



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Paul's Expectations of Generosity  
(*Generosity*, pp. 19-28)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Generosity in the Bible  
(*Generosity*, pp. 82-87)

### 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

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# Paul's Expectations of Generosity

True generosity requires us to give to those in need and make a place for them in our gatherings. Such generosity, the Apostle Paul reminds us, is enabled by the transforming grace of God manifested in the self-emptying life of Jesus Christ and made accessible through the life-giving Spirit.

## Prayer

God of all good things, open our hearts to fresh ways of serving you and your world; open our minds to new ways of sharing all that you have given to us; open our souls so that we may be filled with your overflowing love. Amen.

## Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:17-19

## Reflection

The Apostle Paul consistently emphasizes “through his instruction and the patterns of life established in his churches, that God’s people have been delivered *from* sin and this present age characterized by selfishness and greed *for* the sake of the life of the world; that to belong to God and his people entails being actively engaged in seeking the welfare of the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of society,” Kelly Liebengood explains.

He offers these snapshots of Paul’s view of the place of social justice and generosity in God’s economy.

- ▶ *“Idleness” is an abuse of uncharacteristic generosity* (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). Greco-Roman cities had no public or private systems, or “safety nets,” to help the poor. Most people had few resources, and the rich minority used their wealth for self-serving purposes. The “idle” assume others will provide for their needs; this indicates the Christians have been practicing uncharacteristic generosity toward the poor and some are abusing this. “Paul admonishes the Thessalonians to continue to uphold the practice of caring for those who are truly in need,” Liebengood observes. “In Paul’s mind, what is at stake is the unnecessary squandering of limited resources for those who are able to provide for themselves. But generosity is never taken off the table; it is a non-negotiable for the community of Jesus followers, even if it is being abused.”
- ▶ *“Do good works” becomes a call to live generously* (1 Timothy 6:17-18). “In the Greco-Roman urban centers ‘doing good works’ was self-promoting and ensured that resources continued to circulate almost exclusively among those who had no need,” Liebengood notes. Paul reinterprets this common phrase “through the prism of Jesus’ self-giving life.” Thereafter, “within the Pauline communities it took on a different meaning – namely, sharing your resources with those who can give you nothing (that is, honor or any other kind of reciprocity) in return: ‘Therefore, then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all’ (Galatians 6:10).”
- ▶ *The “lowly” must be included in the fellowship* (Romans 12:16). Because Paul welcomes non-elites (1 Corinthians 1:26-28), marginalized people (such as thieves), and needy people (Ephesians 4:28) in the churches, he is scandalized by how the wealthier members in Corinth treat the lowly (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). “For Paul, to



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participate in the Lord's Supper (which at its core is a celebration of Jesus giving of himself for others; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26) while failing to notice that some within the gathering were being neglected much needed food and drink is to do so in an 'unworthy manner' (11:27)," Liebengood writes. Thus, Paul "charges the Corinthians to 'discern the body' – to look around and notice that their practice of the Lord's Supper was creating divisions in the church along economic lines (11:29), something that was entirely antithetical to what this new community of Jesus followers was called to be."

► *Disciples should participate in God's generosity by joining the relief offering for Jerusalem Christians* (Romans 15:25-27, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, and 2 Corinthians 8-9). Liebengood concludes that "Paul dedicated about five years of his ministry to collect money from Gentile Jesus-followers in order to alleviate suffering due to extreme financial hardship in Jerusalem among some of the Jewish followers of Jesus." He urges members to participate in this offering in obedience to the gospel (2 Corinthians 9:13) and in imitation of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 8:9). "Paul regards generosity towards the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem as proof that Gentile followers of Jesus have indeed been transformed by the Spirit of the self-giving Jesus Christ, that they have indeed become participants in the spiritual blessings of Israel's one true God (Romans 15:26-27 and 8:1-17)... The collection was a tangible indication that the God of Israel had transformed these Gentiles into the likeness of God's generous, self-giving image."

Liebengood summarizes Paul's insights on the roles of social justice and generosity in the Christian life. "He reminds us that genuine love and generosity require us not only to give to those in need, but also to make a place for them in our gatherings. He also reminds us that generosity is enabled as we share in the life of God.... And finally, we see that those who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus are not only called to give cognitive assent to certain propositions about what God has accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, but also required by the gospel to pattern their lives, personal and communal, in such a way that they bear witness to God's own hospitality and generosity."

### Study Questions

1. Some interpret Paul's warning against idleness (in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13) as callous toward the poor. How does Kelly Liebengood read the episode as a call to renewed generosity?
2. What does Paul mean by "doing/working the good"? Discuss how your congregation might "do good works" today.
3. Why is Paul so scandalized by how the Christians at Corinth practice the Lord's Supper? Consider what church practices today might shock him for the same reason.
4. What reasons does Paul give for members to participate in the offering to aid the poor in the Jerusalem church? Are there similar offerings that your congregation might participate in today?

Departing Hymn: "All Who Thirst"

# Paul's Expectations of Generosity

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Timothy 6:17-18	2 Corinthians 9
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Survey major features of Paul's expectations of generosity	Relate those features to the Jerusalem offering
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 3	Questions 2 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To trace through the Apostle Paul's letters his view that generosity is essential for being a disciple of Jesus Christ.
2. To introduce the radical nature of Christian generosity within the context of Greco-Roman culture.
3. To consider the implications of Paul's expectations of generosity for our discipleship today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 an Observation

What comes to mind when you think of the Apostle Paul's teachings? Perhaps you recall some complex but soaring theological claims about Jesus, or some (apparently) difficult statements about women's roles in church life, or his descriptions of Christian virtue. But do you think of Paul as the apostle of social justice? Probably not, Kelly Liebengood admits. "Many biblical scholars and not a few Christians are rather critical of the apostle because he does not appear to say much of anything on the matter [of how God expects us to use our material resources], certainly not enough to promote any kind of meaningful action. To add insult to injury, some of Paul's writings can be interpreted as supporting the oft-heard mantra for self-reliance and social responsibility, 'God helps those who help themselves.'" (*Generosity*, p. 19)

But Liebengood thinks this is a mistake. He invites us to a closer, more charitable reading of Paul's letters, wherein we discover the apostle is eager to protect the vulnerable of society and is quick to care for the poor. Furthermore, Paul expects all faithful disciples to be this way.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Timothy 6:17-19 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The Apostle Paul, in harmony with other voices in Scripture, believes social justice and generosity are essential to discipleship. This study cannot even mention all of Paul's writings (after all, he wrote almost half of the New Testament), so it focuses on these key elements of his expectations of generosity: the continuation of generous giving despite its abuse, the Christian motivations for generous giving, and the inclusion of the lowly in the churches.

If the group would like to extend their study of Paul's writings, reserve for a second session your discussion of his call for members to participate in the Jerusalem offering. In that call some key elements of Paul's expectations of generosity are integrated with one another.

Encourage members who want to explore the wider biblical witness to read Jo-Ann Brant's *Generosity in the Bible* (pp. 82-87). She reviews four books that "demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon...[and] provide practical advice about how we can turn our well-meaning intent [to be generous] into action."

### **Study Questions**

1. It is amazing that the "idle" could count on someone in the church to provide for their needs, Kelly Liebengood notes. Such generosity was countercultural, for in the ancient world the few who were wealthy used their gifts "for the dual purpose of enhancing one's status among those who mattered and for expanding one's economic opportunities." Church members must have been practicing uncharacteristic generosity toward the poor, and the idlers were taking advantage of it. Paul does not want their generosity to stop (3:13), but for it to be refocused on those who truly need it. They should warn and shun the idlers not as enemies, but as fellow brothers and sisters (3:15).
2. When Paul uses the language of "doing/working the good" (cf. Galatians 6:10, 2 Thessalonians 3:13, 1 Timothy 6:17-18, and Titus 3:14), it is "not merely an appeal to generic acts of morality, but rather a call to live generously, using one's material resources to share with others in need," Liebengood explains. Ask members to read these passages aloud and use Liebengood's article to interpret them in context.  
Consider how your congregations shares its resources – money, time, building spaces, members' talents and skills, advocacy in the community, and so on – with those who are in need within the congregation and in the surrounding community.
3. Review the Corinthian situation in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. It seems some members arrive early to eat and drink, and others who come later must go without food. Liebengood writes, "In response, Paul demands that those who had the luxury of arriving early to Lord's Supper (that is, the wealthier members who did not have to work) should wait for the others (that is, the day laborers and others who lived at a subsistence level) so that together they could truly embody what the meal is all about. To do otherwise is to fail to truly 'remember' the Lord's Supper and to provoke God's judgment (11:30). To leave out the poor is to show contempt for the church of God and to humiliate those who have nothing (11:22)."  
Ask members to brainstorm practices in the church today that intentionally or inadvertently cause divisions between wealthy and poor members. Perhaps church programs (fellowship suppers, book studies, support groups, children's programs, family retreats, mission trips, etc.) are cost prohibitive for some. Do worship styles, long-range building plans, or church programming, and so on, cater to the preferences of a few wealthy members? Do church outreach programs target those who can help the congregation financially?
4. Liebengood identifies two related reasons that Paul gives for participating in the Jerusalem offering. First, Paul suggests it is an implication and obligation of their discipleship; he asks them to give in "obedience to the confession of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 9:13). Second, he suggests their giving would reflect and imitate the Lord's gift to them; in Liebengood's words, their "generosity is rooted in and enabled by the transforming generosity of Jesus Christ" (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9).  
Identify the regular and special offerings that are promoted in your congregation. Consider whether they imitate Jesus Christ's gift of himself to the world, and whether they reflect your obedience to the gospel. Is there an offering that you would like for your congregation to promote? How would you justify it to others in terms of Paul's two criteria?

### **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.