

THE SEVEN-DAY GENEROSITY CHALLENGE

Generosity is not a theory. The intent of this Seven-Day Generosity Challenge is to encourage and inspire you to engage in a life of joyful, Christ-centered generosity. Some may ask: Just what does this life look like? Practically speaking, how do we take these lessons, examples, and reflections and put them to work in our life?

To answer those questions, we challenge you to take this Seven-Day Generosity Challenge. We have asked seven leaders of ministries, Christian networks, and churches to provide readers with a practical set of actions that you can use to engender greater generosity in your life. For each of the seven days, there is a Scripture, a teaching, and a challenge. Many of the challenges include additional resources for your use if you want to read and study further in each of these areas.

As you will see, taking this Seven-Day Generosity Challenge will involve freedom, trust, courage, action, readiness, change, and risk.

Commit today to take this challenge and set aside a full week to put these disciplines to work in your life. We know that the result will not only be greater generosity but will also include the unique joy that comes from obedience to the Most High Giver!

DAY ONE

Biblical Stewardship: The Foundation of All Generosity

By Dr. Zenet Maramara (Philippines)

Scripture

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. (Psalm 24:1)

Teaching

God, the maker of heaven and earth, owns all of creation and all it contains, as the Psalmist declares. In His benevolence He has given us all the resources of the earth to use and to enjoy. God, however, never transferred ownership to people. He continued to be the owner, and we are merely stewards. This truth has far-reaching implications for the way we live our life and use the resources entrusted to us, including money and possessions, our work, our business, and everything else we have.

If God is the owner and we are stewards, then we have to follow the will and desires of the owner. This involves knowing the heart of God, surrendering to His will, and living out our purpose. Stewarding God's creation and the resources entrusted to us means that we can generously share with others whatever blessings we receive. Generosity is an overflow of the steward's grateful response to God, who freely showers us with daily abundance. God bestows us with material things for our personal needs, and we can help those who have less in life. Biblical stewardship liberates the stewards and frees them toward generous living and not just generous giving. John Wesley lived off of 10 percent of his income and gave away 90 percent. Most of us give 10 percent or even less and keep the rest for ourselves. Does God need our money? He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and every animal in the forest belongs to Him. God does not need our money, but He teaches us to give to help us gain the freedom from the love of money and to depend wholly on Him. Practicing biblical stewardship guards us from selfishness, greed, and hoarding.

Do you remember the story of Elijah, the prophet of God, and the widow at Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:7-16? There was famine in the land for three years, and the Lord directed Elijah to go to the widow at Zarephath who would feed him. The widow only had the last measure of flour and oil for her and her son's last meal, but she was able to give it up sacrificially to feed Elijah.

Why was she able to give up her family's last meal to the prophet? Because the Lord prepared her heart, and she trusted in Him to provide for her and her son. God was faithful, and the supply of flour from the jar and the oil in the jug never ran out.

The biggest hindrance to generosity is that we think we are owners. But if we understand that we are merely trustees and that God is the ultimate owner, this will lead us to follow the heart and the will of God. It can change the way we live in this world and treat material wealth. What a liberating thought, that we do not own any of our possessions! That can save us from a lot of worries and stress! God is able to provide and take care of our needs. Imagine a world where people freely give and share. One Christian executive I know is a fine example of a steward. He gives support for Christian ministries and people who come to him for help. He says, "I am only a signatory of the Lord's check."

Challenge for Day One

Our response to God's generosity is to begin to surrender today our love for our earthly goods and to put our trust in God, who gives generously all that we ask and need. God as owner is also provider. Our responsibilities are faithful obedience to His will and to carry out God's wishes. That includes pursuing His kingdom and His righteousness, and all the other things will be added unto us. It takes a journey of faith to fully rely on God to carry out His promises, and the time to begin is now. As we daily experience His grace and provision, our faith grows.

Remember the last time you were prompted by the Holy Spirit to make a sacrificial gift. How did you respond? Pray today for the Spirit to prompt you again, and be ready to sense that prompting. Pray that God will give you a sensitive heart and a willing spirit. When that happens, do not be afraid to respond obediently, trusting that God is able to restock His resources. Obey, and then write down how it felt to trust God through your generous giving.

Here is your challenge:

- Read 1 Timothy 6:6–10 and Matthew 6:24.
- Pray for God to rid your heart of the love of anything but Him.
- Respond by creating a list of things you want God to help you set aside, that you may love God more completely. Lay them before Him and feel the chains fall away as you surrender them back to Him.

The God of Elijah who kept refilling the widow's jar of flour and oil is the same God we serve today.

Today I ask God to set me free from the love of earthly things.

DAY TWO

Trust: Abraham: An Example of the Generous Life

By Richard Samuel (India)

Scripture

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. (Genesis 12:1-8)

Teaching

When we are talking about generosity and about being generous, I would like for us to study a generous way of life, from the word of God. Abraham's

journey is full of the open-handed lifestyle. One cannot live a generous life without God in it—it is not something that you do; it is something that you are. It is in the deeper journey with God that we begin to open our hands. We will examine three incidents in the life of Abraham that not only encourage us to

embark on a deeper journey with God but also remind us that generosity is an outcome of a deep relationship with God.

First, God calls Abraham from his country to an alien land far away where he would bless him. And so, in obedience Abraham goes forth from Ur to Canaan, and there God appears to him again and says that He will give this land that he's on to Abraham. In chapter 13 we see that there is strife between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot, so Abraham tells his nephew Lot to choose the land of his choice as his own and that thereafter Abraham would relocate to another place away from Lot.

We have to step back to see the enormity of this posture. Here is the man of promise giving away the land of promise to Lot! Imagine the conversations at the tents that night, beginning with Sarah, all the way to the herdsman who would have been feeling a definite sense of loss and of having been shortchanged. Enter the tents of Lot and his herdsman—what would have been the general conversation that night? It would have been upbeat and may have even been one of having outsmarted Abraham. Enter Abraham's own mind that night—it would have been one of questions, perhaps even doubt. Lot chose the watered ground that is so needed for the flocks, leaving Abraham with hard, rocky places.

All of this weighs on Abraham, and soon his eyes are looking down, despair written over his face. In his strongest generous moment, he is also in his weakest place...with doubts and perhaps even fears—and God knows that. And knowingly enough, God shows up, as if to say, "You did well, Abraham!" In chapter 13:14–17:

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

As soon as Lot leaves, God outdoes Abraham's generosity and says, "I am making you the center. All the four directions are yours from where you are! Everything that you see is yours." Then He says to Abraham, "Walk all over this place, claim this, mark all over it, it is yours." It is almost like Abraham and God are trying to out-give each other!

The second incident is found in Genesis 14 where four foreign kings defeat the king of Sodom, and Lot and his family and possessions are captured and taken away. On hearing this, Abraham immediately takes his men along with his allies and chases the four victorious kings and their troops and defeats them beyond Damascus. Abraham leaves his shepherding grounds and brings Lot and his family back with their possessions. And the king of Sodom offers him the entire possessions of his kingdom in return for the people. But Abraham says, "No, take it all!" He is not there for gain. He came for Lot and his welfare. If he is to prosper, it will be from the hand of his Lord God alone. All else, he gives away. What a high road. God alone will be his provider, not man. And yet, imagine the inner condition on returning back home. He has defeated four kings and their armies and angered the king of Sodom. He has made at least five kings his enemies! Yet before Abraham can fear, God speaks to him in apt words never heard before: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). God is again saying, "Do not regret doing this. Keep on obeying me and I will take care of the rest. Continue to take the higher ground—don't settle for less! You can do this, Abraham. You are secured." Then we see God give him even more territory than promised before, all the lands from Egypt's river all the way to the river Euphrates. First Canaan and now all the lands surrounding Canaan!

Finally, we see shortly after the birth of the promised child that God wants Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. Immediately we see Abraham obeys God in this also. According to Genesis 22:3, Abraham rose "early the next morning." No questions, no wrangling over His will or the fact Isaac is His promised child. No! None of these. With Abraham, when God speaks, he obeys. And just as Abraham is about to do the unthinkable, God intervenes by providing a ram for the sacrifice. Abraham gives it all away, even his own son, the most precious thing in his life. And God saves and rewards. Then God blesses Abraham's generations like He has never before or since blessed any man. God acknowledges Abraham's faithfulness: "You have not withheld your son, your only son." It is no coincidence that God's only son was also given on that same mount on Moriah.

Challenge for Day Two

From these three lessons, we learn that: (1) just as Abraham gave Lot the choice of land and trusted God to provide in whatever was left to him, so God today asks us to give up control of the things we think we possess and trust

Him to provide; (2) God alone is our provider, and we should not look to anyone else to play that role; and (3) no matter the sacrifice God may require, generosity will always be rewarded with joy and God's rich provisions.

Name one place where you need to give up control and trust God to provide, even when others take advantage of your generosity. Now turn it over to God and be at peace in Him. Name one person you are relying on to be your provider instead of God. Repent today of that misplaced trust and, like Abraham, ask God to give you the strength and courage to trust in Him alone. Name one thing that God may be asking you to give away today in order to be obedient to His call to generosity. Make a decision today to be obedient, to give that thing away, and to watch God meet all of your needs.

Here is your challenge:

- Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7.
- Pray for a heart that trusts God above everything else.
- Respond by recalling the times when God has met your needs in surprising and amazing ways. Write them down and share them with someone as a testimony to God's faithful provision.

Today I ask God to help me give up control and begin to trust Him to be my Provider.

DAY THREE

Courage: Financial Stewardship: One-Kingdom Generosity

By Mike O'Neill (United Kingdom)

Scripture

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:1-4)

Teaching

What does your "all" look like?

In these four short verses, we have one of the foundational models for joyful management of our finances, and it comes from a widow. Widows (and widowers) live with loss all the time. Beyond the immediate sense of loss, pain, and heartache is the ongoing struggle to overcome the absence of their husband (or wife)—a source of physical, emotional, spiritual, and practical (including financial) support. For a widow in the first century in particular, life could be treacherous.

By Luke 20, Jesus is approaching the last days of his life and is spending his time teaching many groups of people at the temple in Jerusalem: Pharisees, Sadducees, teachers of the law, and his disciples. Teaching is his priority.

But as he looks up, something even more important captures his attention. He sees an unnamed widow, probably invisible to others, stepping forward and giving absolutely all she has in trust to God. She places two coins into the treasury.

Let's pause for a minute to consider the impact of that one single act and the implication that has for how we approach our financial stewardship. The temple storehouse and treasury was designed for two groups of people: the Levite priests (who could own no property so depended on the temple for their

financial needs) and the poor, the widows and orphans. It was a mechanism by which they could receive financial support, an early social welfare system. Each recipient from the temple store was dependent on the joyous generosity of God's people.

Those who had much, gave. Those who lacked, received.

And then suddenly this widow turns the system on its head. By rights, she could have taken from the treasury, according to her need. But instead she gives!

Nobody notices but Jesus. He stops in his tracks, moved by the way the poor widow gives: he tells us she gives all she has. He emphasizes this word "all" by repeating it three times in his two-sentence directive to the disciples. She gives everything. Nothing is held back.

He also names the widow's gift as "the truth." Remember, the widow in the temple is not a parable or a nice story about how even the poor can give. This is a real event. In this real moment in a real time and place, Jesus stops what he is doing because he sees truth.

By highlighting her gift, he foreshadows his own coming gift, as Hebrews 12:2 states, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." It is through giving that we can experience this joy for ourselves, not just in the instant of the gift but also for all eternity.

William Borden was as real as the poor widow in Luke. But he was fabulously wealthy. As the incredibly wealthy heir to a large family fortune at the start of the last century, the young man wanted for nothing and had the world at his fingertips. In 1904, after graduating from high school, William decided to travel around the world before attending university. Seeing hurting people on his travels altered his plans and moved him to become a missionary. He wrote two words in the back of his Bible: "No reserves."

After graduating from Yale University, Borden turned down all job offers before him. In his Bible, he wrote two additional words: "No retreats." He went on to seminary and, after finishing his studies, set sail for China. Hoping to work with Muslims, he stopped in Egypt to study Arabic. There, he contracted spinal meningitis and, within a month, the twenty-five-year-old died.

Before his death, William had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words “No reserves” and “No retreats” was written: “No regrets.”

With limited resources, the overpowering desire for a widow/widower is often to hold on to what you have and never let go. With great resources, the first reaction to a need could be to write a check, send another for a task, or to give “just enough.” But both William Borden and the unnamed widow let go and gave all. And this is what they have in common with Jesus.

Our unnamed widow guides us to the way that we should live and give. William Borden shows us that material wealth, or poverty, doesn’t matter.

Challenge for Day Three

So what, then, does this mean for our own financial giving? Whether you have a little or a lot, a foundation of joyful giving comes from understanding what your “all” looks like.

Here is your challenge:

- Read Luke 12:15–20 and Matthew 13:44.
- Pray that God will help you define your “all.” Write it down and lay it before God. Share it with the person closest to you in your life. Do they agree?
- Respond by committing together to step out in courage and turn it “all” over to Him, whatever that may require, trusting that He will provide for all of your needs.

The widow and the heir both knew their all. They each held it lightly, ready and willing to give it all in pursuit of the eternal joy that supersedes all earthly joy. An eternal joy that may cost all we have: “no reserves” and “no regrets.”

Today I ask God to give me the courage to name my “all” and hold nothing back from His control in my life.

DAY FOUR

Action: Generous Living: Taking Initiative

By Kehinde Ojo (Nigeria)

Scripture

One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"

She replied, "I have a home among my own people." "What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old."

Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."

"No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!"

But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her. (2 Kings 4:8-17)

Teaching

It is not unusual for a prophet of Elisha's status to have people who come to him primarily for what they can get, whether spiritual, material, or any kind of support. What he may not be familiar with are people who show acts of kindness and generosity without expecting anything in return. However, this is

exactly what he gets and even more on a trip to Shunem. When the wealthy woman invites him in for a meal, he may think she or a member of her family has a problem that money cannot solve. It could be a need for deliverance, healing of a chronic disease that has defied medical care, or whatever. It is certainly a spiritual intervention of some sort.

Rather than asking for support of any kind from the man of God, this family takes the initiative to make their resources available to him by offering him a meal after a tiring journey. This invitation of guests—or, better put, strangers—to meals appears to be a norm for this family such that “no, thank you” was not an acceptable response. Therefore, she persuaded (subtly forced) Elisha to eat (2 Kings 4:8a)! Wow! She is giving away her meal, and she is not ready to take no for an answer. What a generous spirit! It appears that the meal must have been very rich and the atmosphere so cordial and hospitable that Elisha soon becomes a regular guest at meal tables in this home whenever his itinerary allows. The woman, in consultation with her husband, then decides to take their generosity even further by building a guest chalet for Elisha. They are willing to release their resources freely to build and furnish a chalet for an itinerant minister. It is amazing how thorough they are in providing essential furnishings in order to guarantee a comfortable stay for their guest.

It is important to state that while people are still giving to causes in today’s world, not all donations are made with pure and sincere motives. Elisha may have thought that sooner or later, this family would make their request, but to his amazement, they have no other motive than serving God’s purpose and becoming a blessing to anyone who comes around their vicinity. When Elisha presses further to know why they have shown such generosity, the woman states categorically that she and her family dwell in a safe and secure environment. Their generosity is borne out of freewill and primarily to serve. What amazing freedom they enjoy in their giving.

They challenge us to remember that individuals, families, or institutions are to give in order to add value rather than focus on what they get back in return for their giving.

This particular story brings to light another key principle in generous living. This couple took the initiative to give, not because they were asked. It appears they were always looking for opportunity to make a difference. This virtue can be emulated by all, irrespective of cultures or circumstances.

Challenge for Day Four

Generosity involves both heart commitment and hand involvement. We are called to act on our convictions. In Elisha's story a family took the initiative, and they acted out their generosity in tangible ways. And we are called and privileged to do the same.

Prayerfully choose an individual, family, mission agency, or good cause that needs any kind of support or acts of kindness. It may involve the use of your talent, time, or treasure. You may want to make a visit, buy a gift, offer a service, provide counsel and/or encouragement, give a donation, pray, offer a meal, and so on. Reach out today to such persons, families, or organizations as guided by the Holy Spirit and act on the guidance that you have received.

Here is your challenge:

- Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.
- Pray for God to give you joy in making a sacrificial gift.
- Respond by obeying what God puts in your heart. You may want to do any or all of the following in order to sustain this drive and be committed to generous living.
 - Create a fund for missions.
 - Decide who benefits from the fund.
 - Make a commitment to support your choice on a regular basis whether or not the needs are communicated to you.
 - Challenge friends, family, and your network to do the same.

Today I choose one person or ministry, and I will make a sacrificial gift of time, talents, or treasure as God leads.

DAY FIVE

Readiness: Strategic Generosity

By Gary Williams (Australia)

Scripture

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15–16)

Teaching

A famous saying tells us, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.” Giving a fish and giving a fishing lesson are both small and simple acts of generosity but with vastly different outcomes. Development organizations have long recognized the strategic relevance of this concept. A spirit of generosity is wonderful, but it can become something truly transformational when we get strategic! In Ephesians, Paul tells us to “be very careful” how we live. The phrase implies the ideas of observation, thoughtfulness, and focus beyond the normal. “Making the most of every opportunity” extends this concept further. Not just recognizing an opportunity, not just making something of it, but squeezing the absolute maximum out of it! And not just occasionally—every opportunity!

Early in my ministry, I applied for a grant from a foundation that I knew supported the concept of what we were doing. I was hopeful of receiving \$10,000 or maybe even a bit more. Their considered response: “We’ll give you \$10,000 now, and if you can raise another \$10,000 from other sources, we’ll match that with another \$10,000.”

First, I was blessed by their generosity. We had a vision, and they were glad to respond. But I was doubly blessed (triple, in fact!) because of their strategic generosity. We were able to use their gesture to challenge other people to respond to our need, and we ended up with \$30,000. But guess what? We weren’t the only ones who were blessed. The other donors were excited that their gift had been strategically doubled, and the original donor was encouraged to see additional support emerge for us. And our mission was significantly advanced.

This is a simple and common example of strategic generosity. At the other end of the complexity scale, smart and generous people are doing amazing things by blending investment, generosity, and pseudo-banking. Just pause and ponder, for a moment, the opportunities presented by things like low-interest housing loans, or leveraging the trillions of dollars that are sitting in the retirement funds of Christians around the world, or micro-enterprise support in the developing world. Strategic generosity is nothing new, but we still haven't begun to tap the potential that exists when we prayerfully seek to make the most of every opportunity.

Paul's instruction applies to all of us regardless of our wealth, our sophistication, or our circumstances. Maybe you are already living a careful life as a Christian, and that's great. But it may still be worth taking a moment to consider if we can be even more strategic.

Before we can make the most of an opportunity, we need to recognize it. It is not uncommon for us, busily engaged in all sorts of tasks and duties, to pass by an opportunity completely without even realizing it. Imagine, for a moment, that we were to have a debrief with God at the end of each day, when He could alert us to opportunities that we failed to recognize and thus failed to act on in the course of our day. If we had to give a daily account of missed opportunities, we might begin to be more alert to them when we encounter them.

Right now, stop for a couple of minutes and think back over the last week. Looking through the lens of "opportunities to be generous," can you recall anything that, in hindsight, may have presented an opportunity that you missed? (I just did this exercise myself, and yes, I missed a great opportunity six hours ago. By God's grace, I may be able to fix it before it's too late.)

If you, like me, discover that you have failed to even recognize opportunities, don't be discouraged. Act if you think you need to, but use this knowledge to inform your prayers in the days ahead. Developing a habit of recognizing opportunities to be generous is a necessary starting point. Of course, we don't need to wait for opportunities to drop out of the sky—we can also create opportunities whenever we like.

Identifying an opportunity, however, is just the first step. The exciting part comes next: What are we going to do about it? We have some options. We can deliberately ignore an opportunity. We can respond intuitively. Or we can respond strategically.

Challenge for Day Five

By way of challenge, I will suggest three simple disciplines that we can build into our daily life that can assist us to embody what Paul was talking about.

Here is your challenge:

- Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–12.
- Pray that God will reveal to you a new opportunity to give of your time, talents, and treasures to serve His kingdom. Pray daily that God will open your eyes to the opportunities He sends your way. When you recognize a specific opportunity, thank God for it, and then pause to ask for wisdom about how to respond. Sometimes a simple and spontaneous response is entirely sufficient, but sometimes, something more strategic may emerge upon consideration. Be sure to have periods during the year when you take extra time away to be with God, to seek His guidance, and to listen purposefully for His voice. During these times, think and pray specifically about how you can make the most of the opportunities that God gives you. This is where you get to be a proactive steward, not just a reactive one!
- Respond by immediately acting on the new opportunity, not delaying it, practicing generosity as soon as the opportunity presents itself. Find a friend or a small group that you can talk with about these issues.

Next time you are presented with a clear opportunity for generosity, carefully assess whether this is a “fish” opportunity or a “fishing lesson” opportunity. Don’t just make something of the opportunity—make the most of it! For the sake of the Kingdom.

Today I will look for one new opportunity to live generously, and I will act on it as God leads.

DAY SIX

Change: Creation Care Is a Matter of Life

By The Staff and Board of the Evangelical Environmental Network (United States)

Scripture

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Teaching

Creation care is a matter of life. The Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) has been using that slogan for several years, and we have come to believe that it hits at the heart of the rationale for taking care of this earth and its inhabitants, including our neighbors. Here is what this phrase means to us.

First, it calls us to be champions and protectors of life. We do so in the name of the Lord and giver of life and for the sake of the author of life whom we love and serve. Being created in the image of God requires us to love life in every form as God created and sustains it. From conception through final breath, life must be seen as a precious gift from God that is to be stewarded and protected.

Second, it links our actions and attitudes toward creation with this mandate to be life protectors. Creation care means adopting a lifestyle that bears witness to our stewardship responsibility for this earth, a life modeled after the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such a life recognizes that all things were made by Him and for Him, and thus we need to consider how Jesus would have us steward what He made. This means cultivating attitudes that make us sensitive to the ways in which we contribute to the earth's degradation and pollution. Most importantly, it calls us to be proactive, intentional, and committed to speaking in our churches and communities as life protectors.

Third, it fills out Jesus's command to love our neighbor more holistically. It reminds us that we cannot love our neighbor and destroy the very environment that sustains our neighbor. This is especially true of our poor neighbor. The effects of a polluted planet hit the poor first and hardest. Rising sea levels, loss of arable land, drought, disease caused from pollution, and changing growing seasons are all devastating to our subsistence-level neighbors. Our decisions and actions every day with respect to creation care bear witness to the extent to which we truly love our neighbor as Jesus commanded.

Creation care is a matter of life. To be fully pro-life, we must understand the link between a degraded planet and the quality of life for so many of our neighbors.

As God's people, we must be careful to avoid two mistakes when it comes to understanding our role and responsibilities as image bearers of our creator God. The first is the error of shifting from creation care to earth worship. We worship the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Spirit. Whenever divinity is bestowed on creation, it becomes an idol. While we must take seriously God's pronouncement that what He created is "very good," He never intended it to become the focus of our adoration. In the face of this error, we must repeat the words of Jesus to the enemy, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Matthew 4:10).

The second error is to believe that creation is there for us to use as we wish without regard for our stewardship call. This error comes either from a mistaken definition of dominion or from an eschatological belief that it is all going to be burned up in the end anyway. Both views devalue creation and find no support in scripture. They stem instead from an erroneous, post-fall view of God's created intent for us. They demean creation and deny that the earth was created not for our domination but for us to nurture, steward, and use wisely.

Nowhere in scripture is our original mandate to tend the garden rescinded for a utilitarian, consumerist attitude toward creation. This is the error of owners who thirst for control and see all the earth's resources as consumable goods that they use even to their own detriment and that of their neighbor. Would God give us a mandate to use His good resources in a way that hurts our neighbor? Certainly not. Creation care requires humility and a servant's heart. It requires lives lived with the understanding that "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1).

Once we avoid these two errors and we see the link between creation care and loving our neighbor, we can assume the mantle of the generous, faithful steward with regard to our relationship to God's good earth. We can protect life, love our neighbor, and care for creation as a central part of our life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Challenge for Day Six

So what are God's people to do if we are to live out Jesus's command holistically? We offer a three-fold challenge to get us started—or to take us further.

Here is your challenge:

- Read Psalm 24:1–5.
- Pray for wisdom to see where your lifestyle is damaging God's creation and for courage to change.
- Respond by:
 - Declaring God's ownership: Please take this seriously, as it will be an attitude-shifting event. Collect everything in your life that represents ownership and relationship. Things like your house deed, car title, stock and retirement documentation, kids' birth certificates (yes, that's right), marriage license, will, bank account balances...you get the idea. Now, with everything stacked up, lift it up in prayer and surrender it all back to God. He owns it any- way. So use this as a reminder that it's all His—all of it, including your relationships. As you surrender it back to Him, see if you don't feel a sense of freedom as if chains fall. That is the freedom of the faithful steward.
 - Starting a discussion: Gather a group of people from your church or work and commit to going through Scripture and asking God to guide you in understanding your role as stewards of creation. There are a number of great resources to help guide you, and we have listed several in the resources section. As you study the word of God, be ready to be surprised, challenged, and inspired to engage in creation care at a whole new level.
 - Changing one habit: As a result of number one, surrendering everything to God, and number two, discovering what God's word says about caring for creation, make a commitment to identify one habit in your life that needs to be changed or eliminated. It may be a consumer habit, a polluting habit, or an apathy habit. Whatever the Spirit brings to your

awareness, commit today to change or eliminate it, and replace it with a positive action that bears witness to your new passion for creation care. If you change one habit, you will open the pathway for deeper reflection and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in you as you seek to be a more faithful steward of creation and all of life. To God be the glory!

Today I will change one habit so that my life will better reflect my love for my neighbor through my care for God's creation.

DAY SEVEN

Risk:

The Generosity Roller Coaster: Forty Days of Generosity

By Pastor Rony Madrid (Guatemala)

Scripture

This is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Teaching

If you want to have real fun, you must ride the generosity roller coaster. I live in Guatemala, a country with many challenges. But maybe the biggest challenge is to be able to see what the Lord sees and do what the Lord wants. There is so much poverty here that those who were born here have learned to accept it as part of the landscape. I am pastor of a church called Real Life, and through verses in Isaiah 58, the Lord began to awaken my heart to help the needy. In this passage, God says to His people, "I'm not impressed with your religion if you do not dedicate yourself to help the poor."

As a result of understanding the will of God, we decided to start a movement called *Iniciativa 58* and also to do a nationwide campaign called *40 Days of Generosity*. We wanted to teach churches and Christians across Guatemala the blessing of giving and to show God's love for needy people in our country. Brian Kluth, founder of Loving Our Community, gave us permission to use his 40 Day Generous Life devotional across Guatemala. We had a vision event and challenged pastors to give out the devotional, to preach on generosity, and to invite families to read the devotional together every day. At the end of the forty days, we asked each church to raise the greatest offering that they had ever collected. But to do this with pure motives, the offerings that churches received were to go to help the needy. Over one hundred churches, denominations, ministries, businesses, and groups decided to join the 40 Days of Generosity for our country.

Also my friend Jaime Farrach, a well-known businessman in my city, was able to arrange for free advertising space on TV, radio, and news- papers. These 40 Day ads were to challenge all Guatemalans to be more generous. What a joy to see how the Lord opened this media door for us, as \$4,000 USD in advertising was donated for this project!

The Lord was also working behind the scenes. One month before the campaign started, my friend Dave Polstra from Perimeter Church in Atlanta came to Guatemala. He told me that his church had a matching fund of \$20,000 USD to help build houses for people in need. This proposal came precisely at the time when we were deciding how my church's 40 Day offering could be used to help the needy. We felt that God was calling us to allocate our offering to build houses.

In Guatemala there is an organization called Un Techo para Mi País ("A Roof for My Country") that uses volunteers to build small houses for \$1,500 USD each. We decided to challenge our church families to give their offerings to help build houses for needy families.

At the beginning I thought we could raise the \$20,000 USD, meet the matching fund, and build twenty-five or more houses. During the campaign my faith grew, and I thought we could raise enough money to build forty to sixty houses. On the day of the offering, we were surprised by the Lord. We saw many families make enormous efforts to generously support this project.

Here are just a few examples of the outpouring of generosity we experienced:

- A young girl asked her dad to donate all of her quinceañera celebration monies (a long-awaited and costly family event for teenage girls in Latin America when they turn fifteen) to build houses for the needy.
- A grandparent couple had been saving up money to take all of their grandchildren to Disney World. When the 40 Day campaign happened, the grandchildren came to the grandparents and asked them to donate all the Disney World vacation monies to help build houses for the needy. One of the eight-year-old grandsons said, "Grandpa, if God wants us to go to Disney World someday, He will provide another way. But these families need our help now."
- A Christian businessman challenged all his employees to donate and help build houses for the needy. He told them he would double what- ever funds they gave. The employees pooled their resources and raised \$15,000 USD,

and he matched it with another \$15,000—and together their company helped build twenty houses.

When the forty days were over, we didn't receive a \$20,000 offering or a \$40,000 or \$60,000 offering. When all the offering monies were counted at our church, we received \$469,000 USD—enough to build 312 houses! This was the greatest offering our church had ever received in one event. We praise the Lord for what He did in us and through us during these forty days.

The next year, the Lord again put in my heart the idea that we should do another campaign to help the needy. At first I had my doubts if this was a good idea. I was afraid that maybe people were getting tired of giving. But one morning, I received an e-mail from a lady in the congregation. She knew nothing about the idea that God had put into my heart. She wrote me, "Good morning, Pastor Rony. God bless you and your ministry. I want to give you a message from the Lord: He told me about a health campaign that is in your heart. He says, is not from you, He has placed in your heart. Don't worry, because He has it all planned." This was remarkable because at that time, this was not something that many people knew about. God used this woman's e-mail to confirm for me that this was all God's idea. As we moved forward, we decided we wanted to bless people living in extreme poverty with four basic items they needed for their health and well-being:

- Water filter: Contaminated water is the major cause of chronic malnutrition in Guatemala. Fifty-two percent of the population suffers from this condition.
- Ecological stove: Many mothers get sick and even die from lung diseases because they cook using open fires.
- Solar panel with four lights: In Guatemala, many houses do not have electricity.
- Ecological latrine: These help avoid contamination that they might be at risk for with less sanitary facilities.

This time we did the campaign only at my local church. But again we had so much fun doing this together. As a result the Lord allowed us to help one thousand families with a kit called Home Health. At this time we are sending teams of volunteers to bless many families with these Home Health kits.

Challenge for Day Seven

It's fun to be generous. In this short article, I cannot tell about all the miracles we saw in the process. What I can do is invite you to have fun on the generosity roller coaster, in which we obey God and see Him supernaturally provide.

Here is your challenge:

- Read Isaiah 58:5-7.
- Pray for a new vision for your generosity. Hear from God. Pray with an open heart that God will lead you in one specific area of generosity. Perhaps He has had it in your heart for a while and now is the time to step out in faith. Don't stop praying until you know with certainty what God wants you to do.
- Respond to what God puts in your heart, and be prepared to be challenged and blessed. Take a risk in being generous. This is your part of the roller-coaster ride. Step out in faith and be obedient to what God has put in your heart. If it is from Him, it will likely require trust, faith, and courage. Don't hold back—step out and do what He has put in your heart to do. See how He guides and provides. Expect God to meet your needs, but also expect to be surprised. Watch how He will multiply your generosity and perhaps call you into an even deeper level of generosity as a result. Remember, it is a roller coaster. Enjoy the ride!

Today I will take a risk and act generously in a new way as God leads.

SUMMARY

Your Seven Day Challenge at a Glance

Challenge for Day One: Freedom

Today I ask God to set me free from the love of earthly things.

- Read 1 Timothy 6:6–10 and Matthew 6:24.
- Pray for God to rid your heart of the love of anything but Him.
- Respond by creating a list of things you want God to help you set aside, that you may love God more completely. Lay them before Him and feel the chains fall away as you surrender them back to Him.

Challenge for Day Two: Trust

Today I ask God to help to help me give up control and begin to trust Him to be my Provider.

- Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–7.
- Pray for a heart that trusts God above everything else.
- Respond by recalling the times when God has met your needs in surprising and amazing ways. Write them down and share them with someone as a testimony to God's faithful provision.

Challenge for Day Three: Courage

Today I ask God to give me the courage to name my "all" and hold nothing back from His control in my life.

- Read Luke 12:15–20 and Matthew 13:44.
- Pray that God will help you define your "all." Write it down and lay it before God. Share it with the person closest to you in your life. Do they agree?
- Respond by committing together to step out in courage and turn it "all" over to Him, whatever that may require, trusting that He will provide for all of your needs.

Challenge for Day Four: Action

Today I choose one person or ministry, and I will make a sacrificial gift of time, talents, or treasure as God leads.

- Read 1 Timothy 6:17–19.
- Pray for God to give you joy in making a sacrificial gift.

- Respond by obeying what God puts in your heart. You may want to do any or all of the following in order to sustain this drive and be committed to generous living.
 - Create a fund for missions.
 - Decide who benefits from the fund.
 - Make a commitment to support your choice on a regular basis whether or not the needs are communicated to you.
 - Challenge friends, family, and your network to do the same.

Challenge for Day Five: Readiness

Today I will look for one new opportunity to live generously, and I will act on it as God leads.

- Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–12.
- Pray that God will reveal to you a new opportunity to give of your time, talents, and treasures to serve His kingdom. Pray daily that God will open your eyes to the opportunities He sends your way. Be sure to have periods during the year when you take extra time away to be with God, to seek His guidance, and to listen purposefully for His voice.
- Respond by immediately acting on the new opportunity, not delaying it, practicing generosity as soon as the opportunity presents itself. Find a friend or a small group that you can talk with about these issues.

Challenge for Day Six: Change

Today I will change one habit so that my life will better reflect my love for my neighbor through my care for God's creation.

- Read Psalm 24:1–5.
- Pray for wisdom to see where your lifestyle is damaging God's creation and for courage to change.
- Respond by:
 - Declaring God's ownership by putting all of the documents that symbolize your ownership of things (deeds, titles, financial reports, etc.) on a table and then praying over them, surrendering every- thing back to God.
 - Starting a discussion. As you study the word of God, be ready to be surprised, challenged, and inspired to engage in creation care at a whole new level.
 - Changing one habit. If you change one habit, you will open the pathway for deeper reflection and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in you

as you seek to be a more faithful steward of creation and all of life. To God be the glory!

Challenge for Day Seven: Risk

Today I will take a risk and act generously in a new way as God leads.

- Read Isaiah 58:5-7.
- Pray for a new vision for your generosity. Hear from God. Pray with an open heart that God will lead you in one specific area of generosity.
- Respond to what God puts in your heart, and be prepared to be challenged and blessed. Take a risk in being generous. This is your part of the roller-coaster ride. Step out in faith and be obedient to what God has put in your heart. Remember, it is a rollercoaster. Enjoy the ride!