

Generosity of Spirit

BY DOUGLAS V. HENRY

Generosity names not merely something we *do*, but an admirable quality of character, something we *are*. Undergirding the character of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the world, and this understanding inspires genuinely generous activity.

What exactly counts as generosity? Should generosity be an ordinary Christian's aim? Or is generosity a distinctive gift that some have and others don't? Where is generosity at work in daily activities? How do we become generous? Does it matter?

Answers to these questions might seem straightforward. Generosity is giving others something extra beyond what they are due. Ordinary Christians should be generous, relative to their means. Rounding up a server's tip at the local steakhouse, holding open the door for someone whose hands are full, and waiting patiently for a late-arriving friend exemplify routine acts of generosity. We become generous the same way we become good in other ways: through sound habits and healthy self-critical adjustments. And, generosity matters because "to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 22:48).

Such answers are useful and right so far as they go. Yet they do not go far enough. By too neatly defining generosity and its demands upon us, we miss what is most essential about it and imperil our progress toward Christ-likeness.

Instead of thinking of generosity merely as something we *do*, Christians rightly understand generosity as an admirable quality of character, as something we *are*. A generous person naturally engages in acts of generosity. But in important ways generous activity is secondary. Undergirding the character

of truly generous people is a special awareness of themselves, others, and God's gracious provision for the whole world, and it is this understanding that inspires genuinely generous activity. Speaking of *generosity of spirit* thus helps enlarge our imagination of what generosity entails; of the breadth of its influence in our minds, thoughts, and words; and of the worshipful trust in God signified through the actions it prompts. If we would be generous followers of Christ, we must first "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16b) and "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). In order to give as Jesus gives, we need generosity of spirit or, if you will, a spirituality of generosity.

ANCIENT LEGACIES

Christian generosity's special ways of thinking and acting stand in contrast with ancient alternatives.

First-century Romans, for instance, regarded generosity as a virtue especially well-suited to powerful, rich benefactors. Indeed, the Latin adjective *generosus* refers to one's birth or origins; the term is adapted from a Greek word, *genesis*, meaning *beginning*. To be generous in the pagan world therefore entailed making good on one's promising beginning within a well-born noble family. Roman generosity simultaneously expressed and extended an honor appropriate to high status. It did more than that, however. It also exacted obligations from beneficiaries. Someone on the receiving end of a highborn Roman's generosity was bound not only to return thanks or give honor, but to support his or her benefactor. Such support could take the form of preferential business arrangements, promoting a patron for political office, advocating for favorable laws, or championing a benefactor's civic status. Generosity thus underwrote patron-client relationships marked by intractable *quid pro quo* reciprocity. Getting a favor meant returning a favor. For these reasons, generosity was a virtue limited to an elite segment of the population. Ordinary folk, without either high birth or wealth, possessed neither the status nor the resources necessary for generosity. In the Roman world of Jesus, Peter, Paul, Mary, and Martha, generosity was the exclusive domain of the rich and powerful. Cynicism about others' generosity, along with despair in the absence of the riches or standing to get ahead, were common.

Many features of first-century Roman generosity borrow from a Greek legacy. Aristotle's ethical writings especially influenced later thinking about generosity. Although he distinguishes between everyday generosity (giving within ordinary means to others) and *magnificence* (generosity on a grand scale that requires substantial wealth), Aristotle emphasizes the connection of both to a virtue he calls *megalopsychia* – literally, greatness of soul, or what we in English name *magnanimity*. Aristotle reserves magnanimity for elite men (not women!) of noble birth whose superiority is unmistakable, both to themselves and others. In Greek culture four centuries before Christ,

the magnanimous man justifiably looked down on those inferior to him, even as the poor and weak were supposed to look up to and admire him. Generosity comes easily to Aristotle's magnanimous man because he is self-sufficient and therefore without want. At the same time, he disdains the honor others pay him, for it, too, is something he does not need even though he deserves it. Obviously, the birth and bearing of such a man rule out the possibility of humility. Nobility, pride, and self-satisfaction accompany his acts of generosity.¹

With Greek and Roman forms of generosity in mind, the New Testament offers instructions about generosity that early Christians must have heard counterculturally. Perhaps for similar reasons, but possibly also for new reasons, twenty-first-century Christians need biblical resources to support a generosity of spirit that is absent in our own age.

BIBLICAL LESSONS

The truth is that not only in the New Testament, but from the beginning to the end of the Bible, we read of God's generous and good gifts.

At the outset of Genesis, God speaks the cosmos into being, lavishes upon it a divinely bestowed goodness, and pronounces blessing upon all of creation. Moreover, the Lord's plenitudinous generosity toward humankind is explicit: "See, I have *given* you *every* plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and *every* tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (Genesis 1:29).

With the full implications of Genesis 1 in mind, theologians identify the generous character of God's creation in at least two ways. First, creation is *ex nihilo*, literally "out of nothing." Nothing had to exist. Put positively, everything that exists is and only is as a result of God's supererogatory, generous act of creation. Second, theologians speak of *creatio continuo*, the doctrine of continuing creation. Here, they

have in mind God's ongoing attention to and engagement with the created order. The Lord not only created but also renews and sustains, day by day and minute by minute, everything in the cosmos. As Cecil Alexander's great hymn says, "All things bright and beautiful, / all creatures great and small, / all things wise and wonderful, / the Lord God made them all."² And having made such things, the Lord lovingly attends to them, even the birds of

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the air and the lilies of the field, so that we, the very bearers of God's image, should not be anxious about the meeting of our own daily needs (Matthew 6:25-34).

In the final book of the Bible, the Revelation of John, the Lord announces a new heaven and a new earth. In the midst of this sumptuously rich place of abundance, not once but twice an invitation is issued: "To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Revelation 21:6b); "And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (Revelation 22:17b). What God generously creates and freely gives in love, the Lord also generously recreates at the end of days, when everything is made new.

Between its beginning and end, Scripture emphasizes the divine generosity of spirit that animates salvation history. God's covenant with Abraham, for example, is marked by generosity, not only in the promise of a good home and bountiful descendants, but also in its anticipation that in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Similarly, the commandments and laws given to Moses, far from a dour and strict moral miserliness on God's part, constitute a lovingly provided, generous-spirited help for flourishing human life. Prophets, priests, and kings – the "offices" given to Israel to help ensure its wellbeing – constitute another evidence of divine generosity, even though the women and men who filled these offices often fell short of God's generous wisdom, holiness, and power. Nowhere does God's supererogatory generosity find greater fulfillment than in the self-gift of Christ Jesus. As the Apostle Paul writes, "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Through each act in the drama of God's providential presence with Israel – covenant, law, kingship, prophetic witness, messianic ministry, and more – the Lord shows what generosity of spirit and deed looks like.

When the apostles instruct the faithful in matters of generosity we must remember, then, that they do so with great insight into the "divine economy" expressed over the sweep of salvation history. The word *economy* (from the Greek *oikonomikos*, literally the "custom of the house") identifies all those things concerned with household affairs – that is, with stewardship of one's home and one's dependents. The "divine economy" thus identifies and names the ways in which God's "household" operates. Reflecting upon God's household economics helps clarify a radically different outlook and paradigm at work than that held by most people in our world. God's household is not based on scant resources, fist-clenching possessiveness, reluctantly expressed mercy, or resentful envy of others. Indeed, quite the opposite. Plenitudinous bounty, open-armed hospitality, ready words of welcome, and joyful delight in sharing mark the divine economy. Knowing that we Christians share in an abundance originating in God, James there-

fore proclaims “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). And understanding the gladness with which Christ beckons all to his banquet table, Paul enjoins, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

If we inhabit a world of good and perfect gifts, if we live in a world created and sustained by One who is not distant but near and among us, and if ours is a world stamped from beginning to end by divine generosity, then it stands to reason that we ought to “risk” a generosity of spirit commensurate to that reality!

CONTEMPORARY LIES

It does not always appear that our world is of that sort. Indeed, we live in times marked by wretched, widespread failures of generosity. It’s not merely that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, although that is true. Recent studies show that “on current trends the richest 1% would own more than 50% of the world’s wealth by 2016.”³ Yet deeper than the data, and ultimately explanatory of it, lies an underlying spiritual crisis. Two distorted and indeed ultimately tragic views impede generosity of spirit: *presumption* and *despair*.

Where generosity of spirit is lacking, presumption sometimes is at work.

The presumptuous seek security against vulnerability through cleverness and control. By possessing things and exercising power through them, the presumptuous imagine that they can protect themselves from loss. Whether or not they sometimes, or perhaps even regularly, respond to others’ needs misses the point. The issue is that presumptuous people inhabit a world not of gifts, but rather of objects to own, possess, or sequester

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for their private use. In a world of disenchanting objects over which to exercise domination, “me” and “mine” loom larger than “we” and “ours.” Competitive relations overshadow cooperative interdependence. The presumptuous build bulwarks to secure their own interests, thinking little about bridges of hospitality across which those with needs might be welcomed. They may invite beneficiaries into their bulwarks, but they stand ready to bar the gates

if resources grow scarce. And at the false heart of presumption lies the belief that we can fashion a personal heaven of our own making instead of receiving with gladness a shared beatitude promised by God.

An equally corrosive threat to generosity of spirit arises in the form of cynicism or despair. The despairing—beaten down by seemingly endless strings of failure, frustrated beyond their ability at every turn, and held back from a fulfillment they cannot find—simply give up. Having abandoned the prospect of their own satisfaction in life, they similarly dismiss the possibilities for nurturing others' happiness. Again, whether or not they occasionally extend help to those in need misses the point. Like the presumptuous, those who despair see a world of things to be controlled. While the presumptuous appear to master the world, the despairing experience misery instead of mastery in a world of objects beyond their control. For them, confidence falters and cynicism creeps in. Lacking what's rightfully "mine" and resenting the better fortune of "them," the one who despairs thus sees himself standing outside the safe haven that he might have built "if only."

The despairing and the presumptuous represent mirror images of each other, and both of them distort the gracious, gift-laden divine economy of the triune God.

DIVINE LARGESSE

Recall that the divine economy is measured in gifts lovingly shared rather than objects greedily clutched. In that kind of world—the *real* world that Christians discern and embrace—neither presumption nor despair make sense. What does make sense is a Christian generosity of spirit that aspires to the greatness for which God made us. Such generosity of spirit, unlike Aristotle's magnanimity, has room for a proper humility grounded in awareness of what the Lord has done for us.

Christian generosity of spirit provides help to anyone tempted to despairing forms of envy. It reminds us that we bear the image of God, an inalienable gift the value of which is beyond measure. Because this greatness of soul is a gift we share with others in a divinely superintended cosmos, all of which is underwritten by God's generous provision, we need not be anxious or jealous. Inasmuch as our lives are gifts imbued with God's lavish love, we have no cause for despair at what we do not have. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31). In God's good, gift-laden world, we are free to see others not as adversaries or as competitors for scarce resources, but as brothers and sisters trusting confidently in God's gracious provision.

Likewise, Christians known for generosity of spirit evince a humility that leaves no room for presumption. For while we know ourselves to be made in the image of God, we know the *imago Dei* is a status given to us

rather than something achieved by our own doing. Although we are animated by the breath of God, and therefore fearfully and wonderfully made, we remember that we are dust of the earth and therefore something humble as well. Whereas the presumptuous want to get what is theirs, giving to others only when it is convenient and clinging possessively to what is theirs when sharing proves inconvenient, the humble never imagine in the first place that what is theirs is truly and only theirs. Abiding in a world characterized by grace, gift, plenitude, and providence, the meek anticipate the blessedness Christ promises, “for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

Generosity of spirit bears resources for resisting the miserly and envious tendencies engendered by presumption and despair, respectively. Generous-spirited Christians remember *what* we are. We are beings “crowned with glory and honor,” yet “a little lower than the heavenly beings” (Psalm 8:5, ESV).⁴ Those with generosity of spirit also know *where* we are: in a lovingly ordered cosmos that is created, sustained, and redeemed by a Lord who loves us and abides with us. When we cultivate a spirituality of generosity governed by truths such as these, so that we grasp who and where we truly are, then doing generous things becomes far more likely.

What does true generosity entail? How wide is its influence in our minds, thoughts, and words? In which ways might the actions prompted by generosity of spirit signal our worshipful trust in God?

In returning to questions raised above, consider a final way of being in the world that definitively orients Christian responses.

When all is said and done, the followers of Jesus ought to give generously because they delight in the *hope* made possible through Christ. In Dante’s splendid way of putting it, hope is a “certain expectation of a future glory” that grows out of the salvation given to us in Christ.⁵ If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises

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of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need. Hope-filled Christians are not preoccupied with possessing things but with being possessed by generosity of spirit. Through hope in Christ we are freed from the presumption and despair accompanying a world of objects oriented around me, myself, and I. Through that same hope we are freed to give generously. And when we do so, we can rejoice in a divine economy in

which “it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38, ESV).

NOTES

1 Aristotle draws these distinctions in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4:1-3.

2 The hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful” by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895) appeared in her collection *Hymns for Little Children* (1848).

3 Larry Elliott and Ed Pilkington, “New Oxfam report says half of global wealth held by the 1%” *The Guardian* (January 19, 2015), www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jan/19/global-wealth-oxfam-inequality-davos-economic-summit-switzerland (accessed June 30, 2015).

4 Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

5 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 25.67-68.



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