

The Generous Christian



Four Bible studies from
Paul's letters



Introduction

The first three of our studies come from chapters 8 and 9 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. The background to these chapters lies in a severe famine that hit Judea (the province including and surrounding Jerusalem) around AD 45-46. During this time, churches elsewhere in the Empire collected funds to relieve the hungry churches of Judea (Acts 11). It seems that it was taking a while for the churches in Judea to recover, because by the time 2 Corinthians was written ten years later (AD 56), Paul is still organising relief funds. It seems that many churches were keen to help: we learn in 1 Corinthians 16 and in 2 Corinthians 8-9 that the churches of Galatia and the church in Corinth had enthusiastically committed themselves to raising money, as had the churches of Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea). Now that the pledges had been made, it was time to follow up good intentions with action. These chapters in 2 Corinthians are Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians to come good on what they had promised the year before.

The fourth study considers Paul's description of greed as a form of idolatry, but widens to consider other relevant texts as well. It's interesting how the NT posits greed as just as much a false God as Baal, Buddha or Krishna. The opposite of greed is therefore not so much generosity but faith in the one true God; it is once we have our faith correctly aligned that we will be able to act more generously.

Given that Paul's letters were each addressed to specific pastoral situations, it is hoped that these studies will address not just the theory of being generous but also some of the practicalities. Money was just as much an issue in the ancient world as it is today, so we can be sure that Paul's words retain their ... currency.

The Generous Christian

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Study 1 – Why be generous?

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. Do you know anyone whom you would describe as *generous*? How is their generosity shown? Why do you think drives their generosity?
2. Read Psalm 24:1-2. What does the LORD own? Does this challenge the way you view your material possessions and income?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-6. What things characterised the Macedonians' approach to money? How have they echoed the truth found in Psalm 24:1-2? Can you think of any other Bible passages where someone gives "beyond their ability"?
4. Read on vs 8-15. Why is Paul is telling the Corinthians about the Macedonians? Is he commanding them to do exactly the same? What behaviour does Paul want to encourage in the Corinthians?
5. What kind of generosity is being promoted in this chapter, ie who is the recipient, who is the giver, and what is the relief for? Can you think of any modern-day examples where churches have imitated the same generosity?
6. Look again at v9. What reason for generosity is given in this verse? How would you summarise the Bible's reasons for our generosity?
7. On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable are you with the idea of giving away significant portions of your money? Has this study challenged you in any way?

Study 2 – Overcoming obstacles # 1

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

1. What things do you keep on putting off? What stops you “getting around to it”?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-24. How many people is Paul sending to Corinth? Why is he sending them? (sneak a peek at 9:5 if it helps).
3. Who are the two “brothers” representing? What kind of pressure is Paul applying to the Corinthians?
4. What role does the first “brother” have in Paul’s ministry? (vs18-21). What lesson is there here for how we handle money?
5. Read Ch 9:1-3. What have the Corinthians already promised? What is Paul fearful of?
6. What is Paul urging the Corinthians to do in vs 4-5? How might modern day Christians fail to “finish arrangements” with their money?
7. Would you say you’re a disciplined person when it comes to giving money? How have other people in the group become more disciplined?
8. To what extent do you budget your finances? What can you learn from others in the group?
9. Pray that God might grant us a willing spirit of generosity!

Study 3 -What does generosity look like?

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

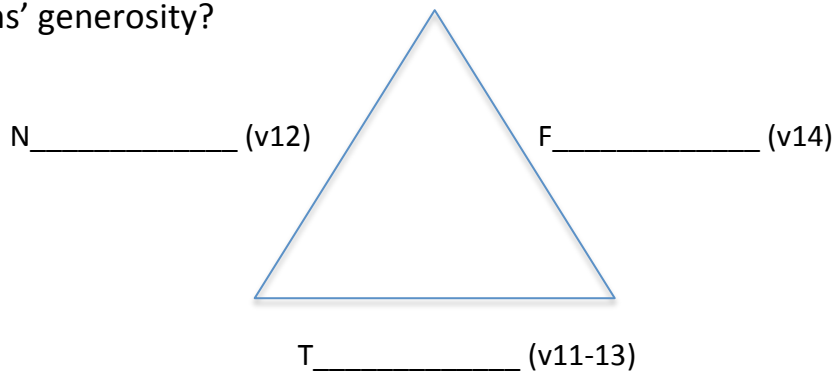
1. What might some people hope to gain from being generous? Rank the different motivations you come up with from terrible to excellent!

2. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6 and restate this principle in your own words. When applied to financial giving, what possible interpretations might people bring to this verse?

3. Read v 7. Does Paul give a clear figure of what we should give? What things *does* he give clear guidance about?

4. Read vs 8-11. What is the purpose of God blessing us with material wealth? How do these verses encourage us to be generous?

5. Read vs 12-14. What three things does Paul expect to see as the result of the Corinthians' generosity?



6. How do vs 12-14 help us to understand vs 6 and 10?

7. How is the Corinthians' generosity described in v 13? According to this verse, is financial giving optional for the Christian?

8. Spend some time thanking God for people who've been generous to you!

Study 4 – Overcoming obstacles # 2

Colossians 3:1-17

1. To what extent does our modern society see greed as a problem?
2. Read Isaiah 44:12-20. What does God think of idols and those who make and worship them?
3. Turning to the New Testament, read Ephesians 5:3-6 and Colossians 3:5-6. How is greed described here?
4. What signs might indicate that we are in danger of worshipping money?
5. Tim Keller, a Presbyterian minister in New York, writes the following in his book *Counterfeit Gods*:

Jesus warns people far more often about greed than about sex, yet almost no one thinks they are guilty of it. Therefore we should all begin with a working hypothesis that “this could easily be a problem for me”

Do you think greed is a real danger in your life? Where and/or when do you most clearly demonstrate your greed?

6. Read Hebrews 13:5. According to this verse, what is the antidote to a love of money?
7. How would you complete the following sentence?
The opposite of greed is not actually g _____ but f _____ G _____.
8. Pray that God will protect you from the idolatry of greed, and that your faith in him will lead you towards generosity.

Leader's Notes

Study 1 – Why be generous?

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. A question where people can start thinking about some positive role models. But the key is to think about the reasons *why* people are generous. This is the key thing we want people to think about in this study, even though there's lots we could discuss about generosity!

2. The Lord owns everything, including our material and financial wealth! What we have really belongs to him, therefore he has a right to have a say how it's used. This is a challenge for everyone who says "it's my money, I earned it, I'll do with it what I like".

3. *Characteristics*: generosity despite poverty; giving more than what they were able; seeking out opportunities to give.

Echoing Ps 24: Note v5, "they gave themselves first to the Lord." They recognised the Lord's authority, and the result was generosity and a willingness to get on board with what Paul was doing.

Other passages: Note Luke 21.1-4, commonly called the story of the "Widow's mite" (a "mite" being a small offering). Some might mention that giving beyond your ability doesn't make sense; how can you give what you don't have? The point is illustrated by Luke's story; to give beyond your ability is to give sacrificially, even dangerously.

4. Paul wants to use the example of the Macedonians to give the Corinthians a gentle push. It doesn't appear that the extraordinary giving of the Macedonians was a strict expectation that Paul put on others. Note their giving was 'unexpected' (v5). But this type of giving is included as a possibility for others to consider. At the least Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate the Macedonians in coming good on the promise of financial support, and to do so with some level of generosity.

5. The recipients are the churches in Judea who are experiencing a season of material poverty while the givers are the churches in Greece and Macedonia. Note that Paul expects the situation could easily reverse. Modern day examples would include churches that give regularly to churches in less resourced areas: City churches to rural churches; western churches to churches in the developing world.

6. This is a key verse, make sure you get time to consider it! The foundation of all our generosity is Christ's generosity towards us at the cross. It was a sacrificial generosity, not merely token, driven by love for others and obedience to the Father. Perhaps ask "Does our generosity look like this?" In summary: money belongs to God and is not ours to hold on to, and the example of Christ compels us to be generous with it.

7. People may or may not be comfortable answering this question out loud, give people a chance to ask this of themselves and then see if people are willing to share. Be willing to encourage others too share, don't accept silence too easily. Finish in prayer.

Study 2 – Overcoming obstacles # 1

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

1. The theme of this study is how ill discipline can get in the way of being generous. We might like the idea of giving generously, but if we fail to get around to it, there is no point! It's not just the thought that counts!

2. Paul is sending three people to Corinth: Titus and two people only known to us as "the brothers". He is sending them to encourage/ensure the Corinthians fulfil their promise of a generous gift.

3. The brothers represent other churches in other parts of the world. Paul is putting pressure on the Corinthians by exposing their actions to other Christians. He's forcing them to be accountable to others!

4. This brother was chosen by the churches to accompany Paul as he conducted this fundraising ministry. Note that Paul himself was being held accountable! The lesson here is that financial matters should be openly conducted, with accountability measures put in place.
5. The Corinthians had already promised to give generously, but Paul is fearful that they were not going to come good on it. This would make Paul look bad because he had relayed the Corinthians' promise onto others.
6. Paul is urging the Corinthians to finish the task and give the money they had promised. We might fail to finish arrangements by: never getting around to organising that automatic payment from our bank; never returning that call to the person who was asking for financial support; never reviewing our giving when we get a raise or promotion. We might mean to do all these things, but we let the busyness of life take over.
7. Talking about our personal financial lives can be uncomfortable, but don't be too quick to surrender to the group's silence. Seek out a few testimonies. Ask "Why do we find it hard to be disciplined in this area?" Hear from a few people as to what accountability/discipline measures they have in their own lives. Let the group learn from each other.
8. Budgeting is a financial discipline that benefits both the individual and also the church. Again, let the group learn from each other's experiences. Be careful not to let those who are financially attentive to become judgmental of those who are more relaxed. There is room for variation here, but no room for financial indifference or irresponsibility.
9. Pray that God might grant us a willing spirit of generosity!

Study 3 -What does generosity look like?

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

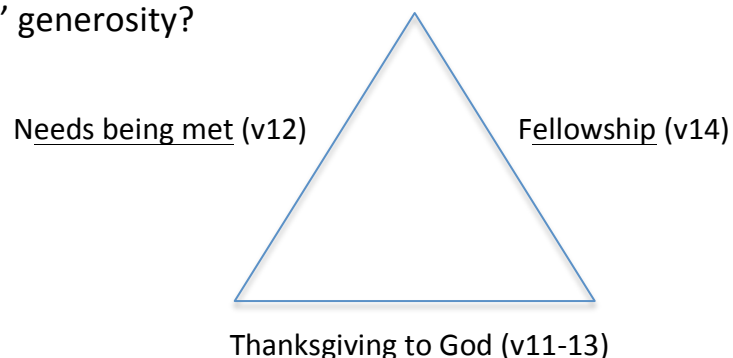
1. Some people might want to feel good about themselves, some people have hearts that break for the poor, some understand that our behaviour is modelled on Christ's generosity, some hope to gain a benefit for themselves, or even manipulate those who benefit from their generosity further down the track!

2. The saying in verse 6 is taken from an agricultural setting. If you sow lots of seed, you'll get a better harvest. Paul is applying this to giving. Some Christians (those who promote the so-called 'prosperity gospel') might assume this means that if you give financially, you will gain financially. We'll revisit these verses later in the study to see if this interpretation makes sense in context.

3. No, there is no clear figure. The Old Testament idea of tithing (giving 10% of your income) is not re-established in the New Testament, so while it's a handy guide for how much to give, it's not binding. In any case, the average Israelite gave much more than 10% when every requirement of the OT law is added up! Rather Paul speaks about the attitude you should have when you give: willingly and cheerfully. But it's hard to imagine a cheerful and willing giver who is stingy, isn't it?

4. The purpose of wealth is to be generous with it, note v11. These verses also remind us that it is God who supplies the "seed to the sower"; the wealth we have comes from him, and so this gives us confidence to be generous. If we wish to be generous, God will give us the means to do so.

5. Read vs 12-14. What three things does Paul expect to see as the result of the Corinthians' generosity?



6. The thing that we'll reap (v6) and the harvest of our righteousness (v10) is NOT personal wealth as the prosperity gospel teaches, but people's praise and thanksgiving towards God. We give so that God is glorified by those who benefit. You might also ask the group "Do you ever think of your financial gifts as leading to prayers of thankfulness and praise?"

7. Their generosity is described as obedience to God, something that ought to accompany our confession of the Gospel. No, giving is not optional; it's a necessary form of obedience for those who believe the Gospel.

8. Spend some time thanking God for people who've been generous to you!

Study 4 – Overcoming obstacles #2

Colossians 3:1-17

1. Sometimes you hear people speak about the greed of corporations, and the greed that destroys the planet. But how many people deliberately curb their own personal spending? Some might, many don't.
2. Note the tragic and farcical nature of idol worship. Half the wood is used for a fire to keep warm, yet the other half is somehow a god! They cannot say to themselves "is not this thing in my right hand a lie?" (v20). Needless to say God is not impressed with such foolishness.
3. Greed is a form of idolatry, and the greedy are idolaters. That is to say, greed is a form of false worship, and is just as foolish and nonsensical as the idolatry described in Isaiah 44.
4. We might be in danger of worshiping money when we ask it to provide what only God can: security, meaning, a sense of value. When we serve money instead of serving God—when all our time and effort goes into making money rather than serving God and his people—that's a danger sign as well. When we invest our money to make more money as a priority over making more disciples, that's putting money first ahead of God.
5. The point here is to emphasise that greed is a 'silent sin', something that goes undetected and unchallenged. We need to school ourselves to be wise to it and to root it out and destroy it otherwise it will destroy us. Just because it is silent doesn't mean it won't kill us. We've been warned.
6. The antidote to a love of money and the key to being content is to realise that God is with us and will never forsake us. The solution to greed is not simply more discipline, but a greater appreciation of God's provision for us. Knowing that God is with us and provides for us enables us to hold our money less tightly.
7. The opposite of greed is not actually generosity but faith in God.
8. Pray that God will protect you from the idolatry of greed, and that your faith in him will lead you towards generosity.

