



The Joy of Giving

Advent Study

Introduction

Read: Mark 10:45

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to *give* his life as a ransom for many.” Fortunately, none of us will be called upon to *give* in the manner our Lord Jesus gave. And yet, we will all have opportunities to give our lives—in one way or another—for the benefit of others. As we lead up to celebrating once again the birth of our Savior, this Advent study will focus on the variety of ways in which we can give, and the joy that giving brings.

When asked to write a 24-day study on “The Joy of Giving,” the person primarily responsible for this series was very reluctant to accept the challenge. He felt that few people would like to read his commentaries on giving for basically a whole month. He was about to decline the assignment when he sensed that God spoke to him during a morning devotion time. What came to him was the idea of asking three other people to work with him on the study.

He chose three full time career missionaries or ministers to write six days each, people who rely on giving by others for their material needs. During that same devotion time, God even gave him the three people He wanted to do the writing. Over the next month you will read about the personal joys and trials of four full time Christian servants who have experienced the joy of giving and receiving. Due to the nature of this study, the writers were given greater leeway than usual in sharing their personal experiences.

R&D Consider the many ways in which you have an opportunity to give of your time, talent and treasure.

Prayer: Lord, during the Advent Season leading up to the gift of Your Son, help me to grow in my understanding and joy of giving.

Lesson 1

Read: Matthew 6:25-34

First Things First

Some time ago, Bobby McFerrin had a very popular song called, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” Is that what Jesus is teaching us in this passage? Three times Jesus says to his hearers, “Do not worry.” He says don’t worry about our life, what we eat or drink or what we are to wear. Then he says it again for emphasis. Our heavenly Father knows we need these things.

God knows that birds need to eat. He takes care of them. He knows that lilies don’t spin or labor and He says their beauty is unsurpassed. But Jesus brings it home when he tells us that we are worth more to God than these birds or flowers. He knows our needs. Our lives are more than clothes and food. We can’t add a single minute to our lives. Control of life is an illusion. But God is sovereign and He will take care of us.

Have you heard it said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing”? What is that? Simply, to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (v.33). Jesus does not say don’t work. He does not say don’t save. What he is saying is do not place an undue emphasis on temporal things. God knows we have need of clothes, shelter and money to live, even before we ask for them. So, “don’t worry, be happy”? How about, “don’t worry, trust God”!

R&D What do you do to remind yourself that the One who died for you to give you eternal life will love you completely and provide for all your needs?

Prayer: Heavenly Father. Thank You that You know what we need. When we have done all that we can do, teach us to relax in the truth of who You are as our Sovereign One, our Provider, and our Lord.

Lesson 2

Read: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

The Grace of Giving

The apostle Paul uses the word “grace” in this passage three times. The first is in reference to “the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches” (v.1). The other two speak to how the Corinthian church was to act: “complete this act of grace on your part” (v.6) and “excel in this grace of giving” (v.7). He was writing to a church that had not been known for its generosity.

Paul was exuberant in his praise for the hill country churches of Macedonia in the northern part of Greece. To the Corinthians, these were a backward people, poor and unsophisticated. But they put their southern neighbors to shame by their generosity. Paul says they gave out of their poverty. No one would have blamed them for not being generous since they were under extreme hardship anyway.

Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* states the issue this way: “They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.” Though poor themselves, they did not act poor. Rather, they lived in the knowledge of the God’s great grace. Because “they gave themselves first to the Lord” and then to their brothers, their giving flowed out of what God was naturally working within their lives. As Paul urges the Corinthians, when we give God full reign in our lives, we have the opportunity to act out of grace and to be grace to others.

R&D What is it that motivates a person to plead for the chance to give to the Lord?

Prayer: Oh Father God, we confess our tendency to love things more than You. Help us to fall more and more in love with You. May the “things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of Your glory and grace.”

Lesson 3

Read: Hosea 10:12

Plant Seeds of Righteousness

There are many “growing” metaphors in the Scriptures. Certainly this one of sowing and reaping is one of the most familiar. Here, God tells us that if we plant righteousness we will reap a harvest of unending love.

I grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania. I learned that we needed to plow a field before we could plant and we had to sow the seeds before we could reap a harvest. We expected that if we planted corn we would reap corn. That seems rather obvious. But I also learned that timing was important in the process as well.

The growing season in Pennsylvania was just long enough to get a crop in and harvested. First we plowed the field after the snow melted, the ground thawed out and it dried up enough to get on it. Then the crop was planted when the ground was warm enough for the seed to germinate. Planting any earlier would result in the seed rotting in the cold ground. The rains were necessary early in the summer to start the seedlings growing, but were no longer necessary by mid summer when the roots had gone down deep enough to withstand the dry days. Finally, corn was harvested just before the frost killed the plant in the fall.

God promises that when we sow righteousness, we will reap the fruit of unfailing love. He tells us to intentionally “break up your unplowed ground; for *it is time* (italics added) to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.” God can teach us a lot through nature. We can break up the unplowed ground of our heart, allowing God to plant seeds of righteousness there that can, when properly cared for, produce the joy of giving for the feeding of others.

R&D Is it time to sow seeds of righteousness—seeds of kindness, grace or integrity—in the lives of those around you? Is there someone who has given you a difficult time with whom you need to sow righteousness in your relationship?

Prayer: God of Heaven, show me today where there is unplowed ground of a relationship that I need to plow in order to sow the seeds of righteousness. For in doing so, You promise the fruit of unfailing love.

Lesson 4

Read: Luke 16:19-26

Rich Man, Poor Man

The vivid imagery of this solemn parable speaks to the terrible end for those who only live for the gratification of their own sinful and selfish desires. With these few words, our Lord draws the contrasts so decisively. He shows how Lazarus and the rich man lived their lives, what happened upon death and their eternal destinies. God has specifically instructed us in His Word to plan for the life that comes after this one on earth.

With parables it is easy to read spiritual truth into every detail. Though this one speaks about abuse of wealth and disregard for the poor, they are not the main point. God would have us know that obedience to and reverence for Him, as well as commitment to His purposes, are not at our discretion. God does not fit into a box, to be addressed at our whims. Abraham’s rebuff of the rich man’s pleas for leniency was clear.

Are there times when we realize that our hearts are callous to the things of the Lord? We have this lifetime only to prepare for the life to come. It is easy to fall into habits that are hard to break. When we are tempted to think that we have time to straighten out things between us and the Lord, Jesus’ word to the rich man about the challenge of overcoming a lifestyle of independence from God should be a wake up call to us all. Let us consider how Jesus would have us live day by day, a life of joyful giving.

R&D Are there times when you realize that your heart is callous to the things of the Lord? Do you have a tendency to postpone laying up for yourself treasures in heaven?

Prayer: *God and Creator, impress on me today the certainty of an eternal home with You. Cause my heart to be captured by You rather than the material blessings that You have given me.*

Lesson 5

Read: Matthew 6:1-4

Anonymous Giving

It was apparently a common practice in Jesus' time to make quite a display of giving to the poor. According to the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, the giving of alms was the sign of a righteous man. The Jews looked upon their righteous deeds as that which made them fit for heaven. Here, Jesus had in mind the Scribes and Pharisees, who did all they did to be seen by men. Putting on the appearance of holiness when their hearts were not at all right with God, brought the strongest condemnation from Christ.

Our Lord tells us not to call attention to our giving, for that will be all the reward we will get. We may not be as blatant as the Pharisee, but we cannot expect God to reward us when we are seeking our own glory instead of His. The applause of others is empty and a poor substitute to the surpassing value of hearing the Lord say, "Well done."

Do we look for praise from people or will we be content to know that God will honor our gifts of time, treasure and talent? God rewards us with inner peace and joy for giving, and especially concerning those enterprises that are near to His heart. We should care for the disadvantaged and we should give to the furtherance of His Kingdom. But we are to take pains to not call attention to ourselves when we do. Let the attention and the honor be to the Lord as we give joyfully.

R&D In what ways are you tempted, however subtle, to have others think well of you in your Christian disciplines and endeavors? Why do we long for others to honor what we do for the Lord?

Prayer: *Oh most gracious Father, we confess our own need for others to think well of us.*

Lesson 6

Read: Exodus 35:4-29

Willing Giving

In Exodus 35, God gave the Israelites an order to bring free will offerings to build His tabernacle. The people were to give out of their possessions the specific items required for its construction, as well their skilled labor. Then beginning in verse 21, the remarkable story of what the people gave is told.

On the surface, we might naturally have assumed the Israelites would respond appropriately, in light of all God had done for them. But if you think about it, these people had been slaves for hundreds of years. They had had nothing until now. Suddenly, they have possessions. The Egyptians gave them their treasures on the way out of the country. Instead of toiling for their taskmasters, they could now use their skills to build a future for themselves and their families. Would we not think that the Israelites were justified in keeping those supplies for the treacherous journey into the Promised Land?

There is a wonderful relationship between the command given and the people's willingness to obey that results in God being glorified. His work was accomplished and His people honored for their part in that work. We see the command in verse five, "Everyone who is willing is to bring

to the Lord an offering...” Indeed, the people were willing. They brought their offerings and gave of their skills to build the tabernacle. In the end, they finished “...all the work the Lord through Moses had commanded them to do.” People might be reluctant to give if arbitrarily commanded to do so. When, on the other hand, their willingness is sought and the need is seen, an entirely different dynamic is at work. This was the Israelites’ opportunity to have an important part in honoring God in a magnificent way. May we see those opportunities to honor God He places before us day by day.

R&D What are those ministries or spiritual activities to which you have a willing heart to give toward that will result in God’s work being accomplished?

Prayer: Oh, King of the Universe, I am Yours. All that is mine is really Yours. When You ask me to give, please make my heart willing to give back to You what really is Yours in the first place.

Lesson 7

Read: Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 2 Chronicles 31:4-6

Tithe vs. Gift

As we see in our readings for today, God was very specific with the Israelites about the tithe. Neither Jesus nor anyone else in the New Testament commanded tithing. Rather than giving being a matter of Law, Jesus taught that giving should be a matter of joyful generosity. Jesus always called his followers higher than the Old Testament Law (see Matthew 5:17-48). For Jesus, a 10% tithe would be a starting point; a gift would be on top of that.

In 1975, when I committed my life to Christ, God gave me a big brother in Christ who was on the full time staff of Campus Crusade for Christ. That brother taught me daily from the Bible. It was a great growth year for this baby Christian. One of the concepts he shared with me was the difference between a tithe and a gift. I became convinced that, as a Christian, I should give ten percent of my gross monthly earnings (the tithe) back to God. I opened a separate checking account and, each month, deposited one tenth of my income, as meager as it was, into that account. I have been tithing now for almost thirty years. I can tell you that I have never missed the money and have never missed a mortgage payment or a meal.

For me, the offering up of my tithe is an act of worship. Some people find it more convenient to send their offering to the church each month or each year. Some churches even accept offerings via credit cards today. But, for me, it is important to offer up my tithe each Sunday during the appropriate time of the worship service.

I believe that a gift is that which you give over and above the tithe. It can be given when, where, and to whom you are led by the Spirit. It is also through your gifts that you are especially blessed, spiritually and materially. It is also through your gifts that you can share in many ministries.

R&D Have you made tithing a part of your life and your worship? Or, are you still planning on tithing when you make more money and can afford it?

Prayer: Generous Father, grant me the courage to trust You by my tithing. Show me that You will always provide me and my family all we need.

Lesson 8

Read: Exodus 12:35, 36; 36:2-7

Giving from What You Have Been Given

It had to be a miracle of God that the Egyptians became “favorably disposed” to give the Israelites silver, gold and clothing (v. 35) in our first reading. And then we see the miracle of the results of the Israelites’ generosity in our second reading. It is when we can see that what we have is truly a gift from God that we can be motivated to share with others, and God has some interesting ways of blessing us for our faithfulness.

Although, as mentioned earlier, I learned to tithe when I first gave my life to Christ in 1975, that was a recession year and I was mostly unemployed. By July my family and I were running out of money. We were down to our last \$2000 when a friend and fellow church member told us that he was three months behind with his mortgage payments and, if he did not make a payment immediately, his family would lose their home. My wife and I gave him half of what we had left, not knowing how we would survive ourselves.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from a friend telling me he had given my name to a friend of his who was the National Marketing Director of a new athletic shoe company called NIKE. Soon afterwards, I received a phone call and the voice on the other end said, “Hello, my name is Dick Larson with NIKE, do we have anything to talk about?” I told him that I hoped we did because I was hungry and needed to go to work. He set up an interview in which I told him, among other things, that I was a Christian and could not do anything that would compromise my Christian beliefs. He responded non-committally and said he would let me know something in about a week. When I had not heard from him two weeks later, I called him and he asked if I would like to be the NIKE representative for the state of Florida! That was the beginning of a very successful sales association with NIKE. I believe that being awarded that NIKE sales position was a direct result of sharing what we had with someone who needed it more.

R&D Can you remember a time when your generosity resulted in an unexpected blessing from God? Share it in a situation that will bring glory to God and instruction to others.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, that You remind me, over and over again, how You have always been with me during my need.

Lesson 9

Read: 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

Giving as an Act of Love

For many Christians, the subject of money and Christian giving is a strictly private concern, not open for discussion. Many would say that “what I give is between me and God, none of your business.”

Paul takes an entirely different approach. He declares that our giving is not just between God and us, but our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are also to be considered and included in the discussion of our obligations. Our offering is more than just for the upkeep of the church but represents an act of love for God and His people. If we have more than we need while others go without, we have a Christian duty to offer our abundance to the relief of those in need, especially those within the church.

Paul points to the example of Christ in that he laid aside the riches of his divinity and heavenly kingdom and emptied himself and became poor in this world, that we who were poor in

spirit could be made rich through his obedience. God sent His Son as an act of love that all might be redeemed and included in His heavenly plan. The very nature of a Christian propels us to give because we have the Spirit of the giver living inside our very being. If God is alive in us, we will give to all those whom God reveals their need to us.

On a business trip, I was about to enter an upscale restaurant where I had made a dinner reservation when I was approached by a homeless person who asked me for some money. I told him that I would not give him any money but would take him to a fast-food restaurant and buy him a meal, which I did. As I then walked back to my restaurant, feeling quite pleased with myself, I was approached by another homeless person. I was now a late for my reservation and I declined to help him. That was not a meal I enjoyed as I sat in this fine restaurant enjoying what should have been an outstanding meal. I went back outside, looking for the man, but could not find him. I had missed an opportunity, as Hebrews tells us (13:2), to entertain an angel.

R&D Do you spend time ministering to others at the hospital, prison, or a homeless shelter? Christ is always there.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive me for not dining with you and yours. Help me to give more freely to those in need.

Lesson 10

Read: Luke 12:13-21

Bigger Isn't Better

The settling of inheritances can be one of the most destructive situations in families. Many times one child believes another is getting more than his share, and there is resentment against the one who made the bequest and the one who received it. In some instances, the complaint is not over money or real estate but over some memento the person thinks he had been promised, and now it is going to someone else. Resentments grow, and the very worst in people surfaces.

Jesus, in the parable, is showing how foolish all of this is. He uses the example of the farmer who just can't hold onto enough. He wants to build bigger barns and store more and more goods. What greed! Would this man end up being happy in his miserly existence? Absolutely not. Joy in life results from generous giving not from accumulating possessions. No one knows when his life may be taken from him; and when that happened to the farmer in the parable, there would just have been the family feud over who gets what.

Jesus' way is a different way. Studies have shown that, year after year, Mississippi—considered the poorest state in the nation—is, per capita, the most generous. On the other hand, some of the “most progressive” states are the stingiest in charitable giving. Statistics would also show that Mississippi and many “Bible Belt” states that also have strong giving records have a much higher percentage of practicing Christians than the stingy states do. In other words, where people focus on Christ and how he would have them live, there will be much more generous giving than in those areas where people's focus is more toward “building bigger barns.”

R&D Recall a situation in your own family or in a family you are familiar with where the dividing of the inheritance strained or broke family relationships. How could the problem have been avoided?

Prayer: Lord, help me never to be envious of what another person has; You are enough for me.

Lesson 11

Read: Galatians 6:7-10

Reaping What We Sow, Part 1

Paul is encouraging us to not lose heart or grow weary, but to continue to do good to all men. We will reap the reward if we are generous to all men, especially those who are of the household of the faith.

In my work with NIKE, two things happened in 1981. The first was an idea I had to expand the business in Florida. Because I believe that God wants to guide us in all aspects of our lives, I'm convinced He inspires us in our work as well as our worship. So, when the idea did not meet with immediate acceptance, I persisted. Eventually I was able to persuade management to see the value in the suggestion, and a profitable operation was begun in which I invested and served as a silent partner.

The other thing that happened was that our pastor invited nine of us to a luncheon to explain an inspiration he had for moving our church to a new location and expanding it substantially. We all caught the vision and pledged support for him to move ahead with the purchase of the property on which the new campus would be located. The initial building campaign pledges totaled ten million dollars. I felt led by the Lord to pledge an amount representing an estimate of the income I would receive from the project mentioned above over the first three years of its operation. Although that was many years ago, I still marvel at how God put an idea into my head that helped support the godly inspiration He had given our pastor.

R&D What involvement have you had with planting a church or a building campaign at your church? How have you specifically seen God at work?

Prayer: Father God, give me a generous heart at all times to share what You have given so freely to me.

Lesson 12

Read: Luke 16:1-13

Reaping What We Sow, Part 2

In what is without question a very difficult parable to understand, Jesus talks about money and the way the world does business. When the steward found out that he was going to lose his employment, he got very busy and creative. The confusion is that Jesus praises the dishonest steward. But the praise is not for his dishonest actions but for his determination to rectify this emergency and insure his future. Jesus asks us to use the same determination and energy in caring for our spiritual life. The story reminds us that one day we will have to relinquish our positions in this world and give an accounting of our lives to God.

I wanted to be a good steward of my pledge to give to the church my estimated profits from the new operation mentioned in the last study. The problem was that my partners wanted to keep pouring what would have been profits back into building the business. So, as things sometimes go even among well-meaning people, I ended up at cross-purposes with my partners over the enterprise. They were exercising sound management policy, but it was impeding my ability to live up to my pledge.

There's no need to go into the details of what happened, but I just kept looking to the Lord for guidance in what to do that would be fair to them but also allow me to meet my obligation. The

solution was for me to sell my interest in the company to them; and, when final arrangements had been made, the result was that I received three times the amount I had estimated would have been my profit for three years. When we are trying to do what we believe God is calling us to do amazing things can happen.

R&D Share your fondest memory of how God has actively worked in your business or in other ways with regard to financial matters.

Prayer: Father God, I give You my will and my life, including my work and my money, to do with as You see fit to bring glory to Your Son Jesus.

Lesson 13

Read: Genesis 14:17-24

Abram and Melchizedek

Abram's nephew Lot and his family had been captured in a battle between kings, including the king of Sodom, where Lot had lived. Word reached Abram, and he gathered an army and went to the rescue. Having defeated the kings who had taken Lot prisoner, there were spoils of war to be divided. That is the background (Genesis 14:1-16) leading up to our reading for today.

There are at least three aspects of our passage that speak to the joy of giving. The first is the reference to the tithe ("a tenth of everything," v.20b) being given in honor of God. Although the gift went specifically to Melchizedek, it was because he was a "priest of God Most High." This mysterious character is mentioned in Hebrews 7:1-3 and is thought by many to have been a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ himself. In any event, the passage establishes the 10% tithe as the standard of giving to God.

Secondly, Abram, who is simply glad to have his family back, has no desire to keep any of the spoils of war. It is his joy to make the tithe to Melchizedek in thanksgiving, and to let the remainder go to the king of Sodom and to those who joined Abram in the battle.

Thirdly, Abram is able to do this because, as far as he is concerned, it is God who has brought victory and everything belongs to God. The joy of giving reaches its highest point in our lives when we realize, deep down within ourselves, that everything we have really belongs to God.

R&D When have you come into an unexpected windfall of money or property? What was your attitude concerning it?

Prayer: Lord, help me always to remember that everything I have belongs to You and to be eternally grateful that that is so.

Lesson 14

Read: Malachi 3:6-12

Robbing God

Obstinacy and sin have been shown to God by the Israelites, turning away from His decrees and not keeping them. How can they show that they want to repent and be obedient? "Put your money where your mouth is," says the Lord. "You have been robbing Me by your lack of tithes and offerings. Show faith by giving first to Me."

An interesting promise from God follows that reveals a great truth. The priestly class of the Jewish people could not own land, but had to live on the tithes of food required by the Law

(Leviticus 27:30-34; Deuteronomy 14:22) and provided by those who possessed the land. In Malachi's time this was not happening, and the priests had to neglect their temple duties and leading worship in order to get jobs and earn money. God asks the people to test Him by bringing the whole tithe to sustain the House of the Lord and He will amaze them with blessings. He isn't saying that we should give so that we will get a reward, but the fact is that putting God first has its own joyful rewards!

This truth came to me fairly early in our married life. When our family first joined a church, we arrived at a figure that we thought would be a proper weekly pledge. We knew nothing about tithing at the time; and, when we were called on to make our pledge, we were frankly discouraged from committing even to the amount we had in mind. The senior member of the church who called on us was also our banker, and he didn't want our young family to be strapped for funds when "the church is doing well and really doesn't need your money." Sadly, we went for a couple of years following his advice before we discovered the joy of tithing. Once we did, we gave joyfully and much more greatly experienced the abundance of God's love.

R&D Where are you on the issue of 10% tithing?

Prayer: Lord, help me to open the floodgates of my giving as You so abundantly open the floodgates of Your love.

Lesson 15

Read: Luke 21:1-4

Sacrificial Giving

Jesus was in the portion of the temple called the court of women. The treasury was either located there or in an adjoining walkway. There would have been seven boxes into which worshippers could deposit their temple tax and six boxes for freewill offerings. It was a freewill offering that the widow made. Not only was she poor, but she was a widow. Widows had few means of income in Jesus' day. Thus, her sacrifice was enormous in comparison to the gifts of others, yet she gave it willingly.

This widow seems to have given all she had to live on. She had faith that God would provide. The rich people were giving out of their abundance, as Jesus noted. He is commending sacrificial giving and taking the gifts of the wealthy for granted. If the amount we give (tithe or not) has no appreciable effect on our lifestyle, then we are simply "giving out of our abundance" (v.4).

Sacrificial giving is the test of our faith and the basis of true joy in giving. Unless we "feel the pinch" and do it anyway because God is first in our lives, we miss something important. There is no better way to demonstrate our love of God who calls us to love Him and our neighbors as ourselves than to share generously what we have with others. We do this by our gifts to the church and to other worthwhile purposes. The joy of giving is best expressed by those who know that all we have belongs to God, and we can be grateful that He allows us to keep as much as He does for our own uses.

R&D What would amount to sacrificial giving on your part? Explain.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to demonstrate my total dependence on You by the generosity of my giving.

Lesson 16

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

Talents

Today's familiar story is about using our resources wisely in the service of God. Even though "talents," in Jesus' day, were coins, the parable can apply equally to things God gives us other than money. By His grace, we do have other possessions than money itself, and we also have time and abilities that can be used to the glory of God. Over the years, I have often taught about lay ministry and the spiritual gifts (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4) we receive for service in the kingdom. Certainly this parable applies to those spiritual gifts that are not for our own selfish use but to be "invested" toward God's work in the world.

In the story, the servants (us) were called by the master (God) who "entrusted his property to them" (v.14). That, of course, is what God does. We human beings are stewards of all that we have. As Christians, we should understand the sacredness of that trust. The servants received no more nor less than each could handle so that, if they failed, they would not have the excuse of being overwhelmed by what was expected of them. Likewise, God gives us what we can handle. The issue is not how much we have in terms of time, abilities, and possessions, but how well we use what we have.

The plight of the third servant makes it clear that we are not to simply "sit" on what we have been given. We are to put what we have been given to work. The extent to which we will do that is evidence of our trust in God. If we, like the third servant, are fearful of God as one who, rather than loving us, is a "hard man" (v.24), we will bury what He has given us. If we, on the other hand, trust in a loving God, we will want to use everything we have to honor Him and to make His love known throughout the world. Concerning money specifically, because every dollar we have belongs to God, our wise use of what we have (producing more for His work) can also be to His glory and our joy.

R&D In what specific ways have you put time, talent and treasure to work for God?

Prayer: Lord, at the end of my day here on earth, I want more than anything else to hear You say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Lesson 17

Read: Philippians 4:10-20

Thanksgiving

Philippians is Paul's letter of joy. The theme of joy rings throughout it. Typically, today's reading begins with "I rejoice." As we reflect this Advent on the joy of giving, it is rewarding to have from Paul himself this expression of his joy because of the generosity of the Philippians and the joy he is sure they have experienced as a result of their care for him.

Paul's life was a difficult one. He faced opposition and persecution almost everywhere he went, and sometimes imprisonment and physical abuse were the result. Yet, he remained content because he knew that what he was doing was in accordance with the Lord's will for him. In those circumstances, to experience the outpouring of love heaped on him by the Philippians was certainly a cause for joy. They had provided Paul with financial support while he was in prison and sent him aid "again and again when I was in need" (v.16). It was obvious that the Philippians cared dearly for Paul because they demonstrated it with their generosity, and Paul is very thankful.

When Paul makes reference to "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (v.18), he is referring to Leviticus 7:12-14 which contains instructions for thank offerings.

Then Paul goes on to say that God would meet all the needs of the Philippians “according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (v.19). When we give joyfully for the needs of others, they are blessed but we are as well. The kind of “riches” we have in Christ Jesus will not always be monetary, and we have no promise that we will always be free of debt, ill health or other troubles. Yet, we are blessed to be a blessing, and, by the grace of God, the joy of our reward is union with Christ eternally.

R&D *Has there been a “Paul” whom you have had the joy of supporting in ministry? Explain.*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who have reached out to me in times of need. Help me to be sensitive to those to whom You would have me give joyfully.*

Lesson 18

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Judgment

The point of the parable is that God will separate those who have been obedient followers from those who have been pretenders or unbelievers. The real evidence of our faithfulness is in our actions. Because Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, what we do for others demonstrates our obedience to Jesus’ command. Although this story is about the last judgment, we really judge ourselves. Our actions show whether we are followers of Jesus or only pretenders.

The parable describes things we can do every day. These actions don’t require wealth, power or prestige in order to be able to engage in them. They are simple acts freely given. Our calling to serve Christ in others does not end with our tithe or gifts we send to charity organizations. We have no excuse to neglect those in real need, and we cannot simply hand such responsibilities over to others when we personally know of the need and are in a position to provide the help. Jesus expects better of us: that we will be personally involved in caring for others. And the inference of the passage is that we will enjoy it so much, we won’t realize we are doing it.

Those who focus on meeting the needs of others are doing the work of Christ in the world. We are not only to provide direct financial support to the church and to the work of ministry, we are to give ourselves generously for the benefit of others. In doing so, we are serving Christ. It is a joy to do so. My wife and I drive weekly for the Meals on Wheels ministry, for instance, and can personally attest to the joy it gives us because it brings us into contact with those through whose appreciation shines the face of Christ.

R&D *What opportunity to meet needs “right at your front door” might you have been missing?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see and respond to those who are hungry, thirsty, estranged, unclothed, sick and imprisoned.*

Lesson 19

Read: Psalm 24:1-10

The Earth Is the Lord's

Today’s passage urges us to open our gates because the Holy One, the King of Glory, is ready to “enter in.” Giving our wills to Him opens the gate to our hearts, and He enters. Preparing us for His occupancy, He first cleanses us and then infuses our lives with His holiness. We begin

experiencing the joy of peace with God in this holy season of Advent as we prepare for Jesus' arrival once again.

When we live self-centered lives, we are like workhorses with blinders on, focused on our little personal universes. In this passage, our God wants to remove our blinders and awaken us to Him and His pre-eminence as the one who created our world and everything in it, including you and me.

Wernher von Braun, the physicist, rocket scientist and Father of the US space program, made a thought-provoking observation. I have often shared it with those who consider themselves too intellectual to accept the idea of a God to whom we are accountable. He said, "Science has discovered that matter does not know extinction, merely transformation. Does it not seem reasonable that the master-piece of God's creation, the human soul, would not know extinction, but merely transformation?"

The world belongs to God. What a blessing that He has made mankind stewards over it. He wants to awaken us to what He has given us that we may experience the great joy of sharing what we have with others. He wants to transform us that we may be transforming agents of His love in a needful world.

R&D In what ways is God opening the gate of your heart to be more giving of yourself this Advent Season?

Prayer: Dear Lord, may Your Spirit have free access to our hearts and minds in order to assure us of Your grace and the joyful life we gain from dependency upon You.

Lesson 20

Read: Isaiah 1:10-17

Meaningless Offerings

In this passage, God is reading the riot act to those who were insulting Him by their religious charades and disobedient lives, which He calls an abomination. He has no interest in their offerings; they are detestable to Him. Why? Because those offerings are insincere. What God wants is the people's hearts not their hypocritical ceremonies and sanctimonious "lip service" to His commands. Instead of trying to look good in His eyes He wants them to do good by seeking justice, caring for the oppressed and defending the widows and orphans (v.17). The problem is that, in order for us to obey God's commands from our hearts, we need His nature controlling ours so that we have the desire and the will to obey.

Since my conversion many years ago, I too have experienced drawing near to God "with my lips" instead of my heart, and letting performance substitute for joyful obedience. Yet, there are no joyful, disobedient Christians.

It is easy to become so familiar with what is expected of us that we perform in a way that may even be applauded in our churchy environment but which is really an abomination to God because we are functioning in our own strength and not in the Spirit.

God wants us to be generous in our lives and in our giving, but not simply because He commands it. Our hearts need to be in our sacrificial giving and serving. By His Holy Spirit within us, our hearts can be changed. When we come to worship and make our offerings because of the love of God within us, we experience joy and so does God.

R&D How have you experienced God's Spirit shaping your giving and your service?

Prayer: *Gracious Holy Spirit, teach us to respond, gratefully, to Your loving ministry of conviction, so that we, made aware of our sins, may agree, confess and return to abiding in Your love and doing Your will.*

Lesson 21

Read: Matthew 6:19-24

Treasures in Heaven

God wants us to live focused on eternal values instead of “you only go around once, so live, love, laugh and be happy.” Someone asked Henry Ford, when he was the first billionaire, “Mr. Ford, how much money does it take to satisfy a man?” His reply: “Just a little bit more!” A psychologist friend said, “I make a very good living off of people who toss and turn all night long on the finest mattresses money can buy.” Augustine stated the issue this way: “Thou hast made us for thyself, dear God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee!” What do these statements tell us? We will never be truly content with anything less than God Himself. Yet, how can we overcome the lure of materialism? How can we substitute treasures in heaven for treasures here on earth?

God wants us to be His people wherever we are, in whatever we are doing. There are only a few whom He calls out of their current vocation into fulltime Christian ministry, but that is what happened to me.

I vividly remember, as a fairly new Christian, daydreaming about how someday I would serve God. I was 32 with a wife, two children and three businesses. My daydreaming was suddenly interrupted by what seemed to be God saying, “Howard, wake up! I might not give you ‘someday’. All you can count on is right now.”

Well, that deflated me, since I was up to my ears in long working hours and financial obligations, with no spare time or money for serving God. God seemed to say, “So what’s new? You are always loaded with obligations that, when fulfilled, you replace with new ones just like the old ones! Complete your obligations. I am not honored by unfaithfulness, but when you fulfill one, ask Me what I want you to do with your new flexibility.”

God, by re-orienting my priorities, began a process that led, over the last 42 years, to a fulfilling life of increasing freedom to serve, that I wouldn’t trade for anything.

R&D How would you like for God to work in your life and circumstances to give you greater freedom to serve?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, impress afresh on each of us that You have not called us to a life of depriving self but rather abandoning self to You and Your loving plan for joyful obedient service.*

Lesson 22

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Good Samaritan

The thought of loving God and loving people (our neighbors) sounds easy if all we do is talk about it. But when we actually act upon these two commandments, on which “hang all or the law and the prophets,” we discover the difference between theory and reality. Like all commandments these do not provide the means for gaining acceptance by keeping them, because God uses them like mirrors that only reveal issues we face in life, not ways to solve them. They

are used by God to convict us of the truth that Paul stated in Romans 7:18b, “To will to do good is present with me, but how to accomplish it, I find not.”

Everywhere we turn, there are people in need of “Good Samaritan” help. Some are easier than others to like. Others can be quite unlovable. When I find someone to be difficult to care about, the Lord usually reminds me, “You were offensive to me, but I loved you anyway; and then, because of my love, you responded. Keep this in mind: if I can love you, I can love others through you. Abide in my love and you will love me as well as your neighbors in need.” We love God because He first loved us, and used others to bring His love to us!

If our lives are perceived by others as prideful, religious, preoccupied with our own needs and unconcerned about others, we repel instead of attract. On the other hand, the Lord magnetizes our lives when His love is free to flow through us, and benefits those around whom we live, work and socialize. To live otherwise, while professing Christianity, is practical atheism.

R&D *What are ways that you can be a “Good Samaritan” where you live, work and socialize?*

Prayer: *Dear Father, thank You for continually reminding us that You did not send Your Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.*

Lesson 23

Read: 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Collection for God's people

The Lord instructs us to *regularly* set aside offerings, as *generous* as possible, which will testify to His love and concern for those in need. “Regularly,” implies a lifestyle, more than occasional responses to special appeals. “Generous as possible” is a very relative term that can involve all three dimensions of our personal resources of time, ability and money.

If I am not “walking in the light,” as described in 1 John 1:1-10, I am joyless instead of joyful and prone to look to material things to fill the emptiness in my own life. In that condition, I am not generous with my time or money or ability. My life becomes introverted, with my concern and resources focused inwardly on my own unmet needs and desires.

Nothing liberates me more from the tyranny of self-centeredness than the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, kindness, faithfulness and self control (Galatians 5:22, 23) experienced under the joyful, loving, Lordship of Christ. With my needs being met by him I am free to share with others my time, money and ability. It is true, “If the Son shall make you free, you are free indeed!”

Colossians 2:10, in *The Living Bible*, reads, “So you have everything when you have Christ, and you are filled with God through your union with Christ. He is the highest ruler with authority over every other power.” The Bible also tells us: Those to whom much is given, from them much is required; and we, in the western world, have been given much that we have the opportunity to share joyfully with others.

R&D *How have you experienced the bondage of pre-occupation with self and liberation from self?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord Jesus, thank you for setting us captives free from ourselves so we can be more like you, living for the sake of others and less for self.*

Lesson 24

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Giving as an Expression of Faith

In this passage we are admonished to determine in our hearts what kind of return we wish to gain from investing the resources the Lord entrusts to us. In God's economy, bigger and bigger barns to accommodate our excessive materialism and need to brag is failure in life. But resources (great or small) gained in honorable fashion for the glory of God and to be used for the benefit of others is real success in life.

JOY has been appropriately defined using each letter in an order of priority for words that read: Jesus-Others-You. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is the perfect example. Others were the focus of his life as a man on this earth. He declared, "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." Also, "As the Father has sent me, I send you!"

As a young man, I enjoyed some success in business that enabled me to be generous in giving to our church and elsewhere. Later, the Lord led us to leave business for a life of faith ministry. This allowed us to experience the generosity of others who found great joy in being partners in ministry by providing funds that allowed my wife and me to devote full time to taking the gospel to many parts of the world. Having been on both ends (giving and receiving), I can testify that the more freely we give, whether the amount is large or small, the more joy-filled is our life.

R&D How have you experienced the Joy of Giving?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your word tells us that you gave your all in life and in death on the cross, for the JOY that was set before you. Enable us to have your JOY in our giving.

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