



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Study Guides for

# Generosity

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the distinctive features of Christian generosity, its central role in discipleship, and why its practice is so difficult in a consumerist culture. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

**Generosity of Spirit** 2

Generosity names not merely something we do, but an admirable quality of character, something we are. Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the world, and this understanding inspires genuinely generous activity.

**Paul's Expectations of Generosity** 4

True generosity requires us to give to those in need and make a place for them in our gatherings. Such generosity, Paul reminds us, is enabled by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit.

**Subversive Generosity** 6

God's reign, founded on God's subversive generosity, stands opposed to Roman oppression in the New Testament. Today it provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism and gives an alternative way to understand our obligations to one another and to God.

**Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt** 8

Most of us admit that our giving behavior does not match our personal or our religion's ideal of what it should be. Yet we are oddly content with this. Why do we have this comfortable guilt, and how can we change our habits to be rid of it?

**How Congregations Differ on Generosity** 10

Not every church member responds to the same message about giving. Not every congregation's culture supports the same approach to developing faithful stewards, or generous givers. What variables in congregational life foster these giving differences in members and congregations?

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### Focus Article:

📖 Generosity of Spirit  
(*Generosity*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 In This Old House  
(*Generosity*, pp. 68-72)

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# Generosity of Spirit

Generosity names not merely something we *do*, but an admirable quality of character, something we *are*. Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the world, and this understanding inspires genuinely generous activity.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

## Meditation†

Generosity is *the predisposition to love open-handedly*. Our hands matter, both literally and symbolically. In the open hand, our palms are up and our fingers extended. A closed hand is usually a clenched fist, tightly grasping what it wants to keep or tensely preparing for battle. To be generous requires that we open our hands.

*Gregory Spencer*

## Reflection

"From the beginning to the end of the Bible we read of God's generous and good gifts," Doug Henry observes. God's creating the cosmos is *ex nihilo* ("from nothing," for nothing had to exist) and with continual, loving attention. In Revelation, the heaven and earth that "God generously creates and freely gives in love, the Lord also generously recreates at the end of days, when everything is made new." In between, God's generosity infuses the narrative – from promising Abraham to bless all families of the earth, to giving loving guidance in the Mosaic laws and providing prophets, priests, and kings to ensure Israel's wellbeing. The self-gift of Jesus Christ crowns a story of love (2 Corinthians 8:9).

When Scripture calls us to be generous with one another, then, it simply is urging us to join this "'divine economy' expressed over the sweep of salvation history," Henry writes. "If we inhabit a world of good and perfect gifts, if we live in a world created and sustained by One who is not distant but near and among us, and if ours is a world stamped from beginning to end by divine generosity, then it stands to reason that we ought to 'risk' a generosity of spirit commensurate to that reality!"

Because most of us don't live as though this divine economy were true, our world is increasingly "marked by wretched, widespread failures of generosity." Henry pinpoints two "lies" that can distort our thinking and impede generosity of spirit. They tempt us to believe we "inhabit a world not of gifts, but rather of objects to own, possess, or sequester for our private use."

- ▶ *Presumption* is the first lie. It urges us to "seek security against vulnerability through cleverness and control," Henry writes. "By possessing things and exercising power through them, the presumptuous imagine that they can protect themselves from loss." They're not always stingy. If they're rich enough, "they may invite beneficiaries into their bulwarks, but they stand ready to bar the gates if resources grow scarce. And at the false heart of presumption lies the belief that we can fashion a personal heaven of our own making instead of receiving with gladness a shared beatitude promised by God."



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► *Despair* is another lie. When we give up on “the prospect of our own satisfaction in life, we similarly dismiss the possibilities for nurturing others’ happiness,” Henry notes. We want to control our world, but failing that, we envy those who possess what we are missing and greedily clutch at all that remains. “The despairing and the presumptuous represent mirror images of each other, and both of them distort the gracious, gift-laden divine economy of the triune God.”

Within the divine economy that Scripture describes and calls us to embrace, neither presumption nor despair makes any sense. “We bear the image of God, an inalienable gift the value of which is beyond measure,” Henry explains. “Because this greatness of soul is a gift we share with others in a divinely superintended cosmos, all of which is underwritten by God’s generous provision, we need not be anxious or jealous. Inasmuch as our lives are gifts imbued with God’s lavish love, we have no cause for despair at what we do not have. In God’s good, gift-laden world, we are free to see others not as adversaries or as competitors for scarce resources, but as brothers and sisters trusting confidently in God’s gracious provision.”

The remedy to modern presumption and despair, then, is Christian hope—a deep trust that God loves us and will provide for our needs now and in the future. This hope is our pathway toward generosity of spirit. “If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need,” Henry concludes. We can welcome the divine economy in which “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

### Study Questions

1. Describe generosity of spirit. How is it expressed in ways other than giving money? Why is it important that it names not merely something we *do*, but something we *are*?
2. Consider the modern attitudes of presumption and despair. How are they “mirror images” of one another? How can each one undermine a generosity of spirit?
3. What is the virtue of Christian hope? How does it alleviate despair and undermine presumption?
4. According to Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise, why is hospitality an important expression of generosity of spirit? Discuss how this facet of generosity can develop in your life.
5. Explore how God’s generous provision for us—the “divine economy” that Henry talks about—is described in Anthony Carl’s new hymn, “All Who Thirst.”

### Departing Hymn: “All Who Thirst”

† Gregory Spencer, *Awakening the Quieter Virtues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 158-159.



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### Focus Article:

📖 Paul's Expectations of Generosity  
(*Generosity*, pp. 19-28)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Generosity in the Bible  
(*Generosity*, pp. 82-87)

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# Paul's Expectations of Generosity

True generosity requires us to give to those in need and make a place for them in our gatherings. Such generosity, the Apostle Paul reminds us, is enabled by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit.

## Prayer

God of all good things, open our hearts to fresh ways of serving you and your world; open our minds to new ways of sharing all that you have given to us; open our souls so that we may be filled with your overflowing love. Amen.

## Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:17-19

## Reflection

The Apostle Paul consistently emphasizes “through his instruction and the patterns of life established in his churches, that God’s people have been delivered *from* sin and this present age characterized by selfishness and greed *for* the sake of the life of the world; that to belong to God and his people entails being actively engaged in seeking the welfare of the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of society,” Kelly Liebengood explains.

He offers these snapshots of Paul’s view of the place of social justice and generosity in God’s economy.

- ▶ “*Idleness*” is an abuse of uncharacteristic generosity (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). Greco-Roman cities had no public or private systems, or “safety nets,” to help the poor. Most people had few resources, and the rich minority used their wealth for self-serving purposes. The “idle” assume others will provide for their needs; this indicates the Christians have been practicing uncharacteristic generosity toward the poor and some are abusing this. “Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to continue to uphold the practice of caring for those who are truly in need,” Liebengood observes. “In Paul’s mind, what is at stake is the unnecessary squandering of limited resources for those who are able to provide for themselves. But generosity is never taken off the table; it is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused.”
- ▶ “*Do good works*” becomes a call to live generously (1 Timothy 6:17-18). “In the Greco-Roman urban centers ‘doing good works’ was self-promoting and ensured that resources continued to circulate almost exclusively among those who had no need,” Liebengood notes. Paul reinterprets this common phrase “through the prism of Jesus’ self-giving life.” Thereafter, “within the Pauline communities it took on a different meaning – namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing (that is, honor or any other kind of reciprocity) in return: ‘Therefore, then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all’ (Galatians 6:10).”
- ▶ The “*lowly*” must be included in the fellowship (Romans 12:16). Because Paul welcomes non-elites (1 Corinthians 1:26-28), marginalized people (such as thieves), and needy people (Ephesians 4:28) in the churches, he is scandalized by how the wealthier members in Corinth treat the lowly (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). “For Paul, to



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participate in the Lord's Supper (which at its core is a celebration of Jesus giving of himself for others; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) while failing to notice that some within the gathering were being neglected much needed food and drink is to do so in an 'unworthy manner' (11:27)," Liebengood writes. Thus, Paul "charges the Corinthians to 'discern the body' – to look around and notice that their practice of the Lord's Supper was creating divisions in the church along economic lines (11:29), something that was entirely antithetical to what this new community of Jesus followers was called to be."

► *Disciples should participate in God's generosity by joining the relief offering for Jerusalem Christians* (Romans 15:25-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, and 2 Corinthians 8-9). Liebengood concludes that "Paul dedicated about five years of his ministry to collect money from Gentile Jesus-followers in order to alleviate suffering due to extreme financial hardship in Jerusalem among some of the Jewish followers of Jesus." He urges members to participate in this offering in obedience to the gospel (2 Corinthians 9:13) and in imitation of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 8:9). "Paul regards generosity towards the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem as proof that Gentile followers of Jesus have indeed been transformed by the Spirit of the self-giving Jesus Christ, that they have indeed become participants in the spiritual blessings of Israel's one true God (Romans 15:26-27 and 8:1-17)... The collection was a tangible indication that the God of Israel had transformed these Gentiles into the likeness of God's generous, self-giving image."

Liebengood summarizes Paul's insights on the roles of social justice and generosity in the Christian life. "He reminds us that genuine love and generosity require us not only to give to those in need, but also to make a place for them in our gatherings. He also reminds us that generosity is enabled as we share in the life of God.... And finally, we see that those who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus are not only called to give cognitive assent to certain propositions about what God has accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, but also required by the gospel to pattern their lives, personal and communal, in such a way that they bear witness to God's own hospitality and generosity."

### Study Questions

1. Some interpret Paul's warning against idleness (in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13) as callous toward the poor. How does Kelly Liebengood read the episode as a call to renewed generosity?
2. What does Paul mean by "doing/working the good"? Discuss how your congregation might "do good works" today.
3. Why is Paul so scandalized by how the Christians at Corinth practice the Lord's Supper? Consider what church practices today might shock him for the same reason.
4. What reasons does Paul give for members to participate in the offering to aid the poor in the Jerusalem church? Are there similar offerings that your congregation might participate in today?

Departing Hymn: "All Who Thirst"



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### Focus Article:

📖 Subversive Generosity  
(*Generosity*, pp. 29-36)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 Stopping to Help  
(*Generosity*, pp. 56-58)

📖 Imperial Gifts  
(*Generosity*, pp. 52-55)

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# Subversive Generosity

God's reign, founded on God's subversive generosity, stands opposed to Roman oppression in the New Testament. Today it provides the moral vision to see through the distortions of consumerism and gives an alternative way to understand our obligations to one another and to God.

### Prayer

Almighty God, we confess that generosity is difficult for us because it runs counter to our culture of abundance.

But it is your heart and your command that we love you with all that we have.

Transform us so that we love our neighbors and care for them even as we love and care for ourselves.

Transform us so that our first instinct is to share with others what has been so freely given to us.

Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

### Meditation<sup>†</sup>

How we understand the role of generosity in our lives – and in the Christian communities in which we do life together – perhaps says more about our faith and our understanding of the gospel than any other single aspect of our faith.

*Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd*

### Reflection

Generosity that is altruistic – where the giver expects nothing in return from the recipient – is both a “guiding characteristic of God” and a “distinguishing mark of God’s reign,” Jason Coker observes. And it is “subversive.” For any community that practices such generosity must step away from the ways of the surrounding culture. That was true of Christians in the Roman Empire and of those who would resist consumerist ways today.

God’s radical generosity pervades Scripture, but it is most unmistakable in the gift of his Son (John 3:16). To embrace God’s reign through Jesus Christ is to welcome this divine generosity: in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “But first seek God’s reign and its justice, and all these things *will be given* to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Jesus displayed extravagant generosity through his life and death, and he explicitly taught it to his followers through his parables (for example, Luke 10:25-37).

As the disciples embraced Jesus’ way, they shared resources with one another (Acts 2:44-47). But such generosity must be heartfelt; the apostles sternly warn against faking it (5:1-11).

In this way, Jesus’ followers subverted Roman social practices of patronage, which showed “partiality to the wealthy (cf. James 2:1-8)” and kindled “the desire to keep one’s possessions for oneself (Acts 5:1-11).” Coker explains, “A community that held everything in common and respected the dignity of every person was fundamentally different and contradictory to Roman social practices based on a hierarchy of humanity.”

The generosity of God’s reign is still subversive today, calling us “to continually correct and regulate our complexly disordered human



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structures.” It stands in opposition to the profit-obsessed global capitalism that “is not centered in any single nation and its primary and overriding motive is profit,” Coker suggests. “God’s reign can critique global capitalism by envisioning a future where human dignity is more important than profit.”

Such generosity also “turns cultural consumerism, a key product of capitalism, on its head,” he notes. “Consumerism promotes retail therapy, the idea that we can buy our way to happiness. This ‘therapy’ is obviously based on *receiving* rather than *giving*, and thus stands in opposition to the New Testament concept of ‘shared possessions.’”

Coker concludes, “The Christian ideal of generosity is grounded in God’s gracious act in the Incarnation, the birth, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, which is the height of sacrificial self-giving. This sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign was subversive in its origin in Roman imperialism and continues to be subversive wherever human dignity is jeopardized due to greed and selfishness.”

### Study Questions

1. How was practicing the generosity of God’s reign truly subversive of Roman society in the first-century?
2. Jason Coker notes that such generosity would be subversive today. What current practices would it call into question?
3. Discuss how the generosity of God’s reign is exemplified by the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable (Luke 10:25-37). How is this depicted in Jacopo Bassano’s *The Good Samaritan*?
4. How do you read the famous mosaics *Emperor Justinian and His Attendants* and *Empress Theodora and Her Attendants* in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy? Do they exemplify (and commend) Roman patronage or subversive generosity?

### Departing Hymn: “Come, Kingdom of Our God”

Come, kingdom of our God,  
sweet reign of light and love!  
Shed peace and hope and joy abroad,  
and wisdom from above.

O’er all our spirits first  
extend your healing reign;  
there raise and quench the sacred thirst  
that never pains again.

Come, kingdom of our God,  
and make the broad earth thine!  
Stretch o’er her lands and isles the rod  
that flowers with grace divine.

Soon may all tribes be blest  
with fruit from life’s glad tree;  
and in its shade like brothers rest,  
sons of one family.

John Johns (1837)

*Suggested Tunes:* FESTAL SONG or ST. THOMAS (Williams)

† Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd, *Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture of Giving in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 17.



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### Focus Article:

📖 Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt  
(*Generosity*, pp. 37-43)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Time to Tithe  
(*Generosity*, pp. 73-77)

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# Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt

Most of us admit that our giving behavior does not match our personal or our religion's ideal of what it should be. Yet we are oddly content with this. Why do we have this comfortable guilt, and how can we change our habits to be rid of it?

### Prayer

Almighty God, forgive us for claiming to be your church in the world, but failing to share what we have with the world. Forgive us for failing to recognize that what we have is yours and is given to us to share with others.

We pray in Jesus' name, and through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Malachi 3:8-12

### Reflection

Ponder these uncomfortable facts: "American Christians who *regularly attend church* earn around two trillion dollars in income annually, yet, on average, they give less than one percent of their annual earnings to charitable or religious causes. One in five of them give nothing at all." Why is this?

To find out, Patricia Snell Herzog and her colleagues visited congregations, studied financial records, and interviewed members. Almost everyone said giving to charitable causes is a good thing. They knew they should give more and wanted to give more, but they didn't. Some really did not have the resources; others (mistakenly) believed they did not have the resources.

But here is the most interesting explanation: many of them had "comfortable guilt." You would expect them to suffer some dissonance—to "become uncomfortable and do one of two things: change their behavior to match their ideal, or change their ideal to match their behavior." But they don't. "For some reason, when it comes to financial giving, most American Christians appear to bypass this social psychological law of human nature to let the dissonance linger," Herzog notes. "They do not seem to be concerned about closing their giving gap."

Drawing on her research, Herzog offers three suggestions to help us cure our own and others' comfortable guilt.

- ▶ *Foster a giving orientation.* People who give more to charitable causes generally "feel personally compelled to act on behalf of others, tend to see abundance instead of scarcity, tend to think as 'we' instead of 'I,' and are not continually focused on their next purchase for themselves." Perhaps we will be greater givers if we develop these characteristics. She writes, "While talk of money certainly has its place, what could indirectly encourage generous giving is helping people to feel in communion with others, to be aware of others' needs and act on their behalf, and to better see the abundance in their own lives, perhaps even by helping them to calculate it."
- ▶ *Offer a web of support for giving.* People who give more tend to be "surrounded by parents, spouses, friends, and communities that regularly give." Perhaps such affiliations "grease the wheels" of giving, while others offer some "friction" for acting on an inclination to give. To foster these webs of support, "people should share more





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about their giving activities” — especially with their children — but not in a boastful way.

- ▶ *Form a giving habit.* When we act unconsciously from habit, we do not draw on our limited supplies of attention. Otherwise, Herzog notes, “the ever-inundating stimulation of modern living can get in the way of having the cognitive resources to attend to carrying out desired behaviors.” She sorts givers into four types — Habitual, Planned, Selective, and Impulsive — (though some others have no discernable pattern). The Habitual and Planned consistently give more than do Selective and Impulsive givers. So, we may “become a giver, give greater amounts, or help others in giving, by moving giving activity from the level of conscious, attention-needing behavior to imprinted behavior, either planned or habitual, and otherwise operating in the background.”

Herzog concludes that “giving may come more readily from those who do not treat contributions as an isolated event outside the bounds of their everyday reality and instead have an integrated, holistic approach to their Christian orientation that fosters a generous lifestyle.”

### Study Questions

1. What does Patricia Snell Herzog mean by “comfortable guilt,” and why is it a *riddle* that people display it?
2. How can your congregation foster “a giving orientation”?
3. Consider the barriers in America to maintaining a web of support for giving. How can you overcome these in your family and congregation?
4. Why do Habitual and Planned givers tend to give more than Selective and Impulsive givers? What specific habits might help you become a greater giver?
5. Discuss Richard Stearns’s comment: “The chief competitor to dependence on God is money — what it can buy and what it symbolizes. We need to give generously in order to inoculate ourselves from the diseases of materialism and consumerism. Unfortunately, we’re not getting our vaccination shots.”

### Departing Hymn: “Lord, You Love the Cheerful Giver” (vv. 1 and 3)

Lord, you love the cheerful giver  
who with open heart and hand  
blesses freely, as a river  
that refreshes all the land.  
Grant us, then, the grace of giving  
with a spirit large and true  
that our life and all our living  
we may consecrate to you.

Blessed by you with gifts and graces,  
may we heed your Spirit’s call,  
gladly in all times and places  
give to you who gives us all.  
You have bought us; now no longer  
can we claim to be our own;  
ever free and ever stronger  
we shall serve you, Lord, alone.

*Robert Murray* (1832-1910), alt.

*Suggested Tunes:* PLEADING SAVIOR or BEECHER



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### Focus Article:

- How Congregations (and Their Members) Differ on Generosity  
(*Generosity*, pp. 44-51)

### Suggested Articles:

- Unlikely Champions: A Widow's Might  
(*Generosity*, pp. 78-81)
- Toward a Theology of Generosity  
(*Generosity*, pp. 88-93)

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# How Congregations Differ on Generosity

Not every church member responds to the same message about giving. Not every congregation's culture supports the same approach to developing faithful stewards, or generous givers. What variables in congregational life foster these giving differences in members and congregations?

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 37:25-26

## Meditation†

Generosity is at its core a lifestyle, a lifestyle in which we share all that we have, are, and ever will become as a demonstration of God's love and a response to God's grace. It is not enough for the church to talk about generosity, nor is it enough for individual Christians simply to commit to being generous. What makes generosity a real and powerful witness to God's love is our action.

*Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd*

## Reflection

Why do congregations, and individual members within them, respond so differently to appeals for giving? "Here are seven variables that come to my mind," Ruben Swint writes:

- ▶ *how leaders speak about money and giving.* He asks, "Do they speak as the *institution* that needs funding to pay its bills, ... *community* that seeks to meet the wants of its members, participants, and prospects, ... [or] *movement* that intends to change the world by bringing God's kingdom to earth?"
- ▶ *members' sources of income.* Those in education, healthcare, and social services stress fairness and equality; entrepreneurs support venture ministries; small business owners want to manage costs; corporate executives protect the bottom line.
- ▶ *generational differences.* "People with different life experiences have difficulty viewing life, church, and giving the same way," he observes.
- ▶ *differing motivations for giving.* Staff, lay leaders, and core members tend to respond to motivations of commitment and challenge; other members may respond better to appeals to community, compassion, or reasonableness.
- ▶ *impact of recent cultural changes.* He notes that "competition has replaced cooperation, and customer satisfaction has replaced inherited institutional loyalty. The successful nonprofits and congregations do not assume they have people's loyalty; they take the initiative and ask for money."
- ▶ *median household incomes.* Churches in wealthier neighborhoods should see higher total giving, though poorer members may give proportionately more.
- ▶ *demographic changes in the neighborhood.* These may indicate growth potential in members' incomes.



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Given these differences in members' motivations and behavior and in congregations' identities and capacities, how can we encourage greater giving? Swint offers several suggestions, including that we "become multilingual in the language of 'stewardship' and 'generosity.'" The language of stewardship has become too closely linked to pledging an institution's budget and paying its bills. "Generosity can lead younger members forward into faithful stewardship and tithing," he explains. "It is best, therefore, to use words from both languages on a regular basis: stewardship and generosity, budget and ministry plan, commitment card and my personal plan for giving, income and contributions, expenses and costs, church needs and church solutions, and budget deficits and ministry successes." He imagines building generosity through various activities, focusing on a day, week, month, and finally year plan for living generously.

Swint would rehabilitate "stewardship" in light of God's kingdom breaking into the world. "Jesus was the faithful steward who aligned his life and ministry with the kingdom of God, a reality to be experienced now and eternally," he notes. "Ultimately, stewardship is all we do with all we have to accomplish our God-given mission, individually and together in congregations. Christian stewards are kingdom-bringers who align their lives and ministries with God's intentions for God's world."

### Study Questions

1. It can be difficult to translate our commitments to generosity into shared action when people hear appeals to generous giving in such different ways. Which of the differences that Ruben Swint cites are prominent in your congregation?
2. Consider whether your congregation is ready for the challenge of a day, a week, a month, or a year of generosity. What might that next step look like?
3. Discuss the seven-step "giving path" that Swint describes. How would you move to the next step?
4. Allen Walworth calls the women in 1 Kings 17:10-16 and Mark 12:41-44 "unlikely champions." What inspiration does Walworth draw from their stories for our giving?

### Departing Hymn: "Lord, Teach to Us Your Way of Loving"

Lord, teach to us your way of loving,  
which is the first lesson of all.  
O Christ, who loved the little children,  
how sweet and tender is your call!  
Lord, help us hear it and then give you  
the love you ask of us today.  
O Christ, help us love one another,  
for this most earnestly we pray.  
Lord, teach to us your way of giving,  
for this is clearly the next thing:  
our love ought always to be showing  
what fruit and offerings it can bring.  
*The Church School Hymnal* (1900), alt.  
Tune: SPIRITUS VITAE

† Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd, *Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture of Giving in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 18.

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# Generosity of Spirit

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To define generosity of spirit as a character trait that describes not only what we *do*, but what we *are*.
2. To consider how Christian generosity of spirit is grounded in appreciating and welcoming God's generous provision for the world.
3. To see how both presumption and despair are barriers to developing generosity of spirit.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

While generosity typically involves donating money or goods, it includes giving less material things. In this way, hospitality is a species of generosity, a making room and giving space to others in your own place, or in your attention, or in conversation.

"Our front door is usually open, though often the glass outer door remains locked to keep toddlers inside. Whether expecting company or not, we try to welcome every visitor, neighbor, and friend at the front door, to jump into comfortable conversations that ease them gently into our home," Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise write. "We try to practice hospitality through a generosity of physical and figurative space. We do not merely invite others into our home when we open that glass door, we invite them to be present in our lives. Friends come for a meal, neighbors for playtime on our swings or sandbox, college students for a Crockpot of chili and a theology reading group, and church friends for a Sabbath potluck. Some people stay a few minutes, some a few hours. Family comes in from out of state and stays for a few days now and then. But as we open our home to those who cross our paths—as we say to them, yes, you are welcome here with us—we've discovered more and more friends in periods of transition, friends whose days in our home turn into weeks and then into months.

"In the last five years we've had seven housemates. A friend asked us recently how it is that we find people to live with us. We responded, 'We don't find them. They find us.'" (*Generosity*, pp. 68-69)

In this study we will consider how generosity of spirit, in its varied manifestations, can grow and pervade our lives. We will also think about the spiritual barriers today to our becoming more generous.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for his many gifts to us that undergird and inspire our generosity.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 8:1-14 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

We begin our study of generosity by defining it as a character trait, rather than merely a pattern of actions. As Christians we should aspire to a generosity of spirit that recognizes, welcomes, and responds in kind to God's loving, generous provision for the world. Today, however, it's easy to be tempted to either presumption or despair, and each of these attitudes will undercut the scriptural view of the world that nurtures generosity.

## Study Questions

1. People have various reasons for giving. In ancient systems of patronage, the rich gave to the poor in order to curry their favor, exact obligations from them, and proclaim superiority over them. We may give for similar reasons—for example, to show our wealth, establish a good reputation, etc. In all of these cases, the donation expresses what Doug Henry calls a "'me' and 'mine'" stance in which "competitive relations overshadow cooperative interdependence."

Henry uses the term "generosity of spirit" to refer to a very different character trait—a patterned way of viewing and responding to the world—that motivates the generous person. "In important ways generous activity is secondary," he writes. "Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the whole world, and it is this understanding that inspires genuinely generous activity." Generosity, which is giving others more than they are due, can be expressed in how we share our time, attention, knowledge and advice, homes and meals, etc.

2. Presumption and despair involve perceptions of the present that shape our attitudes about the future. The presumptuous possess some things and power which they believe will secure their happiness now and in the future. The despairing lack fulfillment now and are cynical or have given up about the future. These attitudes seem to be opposite in every way. Yet they agree in not trusting God's provision and in grasping at resources for personal gain. Both live "in a world of disenchanting objects over which to exercise domination."
3. Henry follows Dante in describing Christian hope as "certain expectation of a future glory," a deep confidence that God will provide our fulfillment. This trust in God's provision undermines the presumptuous idea that we can and must secure our happiness, and it alleviates the despairing worry about the future. Henry explains, "If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need."
4. Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise see hospitality as "a generosity of physical and figurative space" in their home. They have welcomed neighbors, family members, church groups, student groups from the college where Jonathan teaches, and even longer-term lodgers. The development in generosity is not measured just in the growing numbers of guests and their time of stay, but in how the Sands Wise's configure their time and the use of their house. They reserve a weeknight suppertime to share with houseguests; and they moved their growing family down to the main floor, though this involves being closer to visitors. They write, "All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space."

Invite members to make a plan to generously share some aspect of their time, attention, skills, living places, and so on, with others.

5. Jesus says he is "a spring of water" for the thirsty soul (John 4:14), and the Revelation of John summarizes God's provision in the image of Jesus guiding his followers to "the springs of the water of life" (7:17; cf. 21:6, 22:1, 22:17). Anthony Carl alludes to this cluster of biblical images in the first two verses of "All Who Thirst." The third verse echoes the summary statement in James 1:17, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...." The final verse describes a personal experience that gave Carl's family a quiet assurance of God's presence and care for their need.

## Departing Hymn

"All Who Thirst" is on pp. 61-63 of *Generosity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Paul's Expectations of Generosity

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Timothy 6:17-18	2 Corinthians 9
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Survey major features of Paul's expectations of generosity	Relate those features to the Jerusalem offering
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 3	Questions 2 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To trace through the Apostle Paul's letters his view that generosity is essential for being a disciple of Jesus Christ.
2. To introduce the radical nature of Christian generosity within the context of Greco-Roman culture.
3. To consider the implications of Paul's expectations of generosity for our discipleship today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

What comes to mind when you think of the Apostle Paul's teachings? Perhaps you recall some complex but soaring theological claims about Jesus, or some (apparently) difficult statements about women's roles in church life, or his descriptions of Christian virtue. But do you think of Paul as the apostle of social justice? Probably not, Kelly Liebgood admits. "Many biblical scholars and not a few Christians are rather critical of the apostle because he does not appear to say much of anything on the matter [of how God expects us to use our material resources], certainly not enough to promote any kind of meaningful action. To add insult to injury, some of Paul's writings can be interpreted as supporting the oft-heard mantra for self-reliance and social responsibility, 'God helps those who help themselves.'" (*Generosity*, p. 19)

But Liebgood thinks this is a mistake. He invites us to a closer, more charitable reading of Paul's letters, wherein we discover the apostle is eager to protect the vulnerable of society and is quick to care for the poor. Furthermore, Paul expects all faithful disciples to be this way.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Timothy 6:17-19 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The Apostle Paul, in harmony with other voices in Scripture, believes social justice and generosity are essential to discipleship. This study cannot even mention all of Paul's writings (after all, he wrote almost half of the New Testament), so it focuses on these key elements of his expectations of generosity: the continuation of generous giving despite its abuse, the Christian motivations for generous giving, and the inclusion of the lowly in the churches.

If the group would like to extend their study of Paul's writings, reserve for a second session your discussion of his call for members to participate in the Jerusalem offering. In that call some key elements of Paul's expectations of generosity are integrated with one another.

Encourage members who want to explore the wider biblical witness to read Jo-Ann Brant's *Generosity in the Bible* (pp. 82-87). She reviews four books that "demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon...[and] provide practical advice about how we can turn our well-meaning intent [to be generous] into action."

### **Study Questions**

1. It is amazing that the "idle" could count on someone in the church to provide for their needs, Kelly Liebengood notes. Such generosity was countercultural, for in the ancient world the few who were wealthy used their gifts "for the dual purpose of enhancing one's status among those who mattered and for expanding one's economic opportunities." Church members must have been practicing uncharacteristic generosity toward the poor, and the idlers were taking advantage of it. Paul does not want their generosity to stop (3:13), but for it to be refocused on those who truly need it. They should warn and shun the idlers not as enemies, but as fellow brothers and sisters (3:15).
2. When Paul uses the language of "doing/working the good" (cf. Galatians 6:10, 2 Thessalonians 3:13, 1 Timothy 6:17-18, and Titus 3:14), it is "not merely an appeal to generic acts of morality, but rather a call to live generously, using one's material resources to share with others in need," Liebengood explains. Ask members to read these passages aloud and use Liebengood's article to interpret them in context.  
Consider how your congregations shares its resources – money, time, building spaces, members' talents and skills, advocacy in the community, and so on – with those who are in need within the congregation and in the surrounding community.
3. Review the Corinthian situation in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. It seems some members arrive early to eat and drink, and others who come later must go without food. Liebengood writes, "In response, Paul demands that those who had the luxury of arriving early to Lord's Supper (that is, the wealthier members who did not have to work) should wait for the others (that is, the day laborers and others who lived at a subsistence level) so that together they could truly embody what the meal is all about. To do otherwise is to fail to truly 'remember' the Lord's Supper and to provoke God's judgment (11:30). To leave out the poor is to show contempt for the church of God and to humiliate those who have nothing (11:22)."  
Ask members to brainstorm practices in the church today that intentionally or inadvertently cause divisions between wealthy and poor members. Perhaps church programs (fellowship suppers, book studies, support groups, children's programs, family retreats, mission trips, etc.) are cost prohibitive for some. Do worship styles, long-range building plans, or church programming, and so on, cater to the preferences of a few wealthy members? Do church outreach programs target those who can help the congregation financially?
4. Liebengood identifies two related reasons that Paul gives for participating in the Jerusalem offering. First, Paul suggests it is an implication and obligation of their discipleship; he asks them to give in "obedience to the confession of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 9:13). Second, he suggests their giving would reflect and imitate the Lord's gift to them; in Liebengood's words, their "generosity is rooted in and enabled by the transforming generosity of Jesus Christ" (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9).  
Identify the regular and special offerings that are promoted in your congregation. Consider whether they imitate Jesus Christ's gift of himself to the world, and whether they reflect your obedience to the gospel. Is there an offering that you would like for your congregation to promote? How would you justify it to others in terms of Paul's two criteria?

### **Departing Hymn**

"All Who Thirst" is on pp. 61-63 of *Generosity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Subversive Generosity

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the generosity of God's reign was exemplified and taught by Jesus Christ.
2. To see how such generosity was subversive of patronage practices in the Roman Empire, and remains subversive of global capitalist and consumerist ideals today.
3. To critique two famous examples of Christian art that depict this generosity.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Come, Kingdom of Our God" locate one of the familiar tunes FESTAL SONG or ST. THOMAS (Williams) in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with an Observation

The Christian generosity that is a defining feature of God's kingdom stands in stark contrast to ancient Greco-Roman practices of giving. "First-century Romans regarded generosity as a virtue especially well-suited to powerful, rich benefactors," Doug Henry explains. "It exacted obligations from beneficiaries. Someone on the receiving end of a highborn Roman's generosity was bound not only to return thanks or give honor, but to support his or her benefactor. Such support could take the form of preferential business arrangements, promoting a patron for political office, advocating for favorable laws, or championing a benefactor's civic status. Generosity thus underwrote patron-client relationships marked by intractable *quid pro quo* reciprocity. Getting a favor meant returning a favor. For these reasons, generosity was a virtue limited to an elite segment of the population. Ordinary folk, without either high birth or wealth, possessed neither the status nor the resources necessary for generosity." (*Generosity*, p. 12)

Let's keep this context in mind as we explore Jason Coker's idea that the practices of Christian generosity were "subversive" of oppression in the Roman Empire, and they continue to be subversive of ways of life shaped by consumerism and profit-driven capitalism today.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:25-37 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

The first two studies in this series, “Generosity of Spirit” and “Paul’s Expectations of Generosity,” contrasted Christian generosity to ancient Greco-Roman understandings of the virtue. This study builds on that insight by positing that the practice of Christian generosity remains subversive of economic and cultural ways today. To spotlight these contrasts (in both the first-century and now), Jason Coker describes the *basileia* of God—which is usually translated “kingdom of God” or “empire of God”—as the *reign* of God, for this better conveys that it is God who governs our communal life and the divine generosity that shapes our practices.

## Study Questions

1. Review Doug Henry’s summary of patronage in the Roman Empire (in “Begin with an Observation”). Kelly Liebgood describes its effects this way: “The startling reality was that most of the material resources that were available in Greco-Roman urban centers were harvested or extracted by those living at or below subsistence levels, but distributed among the elite.” He explains that “the generosity that was practiced by and even expected of those who had reserves was blatantly self-serving. In the extremely competitive social construct of honor and shame, extravagant giving (for civic monuments, public works projects such as theaters, roads, water systems, or public baths, opulent banquets, sponsorship of gladiator games, and so on) was for the dual purpose of enhancing one’s status among those who mattered and for expanding one’s economic opportunities” (*Generosity*, pp. 20-21).  
“God’s generosity opposed Roman selfishness,” Jason Coker notes. It called all persons to be generous (as their means would allow), did not favor the wealthy (as givers or receivers of gifts), and did not expect a return benefit. Members might consider how the Good Samaritan breaks the cultural norms of Roman patronage.
2. Jason Coker identifies two current practices significantly out of step with the sort of generosity that characterizes God’s reign. The first is the practice of capitalism when its “primary and overriding motive is profit—based on human greed.” In this case, profit is not a means to make opportunities for workers to create useful products or meet human needs, but is an end in itself that outweighs all other motives for work. Then profit-making becomes selfish, focuses on taking rather than giving, and is complacent or destructive of human dignity. The second is the practice of “retail therapy,” the consumerist idea that we can purchase enough things to make our lives happy.  
Encourage members to discuss Coker’s two examples and to brainstorm specific examples of their own. Consider, for example, how we spend resources today—purchasing the latest products, buying access to the appropriate venues, making gifts to the attention-gathering charities, and so on—to establish our standing in the community. These seem to be modern forms of patronage.
3. Heidi Hornik explains that the artist “Jacopo Bassano was a simple man by the standards of his contemporaries,” but he created “readings” of Scripture through his paintings to encourage people to a more faithful way of life. Generosity was close to Bassano’s heart, for he regularly “assisted the efforts of relief for the sick and poor in his day.” In *The Good Samaritan*, Bassano uses lighting, clothing color, and composition to focus on the Samaritan’s helping the traveler (in contrast to the passing priest and Levite ignoring him). The costliness of the Samaritan’s care in time, resources, and effort is suggested by the blood-soaked bandages, the flasks of oil and wine, and physical effort to lifting the traveler. The traveler has nothing to repay the Samaritan’s provision.
4. Heidi Hornik writes, “The Emperor Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565, and his wife, the Empress Theodora, enabled the spread of the Eastern Church to its most Western point on the Italian peninsula. Their generous gifts established the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. The two mosaics discussed here honor and commemorate their achievements.” On the one hand, the images point to the wealthy patrons (and, thus, reward their financial gifts with public honor). On the other hand, the Emperor and Empress carry the emblems of the Eucharist, which point beyond them to the donation of God in Christ to establish salvation. In this way the images show them participating in worship with the gathered congregation and commending the congregants attention to God’s generosity.

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Solving the Riddle of Comfortable Guilt

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the idea of “comfortable guilt” as a partial explanation for why American Christians give so little to charitable causes.
2. To examine three strategies to cure comfortable guilt in ourselves and others.
3. To discuss how generous giving can counteract the spiritual diseases of materialism and consumerism.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Lord, You Love the Cheerful Giver” locate one of the familiar tunes PLEADING SAVIOR or BEECHER in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with a Story

“After the 1987 stock market collapse, one of Wall Street’s worst days, I panicked over my lost investments,” Richard Stearns remembers. “We had lost more than a third of our life’s savings, including the money we had set aside for our children’s college. I became obsessed, analyzing spreadsheets and calling in orders to sell our stocks and funds in the hopes of preventing more losses.

“It was obvious to my wife, Reneé, that I had far more of my desires and dreams tied up in that money than I should have. She said, ‘Honey, this thing is consuming you in an unhealthy way. We have our marriage, our health, our friends, our children, and a good income. You need to let go of this and trust God.’

“She was right, but it was not easy to let go. So Reneé suggested something that seemed outrageous to me at the time. After we prayed together, she told me that we needed to write out some large checks to the ministries we supported. This was not easy for me to do, especially in the state I was in. But once it was all over I felt a wave of relief. We had broken the spell that money had cast over me.” (*Generosity*, p. 75)

How have materialism and consumerism “cast their spell” over us, so that, despite our good intentions, we rarely turn our attention to giving? That’s a big factor in (what Patricia Snell Herzog calls) “the riddle of comfortable guilt.”

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Malachi 3:8-12 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study examines Patricia Snell Herzog’s proposed explanation for why most American Christians who regularly attend church give relatively little to charitable and religious causes: they have “comfortable guilt.” After members are clear about this phenomenon, focus on the three remedies for comfortable guilt that she recommends.

The next study guide, “How Congregations Differ on Generosity,” explores how congregations’ organizational structures are more or less successful in inspiring giving. As Herzog notes, “Americans are all-too-isolated in their giving activities, and creating an organizational culture of giving is a way to potentially implement several of these remedies simultaneously.”

### *Study Questions*

1. Patricia Snell Herzog stresses that comfortable guilt is not selfishness. She is describing people who want to be generous givers and know that they have adequate resources, but fail to give anything like their ideals would suggest. She reports them saying, “I suppose I could cut down my own needs to have more money to give, but I don’t feel guilty about that.” “There might be a slight amount of guilt, because like I said, you can always give more. But that wouldn’t keep me up at night.” “It’s not really uncomfortable. It’s just, ‘Darn, I wish I could give more. I wish I could.’” And, “I’m comfortable, but then I’m not comfortable.”

The riddle is that they allow dissonance between their practice and ideals to linger; they do not adjust their practice, nor do they give up on their ideals. So they continue to experience guilt, but have become comfortable with that.

2. Herzog identifies four elements of a giving orientation: “higher levels of social responsibility, greater degree of holding a prosperity outlook, more social solidarity, and lower tendency to acquisition seeking.” You might choose one element for all members to focus on, or form four small groups to reflect on them individually. Brainstorm how worship, education programs, small groups, mission activities, fellowships, and so on, in your congregation influence that element of a giving orientation. What more can your congregation do?
3. “People in the United States are private about their giving—both in their talking about it and their doing it; thus, few people have access to the kinds of giving activities that others around them are actually doing,” Herzog notes. She mentions how she models giving behavior before her children when an offering is collected in worship. In some churches, members fill out pledge cards or sign a chart to indicate their gift of money, time, and labor. How can your church encourage people to share their giving behaviors in a humble way?
4. Herzog suggests that Habitual and Planned givers establish a habit or set up a plan for their regular giving, and then they do not have to stop and think about it as the year goes on. Some examples might be giving a certain amount each week or each month, establishing an automatic withdrawal for online giving, scheduling a certain time to write checks to charitable organizations, and so on. Selective and Impulsive givers, on the other hand, are more likely to be distracted from carrying out their intentions to give, since it was never formed into a habit. She explains, “For example, we hear people say, ‘I should go to the gym more, but I don’t.’ This same mechanism can help to explain significant differences in giving.”

Encourage members to share the giving habits that they have successfully formed, or would like to establish.

5. Richard Stearns makes this comment at the end of his story about overcoming his enervating fear when the stock market collapsed in 1987 (see “Begin with a Story” above). Materialism and consumerism rivet our attention on gaining personal wealth, possessions, status, security, and so on. This can be a serious distraction from focusing on others’ needs, our interdependence on others, and the abundance we already have, which are the key features of (what Herzog calls) “a giving orientation.” These “diseases” encourage us to depend on ourselves rather than on God. Stearns reports “a wave of relief” after he acted in opposition to their temptation, by writing generous checks to the ministries his family supported.

Stearns believes these diseases infect congregations too: only small percentages of church budgets go to overseas ministries, humanitarian aid, or direct assistance to the poor.

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# How Congregations Differ on Generosity

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Psalm 37:25-26	1 Kings 17:10-16 and Mark 12:41-44
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore congregation's giving	Discuss stories and plan a giving path
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Question 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider differences among congregations and individual members that can make a difference in how they hear appeals to generous giving.
2. To make plans for increased personal and congregational giving.
3. To review scriptural portraits of generous giving.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lord, Teach Us to Your Way of Loving" locate the familiar tune SPIRITUS VITAE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)) or Hymnary.org ([www.hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org)).

## Begin with a Story

At "a meeting to discuss a congregation's annual giving," Ruben Swint recalls, "an octogenarian expressed the view that the answer to the church's funding needs was an emphasis on tithing, by which he meant giving ten percent of one's gross income to the church, gross income being the only valid way to determine one's tithe. Another member stated that because her career was in the non-profit world, her tithe included what she gave to the church plus what she gave to the organization she was serving. Still another participant stated that tithing and institutional support were not very motivating for their 30s-something age cohort, who would respond better to appeals to help hurting people.

"Was it ever true that every church member responded to the same message about giving? Was it ever true that every congregation's culture supported the same approach to developing faithful stewards, or generous givers? I think neither was ever completely true. If we have four Gospels portraying the good news in particular contexts and paradigms, then we have different gospels of good giving alive in members and their congregations." (*Generosity*, p. 45)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide the leaders of your congregation as you seek to develop a spirit of generosity and pattern of generous actions.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 37:25-26 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

### *Reflection*

This study raises our awareness of why congregations and individuals can hear appeals to generous giving so differently. Use this time to focus on understanding and planning for your congregation's giving, or for developing members' personal plans of giving. Point members to Arthur Sutherland's review in "Toward a Theology of Generosity" of three books that approach generosity from a Christian theological perspective and can help motivate generous actions.

If the group would like to extend this study, schedule a second session to draw inspiration from the "unlikely champions" in 1 Kings 17:10-16 and Mark 12:41-44. Focus on the congregation's giving in the first session, and on individual members' giving plans in the second.

### *Study Questions*

1. Ruben Swint discusses seven differences: how leaders speak about money and giving, member's sources of income (or type of employment), generational differences, differences in motivations for giving (which may or may not match how leaders speak about giving), impact of recent cultural changes (from cooperation and institutional loyalty toward competition and customer satisfaction), median household incomes, and demographic changes in the neighborhood (that influence household income). After group members agree on which differences are most prominent in your congregation, discuss how you can use this knowledge to shape appeals for more generous giving.
2. Members and groups within the congregation will be ready for different levels of challenge. Review Swint's descriptions of a day, week, month, and year of generosity. Encourage group members to select a level that is most appropriate for the group, or for the entire congregation, and then brainstorm the best way to structure and present the challenge.
3. The giving path involves donation of "time, skill, money, and influence to bring the good news of God's kingdom to more people." It invites members to begin with any amount of their time, percentage of their income, and so on, but to "communicate [their] personal plan for giving each year and invite people to walk the path with [them]."

Discuss why each "step" is an advance in faithful discipleship. Invite members to prayerfully consider what steps they have taken, and how they can advance to the next one. There will be a personal challenge for everyone. Even those who have taken many steps will find it a challenge to increase the percentage of their income, amount of their time, etc., that they give. They may be reluctant both to share their path with others and to encourage others to join them on the path. How can your group members encourage one another in this giving path?

4. Allen Walworth notes that the women in 1 Kings 17:10-16 and Mark 12:41-44 are both unnamed, poor, and widowed. Any of these characteristics would be enough to make it "unlikely" for them to be exemplars of generosity in the ancient world, but God notices them and the biblical writers record their stories. When Jesus retells the story of the widow at Zarephath (Luke 4:26), he emphasizes another unlikely feature: that she is a Gentile.

The women's gifts are not large in amount, but they are sacrificial. We do not know these women's motives, or stories, but we know enough to say they are not giving to impress others, to gain a reputation, to exact an obligation, and so on. So, we can conclude that they are generous and that they trust God. "Behind every great act of generosity is a story, even if only known to the giver and to God," Walworth writes.

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.