

Three Lessons Learned from Generous Giving's Stewardship Study Notes Project

This paper was originally presented to the leadership of Generous Giving to summarize three lessons that were learned from the Stewardship Study Notes Project.

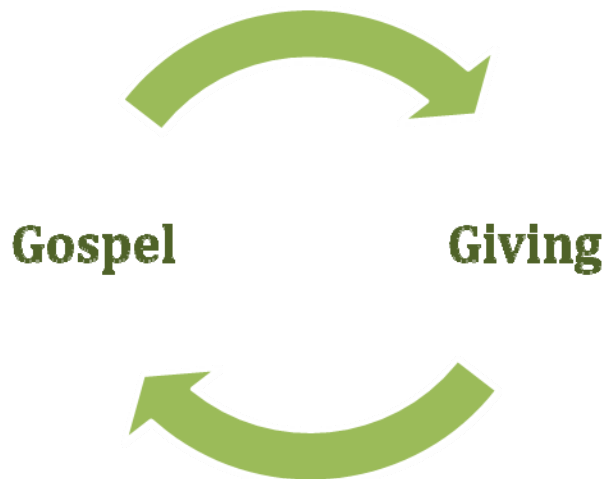
Generous Giving's Stewardship Study Notes are a passage-by-passage thematic commentary covering issues of stewardship and generosity in all sixty-six books of the Bible.

For more resources and information about the biblical message of generosity including the Stewardship Study Notes visit
www.GenerousGiving.org

Generous Giving is a privately funded ministry that seeks to encourage givers to experience the joy of generosity and embrace a lifestyle of giving, according to God's word and Christ's example. It was launched in 2000 by the Maclellan Foundation to stir a renewed, Spirit-led commitment to generosity among Christians.

(1) The Gospel Shapes Giving and Giving Shapes the Gospel

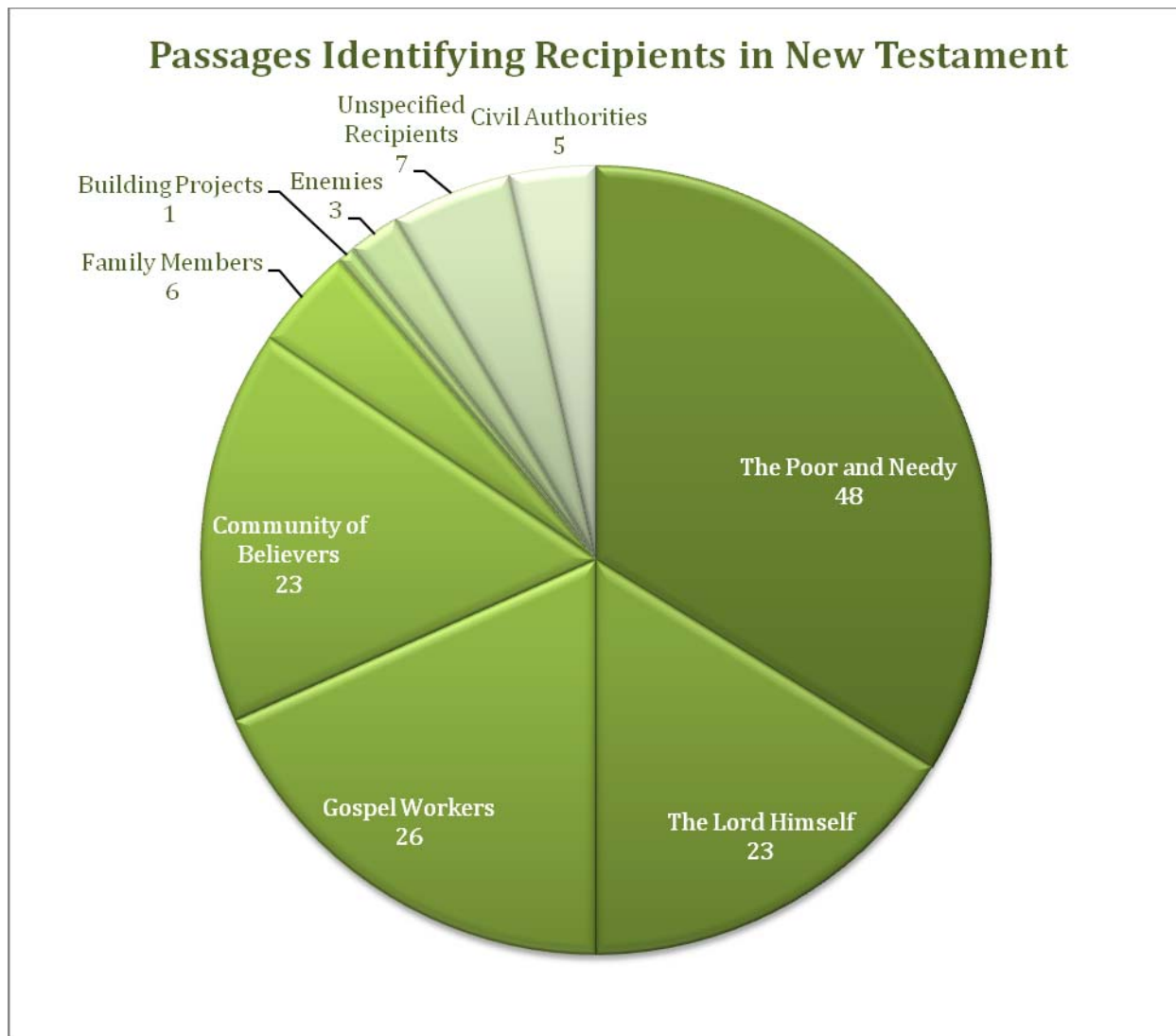
- If there is anything that we've taken away from the study notes project it is that the gospel shapes giving and giving shapes the gospel.¹
- On the one hand, the New Testament consistently interprets the gospel in terms of God's generosity in passages like John 3:16 which tells us that "*God so loved the world that he **gave**...*" and Ephesians 5:25 which reminds us that "*Christ loved the church and **gave** himself up for her...*"
- On the other hand, the New Testament also uses the gospel as a practical guide for our giving in passages like 1 John 3:16-17 which moves from the fact that "*Jesus Christ laid down his life for us...*" to the duty we have "*... to lay down our lives for our brothers...*" and then describes what this actually means in terms of sacrificial generosity. "*If anyone has **material possessions** and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?*"
- We could go on and on here, but the crucial point is simply that the New Testament envisions the gospel as uniquely shaped by generosity and generosity as uniquely shaped by the gospel.
- Generosity is not merely an expression, a by-product or even just a response to the gospel, but is essential to the good news.
- After all, if we took the words "*God so loved the world that he **gave**...*" out of John 3:16, we would not only lose the biblical message of generosity, we would lose the gospel itself.



¹ Key passages that show how the gospel and giving are shaped by each other include: Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 4:18-19; 7:22; John 3:16; Acts 20:32-35; Romans 5:15-17; 6:23; 8:32; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 1:4; 2:20; Ephesians 2:8; 5:1-2, 25; 1 Timothy 2:6; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Titus 2:14; 1 John 3:16-17; 5:11-12.

(2) Biblical Generosity is Oriented According to God's Special Concern for the Poor

- A second lesson is that the Bible rarely promotes the idea of generosity in general. Instead, we've found that the Bible promotes generosity in a way that is more often oriented according to God's special concern for the poor.
- As Deuteronomy 10:18-19 says, "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothes. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (cf. Exodus 20:1-2; Deuteronomy 26; Exodus 22:21; 23:9).
- In response to the way God himself had demonstrated His own generosity by caring for the poor and oppressed nation of Israel, God's people were called to be generous to the poor and oppressed.
- Isaiah 1:13-17 goes one shocking step further when it informs us that God does not even desire our gifts if we fail to share his heart for the poor, "Bring no more vain offerings... bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."
- This specific emphasis on God's generous concern for the poor (as opposed to a more generalized generosity) never goes away.
- It remains throughout the Old Testament. It saturates the wisdom, poetry and prophetic literature and lends biblical clarity and focus to the practice of generosity.
- As Proverbs 22:9 says, "A generous man will himself be blessed..." Why? "*for he shares his food with the poor*" (cf. Psalm 10:14-18; 112:9; 146; Proverbs 14:31; 19:17; 21:13; 28:27; Isaiah 1:10-17; 58:1-11; Jeremiah 22:13-17; Ezekiel 16:49-51).
- This special emphasis on the poor continues (and even expands) in the New Testament as we can see in the graph:



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- Of course, the point here is not to dissuade anyone from other forms of biblical generosity like caring for aging parents or supporting missionaries etc.³

² Each passage refers to a positive example or command of giving in the New Testament. (That means, for instance, that the giving of Ananias and Sapphira is *not* counted.) Some references fall in more than one category. But regardless of the length of the passage, it only counts once.

³ The pie chart above should not be misused. Adding up instances of giving in God’s word is not going to provide us with a nice and easy formula of percentages for giving in various areas. But it can provide us with a glimpse of the Bible’s major emphases. Also, we should note that the passages identifying generosity to “The Lord Himself” are mostly passages where Jesus receives a gift. Mark 14:3 is a good example of one such passage. The woman breaks the alabaster jar and pours perfume on Jesus, giving a gift directly to the Lord himself. Of course, we don’t have Jesus’ physical presence among us today so we give to the Lord by giving to others, especially the poor. Thus, the category of the poor actually expands for us today and becomes that much more important (Matt. 25:37-40).

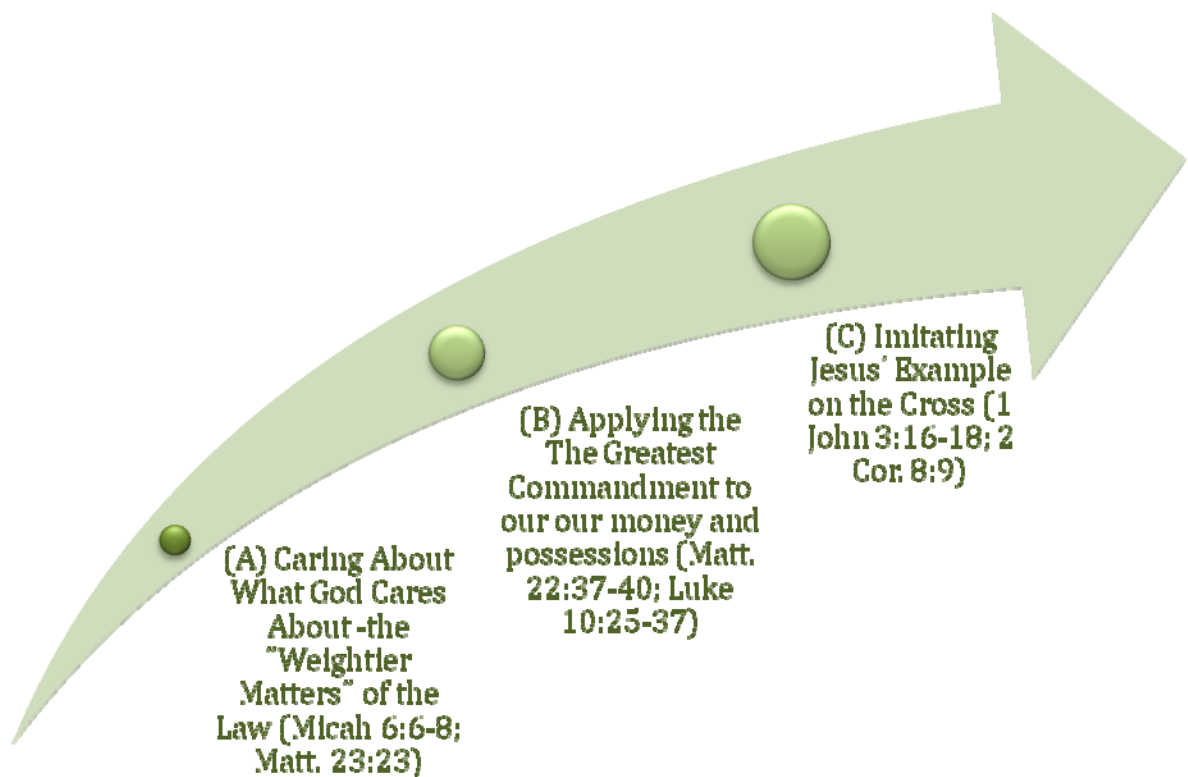
- Instead, the point is simply that since certain emphases present themselves over and over again when God’s word talks about giving, we probably should note that these emphases reflect the heart of our Father, who calls us to know and imitate his love.
- Finally, in light of the first point we made about how the gospel shapes giving we should note that the good news itself opens our eyes to God’s special concern for the poor.
- As Luke 4:14-19 tells us, when the time came for Jesus to announce his mission statement and to set his public ministry in motion he said that he had been anointed by God’s Spirit *“to preach good news to the poor”* to be among the poor and to do God’s business on their behalf—and this is precisely what Jesus did (Luke 7:18-23).

(3) The Bible Teaches a Three-Fold Framework for Generous Giving

- Whenever we talk with people about the subject of generosity, we’ve all been asked about what the biblical standard for giving is. Simply put, people want to know how much they’re supposed to give.
- As we’ve worked through the Scriptures for the study notes project we’ve found this question to be both *problematic* and yet quite *necessary*.
- First of all, looking to the Scriptures for a “standard” for Christian giving can be dangerous.
- The Bible is not a simple rulebook. And so, if we look to the Bible for a simple rule on giving, we are bound for disappointment.
- At the same time, we recognize that we need to look for a biblical “standard” and ask the “how much?” question if we want to become more generous.
- It was, after all, the Holy Spirit Himself who inspired the prophet Micah to ask the how much he should give in Micah 6:6-8.
- So, while on the one hand, we should be concerned by those who impose simplistic standards like 10 percent giving as the Bible’s “basic standard” for Christian generosity.
- On the other hand, we should be concerned by the opposite tendency to shy away from the question of “obligation” or biblical “standards” altogether because this tends to lead people to downplay or ignore the radical financial demands that Jesus makes on us as his disciples (e.g., Luke 14:25-35).
- So the question is “Where does this leave us?”
- How can we embrace the tension that exists between the Bible’s commands on the one hand *and* the genuine freedom we have as Christians to give on the other hand?
- We believe the answer lies in the fact that the Bible envisions givers who give freely within form—like instrumentalists in a jazz band.
- Let me explain what I mean: When a jazz band jams, the lead musician will often play improvisationally. However, the musician’s creative freedom always exists within a certain form.

- In other words, there’s always a musical framework composed of constants like the basic “beat” of the song, and the musical key and a musical genre like jazz within which the soloist is able to play freely.⁴
- Similarly, there is “*freedom within form*” when it comes to biblical generosity.
- What we would like to do next is describe three biblical “constants” which make up a framework within which Christians may give with Spirit-led freedom.

A Biblical Framework for Generous Giving



(A) CARING ABOUT WHAT GOD CARES ABOUT: The first feature of this framework involves a light-bulb experience in which our hearts and minds are reoriented according to what God says that He cares about over and over again in his word. This first step is important because, as we’ve already seen, it is possible to give in ways that are meaningless to the Lord. For example, Jesus told the Pharisees that they were out of sync with biblical generosity—despite their careful attention to tithing laws because they did not care about

⁴ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 6.

what God cares about. Jesus said, “Woe to you... For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness...” (Matthew 23:23; cf. Micah 6:6-8). Just like the prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus emphasized the fact that the minimal requirement of biblical generosity is to care about what God cares about—to get in sync with God’s demand for justice and mercy and his heart for the poor. Refusing to respond to their needs means that we are not merely lacking in generosity—it means that we have actually forsaken our Lord Jesus himself, as we learn in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46; cf. Luke 16:19-31; 1 John 3:16-17).

(B) APPLYING THE GREATEST COMMAND TO OUR MONEY AND POSSESSIONS: Of course, it is one thing to get in sync with God’s heart for the poor and it is another thing to actually incorporate that basic beat into the “rattle and hum” of our everyday lives. Simply put, there is still a need for practical teaching on how to be generous in the midst of the financial decision-making process. Does the Bible provide this kind of practical advice? We believe the answer is “Yes!” The Bible says a lot about giving, but Jesus reminds us that every single one of the Bible’s principles and commands—indeed, all of the Law and all of the Prophets!—hang on the commandment to love God wholeheartedly and our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:40; cf. Luke 10:25-37; cf. Philippians 2:5-11). Accordingly, when confronted by difficult financial decisions, we need to ask ourselves this profoundly simple question, “Have I considered the financial interest of others to be as important as my own?” The point is not the precise percentage that we give; it is whether we are actually treating the needs and desires of others to be as significant as ours. Let’s take a practical example. Statistics says that in the time it would take for one of us to eat a Big Mac—say about 15 minutes—240 people will have died from hunger and hunger related causes.⁵ Biblical generosity calls us to care about these people like we care about ourselves and, therefore, to take their needs into account when we are making financial decisions in the same way in which we would want them to take our needs into account if our situations were reversed. This is the second basic standard, the real “working center” of biblical generosity.

(C) IMITATING JESUS’ EXAMPLE ON THE CROSS: Finally, we return to the gospel itself because “the gospel shapes giving and giving shapes the gospel.” In this case, the gospel opens our eyes to the fact that God gives what he demands—a life poured out in sacrificial giving to others (Mark 8:34-36; Romans 12:1). Jesus’ death on the cross not only atones for our sins, it also provides an example. Thus, the ultimate standard for generous giving must be the cross on which Jesus died—not only to give us life, but also to show us how to live it (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:1-2) as Jesus says, “If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24; cf. Luke 14:33). Simply put, Jesus’ death must become a way of life for us. In the New Testament Jesus’ death is repeatedly described as an act of self-emptying love which Christians are explicitly called to imitate, not only with their lives in general (Ephesians 5:1-2), but with the use of their money and possessions in particular (Luke 14:33; 2 Corinthians 8:9, 1 John 3:16-18). Thus,

⁵ Food for the Hungry points out that 24,000 people die from hunger and hunger-related causes every day. Which means that one person dies every 3.6 seconds—more than 16 people each minute, 1,000 each hour and 8,760,000 every year! See Food for the Hungry, [Hunger Facts](#).

the true measure of our generosity is the degree to which our giving brings us into closer conformity with Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. (Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:24). As John concludes in his first epistle, "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"