

LESSONS IN BIBLICAL GENEROSITY

by Drew Flamm

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EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD BELONGS TO HIM... SO HOW DOES GOD WANT US TO MANAGE HIS STUFF?



Remember my first donor appointment well. My boss asked me to accompany him to play golf with George, a major donor. I spent the previous night ironing my clothes, shining my shoes, and ensuring my golf clubs were in tip-top shape. We showed up to the course early and waited for George to arrive. When George pulled into the parking lot, my preconceived notions about what a donor should look like were immediately challenged. He drove a rusted-out Ford, had patches on his khaki pants—which his wife would sew on whenever holes appeared—and when I asked where he acquired his clubs, he responded in all seriousness, “Kmart special.”

I learned during that round of golf that George worked at a manufacturing plant his whole life and his wife was a teacher. They did not have any kids so giving to help students learn about Jesus and get an education became their mission. Through scrimping, saving, and the Lord’s blessing, they had been able to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to various causes.

George was one of the first to teach me about biblical generosity. Since then, I have had the privilege to sit with hundreds of donors who have all helped me better understand what God says about generosity and how to live it out. Here are just a few lessons I have learned:

God Owns Everything

Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” God is the creator of the heavens and earth

and, therefore, everything in the world belongs to him. He allows us the honor and privilege of managing small portions of his estate for a short period of time. So how does God want us to manage his stuff? His word provides many principles, but one central financial management principle God endorses is being generous with his wealth. What an awesome privilege! What if I wrote you a million-dollar check and asked you to give it away? How fun would that be! You get all the joy of giving away someone else’s wealth. Well, that is exactly what God does with us. He gives each of us resources to manage and give away. Our performance as God’s portfolio manager has significant ramifications as well, and we should be seeking an eternal return on investment. As Jim Elliot famously put it, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Money and Stewardship are Important to God

The Bible has 2,350 verses that deal with money and possessions. That is more than verses about heaven and hell combined. The first stewardship command comes in Genesis 1:28, “And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

One of the first things God tells his new image-bearers has to do with stewardship—to rule over and take care of everything that moves. Passages about stewardship and

money are sprinkled throughout Scripture making it impossible to miss the value God places on stewardship. Jesus taught extensively on stewardship and money. He taught that money should be given to support the work of the Lord through religious institutions (Matthew 23:23; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 8:1-3); he said we should pay our taxes (Matthew 17:24-27; 22:17-22); he taught we should use our financial resources to help the poor and needy (Luke 10:29-37; 18:18-25); Jesus valued missionary support (Luke 8:1-3; 10:1-9); he taught to be shrewd in spending (Matthew 7:7-12); he exhorted his followers to trust God to supply our all our needs and not to rely on our own resources (Matthew 6:9-13, 19-34; Luke 12:22-34); and, he taught not to use the power money provides to coerce or lord it over others (Matthew 18:23-34; Luke 7:40-43; 20:9-16). Maybe the greatest example of the value Jesus placed on money and stewardship is found in Matthew 25:23 in the parable of the talents as the master commends his servant who invested his money well by telling him, “Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master.”

God Gets the Praise for Generosity

Paul, in Philippians 1, praises God for the Philippians’ missionary support. We have a donor couple at Grace College and Seminary who asks us to publish the words “To God be the Glory” on anything they support. This couple has been very generous, so we have a “To God be the Glory Scholarship”

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and if you look around campus, you will find that phrase posted on various buildings and rooms. This couple gets it. They understand it's all God's money, and they are simply temporary stewards. After learning this principle, I began to praise God and thank donors. When writing a letter or making a call to thank a donor, I will start with the phrase, "We praise God and thank you for ..." It is a subtle way to ensure both of us recognize God gets the praise.

Donors Should Know the Impact of Their Generosity

After giving praise to God for the Philippians' generosity, Paul lets them know how their generosity has "advanced the gospel" by telling them the gospel has made it all the way to the imperial guard, which is likely the emperor's group of elite body guards. What joy the Philippians must have felt in hearing the impact of their generosity. We need to share specific stories of impact more often and more creatively in thanking those who give generously. How often do you thank your supporters? Is it generic or do you let them know specific instances of eternal impact that happened because of their generosity? Give your supporters stories of impact so they may praise God with you.

Generosity Brings Joy

Giving can be so much fun (2 Corinthians 9:6-14). Hudson Taylor once reflected, "The less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become." Recently, a

donor called me on the phone after the passing of her mom and dad. She was calling to thank me for the joy their family was able to receive through the gifts their mom and dad made to Grace College and Seminary. This donor was literally thanking me for allowing her parents to give away hundreds of thousands of dollars of her inheritance. Wow! That kind of joy and perspective is rare. I sometimes joke that I'm in the business of selling joy. If you give to the college, you get nothing in return, except the joy of knowing you are making an eternal impact through students' lives and hearts being shaped, molded and prepared to go serve a desperate and dying world. It's actually a pretty good deal!

Our Generosity Should Reflect God's Generosity

We should give out of gratitude for what God has done for us. The familiar refrain of John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he GAVE his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The greatest act of generosity this world has ever seen is God giving up his Son so that we could be adopted into God's family. It is the great exchange; God's grace for our sin. Ultimately, generosity is about the gospel and God's heart for sinners. There is nothing in me and nothing in you that would incentivize or compel God to give up his greatest possession for our souls. His love for us is deep, wide and beyond comprehension, and his generosity is beyond compare. Our motivation to be generous should be out of

thanksgiving for God giving his only Son to save sinners like you and me.

Not only is God's sacrifice our motivation, it is our example. Have you ever experienced quid pro quo giving? The person who gives with the expectation of something in return. We do this with neighbor kids all the time. We buy their cookies for their school fundraiser, then a few weeks later, we send over our kids to ask for a return purchase of overpriced cookies. It's not true generosity; it's quid pro quo giving. I'm thankful God is not a quid pro quo giver. He willingly gave his Son to pay for our sin, he compelled us to follow him, he took away our sin, and he gave us the promise of eternal life. We did nothing; he gave everything. Our generosity should reflect his. We should give without expecting anything in return and give all the glory to God for any good that comes from our generosity.

If generosity is at the heart of the gospel, and money and stewardship is one of the most written about topics in the Bible, then it should be a topic we engage, teach, exhort and recognize. Begin talking about stewardship and generosity on a regular basis; praise God for those who give; make sure supporters know you are thankful for them; let your ministry supporters hear the specific ways their giving is making an eternal impact; and always point to the most generous of Fathers as our example and motivation. Begin selling joy to those you lead!

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