospel. He traveled from place to place, to preach the gospel and establish churches where Christ had not yet been named (Romans 15:20), and he kept returning to the churches he had already established to guide them along the way. Interestingly enough, he refused to receive charitable support from the church in which he was serving at any given time. "We did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you," he wrote to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:8). Not that he thought he had no right to receive pay (v. 9). Instead he chose to forgo compensation.

He refused support from his flock for many reasons, most of which had to do with his understanding of gift giving. He wanted to teach his churches to be productive so that they would be able to give rather than only receive (v. 9); he quoted Christ in saying it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). His main reason, however, for refusing pay might have been that his message was about God's indescribable gift, and he wanted to deliver it the same way it was given – "free of charge" (1 Corinthians 9:18). That's why he would take money from one church to serve in another but wouldn't take any money from the church in which he was serving! The Philippians supported his missionary efforts elsewhere. He hoped that the Romans would send him off to Spain (Romans 15:24). The Apostle was the recipient of these gifts but not their beneficiary; rather, he received the gift of support so that he could give the gift of the gospel freely.

When gifts are given to be passed on, recipients have an obligation to be givers. Paul shouldn't have pocketed the Philippians' money and gone off to the beautiful rocky beaches of western Illyria – present-day Croatia. He even felt uneasy that he landed in prison after being given support to preach the gospel, though he was imprisoned *for* preaching the gospel (see Philippians 1:12–18). The receipt of the original gift is itself like an unwritten contract: By receiving, I promise not to keep the gift for myself or to use it as I please, but to pass it on in accordance with the wishes of the original giver. If I receive the gift but fail to fulfill the promise, I have misdirected the gift, wronging both the original giver and the intended recipient.

Christ's Equals

Givers, we are told by some anthropologists and philosophers, are seen as socially, and possibly even morally, superior to receivers. Hardly anyone puts the claim so boldly, but many maintain that the act of giving puts a person in a position of wealth and power, whereas the act of receiving puts a person in a position of poverty and weakness. The giver is full, the receiver is empty. The giver is active; the receiver is passive.

For these reasons, a rivalry can develop between givers and receivers. To climb out of the social hole into which receiving has thrust them, receivers must return more than they were given. If they fail, they lose honor.[19] When we give, we often engage in rivalries and set up hierarchies – but that's not giving as it ought to be.

When gifts circulate within the Godhead, no rivalry happens and no hierarchy is established. The One who gives is not greater than the One who receives. For all give and all receive, and they give glory to each other with each gift they give. True, Jesus said that the Father is greater than he is (John 14:28). But that's because Jesus was the Word on its earthly sojourn, clad with the finite beauty of frail human flesh. The Father is not greater than the eternal Son, and the Son is not greater than the Spirit. They are equal as divine persons. They are equal as givers.

What happens, though, to the equality of givers and receivers when God's gift giving turns toward the world? There is no equality between God and creatures. God is God, and creatures are creatures. The difference between them is so great that it can't be measured on the same scale. Pick any number you want, and you can't say, "God is x times greater than a creature." God is radically different and immeasurably greater. And yet, paradoxically, God gives so that the relation between God and human beings can be brought to greater parity.

Recall what the apostle Paul said about the purpose of Christ's generosity. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Luther developed this idea of swapping riches for poverty in the famous passage about "wonderful exchange" in *The Freedom of the Christian*. Like bridegroom and bride, by faith Christ and the Christian are one flesh. It follows that "everything they have they hold in common ... Accordingly the believing soul can boast and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has, Christ claims as his own."[20] Christ enters the poverty of self-enclosed selves, indwells us, and makes his divine life to be our own. Christ's

gift makes each of us a "Christ". When God gives to us, inequality remains – radical inequality – yet we become, in a certain regard, Christ's equals.

Love Equalizes

Like gifts among divine persons, human gifts should foster and express equality. Between lovers, there is no first and last, no greater and smaller. Love equalizes as nothing else can. Given in love, gifts neither establish the superiority of the giver, nor trigger rivalry between the giver and the receiver. Lovers give because they delight and adore. When they aim to outdo each other, it is not in getting honor, whether by giving gifts or any other means, but in *bestowing* honor. "Love one another with mutual affection," wrote the apostle Paul, adding, "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10). Lovers' gifts elevate rather than diminish the beloved – especially if love is mutual. Good givers don't give gifts to recipients but honor to themselves. They give both gifts and honor to the recipients even if they, as a result, end up bing honored as good givers. And then as the circle moves, they get both the gifts and the honor in return.

Like Christ's gifts to humanity, our gifts to one another should aim at establishing parity in the midst of drastic and pervasive inequality. When giving to those who are in need, wrote the Apostle, it ought to be like food given from heaven: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little" (2 Corinthians 8:15). The immediate goal is not uniformity. Equality of the kind the Apostle has in mind is compatible with one party having much while the other has little, but it's incompatible with one party having "too much" while the other has "too little".

It isn't always easy to determine what "too much" means concretely. With the help of the community that holds us accountable, each of us will ultimately have to make that decision on our own, just as each of us will stand on our own before the ultimate Judge to account for what we have done with the gifts we have received. In general, the Apostle's point seems clear: Differences in wealth are legitimate even if they are destined to disappear in the world to

come; that some suffer abject poverty while others enjoy opulence is not. Put differently, the aim is equality of satisfied needs, precisely those needs that motivated the gift giving in the first place.

What is given may create greater equality, someone might argue, but doesn't the very fact of giving undermine any equality that the gifts confer? The gift made the recipient more equal to the giver, but it was the giver who did the equalizing. Gifts have flowed from the giver to the recipient, with the giver seemingly above and the recipient below. Yet in truth, as I will explain in chapter 3, human givers are not above human recipients because they are not the source of gifts, but are their channels. Here I want to note that the gift's magnitude is irrelevant in assessing the greatness of the giver. What matters is the spirit in which the gift is given. The apostle Paul called it "eagerness" (2 Corinthians 8:12). What is the measure of eagerness? It's the degree of a giver's joy and sacrifice, not the magnitude of the gift.

Consider Jesus' story about the rich givers who deposited large sums into the temple treasury and the poor widow who put in only two copper coins. Jesus commented, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow had put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put all she had to live on" (Luke 21:3–4). She gave more because what she gave cost her more.

Now imagine the poor widow and one of the wealthy people giving presents to each other. She gives him her two coins, and he, as a counter-gift, hands her the title deed and the keys to one of his palatial summer residences on the Mediterranean Sea. She has still given more, and for exactly the same reason that she put more into the temple treasury! He is not above and she below. It's the other way around. Even though he has given a palace and she only two coins, more has flowed from her to him than from him to her. In the economy of honor before God, a friendly smile from a beggar can easily outdo the largest of gifts.

In *Matryona's House*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn told the story of an old woman: "She never tried to acquire things for herself. She

wouldn't struggle to buy things which would then mean more to her than life itself. All her life she never tried to dress smartly in the kind of clothes which embellish cripples and disguise evildoers." Misunderstood and abandoned even by her husband, she buried six children but continued to give. She worked without pay and had no possessions, but her gifts had immense, if unrecognized, weight. "We all lived beside her," Solzhenitsyn put in the mouth of one of her fellow villagers, "and never understood that she was the righteous one without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand. Nor any city. Nor our whole land."[21] A very great giver of very meager means she was!

Gifts of God, Communion with God

In and of itself, no particular thing in the world is a gift. We do have so-called gift shops, full of all sorts of little things we usually give to friends and acquaintances. But things sitting on the store shelf are not gifts. Just like any other thing, an item from that store *becomes* a gift when you buy it and give it to someone else. A gift is a social relation, not an entity or an act in itself. It is an event *between* people.

As Solzhenitsyn's story underscores, gifts don't just happen between people; they also serve "to create, nourish, or re-create" social bonds.[22] Cords of concord like nothing else, good gifts bind people together. That's one thing that distinguishes the relationship between givers and receivers from that of creditors and borrowers. To the creditor, wrote Seneca, "I shall have to return the same amount that I have received, and, when I have returned it, I have paid all my debt and am free." To the giver, on the other hand, "I must make an additional payment, and, even after I have paid my debt of gratitude, the bond between us still holds; for, just when I have finished paying it, I am obliged to begin again, and friendship endures."[23] Gifts forge communities, and as many sociologists observe, communities foster gift giving.[24]

When we say that God is the Holy Trinity, we mean that the divine persons are mysteriously one and three. The oneness of the

Three and the threeness of the One make up the divine communion of love. But how is that communion achieved? Divine persons give themselves to each other, and they do so in a special and exclusively divine way. Each dwells in others and is indwelled by others. As John's gospel tells us, the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father. And as the apostle Paul implies, the Holy Spirit is in the Son, and the Son is in the Holy Spirit. By such mutual indwelling, the Holy Three are the Holy One. Because the Godhead is a perfect communion of love, divine persons exchange gifts – the gift of themselves and the gift of the others' glory. The inverse is also true: Because they exchange such gifts, they are a divine communion of love. So it is in God's eternal life, apart from God's relation to the world.

As I noted earlier, when God turns toward the world, the circle of exchanges within the divine communion begins its outbound flow. God gives to creatures because God delights in them. But God's delight is part of a more encompassing divine relationship with creatures, and the name of that relationship is communion. Human beings were created for communion with God. Granted, it's a different sort of communion than communion among divine persons. Human beings are not divine and therefore cannot be *part* of God's eternal communion. A few billion human beings can't just be added to the communion of the Three with the result that it's now a communion of a few billion and three! Yet still, there is a form of communion between God and us.

Just as the Three are the One because they mutually indwell each other, so we are one with the Divine One because Christ lives in us and through us. Whereas the Three reciprocally give and receive as equals, we only receive from God; we are given our very being, are freed from sin, and will be glorified. We don't give anything back to God. As we saw in chapter 1, faith, gratitude, availability, and participation are our appropriate responses to God's gifts, our way of loving God. Through these ways of relating to God, we recognize God as God and let Christ live in us and work through us. So God's communion with creatures differs from intradivine communion. The first rests on unilateral giving; the second is thoroughly reciprocal.

One Body, Many Gifts

We were created for communion with one another, not just with God. Correspondingly, Christ came not just to live in us, or even just to live through us. He came to make us into one body – his body, the church. For the apostle Paul, the indwelling of Christ in the believer and the creation of the church as the body of Christ are intimately related. The bread and wine of the Eucharist stand for the body and blood of Christ, and the body and blood of Christ stand for his giving of himself on our behalf. By receiving bread and wine, we receive Christ, and with Christ, we receive ourselves as one body of Christ. The Apostle wrote, explicating the relation between receiving Christ and being a community, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). In giving himself to us, Christ gives us a community – ourselves.

As we read the apostle Paul's epistles, especially where he instructed Christians on how to live, it is striking how frequently he used the little phrase "one another". We've looked at one excellent example already: "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10). The Apostle mentions the phrase "one another" twice in a single short verse, and close to a hundred times in his letters! That's because interdependence and mutual service *are* the life of a body. "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:4–5).

Significantly, each member of the body is endowed with what the Apostle called "spiritual gifts" – roles and abilities the Holy Spirit gives to each for the benefit of the others. Each one, gifted to give, now gives to others. As the one with the gift of the apostolate, Paul is part of this community of "giving and receiving", as he calls it in Philippians (4:15). It's not just that he preaches and others "sen[d] help" for his "needs" (v. 16). The Apostle strengthens the faith of churches, and his faith is strengthened in return. He wants to come to the church in Rome, for instance, "so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:12).

The reciprocal exchange of gifts expresses and nourishes a community of love. Take reciprocity out of gift giving, and community disintegrates into discrete individuals. Without any reciprocity, the best-case scenario would be that we all live on our individual islands and anonymously send and receive "packages" to help those who can't help themselves, or – amounting to nearly the same (though minus the willingness of gift giving!) – we all send our contributions to the government for distribution to the needy. Clearly, in the complex societies of today, the government has an important role in tending to social needs. But the government cannot replace reciprocal gift giving. Neither can our unidirectional gifts to those in need. Without reciprocal giving, we would at best inhabit a world of lonely altruists.

Or we would inhabit a world of collaborating egoists! Take gift giving out of reciprocity, and community degenerates into individuals who'll cooperate and split apart when it suits their interests. You have a good I want? I'll persuade you that I have a good you need, we'll swap our wares, and be on our merry ways. This is the exchange mode of human relations, and there is a place for it. We have the right to exchange goods for their rough equivalents. Without such exchanges, we would languish and suffer oppression in a world organized in complex systems and populated by selfish persons. And yet to transmute most reciprocal relations into self-serving exchanges would rob us of what is essential to our very humanity.

The best gift we can give to each other may be neither a thing (like a diamond ring) nor an act (like an embrace), but our own generosity. With that "indescribable gift" called Christ, God gave us a generous self and a community founded on generosity. Such a self bestows gifts freely. It gives because it delights in the beloved and can't endure the need of the needy. In giving, it subverts hierarchies and transforms rivalries into mutual exaltations. And in all of this, it forges lasting bonds of reciprocal love. At the most basic level, generosity itself is exchanged in all our gift exchanges: My generosity is reciprocated by your generosity, and the circle of mutual love keeps turning.

How should we give? By letting our generosities dance together! But how are they able to?

The Moral Vision of the New Testament

Community, Cross, New Creation

A Contemporary Introduction
to New Testament Ethics

Richard B. Hays

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will lead on to some final remarks about the task—and limitations—of New Testament ethics.

Sharing Possesions: A Challenge to the Church

There is always the danger that, in our complex hermeneutical deliberations about New Testament ethics, we might construct an elaborate system of rationalizations that simply justify the way we already live our lives. On no other topic is this danger so acute as on the issue of sharing possessions. Therefore, we cannot bring our treatment of New Testament ethics to a conclusion without attending—if only briefly—to the New Testament's teaching on this issue.[2]

The challenge of the New Testament is clear: from Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament writers bear witness passionately about the economic imperatives of discipleship. Without undertaking a full-scale descriptive reading of the individual texts, we can see even on the most cursory survey that the New Testament writers manifest a pervasive concern for just use of money and for sharing with the needy. Let us recall a few representative highlights of the New Testament's teaching on this question.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples to relinquish anxiety about their own economic security and to seek first God's justice (Matt. 6:25–34); they are taught to pray for the provision of their daily needs and to forgive those who may owe them debts (Matt. 6:11–12, cf. 18:23–35). When the twelve disciples are sent out on a mission to Israel, they are to take no money with them and to receive no payment for their ministry (Matt. 10:8–9). Most tellingly, in the great Matthean parable of the last judgment (25:31–46), the sheep are separated from the goats on the basis of their treatment of those who are hungry, naked, sick, and in prison. Clearly, for Matthew authentic discipleship entails using one's resources to help those in need.

Mark tells the story of Jesus' challenge to the rich man who wants to know how to inherit eternal life: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The man, stunned by this radical demand, goes away grieving, "for he had many possessions" (Mark 10:17–22). This becomes the occasion for Jesus' more general declaration that it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (10:23–27).[3] By way of contrast, Jesus praises the poor widow who puts her last two coins into the temple treasury (10:41–44).

Luke, as noted in the descriptive sketch of his moral vision in Chapter 5, proclaims God's liberating power on behalf of the poor and hungry (Luke 1:52–53, 4:18–19) and highlights the vision for a new community of believers who share all possessions in common so that there are no poor among them, in fulfillment of the Deuteronomic command. This new community is portrayed as manifesting the power of the message of the resurrection (Acts 2:42–47, 4:32–35). Accordingly, the concrete economic cost of discipleship receives consistent emphasis in Luke's

story: Jesus proclaims bluntly, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:25–35). The person who stores up provisions for himself is a fool (Luke 12:16–21), whereas Jesus' followers are exhorted to sell their possessions and give alms (Luke 12:33). Zacchaeus exemplifies authentic response to the coming of the kingdom of God by declaring that he will give half his goods to the poor (Luke 19:1–10).

Paul exhorts his churches to contribute to a collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Pointing to the story of God's provision of manna in the wilderness, which could not be hoarded and stored up for the future (2 Cor. 8:13–15, quoting Exod. 16:18),[4] he urges that there should be "a fair balance" (*isotēs*) between those who have abundance and those who are in need. Such a practice of sharing is the minimal expression of conformity to Christ's example of self-emptying, which ought to lead the community to "look not to [their] own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4) and therefore to act sacrificially.

According to 1 Timothy, those who are not shaped by "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ" are likely to fall into the trap of self-destructive greed:

> *Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.* (1 Tim. 6:9–10)

Members of the community of faith are called instead to be "rich in good works" (6:18).

In language reminiscent of Amos and Isaiah, the letter of James denounces the rich, whose gold and silver will rust (cf. Matt. 6:19–21) and bear witness against them on the day of judgment. Their oppression of poor laborers will not escape God's notice: "You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter" (James 5:1–6). By contrast, God has "chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him" (James 2:5).

Even the Johannine literature, notable for its lack of specific ethical teaching, exhorts the community of faith to practice economic sharing:

> *How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* (1 John 3:17–18)

To fulfill the new commandment of Jesus ("Love one another") necessarily entails the sharing of possessions with the poorer members of the community.

Finally, Revelation draws a striking contrast between the church at Smyrna, living in affliction and poverty (2:9), and the church at Laodicea, which prides itself on its wealth (3:17). To the former, the prophetic word of the risen Christ offers consolation; to the latter, threatening to spit them out of his mouth, he says, "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Economic

power and prosperity are consistently associated in this prophetic book with the power of the Beast that tries to delude the saints. At the fall of Babylon, the great city, in Revelation 18, "the merchants of the earth" weep and mourn, because they have lost their market for luxury items and because "in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste" (18:11–17a).

Thus, while the particular mandates and forms of expression may vary, the New Testament witnesses speak loudly in chorus: the accumulation of wealth is antithetical to serving God's kingdom, and Jesus' disciples are called at least to share their goods generously with those in need, and perhaps even to give everything away in order to follow him more freely.[5]

The focal images of community, cross, and new creation bring this material together into a compelling unified picture.

Community. The imperative of sharing material goods is addressed to the community as a whole. The New Testament writers are not concerned merely with how individuals might seek eternal life; rather, they are concerned with how the church as a whole might embody the economics of the kingdom of God. This communal dimension is explicit in the Acts narratives about the earliest community, in Paul's directives for his churches to participate in the collection for the poor among the saints as an expression of their *koinōnia* in Christ, in 1 John's exhortation to sharing as the authentic expression of loving one another within the church, and in Revelation's prophetic address to the churches of Smyrna and Laodicea *corporately*. Even where the corporate dimension of the economic imperative is less explicit, as in Matthew, it is implicit in the larger conception of discipleship: Matthew sees the community of Jesus' followers as a city set on a hill, a *polis* that manifests the righteousness of God. Thus, the good works (Matt. 5:16, cf. 25:31–46) of the community are a sign to the world of God's glory.

Cross. Relinquishment of material goods is closely linked to the way of the cross. This is directly stated in Luke 14:25–33, which begins with Jesus' call to "carry the cross" and ends with his challenge to his disciples to give up all their possessions. Paul also grounds his economic appeal to the Corinthians in the self-sacrificial example of Jesus (2 Cor. 8:9). The passage in 1 John that commands helping the brother or sister in need (1 John 3:17–18) is immediately prefaced by a direct allusion to the cross: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The meaning of "laying down our lives" is then immediately specified in terms of economic sharing. In this matter, as in others, the imperative of self-sacrificial love is rooted in the paradigm of Jesus's death on the cross.[6]

New Creation. The practices of sharing that characterize the New Testament church are to be understood as eschatological signs, demonstrating that the transforming power of God's kingdom has broken in upon the old age. Those who seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) will, as a necessary consequence, put the old

order's economic concerns in a secondary place. In Luke's Gospel, the mandate for sharing is premised directly on the promise of the coming kingdom:

> *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*
> (Luke 12:32–33)

The message of such texts is not only that heavenly rewards relativize present economic anxieties but also that the kingdom impinges upon the present in such a way that we are freed to act with a generosity that figures forth God's good future. That claim is most powerfully made manifest, of course, in Luke's description of the Jerusalem church, where the power of the apostles' testimony to the resurrection of Jesus is confirmed by church members' practice of selling their property and sharing the proceeds so that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:32–35). The link between the kerygma of the resurrection and the community's sharing of goods is direct and material. The author of 1 John makes a similar point when he writes, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another" (1 John 3:14a)—a love that is necessarily to be expressed, as we have seen, through sharing the world's goods (3:17). Thus, the church that lives in the time between the times—while still subject to mundane obligations such as paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17, Rom. 13:1–7)—will also embody in its economic practices the sharing that prefigures the joy and justice of the world to come.

How are we to respond to the New Testament's challenge? A full discussion of the hermeneutical and pragmatic issues would require a lengthy discussion indeed. For the present, then, we must be content with a few basic observations:

- The New Testament's direct commands and general rules about possessions are embedded in a canonical context that complicates simple literal application. As Luke Johnson has demonstrated, even within Luke-Acts the rule that disciples of Jesus must give up all their possessions (Luke 14:33) is set alongside other teachings and narratives that pose different models of faithful response to the gospel.[7] Zacchaeus, for example, is commended for his repentant response ("Today salvation has come to this house" [Luke 19:9a]), even though he gives up considerably less than everything. Even the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2 and 4) is characterized by generous *sharing* of possessions rather than radical renunciation. The point is that we cannot derive simple or univocal rules for economic practice from the New Testament.
- Very little direct appeal is made in the New Testament texts to principles of equality and justice, though such principles may be implicit in some passages, such as 2 Corinthians 8:13–15. For the most part, the texts call the church to acts of sacrificial service far beyond what simple justice would require.

- The New Testament texts address us on this issue primarily through the medium of narrative. The various stories and parables of the Gospels and the narrative of Acts provide us with the fundamental paradigms to which we must respond faithfully. The particular exhortations and warnings about money found in the New Testament epistolary literature make sense only within the symbolic world narrated in these stories. On this matter, then, our basic orientation must be provided by the narrative texts, and our hermeneutical application of the New Testament will involve retelling these stories in such a way that we find our place within them; in other words, we will bring our communities metaphorically into conjunction with Acts 4—to cite one particularly important example—and ask ourselves, "How can we order our economic practices in the church in such a way that we give testimony with power to the resurrection of Jesus?"
- To ask that question in a serious and sustained way will require of us not only imaginative reflection but also costly change. No matter how much hermeneutical squirming we may do, it is impossible to escape the implications of the New Testament's address to us: imaginative obedience to God will require of us a sharing of possessions far more radical than the church has ordinarily supposed. To be sure, there have been many communities of Christians throughout history that perform the texts in impressive ways, sacrificing their own interests and sharing their goods with the poor. But such embodiments of the text are typically seen—at least in mainstream Protestantism—as the exception rather than the authentic norm of Christian faith and practice. For the church to heed the New Testament's challenge on the question of possessions would require nothing less than a new Reformation.

To bring the matter close to home, perhaps a word about myself, the author of this book, would be in order. As a tenured professor in a major U.S. university, I live a life of comfortable affluence and relative economic security. I participate in a church and support it financially, contribute money to good causes, and do the occasional service stint in a homeless shelter. But—let there be no mistake—such modest forms of economic discipleship fall far short of the New Testament vision, and most of the churches I have known have been formed by the forces of market capitalism as least as much as by the teaching of Jesus. I remain among the wealthy of the world, and the churches in which I have participated for the last twenty years have made only fitful and tepid attempts to respond to the New Testament's imperatives concerning the sharing of possessions. I say "for the last twenty years" because from 1971 to 1976 my wife and I participated in Metanoia Fellowship, a small church community in Massachusetts that practiced radical economic sharing through a common purse, seeking to have "all things in common." The ultimate demise of that particular communal-discipleship initiative in no way vitiates the legitimacy of its vision or excuses our subsequent failure to seek other communal expressions of the New Testament vision for sharing possessions.

Pressing On Toward the Goal: The Vision of New Testament Ethics

The purpose of the foregoing autobiographical remarks is simply to provide the necessary backdrop for some final remarks about the task of New Testament ethics.

First, the ethic envisioned by the New Testament writers is not an impossible ideal. If we fail to live in obedient responsiveness to their moral vision, that is because of a failure of the imagination—or perhaps a lack of courage—on our part. I include myself fully in this indictment, and I throw no stones at those who do not live according to the norms articulated in the other parts of this book. The difficulty of living in conformity with the New Testament vision does not, however, let us off the hook: my experience of struggle and failure to respond to the New Testament's challenge concerning possessions does not authorize me to disregard the New Testament's summons, or to pretend that the New Testament does not mean what it says, or to devise less costly standards for myself and for the church.

Second, with regard to the question of possessions, as with most of the other issues considered in this book, there is no single set of rules that can be promulgated for the community of faith. The New Testament is not a rulebook, not a cookie cutter for forming identical people or identical communities. Instead, the New Testament texts call us to respond in imaginative freedom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to form communities that will embody the truth of the Word, demonstrating metaphorically the power of God's grace in our midst.

Third, such imaginative performances of obedience to the Word will prove costly: indeed, they may cost us not less than everything. That is what following Jesus requires.

Fourth, the whole vision for New Testament ethics developed in this book calls for a fundamental transformation of the church. To do New Testament ethics as I have proposed requires far more than the reconceptualization of an academic discipline; it requires the recovery of the church's identity as the eschatological people of God, prefiguring God's healing transformation of the world.[8] The church must be a *community* living in conformity to the paradigm of the *cross* and thereby standing as a sign of the *new creation* promised by God. Insofar as the church seeks to enact an obedient response to this vision, its reading of the New Testament texts will come more sharply into focus. For example, if we really want to understand the New Testament's challenging mandate concerning possessions, we must begin by being obedient to the light we have been given. For me and for my community, this would entail some immediate practical and sacrificial changes in what we do with our money.

Fifth, lest all of this sound utopian, we must never forget that the eschatological reservation, the "not yet," is an integral part of the New Testament's understanding of new creation. To acknowledge that the kingdom is not fully realized in our midst is not to compromise the New Testament's moral vision; it is, rather, to respect it. We cannot suppose that all our lives can be lived in the first enthusiasm of Pentecost; our ethical decisions and our actions must be performed over the long haul in

entering the movement
of **divine generosity**

God So Loved, He Gave

Kelly M. Kapic
with Justin Borger

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On the bank of some dark river, as we are thrust backward, onlookers will remark, "They could kill somebody like that." To which old John might say, "Good, you're finally catching on."

William Willimon[1]

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer[2]

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

1 John 3:16–17 NIV

This double kindness is the twofold aspect of Christ: gift and example.

Martin Luther[3]

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 Corinthians 8:9

The self-giving love Christ has for us leads in turn to the believers' giving themselves for the world in preaching the gospel, in social action, in peacemaking and through acts of self-giving and self-denial.

Derek Tidball[4]

chapter ten

Following a Crucified Lord

From Receiving to Giving

Having received from God the great gift of himself, we find ourselves in his kingdom, free to live, and as we will learn, free to die. Yet God's generosity does not annihilate our dignity and significance; rather, it liberates our actions as he invites us to participate in the movement of his divine generosity. A personal story from Justin, my research assistant for this book, may help us to better appreciate this gift of participation.

> I remember meeting a homeless woman a few years ago. I was walking down Broad Street in front the library of Chattanooga, Tennessee, when this woman came up to me and began asking for money. Not knowing who she was, I decided not to give her any cash. But when I told her that I'd buy her anything she needed, she took me up on the offer. In fact, she said she needed many things: a coat, some clothes, and shampoo to begin with. Her name was Tammy, and she was living under a bridge.
>
> After helping Tammy that night I didn't hear from her for a few weeks until she called me, right in the middle of church one Sunday morning. She said that she had been raped and needed someone to take her to the hospital. After that, Tammy started coming to church, and our deacons' fund started helping her out.
>
> One of my jobs at church at the time was to fill out these small slips of paper that we gave Tammy and others to exchange for gro-

ceries at the local food bank. The only problem was that Tammy liked to share.

"Don't give this away," I can remember telling her as I would hand her the slip for the food bank. "You need to keep this for yourself. Otherwise you'll run out and have nothing to eat." But after a while Tammy grew tired of being told not to share the food that our church gave her. "I want to give some away too," she replied.

Living under the bridge meant living with other needy people, and so she let me know that it would be unthinkable for her to return there without sharing her groceries. "So, why can't I share some of it?" she asked with an incredulous stare. "Why can't I give some too?"

I found myself taken aback. *Why shouldn't Tammy be allowed to give some of what she'd received? Wasn't that exactly what I was doing?* I paused for a moment. But then I gave her a very pragmatic answer, telling her that our church deacons' fund wasn't set up for that. "We're giving this to *you*," I told Tammy, "not to everyone else you meet." Yet, I recognized the deeper problem: to only receive and never to give is to be belittled—to be humiliated. Over time, I had begun to think of Tammy as a kind of pet project in which I was always the giver and she was always the recipient. Our roles in this relationship were well defined, or so I thought.

But the good news is that God has not only made us to be recipients of his grace but also participants in the movement of his own generosity. Unlike Justin's original advice to Tammy, God does not show us his love and then warn us against sharing it with others. Nor does he give us his grace and then tell us to limit our participation to token tithes and offerings. Drinking in God's love leads to an overflow that sweeps us into the stream of his grace. We have become part of that rushing river, that life-giving water.[5] Indeed, when God shows us his love, he invites us to become *full* participants in his divine generosity. He invites us—even the poorest of us (2 Cor. 8:1–3)—to live lives, however imperfectly, that extend and reflect his own role as Giver.

Imitating God: Image, Imitation, and Imagination

The biblical basis for our *imitation* of God's generosity goes all the way back to the creation of Adam and Eve in the *image* of God. To be human

is, at its most basic level, to be *like* God (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; cf. Ps. 8).[6] Men and women are essentially creatures whose whole persons are, in some sense, made to correspond to and reflect the nature of God. What greater privilege could have been given at creation than this initial gift of God-likeness?

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

As those who have been uniquely created in the *image* of God, human beings are consequently called to the *imitation* of God. To be sure the task of imitation requires the use of a biblically informed *imagination* because we are also very different from God (cf. Ps. 113:5–6; Isa. 55:9). As we will see later in this chapter, there is both a freedom and a form to this imitation, but we are called to imitate him nonetheless.

The "image" we bear in God's likeness involves the whole person—both *who we are* and *what we do*.[7] That is, it involves both our attributes and our actions—both our *being* and our *behavior*. To be created in the image of God is both an incredible privilege and an amazing responsibility.

While it has often been said that the Bible represents God "anthropomorphically," that is, like a human being, Bruce Waltke argues that it is more accurate to say that human beings are "theomorphic," that is, made like God, so that God can communicate himself to people. "He gave people ears to show that he hears the cry of the afflicted and eyes to show that he sees the plight of the pitiful (Ps. 94:9)."[8]

As we saw in chapter 2, the reason there is so much wrong with the world today is because humanity has failed miserably in this calling to be like God; as a result, God's image has become deeply disfigured and distorted within us. Instead of wanting to be *like* God, we now desire to become God! We twist the original order so that instead of reflecting his character, we attempt to fashion as many little gods after our own image as we can. Instead of seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness, we seek to establish our own.

Yet, in spite of the catastrophic consequences of our sin, the image of God has not been altogether annihilated (e.g., Gen. 5:1–3; 9:6; Ps. 8). Biblically, our status as image-bearers is never called into question but is always presupposed.[9] Thus, even after the fall God calls his people to follow him by keeping his commandments and shaping their lives around what he values. God tells the Israelites, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD

your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; cf. 11:44–45; 20:7–8; 21:8; Matt. 5:48; 18:32–33; Luke 6:36; 1 Peter 1:16). Such a command assumes humanity's call to image God, to imitate him. Yet as we saw earlier, only the Holy Spirit brings fallen humanity into God's life again, and only by his Spirit can we live in his holiness. So what does this imitation of God look like? *We have to look to the cross.*

The imagery of the cross in the New Testament includes two crucial realities. First, it represents Jesus' death as an effective sacrifice for sin. Second, it calls us to participate in the same pattern of Jesus' self-giving love.[10] As Martin Luther explained,

> Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift. After that it is necessary that you turn this into an example and deal with your neighbor in the very same way, be given to him also as a gift and an example.... This double kindness is the twofold aspect of Christ: *gift and example.*[11]

But far too often this broader message of the cross has been reduced in one direction or the other. Either it has been reduced to an effective sacrifice or as something merely to be imitated. But in contrast to such reductions the Bible teaches that the realities of *amazing gift* and *costly demand* are always held together in powerful tension at the cross. That is to say, we end up missing the greater significance of Jesus' death when either the *gift* or the *demand* of his cross is viewed in isolation from the other. The cross is always *both*—redemptive and exemplary.[12] As John Stott has wisely explained:

> Every Christian is both a Simon of Cyrene and a Barabbas. Like Barabbas we escape the cross, for Christ died, in our place. Like Simon of Cyrene we carry the cross, for he calls us to take it up and follow him.[13]

In other words, Jesus has died to give us life and to show us how to live it. His cross is the *source* of our life and must therefore shape the whole *course* of our life. As Peter summarizes: "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example" (1 Peter 2:21).

Having already focused on the first part of this broader message in chapter 4, we must now turn to the second half. As Derek Tidball has said:

> The love of God should never flow into our lives without also flowing through them to others. The cross not only affirms that God loves us, but insists that we must love others in turn. To have received the love of God in our own lives and then to refuse to share it with others is to turn God's free-flowing grace into a stagnant pool.[14]

As we experience God's love, he also empowers us to participate in the free-flow of his grace, even commanding us to *imitate* the supreme example of his generosity on the cross. Thus, our lives become shaped by a cross that represents both death and life, both poverty and riches, both slavery and freedom. Jesus and his cross become the center, not merely of Christian believing, but also of Christian living. This becomes the key to imaging and imitating God.

Cross-Shaped Living

Understanding the death of Jesus in this way means reexamining our entire lives in light of the amazing gift and costly demand that has been revealed to us in the person and work of Jesus on the cross. That is to say, if you want to know what it means to image God, look to Jesus. While humanity was made in God's image, Jesus himself *is* God's image. To see Jesus—the exact image of God, who bears the very stamp of his nature—is to see what we were always meant to be (Rom. 8:29; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:20–24; 1 John 3:2). Christians are those who, by God's Spirit, are being reshaped by this image, now most clearly seen in his Son. His life is defined by his self-giving, and that must define our lives as well.[15]

A Person, Not a Percentage

So what does God call us to give? Finances often reveal a great deal about us and our hearts. We've all heard that to see what someone values, you should look no further than their credit card statement. This bears the ring of truth. As Jesus unabashedly reminds us: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24). So we naturally ask ourselves, "What is the Bible's basic standard for Christian generosity? Does giving 'ten percent'—or a tithe—provide the norm for generous living?" Although that sometimes has become the assumption among many Christians today, this answer easily misses the point. Conformity to Christ is our destiny as disciples. Thus, the biblical standard for giving calls our attention to focus on a *person*, not just a *percentage* of our income.

Contrary to popular opinion, the "tithe" or 10 percent giving was *never* the starting place for faithful giving—even in Old Testament times.[16] The

Jews understood the law as calling for somewhere between two and four different "tithes," adding up to approximately 23.3 percent of a family's income.[17] In addition to this, the law called for an array of other obligatory sacrifices and freewill offerings as well (e.g., Lev. 1–7). It included a host of different laws about gleaning, the sabbatical year of release, Jubilee, as well as a whole kaleidoscope of other warnings and economic stipulations that further codified God's concern for the poor.[18]

Taken together, this impressive system of generosity and justice was given to Israel as a way for them to gratefully extend and reflect God's compassionate character. Thus, emphasizing a 10 percent tithe as the basic gauge for giving can prove problematic as it can ironically end up distracting from God's purpose in making us more like him.

There are, of course, important principles we learn from the Old Testament tithes.[19] For example, asking questions like "Who tithed?" in the Old Testament can be illuminating. While we tend to think of the tithe as a "one-size-fits-all" standard of giving, in the Old Testament only those who owned property in the Promised Land actually tithed. Since Old Testament Israel was an agricultural economy, the tithe applied only to crops and livestock (Lev. 27:30–32; Deut. 14:22; 26:1–2; cf. Matt. 23:23), not to all income in any time and place.[20] People who did not own *land* in Israel could not produce their own crops and livestock from which the tithe was supposed to come and, therefore, were not expected to give in the form of a tithe. They were, however, called to give in other ways (e.g., Lev. 1–7).

Thus, the fact that landless Israelites would not have tithed is instructive for us today, reminding us that the Bible identifies no "one-size-fits-all" gift that fulfills all of our financial responsibilities before God. Overemphasizing the tithe above everything else the Bible says about generosity can lead wealthy Christians (including most Americans) into a false sense of self-righteousness; it can also burden those who are truly poor with inappropriate feelings of guilt. By way of contrast, the New Testament praises people who *cheerfully and voluntarily* express love for God and neighbor by giving at great cost to themselves (Mark 12:33–44; 2 Cor. 8:1–7). In this way they pattern themselves after Christ: "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).

It is also instructive to ask the question of how the tithes in the Old Testament were used. There were at least three different ways Old Testament tithes functioned:

To support the full-time religious workers. This tithe was given to the Levites, who had no inheritance in the land (Num. 18:8–32). In turn, the Levites were commanded to give a tenth of this tithe to the priests, who had no other means of income (Num. 18:26–28).

To provide a community meal for fellowship and celebration of God's goodness. This tithe of crops and livestock was to be shared in joy with family and community, including the poor and especially the Levites (Deut. 12:5–19; 14:22–29).

To help the poor. This "triennial" tithe, given every third year, went to the local storehouses to be distributed not just to the Levites but also to the poor and marginalized: the aliens, fatherless, and widows (Deut. 14:28–29; 26:12–13).

These giving priorities teach us that it is impossible to love God wholeheartedly unless we consider the needs of others to be as important as our own. In sum, while various principles of tithing, such as proportional and planned giving (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1–4), provide helpful guidelines as we strive to develop a lifestyle of greater generosity, it was and still is possible to "tithe" faithfully, yet fail to give generously. As Jesus himself said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23).

The subtle temptation when we think that only 10 percent of our income must be *given* to God is to begin to act as if only 10 percent of our lives *belong* to him. He can have Sunday morning, an occasional offering of my time when someone is in need, but not much more than that. Yet the truth is that when it comes to our time, talents, and treasures, it is not 10 percent that belongs to God, but 100 percent. And because of the cross of Christ, we again belong fully to him; thus, as we image Jesus, we offer him everything (Rom. 12:1–2). In other words, such giving cannot be easily calculated on one's tax returns.

Jesus' example of living and giving fully expresses the heart and identity of God. Jesus reveals what God is like and what we are to be like. His call is not for 10 percent but for us to take up our cross and follow him. When we look to this *person* and not just to a *percentage*, we are reminded of the fundamental character of Christian discipleship: all things hold together in Christ. We do not partition stewardship and generosity off from our discipleship as a whole, dividing our obedience into "a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior."[21] We fix our eyes on

Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith (Heb. 12:1–2), and looking to him our lives are reshaped.[22]

Imitating Jesus

There has been considerable confusion (and even some controversy) throughout church history with regard to what it actually means to imitate Jesus. Debates have swirled around a variety of different questions, including the question of what it is about Jesus that we are called to imitate. We know, for example, that in his early life Jesus lived as a carpenter. Later, after he began his public ministry, we know that he traveled about the countryside as an itinerant preacher without acquiring any personal property of his own. We also know Jesus never married. But Christians are never directly commanded to imitate any of these aspects of Jesus' example.[23] So, what are we to imitate?

The Cross, Not the Career

The short answer is that Christians are called to imitate Jesus' self-giving love on the *cross*, not his crown as a king or his career as a carpenter. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously put it, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."[24] A handful of passages illustrate this point of emphasis:

> If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34 NIV)[25]

> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:12–13)

> Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph. 5:1–2 NIV)

> To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21NIV)

> This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. (1 John 3:16 NIV)

We could go on multiplying examples, but the point is clear: Jesus' *cross* provides the primary pattern for our faithfulness to God in the present.[26] It is not primarily his career but the sacrificial gift of his cross that we are called to imitate.[27] In other words, imitation is not so much about slavishly mimicking all of the different things Jesus did while he was on earth, but of creatively reenacting the *virtue* of his unselfish love in countless and different situations.[28]

When we remember just how radical the cross is, keeping in mind how it was considered "folly" to worship a crucified Lord, we see how radical this metaphor becomes for shaping the Christian life.[29] Much confusion arises from a lack of attention to this emphasis on the exemplary significance of the cross in contrast to Jesus' life more generally.[30] Many are distracted, for example, by debates about Jesus' specific social and economic identity. "How poor was Jesus?" they ask. "Might he have actually been middle class?"[31] In fact, this preoccupation with the normativity of Jesus' socioeconomic identity is commonplace, both in some traditional approaches to the imitation of Christ and in more recent trends.

For example, the imitation of Jesus' life of poverty became especially popular in the thirteenth century under the influence of St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) and the monastic order he founded.[32] According to the example of St. Francis—who famously renounced his large family inheritance, exchanged clothes with beggars, and kissed lepers—the imitation of Christ involved an attempt to mimic, as nearly as possible, all of the sufferings of Christ, especially his life of poverty.

By way of contrast, in response the tradition of *imitatio Christi* and to Ronald Sider's more recent emphasis on Jesus' life of poverty in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, John Schneider argues that while there is, indeed, an "awesome lowliness about the entire Incarnation," the narrative of Jesus' early life was relatively comfortable, perhaps even affluent by the standards of his day.[33] Instead of focusing on the exemplary significance of Christ's cross, Schneider emphasizes Jesus' early career as a carpenter:

> Until he was about thirty, it is assumed, Jesus worked in Nazareth—perhaps he even inherited the family business, since there is no mention of Joseph in any narratives of his adult life. At any rate, that is how people identified him; he was known in his hometown as Jesus "the carpenter" (Mark 6:3). For the greater part of his life, then, it seems that Jesus worked this trade. . . . We know nothing about Jesus' income or personal habits of investment, savings, or charity. All we can say, perhaps, is that a builder's son in Nazareth may not have been rich, but he would have had much to be thankful for compared to the majority of his countrymen.[34]

Schneider goes on to mention that because of a huge stimulus from Roman construction activity that took place in Galilee during our Lord's lifetime, Jesus might actually have done quite nicely for himself.[35] He employs this point to defend the "good of affluence" more generally, as God's ideal for Christian economic life, saying that the specific form of Jesus' social and economic experience "implies a very strong identification on God's part with the sort of human personhood that it was"[36]—that is, a socioeconomic identity and experience that were "of some little affluence."[37]

But this preoccupation with Jesus' social and economic identity—whether asserting his relative poverty or affluence—misses the point. We are never explicitly called to imitate Jesus' early life or career. These aspects of Jesus' example are never directly identified as the framework for the economic life of Christians, though they obviously influence us (e.g., his associations with tax collectors and sinners). But we are specifically commanded, over and over again, to imitate Jesus' unselfish giving on the cross.

To be sure, we are not all necessarily obligated to enter into a life of voluntary poverty. But we cannot claim Christ's cross as the *source* of our lives without allowing the same cross to shape the whole *course* of our lives. Our faithfulness is not to be judged by where we fit into the socioeconomic ladder, but by the degree to which our daily decisions and life story as a whole correspond to Christ's self-giving example on the cross.

Imitating Paul and Others

It is also important to recognize that imitating Jesus' self-sacrificial obedience is something we are to do, not as isolated individuals but in the context of community. *The call to sacrificial generosity in the New Testament is addressed to the community as a whole.*[38] As Richard Hays has observed, this communal dimension of giving is particularly striking in passages like Romans 12:1–2, where Christians are called to lay down their individual "bodies" (plural) as "a living sacrifice" (singular).[39] In other words, the idea of this one "living sacrifice" that is made of many Christian lives describes the vocation of the community as a whole.

Unlike our Lord, who suffered alone, we follow after Jesus in fellowship with a "so great a cloud of witnesses" like Moses, who chose to be "mistreated with the people of God" and "considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt" (Heb. 11:25–26; 12:1). Consequently, following the pattern of Jesus' obedience always involves learning from the example of others who have gone before us. The Christian life is designed by God so that much of our growth comes through imitating godly examples, imperfect though they may be.[40]

The apostle Paul, as the primary case in point, repeatedly summoned his readers to progress in their faith by imitating his example.[41] His life, which was meant to imitate the cross of Christ, provided a concrete example for his fellow believers to follow after.[42] Believers follow not simply his words but also his concrete sacrificial actions. As he says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).[43]

The Abundance of the Cross

The most profound moment in the movement of divine generosity is the moment that takes us from death to life, from the cross to the resurrection. For as we will see in the next two chapters, it is ultimately in the bright light of Easter morning that we finally get a clear look at what God's generosity is all about—the new creation for which our bodies are now yearning. Yet, it is important for us to realize that even in this ultimate movement, Christ's cross is not left behind.

Had the cross been merely a means to an end, a simple "tool" in the larger scheme of God's purposes, early Christianity might have chosen a different image as the great sign and symbol of the faith. But as history has shown us, this was not the case. The cross remains at the center of everything, even after the resurrection; and not only for understanding the salvation God has accomplished in the past, or only as the pattern for our own obedience, but also for our experience of God himself and his abundance in the present.

We see this unique perspective on the abiding centrality and significance of the cross in passages like Philippians 3:10–11, where Paul says,

> . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

What is so striking here is that Paul begins by expressing his desire to know the power of Christ's resurrection, but then he returns to cross![44] That is, "to share in his sufferings." Shouldn't this go the other way around? Of course, the obvious answer is yes, at least logically speaking. But here is a taste of some divine "foolishness." For we only truly experience the present abundance of Christ's resurrection in powerful tension with the "sharing in his sufferings." Christ's resurrection stands behind us. Our

resurrection is held out before us. But in between the power of the resurrection stands our present fellowship with Jesus through the cross.

How Should We Then Live and Give?

But how are we supposed to do what we have examined in this chapter? On a practical level, what does it actually mean to imitate Jesus in our giving? After all, it is one thing to say that our lives ought to be shaped by the cross. But it is another thing to hazard an explanation of how this is actually done. Nitty-gritty questions of this kind make all of us uncomfortable.

We must also be careful before trying to specify certain behavioral norms since even the most devout and thoughtful Christians can differ *widely* over such details, and our individual callings and particular situations will inevitably impact the way Christ's cross takes shape in our lives. As Michael J. Gorman has astutely observed, the way of the cross cannot be neatly defined or legislated:

> It can only be remembered and recited, hymned and prayed, and then lived by the power of the Spirit and the work of inspired individual and corporate imagination.[45]

This important word of caution does not mean, however, that the call to imitate Jesus lacks any clear implications for our lives. There is *freedom* within Jesus' example, but there is also a basic *form*. Thus, the challenge we face is always the challenge of *knowing Jesus more* so that we can discerningly apply his example more and more *freely within form*—like a jazz soloist who is able to improvise long rifts because he is so intimately familiar with the basic beat of the song. Let us conclude this chapter by describing two aspects of that "basic beat," which can be summarized in terms of giving up rights and giving up resources.

Giving Up Rights

Nothing is more basic to the self-giving pattern of Jesus' example than his willingness to *give up his rights*. As Paul explains in Philippians 2:5–8, Jesus' death on the cross was not some sudden or spontaneous act of generosity. It was the climactic conclusion of his long-standing decision to forego the use of his rights as God. Our attitude, Paul says, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

> Who, being in very nature God,
> did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
> but made himself nothing,
> taking the very nature of a servant,
> being made in human likeness.
> And being found in appearance as a man,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to death—
> even death on a cross! (NIV)

Here we see that the Son of God takes the path of humility, of lowliness. Jesus obediently submitted to one progressively degrading situation after another until he was finally in a position—stretched out and exposed—to give what we most desperately needed. In Jesus' humble renunciation of his divine rights, we discover the genius of God's generosity and the crucifixion of our common sense.

One of the reasons giving up our resources is so difficult for us, and often spectacularly ineffective, is because we try to give away our resources while clinging to our rights. But Jesus set aside his rights *before* he gave up his resources. In God's grace and provision, the use of our rights and resources are always connected.

By way of contrast, sometimes we hear philanthropists and celebrities speak about the thousands of people who die every day from easily preventable diseases. With good intentions, they will often call for more foreign aid and private donations. But the truth is that such expenditures are all but meaningless if they are not drenched in *humility*.

As development economist William Easterly has observed, the West has spent over 2.3 trillion dollars on foreign aid over the last five decades. But with that mountain of money it has accomplished precious little.[46] Why? Easterly does not use biblical language or categories to explain his diagnosis. But in the final analysis, this respected secular economist ultimately concludes that the problem has been rooted in pride. The West, according to Easterly, has made its "Big Plans" to help the poor and given away lots of money. But it has failed to listen to the voices of the poor in the process. A lack of feedback mechanisms from the beneficiaries of aid to those giving the aid has made many programs dangerously ineffective. Donor countries, institutions, and individuals are tempted to dole out money, but they are reluctant to sacrifice their privileged positions of power and authority.[47]

This is a struggle for all of us, but the poor need to be heard and valued as image bearers, not projects. But we can only hear their voices when we humble ourselves and genuinely listen and engage their lives. Thus, biblical generosity always involves not just giving, but also walking with the poor and "associating with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16). This applies, of course, not merely to donor countries and institutions, but to each of us as individuals in meaningful communities.

Of course when it comes to giving up our rights, we are all much like the man in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, who declares his heroic intentions but scratches his head at his inability to follow through.

> "I love mankind, but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular.... In my dreams," he said, "I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days.... As soon as someone is there, close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I can begin to hate the best of men.... I become the enemy of people the moment they touch me," he said. "On the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity."[48]

Like Dostoevsky's character, we may daydream of sudden sacrifice, perhaps even imagining ourselves going to the cross in an instant of heroic necessity. But our good intentions remain an illusion. So long as we cling to our personal rights instead of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, we will never find ourselves in situations where cross-shaped generosity is possible.

The point here is not that there is anything *wrong* with our *rights*. After all, there was certainly nothing wrong with the privileges Jesus enjoyed from all eternity as the only Son of God. Instead, the point is that there is something which is *better* than our rights, something that Jesus revealed by giving his away (Acts 20:35).[49]

The truth is that we are often faced with *relative choices*—choices that are not necessarily black and white, but are between two or more *relative goods*. Jesus had to choose between the enjoyment of his divine rights and the salvation of sinners. And he chose the cross, which has now become the great sign and symbol of God's wisdom in choosing what is *best*. "Into the immeasurable calm of the divine blessedness," Benjamin Warfield once said,

> He permitted this thought to enter, "I will die for men!" And so mighty was His love, so colossal the divine purpose to save, that He thought nothing of His divine majesty, nothing of His unsullied blessedness, nothing of His equality with God, but, absorbed in us,—our needs, our misery, our helplessness—He made no account of Himself. If this is to be our example, what limit can we set to our self-sacrifice?[50]

Thus, we also have decisions to make—some big and others small. Where should we live? Where should we send our children to school? What kind of car should we buy? What should we do for vacation? With whom should we spend our time and energy? How are we to make such decisions? How will we know what is *best* if not by looking to the cross? Here is where we need the genius of Jesus' generosity, which is also the folly of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Regarding this foolishness, this wisdom increasingly moves us to give up our positions of power and privilege rather than grasp after our personal rights and prerogatives.

Giving Up Resources

While clinging to our rights can render the gift of our resources ineffective, several key passages make it clear that there is, nevertheless, an iron-clad connection between *material generosity* and the way of the cross:

> Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple ... any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27, 33)

> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.... You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor. 8:9; 9:11 NIV; cf. 2 Cor. 6:10; Heb. 10:34)

> This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? (1 John 3:16–17 NIV)

But how are we to understand this connection between financial generosity and the way of the cross? In conclusion, let us just briefly take a closer look at the last of these three texts.

It is, after all, with striking simplicity that John provides the ultimate summary of how we know love: "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." That is how we know love. Our sure knowledge of God's love hinges on this singular event of Christ's self-giving death on the cross.

Astonishingly, however, 1 John 3:16–17 then moves all the way from the loftiest of subjects to the practical use of our financial resources! Without missing a beat, John rapidly goes from God's love, to Jesus' death, to our laying down of our own lives after his example, which is then immediately spelled out in terms of what we do (or don't do) with our *material possessions*. The movement here is surprising and convicting, and it can also be liberating. Yet this movement really should not catch any serious student of Jesus by surprise. For it was our Lord himself who taught his disciples that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). Luke Timothy Johnson artfully explains this connection by pointing out:

> Possessions are symbolic expressions of ourselves because we both are and have bodies. Every claim of ownership, therefore, involves an ambiguity; we say, this is *mine*, but we imply as well, this is *me*. Our possessions extend not only our bodies as possessions into the world but also our bodies as our *selves*.... When I open wide my *arms* to greet you, I am stating a welcome; when I open wide the *doors* of my house as you walk by, I am making precisely the same statement. The disposition of our possessions symbolizes our self-disposition in the same way that our bodies symbolize our selves.[51]

For the apostle John, there is a connection between how we understand the nails in Christ's hands and what we do with the cash in ours. Jesus chose what was best by going to the cross. We have a similar opportunity to choose what is best by giving up our rights and our resources. In such sacrifice we inevitably experience genuine pain and loss, but there is also joy. For in pouring out our lives after Christ's example, we know that we have a "better possession" that is still before us—"and an abiding one" (Heb. 10:34).[52]

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The TREASURE PRINCIPLE

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Chapter 3

Eyes on Eternity

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

Matthew 16:27

The streets of Cairo were hot and dusty. Pat and Rakel Thurman took us down an alley. We drove past Arabic signs to a gate that opened to a plot of overgrown grass. It was a graveyard for American missionaries.

As my family and I followed, Pat pointed to a sun-scorched tombstone that read: "William Borden, 1887–1913."

Borden, a Yale graduate and heir to great wealth, rejected a life of ease in order to bring the gospel to Muslims. Refusing even to buy himself a car, Borden gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. After

only four months of zealous ministry in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of twenty-five.

I dusted off the epitaph on Borden's grave. After describing his love and sacrifices for the kingdom of God and for Muslim people, the inscription ended with a phrase I've never forgotten: "Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life."

The Thurmans took us straight from Borden's grave to the Egyptian National Museum. The King Tut exhibit was mind-boggling.

Tutankhamen, the boy king, was only seventeen when he died. He was buried with solid gold chariots and thousands of golden artifacts. His gold coffin was found within gold tombs within gold tombs within gold tombs. The burial site was filled with *tons* of gold.

The Egyptians believed in an afterlife—one where they could take earthly treasures. But all the treasures intended for King Tut's eternal enjoyment stayed right where they were until Howard Carter discovered the burial chamber in 1922. They hadn't been touched for more than three thousand years.

I was struck by the contrast between these two graves. Borden's was obscure, dusty, and hidden off the back alley of a street littered with garbage. Tutankhamen's tomb glittered with unimaginable wealth. Yet where are these two young men now? One, who lived in opulence and called

himself king, is in the misery of a Christless eternity. The other, who lived a modest life on earth in service of the one true King, is enjoying his everlasting reward in the presence of his Lord.

Tut's life was tragic because of an awful truth discovered too late—he couldn't take his treasures with him. William Borden's life was triumphant. Why? Because instead of leaving behind his treasures, he sent them on ahead.

ETERNAL REWARDS

If you imagine heaven as a place where you will strum a harp in endless tedium, you probably dread it. But if you trust Scripture, you will be filled with joy and excitement as you anticipate your heavenly home. As I've written elsewhere, heaven will be a place of rest and relief from the burdens of sin and suffering; but it will also be a place of great learning, activity, artistic expression, exploration, discovery, camaraderie, and service.[1]

Some of us will reign with Christ (Revelation 20:6). Faithful servants will be put "in charge of many things" (Matthew 25:21, 23). Christ will grant some followers leadership over cities, in proportion to their service on earth (Luke 19:12–19). Scripture refers to five different crowns, suggesting leadership positions. We'll even command angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

We are given these eternal rewards for doing good works (Ephesians 6:8; Romans 2:6, 10), persevering under persecution (Luke 6:22–23), showing compassion to the needy (Luke 14:13–14), and treating our enemies kindly (Luke 6:35).

God also grants us rewards for generous giving: "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21).

Jesus is keeping track of our smallest acts of kindness: "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

Jesus is keeping track of our smallest acts of kindness.

God is keeping a record of all we do for Him, including our giving: "A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name" (Malachi 3:16).

Imagine a scribe in heaven recording each of your gifts on that scroll. The bike you gave to the neighbor kid, the books to prisoners, the monthly checks to the church, missionaries, and pregnancy center—all are being chronicled. Scrolls are made to be read. I look forward to hearing your giving stories and meeting those touched by what you gave.

Jesus said, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling

worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" (Luke 16:11–12). If you handle His money faithfully, Christ will give you true riches—eternal ones.

By clinging to what isn't ours, we forgo the opportunity to be granted ownership in heaven. But by generously distributing God's property on earth, we will become property owners in heaven!

Many benefits of our present giving will come to us in heaven. After speaking of the shrewd servant's desire to use earthly resources so that "people will welcome me into their houses" (Luke 16:4), Jesus told His followers to use "worldly wealth" (earthly resources) to "gain friends" (by making a difference in their lives on earth). The reason? "So that when it is gone [when life on earth is over] you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (v. 9).

Our "friends" in heaven will be those whose lives we've touched on earth, who will have their own "eternal dwellings." Luke 16:9 seems to say our friends' eternal dwellings are places where we stay and fellowship, perhaps as we move about the heavenly kingdom. The money we give to help others on earth will open doors of fellowship with them in heaven. Now *that's* something to get excited about!

John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* in an English prison. He said:

> Whatever good thing you do for Him, if done according to the Word, is laid up for you as treasure in chests and coffers, to be brought out to be rewarded before both men and angels, to your eternal comfort.[2]

Is this a biblical concept? Absolutely. Paul spoke about the Philippians' financial giving and explained, "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (Philippians 4:17). God keeps an account open for us in heaven, and every gift given for His glory is a deposit in that account. Not only God, not only others, but *we* are the eternal beneficiaries of our giving. (Have you been making regular deposits?)

But isn't it wrong to be motivated by reward? No, it isn't. If it were wrong, Christ wouldn't offer it to us as a motivation. Reward is His idea, not ours.

Our instinct is to give to those who will give us something in return. But Jesus told us to give to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.... Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13–14). If we give to those who can't reward us, Christ guarantees He will personally reward us in heaven.

Giving is a giant lever positioned on the fulcrum of this world, allowing us to move mountains in the next world. Because we give, eternity will be different—for others and for us.

A HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Ever hear the song "Thank You (for Giving to the Lord)"? It depicts us meeting people in heaven who explain how our giving changed their lives. Whether we were their Sunday school teacher or put money in the offering, these people will one day express their gratitude to us for our giving.

God promises us generous heavenly rewards, in a magnificent New Heaven and New Earth, no longer under the curse and no longer suffering (Revelation 21:1–6). We'll forever be with the person we were made for, in a place made for us.

Many Christians dread the thought of leaving this world.

Nevertheless, many Christians dread the thought of leaving this world.

Why? Because so many have stored up their treasures on earth, not in heaven. Each day brings us closer to death. If your treasures are on earth, that means each day brings you closer to losing your treasures.

John Wesley toured a vast estate with a proud plantation owner. They rode their horses for hours and saw only a fraction of the man's property. At the end of the day they sat down to dinner. The plantation owner eagerly asked, "Well, Mr. Wesley, what do you think?"

Wesley replied, "I think you're going to have a hard time leaving all this."

I recently spoke with Laverne, a woman with terminal cancer. She was crying—not because she's going to die, but because I asked her to talk about giving. Through tears she said, "Giving melts me. It blows me away to know that God's chosen me to give. It won't be long before I see Him face-to-face. I just want to hear Him say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

Suddenly, Laverne laughed. "I mean, what else matters?" she said. "Why should I care about anything else?"

Laverne's heart is focused on heavenly treasures. Because she is storing up treasures in heaven, each day brings her closer to those treasures.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). That's the second key to the Treasure Principle.

TREASURE PRINCIPLE KEY #2

My heart always goes where I put God's money.

By telling us that our hearts follow our treasure, Jesus is saying, "Show me your checkbook, your VISA statement, and your receipts, and I'll show you where your heart is."

Suppose you buy shares of General Motors. What happens? You suddenly develop interest in GM. You check the financial pages. You see a magazine article about GM and read every word, even though a month ago you would have passed right over it.

Suppose you're giving to help African children with AIDS. When you see an article on the subject, you're hooked. If you're sending money to plant churches in India and an earthquake hits India, you watch the news and fervently pray.

As surely as the compass needle follows north, your heart will follow your treasure. Money leads; hearts follow.

As surely as the compass needle follows north, your heart will follow your treasure.

I've heard people say, "I want more of a heart for missions." I always respond, "Jesus tells you exactly how to get it. Put your money in missions—and in your church and the poor—and your heart will follow."

Do you wish you cared more about eternal things? Then reallocate some of your money, maybe *most* of your money, from temporal things to eternal things. Watch what happens.

God wants your heart. He isn't looking just for "donors" for His kingdom, those who stand outside the cause and dispassionately consider acts of philanthropy. He's looking for disciples immersed in the causes they give to. He wants people so filled with a vision for eternity that they wouldn't dream of not investing their money, time, and prayers where they will matter most.

Of course, giving isn't the only good thing we can do with money. We need to feed, clothe, house, and transport our families. But when the basics are taken care of, why shouldn't the rest go toward treasures in heaven?

Moses left Egypt's treasures "because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11:26).

He who lays up treasures on earth spends his life backing away from his treasures. To him, death is loss.

He who lays up treasures in heaven looks forward to eternity; he's moving daily toward his treasures. To him, death is gain.

He who spends his life moving away from his treasures has reason to despair. He who spends his life moving toward his treasures has reason to rejoice.

Are you despairing or rejoicing?

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But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

1 Chronicles 29:14 NIV

Let us . . . contribute whatever we have — wealth, diligence or care giving — for our neighbor's advantage. . . . For nothing is so pleasing to God as to live for the common advantage.

Chrysostom[1]

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

2 Corinthians 9:11 NIV

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

2 Corinthians 9:15

chapter fourteen

Giving Life Together

God Gives His People as a Gift

As Yahweh's "called-out ones," his people become God's gift to the world. We are not simply a country club, an environmental advocacy organization, or a place for group counseling. Having experienced the forgiveness of sins, the fellowship of Christ's suffering, and the power of his resurrection, we now gather as agents of God's work and continued concern for his world. Paradoxically, this means that as we gather, we should look outward. We are called to be a community focused on "the other" rather than on "self."

This has always been the pattern of God's redemptive work in history. God calls a particular people to himself and blesses them, with the purpose that they will then be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:2–3).[2]

> God chooses not only to make Abraham and his offspring the *object* of his blessing but also to make them the *instrument* of his blessing to the world. This person, family and nation who are to be blessed by God will be the means of others coming into the same blessing.[3]

In other words, God blesses the particular in order to be a universal blessing; he works not generically, but through real people gathered in real communities. From the Abrahamic covenant to Christ's gathering the Twelve, and then the growing of the disciples and the formation of his church, God has always gathered his people to serve as a light to the world, bringing the gift of salvation (cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Luke 2:25–32; Acts 13:46–48).

There is a difference of relative emphasis, however, in the pattern of how God's people care for the nations. According to Charles Scobie, "In the OT the ingathering of the Gentiles involves the nations coming to Israel, not Israel going to the nations. Here [in the NT] the reversal is even more striking: the basically *centripetal* movement of the OT is replaced by the *centrifugal* movement of the NT." Scobie further explains, "The OT 'come' [Isa. 60:3; 66:23; cf. 45:14; 60:5, 14; Mic. 7:12; Tobit 13:11] is replaced by the NT 'go' [Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8]."[4]

The people of God became the normal avenue for the world to encounter God's presence and redemptive activity in the world. At first the pattern primarily moved "from the periphery to the center" in order to draw the nations in, but now the focus is primarily from the center out. Certainly we would not want to be overly rigid in distinguishing the different patterns between the Old and New Testaments, since one can find examples in each Testament that breaks this general rule. For our purposes, however, the point is that both of these movements (centripetal and centrifugal) are forms of divine hospitality and the extension of grace.

The mission of Jesus—the mission of God—is a movement of inclusion, not exclusion; a movement of grace, mercy, and love, not of rejection, hatred, and fear. It is good news, after all. Yes, it calls for repentance, as we discussed earlier in the book. It requires us to come before the holy God, in an encounter that reveals our great sin and need. This is why there were sacrifices to be offered. This is why the great sacrifice of Christ was offered (Heb. 9:11–28). But this is also why this mission centers on *good* news. It captures us, frees us, and then moves us toward God and toward each other. Thus the repeated biblical refrain, "how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news" (Rom. 10:15; cf. Isa. 52:7; Nah. 1:15; Eph. 6:15).

Belonging to God does not mean we escape this world but that we bring God's life, light, and hope further into it. We hear this movement echoed in Jesus' prayer to his Father just before he was arrested: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18; cf. vv. 15–18). As disciples of Jesus we belong to God, not to justify a hatred or frustration with this world, but so that divine love may move through us to others. We go out to the world not representing perfection or superior etiquette, but as shattered sinners who have been reconciled with the holy God.

> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:17–20 NRSV)[5]

As those who have tasted God's grace and forgiveness, we are now his ambassadors, willingly carrying this message of hope even if it means our suffering (Eph. 6:20). This is not retreat: this is movement forward, outward. This is the movement of divine generosity, a movement that is meant to pulsate through God's church to the world.

A People Known for Hospitality

So what does hospitality look like? I think Christine D. Pohl is right: "Part of the mystery [of Christian hospitality] is that while such concrete acts of love are costly, they nourish and heal both giver and recipient."[6] We are healed as we move with God in his motions of generosity. God's gifts are wonderfully ironic; we often experience his love for us most when we love others. As conduits of his love we find ourselves strangely reinvigorated through hard work and humble service. It is only when we see how much we have been forgiven that we can participate in God's grace to others. At their (and our) most faithful moments, this is how Christians have been known: not because they wielded great political power, but because they wielded great sacrificial service.

In a fascinating book called *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark reconsiders the early developments of the fledgling church after Christ's death, trying to understand how it was that this small group of believers in an obscure Jewish Messiah rose to become such a dominate presence in the world in just a few centuries. He found that the empirical evidence points to a few massive and deadly epidemics as a crucial time of numerical growth for the early Christians. Why? Because during this deadly period of plagues, their faith provided not just a doctrine that carried explanatory force, but one that also "provided a prescription for action."[7] The Christian faith combined word and deed.

While we may take the idea for granted, Stark argues that the thought of loving your neighbor, especially the vulnerable stranger, was a revolutionary Christian concept, foreign to paganism.[8] As an epidemic spread, people abandoned the cities and homes, commonly even leaving loved ones who had been infected. Based on their pagan beliefs and worldview, it was the only rational thing to do. These people had no eternal horizon.

But many Christians stayed behind, first caring for their own and then for others who were abandoned in their illness. The Christian bishop Dionysius wrote of his fellow believers, "They were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner." Even Emperor Julian, clearly no friend of Christians, found himself frustrated by how well the "Galileans ... devoted themselves to benevolence" and thus far outshone the pagans.[9] Elsewhere Julian wrote:

> These impious Galileans [i.e. Christians] not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their *agape* [love], they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes.... Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love-feasts, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes a contempt for our gods.[10]

Clearly not all Christians engaged in this heroic work, but the evidence shows that a great many did. This defined the church's character for the pagans around them. Christians in their small networks and local connections extended the love of the crucified and risen Savior by entering into the poverty, pain, illness, and isolation of others. In this way they became the avenue by which others were received and welcomed into the hospitality of God.[11]

The Collection: Participating in Divine Generosity

The earliest Christian communities never limited their expressions of sacrificial generosity to their local fellowships. From the outset they looked beyond their own immediate communities. To be sure, the early church delighted in the breaking of bread and table fellowship that radically reduced the poverty among them (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37). But this joy also overflowed. Their giving spread and expanded. Nowhere do we see the expansive and unifying force of the early church's generosity more clearly than in the enterprise that came to be called "The Collection."

It is indeed striking that the first thing we are told that believers did after being called "Christians" for the first time was to take up a collection for the poor (Acts 11:19–30, esp. vv. 26–29). When believers in Antioch heard of a famine that was about to hit Judea and Jerusalem, they immediately *decided to give*. These gifts went to fellow believers whom they had never met because they lived far away. This collection and the collections that would follow also played a formative role in the life and mission of the apostle Paul.

Early in his ministry, the elders of the church at Antioch asked Paul with Barnabas to deliver this relief fund. In Galatians 2:1–10 Paul recounts the common concern for the poor that he also shared, not only with the leadership at Antioch, but also with the "pillars" of the church in Jerusalem. Such shared concern was as a natural outworking of their unity in the gospel:

> ... and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal. 2:9–10)

Commenting on this passage in Galatians, New Testament scholar Scot McKnight says, "Little did the Jerusalem leaders know that their suggestion would become Paul's *obsession* for nearly two decades."[12] This may come as a surprise for many of us who know Paul primarily for his letters—his words. But if we think we know Paul's theology and remain ignorant of his work on behalf the poor, we should reread those letters (esp. Romans, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians). Although we cannot fully unpack this here, studying Paul's theology apart from the Collection is very much like studying the presidencies of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln apart from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, or the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. apart from the Civil Rights Movement. To be sure, Paul did many different things, but this campaign consumed such a great deal of the apostle's energy and imagination that we cannot rightly understand the one apart from the other.[13]

The Purpose of the Collection

James Dunn has said that the Collection held a "peculiar significance" for Paul: it "sums up to a unique degree the way in which Paul's theology, missionary work, and pastoral concern were held together as a single whole."[14] N. T. Wright similarly insists, "This project cannot have been a mere whim, a nice idea dreamed up as a token gesture. Paul must have wanted very, very badly to do it."[15] But why? Paul appears to have been

willing to give up his very life to complete this project (Rom. 15:31; cf. Acts 20:3, 24).[16] But why was it such a priority?[17]

The short answer is that the Collection appears to have been a campaign that combined a rich variety of implicit and explicit purposes. These different motivations and aims seem to have included the following.

To relieve poverty. Whatever we say about the meaning and purpose of the Collection must include the obvious fact that it displayed a deep concern for the poor (Acts 11:27–30; Rom. 15:25; Gal. 2:10; 2 Cor. 8:4, 13–15; 9:12). Paul and the early church repeatedly exhibited their desire to help fellow Christians in need.[18] At a basic level, then, Paul viewed the Collection as "a matter of fairness" (2 Cor. 8:13). The parallels with the priorities of Jesus' own life, preaching, and ministry are obvious (Matt. 5:42; 6:2; 25:34; Mark 10:21; Luke 4:18–19; 7:22; John 13:29).

Jesus meant the church, his body, to be identified by her sacrificial concern for those in need. In this way, whatever the church owns was, ideally, made liberally available to the poor. In fact, John Calvin even observed, "You will frequently find in both the decrees of synods and in ancient writers, that all the church possesses, either in lands or in money, is the patrimony [i.e., inheritance] of the poor."[19] Luther similarly concluded, "After the preaching of the Gospel, the office and charge of a true and faithful pastor is, to be mindful of the poor."[20] This has always been an abiding concern of "Christians" since they are called by that name (Acts 11:19–30).

To unify the church. Yet, we cannot reduce the significance of the Collection to poverty relief alone. For Paul himself saw fit to accept contributions from the Macedonians who themselves were *poor* and whose "abundance of joy and their extreme poverty," Paul says, "overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (2 Cor. 8:1–2). Thus, there must have been some significance that transcended even the practical purpose of the project, important though that was. Part of the greater purpose of this gift, in Paul's mind, seems to have been that it was not only for the recipients but also for the *givers*. This collection came primarily from Gentile converts and was directed primarily to Jewish believers in their season of poverty. Paul therefore clearly hoped that this Collection would help establish *unity* within the church as a whole, bringing Jew and Gentile together. N. T. Wright has expressed this point beautifully, describing the Collection as

> a massive symbol, a great prophetic sign, blazoned across half a continent, trumpeting the fact that the people of God [were being] redefined around Jesus the Messiah [as] a single family.[21]

In other words, Paul saw the Collection as a project that would defy on a practical level the divisions that threatened the unity of the church. To overcome the conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers, Paul sought *spiritual solidarity* through *generous giving*, allowing Gentile Christians the opportunity to "express tangibly their spiritual debt to Jewish believers" (Rom. 15:27).[22] In this light, Paul's decision to delay his trip to Rome makes sense (Rom. 15:22–29). The unity of the church was the foundation for her growth.[23]

To participate in God's grace. From a pastoral perspective, Paul not only envisioned the Collection as a means of relieving poverty and promoting the unity of the community. He also saw the Collection as an opportunity for each contributor to actively participate and share in God's grace.

When we discover that two whole chapters of Scripture are devoted to a single topic, it tends to capture our attention. In 2 Corinthians 8–9, at the heart of one of Paul's major letters, this is precisely what we find: two chapters entirely devoted to the Collection. In these chapters the word grace (*charis*) appears no fewer than ten times. This is one of the most concentrated uses of one of the most important words in Paul's vocabulary that we find in the New Testament. As Keith F. Nickle has said, "If any one phrase could summarize Paul's theology, it would be 'the grace of God in Christ.'"[24]

God's grace, supremely manifested in Jesus Christ, is Paul's greatest theme and he applies it to the Collection in an astonishing variety of ways:[25]

- as the inexpressible gift that made participation in the Collection possible (2 Cor. 8:1; 9:8, 14–15)
- as the act of participation in the Collection itself (2 Cor. 8:6)
- as the result of participation in the Collection (1 Cor. 16:3)
- as a direct expression of Christian fellowship (2 Cor. 8:4, 7)
- as an activity stimulated by the grace of Christ's example (2 Cor. 8:9)

After holding up the example of the grace God gave to the Macedonians, Paul appeals to the ultimate example of generosity: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9 NIV). It's worth taking a moment here to stop and consider the incredibly *practical* situation that gave rise to this much loved verse on the mystery of Christ's incarnation. We often quote it out of context as an opportunity to talk philosophy. But Paul is not giving a lecture on systematic theology at this point. He is fund-raising. Thus, for Paul, practical

participation in the church's collective work of generosity brings into fruition our knowledge of God's grace. Raising money for the needy provides the perfect setting and environment for doing true theology and engaging in true worship. For Paul, the Collection demonstrates what the knowledge and truth of God's grace really look like in the life of a community.

Thus, it would be a mistake to think of the Collection as if it were somehow marginal to Paul's message or mission; rather, it takes us to the very heart of the gospel. Only because people know God's grace are they able to give with true and voluntary abandon after the example of their Lord. Thus, flowing out of our confession of the gospel, the church's collective generosity is to be experienced as a participation in God's grace that results in his glory and our good. "Thanks be to God," Paul concludes, "for his inexpressible gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

To prefigure the future. While it is nowhere stated as one of Paul's explicit purposes for organizing the Collection, this project bears some striking similarities to various Old Testament prophecies. A time in the future was anticipated in the Old Testament when Gentiles would come bringing gifts to God's people in Jerusalem.[26] When Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, comes together with his foreign companions to bring their gifts from Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia, and Asia, they certainly appear to be, at least partially, fulfilling some of these ancient expectations so long foretold:

> Then you will see and be radiant;
> your heart shall thrill and exult,
> because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
> the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
> (Isa. 60:5; cf. vv. 3–4, 6–7, 11, 13, 17; 2:2–4; Mic. 4:13; Hag. 2:7–8; Zech. 14:16–21)

Regardless of whether the Collection should be read directly in light of such texts from Isaiah and the other prophets, it is clear that one final day is coming when all the wealth of this world will come rushing back in worship to God. When Paul remarks that all things are not only from God, but also through him and to him (Rom. 11:36), he reminds us that God's ownership points not just to the past but to the future as well.[27] In the Collection we see a picture of God's people manifesting the truth of this good future.

The beginning of the Bible's grand story shouts to us of God's ownership of all things. The end of the narrative also highlights all things

rushing back to him (Rev. 21:24–26). Here we discover again just how far God's redemptive rule will reach: to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Near and far, they will all come bearing gifts. And the Collection appears as a concrete symbol of this great expectation. We belong to each other. We belong to the Lord!

Stewards of the Gospel

In light of this emphasis on the "collection for the saints" (1 Cor. 16:1), we observe that fundamental to the church's life together is also the idea of *stewardship*. Despite our tendency to reduce this language to purely monetary matters, most often the New Testament uses this vocabulary in reference to the gospel itself. Beginning with Paul and his missionary team, the apostolic call was to be "stewards [*oikonomoi*] of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1–6).[28]

The apostolic proclamation is entrusted to ministers and preserved in local congregations (2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2; 3:14). This trust calls God's people, and particularly shepherds of God's flock, to be stewards of the good news (Col. 1:24–27). Consequently, ministers who steward this message are told to be "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Such an "overseer" must not be "arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined" (Titus 1:7–8). Not only must leaders quench their greedy impulses, but also the first positive trait they must cultivate is hospitality. They represent, in proclamation and action, God's immense generosity and grace.

This message of salvation has been entrusted to the leaders of the church as "the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me [Paul] *for you*" (Eph. 3:1–3, italics added). Paul expresses the movement of grace given from one to another rather than withholding from each other. These mysteries are now revealed; they have been shared with us that we may spread them around. The mysteries are not abstract speculations but rather what God has made known in Christ and what we have received by faith (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3–7; cf. Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:6; 3:3; 6:19; Col. 1:26–27). Having received this gift from God, thus entrusted with the care of his gospel, our reaction should not be pride; rather, we should delight in offering this word of hope freely and whenever possible (1 Cor. 9:16–18).

Ultimately all Christians are to act as stewards of the gospel, spreading this truth by word and deed. Peter connects the imagery of gift and

stewardship, challenging us to live together in a way that promotes the praise of the Triune God through sacrificial service:

> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10–11)

This is how God's people should be known, as servants of Christ and stewards of the varied grace that God has given us.

Conclusion

As we said earlier, divine hospitality is a gift that is not so much possessed as entered into. It is the gift of new surroundings and stories. Hospitality says, "Come with us into the joy of our Lord; join the feast at the table of God." Gathered around the bread and wine, we are reminded that God manifests his love and lordship supremely as gift. He reveals his sovereignty in self-giving. As those who belong to God, we extend his love and lordship to others, inviting them into the feast of communion with their Creator, who redeems and sustains his world.

God calls his people to live out together the gospel pattern of gift. Even as God has given himself to us in our lowliness, caring for us in our great need, so now God calls the church to care for the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. In this way God includes us in his ongoing movement of grace and love, promising that such giving wastes nothing but leads to "life that is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:19 NIV).

God So Loved, He Gave

> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:15–21)

The Creator of all things, including humanity, comes: he comes himself, entering the chaos, the brokenness, the poverty, and the shame. He comes quietly, humbly, truly. And when he comes, he does the scandalous, for God becomes a human being. And in the end this man, Jesus the Messiah, suffers, dies, rises, and ascends. In this we learn what is called the "gospel," the good news of God. God has reestablished our belonging to him not by taking, but by *giving*!

This good news is about God's liberation of sinful humanity, bringing forgiveness, freedom, hope, and restored communion with the Creator. Here is the work of renewing creation—all things have been made new in Christ.

Unedited transcription from a talk given by Henri Nouwen to the Marguerite Bourgeoys Family Service Foundation
September 16, 1992

SPIRITUALITY OF FUND RAISING

A CONVERSATION WITH HENRI NOUWEN

I must say at the outset that fund raising is a subject I seldom speak about. But I was invited to say a few words about it to the Directors and some of the Board members of L'Arche, and that is how I came to talk to you about it.

In a way the whole subject came up in our community because quite often, fund raising is something that happens as a response to a crisis – you don't have enough money – you're in trouble somewhere, and so you say, "We need some money, how are we going to get it, we have to start asking for it". And suddenly you realize that you aren't used to doing this, and you feel awkward about it, and you feel a little embarrassed about it. So you start thinking: "Gosh, how do you do that?" It's interesting that most people I have spoken to about fund raising feel somewhat uneasy with the idea that they have to go out and ask for money.

By way of introduction, I want to say that fund raising, if you think about it from the perspective of the Gospel, is <u>not</u> a response to a crisis. Fund raising is first of all, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing your vision, and inviting other people into your vision with the resources that are available to them.

-- FUND RAISING IS NOT A RESPONSE TO CRISIS. IT IS A FORM OF MINISTRY --

Fund raising is proclaiming what you believe in and proclaiming it in such a way that you offer the other person an opportunity to participate in your vision. So it is precisely the opposite of begging. It's not saying, "Please we have a problem could you help us out because lately it's been hard." It is saying, "We have a vision that is so exciting that we are giving you the opportunity to participate in that vision with the resources that God has given you.

-- YOU WON'T BECOME POORER, YOU'LL BECOME RICHER BY GIVING --

And, further, since it is a ministry, it is always a call to conversion. That is, to say to people, "I invite you to a new way of relating to your resources. So that making your resources available to us is good for you". If it is good only for us who receive; it is not fund raising in the spiritual sense of the word. Fund raising from the point of view of the gospel, is saying to people: "I will take your money only if it is good for your spiritual journey – if it s good for your health." In other words, you won't become poorer – but

you will become richer by giving. Otherwise you are saying, , "I'm here, you're there, and you're giving some a little bit," and then suddenly, you are begging again, and you are not standing up for your vision.

Certainly, fund raising, from a spiritual point of view, is a very concrete way to help the Kingdom come about. What is the Kingdom? It is the creation of a community of love in their world – and beyond this world – because wherever love is create, it is stronger than death. So when we build the Kingdom here on earth, it is a Kingdom that will reach out beyond our own chronological existence, and if you raise funds for the creation of a community of love, you are building the Kingdom. You're doing exactly what you're supposed to do as Christians.

If you say that your work is to offer a holistic, ecological approach to the question of fertility, and personal health care – if that's what you are about – then you are about the Kingdom. You are about creating a community of love. Because that's what the holistic approach to fertility is; a holistic call to be fruitful as Jesus calls us to be fruitful. And this is something about which you are not supposed to be begging.

You don't say, "Please we have a nice little project going here, and wouldn't you like to help us out a bit". No! You say, "Aren't you glad that we, who give our time and our lives to a holistic, ecologic fertility and health care, invite you in and aren't you delighted that you are allowed to make your resources available for this great work?" You see? You're now longer begging. But this is not exactly what we're talking about. I want you to sense – right here – that what we're talking about involves a real turnabout, a real conversion.

And interestingly enough, in this sense, the people of the world are often wiser than the people of the Kingdom because the world – the people who do big business – know that you never get much money if you beg for it.

I once went to see a big fund raiser in Texas, and I remember walking into his office and seeing a beautiful mahogany desk, wonderful paintings hanging on the wall, and a magnificent marble sculpture. And I said, "How do you dare to ask for money in this office?" He replied, "this is precisely why I have such a good-looking office because people, seeing it, will say that I know how to work with money – how to make it grow. They don't like to invest money in people who say, "I don't have anything." And if people do give them money, they are out begging again next week.

In any case, what this man was saying spiritually to me was, "I ask for money standing up, not bowing down, because I believe in what I am about. I believe that I have something important to offer." And he invites people to be a part of this.

I want to speak, now, about three things:

1. Your security base.
2. People who are rich
3. Asking

First of all, I want to speak very concretely about you and me, who ask for money. And I want to talk about this because it is a very important question. What is your security base? That is the question: God or Mammon? That is what Jesus would say. What is your security base? Where do you find your security? So I'm going to start talking about you and me who ask for money. Not talking about how to get money. I'm just asking about your *relationship* to money.

I'm going to play a little game with you. I am going to ask you a lot of questions, you don't have to answer any of them, but I ask you to think about them as I raise them. The general question is: What is the place of money in your life? You will never be able to ask for money if you don't know what your own relationship to money is.

Do you know how much money your father earns, or has, at this moment? Do you talk to him about money? "Dad, how much money do you earn?" And, "How much do you have in the bank?" Does your mom or your dad talk to you about this? Did they talk to you about it when you were a child? Was it a subject of your table discussions at all, ever?

Do you talk with your own children about your money? Tell them how you earn it and how you use it?

If you have money, how do you spend it? Are you inclined to cling to it because of possible emergencies? You know: "Something might happen, and I better have it there in case somebody gets sick."

Do you like to give your money to friends or institutions? You know: "Say I have a friend who is in need. He really needs a thousand, so let me give him a thousand." Or do you say "I really have compassion for the children in Somalia, I'm really so terribly frustrated, that's where I want to give a significant part of my money." Where are you, in fact, giving it?

Are you concerned as to whether or not your gift is tax deductible? Or does that even occur to you?

How do you feel when people use the money that you gave them in ways different from those for which you had given it? How do you feel about that? You give a thousand dollars to somebody who asked you because you wanted to help the children and you find out that he used it for a trip to the Caribbean. Do you get angry? Once I had a seminary president who said to me, "If you never want to be fooled, you will never give money."

How does having or not having money, affect your self-esteem? Your sense of value? Do you feel good when you have a lot – or do you think it doesn't matter at all? Or do you say, "I'm getting very nervous because maybe I'm not as good as I think I am because I don't really have any money."

Do you ever use money to control people or events? "I am a power, and if I put this money there, this is going to happen; or if I put it there, then that is going to happen." In other words, do you use your money to make things happen, as you want them to happen? Do you ever use money simply to give others the freedom to do what they want to do? I don't care how you spend it, I just want you to have it."

Instead of saying, "Do you have some money?" people say to me, "I know you have some money, I know you have different ways of spending; I want you to give me a thousand dollars. I'm going to ask a few more people, and so you have the first chance to give it to me . . . for this book." The question here is not how you ask for money, but how do you feel when people ask you for money?

I'm asking all these questions simply to get you in touch with the question: Where is your security base? Is it in God or is it in money? It's very interesting and it's very important to realize that money is one of the greatest taboos around. Greater than sex, greater than religion. A lot of people say, "Don't talk about religion, that's my private business. Don't talk about sex." But talking about money is even harder.

Money is one of the greatest taboos. And you notice this immediately when you come to fund raise . . . you don't feel that it is an easy thing, something about which you can be very "up front".

And the reason for the taboo is that money obviously has something to do with that intimate little place in your heart where you need security, and you don't want to give that away. As long as I have some money in the bank, nothing can really happen. War might come; somebody in my family might die. My father always said, "Henri, be sure you don't become dependent on anybody. Be sure that you do not have to beg. Be sure you have enough money, in case something happens, so that you don't end up in a nursing home where you don't want to be, or in a convent, where you don't want to be; be sure that you always have enough money yourself so you can have your own house and your own things, and have your own people to help you.

Jesus, however, says something very radical. He says that you cannot put your security in God and money. You have to make a choice. And all those questions I asked you were simply to ask yourself whether you are somewhere, perhaps; still putting your security in money because Jesus says put your security in God. You have to make a choice – where you want to belong, to the world or to God. Your trust, your basic trust, Jesus says, has to be in God. And as long as your trust is in money, you cannot be a true member of the Kingdom.

Now, the statement I want to make here is very simple. If you totally put your security in God, you can ask for as much money as your want. If your security is in God, then you are free to ask for money. When you are free from money, you can ask for it. The reason that we have such a hard time asking for money is precisely because it is a taboo subject. And it is a taboo subject because our own little securities are connected with it, and so we are not free. But if, on the other hand, I am absolutely sure that my whole trust is in God, and absolutely sure that I am concerned only for the

Kingdom, then I will have no trouble at all in asking you for a million dollars. All you can say is "no," and I can reply, "Fine, you missed your chance," and I can go on about my business. Do you see the connection here? It's very important, especially insofar as I address you as fund raisers – that you be free from money in terms of your security base. Now, let me tell you a little story.

I know a person, who is very very rich. And I say to him, "Hey do you have a lot of money?" What is going on when people make a remark like that? Or, "did you get something from that rich guy?" What is happening here? First of all, I think that it is sometimes just plain jealousy: "these rich people." Or sometime it's anger. How did they make all that money? "I'm not so sure that they made it in an honest way".

When we make remarks such as these, we get in touch with our own unresolved relationship with money. When rich people make us jealous or angry, we simply show that we are not free, and therefore, in a strange way, not ready to ask.

I am profoundly concerned about this for me and for the people with whom I live – that we do not ask out of anger. "You are so filthy rich; you shouldn't have all that money, and I'm going to get it from you." Now, that is not giving the person the means to become a brother; he or she realized immediately, that there is some kind of competition going on and that you are not free. The offer is no longer for the Kingdom; it no longer speaks in the name of God in whom your security is based.

Now, I want to deal with a second subject, people who are rich – I've met a number of them since coming to l'Arche. We, in l'Arche are fond of saying that God has made a preferential option for the poor. God loves the poor, and so it is with our community; our community is really committed to the poor. But sometimes we also have a prejudice against the rich, that they are not as good as the poor. They have more money than they deserve. I wonder how they got it. I wish we were as lucky as they. We make little jokes, but these jokes sometimes reveal that we might not love the rich as much as the poor. And nobody says we should love the rich less. And the rich will know it right away. And my personal experience is more and more, that rich people are also very poor – in many other ways.

Many rich people are very lonely. Many rich people suffer a lot from feelings of rejection or of being used, or of depression. And they all need a lot of attention and a lot of care. Just like the poor. Because they are as poor as the poor. And I want you to hear this, because so often I have come in touch with people who are totally in the prison of thinking "The only thing people see in me is money. So wherever I go, I am the rich aunt or the rich friend or the rich person, and I have these houses and these horses and these properties, and so I stay in my little circle, because as soon as I get out of it, people are there and say, He's rich!"

I once met a woman who had come to Daybreak; she was very wealthy, and she was very depressed and went from one psychiatrist to another, and paid them huge fees, and my feeling was a little bit that the psychiatrist was very reluctant to heal her. And she said, "You know, Henri, everybody is after my money. That's how I was born, and

that is how my family is." She went on, "Wherever I go, I never feel that people love me for who I really am. And I am so afraid that I am loved only because of my money.

I relate another story that happened to me. It was just about six years ago; someone had read a lot of my books, and called my assistant at the university; I wasn't there, I was a away for a few months; and he said, "I'm reading Henri Nouwen's books and I wonder, does he need any money because I really want him to write more and it is expensive to write books these days." So my assistant called me and said that we had this banker who wants to help you with money. I didn't know what to do, so I said, "Well, go and have dinner with him." So the two went out for dinner; I stayed away for about four months, but they continued to have dinner every week – talking about all sorts of things. Finally, I came back; the two had become good friends – even though my assistant was about 25 years old, and the banker was about 50. I was invited to join my assistant to meet this banker. The man would say, "Henri, I know you don't know one thing about money". I said, "How do you know?" He answered, "I know people like writers don't know a thing about money." So I said, "Well, maybe that's true, if you want to help me with some money, that's okay." What was really going on, however, was "What you're writing about, is something I want to speak about on a more personal level, and the only way I can get into your life is through my strength which is being a banker." Ultimately, what this man was saying was; "I'm weak, and I really would like to get to know you." I replied, "Let's not talk about money right now, and let's just talk about you."

Over time, we became close friends, and we entered into a relationship, which was very, very radical – in the spiritual sense. He gave me a little money – a few thousand dollars – this happened year after year. I needed it, but I never had to ask for it. He simply gave it to me; I used it well and told him what I had done with it. But interestingly enough, if was not a relationship of begging; it was more a sharing of who he was.

When he died, his family said to me, "We as a family would like to continue supporting you because of the love that you had for my husband and my father. We find it so normal that you always feel that there are people who will support you because we love you, as our father loved you".

I'm telling you this because it shows so well that it was only through the poverty of the rich man that something very much of the Kingdom developed. And the money became real – it was there – but it wasn't I felt really impressed by it; we both had resources, I had spiritual and they material. What was impressive was that, together, we both wanted to work for the Kingdom, to let something happen that was greater than us. You must minister to the rich from your place of wealth – spiritual wealth – you must have the courage to go to them and say, "I love you, and it is not because of your money, but because of who you are." Go to this person, not in anger – because you are just as poor and in need of love as I am; can I discover the poor in that person? Because that's where the person's blessing is. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." The rich are also very, very poor, because they have money; nobody reaches out to that place in them. If you ask money from people who have money, you have to love them

deeply and when you ask for the money, don't worry about the money, worry as to whether that person has become closer to God.

Third point, this one is about asking. Once you have placed your security base in God, and once you have learned to love the rich, and once you believe that you have something of great value to give, then you can ask whatever you want and you will get it. That's what the Gospel says: "Ask, and it will be given to you; knock and the door will be opened". Let me recall what I said earlier; asking people for money is giving them the opportunity of putting their resources at the disposal of the Kingdom, it is giving other people the chance of offering their resources for the work of God. Secondly, asking people for money is inviting them into a new communion. This is very important; asking for money is inviting people into your vision" We want you to get to know us. We want you to enter into communion with us." What you must always offer is communion, friendship and community.

If it is true that this world is full of lonely people, isolated people, then fund raising has to be community building. People have such a need for friendship and for community, and you have to believe that you have that to offer. Community is one of the greatest gifts we have to offer. Loneliness, isolation and separation are everywhere and if you ask for money, it means that you offer a new fellowship, a new brotherhood, a new sisterhood, a new way of belonging.

The money is the least interesting thing. I know people in our community who live just from the friendship with our community; they come and visit, and it is there that they find nurture and support. If these people have money, they will give it, but that is not the point. Every time these people are asked for money, you must be sure that they are invited to something; invited into this ideal that you have of health care and fruitfulness. And asking doesn't just mean inviting them to get to know some people, but to get to know a vision. You want them to see what God means when he says, "be fruitful." We want you to have an idea about the fruitfulness in the whole rich vision, which is much more important than successfulness or productivity. You've got to have a spirituality of fruitfulness that affects not only childbearing, but also life itself. We invite people into this vision, and we have a meeting, and we reflect upon our vision, and invite you to tell use what you think about. We have a vision and we think about it and write about it, and it is good to have your aboard. We are not hiding it; this is open to you.

And thirdly, asking has to be good for you, for the one who gives, and for the Kingdom.

If you come back from asking and you feel awful, there is something wrong. You have to *love* fund raising as a form of ministry. So you have to do it, and don't be tricked into thinking that fund raising is a sort of secular thing. Fund raising is as spiritual as giving a sermon – if you believe in the Kingdom. So it has to be good for you, for your conversion too, because you have to get in touch with your own hang-ups about money, you have to get in touch with who you are, and suddenly you say, "I'm afraid to ask for money, I'm afraid to say to this man, give us a thousand dollars." What are you so afraid of? Is he going to kill you? "No, I'm just afraid." Well, are you willing to be

converted so that you are no longer afraid? Are you willing to find a little piece of freedom in yourself?

-- In fund raising we discover that we are all poor and we are all rich --

Fund raising has to be good for you. And sometimes, when you ask, people may say, "Never! You'll get nothing from me." What do you do in this situation, get depressed? Jesus says, "You walk into the house and offer peace, if people don't want it, shake the sand off your shoes and walk on." Don't get depressed when someone says, "I'm not going to get involved in your project."

Asking has to be good for the person from whom you ask money. The person or group from whom you ask money has to feel that they are invited into something new.

And finally, it must be good for the Kingdom. You must be very conscious of our call. The call that you have in your life, and in God's eye, must be deepened and strengthened in your fund raising. So you must listen to it.

There are quite a few fund raisers who have said to me, "Henri, if we give you money, we want you to be more faithful to your priestly vocation, so that you don't spend your time running around doing these other things." You see? I need to be ministered to as well. People say to me, "I will give you money if you stop being so busy; you run around and talk your head off, but you don't write enough. Our kids need books about marriage and the other sacraments. I'll give you the money if you take up the challenge to be a better priest, to be more faithful to your vocation, and be more involved in it. And I know that this is difficult for you – to shut the door and sit behind your desk and not speak to anyone.

Fund raising must always create new, lasting relationships. It must keep it's focus on ministry; we have something to offer – home, friendship, prayer, peace, love, fidelity and affection – and these things are so valuable that people are willing to make their resources available for them.

Fund raising then is a very rich and beautiful activity. It is an integral part of our ministry. In fund raising we discover that we are all poor and that we are all rich, and in ministering to each other – each from the riches that he or she possesses – we work together to build the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the poor.

"How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven".