

R. Herbert

THE WAY OF GIVING

Learning to Live
Generously

A Tactical Christianity Book

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By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION:

What Giving Is All About

If you have ever read Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, you will remember the character of the miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, who in his old age finally learns generosity and through it, happiness. Most people are not as unwilling to make giving a part of their lives as Dickens' character, but most people will also admit that there is a bit of Scrooge within the human nature of all of us.

As a result, people may only give to their relatives and close friends. Or, if they give charitably, perhaps it is only when they feel social pressure to do so. This is strange because even from a purely physical perspective, it is well known that giving enhances the lives of those who give. Social scientists have found, for example, that those who exhibit a good degree of generosity are often happier and experience less stress and conflict than those who do not make giving a part of their lives.

In their compelling and carefully researched book *The Paradox of Generosity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), sociologists Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson show that those who give regularly of their income and those who volunteer their time are more likely than others to be happy, to find more meaning in life, and to be in better health. Smith and Davidson conclude, in fact, that giving has a multitude of measurable benefits and that "The absence of generous practices has the capacity to shape people negatively, just as much as the presence of generosity affects them positively."

This is not surprising to the Christian who knows and believes the words of Jesus – that "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Jesus was not just referring to physical blessings, of course, but to spiritual blessings also (as we will see in the first chapter of this book).

The Bible puts a strong and ongoing emphasis on giving. The Scriptures begin with the story of what God gave humans at the beginning of history and end with what he wants to give them at history's end. Between these bookends of giving, the Bible teaches generosity in the majority of its sixty-six books.

Why do we see this constant stress on giving found throughout the word of God? The answer is found in the nature of God himself. Every Christian knows that God is love (1 John 4:7–8), but what exactly is that love – how can we best define it? The answer is found in that best known of all New Testament scriptures: “For God so loved the world, that he *gave* his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV, emphasis added). In this verse the apostle John shows that giving defines God's love: he gives because he loves.

John makes this connection between God's love and the practice of giving even more clearly in his first epistle: “If anyone 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 that person?” (1 John 3:17). The Scriptures show that ultimately, whatever else it may be, love is giving, and the God of love is truly a God of giving. Giving lies at the heart of God's nature and at the center of what Christianity is all about.

This book is based on that simple truth: if we really want to learn about God and how we can grow to be more like him, we need to learn more about how to give. This is a compelling reason to make giving a priority in our lives. Yet as we will see, there are many more reasons to give and far more opportunities to be generous than we often realize – even if we think we have little or even nothing to give. In fact, there are amazingly powerful ways in which we can all accomplish good through the kind of giving God encourages.

PART ONE:
THE WAY OF GIVING

1. TEN REASONS TO GIVE

If you are reading this book, you may think you don't need to ask "Why should I give?" – the chances are you already have one or more very good reasons in mind. But it is a good question for every Christian to ask, nonetheless. Focusing on the reasons for giving helps us to see it in better perspective, helps us to see reasons we might not have thought of, and often helps us to better implement the attitude of giving that every Christian should develop. So, consider the following ten reasons for giving. They certainly are not the only ones that could be listed, but for the Christian they are the most important and are all aspects of giving that we should keep in mind as we begin to look at this topic. In each case we let the Bible speak for itself by briefly listing a few scriptures that help explain the specific principle.

1. *Giving is part of God's nature.* The Bible makes it clear that God's very nature is one of giving: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32 and see Acts 17:25; James 1:17). Because we are called to learn to become like God (Ephesians 4:24), we are also called to learn to give.

2. *Giving is commanded.* Although it is sometimes said that giving is not commanded in the New Testament in the same way it was under the old covenant, the principle of giving still applies, and the New Testament contains numerous commands to give. We see this in Jesus' words "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8 and see 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; 1 Timothy 6:17–18).

3. *Giving draws us closer to God.* Although we do not give in order to somehow improve our relationship with God, it is a spiritual reality that giving does draw us closer to God. As the author of Hebrews tells us: "And do not forget to do good and to share with

others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16 and see 2 Corinthians 9:7; Philippians 4:18).

4. *Giving helps those who cannot help themselves.* As we will see later, giving to those who are in true need is a central part of the teachings of the Old and New Testaments alike. “In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak” (Acts 20:35 and see Proverbs 19:17; James 2:15–16).

5. *Giving strengthens the Church.* The Bible records stories of Christians helping other believers in need from the very foundation of the New Testament Church. Paul taught that lasting principle when he wrote: “When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them” (Romans 12:13 NLT and see Acts 4:32; 2 Corinthians 8:2–4).

6. *Giving is blessed.* This should perhaps be the last reason we focus on when we think of giving, yet it is a fundamental truth that we need not feel apologetic about. Giving should never be done in order to get, but we should not be surprised when our giving is blessed, either – as Jesus himself taught: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 and see Luke 6:38; Philippians 4:17).

7. *Giving is part of the gospel.* Giving is something that God uses to help others see his way of life in action. In that sense, giving is a part of preaching the gospel: “others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (2 Corinthians 9:13 and see Matthew 5:16; 2 Corinthians 8:7).

8. *Giving is managing what is God’s.* Eventually, every Christian comes to realize that in this life we are not owners, but stewards or managers of what God has given us. “Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand” (1 Chronicles 29:14 and see Luke 12:48; 1 Peter 4:10).

9. *Giving expresses thankfulness.* Whatever and however we choose to give, giving can and does express our thankfulness to God for all that we have received. That is the truth behind the psalmist's question: "What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?" (Psalms 116:12 and see Leviticus 22:29; Psalm 50:23).

10. *Giving makes us more like Christ.* We have already said that giving is part of God's nature, but the New Testament specifically draws our attention to Christ's example of giving and urges us to follow it. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1–2 ESV and see Ephesians 4:7; 2 Corinthians 8:9).

These ten points only begin to scratch the surface of the Bible's teaching on giving. As we look more closely at what the Bible has to say on this subject, we will see additional reasons for giving in the following chapters. And as we expand our knowledge of these many reasons to give, we will come to see why and how giving should be such a central part of our Christian lives.

2. PATTERNS OF GIVING

One would think that most people would make generosity a part of their lives. But, of course, this is not always so. Many people – even those who may enjoy great material prosperity – never learn the principle of giving or apply it in their lives. Some may not give out of fear of the uncertainties of life, and some feel that they first need to achieve substantial financial independence before they can give.

Sadly, these people usually do not find the feeling of certainty they crave, even if they are able to gain considerable financial stability or personal wealth. As the book of Proverbs tells us: “One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty” (Proverbs 11:24). Like the rich young ruler who spoke with Christ, these people may want to do what is right, but not at the expense of their physical possessions (Matthew 19:16–30 and parallel accounts).

While many rich people give generously to help others, at least in the United States and other developed countries, it is often those who are not rich yet not particularly poor who give the most to charities. The statistics behind that truth are interesting. While we may think of philanthropy as something mainly done by companies, corporations, and foundations, that is not really the case. In recent years, of the hundreds of billions of dollars given annually to U.S. charities, foundations and large corporations gave some 21 percent, but by far the largest source of charitable giving came from individuals, at almost 80 percent of the total amount given.

Typically, just over half of American households (55 percent) donate to charity in a given year, with a predominance of offerings coming from individuals with moderate incomes – the average household giving being between two and three thousand dollars annually. Of course, this is an overall average with differences existing between geographic areas as well as across income, generational, gender, religion, and other divides.

What do all these statistics mean for our understanding of giving? Primarily, they show us that most giving – and the most good – is done not by corporations and other large entities, but by individuals who give when asked or because they choose to give. Second, the available statistics show us that not everyone gives, and it is actually a narrow segment of the population that does most of the giving. Many of the gifts given by these people may be relatively small, yet they add up to a huge amount of good being accomplished.

The Old Testament description of the collection received by Moses from the Israelites in order to construct the tabernacle is a good example of this. The tabernacle, of course, was a tent dedicated for the presence of God – a kind of portable temple – and while we do not tend to think of a tent as a permanent structure, the tabernacle was of lasting importance and served as the focal point for the Israelites' worship for almost five hundred years.

The offerings the Israelites gave to make the tabernacle are discussed in Exodus 35:4–36:7, and the detailed account makes several important points. Both men and women gave (Exodus 35:22), but the giving was not mandatory. Instead of taking up a collection from the assembled Israelites (as many modern churches might do with pledges and gifts given under the pressure of the moment), Moses simply told the people of Israel about the opportunity – then dismissed the congregation!

Exodus tells us that everyone whose heart was *willing* (Exodus 35:5, 21, 24, 29) returned after pondering the matter to bring a gift as they felt was appropriate. So, note that it was not the whole congregation of Israel, but only those individuals who were moved to give who made the building of the Old Testament tabernacle possible. Exodus also shows that those who gave contributed greatly – to the point that Moses finally told the contributing Israelites to stop giving (Exodus 36:2–7) – they had given more than enough to complete the job!

The Gospel of Giving

In the New Testament the importance of committed individual giving is seen repeatedly and especially in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's account might even be called the "Gospel of Giving" because it frequently comments on giving and shows men and women from different economic backgrounds – and at all stages of faith – who came to live outgoing and generous lives and whose giving made a difference. Luke tells us, for example, about the women who helped to support Jesus' ministry out of their own means (Luke 8:1–3).

Luke also provides a detailed example of personal giving in the story of the repentant tax collector Zacchaeus who had evidently grown quite rich – not always ethically – through his profession, but who demonstrated his changed life by not only paying back anyone he had cheated, but also by giving half of all his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:1–10).

Luke's accounts of giving are particularly interesting, as he often arranges his material to contrast stories of giving with others exhibiting the lack of it. In this way he contrasts the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who gave, with that of the rich young ruler who would not give (Luke 18:18–27), just as he pairs the stories of the poor widow who gave to the temple treasury (Luke 21:1–4) with that of Judas taking money from the temple treasury (Luke 22:1–6).

As we progress through this book, we will see many other biblical accounts of giving and what we can learn from them, but the overall lesson regarding the importance of individual giving is clear in every story – and it is something we can all take to heart. Many people may think that the amount they can give to help others is so small that it is insignificant, but – just like a single vote in an election – while a single small gift may not seem of great importance, the combination of many such gifts accomplishes much. And sometimes, as we will see in the next chapter, even those who have little to give can make a great difference.

3. THE POWER OF GIVING

The Bible contains a number of stories about generosity, and these accounts cover a whole spectrum of giving – ranging all the way from a few cents' worth of small change to the sacrificed life of the Son of God himself. These stories also show a vital fact – that whatever the size of the gift, it can often make a great difference.

The Biggest Little Gift

News media occasionally carry stories about very rich people making extensive philanthropic gifts to charity – sometimes in amounts of millions or even billions of dollars. But what would you think if you heard of a pitifully small amount of cash given to a good cause that ended up outweighing even the greatest donations of the very rich? We see exactly this situation in the biblical story of the poor widow who gave out of her extreme poverty:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:41–44 and see also Luke 21:1–4)

There is more to this small story than meets the eye. The Gospels tell how the poor widow contributed two small “lepta” – the smallest coins in ancient Judea – to the temple treasury, so the gift was certainly a small one. Now we know that in one way the woman’s gift was more than everyone else had given because she

gave more proportionately, giving all she had. Jesus confirmed that in this way the sacrifice sometimes speaks louder than the size of the gift, and even the smallest act of generosity is valuable in God's eyes. But the woman's tiny gift was also perhaps literally more than all the others had given that day. How could this be? The widow's tiny coins may have been insignificant of themselves, but they have inspired generations of Christians to give for over two thousand years. In fact, the total amount given as a result of that small gift may well be many times more than all the money cast into the temple treasury through all of the temple's history.

Think about the rain. When one or two tiny droplets fall, they join with others and become larger and they also bump and jostle other droplets into falling, too. But sometimes even a single drop of rain feeds a tiny seedling and makes a difference. Our small efforts may do likewise. Even if our giving does not result in a rainstorm of similar actions, it may still have an effect.

A number of biblical stories show that those who are recorded as having made a powerful gift often had developed the practice of giving over time. Such biblical accounts show men and women of God giving not only of their possessions, but also of their time, their energy, and even, when necessary, their very lives. Those who have given this ultimate gift have often done so by following the words of Jesus: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Usually, however, people do not suddenly give to such a great extent without having learned and developed the practice of generosity over time. Yet such is the power of giving that it becomes an established part of a person's being – to where even ultimate giving becomes possible.

The Ultimate Gift

During the Second World War, Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe was arrested by the Nazi authorities for sheltering Jews and Polish refugees and helping them to escape from German-occupied

territory. Kolbe was sent to the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp and what he would do there was based on many years of giving and serving.

When one of the prisoners disappeared from the concentration camp, the Nazi officer in charge ordered his men to pick ten other prisoners to be starved to death in order to deter further escape attempts. One of the ten men chosen, Franciszek Gajowniczek, a Polish army sergeant, begged for his life on the grounds that he had a wife and children. At this point, Kolbe stepped forward in Christian love and offered to take Gajowniczek's place. Surprisingly, the Nazi officer granted the request, and Kolbe was locked in a cell with the other doomed prisoners. Each day in the cell Kolbe led prayer, sang hymns, and encouraged the other starving prisoners. After two weeks only Kolbe remained alive. Because the cell was needed for other use, on 14 August 1941 he was given a lethal injection in order to make the cell available. According to an eyewitness Kolbe raised his arm and calmly waited for the injection without fear, evidently glad that he had given all he had to give.

Kolbe's selfless gift of life naturally had a great impact on the man whose life he had saved. The grateful man did much to spread the story of Kolbe's gift, and in 1994, when Gajowniczek visited the United States, he stressed that "so long as he ... has breath in his lungs, he would consider it his duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe." Gajowniczek died at the age of 93 after a long life in which his often-told story affected and influenced countless other people for good.

For most of us, our giving lies somewhere between that of the rich who may give without noticing any loss, and that of the poor widow and the priest who gave everything they had. But all of us have the opportunity to learn to utilize the extraordinary power of giving in our lives – and perhaps to give more – wherever we may be on the spectrum of generosity at this point in time.

4. THE GIFT OF GIVING

The New Testament lists many spiritual gifts that God gives to his people – gifts ranging from the ability to teach or heal, to the gifts of serving or encouraging. All these gifts fulfill needs and all are important, but not all gifts are created equal! Some spiritual gifts are *specific* and given at certain times for particular circumstances. But other gifts that God gives are general or ongoing in the sense that they are given and used continually rather than in any particular situation. How does this apply to giving? We may not think of giving as being something we receive, rather that it is only something we ourselves do in an outgoing way. But in his epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul tells us that the gift of giving is something that we receive: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is ... giving, then give generously (Romans 12:6–8).”

Unfortunately, we often do not place the same importance on Paul’s words regarding giving as we do on the seemingly greater gifts he also mentions such as prophecy or teaching. In fact, we may think of the spiritual gifts he mentions as being listed in descending order of importance, yet that is not what he intended at all. Paul clearly tells us elsewhere in his writing that there are many spiritual gifts of different types, but all are important – all are necessary for the functioning of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7–27).

The important thing for us to realize is that although giving can be a gift that is sometimes bestowed by God to a greater degree on some individuals, giving is a spiritual gift we can and should all ask for because it is a Christian responsibility, just like the service and encouragement Paul also mentions.

But God often does not impart the gift of giving by simply enriching us with more physical things that we can share (though he may do that, of course). Perhaps more often, God gives us qualities such as an increased desire to give and an ability to see

needs that we can fulfill. These are the things for which we can and should pray in order to increase our gift of giving – with no fear that we are simply asking for more for ourselves. Often, those who pray for a more giving attitude receive both that change of heart and the means to give more, also. But that, of course, is in God’s hands as to how he chooses to fulfill our prayers – yet the request for a giving spirit is one that God does always seem to grant!

How do we know when we receive this gift of giving? It is usually not that we suddenly desire to give away all or most of what we have. Instead, we find subtle but noticeable changes that take place in our lives. The gift of giving:

1. *Usually is accompanied by an affection for and a deep desire to help those to whom we give.* Paul talks about this in his letter to the Thessalonians: “We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8 CSB).

2. *Frequently carries with it an increased ability to see and recognize the material and spiritual needs of others.* As Paul wrote to Timothy: “Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4 CSB). The gift of giving helps us to do that more effectively.

3. *Often prompts us to give more – quantitatively and qualitatively – than we might otherwise have done.* We begin to give more generously without holding back the best. The principle is clear in the Old Testament command: “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops” (Proverbs 3:9).

4. *Helps us maintain balance in our generosity.* We become desirous to give but do not over-give or feel badly when we cannot give more. “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable

according to what one has, not according to what one does not have” (2 Corinthians 8:12).

5. *Prompts us to give more effectively.* Inspired giving looks carefully at exactly what is needed – as we see in the well-known words of Jesus: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:35–36).

6. *Helps us to see more ways that we can give.* Giving is not just about money, of course, and the gift of giving helps us to see ways we can help others even if we cannot help them monetarily or in other physical ways. That is what Paul meant when he wrote that: “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way” (2 Corinthians 9:11 ESV).

7. *Brings happiness.* Giving not only makes the receiver happy – it also brings a sense of deep happiness to the giver. When Paul wrote that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7), the word “cheerful” that he used was the Greek word *hilarós*—the origin of the English word “hilarious.” This word means cheerful, joyous, and happy, and the principle works both ways: the happier we are to give, the happier we often become as a result of giving.

All these aspects of the gift of giving are simply manifestations of the Spirit of God working within us – and that is how we receive the gift of giving, of course: through the Spirit placed within us. But even when our desire to give increases, we must still learn to give wisely, as we will see in the following chapters.

PART TWO:
HOW NOT TO GIVE

5. GIVING TO GET

We might think that giving would be such a simple thing: that we simply extend the help we can when we see a need. But the Bible shows that is not always the case. In this chapter we will look briefly at some of the reasons for giving that we need to avoid.

Giving to Get Approval

A frequent mistake in giving comes when people give with the wrong motivation: giving something to get something. Perhaps the most common human failing is giving to get the approval of others. Jesus himself warned his disciples about this:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1–4)

In this powerful statement Jesus made the point that giving is not for the approval of others. That does not mean that we must only give anonymously – often that is not practical or even possible, and sometimes it is good that the recipient of a gift knows where it is coming from when this gives the person a sense of connection with the giver and an understanding that they are experiencing the love of an actual individual. Even theologically we see that giving need not be anonymous. God did not give the gift of his Son secretly – the Scriptures proclaim his gift! – but on a daily basis, God gives continually, often without us even realizing it. If we never give unless others are aware we are giving, then we are almost certainly missing Jesus' warning in this area.

In a similar manner, our giving should never be to try to gain approval from God. Our good works should always be done from a motivation of love or concern for others. God certainly sees and is pleased with his people's generosity (Matthew 6:4), but that should be the result, not the sole motivation, of our giving!

Giving Because We Feel Compelled

A related way in which many people fall down in the area of generosity is in giving only because of a feeling that they will be looked down on if they do not give. It is a well-known fact of fundraising that people who might not otherwise give at all will give if they feel social pressure or responsibility to do so.

In one study the role that social pressure played in motivating people to donate to a children's hospital was examined. It was found that when people were given the chance to opt out of being asked to donate, donations fell dramatically. The study concluded that at least 75 percent of the money donated to this charitable cause was due to social pressure, with only 25 percent of the donations being due to true altruism (S. DellaVigna, J. List, and U. Malmendier, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 127, Issue 1, February 2012, pages 1–56).

This phenomenon is not quite the same as giving to get positive approval, as that is often done willingly. Giving because we feel compelled to give is usually based on fear of negative approval – of being thought ungenerous or not a “good person” – but it is unwilling giving. As the apostle Paul stressed “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Giving to Be Blessed

One of the most widespread wrong reasons for giving is that proclaimed in the so-called “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospel. This misunderstanding of biblical teaching places great emphasis on “claiming God's promises” of good health and abundance at the present time. While it originated in the U.S., the

prosperity gospel has spread around the world and especially in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where poverty is prevalent.

Although the Bible does show that God wants those who turn to him to enjoy great spiritual blessings, physical blessings are by no means a guaranteed part of Christian life. In his wisdom, God allows many Christians to experience persecution, loss, illness, and physical discomfort in this life (2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Hebrews 10:32–34; etc.). The Bible teaches that in the next life God’s people will experience no sickness or disease, no poverty or loss, no persecution or injustice – no evil of any kind – but that is in the age to come (Revelation 21:1–4). In this life, God’s word preaches not freedom from such things, but persevering faithfully despite them (1 Peter 1:6).

Unfortunately, the prosperity gospel is more than just a faulty doctrine. It has direct repercussions on how we live. It encourages believers to focus on the physical instead of the spiritual (Hebrews 13:5), to place their own desires rather than the needs of others at the center of their prayers, and to focus increasingly on what we hope to receive rather than what we can give. This twisting of the gospel often leads believers to feel they are not loved by God, or not doing something right, if they do not enjoy health and prosperity. It also – even if only subconsciously – encourages the elevation of those whose lives exhibit health and wealth and a judgmental attitude toward those whose lives do not.

Although one of the leading founders and proponents of prosperity gospel recently announced that he has seen the error of this teaching and has discontinued it, the doctrine cannot be simply “pulled back” and continues to be followed by many around the world. We must all exercise care that we are not influenced by this message. The apostle Paul speaks bluntly about teachers who become “people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain” (1 Timothy 6:5). We must be careful, Paul warns us, never to use giving as a way to get, never to see generosity as a means to gain. It may seem a basic lesson, but it is one we must never forget.

6. JUNK FOR JESUS?

The title of this chapter has nothing to do with the Christian used-car donation charity light-heartedly called “Junk for Jesus” that accomplishes a good deal of valuable charitable work. Instead, it looks at an aspect of giving which can be problematic.

Sadly, for many people charitable giving involves giving only what is no longer needed: giving to get rid of things – the old, the worn-out, the expired, the “junk” in closets or garages. There is nothing wrong with giving items we no longer need, of course, but if it is our only giving, we have missed the point of what true giving is all about. The Christian must be watchful of this human tendency to give only the least desirable of what we have.

An Old Problem

This problem is seen in one of the Bible’s earliest recorded stories:

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. (Genesis 4:2–5)

Some people believe that in this story God did not accept Cain’s offering because it was not a true sacrifice involving the slaying of an animal as we find in the later Mosaic sacrifices. According to this view, God had instructed the first man and woman in how to sacrifice when he made clothing for them from the skins of animals (Genesis 3:21). However, this is entirely speculative in that the Bible does not say this or even mention sacrificial offerings at all before this point.

But although Genesis 4 does not indicate that the difference between the two offerings was one of blood sacrifice and non-blood sacrifice, it does give us important clues as to what the problem was with Cain's gift and the lesson we can learn from it.

First, we should notice that the text tells us that Cain brought only "some" of the fruits of the soil as his gift (vs. 3) and the word "some" could connote randomly selected items, or even items selected that were of no particular distinction. This is contrasted with what we are told of Abel's offering – which was an offering of "the best portions of the firstborn of his flock" (vs. 4 BSB, NLT, etc.).

Some older translations say he gave from the "fat" portions, but the Hebrew means "best" and the meaning is clear that Abel was highly selective – he offered the choicest parts of selected firstborn animals as his gift to God – a description which is very different from the fruits Cain offered which were merely "some" of those available to him. Clearly, Abel's gift was a generous and appreciatively chosen one, while Cain's gift was not at all special and apparently an inferior one.

But we must notice that God's reaction to Cain and Abel was not primarily toward the gifts– but toward the givers: "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor" (Genesis 4:4–5). The Hebrew stresses it was primarily with Cain that God was displeased, and this is made clear in the following verses: "Then the Lord said to Cain ... 'If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door'" (Genesis 4:6–7).

So Genesis 4 primarily paints a picture of the very different attitudes exhibited by Cain and Abel – between the desire of Abel to give quality gifts and the less generous and careless attitude of Cain – attitudes that were clearly reflected in the gifts they gave. In this story, as always, God looks more closely at the heart of the giver than at the gift itself (Hebrews 11:4), but the gifts we give invariably show much about us as givers.

A Matter of Quality

The same principle of quality in what we give is seen in the words of the Old Testament prophet Malachi who spoke forcefully to the ancient Israelites regarding their sub-standard sacrificial giving:

When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the LORD Almighty ... "I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."
(Malachi 1:8, 10)

Here, in the very opening of the book of Malachi, the prophet shows what was foremost in God's mind regarding the Israelites' giving. The offerings given by the Israelites were clearly not the best of their flocks but the worst. "Would your ruler accept such gifts from you?" God asks through the prophet, and the answer is obviously that he would not. The Mosaic sacrificial law stated specifically that offerings should be perfect and without blemish (Leviticus 22:19–25). It is not surprising, then, that God says he would not accept such gifts – just as he did not accept the sub-standard giving of Cain.

But we should never think that such principles do not apply to us in New Testament times. Jesus made it plain that when we give to others, we are giving to him (Matthew 25:38–40), so should not what we give be what would be fitting to give to him? Although we may not be giving carefully selected animals from a flock or herd, we can apply this principle in many ways in our own lives. It is often said that "one dollar is as good as another," but we do not only give in monetary ways. As we will see later in this book, there are a great many ways we can give that do not involve money – and these should all involve quality giving.

7. HOLDING BACK

There has been a widespread and simultaneous decline and increase in giving to charities in many countries in recent decades. How can this be – that giving is going up and down at the same time? The answer is that while some few people are giving much more, a great many are giving less. In the U.S., for example, while two thirds of all households made charitable donations in 2000, by 2015 this figure had declined significantly and only just over half of American households donated something to charity. On the other hand, while many were increasingly holding back from giving, a relative few were giving more and more. In 2015, just 20 percent of U.S. households gave over 80 percent of donations.

It is not entirely understood why this decline in giving is occurring among many people, though it seems likely that it may be connected more to widespread loss of religious faith and activity than to economic factors. In any case, it is clear that while some are giving more, many people are giving less today than in the past.

Giving, But Less

Many centuries ago, the prophet Malachi wrote about a similar situation in his time. The Jews had recently returned from captivity in Babylon and while we might expect that the freedom and new life they had been given would be reason for an outpouring of generosity, such was not the case. God spoke through Malachi regarding this situation:

Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ “In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. (Malachi 3:8–10 ESV)

Notice that in this passage of Scripture God's complaint against the unthankful Jewish individuals he addressed was not that they were not giving, but that they were robbing God in not giving as much as they could or should. God says "Bring the *whole* tithe" (vs. 10) showing that people were skimping on their offerings and giving less than what was right.

Many other verses in the Old Testament show the principle of giving fully and generously – for example: "Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely" (Psalms 112:5), and "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25). The Hebrew word translated "generous" in many of these Old Testament verses does not simply mean someone who gives, but someone who gives freely and extensively. We are blessed not for giving a little, but for giving deeply – as much as the circumstances warrant.

New Testament Giving

When we look at the New Testament, we find that Jesus spoke about that kind of generosity when he said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ...The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness ...You cannot serve both God and money.
(Matthew 6:19–24)

The Greek word for "healthy" in these verses can also imply "generous," and the word used for "unhealthy" can imply "stingy." Given the context of serving God or money this is doubtless the meaning of the passage – that we should have a generous outlook rather than a stingy one. We should, Jesus tells us, be more

concerned about saving treasure in heaven than stingily being unwilling to share what we have on Earth. That is why Jesus taught:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:38)

We already saw that we should never give just to get, but Jesus spoke to the spiritual reality that we are blessed for giving – and to the degree we give we are blessed. As we also saw in a passage we quoted earlier, the apostle Paul reinforced that truth when he wrote: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully... for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:6–7 ESV).

While the Old Testament regulated the minimal amount that God’s people were to give to help others in the form of the “third tithe,” the New Testament gives no percentage rule for this kind of giving, but we should all strive to give what we can. As C. S. Lewis famously wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.” This perhaps need not always be the case, but while giving doesn’t have to “hurt” in order to help, we should always be willing to give and to give to the point of sacrifice when that level of giving is needed (2 Corinthians 8:3).

Many people rationalize that they are too far in debt or that they don’t make enough to give, but if we let ourselves be guided by biblical teaching and the Spirit of God, we will see that we can always give. No matter how little we have, there are those who have less. Certainly, if we are blessed with the means to live a reasonably comfortable way of life (for example, if we are reading this book on a computer, phone or e-book reader), we probably have the ability to give. And if we are able, we are called not just to give, but to give generously.

8. GIVING TOO MUCH?

It may seem strange, after talking about not giving generously, to talk about giving too much! However, human nature often tends to one extreme or the other and when it comes to how much we give, the biblical principle of giving is often misunderstood. Sometimes, well-intentioned people feel they should perhaps give everything they have if they are to truly follow Christ's commands. This feeling is usually based on a mistaken understanding of one or more of a few biblical passages – such as the story of the poor widow who gave all she had (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4); that of the rich young ruler who Jesus told to sell all he owned and give it to the poor (Matthew 19:16–30; etc.); and the accounts in the book of Acts of how the early Christians in Jerusalem sold possessions and “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35).

In reality, these stories all reflect special circumstances. The first two can be quickly explained. The story of the poor but generous widow simply tells us about the wonderful attitude of giving that the woman had. In her case she appears to have given the last few “pennies” she had at the time, but that does not mean that she had no hope for further income, or that Jesus used the story to show we should give all we have. This is a good example of the theological principle that a biblical story without a command should not be used to decide doctrine or behavior – especially when there are other scriptures that would indicate something different.

This principle applies in exactly the same way to the story of the rich young ruler. The New Testament makes it clear that the young man was being tested, but failed the test due to his love of his wealth (Matthew 19:22). And we should notice that in this story Jesus did not *command* the man to sell everything he had and give to the poor – he simply invited him to do so and to follow him. This was a particular circumstance that applied to a particular individual and should not be seen as some kind of general principle that we

should all follow. If we already follow Jesus and if we do not put material things before him – as the young ruler evidently did – the situation clearly does not apply to us.

The final story that is often misunderstood about giving – that of the way in which the early Christians sold and shared their possessions (Acts 4:32, 34–35) – needs to be looked at a little more closely to fully understand it. Some have used these verses in Acts to try to prove that the early Christians followed a form of communism, but a careful reading of what the Bible says here shows that nothing could be further from the truth. We should note that this seems to have been a temporary situation while the fledgling Church was becoming established and before any formal mechanisms for helping the poor within the Church were in place. Many of those who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and had been converted at that time were now staying in the city and had as yet no means of support. As a result, many local Christians shared what they had to help them. There was no requirement to share (Acts 5:3–4), and once this temporary situation had passed, there is no evidence in Acts or elsewhere in the New Testament that the early Church continued in exactly the way described in Acts 4.

Balanced Giving

That God does not expect or desire us to give all of what we have under most circumstances is clear in the system of tithes that he instituted for Old Testament Israel. Under this divinely given system, the Israelites gave a tenth of all their increase to God (Numbers 18:21–26), they saved a tenth to enable them and their families to enjoy the annual religious Holy Day festivals (Deuteronomy 14:22–26), and gave a further tenth every third year to support the poor and needy (Deuteronomy 14:27–29). This meant that not counting the tenth they saved for themselves, the

Israelites were instructed to give approximately 13 percent of their income, but this is a long way from giving everything.

We see this kind of balanced giving in the way Jesus himself utilized what funds he and his disciples had – we are told that those funds were used as needed, and on occasion some of the funds were given to the poor (John 13:29) rather than anything that was received being automatically given away. Jesus' attitude toward those in need was always a compassionate one, but it was also realistic. His famous saying that “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew 26:11; etc.) was not callous but simply honest. These scriptures and others show that Jesus lived the way of giving in a sane and balanced way that strived to help others but not in an unrealistic manner.

We should always remember the simple fact that God's balanced way of giving presumes that we will keep what income we need to continue to run our businesses or to work our jobs, as well as to purchase needed items for our families, and to occasionally enjoy good things in proper moderation. In fact, the amount we can give charitably over a lifetime of ongoing business or work far exceeds what we could give if we gave all we had then had no way to procure further income.

So it is possible to “give too much” when it comes to generosity. If we give to such a degree that we hurt ourselves and our families, or we prevent ourselves from being able to continue to be a productive part of society, we have missed the balance that God shows us is a part of giving in a way that is pleasing to him.

PART THREE:
GENEROUS GIVING

9. WHAT THE GOOD SAMARITAN GAVE

The first and most obvious aspect of generous giving is its fullness. True generosity is not just giving, but giving *more* – it avoids giving only a minimum or token gift and chooses to give extensively, when possible, in order to better fill the need.

The book of Proverbs tells us “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it” (Proverbs 3:27 ESV), and this speaks directly to the concept of giving generously as well as simply giving something. Perhaps the clearest example of this principle in the Bible is found in one of the best known and most profound of all the parables of Jesus. This story is often referred to as the parable of the “Good Samaritan” but might be better called that of the “Giving Samaritan” – of all Jesus’ parables, this is the one that most closely focuses on the act of giving.

The striking nature of the parable of the Samaritan who helped an injured Jewish traveler on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:25–37) is underscored by the tension and animosity between the Jewish and Samaritan people of that time (John 4:9; etc.) – a situation that meant the Samaritan’s kindness was all the more remarkable.

Well-known as it is, many do not realize that Jesus’ parable was probably based on an Old Testament story that tells of the kindness given to certain Judean military captives by men of Samaria whose behavior resembles that of the Good Samaritan at a number of points. The earlier story tells us that the Samaritans helped the Jewish captives considerably in that:

they clothed all who were naked. They provided them with clothes and sandals, food and drink, and healing balm. All those who were weak they put on donkeys. So they took them back to their fellow Israelites at Jericho, the City of Palms, and returned to Samaria. (2 Chronicles 28:15)

The similarities between this story and Jesus' parable are obvious – the setting in the area of Jericho, the fact that the people helped were enemies, the anointing and care for the individuals concerned, placing those too weak to walk on donkeys, and their delivery to an area where they would be cared for are all directly parallel. Jesus knew the Scriptures thoroughly, of course, and would have been familiar with this story, as would many of his listeners. The surface difference between the Samaritans helping a group of people in the Old Testament story and the single Samaritan helping an individual in Christ's parable simply shows that if he were using that older story as a basis for his own teaching, Jesus wished to focus on our responsibility to individuals in need.

Regardless of the origins of the story of the Good Samaritan, its timeless message teaches us that when there is *true need* – as opposed to requests for money by those who are unnecessarily living on handouts (something we will cover in Chapter 13 “The Savvy Samaritan”) – we should give without hesitation. That much is clear from even a cursory reading of the story, but the parable also teaches something that is easier to miss – that in cases of real need, we should be willing to give with great generosity.

Christ's parable tells us that the Samaritan who rescued the injured Judean – despite belonging to a group that was generally shunned and even despised by many Jews – not only bound the man's wounds and carried him on his own donkey to the nearest inn, but also made provision for the man's upkeep. The story tells us: “The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have’” (Luke 10:35).

It is easy to read over the fact that the Samaritan gave “two denarii” – or “two pence” as some older translations have it – for the man's upkeep, but the amount was not a small one. The denarius was a silver coin of the Roman Empire – from which the word “money” is derived in several modern languages (for example, Spanish “dinero”). We know historically that at the time of Christ a

single denarius would be the approximate pay for a day's labor (Matthew 20:2). Two denarii equaled two days' wages, or a full third of what an individual could earn in a week; at current U.S. minimum wage it would be about \$140. But what would that amount buy at that time?

Archaeology can help answer that question. A sign discovered in an inn located in a city of the Roman Empire not too distant in time from the setting of the parable of the Good Samaritan indicates that the nightly cost for a room was very low. So the fact that the Samaritan provided two denarii for the care of the man he helped shows that he was providing for more than just a single night's lodging and food. The Samaritan also made it clear that when he came by on his return journey he would pay for any extra expenses if the two denarii were used up.

Generous Giving Is Extensive Giving

So, the gift of the Samaritan was not a small one and the extent of the individual's generosity toward a total stranger (especially of a nation that generally shunned his own people) seems astonishing. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus advocated giving large amounts to everyone we attempt to help. We do not know how rich or poor the Samaritan was – the parable does not give us that context. But how different this giving is from the concept many people have today of just giving a dollar or two when they feel it is expected. Even those who do give more generously may be reluctant to help an individual in need as opposed to a tax-approved organization. But Christ's parable shows us, through what the Good Samaritan gave, that we should not hesitate to help an individual in real need, and that when human need is real we should give generously – even at the individual level – when that is appropriate.

10. THE GIVING CHURCH

When we think of generosity, we usually think of the value of the gift that is involved, but the Bible shows that the attitude behind the gift is just as much a part of what truly generous giving is all about. The Old Testament emphasizes this repeatedly – as when the book of Deuteronomy tells us: “Give generously ... and do so *without a grudging heart*” (Deuteronomy 15:10), and in the New Testament the apostle Paul taught that: “Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly” (2 Corinthians 8:12, NLT). In fact, truly generous giving delights in the opportunity to give, and this is seen repeatedly in the history of the early church.

The book of Acts tells us that not long after the formation of the New Testament church, a prophet named Agabus predicted that a severe famine would spread over the Roman world (Acts 11:28). Luke, in writing Acts after the event, mentions that “This happened during the reign of [the emperor] Claudius” (A.D. 41-54) and indicates that the famine in Jerusalem and Judea was particularly severe. Luke also tells us that the believers in the city of Antioch:

as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:29–30)

Brief as it is, this account tells us a number of things – that the giving was nearly universal (“each one”), that probably even poor members gave (“as each one was able”), that the gift was delivered by trusted individuals (“Barnabas and Saul”) and that it was delivered to trusted individuals (“the elders”) to be administered.

Most of all, however, we see the love behind this giving in that the new congregation in Antioch – which was composed of Gentile converts who only a little while earlier had been considered by many in Jerusalem as questionable recipients of the gospel (Acts

11:1) were now generously helping those in Judea who had only recently been rejecting them. Forgetting the reluctance of many of the Jerusalem Christians to welcome gentiles, the believers at Antioch now responded with love to those they considered “brothers and sisters living in Judea.”

The famine situation among the Jerusalem Christians was doubtless particularly severe as most of the wealthier members had probably fled the area, and the early practice of selling personal property (described in Acts 4:32–37) to help the many individuals from other areas who had stayed on in the city likely reduced the economic strength of the church community. Coupled with persecution and resulting economic difficulties, the famine had doubtless strained the church’s financial resources severely.

We see an indication of this situation in the way the leaders of the Jerusalem church urged Paul to: “keep on helping the poor, which I have always been eager to do” (Galatians 2:10 NLT).

That is why Paul later organized a great collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem from numerous churches that he and others had founded in the area of Greece and Macedonia. This charitable collection was similar to the one done in Antioch in several ways. Paul advised the members of these churches that “each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income” (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Once again we see that all the Christians gave in this difficult situation, and that they all gave according to their ability. And we should remember that the majority of these Christians were gentiles who had not been warmly welcomed by many mistaken Jewish believers who apparently had resented the inclusion of non-Jews in the early church.

Nevertheless, the gentile Christians of Antioch proved their faith and very real love by sharing their material possessions with those less fortunate themselves, despite hard feelings that they could have harbored if it were not for the generous spirit they exhibited.

Generous Giving Is Joyful Giving

It was in the context of this collection that Paul wrote his famous words regarding Christian giving:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6–7)

The word translated “cheerful” in this verse is the same *hilarón* (from which we get our word “hilarious,” as we saw earlier), meaning cheerful and joyous. Giving “cheerfully” is giving with joy! That is the attitude James tells us God exhibits: “God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” (James 1:5 CSB).

Evidently, the Corinthians and other gentile churches gave in this way because Paul also mentions “the generous gift” they were giving (2 Corinthians 9:5). There is no question that the early church responded with kindness and concern to those Christians needing help, and that the combined assistance saved many lives and reduced suffering among those affected by the famine conditions.

Today, in our era of mega churches and the massive financial incomes of many congregations in the “first world,” we should perhaps reflect on the fact that so many Christians around the world desperately need help because of political turmoil or natural disasters – which have duplicated the situation of the early believers in Jerusalem. We can all ask ourselves if we are seeing their need and responding – and if Paul’s words that God loves a joyful giver apply both to us personally and to our churches as well.

11. THE TREASURES OF CIRTA

An important aspect of biblical generosity is its ongoing nature. Sadly, many people take the attitude that if they gave recently, they are “off the hook” – an “I gave at the office” attitude of only giving occasionally and when necessary. Some have even misused Jesus’ statement that “the poor you will have always with you” (Matthew 26:11) as if it means we need not give to them; but Jesus was simply quoting the scripture that says “There will always be poor people in the land” (Deuteronomy 15:10–11), and the emphasis of these verses is that there will always be a need to give. As a result, if our giving is truly generous it will be continual.

History records an inspiring example of this. We have all been saddened at some point by stories – often trumpeted across the news media – of churches or individuals within churches having amassed embarrassingly large sums of money and goods for their own use. The lavish lifestyles, the luxury items, the extravagant hoarding and spending, all sadden us not only for how they reflect Christianity out into the world, but also for how they represent such a deep failure of what Christianity should be on the part of those who appear to be selling heaven and pocketing the profits. Fortunately, history can give us a better perspective of how giving the church is, as a whole, and how *ongoing* that giving is.

During a great persecution of Christians enacted during the latter part of the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian (AD 284 to 305), Imperial troops were sent to seize the possessions of a church in the city of Cirta (present day Constantine in Algeria) in North Africa. The soldiers were doubtless delighted to find some items of gold, silver, and bronze – the chalices, urns, lamps, candlesticks and other small items used in the church’s worship services. The exact value of these metal objects is not known, but it is clear that they did not represent substantially more than what was in use by the church in its day-to-day functioning.

However, the soldiers were suspicious that there were so few books in the church, so they searched the homes of the church leaders and found a total of 37 manuscripts, which the Christians had hidden. Clearly, the manuscripts regarding the faith were of much greater value in the eyes of these Christians than the gold and silver furnishings that had been left in plain sight in the church.

But in an inner storeroom within the church building the soldiers also found goods of a different kind. An Imperial document dated May 19, AD 303, lists these hidden-away treasures: 82 women's tunics, 38 capes, 16 men's tunics, 13 pairs of men's shoes, 47 pairs of women's shoes, and 19 peasants' wraps (*Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 16:3, 2008, 341–369, p. 350). These carefully amassed items of clothing were being collected to help the poor, the widows, and the destitute of the city. Certainly the church had a few valuable vessels for use in its worship, but the value of the items was appropriate for their intended use (2 Timothy 2:20). What is clear is that the treasures of this church were its documents of faith, and what was being amassed was being gathered for others.

Surely, this has often been the case. For every church infected with the spirit of mammon there have been others – and frequently many others – infused with the heart of Christian giving. Although Acts 5 itself gives prominent mention to the cautionary record of Ananias and Sapphira, we should remember that their story follows directly on the heels of the statement that:

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:33-35)

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of these facts of history when we are dismayed by the failings of some in our own age who use Christianity for personal gain (1 Timothy 6:5).

Generous Giving Is Ongoing Giving

The story of how the Christians of Circa collected great quantities of goods – clearly in an organized and ongoing way – for continuing distribution to the poor carries an important lesson. The gathering for others by those Christians was not moved by some urgent but momentary event, but was evidently based on giving in a continuing manner to help with the ongoing needs of many. Ongoing giving of this type is one of the clearest aspects of generosity in the Bible. It is the kind of giving God instituted in the Old Testament tithing system, including the so-called third tithe which was given by Israelites every third year to help the less fortunate and those in need (Deuteronomy 14:28–29). In the New Testament, this kind of ongoing giving is implied in Jesus’ words:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

In these words, the expression “store up” does not mean to simply put aside in one single action; it means to put aside, hoard, or build up in a continuing manner. That is a central part of true generosity – that we never allow ourselves to feel that we have helped at some point so need not do more. Generous giving is continually giving as we are able and as long as there is a need (2 Corinthians 9:11).

An additional point that we can learn from the story of Circa is that it is good to remember physical things are never our most valuable possessions. The most important treasures of the earliest believers, of the Christians of Circa in AD 303, and of many churches throughout history were really their faith and their love for God and for their neighbors. These too were treasures the Christians of Circa shared with others continually. We should pray that our true treasures are the same – and that we will not forget to continue to share them, also.

12. HANNAH'S GIFT

The final aspect of generous giving that we will consider here is one that is found repeatedly in the Bible. It is seen, for example, in the story of the poor widow who gave her last remaining few coins to the temple (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4), and in the story of the woman who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume shortly before his death (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8). Different as these stories may seem on the surface – one involved giving a little and the other involved giving a lot – they both involved the same aspect of generosity, which is sacrificial giving.

The poor widow obviously sacrificed in giving all she had, but the woman who anointed Christ also sacrificed by giving an extremely expensive gift. The kind of perfume she gave and the quantity (she poured out the whole container) would have cost a great deal. We are told it was worth three hundred denarii, and a denarius was regarded as a day's wage – so three hundred denarii equaled a year's wages for a working person (365 days less Sabbaths and Holy Days equals approximately 300 work days). It may well be that the jar of perfume that the woman gave was her dowry or inheritance and was likely the most valuable thing she owned. Whatever the case, it was certainly a sacrificially expensive gift.

Another and perhaps even more instructive account of sacrificial giving is found in the Old Testament in the story of Hannah. Hannah was one of the two wives of the Israelite Elkanah, a woman whose story is a lasting testimony to sacrifice and blessing (1 Samuel 1; 2:1–11). Although she was loved by her husband, Hannah was childless and was tormented by her co-wife, Peninnah, who had borne children to him. Every year Elkanah went up to the religious center of Shiloh to offer sacrifices, and it was on one of these occasions that Hannah went into the sanctuary and prayed before God while the High Priest, Eli, was sitting nearby. In her anguish

Hannah prayed silently yet fervently for a son, promising that she would give the child back to God, as a lifelong servant, if he would answer her prayer (1 Samuel 1:10-11). Such was the fervor of Hannah's prayer that Eli thought she was drunk and rebuked her, only to change his correction to a blessing when he realized the truth of the situation.

As 1 Samuel shows, God heard Hannah's prayer and blessed her with a son; but true to her word, after she had raised the young boy, she returned to Shiloh and presented him to Eli for the service of God. Notice Hannah's words: "I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:27-28). But a more literal translation of the last part of this passage might be as follows: "I also have given back what was asked [what I prayed for] to God" The more literal translation puts focus on the fact that Hannah had given back a gift from God – which meant a great deal to her – and returned the gift to God, despite the fact that it was doubtless a great emotional strain for her. In fact, we must put ourselves in Hannah's shoes to see what a sacrifice this was for her. Hannah knew that her son was miraculously given and that she had no guarantee that she would ever be able to have another child to replace him. The gift was a sacrifice not only of her son, but of her greatest desire, the thing she longed for most in life.

Generous Giving Is Sacrificial Giving

We see several things regarding sacrificially generous giving in the story of Hannah – not least that God often blesses those who give back his gifts to him even more than before. After sacrificing her beloved only son to God's service, God blessed Hannah with more children (1 Samuel 2:21) and doubtless great happiness.

God honors what we sacrifice and give back to him, also. We have all received gifts from God (James 1:17), and if we are willing to give some of them back, God often blesses us richly. That is not

“prosperity gospel” teaching – in fact, it is the very opposite because biblical giving is giving and expecting nothing in return. But the Bible does make it clear that God’s people have always given generously – and that they are blessed for it with either physical or spiritual blessings.

Another lesson we learn from the story of Hannah is that God often uses the gifts which are true sacrifices in very powerful ways. Hannah’s son Samuel grew to be one of the greatest prophets of ancient Israel and God’s leading servant in that era. We see this pattern in the lives of a number of biblical figures – that those who are dedicated to God and sacrificed to his purpose perform great deeds, as we see repeatedly in the lives of individuals like Samuel and Samson and in no less a person than Jesus himself: the greater the sacrifice, the greater that which is accomplished through it.

Hannah’s story also shows that the greatest gifts we can give are not those things which we can easily replace or not notice their absence, but those things that we do miss, that may hurt to give, and that are given in sacrificial love. Hannah exemplified that kind of love in giving her only son – a type of the greatest gift ever given:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal
life. (John 3:16)

This is a perfect definition of sacrificial love. It is generosity to the full, and it is the kind of generous giving to which we can all aspire – even if it is to a far smaller degree – in our own lives.

PART FOUR:
OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE

13. THE SAVVY SAMARITAN

As he came over the brow of the small hill, he saw the beaten and bloodied man lying at the edge of the road. The Samaritan hurried to him and tended the man's injuries as well as he could before carefully helping him onto the back of his donkey and setting off for the nearby inn (Luke 10:25–37).

Fast forward two thousand years. Today, the Good Samaritan would probably call emergency services and help the injured man as much as possible until professional help arrived. Thankfully such things are rare occurrences in most people's lives, but what about the more frequent times when many of us are confronted by lesser situations where someone might be in need?

You know those situations. As you walk out of a shopping center you are approached by someone who asks: "I need help, could you spare a few dollars?" We have seen the signs many people carry – pulling at heart strings from every possible direction – "Homeless," "Veteran," "Injured," "Hungry," "Please help, God bless." Some of these messages may reflect genuine need, but police officers and social welfare agents know that this is just a business for a good number of people, and that they are not destitute at all. You know this, too, but how are we to judge a given case? What is the Christian's right response when asked for help in such circumstances?

Caring and Caution

Dozens of scriptures throughout the Bible show our responsibility to those in need. Certainly Jesus cared for those needing help (John 13:29) and commanded that we care also (Luke 11:41). No scripture is clearer on this aspect of love than 1 John 3:17: "If anyone 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 that person?"

But God's word is not divorced from reality. It shows that people sometimes do feign appearances for their own purposes (Joshua 9) and confirms the possibility that some who ask for help may be doing so because they do not want to work. The apostle Paul stresses the unworthiness of such an attitude by saying "one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

The wise Samaritan acknowledges both of these perspectives, being caring yet careful not to waste the ability to help those truly in need. This approach is actually implicit in 1 John 3:17, if we look closely. Notice first that John's reference to "a brother or sister in need" puts his statement in the context of helping fellow believers (see also Romans 15:26, etc.), though the principle can, of course, be extended to any human brother or sister needing help. But the two key words in this verse are "sees" and "needs." The word "sees" clearly indicates that there is visible evidence of the need – we are not somehow bound to accept someone's statement of need without "seeing" its reality. Even more importantly, the word "need" which John uses (*chreian*) means real needs (such as food and clothing) of a serious and not a frivolous or contrived nature. The two concepts actually go hand in hand as real need is usually serious enough to be clearly visible – just as the need of the ancient traveler was clear to the Good Samaritan.

Wise Samaritans and Careful Stewards

When we are asked for help and the situation seems genuine, a primary response might be to call appropriate assistance. Police and other services are trained and prepared to help individuals in immediately difficult circumstances. But if the situation does not appear to warrant professional help, we might ask ourselves: Is this person really in need? Will any help we give be used for any real need? Sadly, when offered food or items of clothing, many asking for help will decline the offer as all they really want is cash for other things such as alcohol or drugs. We should certainly consider the moral responsibility of not enabling an addiction whenever cash is

requested. We also owe it to those in need to be good stewards of the resources that are available to us – employing them wisely and only where real need is found.

Today, the wise Samaritan can often do more good by contributing even small amounts to worthwhile charities that carefully administer their help. The most desperate needs are often far from where we may be. But even then, we can apply wisdom by choosing charities that we know have been carefully screened or developed by groups we trust. Before donating to other charities, the internet-savvy Samaritan may want to look at their ratings and use of funds by checking some of the online sites run by monitoring organizations, as we will see in the next chapter.

None of this is to say that we should pull back from physically helping others when genuine need is present before us. Belief devoid of willingness to help those in real need is a poor excuse for true religion, as the apostle James also states: “If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:16 and see Isaiah 58:7). Some people choose to err on the side of kindness when asked for help - even if they feel they are perhaps being taken advantage of. Some carry a few easily accessed dollar bills separate from billfold or wallet for cases which might possibly be genuine. But we need not feel swayed by words of “need” written on cardboard signs or by unsubstantiated requests for cash. Nothing in God's word urges us to give to those who appear to be making a living simply by saying they are in need. Everything in God's word shows that we should not hesitate to help where help is truly needed.

There is much that we can do to help those in genuine need in this world, but we need to be wise Samaritans and careful stewards of our available resources, if we are not to be enablers of wrongful behavior but rather helpers of those who truly need help.

14. CHARITIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There are so many needs in the world, and the needs are often so great that it can sometimes discourage us from trying to help. But as we have seen many times in this book, God's word makes it clear that helping those in need is a responsibility we should all acknowledge and not avoid (Hebrews 13:16; 1 John 3:17; etc.).

However, because not every apparent need is real (as we discussed in Chapter 13), giving to an established charity is often the best way to help genuine cases. But even when we want to help where the need is real, finding charities that do the most good is not always easy. Some charities spend a great deal of what they receive on overheads and salaries (as much as 60–80 percent in some cases), while others may support good, but hardly vital, causes.

Yet there are many charities that do accomplish a great deal. How can we find them? One of the best strategies we can utilize before donating to a charitable organization is to look at its ratings and use of funds by checking some of the online sites run by charity monitoring organizations. For example, the Charity Navigator.org website allows you to search its rankings by charity name or browse charities by type. The site also allows you to just see the top-rated charities in any given category if you wish, and it even has a list of those charities that have been awarded perfect scores. For example, Charity Navigator gives a perfect 100 percent score to the organization *Lifesong for Orphans* that provides adoption and assistance for homeless children around the world – so if you give to them, you know your gift is helping that particular need about as much as is humanly possible.

Another great example of a charity given a 100 percent rating by Charity Navigator is the wonderful Children in Christ ministry that is carrying the word of God to unreached people groups in Africa and India (with more areas projected), by means of children's clubs

and in other innovative ways. A little research on this charity shows just how cost effectively it functions in accomplishing its work (the CEO even works on a volunteer basis) and how excellently it performs in spreading the gospel to and through young people.

Some smaller, newer, or non-traditionally organized charities may not be rated by monitoring sites. But in many cases online research can find out enough about an organization to judge if it warrants our support, and dramatically increase the chances that our contributions will be used for maximum good.

Yet even when we only look at the most effective charities, there are still dozens that we might consider. How do we choose wisely among them? One thing we can do is to narrow the field by looking only at charities that focus on the relief of life-threatening and dire human needs as opposed to simply good causes. If we do that, there are three main types of need:

Disaster: Disasters of various kinds strike almost continually at different places around the world, suddenly plunging many people into dire need. Jesus referred specifically to situations of this kind when he said “those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!” (Luke 13:4–5). Fortunately, a number of charities do good work in this area, but some have high overhead costs. A safe and great way to help in this area is through major disaster relief funds such as the International Red Cross or various church charities that send aid to countries around the world to help with devastating disasters such as floods, earthquakes, landslides, tornadoes, and tsunamis. Mega-disasters of this type may receive extensive media coverage, but smaller-scale events are just as life threatening to those involved, and this kind of disaster occurs frequently at some point or other in the world. As a result, if you feel led to help others in this area, you can consider signing up to receive disaster and relief effort news reports by email from one or more of the larger disaster charities.

Hunger: The United Nations Global Hunger Report (6 July, 2022) estimates that about a billion people – some 10 percent of the world’s population – are hungry or starving at any given time, and this is a very real need that the Bible shows God’s people should consider. The book of Proverbs tells us “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9), and Jesus made the point even more strongly, telling his disciples “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” (Matthew 25:34–35).

Some well-known charities like *Action Against Hunger* do very good work, but this is an area in which it pays to be especially careful. Some of the charities in this group also use funds for tangential causes such as unspecified “human services,” which may include a number of non-hunger related expenses. So it wise to research some of these charities carefully before contributing.

Medical: The book of Ezekiel records God’s promise that he “will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34:16), and God’s desire that we also help those suffering medical needs is clear in many scriptures ranging from Jesus’ commission to his disciples (Matthew 10:8; etc.) to his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Today, there are specialized charities for many medical needs – all of them worthy causes – but the ones which can potentially save lives as well as bring relief from great suffering are surely especially deserving. For example, *Smile Train* and other cleft repair charities provide cleft lip and palate surgeries to children around the world, enabling them to properly eat and drink as well as to be free of a debilitating disfigurement and to lead normal lives. The *American Leprosy Mission* is another example of such excellent focused charities.

Praying for guidance in giving, and being willing do a little research, can make a great difference in the effectiveness of what we can give. Even small contributions can help well-run charities, and strong currencies such as the U.S. dollar go a long way in Third World countries where the needs are often greatest. So never think that a small amount will not accomplish much. We may have no idea of how much someone may be helped by our support. And even if we are not able to give financially for some reason, we may still be able to find worthwhile charities and perhaps volunteer time with them – and we can all pray for the success of charities that serve and help those in genuine need.

15. GIVING IS NOT JUST ABOUT MONEY

“I give a portion of what I earn each month,” April confided to her Christian friend, “but I feel I could be doing more.” Do you ever get that feeling? Perhaps we all do, and perhaps we all could do more. In this chapter we will look at giving “beyond money” – and if we have little to give physically, opportunities to give anyway!

Perhaps we can increase the power of our gifts by sharing products we produce or by giving items we no longer need – or don’t need as many as we have. Most people are aware of the opportunities to give in these ways through the food banks, the *Salvation Army*, or other helping agencies in our own communities, but we may not be aware of some of the charities that send products and lightly used items to distant places around the world where the needs may be even greater than those of our own communities.

An example of this kind of charity is *Matthew 25: Ministries* (a Charity Navigator 100 percent rated charity) which aims to help “a needy world with the things we throw away.” This innovative charity collects and passes along used items that can truly help those in need nationally and internationally – including things we may not often think of such as empty prescription pill bottles which are sent to areas where what medicines are available are often literally wrapped in leaves or paper and subsequently are spoiled through moisture and in other ways. Yet another organization, *Christian Resources International*, specifically focuses on sending used Bibles and religious books to areas where they are not generally available.

More than Physical Things

Most Christians understand the principle of being “blessed to be a blessing” (see Genesis 12:2–3): that one of the reasons God blesses us is to enable us to help others; but many of us limit the

understanding of that principle to our financial and material blessings. Those things are certainly an important part of our giving, but we do not need to stop there. While we may acknowledge intellectually that life is much more than just money and material things, it's sometimes hard to really apply that understanding when it comes to giving.

Often, we do not see blessings that we have been given that we can share with others because we do not think of them as an abundance of something other people need. But we should realize that sometimes the best help we can give to many who are in need is not tangible (Matthew 11:5; Acts 3:1–6). The apostle Paul puts this in clear perspective for us by quoting Jesus' statement about giving not in regard to money, but work!

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 20:35)

Paul frequently stresses our ability to help others in non-material ways and perhaps nowhere more so than in his letters to the Galatians and Romans where we find this theme expounded. Below are four non-material blessings to which Paul alludes directly or indirectly in those letters – gifts we have been given that we can share with others:

Time: "Therefore, *as we have opportunity*, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). We may know this scripture well, but we don't always equate opportunity with time. If we are retired, between jobs, or often have some time on our hands, we can ask ourselves to what extent we give of our time. We can think about how we can share the blessing of time we have in ways such as volunteering with a good charity or service organization, or simply helping those around us.

Health: “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Romans 15:1 WEB). Paul mentions this principle in a wider context than just physical health, but it does apply there. If we enjoy good health – or even reasonably good health – we can ask ourselves to what extent we give of the health we have and think about how we can share the blessing with those less fortunate than we are. It could be in service, by helping those who now cannot help themselves, or perhaps just in regularly taking time to encourage those in poor health – which is something we can do even if our own health is limited.

Skills: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us” (Romans 12:6). Although Paul is talking primarily about spiritual gifts in Romans 12, the principle applies in other areas, just as he speaks of gifts of teaching, giving, and leading (vss. 7-8). Do you have specialized knowledge, training, or talents in an area with which you can help others? If you have medical, financial, or legal training, there are a number of ways you can help those in need, but there are many other types of knowledge that can be shared by helping those without the training you may have. Even basic skills can be shared by serving with volunteer organizations.

Understanding: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). The “mutual edification” Paul speaks of involves sharing and building each other up through the understanding we have been given of God’s way. Most people go through life blindly making mistakes that hurt themselves and others, and those of us who understand there is a better way to live can share that blessing if we look for opportunities to do so. Sometimes this can be as simple as acting as a mentor or friend to a young person we know, or just sharing wise counsel (or a copy of the book of Proverbs!) with those who might profit from it. Understanding is a blessing that can be shared like any other, but it is a particularly valuable one.

These are just some basic areas in which we can share the non-material blessings we have. Even if we are poor, we may have time we can give. If we do not have time, we may have health we can share; if not enough health, we may have knowledge or skills we can use to help others. Even if we have none of these things, if we have understanding from learning God's way, that is in itself a great blessing that we can share with others. We simply need to develop the habit of seeing the blessings we have and learning to share those non-material things – to fulfill the purpose of being blessed to be a blessing to others.

16. THE GIFTS THE WISE MEN GAVE

Throughout this book we have concentrated mainly on giving to others – to those in need – according to biblical teaching. But the Bible also teaches us to give to God, of course, and as Christians this is naturally something we all desire to do. But the two directions of giving are not unrelated.

Many scriptures make it clear that what we give to others, we give to God. The proverb tells us “Kindness to the poor is a loan to the LORD (Proverbs 19:17 CSB) and we need only think of Jesus’ words “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40) to see this. But we can also give to God by supporting his work in this world, and our gifts to churches, Bible translation groups, and missionary organizations certainly fulfill this goal. Yet there are even more direct ways that we can give to God. We can see this by looking, for example, at the biblical story of the *Magi* or “wise men” who gave gifts to the infant Jesus and noticing what the Bible shows regarding the spiritual aspects of those gifts.

Gifts Fit for a King

The story of the “wise men” and the gifts they gave to Christ is one everyone knows, though Matthew is the only Gospel that records it (Matthew 2:1–12) and we have few details. We really don’t know how many wise men brought gifts to the young Jesus (the tradition that there were three of them is based only on there being three types of gifts), where they came from (other than “the East”), or even when they came (the New Testament shows it could have been up to two years after the actual birth of Jesus when they arrived at the house in which he was living).

The one thing we do know for sure is what the gifts were that they gave to the young Jesus. Matthew tells us: “On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed

down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11). The three types of gifts were all costly ones, and perhaps the most expensive, by weight, that could be given in that ancient culture. The Bible uses these three substances as symbols of qualities that go beyond the purely physical and economic aspects of the gifts.

Gold – Faith: It’s easy to understand that gold was considered a gift fit for kings. This precious metal never tarnishes and was used for the crowns and other royal insignia of kings and queens – and by those who could afford it, for personal jewelry. But gold also functioned as the highest form of currency in ancient times – gold was “big money”! Today we may give of our “gold” in terms of financial offerings, but the Bible looks at the spiritual quality of faith as an even better offering. The apostle Peter speaks of trials we endure and tells us: “These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). Even if we have little “gold” that we can give, we can give the better gift of faith. Faith, of course, is partly the gift of God to us – but we can nourish, grow, then “give it back” through the exercise of faith in our lives in a similar way to what is described in Jesus’ parables of the pounds (Luke 19:11–27 NLT) and the talents (Matthew 25:14–30 ESV). We grow God’s investment of faith and can give it back to him, as a gift that, as Peter says, is worth more than gold.

Frankincense – Prayer: Frankincense was an expensive fragrance used in the making of incense offered in the temple (Leviticus 2:1–2) and was thus a fitting gift to be given to a priest (Hebrews 4:14–16). Although we may not think of our prayers as gifts, they are – just as much as incense – as several scriptures show. The book of Revelation refers to the prayers of the saints as fragrant incense on the heavenly altar before God: “Another angel, who had a golden

censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne" (Revelation 8:3–4). That is why David wrote "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Psalm 141:2 ESV) – and why, in the New Testament Luke records "And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense" (Luke 1:10 ESV). Our prayers can be gifts if they are pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

Myrrh – Witness: Myrrh was another expensive fragrance and was powerful enough that it was often used in embalming the dead – as it was for Jesus (John 19:39–40). In that sense it was a fitting gift to one destined to die for humankind. As one of the strongest perfumes, myrrh also signifies what the apostle Paul wrote: "Now [God] uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God" (2 Corinthians 2:14–15 NLT). Paul's reference to death in the following verse shows he may well have had myrrh in mind. But the point he makes is that our lives – our actions as well as our words – "spread the knowledge of Christ." In that sense we see the aspect of Christ as prophet, telling and foretelling the truth of God in our lives as he did in his.

When we consider these symbolic aspects of the three gifts of the wise men, we see how appropriate they were for the One who was to be the great King, Priest, and Prophet. And while the physical gifts themselves are not ones we can give directly to God in the way the Magi did, if we choose to do so, through God's grace we too can offer things that are associated with the same gifts – our underlying faith, our relationship with God himself, and our witness to others. In this way, even those of us who might feel we have little to give can give better gifts – that may please God even more – than the gifts the wise men gave.

CONCLUSION: **Excelling in Giving**

Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love we inspired in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (2 Corinthians 8:7 BSB)

When the apostle Paul wrote those words, he was speaking in the context of the collection that he had organized for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem during a time of famine. Today, we can apply his words to giving under all kinds of circumstances and in many ways, but we should notice that Paul stresses that even if our lives are producing much spiritual fruit – qualities such as faith, sincerity, and love – we still need to excel in giving if we are to grow as God desires.

But what exactly did Paul mean by “excel in ... giving”? We can say for sure that he did not simply mean that we give more. Paul encouraged others to be generous in giving, but he also doubtless hoped that those he taught would excel in all the aspects of generosity that he mentions in his letters and that we have discussed in this book.

As we saw in Part One, there are many good reasons to give, but perhaps most important is the fact that giving is part of God’s nature and learning to give helps make us more like him (Ephesians 5:1–2). Paul and other biblical writers show that our giving is a strong demonstration of our love for God and others, and it is also a form of worship when we give to God or enable God to help others through us. But in Part Two we saw that there are ways in which we can short-circuit the process of giving; we should all consider these potential problems so that we can avoid them and give as we should.

In Part Three we focused on what true generosity looks like and found that the Bible’s greatest stories of giving teach us multiple

aspects of generous living. We can learn much from Hannah in the Old Testament and the Good Samaritan in the New – as well as the recorded giving of Christians both in New Testament times and afterwards. The stories may differ and the lessons may vary, but these stories can all encourage and guide us in learning to give generously.

Finally, Part Four looked at opportunities we all have for effective giving – both to others and to God directly. We can utilize these opportunities in our own lives on a daily basis – especially when we remember that there is so much more to giving than money alone. No matter how poor we may be, we still have opportunities to give, and the Bible repeatedly makes it clear that God honors even the smallest such gift when it is given in love.

That is perhaps the greatest principle we can learn when it comes to giving: if we are really opening our hearts to others, we will also be opening our hands. The more we learn to love, the more we will find we are able to give – more thoughtfully, more systematically, and more sacrificially. That is because, ultimately, Christian giving is not just learning to give, but learning to excel in giving – and learning to be more like the One who has, and who gives, everything.

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