

# Generosity: What's it Good for?

## Opening Prayer

“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.” Proverb 11:24 Generosity is essential to living out the Christian faith. Greed, apathy, pride, and self-righteousness are all deeply rooted in the World around us. As Christians, Jesus called us to be the salt and light of the world. Without using our time, money, and other resources generously, we fail to witness the gospel to the world. God desires His children to be generous with their resources. God does not nudge or wink, trying to coax you to be generous. He requires a generous spirit based on the same love that we receive from Him. What does the Word of God have to say about generosity? How do Jews and Christians think differently about tithing? Why does God require us to be generous with our resources? Today we are going to take a deep dive into Scripture to attempt to answer these hard questions.

In the Bible, there are many different examples of generosity in the form of sacrifice. The first act of a sacrifice given to the Lord happens very early on in the book of Genesis. Right after the Fall of Mankind, Adam and Eve's children generously give some of what they produce to God. Genesis 4:2-7 says, **“Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”** Abel graciously gives God the best portion of his offering. The fat of an animal is the juiciest and most desirable part, especially in ancient times. We don't really know why God favored Abel's offering over Cain's, but the point is what God says in response to Cain's anger. He says, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” This seems to suggest that the intent behind the sacrifice is the most important factor. God is warning Cain to watch his heart, and make sure that he doesn't let sin rule over him. God, who knows the contents of our hearts, saw that Cain was close to sinning against his brother.

Abraham, the patriarch of the children of Israel is another example of a man obedient to God with his resources. He trusted God with all that he had. When Abraham's cousin was kidnapped by a large army, Abraham trusted God would give him the victory and he chased after this large army with only 318 of his own men. After defeating his enemies, Abraham has a very interesting exchange with a man named Melchizedek. Genesis 14:18-20 says, **“After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).**

**Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.**” Melchizedek’s name means king of righteousness and he is recognized as the priest of God Most High. His blessing causes Abraham to respond by giving a tenth of all the stuff he had just taken from the army he fought. Moses may have had this incident in mind when he commanded the Israelites to give a tenth of all they produced to God.

God hand-picked the Israelites as a people separate from the rest of the nations. He didn’t do this because they were better or bigger than the other nations, but because he loved Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God intended the Israelite nation to be a light to the rest of the world. All of the men were commanded to appear before the Lord 3 times each year. The Feast of First Fruits was when the Israelites would bring a tenth of all they produced and give them to the Levites. Every 3 years, the Israelites were commanded to give a second tithe to the poor and the Levites. Deuteronomy 14:22-27 says, **“Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God always. But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the Lord your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the Lord will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the Lord your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice. And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own.”** The Israelites were supposed to honor God with the blessings they received throughout the year.

What was the function of tithing within the Israelite community? It probably felt more like an involuntary tax than a freewill offering. The Levites were set apart by God to operate as the priestly class. They were not allowed to make a living outside of working in the temple. This means that the food they ate, the houses and land they had and all of their possessions were dependent on the tithes and offerings people brought throughout the year. Tithing was not an option for the Israelites, just as paying taxes are not really an option for us today. Another reason God commanded the Israelites to tithe was to teach them to revere God with all they had. Just as the regular burnt offerings were a reminder of sin and appeasement to God, tithing reminds the Israelites where their blessings really came from. The physical act of setting aside part of what was produced for God reminded them that God provided all they had. I learned an incredibly valuable lesson of tithing while in college.

I attended Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I moved far away from family and friends to study at a small, Christian liberal arts university. This was the first time I lived independent from my parents. I struggled to use my money well, with large student bills looming over my head and ever present, personal needs. I didn't actively give to any church because I struggled to find a new church home. Every month I felt anxious about money I didn't have and I worked as hard as I could to provide my needs. My freshman year of school was full of such anxieties. Over the summer, God convicted me about my lack of generosity to His church. He reminded me that all I have was provided by Him. I could afford to be generous. My sophomore year looked completely different because I regularly gave to God's work. Sometimes it would bring my bank account down to zero, but the bills were always paid and I had no anxiety over my money. By the end of the year, I was giving much more than 10% to God's work. God provided for my needs in miraculous ways, and my faith grew stronger every time he provided. Being generous with our resources is so important to be a Christian. The New Testament actually does not command that Christians give a tithe to the Lord. However, the New Testament has A LOT to say about being generous to others around us and to God's work through the Church.

Paul wrote one of the best appeals to generosity in his letter to the church in Corinth. The congregation was quite wealthy compared to some of the other early churches around the Mediterranean. Throughout the Middle East there was a very severe famine that caused affliction to the churches. Despite facing this trial, the churches gave above and beyond their means to help the church in Jerusalem. 2 Corinthians 8:1-7 says, **“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”** The Macedonian churches gave much more than 10% of what they had to the church in Jerusalem. They knew that despite their own trials, they were called extend grace and love through their resources. By displaying this faith, they lived out the calling Jesus had placed on their lives. Paul urges the church in Corinth to do the same thing.

Notice that no one forced the churches in Macedonia to give above their means. This was not a tithe or a tax Paul was collecting from all of the churches. He presented the needs of another church in a far and distant country. His message resulted in relief based on the love and faith the Macedonian churches had in God. Paul is challenging the Corinthians, who are much wealthier than the Macedonian churches, to respond with faith and grace as well. Notice that the heart behind the gift is just as important as the gift itself. This reminds me of the example Jesus made of the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44: **“Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you; this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on.”** The intent behind the gift matters a lot more than the amount. God alone knows the content of our hearts and we should be careful to honor him when we give to his church.

When we think of tithing, we automatically think of money, but you can tithe with much more than financial resources. What would it look like for you or your family were to be generous with EVERYTHING that you have? Giving clothing to nonprofits who serve the poor can be considered tithing. Using your time on a weekly basis to volunteer at church or other ministries is another way to tithe. Generously giving part of everything you have means far more to God than only giving 10% of your money. Even a gracious and loving word or action can be tithing. This brings us to what I believe is the whole point of generosity: Christians are generous because of the salvation they receive in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When our lives reflect the same Christ-like love toward others, we cannot help but be generous with all we have. Jesus paid the ultimate price for our souls, and our lives should reflect our love and appreciation for his sacrifice in the form of generosity to others.

Paul wraps up his teaching on generosity by saying, **“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”** 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 The arbitrary number of 10% is not something Christians should lean on. Being generous with our resources is not supposed to feel like a tax. Instead, recognizing the grace and blessings we receive from God, we should give freely and cheerfully. This can be really hard for Americans to do in particular.

When we read in the Bible that God desires us to give to others, we almost naturally want to avoid giving at all. The sobering message of the gospel reminds us just how much God has given us. There is no way we could ever outgive God. He has generously provided the only way to eternal life with Him. All that we have is a gift from God. Generosity is the only way to externally witness your love for God to others.

Yours In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris A Rice". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Aaron Rice