



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Generosity of Spirit  
(*Generosity*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 In This Old House  
(*Generosity*, pp. 68-72)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Institute for Faith and Learning  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97270  
Waco, TX 76798-7270  
Phone 1-254-710-4805  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

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# Generosity of Spirit

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.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

### Meditation†

Generosity is *the predisposition to love open-handedly*. Our hands matter, both literally and symbolically. In the open hand, our palms are up and our fingers extended. A closed hand is usually a clenched fist, tightly grasping what it wants to keep or tensely preparing for battle. To be generous requires that we open our hands.

*Gregory Spencer*

### Reflection

"From the beginning to the end of the Bible we read of God's generous and good gifts," Doug Henry observes. God's creating the cosmos is *ex nihilo* ("from nothing," for nothing had to exist) and with continual, loving attention. In Revelation, the heaven and earth that "God generously creates and freely gives in love, the Lord also generously recreates at the end of days, when everything is made new." In between, God's generosity infuses the narrative – from promising Abraham to bless all families of the earth, to giving loving guidance in the Mosaic laws and providing prophets, priests, and kings to ensure Israel's wellbeing. The self-gift of Jesus Christ crowns a story of love (2 Corinthians 8:9).

When Scripture calls us to be generous with one another, then, it simply is urging us to join this "'divine economy' expressed over the sweep of salvation history," Henry writes. "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!"

Because most of us don't live as though this divine economy were true, our world is increasingly "marked by wretched, widespread failures of generosity." Henry pinpoints two "lies" that can distort our thinking and impede generosity of spirit. They tempt us to believe we "inhabit a world not of gifts, but rather of objects to own, possess, or sequester for our private use."

- ▶ *Presumption* is the first lie. It urges us to "seek security against vulnerability through cleverness and control," Henry writes. "By possessing things and exercising power through them, the presumptuous imagine that they can protect themselves from loss." They're not always stingy. If they're rich enough, "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."



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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► *Despair* is another lie. When we give up on “the prospect of our own satisfaction in life, we similarly dismiss the possibilities for nurturing others’ happiness,” Henry notes. We want to control our world, but failing that, we envy those who possess what we are missing and greedily clutch at all that remains. “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.”

Within the divine economy that Scripture describes and calls us to embrace, neither presumption nor despair makes any sense. “We bear the image of God, an inalienable gift the value of which is beyond measure,” Henry explains. “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. 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.”

The remedy to modern presumption and despair, then, is Christian hope—a deep trust that God loves us and will provide for our needs now and in the future. This hope is our pathway toward generosity of spirit. “If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need,” Henry concludes. We can welcome the divine economy in which “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

### Study Questions

1. Describe generosity of spirit. How is it expressed in ways other than giving money? Why is it important that it names not merely something we *do*, but something we *are*?
2. Consider the modern attitudes of presumption and despair. How are they “mirror images” of one another? How can each one undermine a generosity of spirit?
3. What is the virtue of Christian hope? How does it alleviate despair and undermine presumption?
4. According to Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise, why is hospitality an important expression of generosity of spirit? Discuss how this facet of generosity can develop in your life.
5. Explore how God’s generous provision for us—the “divine economy” that Henry talks about—is described in Anthony Carl’s new hymn, “All Who Thirst.”

### Departing Hymn: “All Who Thirst”

† Gregory Spencer, *Awakening the Quieter Virtues* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 158-159.

# Generosity of Spirit

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To define generosity of spirit as a character trait that describes not only what we *do*, but what we *are*.
2. To consider how Christian generosity of spirit is grounded in appreciating and welcoming God's generous provision for the world.
3. To see how both presumption and despair are barriers to developing generosity of spirit.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Generosity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

While generosity typically involves donating money or goods, it includes giving less material things. In this way, hospitality is a species of generosity, a making room and giving space to others in your own place, or in your attention, or in conversation.

"Our front door is usually open, though often the glass outer door remains locked to keep toddlers inside. Whether expecting company or not, we try to welcome every visitor, neighbor, and friend at the front door, to jump into comfortable conversations that ease them gently into our home," Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise write. "We try to practice hospitality through a generosity of physical and figurative space. We do not merely invite others into our home when we open that glass door, we invite them to be present in our lives. Friends come for a meal, neighbors for playtime on our swings or sandbox, college students for a Crockpot of chili and a theology reading group, and church friends for a Sabbath potluck. Some people stay a few minutes, some a few hours. Family comes in from out of state and stays for a few days now and then. But as we open our home to those who cross our paths—as we say to them, yes, you are welcome here with us—we've discovered more and more friends in periods of transition, friends whose days in our home turn into weeks and then into months.

"In the last five years we've had seven housemates. A friend asked us recently how it is that we find people to live with us. We responded, 'We don't find them. They find us.'" (*Generosity*, pp. 68-69)

In this study we will consider how generosity of spirit, in its varied manifestations, can grow and pervade our lives. We will also think about the spiritual barriers today to our becoming more generous.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for his many gifts to us that undergird and inspire our generosity.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 8:1-14 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

We begin our study of generosity by defining it as a character trait, rather than merely a pattern of actions. As Christians we should aspire to a generosity of spirit that recognizes, welcomes, and responds in kind to God's loving, generous provision for the world. Today, however, it's easy to be tempted to either presumption or despair, and each of these attitudes will undercut the scriptural view of the world that nurtures generosity.

## Study Questions

1. People have various reasons for giving. In ancient systems of patronage, the rich gave to the poor in order to curry their favor, exact obligations from them, and proclaim superiority over them. We may give for similar reasons—for example, to show our wealth, establish a good reputation, etc. In all of these cases, the donation expresses what Doug Henry calls a "'me' and 'mine'" stance in which "competitive relations overshadow cooperative interdependence."

Henry uses the term "generosity of spirit" to refer to a very different character trait—a patterned way of viewing and responding to the world—that motivates the generous person. "In important ways generous activity is secondary," he writes. "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." Generosity, which is giving others more than they are due, can be expressed in how we share our time, attention, knowledge and advice, homes and meals, etc.

2. Presumption and despair involve perceptions of the present that shape our attitudes about the future. The presumptuous possess some things and power which they believe will secure their happiness now and in the future. The despairing lack fulfillment now and are cynical or have given up about the future. These attitudes seem to be opposite in every way. Yet they agree in not trusting God's provision and in grasping at resources for personal gain. Both live "in a world of disenchanting objects over which to exercise domination."
3. Henry follows Dante in describing Christian hope as "certain expectation of a future glory," a deep confidence that God will provide our fulfillment. This trust in God's provision undermines the presumptuous idea that we can and must secure our happiness, and it alleviates the despairing worry about the future. Henry explains, "If our hope ultimately rests neither in what we own, nor our wits, nor our feats, but in the reliable promises of our gracious God, then we can share gladly and liberally with those in need."
4. Jonathan and Elizabeth Sands Wise see hospitality as "a generosity of physical and figurative space" in their home. They have welcomed neighbors, family members, church groups, student groups from the college where Jonathan teaches, and even longer-term lodgers. The development in generosity is not measured just in the growing numbers of guests and their time of stay, but in how the Sands Wise's configure their time and the use of their house. They reserve a weeknight suppertime to share with houseguests; and they moved their growing family down to the main floor, though this involves being closer to visitors. They write, "All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space."

Invite members to make a plan to generously share some aspect of their time, attention, skills, living places, and so on, with others.

5. Jesus says he is "a spring of water" for the thirsty soul (John 4:14), and the Revelation of John summarizes God's provision in the image of Jesus guiding his followers to "the springs of the water of life" (7:17; cf. 21:6, 22:1, 22:17). Anthony Carl alludes to this cluster of biblical images in the first two verses of "All Who Thirst." The third verse echoes the summary statement in James 1:17, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...." The final verse describes a personal experience that gave Carl's family a quiet assurance of God's presence and care for their need.

## Departing Hymn

"All Who Thirst" is on pp. 61-63 of *Generosity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.