



Developing Praiseworthy Generosity

Breaking with what is “normal” in America

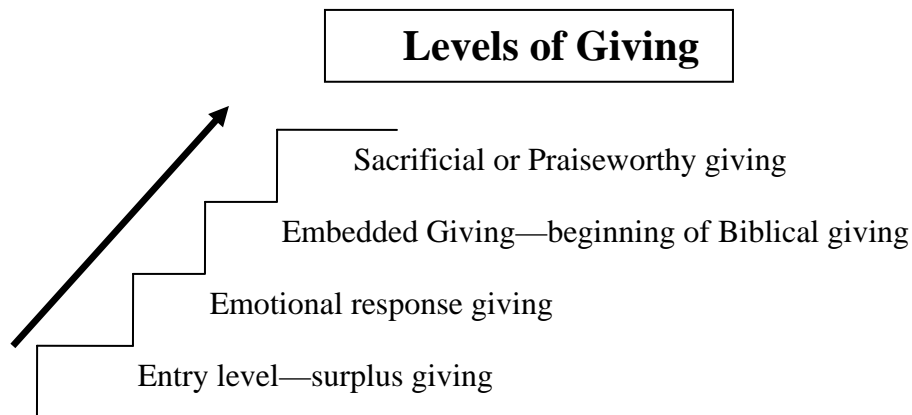
One of the key values, according to Jesus, that we must develop as His followers is Generosity. Jesus’ parables and sermons taught that **how we handle our money reveals to a great degree where we are in our spiritual development** (Matt. 19:16-24, Luke 11:39-41, Luke 12:22-34, I Tim 6:17-19). They point out that where our treasure is would also be the focus of our hearts.

Studies show that most evangelicals give to God around 2% of what they earn. A full 25% give nothing. It’s pretty clear from scripture what Jesus would say about that. Its also pretty clear what it reveals about our real heart commitments. I’m sure we don’t want to be found in this crowd.

Understanding Giving mindsets

Generosity is one of those things we tend to learn from our peers. And there is the rub. Because of these sources, we tend to reflect the values of our culture rather than God’s values. **It could be said that our view of money reflects our view of God and His place in our life.**

The illustration below shows a progression in how we see our treasure and how we understand our responsibility to be generous.



Surplus giving The most basic level of giving, what I call the entry level of giving, involves giving out of our surplus. The good thing is that the person gives. The danger is that they can unknowingly offend God. The great error is that the person thinks all they have belongs to them to do with as they want. Pride and greed are siblings that firmly anchor this perspective of wealth. God is only worthy of the crumbs from the table.

Note that giving at this level is painless because you give from your overflow. There is no heart involved at all. For adults especially, it’s all superficial. You give what you would be oblivious to or what you

would squander on trinkets anyway. Surplus giving includes giving away old clothes, old furniture or any other thing that would have been cast off.

The book of Malachi has some powerful things to say about this. God is angry that rather than the most valuable of the flock, the first fruits and unblemished, Israelites were giving the old, the lame, the weak. He rages against them in indignation (Malachi 1:6-9). **He states giving the weak, the old, the second best is an act of contempt against Him.** See what I mean about this being a dangerous action by adults?

Does that mean there is no place for surplus giving? No. It means that we must be careful when this desire comes to the forefront in our giving. Personally, I prefer selling old items at yard sales and then using the money to either buy new items to donate or merely donate the money. I believe it honors God.

Surplus is a start for children giving Surplus giving is a starting point, especially in training young children, in developing Generosity. You can begin to train them to be generous in two key ways with surplus giving.

1. **Purge excess.** Purging closets and toy bins is a start. Remember Malachi. I think it's better to have them sell their toys or clothes at a garage sale and then either donate the money or buy new toys for donating to a local charity. Doing this teaches some good entrepreneur principles as well as establishing a proper attitude toward what we give to God and how we handle money.
2. **Loosing the power of change.** Next, **a bare minimum starting point for families with children is collecting loose change daily in the home and designating it for God.** The average household has at least \$.78 in change in various pockets each day. Have the kids collect the change and put it into a jar at the end of each day. At the end of the month, take it to the bank to be counted and donate the money to God. As a family you can choose a missionary, orphan or mission agency to support or you can take it to church for the children to place in the offering. Either way, it captures surplus for use in the Kingdom.

A final note on surplus giving as the sole means of giving for adults. It can injure you. How? It can develop within you a “good enough” attitude that dehumanizes people. Jesus said we were to love our neighbor as our self. **Giving should always be an act of worship.** We give not to causes but ultimately to the Lord to advance His Kingdom in some way. Our “good enough” attitude eventually begins to shape our view of God. We denigrate Him and begin to lose our fear of Him. Our self deception regarding our responsibility to Him causes us to mock Him. Never a good idea.

Emotional response giving Most people give emotionally. There is a disaster somewhere, they encounter a person in need; some image, song, TV appeal, or challenge from a speaker captures their attention. Out comes the wallet or checkbook. A donation is made. Often no more giving happens until the next emotionally moving situation comes along, this unfortunately, leads to the “poorly tipping God” numbers I mentioned above. Those momentary, occasional checks may look large at the time, but by the end of the year you find that it really is a small fraction of your income.

Another danger associated with emotional giving is the development of callousness or cynicism. In our media saturated culture we can be bombarded with images and stories of tragedy and need. Over time, we develop emotional insulation from these stories. In Biblical terms, our hearts begin to harden. Emotional giving succumbs to the law of diminishing returns. It eventually takes more dramatic or tragic stories to move us. We become numb.

What is good in emotional giving is that the person's heart was moved! There was some emotion involved, sympathy or empathy surfaced long enough to affect a choice. Emotional giving is not the destination; it is a momentary response to a prompting of God. **It is good to cultivate a tender heart and to learn to listen to God's Spirit. This listening when He shouts is a first step to listening when He whispers.** However, there

is no guarantee that because they hear today they will hear tomorrow. This type of giving is all too sporadic and subject to our prejudices and whims. It can even arise out of our own heart and be in conflict with God's will. (See the book, *When Helping Hurts*.)

At this level, the person has realized that God has a claim on all he or she possesses, but the person still believes at their core that what they have is all theirs to do with as they please. This is momentary giving, still subject to a surplus mentality. The flirtation with pride and greed continues and the seductions give birth to various forms of materialism.

Emotional giving has its place. Paul, in II Corinthians, challenges the church to respond to the tragedy of famine in Jerusalem and the suffering of those in the body of Christ. The parable of the good Samaritan points to the need to be compassionate. I John 3:16-18 measures our devotion to Christ by our ability to emotionally connect with those suffering and alleviate their pain. However, it is not the root of Biblical giving.

Embedded giving Here is where truly Biblical giving starts. Embedded giving has its roots in the tithe required of Israel. (Lev.29:30-33) Ten percent of one's increase, the first born, the first fruits, were required by God. **It was a reminder that all a person has comes from God.** It is not theirs to do with as they please following any whim or desire. It takes giving from a sporadic, emotional response and forever linked it to how one views their financial obligations. God is to be first and foremost.

There are arguments as to whether tithing is required by followers of Jesus. Whichever side you fall on in the debate, the greater truth is this: The requirements of Jesus are more stringent. Tithing would be seen by Him as only a first step in how you handle the treasures God placed in your stewardship. In numerous places He uses language that says all you have is actually God's and the best thing you could do to gain spiritual capital (treasure in heaven) is to give it to the poor...all of it! (Seems to me tithing then becomes a pittance response compared to what Jesus demanded of so many. Matt. 19:21, Mk. 10:21, Luke 12:16-33, Luke 18:22.)

What tithing as a concept does is make it clear that Generosity is an obligation that is expected to be an automatic preeminent regular act. It formalizes giving just as the acts of communion and baptism formalize commitment to Christ. I made sure that our children grasped this concept from an early age. We collected loose change as a family and my children were also required to tithe what they earned in odd jobs and their little car washing business. We never encountered any objections to this. It made perfect sense to them.

Giving to God's work should be a line item in your budget that is untouchable by you. Rather than dip into the money designated to God, you scrimp in other areas to get by. Wait, you say, that sounds painful. I don't know if my budget can handle that! This objection has a powerful spiritual truth hidden inside it.

Embedded giving involves sacrifice. Consequently, it is the first step in making giving what it really should be, a form of worship.

It is a window into your devotion to Christ. He has said so.

The danger of tithing is twofold. First, it can be misconstrued as the maximum obligation you have to God financially. This was the error of the Pharisees. Jesus challenged them to go beyond tithing. Next, it can become meaningless in the sense that it is done so automatically that the heart is no longer involved.

Sacrificial or praiseworthy giving This is a level of giving that embraces what I believe God expects. **It is giving that reflects a heart captured by and fully engrossed in God.** It is giving as pure worship. It may involve everything mentioned previously (It is planned, embedded and purposeful and sensitive to human need.) but goes beyond it in this way: **It is always sacrificial and always requires faith.** Jesus drew attention to this by singling out the widow who gave two pennies (Luke 21:1-4), all she had to live on. It is captured in the story of the woman who broke the alabaster box (Matt. 26:6-13) and poured a year's wages of perfume on Jesus' feet. Her "waste" was a great sacrifice and act of worship. **It is not the size of the gift, but the size of the sacrifice that reveals the true emotion of the heart.**

This level of giving reflects the man who found a treasure hidden in a field and sold all to obtain it. At this level of giving, money only has value through how God can use it. This is giving that truly gets God's attention. It can be done in a number of ways and it can incorporate all the levels below it. Tithing is transformed at this level.

There is much written that captures and goes beyond the idea of a mere 10% obligation to God. I like Ron Sider's concept of graduated tithing. He recommends examining your lifestyle before God to determine what you really need to live. That amount is tithed at 10%. After that threshold, say \$20,000 just for discussion's sake, you progressively tithe the amounts over that. Say every \$2000 beyond the 20K threshold gets an additional 10% taken out of it. So, the first \$2000 (22K) is tithed at 20%, the next (24K) at 30% and so on. It's an example of how you place all your treasure at God's disposal, recognizing that you are His steward... managing His money according to His criteria for advancing His Kingdom.

Some people seek to embody this level of giving through faith promises. At the beginning of the year, after a time of reflection and prayer, they set a goal for giving that can only be met through faith and sacrifice. Throughout the year they seek God's face and examine their lifestyle to free up money for advancing His Kingdom. They expect God to perform miracles of provision. They do as much as they can to sacrifice. Some take on a part-time job, others may donate items to God and sell them. (I think of farmers who donate portions of fields or whole fields to God and then take the proceeds of the harvest and give it to Him.) Some forego something in their life to free up money (all life become a celebration of Lent). **It is an extravagant act of love** for them (not to be compared with what others are doing).

Where are you in this continuum of giving?

Growing in our love and devotion to Christ is linked to how we grow in relation to the resources He entrusts to our care. All we have comes from God. It belongs to Him. We are His stewards (we manage His money according to rules He has left to guide us). To fully follow Jesus requires relinquishing the hold we have on our pocketbooks and embracing the reality that He expects us to become praiseworthy givers.

No matter where you are on the continuum, you should be striving to surpass what you did last year. We all should transform our concept of giving into what God intended it to be, an act of worship. The book of Malachi makes it clear that this is how God views it. If we have a bad attitude toward giving to God's work, then we have a bad attitude toward God. If we treat it lightly, we treat Him lightly. If we ignore it, we ignore Him.

The whole issue of how much we give and how we give really boils down to one question. **How much do you love Christ?**