

The background of the entire image is a white fabric. It features several blue ink drawings of hands, some in various poses. Scattered across the fabric are numerous small, shiny crosses made of gold and silver sequins or beads. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent grey rectangular area in the upper right portion of the image.

**MORE THAN
MONEY:**
*the spiritual
practice of*
generosity

OVERVIEW—WHAT IS GENEROSITY?

When you hear the word “generosity” what comes to mind? Is it a wealthy person who contributes vast sums of money to a charity? Is it the spontaneous, warm feeling of sympathy for the less fortunate?

In their book *The Paradox of Generosity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson define generosity as “*the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.*”¹ For centuries, it applied only to the wealthy and their practices of giving, but by the nineteenth century it came to be seen as a character trait that anyone could acquire. They call it a “virtue” because it is a quality that is formed through intentional, habitual practice.

This understanding of generosity is very different from the stereotypes based on wealth and spontaneity. It is something that everyone can do but it takes practice. It is not the same as “altruism,” which is a completely selfless concern for the well-being of others. A person can be generous and be motivated by the benefits they receive as byproducts of their

¹ p. 4.

generosity. On the other hand, generosity excludes any attempt to manipulate or control through the giving of gifts. The end goal of generosity is the well-being of others.

Because generosity is the virtue of giving good things, it is much more than donating money. To be sure, it includes financial gifts but there are many other things that enhance the well-being of others. There is the generosity of our presence and relational support (emotional generosity); there is the sharing of our time and talents to help a neighbor (timely generosity); and there are the collective efforts of being generous that we do through the church and other organizations.

Smith and Davidson show the benefits of generosity for the giver. People who practice a lifestyle of emotional, timely and financial generosity are happier and healthier, have a greater sense of purpose and more fulfilling relationships. Indeed, acts of generosity and well-being are mutually reinforcing. Thus, they describe the practice of generosity as a paradox: “The reality of generosity is instead actually paradoxical. Generosity does not usually work in simple, zero-sum, win-lose ways. The results of generosity are often

instead unexpected, counterintuitive, win-win².”

If you want a better quality of life, you have to do what Jesus said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (Mark 8:35-36)”

This Lenten Study Guide is based on *The Paradox of Generosity*. I encourage you to get a copy and read it along with this study, especially if you are leading a discussion group. For readers of the book, you will notice that I have made some changes to the categories Smith and Davidson use to make them more useful for our reflections, but the basic concepts are the same.

Whether you are doing this with a small group or on your own, this study guide is designed to help you develop the spiritual practice of generosity. Each week’s scripture readings will be featured in Sundays’ services and sermons. Each session features a generosity “audit” to aid your personal introspection and a generosity “experiment” to

² p. 11.

put into practice the ideas for that session. A generosity “journal” is included at the end of each session for you to record your reflections and experiences.

Generosity is never an easy topic. We may feel uncomfortable because we assume that it only involves money. We may shy away from it because we feel inadequate to call ourselves “generous.” Or we may not want to examine the deeper issues that it brings up about our relationships and priorities.

Taking on the issue of generosity is not for the faint-hearted, but it is worth it. Learning to be more generous will enhance our relationships, deepen our faith, and improve our health. It is worth the investment.

Before you begin this study, ask yourself: What reservations do I have about examining my generosity?

Pastor Darren
Lent 2015

Session One:

Emotional Generosity

INTRODUCTION

From music to athletics to academics, we know that practice is an essential part of becoming proficient. So too with generosity. In *The Paradox of Generosity*, Notre Dame researchers Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson detail the psychological, interpersonal and physical benefits of generosity for the giver. But they caution that “for generosity to enhance one’s well-being it must be *practiced*.³” Random acts of generosity do not have a beneficial effect; instead, our formation as generous persons takes time, repetition and practice.

Did You Know?

48% of persons who scored high on relational generosity report having excellent/very good health

36% of persons who scored little relational generosity report having excellent/very good health

³ p. 96.

Generosity is a *spiritual* practice because it enhances our connection with God and, through God's Spirit, with others. Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also....No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:21, 22-23)." By focusing our treasures on God and others we reorient our lives to the source of our life and joy in Christ.

Our treasures are more than money. In this first session we examine "emotional generosity." This kind of generosity includes: giving one's undivided attention to another person, making a special point to be kind to someone who is troubled, praying with and for others, expressing affirmation, and showing hospitality. This foundational form of generosity can also be called "relational" or "interpersonal" generosity.

As you begin your Lenten reflections, remember back across your life. When have you been the recipient of emotional generosity?

STORIES FROM

THE PARADOX OF GENEROSITY

“Troy Musser in Illinois lives with ‘Gary,’ whom he calls his “husband-in-law.” He and Troy divorced the same woman, and now he helps raise Troy’s children. ‘I know it sounds kind of weird, but he was stepdad to my kids for 12 years. And when he and their mother were separating, she thought he would just disappear, but with 3 kids that wasn’t going to happen.’”

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

- 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
 - What is the relationship between God’s comfort for us and our comfort for others?

 - How did Paul see his “afflictions” as an aid to his ministry?

- Have your “afflictions” made you more compassionate or more reticent toward others?

- Who do you know is under pressure right now and what might you do to be emotionally generous to them?

- Job 2:11-13
 - What do Job’s friends do and not do?

- How do you know when to “just listen” rather than problem solve for someone in need?

- Psalm 31
 - When have you experienced God walking with you during a time of serious distress?

 - How can we imitate God’s readiness to listen?

EMOTIONAL GENEROSITY AUDIT

In the past 30 days⁴:

- When one of my loved ones needed my attention, I really

⁴ For the complete survey, see p. 18 of *The Paradox of Generosity*.

tried to slow down and give them the time and help they needed.

Y N

- I went the “extra mile” to help take care of my friends, relatives, and acquaintances. Y N
- When friends or family members experienced something upsetting or discouraging I made a special point of being kind to them.
Y N
- I was willing to risk my own feelings being hurt in the process if I stood a chance of helping someone else in need. Y N
- I made it a point to let my friends and family know how much I love and appreciate them.
Y N
- I went out of my way to take time to include someone at work/church/school who was new or overlooked. Y N
- If you answered no to any of these statements, what interfered with your ability to be emotionally generous?

GENEROSITY EXPERIMENT #1:

This week, review those items in your audit that were “no.” Try to find ways to practice each of them this week. How did it make you feel? How did your emotional generosity affect others?

GENEROSITY JOURNAL:

Session Two: Timely Generosity

INTRODUCTION

According to Steve Jobs, “My favorite things in life don't cost any money. It's really clear

Did you know?

-Percentage of Americans who volunteered in 2013: 23.6%

-Percentage of Americans who
-Never helped a friend or neighbor with a job: 30%
-Never watched the home of a friend: 34%

-Never taken care of others' children: 42%

-Did not give blood: 88.5%

that the most precious resource we all have is time.” Regardless of your financial situation, you can still be generous with your time. Timely generosity is not a consolation prize; it is a supreme act of generosity because it requires personal investment and relationship building.

Timely generosity is the

Golden Rule—“Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Lev. 19:18; Rom. 13:9)—put into

action. It includes informal acts of helping a neighbor, such as watching their pet while they are on vacation, loaning them a gardening tool or helping with a project. Timely generosity also includes a host of volunteer opportunities with non-profit organizations, civic groups and churches⁵. Regardless of your skills, it is your willingness to lend a hand that makes all the difference.

When was the last time you were the recipient of timely generosity?

**STORIES FROM
*THE PARADOX OF GENEROSITY***

“Tina Kennedy, a Northern Californian single mother of 3 boys, cannot change the social structures underlying poverty, so instead she works to change the self-perceptions and self-presentations of the poor. Doing their hair and makeup for free is an act of generosity.”

⁵ Timely generosity combines what Smith and Davidson categorize as “Neighborly Generosity” and “Volunteering”.

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

- Romans 13:8-10
 - The preceding passage (vv. 1-7) describes the Christians' relationship with the governing authorities. How is loving your neighbor a part of the Christian witness in society?

 - What is the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule?

 - Why is it difficult for us to love our neighbors?

- Leviticus 19:13-18
 - In which areas of life does Leviticus apply the Golden Rule?

 - What kind of society does Leviticus envision?

 - What is the relationship between love and justice?

- Psalm 146
 - How does the psalm describe God?

- How is the nature of God the basis for loving our neighbors?

GENEROSITY AUDIT:

In the past 30 days have you....

- Taken care of another person's child Y N
- Watched the house/property of a friend or neighbor Y N
- Helped a coworker when it was not a part of your assigned tasks Y N
- Helped a friend or neighbor with a task Y N
- Assisted a stranger with information or a task Y N
- Helped a sick friend Y N
- Other acts of timely generosity:

How much time do you spend each day...

- a. Engaged in timely generosity _____
- b. Watching TV _____

c. Online/Engaged in Social Media

d. Doing a hobby _____

GENEROSITY EXPERIMENT #2:

This week, are there opportunities to turn any of your “nos” into “yeses?” Offer your time and skill to help a neighbor or a coworker solve a concrete problem. What was the task? How long did it take? What was their reaction?

GENEROSITY JOURNAL:

Session Three:

Financial Generosity

INTRODUCTION

How do numbers make you feel? Some people like the orderliness and certainty of numbers. Mathematical proofs can be called “elegant.” For others, numbers are anxiety producing and baffling, especially when the numbers are dollars and cents. When it comes to finances, some people are tempted to find security in a close scrutiny of their numbers, but others are tempted to ignore the numbers altogether.

Since Lent is a time for self-examination, this week you will take a closer look at your financial generosity. The goal is to avoid the two temptations mentioned above. While there is no ultimate security in money, it is not something we should ignore either. We call it “currency” for good reason: money conveys our relationships, obligations, hopes and fears. In short, it is one form of currency of the soul.

On the positive side, God uses our financial resources as a currency of blessing to others. In turn, we are blessed through these relationships.

On the negative side, our financial resources can become a currency of unfaithfulness, expressing our lack of faith in God to care for us and our unwillingness to follow Christ. Ultimately, our anxiety over money and our attachment to the things money can buy separates us from God.

Because it is a currency of good or ill, John Wesley counseled in his sermon “The Use of Money” that we should earn all we can, save all we can and give all we can. The early Methodists became good at the

first two, but they seemed to struggle with the last one. In a series of sermons near the end of his life, Wesley warned them about the ill effects of wealth. Without a robust and systematic approach to giving, one’s spiritual life is stunted. Smith and Davidson’s research backs up Wesley’s maxim. If you want a healthier, happier, and more purpose-driven life you need to practice generosity.

Did You Know?

-Percentage of Americans who give 10% or more of their income: 2.7%

-Percentage of Americans who give less than 2% of their income: 86.2%

-Percentage of Americans who give 0% of their income: 44.8%

Take this week to review your practices of financial generosity. Make plans to earn all you can, save all you can so that you can give all you can.

When have you been the recipient of financial generosity? What impact did it have? How did/does it make you feel?

STORIES FROM

THE PARADOX OF GENEROSITY

“Alan Bradshaw finds pleasure in assisting people who are unable to pay their utility bills or rent in full. ‘It’s really fun to just be able to go, ‘Hm, let me cover that.’ And not have to worry about where it’s coming from and that people even have any idea where it came from.’”

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

- Luke 21:1-4
 - What made her gift acceptable?

 - What would be a financial sacrifice for you? What would you have to change or plan in order to do it?

- I Samuel 25:14-25, 32-35
 - What motivated Abigail's generosity?

 - What character traits of Abigail does the story reveal?

- How do you prioritize your financial giving? Which organizations and what amounts?

- Psalm 116
 - What motivates the psalmist to 'pay my vows to the Lord' (v.14)?

 - Which of the following motivates your giving to the church (rank from 1 to 4):
 - ___ Gratitude for God's love
 - ___ Duty to God
 - ___ Support the mission of the Church
 - ___ Thankful for your Church Family

GENEROSITY AUDIT:

Look at your total financial giving (include all organizations, not just the church. Also include other informal financial gifts to family and friends which are not loans). What percentage of your net income is it? What do your financial gifts reveal about your values and priorities? What would you like to change?

GENEROSITY EXPERIMENT #3:

This Monday, begin keeping a record of every potential opportunity to give away \$10. On Friday, choose one of these opportunities and make your donation. How many opportunities did you record?

GENEROSITY JOURNAL:

Session Four:

The Generous Church

INTRODUCTION

Nestled among the live oaks and pine trees in Summerville, South Carolina is Dorchester Presbyterian Church. My father-in-law, Richard Cushman, was the founding pastor and for over 30 years led them in becoming a

Did You Know?

-89% of volunteers report that volunteering has improved their sense of well-being
-73% of volunteers report that volunteering has lowered their stress levels

generous church. There are four buildings that house the sanctuary, day care, fellowship hall and offices. Each one was built by volunteer crews of church members over the course of thirty years. Behind the church are several acres of woodlands that the

church maintains as a nature preserve amid several subdivisions. Dorchester is an example of the generous church. They shared their time and talent to physically and spiritually build

the church and its mission. They share their generosity with God's creation and the community.

The generous church is more than a fiscally sound congregation. To be sure, financial sharing is a necessary part of the life of the congregation, but, as you have learned from the previous sessions, generosity is more than money.

The generosity of the church is a reaction to God's generosity. The church is created by grace. The gift of the Holy Spirit connects us with one another and we become the means of sharing God's love to one another and to the world. In other words, we do not make, maintain or save the church by our giving. Instead, we receive the church as God's gift and we participate in sharing that gift.

In response to this grace, the church is called to participate in God's generosity to the world. The mission of the church is our partnership in God's offering of Christ to all people. In so doing, the church provides opportunities for individual members to contribute to God's mission.

We give *to* and *through* the church as a spiritual practice. We give to the church as an

expression of our spiritual fellowship. We give through the church in order to advance God's generosity to the world. The generous church is a fellowship of believers who share one another's burdens and a partnership of disciples who work together.

How has the church helped you be a generous person?

When have you received the generosity (emotional, timely or financial) of the church?

If the church is created, sustained and renewed by God's grace, how should this shape the way we talk about the church's finances?

STORIES FROM

THE PARADOX OF GENEROSITY

“When the plant where he worked as a mid-level manager for over 30 years shut down at the start of the Great Recession of 2008, Gerald Harris in Texas did not wallow in misery or become self-absorbed. Instead, he helped the men and women who worked for him find new jobs. Gerald stepped in to help people update their resumes: ‘You try to jump in, try to help people.’”

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

- Acts 4: 32-5:11
 - How was the church a “counter-cultural” community through its generosity?

- What was the relationship between their generosity with one another & the apostles' message about the resurrection?

- Why did Ananias & Sapphira die? What might this tell us about our spiritual relationship with our possessions?

- 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
 - What was the example of the church in Macedonia?

 - How was giving an expression of their spiritual connections?

- According to Paul, why give?

- Psalm 46
 - God promises protection and prosperity to Jerusalem. In similar ways, how has God provided for the church?

 - The psalm describes the city as a joyful refuge from a chaotic world. What kinds of economic 'chaos' are people facing today? How can the church be a joyful refuge for them?

CHURCH GENEROSITY AUDIT:

Examine North Church, both its official programs and informal relationships. Rate each form of generosity on a scale from 1 to 5 (1=the church does very little; 5=the church excels). How many opportunities are there to engage in each:

Rating:

Opportunities:

___ Emotional generosity _____

___ Timely generosity _____

___ Financial generosity _____

In what ways are you generous to and through the church? For you, which type of generosity do you practice the most/least in the church?

GENEROSITY EXPERIMENT #4:

If you are a part of a small group, Sunday School class or other group, plan 1 activity of generosity for your group to engage in the next 60 days. If you are not in a group, ask 2 other members to join you in planning and doing an act of generosity.

GENEROSITY JOURNAL:

Session Five: The Generous God

INTRODUCTION

The most illuminating part of Smith and Davidson’s research is the worldview of ungenerous Americans (chapter 4). Comparing interviews with ungenerous and generous persons they saw stark differences in the outlook of each group. Even though two people may have similar financial and personal circumstances, the ungenerous person will see “a world of scarcity, deficiency, vulnerability, and insecurity.” In turn, “personal autonomy, self-preservation, and rugged individualism are key and sacred concepts in the vocabulary of the ungenerous people” they interviewed⁶. In contrast, the persons they interviewed who practiced a generous lifestyle saw reality as infused with meaning and purpose, and saw possibilities and an abundance of blessings through their relationships.

The spiritual practice of generosity forces use to confront whether we see the world as one of scarcity or abundance. As long as one

⁶ p. 74, 119.

focuses on scarcity it will be difficult to practice generosity and to receive the benefits of a generous lifestyle. Smith and Davidson counsel:

“Practicing generosity often entails at some point an existential confrontation that is involved in the personal paradigm shift away from living in a world of scarcity and instead into living in a world of abundance, blessing, gratitude, enjoyment, security, and sharing. Therefore, practicing generosity in this way tends to promote happiness, health, and purposeful living.”⁷

This paradigm shift is possible because of who God is. God is a generous God, and when you learn to see the world from the perspective of divine generosity you will be able to discover the fulfillment of generous living. In religious terms, Smith and Davidson are talking about “repentance.” Repentance is a mental, emotional and behavioral shift from one worldview to another. What makes this repentance possible is that God’s generous love in Jesus Christ saturates our lives and the world.

⁷ p. 77-8.

This week we will examine the Christian story from the perspective of divine generosity. God created the world as a pure act of love, and God redeems the world as a free gift. As we prepare to go through Holy Week we will see how Jesus' final days, his death and his resurrection are expressions of generosity that reshapes the world.

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

- John 3:16-17 and Deuteronomy 8:11-18
 - What does the Exodus story tell us about the generosity of God?

 - Examine each stage of Jesus' life: birth, ministry, death, resurrection. How is each stage an expression of the generosity of God?

- How is divine generosity the common thread that links John 3 and Deuteronomy 8? How did people respond to God's generosity in Exodus and in the Gospels?

- What are the Israelites commanded to remember when they become prosperous? How does this memory shape our perspective and practice of generosity?

- What do your practices of generosity imply about your view of God and reality?

HOLY WEEK GENEROSITY MEDITATION:

Below are the lectionary readings for each day of Holy Week and Easter. Each day read the assigned passage and meditate on the following questions:

- How is Jesus the expression of divine generosity in the story?
- How do others respond to his generosity?
- How should I respond to God's generosity that I have received?

Palm Sunday—Mark 11:1-11

Monday—John 12:1-11

Tuesday—John 12:20-36

Wednesday—John 13:21-32

Holy Thursday—John 13:1-17, 31b-35;
Mark 14:12-25

Good Friday—John 18:1-19:42

Holy Saturday—Matthew 27:57-66

Easter Sunday—Mark 16:1-8

GENEROSITY JOURNAL:

