

Generous God, Generous People



A series of daily Bible readings
on the theme of Christian
giving

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INTRODUCTION

This is a five week set of Bible readings for your personal devotions. The theme is 'generous God, generous people', or more simply, our calling as stewards of all that God has given us.

Each week tackles one aspect of the overall theme. Each day follows the same simple format of a reading, the main verse, a brief reflection followed by a response to consider, a passage for further study and a simple prayer. You might want to have a notebook with you to record your own reflections and responses to the questions and actions.

The five themes are:

Generous God

Generous people

Generous giving

Generosity towards others

Principles for generous people to live by

At the end of each week you might want to spend a little time reflecting on what you have learned.

- Which themes or issues made a special impact on you?
- What challenged you and perhaps made you uncomfortable?
- What excited you?
- What will you do as a result of this?
- How does this affect your attitude to your faith, the church, those around you?

This is a brief introduction to get us thinking about how we can be responsible and faithful disciples in a challenging world.

Enjoy your reading and prayer and may God richly bless you.

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WEEK 1: GENEROUS GOD

It's obvious when you think about it. We love God because He first loved us and we give because God first gave to us. Our whole lives are a response to a loving, generous God.

So we start our five weeks of study on the theme of giving with the character of God. It is only as we immerse ourselves in the character of God that we realise that all we are and all we have comes from the generous God who is our provider and sustainer.

During the week we will look at the amazing love of God revealed in Jesus, God's generous daily provision such that we lack nothing and the values that God sets for the world.



DAY 1: AMAZING LOVE

Reading: John 3:11-21

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son' v16

Where else could we start? As Christians we worship a loving and generous God, whose nature is to give, freely and without measure, to the whole world. Jesus is His love gift to the world. If we measure the value of God's love by the value of the gift then it could not be greater. He could not have loved more.

So the familiar verses from John's gospel come to us as a reminder that while we might try to reach God through our efforts, it is God who reaches out to us through His Son.

He gave Jesus to the world that through him we might have eternal life and to have eternal life is to know God in a way that without Jesus it would not be possible. So, as we meditate on who God is and on His character, the call to be like our heavenly Father challenges us to emulate his generosity. Such love knows no boundaries and will challenge us as much as it will challenge and bless those around us.

For further study: Psalm 103 - the love of God.

Response: As you set out on the course of Bible study what do you hope to gain from it?

Prayer: Almighty God, whose generous love transforms all people, create in me a heart to seek your will, that formed in the image of your Son I may give myself and my possessions in response to your call. Amen.

DAY 2: NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD

Reading: Romans 8:31-39

‘He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all’ v32

Returning to our theme from yesterday, we reflect on the loving God who did not withhold his own Son. Our starting point is to reflect on our relationship with God. As children of God we are in a family relationship with our loving, heavenly Father who did not spare anything so that a saving relationship could be established. Therefore as Paul says ‘will he not give us everything else?’ Our generous God will open the heavens to bless us. It is not a case of giving because we are compelled to; rather we give because we love God.

The context is our relationship with God and how He will bless us with every spiritual blessing (see Ephesians 1). In the earlier part of the chapter, Paul reminds us that we may find ourselves in exceptionally testing situations, but even so, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Indeed the deeper the testing, the closer we could be drawn to God.

For further study: Isaiah 54:4-10 - God's unshakeable love, even when we face difficulties.

Response: What testing times have you experienced? How did you respond? When you emerged from that time how did it change your relationship with God?

Prayer: Loving God, nothing can separate me from your love. Help me to respond each day to the prompting of the Holy Spirit that in all things I may exercise a generous spirit to all. Amen.

DAY 3: OBEDIENT CHILDREN

Reading: Deuteronomy 8:5-20

‘walking in obedience to him and revering him.’ v6

As the children of Israel approached the promised land, they were reminded that they had to walk obediently with God. Yes, there was a wonderful land for them but it came with conditional promises. They were not to forget the Lord their God, what He had done or His commandments. Neither were they to sit in fine houses and think that they could do anything by their own strength.

There will be times when we stray from God’s chosen path and He will discipline us, just as a parent disciplines a child. It is on those occasions that we are reminded by the words in this passage to remember God and not to forget His ways.

The experience of the wilderness was that God provided at all times. The pattern follows for us today. It is the Lord who provides for us and all that we have is God’s. So our calling as Christians is to live as responsible stewards of all that God has given us. The more that we are blessed materially, the more we can use ‘our’ possessions for the work of God, recognising that all that we have is not ours anyway, it belongs to God.

For further study: Hebrews 12:1-11 - God's love in discipline.

Response: What does it mean to walk obediently before the Lord your God?

Prayer: Lord God, all that I am and all that I have comes from you; help me to hold less closely the things of this world, that I may trust in your generous provision. Amen.

DAY 4: GOD THE PROVIDER

Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

‘your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.’ v32 (NRSV)

We live in a materialistic world where, at every turn, we are encouraged to buy things whether we need them or not. Indeed for many of us, our lives are so cluttered with ‘stuff’ that we now have to hire storage pods to cope with the overflow. We may look around and contemplate all the things we think we need. There is a difference between what we want and what we need and God knows the difference! So in this passage we are encouraged to set out our priorities and put God first.

To make the point that God is our provider, Jesus reminded his hearers of the birds of the field and how God looked after them. It is easy to say ‘don’t worry about food’ when we have a full cupboard, but we are encouraged to recognise that it is God who is providing for us. This does require faith on our part, to be able to trust with ‘simple, childlike faith’ that our heavenly father really does know what is needed. Worrying won’t get us anywhere. Rather than being anxious about these things, we could be resting in the love and provision of God.

This is one of the most challenging things that we, as Christians, face. We can trust God for the unseen ‘spiritual things’. However, to trust God for our daily requirements is much more tangible. It really is a test of our faith.

For further study: Hebrews 10:32-39 – the confidence the writer of Hebrews had in God's provision.

Response: What purchases are you expecting to make over the next month? How many are essential? What impression are you giving to other people by your recent purchases?

Prayer: Father God, help me to rest in you and know that you are my provider. Help me to resist the temptations of the adverts and to think carefully about how I use the money that you have provided. Amen.

DAY 5: ALL THINGS COME FROM GOD

Reading: I Chronicles 29:10-20

‘for everything in heaven and earth is yours.’ v11

For Anglicans these are some of the most familiar verses in the Bible. Many of us hear them Sunday by Sunday at the offertory during Holy Communion. They are a powerful reminder to us that even when we offer up the fruit of our hands, the provision is from God.

In an echo of Psalm 145 David praises God for who He is, recognising that God’s kingdom (rule) was and is over all things. The almighty God, who is all powerful, does give good gifts to us all. Can we, like David, recognise this generosity in the things around us?

By acknowledging an awareness of God’s nature and purpose we too, like David, will come to a fresh awareness of ourselves and our actions. David set an example to all those around him by giving out of his personal wealth.

Having sufficient for today (as we saw yesterday) is what God promises us. Perhaps an abundance of riches is a supreme test of the uprightness of our hearts (v17). Would we really be able to cope?

For further study: Psalm 104:1-26 - whole of creation is sustained by God.

Response: When you hear these words on a Sunday, how does it affect your attitude to money and possessions?

Prayer: Lord God, all things come from you and of your own do I give you. Release in me that generosity of spirit that comes from you. Amen.

DAY 6: NOTHING SHALL I LACK

Reading: Psalm 34:1-22

‘those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.’ v10

We are beginning to see a pattern emerge from our readings. We are children of our heavenly Father, who is a caring God who provides for His children. He calls us to seek His will. As we do so then other aspects of discipleship fall into place. It won't be easy. It is only as we experience the testing that we learn to trust God and seek His face. Such trust is rewarded by God, who is faithful towards his people.

The young lions suffer want and hunger. Perhaps this is because they are wilful and wander off, rather than using the wisdom of their elders? As we grow in our faith, so we become more aware of the abundant provision of God, sufficient for our needs. The promise of God is that we will lack no good thing. He doesn't promise that we will all be millionaires. Would you want that responsibility?

The Psalm is about our daily walk with God. Starting with our daily worship of God, as we give ourselves to Him, so we become more like our heavenly Father. As we are shaped by Him so we will not only learn to trust Him for each day, but we will become mindful of those around us and reach out to them.

For further study: Jeremiah 39 - Jeremiah's trust rewarded (especially v17-18).

Response: What holds you back from trusting God for your daily provision?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me this day to trust you more, to be shaped by you and aware of those around me who are in need. Amen.

DAY 7: A RIGHT WAY UP WORLD

Reading: Isaiah 55:6-11

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.’ v8

So we finish the week having reflected on the greatness, the generosity and the goodness of God. The One who provides for us, who calls us to trust him and be content in all we do. At this point as we reflect both on the past few days and prepare for those to come, let us ask the Holy Spirit to search our lives, to reveal all that is not of God and to call us back to His ways.

Like yesterday’s reading, today’s passage starts by calling us to seek God. Not a search for that which is lost, but a diligence in seeking out God and His will for us. As we do so we will forsake all that would hinder us in our growth as disciples. As penitent sinners who experience grace in the pardon from God, we can rejoice that, as in all things, God acts differently to the way of the world. We also know that when dealing with money, God’s economics are not those of the world. It is our trust in Him that means that money can expand or contract and yet still be sufficient for our needs.

As Christians, our approach to life, including money and possessions, will run counter to the prevailing culture of the day. It is sometimes asked, ‘If people didn’t know you were a Christian, would they see enough evidence through your actions and lifestyle to be convinced?’

For further study: Psalm 112 - God's delight in those who behave well (with money v5 & 9).

Response: Have there been occasions when you have seen the truth of verses 8 and 9 in your life?

Prayer: Lord God, I know in part that your ways are different from mine, may I come to know and experience this truth more in my life. Amen.

WEEK 2: GENEROUS PEOPLE

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus says 'you must always act like your Father in heaven'. So the generous loving God calls us to be shaped in His image. Hence we are a generous people.

That generosity is prompted by the way God is at work within us. Every facet of our lives is about the response to God. It is not about the 'ought' of life, rather, the freewill offering of ourselves.



DAY 8: OFFER YOURSELVES TO GOD

Reading: Romans 11:33-12:8

‘offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.’ v12:1

We continue the theme of our relationship with God. Without a relationship with God, all that we do is worthless. As followers of Jesus we will come to an understanding of who we are in Christ. In doing so, we will recognise God for who He is, a generous God, whose ways are so far above ours. A relationship with God is not good unless we are transformed people, so in the words of John Stott ‘duty is linked with devotion and belief with behaviour.’

Paul calls on his readers to offer themselves as living sacrifices. In a world where they would have seen animals being sacrificed on a daily basis they would have known something of what this might mean. As we offer ourselves to God, our whole life becomes worship; we become renewed and shaped into the image of God, no longer conforming to the pressures that the world puts upon us. God’s values shape every aspect of our lives, not just an attitude to money but to the whole of our lives including how we live in relationship with those around us. Instead of being squeezed into the world’s mould, let us become Christ shaped in all we do.

For further study: Philippians 4:4-9 - Paul's practical advice on being holy.

Response: What things in your life are shaped by worldly pressures rather than the will of God? How might you change this?

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit and fill me with a desire to offer myself as a living sacrifice, that transformed I may no longer be squeezed into the ways of the world and instead be conformed to the will of God. Amen.

DAY 9: THE PURSE WITH HOLES

Reading: Haggai 1:1-11

‘You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it’ v6

It was the year 520BC. The exiles had returned from Babylon to rebuild the Temple, but somehow other legitimate priorities had taken over, such as the need to house families. However, instead of basic accommodation people had started to create fine houses with panelled walls. They had fields with poor crops, houses and clothes but they weren't warm and they were facing rampant inflation. Haggai describes it as 'earning wages to put into a bag with holes'. As they failed to give to the work of God, so their money didn't stretch far enough. Literally they were experiencing the discipline of God (v10).

Haggai calls on the people to consider or reflect on their situation. He then says that the problem is all down to wrong priorities. Instead of putting God first, they had put their own personal comfort at the top of the list. So the two brief chapters of Haggai are about righting wrong priorities, and putting God first. When they did that there was a change in circumstances and they received the promise from God that He would bless them.

In order to set the right priorities for our lives we start by seeking the help of God.

For further study: Haggai 2:6-9 - It all belongs to God.

Response: Have there been times when you have set the wrong priorities for your life? What brought you to the point of realisation that things were amiss? What did you do to change the situation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to be mindful of the priorities that you set for my life. Make me aware of your loving discipline and correction that in all things I may put you first. Amen.

DAY 10: GOD'S ECONOMICS

Reading: Proverbs 11:24-28

'One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.' v24

This could be our theme throughout the next few weeks. It seems that the more we give, the more we are blessed and our needs are met. That is not why we give but it seems to be the consequence of our response to God. The writer here reflects on what happens when people give freely, they seem to be richer. Our bank balance may not grow, although as we saw last week our needs will be met. Also our sense of well-being and peace with God will grow, for if we are generous then the by-product is that we are enriched. As we give money back to God and to good causes so we are enriched. We know that it is not just our obedience but also that God will use the gift to bless others.

We don't give to gain from God, but He is not in debt to anyone. Our giving is in response to God's love and generosity and is linked with right living. So integrity is rewarded. Perhaps, as in the reading from Haggai, if we withhold things from God then we will find that our money doesn't stretch as far as we would like.

For further study: 1 Samuel 25:1b-35 - meanness nearly causes disaster, which is averted by generosity.

Response: How have you seen verse 24 reflected in your own life?
How has it helped you establish principles for a life of obedient discipleship?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have revealed the Father's love through your life and death. May I respond with open hands to all that you call me to. Amen.

DAY 11: WHAT ARE YOU SAVING FOR?

Reading: Matthew 6: 19-24

‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’ v21

This is a passage that is unambiguously about money. What’s the point of saving up everything and not using it? It is prudent to save, to invest and to prepare for old age. The likelihood is that most of us do not save enough. However, sometimes we gather so much to ourselves that we have moved from basic needs to squandering things. So here the words of Jesus are a challenge to our bank balance and our investments.

Here are Jesus’ words about divided loyalties, for as Christians we either serve God, with a single generous open-hearted manner, or we serve ‘mammon’, a false god which corrupts our heart.

Put simply, are we trusting God, or are we gathering things to prop us up? Whatever we have set our hearts upon is our treasure. To put it another way, whatever we have set our eye upon will betray where our heart is. And when we have done that we see who we really serve. It is not just loving God over and above money, but also building a sense of daily dependence upon God that will help us to establish the principles of generous living. The farmer was not wrong to gather his produce into barns or even to plan for the future. It was only when he ceased to recognise his dependence on God that things went wrong.

For further study: Psalm 73:25-26 - true contentment is found in God.

Response: How are you ordering your finances for today and into the future? What new priorities are you setting yourself for how you handle worldly goods?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to set priorities for daily living and to be mindful of the need to save for the future. May I truly be dependent upon you and wise in my saving. Amen.

DAY 12: GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

Reading: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

‘Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.’ v6

Sowing seed in the allotment can be very interesting. Sometimes counting out seeds one at a time means that the harvest is very poor. On other occasions sowing more than we need results in an abundance of plants growing so there are plenty to give away. Paul reminds us that if we are mean in our sowing then the harvest will be poor.

It is God’s grace that produces in us a generosity of spirit. God’s generosity is without measure and we who have received it respond without measure or calculating the cost.

But it is important to recognise that whatever we give to God is not a result of compulsion. It is the freewill offering of a generous spirit. As we give, so God blesses. We don’t give to gain the blessing of God, that is the by product of living in the Spirit. Indeed it will not be just financial giving, it will affect every dimension of life for we will want to be generous and open handed in how we give.

For further study: Acts 10:1-6 - Cornelius's generosity results in an angelic visitor.

Response: To what extent have you caught the generosity of spirit? Today look for a generous action from another and thank God for it. Make one new generous act of your own today.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, may your generosity of spirit so inhabit my mind and actions that it is second nature today and all the days of my life. Amen.

DAY 13: THE LOVE OF MONEY

Reading: I Timothy 6: 6-10, 17-19

'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' v10 (NRSV)

Oh that we could reach that point of godliness with contentment. Do we strive after things? The next car, set of clothes, house, job or pay rise? All things which in themselves may not be wrong, but do show a restless spirit that is not content with where God has placed us? As Christians we are called to blossom where we are planted and to be content in all things. Paul warns against desiring to be rich, for it is the way of temptation. The love of money can lead us astray. It is a reminder of the need to set our heart on God and on serving Him. As we do so we will find that contentment which comes from godliness, from being shaped in the image of our heavenly Father.

Some of the harshest words in scripture are for those who have the blessing of riches, for if they hold on to those things then they harm their spirit. So we rejoice in all that God has provided for our enjoyment and seek to do good with it. The by-product will be that we are laying a foundation for spiritual growth.

For further study: Psalm 49 - further thoughts on the perils of wealth.

Response: What things can get in the way of you gaining godliness with contentment? What are you doing to change things?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in a materialistic world it is difficult to be content with my lot. Help me to trust and rest in you. Amen.

DAY 14: ONE PERSON'S SMALL GIFT IS EVERYTHING THEY HAVE

Reading: Mark 12:41-44

'but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.'
v44

Size matters? Well no, it was not the size of the gift that was noted. It was the totality of it. The widow gave everything she had. We will often hear in church circles of the 'widow's mite' meaning someone who might be on a low income and can only afford to give a few pounds. But Jesus was looking at the whole gift. If you read the preceding paragraph it condemns the Pharisees who had seized the houses belonging to widows. Avarice meant they had neglected the principle of caring for the widow.

In this story, as the rich very openly and pointedly gave ostentatious gifts, the widow sneaked in and put in two small coins. To the grand scheme of collections in the Temple treasury it would have meant little. But to God, who saw the heart of the giver, He recognised the generosity of spirit that inspired her to contribute her last two coins.

God honours both the gift and the giver. He measures not what we give but what we retain.

For further study: 1 Kings 17:7-24 - the widow gave beyond her means which resulted in blessing

Response: When you have read this story, how often have you focused on the size of the gift instead of the heart of the giver? If you were in a similar situation would you be able to offer your last penny?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, who looks at the heart of the giver, inspire me to be ready to give my all. Amen.