

21 Days to Generous Living

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A Devotional Guide for

Bridgeway's
Amazing
Capital Campaign

Written by Gordon MacDonald.
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Chattanooga, Tennessee
www.GenerousGiving.org

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Introduction

You hold in your hands the *21 Days to Generous Living Devotional*, a collection of twenty-one daily devotional readings, taken from Scripture passages on the theme of Christian generosity, and written by author and speaker Gordon MacDonald. These devotional readings are organized into three groups of seven, and they are designed to be read over a three-week period.

There is a biblical theme for each week, on which all readings for that week elaborate. The weekly themes are as follows:

- Week 1: God owns everything, and I am His money manager.
- Week 2: My heart always goes where I put God's money.
- Week 3: If I look at Christ long enough, I will become a giver.

In addition, there is a memory verse for each week, corresponding to that week's theme; so that ideally, on any given day, you would read that day's devotional and work on that week's memory verse.

Whether you use this devotional in conjunction with your church or just for private meditation, we pray that it will help you to hear the word of God clearly and to excel more and more in the grace of giving (2 Corinthians 8:7).

Daily Readings for Week 1:

Theme:

God owns everything, and I am His money manager.

Memory Verse:

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;
for He founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters” (Psalm 24:1).

Day 1: All We Have Belongs to God

“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

We are introduced to the idea of stewardship in the account of creation. This concept is among the Bible’s greatest and most significant themes.

The Scriptures make it clear that all of creation belongs to God. He made it, directed how it was to be managed, and expects those to whom He has entrusted it to “report” back to Him. The health and beauty of life in creation has always depended upon our willingness to honor and obey God, as the Creator of all things. And so, the question remains: *Do we understand that everything we have actually belongs to God, and has been temporarily entrusted to us?*

No one knows how long Adam and Eve lived under the “politic” of stewardship, caring for and delighting in all the things God had made. Was it days? Months? Years? Centuries? As long as they were diligent in their responsibilities and were obedient to their Master, all was well.

Work is never more fulfilling than when it is seen in the context of stewardship. The steward (or the manager) knows what belongs to the master and what belongs to him. There is no confusion between the two. A good steward does not fight for control over things that do not belong to him. And the steward does not seek the honor that belongs to the one for whom he works. And, furthermore, *the steward is careful to give an account of what he has done and to return to the owner that which belongs to him.*

The idea of stewardship is at the heart of the discipline of generous giving. Without it, giving becomes a miserable experience, and truly generous giving may not even be possible. The creation story reminds us that we do not give because we find it convenient or practical. We give because all that has been entrusted to us is God’s, and must be used as He sees fit.

Application Questions:

1. If everything I have belongs to God, and I am only a temporary trustee, in what ways should my life look different?
2. How am I doing at giving a good account of what I do with God’s stuff?

Day 2: God's Kingdom Is a Community

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone ..." (Genesis 2:18).

In God's eyes, creation was not complete until it included a *community of people*. The first community was a twosome: Adam and Eve. We think of them as husband and wife, but they were also a community, a reflection of all people who live in some kind of covenant relationship.

When God created Eve out of Adam's rib and presented her to her husband, He blessed them. That is to say, the Lord formally covered them with His grace and approval. But with the blessing came responsibility.

Everything God creates has a purpose. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," the Psalmist wrote (Psalms 19:1). In the highest sense, all created things—from the greatest galaxy to the tiniest microbe—exist to declare the glory of the Creator.

How were Adam and Eve to declare the Creator's glory? By filling creation with their progeny, by managing creation responsibly, and by exploring creation and giving the living things names. The right to *name things* was an indication of privilege, responsibility and accountability.

There has never been a better "job" than the work of the first community before the Fall. It was a noble work of dignity, of delight, of renewal. It did not include the exhaustion and frustration, the mediocrity and the contentiousness, and the life-shortening and dehumanizing that we see today in the lives of so many workers. No, the work of the first community was designed by God, given to humanity, and seen as a privilege.

Today the best work falls far short of God's original intent. Adam and Eve experienced abundant energy, excitement and fulfillment; they finished every day with a sense of accomplishment. We grow tired, bored and fall short of our potential because we are afraid to fail. However, then as now, the work God has given to us is for our benefit—it is *good*. Through the work we do, we continue to reflect God's order and creativity and continue to do our part to bring the life of Christ to the world around us—that is, to our community.

Until the day of Christ, our work will always include frustration. But the ideal of the work of the first community should always be our guide star. We must reach for it so that, in working (whatever the work of the moment happens to be), God's glory is proclaimed.

Application Questions:

1. Am I an active part of a Christian community, or am I trying to go it alone? If the former, in what ways? If the latter, why?
2. If the work God gives me to do really is good, what should my attitude be toward it? How different is this from my current attitude?

Day 3: The Tragedy of Disobedience

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

In the first two chapters of the Bible, we learn of stewardship and its opposite: *disobedience*.

In the early days of creation, all was well in the first community God had established. There is mystery and beauty in the words that describe them: *The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame*. When these words were written many years later, how far the human race had come! The total transparency of the Garden, including spiritual and intellectual "nakedness" as well as physical nakedness, was gone. In its place was a society in which everything was divided and covered up.

How had it happened?

Answer: *The principle of stewardship had been violated*. Adam and Eve, God's first stewards, simply decided that they knew more than God. It can hardly be said any plainer.

Some critics of this story have scoffed at the triviality of eating fruit. However, if the first man and woman could not keep even this simple command—"eat from any tree but this one" (see Genesis 2:16)—how could they have remained faithful to issues of greater magnitude?

Those who live as faithful stewards of the Master do not question His word. He *knows* what is his to control and use, and he *knows* what to leave alone. There is true freedom in following God's directives; conversely, our disobedience brings only the tragic loss of trust and intimacy with our Master.

In hiding from God, Adam hid from himself ("I was ashamed") as well as from Eve ("it's her fault"). And as these three relationships imploded, so did the relationship of the community within creation. From this point forward, creation was no longer Adam and Eve's to manage. In effect it became the enemy: something to be overcome if they were to survive.

When a steward breaks faith with the Master, tragedy results.

Application Questions:

1. In what ways do I violate the principle of stewardship?
2. Am I willing to trust God's word? Can I accept the fact that He knows best? Why or why not?

Day 4: Sheep and Goats

When the Son of Man comes in his glory... all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:31-32).

This text of Scripture records some of the last hours of our Lord before He was arrested and marched off to the trials that led to the cross. We might assume then that Jesus was trying one more time to drive home to His disciples the core truths of his gospel.

One word that comes to mind to describe the theme here is *accountability*. The Savior describes what some would call an apocalyptic event: an incident in the time to come. In this picture that Jesus paints, the Son of Man (the Lord Himself) is seated upon a throne, framed by all the symbols of sovereignty and majesty. "All the nations will be gathered before him."

From other parts of the Bible we can bundle together descriptions of this apocalyptic moment and gather a sense of what is going on here. All of humanity is to be judged in the presence of God. Every heart (normally well hidden) is laid bare before him: the intentions, the ambitions, the secrets of everyone.

One might imagine that this would be a rather uncomfortable moment. Too many of us have gotten by in life because we are adept at keeping our thoughts and designs hidden from the eyes of others. But here—in this moment—Jesus says, all the books of every life are opened for audit.

Using farming language of the day, Jesus offers the notion of people being separated into two massive groups: the sheep and the goats. It would not have been unusual for anyone to see sheep and goats grazing together in the countryside. But there came a moment when the two species of animals were segregated according to their purpose and value.

And so it is in this parable: sheep to the right, goats to the left. The important thought in the opening of this story is simply this: All the *unknowns* in our lives today will become *knowns* in the future. The person whose life is in business understands the reality of the audit. Each time a financial entry is made in the books, it is done with awareness that one day the books will be opened and inspected. All the day-to-day dealings of the business will be revealed. The strategies and priorities and effectiveness of the business owner will be there in the numbers. The truth will be told.

The generous giver knows this also: that there is a set of books kept that will reveal the intents and convictions of each person's heart. *And these books cannot be cooked.* We live in daily respect of that day when, with all the nations, we shall stand before him.

Application Questions:

1. What shameful things do I do in secret, thinking that no one will ever know?
2. Am I living my life in light of the fact that I will one day be audited? If not, how could I start living that way?

Day 5: Altars Everywhere

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2).

Mixed into Abraham's story is an obsession: Abraham wanted a son. Not to have one was unthinkable, for it would mean the end of the family line. Abraham must have a son. And he will do anything to make it happen.

Despite God's assurance that He had made Abraham the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5), Abraham acted as though God needed his help. At one time Abraham appointed a slave, Eliezer, to be his designated son. Later, Abraham impregnates his wife's servant in the hope of having a son of his own bloodline. In both cases, Abraham paid a severe price for his connivance and manipulation.

Finally, when Abraham and his wife were too old to have a child in the conventional way, God intervenes with a miracle: He gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac was more important to Abraham than anything else in life. No amount of wealth, no measure of influence, no promise of longevity could compare with the value of having a son. And so, Abraham must have been stunned when God asked him to lay Isaac on the altar, *to give him back*.

In modern Western terms, this would seem to be one of the cruelest moments in the Bible. Yet there is also a powerful lesson for us. Isaac represents *everything and everyone we hold precious in our sphere of influence*. He is the sum total of all we are, all we have earned, all we own.

We are not among the generous givers until we have, like Abraham, climbed the mountain of God's choice, and laid it all on the altar. And when we do, we are saying: *I acknowledge that what is mine is really yours*. We are saying: *I trust God that He knows what He is doing*. We are saying: *Though He asks for my very life, I will hold nothing back*.

Let us never think that the life of a generous giver is always going to be easy, full of laughter and applause, free of challenge or difficult decisions. *There are altars ahead*. And each altar is likely to elicit from us greater levels of commitment and sacrifice. This is the pathway of the generous giver. But at the end, we may hear, as Abraham did, *Now I know that you fear God*.

Application Questions:

1. What are the "Isaacs" in my life? What are the things that I hold most precious?
2. Do I trust God enough to offer those treasured things up to Him? How would I go about cultivating that kind of trust?

Day 6: Seek First the Kingdom

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

These are some of the most popular and most challenging words in all of the New Testament: Seek *first* his Kingdom and His righteousness. This is Jesus’ practical antidote to worry: Set your mind on other things than the length of life, food to eat and clothes to wear. Seek the kingdom.

We spend our lives tempted to build our own kingdom—not a big one, of course, but certainly bigger than our neighbor’s. We want a little world where we are in charge, where our word and our will count for something. We want a private kingdom that is safe from fear and safe from need. So we go off to work each day, keep our stockbrokers busy, shop the sales, do deals and more. Nothing wrong at all with these activities ... unless they are really targeted on building a private kingdom in which *we* are the king.

But seek His kingdom. Whose? God’s. A kingdom in which He is the undisputed Lord, where all things are His, where the final word is His, where the highest purposes are His. Biblical people understand this and submit to it.

To seek *first His* kingdom is to think the lordship of Christ in every context. *What would Jesus do?* is not an unhelpful question to drive this idea. Jesus, Lord of my marriage and my family. Jesus, Lord of my friendships. Jesus, Lord of my career. Jesus, Lord of my financial activities. Jesus, Lord of all my plans and initiatives.

The man or woman armed with this question and willing to press it into every choice, every plan, will see something new and fresh in life that relatively few people ever see. He or she will, first of all, quit worrying. That was Jesus’ earlier point. But well beyond that, he or she will be caught up in a dream: the dream of the kingdom, a world in which all eyes are upon Jesus and all of life is organized around His ways and means.

Why worry about surviving when you can dream and then invest in a kingdom?

Application Questions:

1. What things constitute my little kingdom? What is it I am building for myself?
2. Am I seeking God’s kingdom above everything else? What conclusions would someone draw from looking at my life?

Day 7: Getting on God's Right Side

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? ...' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' " (Matthew 25:37-40).

In the story of the sheep and goats, the sheep are located on the right. Then the Son of Man speaks to them, "Take your inheritance," which is to say, receive your reward as the genuine heirs to the kingdom.

How did Jesus determine which of these people were "sheep"? By things they had done in the past: They had fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, provided hospitality to the stranger, offered clothing to the naked, care to the sick, mercy to the prisoner.

There are two surprises in this scenario. First: *that the person in need was Christ*. Jesus had distilled each of these generous actions into a single exchange, as it were, between the giver and Himself. "You fed *me*. You gave a drink to *me*. You took *me* in. You clothed *me*. You cared for *me*. And you came to *my* prison cell and visited *me*."

The second surprise: The "sheep" had no idea what Jesus was talking about. *When did we do these things to you?* is their startled query. And that is the catch. They didn't know or realize that to act in such a way to the nameless and faceless poor of the world was, in fact, to have done it unto the Lord. This is indeed a wonderful surprise. There is an innocence, a naiveté to their question that gives added value to their original giving.

But Jesus was emphatic. *Every time you did anything for these who are the least of my brothers (in any society) you were doing it unto me.*

We must retrace our steps back to the people Jesus identified as the recipients of mercy: the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

Of course, in the time in which Jesus told this story, there were no social "safety nets" such as we have today. In fact, Jesus was describing a genre of people who were totally without hope. Their rescue depended *only* on the initiative of generous givers. Today there are practical remedies available for the needy: Prisoners can appeal for justice, or the sick can seek medical relief. Food, drink and clothing can be had at various charitable institutions, and there are shelters for the homeless. We can support these efforts, of course; it is an admirable thing to do. Yet is this enough? Or is there more we can be doing to minister to the Lord "in distressing disguise"?

Let us not leave these wonderful "sheep", these generous givers, without reflecting upon this mystery. Many of us have believed that correct theology will assure us a place to the right of the Son of Man. Some rely on religious busyness to get us there. And a few may bet on simply being virtuous people. But in this story, the thing that qualified people to stand at the right of the throne was their enthusiastic generous giving. Now what is the message in that?

This story does not end there, though you wish it would. There are still those "goats" on the left. Since this is a parable about accountability, their books also must be opened up; their deeds (or lack thereof) exposed.

And what do we learn? The people to the left were impervious to hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, sickness and imprisonment. They didn't see it when it stared them in the face. And if they saw it, they chose to ignore it.

Again, Jesus personalizes the lack of transaction: You ignored *me!* I should think this would be a most uncomfortable moment for the goats. To realized that each of them meet the Son of Man again and again in the person of the poor and the weak, and passed Him by.

Again the surprise; again you hear them protest: Was that *you?* Were *you* that person I left in the ditch, in the jail, in the final throes of hunger? *You?*

And the response is eerily similar to the one given to the sheep: "What you *did not do* to these needy people, *you did not do for me.*"

The ending assigned to the goats is not a happy one. It is pictured in its extreme: eternal punishment. This is not a time to raise the old question as to whether some people are destined to suffer forever. That is not at issue in this story. Rather, the "rabbi" in Jesus is making a point, a strong point: If you are blessed with resources and influence and you resist using it on behalf of those who are weaker than you, expect that your neglect will be exposed before God Himself. Expect that there will be a consequence.

Few biblical passages make the case for generous giving as poignantly as does this story told by the Lord. In the final analysis, it serves to remind us that we might, in fact, encounter Jesus several times a day in those "insignificant" encounters with those who we might otherwise fail to see. Think about it!

Application Questions:

1. How does my life square with Jesus' judgment in Matthew 25? Am I a sheep or a goat?
2. Who are "the least of these" in my sphere of influence? How do I treat them?

Daily Readings for Week 2:

Theme:

My heart always goes where I put God's money.

Memory Verse:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.
But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.
For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

Day 1: Building for the Wrong Reasons

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

Babel was the first city of consequence recorded in the Bible. We know the city-building began with great enthusiasm and apparent expertise, with a common goal: *to make a name for ourselves*. The city was to convey an image of invincibility and power that would cause their enemies to think twice before threatening them.

History has taught us that efforts like this usually lead to a sense of hubris or pride. *“We’ve done this ourselves, and we need no one else.”*

Over and over, the Scriptures remind us of the dangers of this kind of self-sufficiency. The Psalmist reminds us, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

We see further evidence of this in the Babel story. In verse 5 we read: “But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.” It’s immediately apparent that God does not like what He sees. The effort is cursed with a spirit of confusion, and, in a short time, the construction project is halted, and its workers are scattered.

Sadly, the “spirit of Babel” is alive and well today. Employees of a phenomenally successful computer company in the 1980s sported T-shirts that read, “We’re ____ (the name of that company), and you’re not.” Not long ago the company lost enormous market-share, was acquired and, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist.

The Babel story reminds us of the dangers of acquiring expensive things simply to build and project an image of power and self-sufficiency so that others will be impressed and respectful *for the wrong reasons*. Of course, it is not for us to judge someone who builds a \$50 million-dollar mansion, acquires a 400-foot yacht or amasses a great art collection for his or her own enjoyment. However, it is our responsibility to conduct ourselves in such a way that, when the Lord sees us, He does not catch a “whiff of Babel.”

As Christians, we stake our hope on eternity. What we accomplish here and the name we make for ourselves now must be evaluated in that light. Our names will one day be forgotten. But all we do to *glorify God’s holy name* will last forever.

Application Questions:

1. What things do I do just to make a name for myself?
2. What things am I doing that will last forever because they glorify God’s name?

Day 2: The Dangers of 'Stuff'

And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot (Genesis 13:7).

All our possessions are gifts from God, to be used to enrich our lives and the lives of other people. However, these resources can become a curse if we fail to remember a simple, earthy, old principle: *Stuff* (let's call it for what it is), *if it is not well managed, can be a divisive force*. It divides marriages, families, friends and communities.

Stuff divided Abraham and Lot. As their business interests grew, it must have been easy for them to imagine that life could not get better. Yet their success was breeding an undercurrent of strife that reached a head and exploded in everyone's face.

The quarrel between those loyal to Lot and those loyal to Abraham probably had something to do with their spiritual priorities. However, Abraham was beginning to grow in his appreciation for God's claim upon his life. Business was becoming less important to him as his walk with God increased in intensity. He chose the way of peace.

For Lot, succeeding in business was very important; it was connected to acceptance and social standing. Lot was willing to do anything to advance his self-interests—even if it meant living in Sodom.

Lot and Abraham symbolize for us the two different spiritual itineraries from which people of means must choose.

The first does not despise success or wealth; however, it submits them to the purposes of God. The second way drifts steadily toward Sodom, where everything appears to be prosperous and secure. The man who put God's agenda first went on to be the father of a great nation; the man who seized the initiative and took his family to Sodom lost everything; his holdings, his family, his credibility.

Which way will you choose?

Application Questions:

1. Is there 'stuff' in my life that is causing strife or division? In my marriage? In my family? At work? With my friends? What is that 'stuff'?
2. What changes do I need to make in order to submit my 'stuff' to God's purposes?

Day 3: Wealth Has Its Blind Spots

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out the city, for the Lord was merciful to them" (Genesis 19:15-16).

In Scripture we read that *Lot pitched his tents near Sodom* (Genesis 13:12). Choosing the lush plains of Sodom was a sound business decision for any herdsman who was intent on increasing his holdings. In a place like that, achieving financial success was a "no-brainer"—though it made attaining spiritual success far more unlikely.

Be careful where you point the front door of your tents, says the old adage. Soon you will head in that direction. And before long, Lot found himself no longer pointing toward Sodom but living in it. And before long, Lot was "seated at the gate" with the leaders of that community. Lot's daughters were engaged to Sodomite men. His family was riddled with conflicting spiritual interests. His wealth increased, but his spiritual center collapsed.

The generous giver is not protected from making grave, life-changing choices. The truth is, many of the questions facing a person of means have no easy answers. So how does one position oneself to enlarge business interests and still remain faithful one's commitment to living a devout and holy life?

Abraham headed for the hills. In terms of his business, this was not exactly a welcoming environment. However, it was there that Abraham found increasing intimacy with God. Clearly total isolation is not a possibility for most people—nor am I suggesting that it is even the ideal. So what is this sad story of Lot and his family saying to us?

Let's look at the situation in terms of results. Lot's would-be son-in-law thought that the angels' warning was a joke. His wife turned back, despite what she had heard (so much for Lot's spiritual influence). Lot lost everything he owned and operated. Finally, Lot lost his dignity when his daughters enticed him to drunkenness in a bizarre plot to perpetuate the family line. Clearly, Lot and his family never escaped the gravitational pull of the culture of their birth.

How does one grow in faithfulness to God yet remain free of the seductions of this present age? There are no easy answers to this difficult question. Generous givers must, like Abraham, "lift up your eyes" to find the answer.

Application Questions:

1. Where is the door of my tent facing? Am I dangerously close to dangerous influences?
2. In what ways have I been seduced by this evil age? How can I escape their influence?

Day 4: Soften Your Heart

[The Lord says,] I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them (Hosea 14:4).

It was Hosea's "misfortune" to live in a time when a population thought it could control everything that makes life secure and reasonably comfortable. Thus, it must have been unsettling to the people in the street when the prophet warned them that God would tolerate their spiritual hardheartedness for just so long.

Here is his ringing cry—a one-stringed instrument, if you please—*Return, O Israel!* Hosea had warned his people: "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears ... (you) are a flat cake not turned over." To those who thought they were appeasing God by empty religious exercise: "I desire mercy, (God says), not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."

Hosea had heard the boasts of the wealthy: "I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity." Translated: If you're rich enough, you can live above the rules, you can cover up your dark sides, and you can get special treatment." Hosea's blunt answer: It doesn't work that way.

And that's why he offers the only solution there is to jumpstarting a cold and ineffective spiritual life: *Return or repent*. Either way, it means to abandon all pretense that who we are, what we think we are, and what we have makes any difference at all to God.

"Take words," the prophet writes, "and say (to God), 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously ... Assyria cannot save us; we not mount on war-horses. We will *never again* say "Our gods" to what our hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion' " (italics mine).

His point? Stop looking at things you've earned, made or acquired and thinking of them as gods. For that, indeed, is what we all do (then and now) when we permit our money and our possessions to symbolize security or stability in life. Hosea has put his finger on the mind and heart of the person seduced by materialism. And he challenges us to renounce it when we see it in ourselves.

Application Questions:

1. Do I secretly believe that my wealth lets me live above the rules? What conclusions would someone draw from looking at my life?
2. Am I willing to abandon the 'gods' that are my possessions? Have I ever truly repented? If so, how do I know? If not, what is holding me back?

Day 5: Whom Do You Work For?

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24).

As this collection of sermons (known in sum as the Sermon on the Mount) moves along, we may grow increasingly uncomfortable at the insights of the Master. He knows too much about our interior lives: what we think, what’s important to us, and what our hidden intentions are.

This bit of insight is no exception. He knows that all of us dearly wish to have it both ways. We want to maximize our wealth here on earth, and, at the same time, we’d like to maximize our approval in heaven. The Savior is not in a mind to negotiate these issues; He is blunt and to the point: You can’t do both.

Here is a challenge about priorities. There cannot be two masters or controlling principles in life. And in case we do not get the point, He moves—as does the typical rabbi of His time—to the opposite extremes. You must *love* one and *hate* the other. In our Western mindset, we struggle with this presentation. We want to point out the logical impossibility of what He asks.

But Jesus does not deal, at least here, with the Western logical mind. He is making a point. Your desire to be a pleasure to God as a generous person and your desire to have it all now are incompatible. One perspective must ascend above the other and ascend with dominance and conviction.

Devoted is a key word in this text. It means to cleave or adhere to. It describes a passion which must grow in our interior lives: a passion to be wealthy or a passion to serve the living God. One of these passions must control the other. And if it is the latter of the two, then all wealth will be placed at the disposal of the One we have chosen to serve.

This is the mindset of the would-be generous giver. This is his devotion: to serve the One who is the giver of all things and to seek His purposes at all times. This is a high calling, difficult to reach, but packed with immense blessing and satisfaction. The truly generous giver comes to know this.

Application Questions:

1. Who or what is my master? Could you tell by looking at my life?
2. Am I trying to have it both ways? Am I trying to please both God and Money? In what ways?

Day 6: Are Your Gods on the Altar?

When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth (Matthew 19:22).

The confident young man probably shouldn't have asked what it was he was lacking. For the Savior hit him with a challenge and an invitation that no one in his right mind would have put forward: "Go sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come and follow me."

Herein lies one of the great Christian enigmas. Does Christ really want any person to have (much less enjoy) wealth or not? Why does Jesus give this confrontational command when others in the biblical literature (both Old and New Testaments) appear free to have many possessions?

The only conceivable answer is this: Jesus, looking into this man's heart, knew that his wealth owned him, that he defined himself with his money and his status. Or to use religious language: His money and his lifestyle was his god, and he worshipped it all.

It was this abnormal attachment that stood between him and the eternal life he asked Jesus about. Not a lot different from the attachment Abraham apparently felt to his only son, Isaac. In both cases, men were challenged to lay their "gods" on the altar. One man, his son; the other, his money.

"When the young man went away, he felt sad because he had great wealth." One wonders, how long did this young man live with that sadness? A few days? Months? A lifetime? A laser beam of conviction had been shot into his soul, and his real god had been exposed.

What if the young man had said to Jesus: "I'll do it. I'll meet you here tomorrow after I've divested myself of everything." Can you imagine Jesus saying, as heaven had answered Abraham many years before, "Stop, now I know that you love me"?

Some think that the young man actually thought this challenge through and did what Jesus asked. I'm doubtful. If only that I suspect Matthew would have told us the end of the story had that happened.

The would-be generous giver must read this story many, many times. Memorizing it would not hurt. It speaks to the chief temptation any successful or wealthy person has: When does all of this become a god to me? And what if Jesus were to put the challenge to me?

Application Questions:

1. Have my possessions become a god to me? How far is it before I cross that line? How would I know if I crossed it?
2. Do I take Jesus' challenge to the rich ruler seriously? Or am I quick to explain it away? Do I even acknowledge the possibility that Jesus might ask the same thing of me? If no, why not?

Day 7: Are You Fully Devoted?

“As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God” (1 Kings 11:4).

“King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. All the kings of the earth sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart” (2 Chronicles 9:22-23).

Yet Solomon died in disgrace. The young man who’d prayed for wisdom, who’d built a temple, who’d led a country with extraordinary insight so that he was sought as an expert by other kings, failed. How? Once again, the three classic temptations raised their ugly heads: money, power and sex.

Solomon began to accumulate enormous amounts of silver and gold (1 Kings 10:14-25). We hear of all wealth that came pouring in. We hear nothing of the way it was poured out. Is there a message here? An argument from silence about hoarding and not giving?

Solomon began to accumulate horses and chariots, the symbol of human power. It was like a president or prime minister today who builds the army larger and larger to project the power base of the country. Solomon wanted a reputation as an intimidator.

And, finally, Solomon began to collect wives—700 wives, 300 concubines—“and his wives led him astray” (11:2-3). Centuries before (Deuteronomy 17) Moses had warned that a king must not mass large amounts of silver and gold, large numbers of horses, and many wives. And Solomon violated this principle to the extreme.

As an old man, at the time he should have been at the height of his spiritual strength and intimacy with God, the Bible tells us that “the Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away ... [So God said,] ‘Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees ... I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you’ ” (11:9ff).

Any man or woman who has been given stewardship of money, influence or unusual skill must read this story with great fear. It reminds us that life, in most cases, has many years. And that the early years of success do not guarantee that the latter years will be greater. It reminds us that great gifts can be squandered, misused or forfeited.

Solomon had great wealth; he hoarded it. Solomon had great power; he felt driven to enlarge it. Solomon was attractive to many women; he engaged with them in the wrong way. And this wonderful heart of his—which God had filled with wisdom—became clogged with the wrong things. And the wisdom that had ruled a nation was no longer powerful enough to rule the life of one man.

Application Questions:

1. How am I handling the wealth and influence God has given me? Have I succumbed to their gravitational pull?
2. Do I presume that I cannot fall away from faithfulness? Am I being diligent to the end? In what ways am I being presumptuous?

Daily Readings for Week 3:

Theme:

If I look at Christ long enough, I will become a giver.

Memory Verse:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor,
so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Day 1: Our Shepherd God

"I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. ... I will shepherd the flock with justice" (Ezekiel 34:15-19).

The gods of the peoples of Israel's day were not caring gods. They were aloof, insensitive, capricious, amused by the sufferings of people. The best a pagan worshipper could hope for was that his god would be appeased, somehow mollified into granting the prayerful petitioner his wish.

Not so with Israel's God. He not only cares, but Ezekiel pictures Him also doing what the shepherd will not do: "I myself with search for my sheep." The world had never heard of a God who would come down, hear the cries of His people, and act on their behalf.

Listen to God's intentions: "I will rescue them ... I will bring them out to their own land ... I will pasture them ... I will tend them. ... There they will lie down ... feed in a rich pasture ... I will bind up the injured, strengthen the weak. ... I will shepherd the flock with justice."

This is the mind of God, revealed to us. Surely, it provides a platform for the thinking of the would-be generous giver. If this is God's intention, His pattern and His expectation, then what should be ours as we look to the future and ask concerning the best investment of our lives and our resources?

There is no question about it. A God who would go to these lengths, in the perspective of Ezekiel, is a God who expects us to be doing the same.

One's day takes on a new orientation after reading these words. No longer can one pray, "God show me your will and your purpose for my life." In the largest sense, that prayer is already answered. As God has engaged in searching for His sheep, has He left us with any question as to what He expects of us?

Application Questions:

1. Do I relate to God as my shepherd? Have I experienced His searching, care-giving love? When and how?
2. Am I faithful in obeying the will of God that He already has revealed to me? Or am I always asking Him to show me His will, while ignoring what He already has said? And why?

Day 2: A God of Relentless Love

The Lord said to me, "God, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods" (Hosea 3:1).

No one must know more about biblical love than the would-be generous giver. And one cannot appreciate the depth and breadth of biblical love unless he is acquainted with the larger cultural context of human relationships as it was practiced in the days of the Older Testament.

Most people lived according to the ethic of vengeance or at least the rigid one-for-one justice that said, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Hurt me, and I will hurt you back significantly more. Bring shame to my family's name, and I will make you suffer."

Enter Hosea. Under God's directive, Hosea marries Gomer, a woman who sounds pretty much like a prostitute. It would be difficult to exaggerate the lowness of her status in the culture of those days, where sexual infidelity was usually punished by stoning. But in obedience, Hosea marries Gomer and begins to raise a family with her. And just when one might think that Gomer has learned her lesson and will live gratefully as Hosea's wife for the rest of her life, she leaves again and returns to the streets. The first time was bad enough. But now she has re-entered the old way of living.

Most of us—then and now—would say that she deserves whatever consequences come her way. Except God, who says to Hosea, "Go show your love to your wife again, even though she is loved by another and is an adulteress?" And here's the real message, the next line: "Go love her as the Lord loves the Israelites."

This is biblical love; it refuses to be scorned. It keeps going back. Who could love like that?

The love behind generous giving looks like that. The money we give does not buy loyalty, even appreciation. It does open the door of grace, and it provides the pathway by which some will discover not only relief of the body but also relief of the soul. But the end result is God's business.

What does He ask of us? To match our money with our mercy and love. Love for the "Gomers" of this world, who never quite get it but who never fall off of God's horizon, or ours either. This is a love—this biblical—love that knows no limits.

Application Questions:

1. Have I experienced God's persistent, rescuing love? If so, do I still experience it daily? Why or why not?
2. Does my charitable giving bear the marks of biblical love? Is it unconditional and persistent? Or is it stingy and judgmental? What would someone conclude from looking at my life?

Day 3: Going the Extra Mile

“Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:39-40).

You could call it Moses' justice: *eye for eye, and tooth for tooth*. That was Moses' answer to the culture of vengeance all around him, which called for the eyes of seventy-seven in exchange for one wrongfully blinded, or seventy-seven lives in exchange for one wrongfully killed. With such retributive “justice,” Moses saw, the world would kill itself off rather quickly. So, Moses had an answer: one for one. And it seemed to work.

But our Lord had an even better way: forgiveness. Don't hit back. Don't hold onto what you have if someone is determined to take it from you. And don't refuse to go a mile with a soldier if he commands you to carry his pack; in fact, go two miles. Oh, and give to one who asks you.

You can be sure these contrasts between Moses' tradition and Jesus' teaching caught peoples' attention. By taking things to these extremes, Jesus guaranteed, first of all, that He would evoke thought and reflection on the part of his hearers. But more importantly, He was effectively getting people to think about *grace*, the absolute opposite of hatred and reprisal.

We thought that generous giving began with solving practical problems such as who the worthy recipients of our gifts might be. Or with the resolution of tax and other legal problems: How much can I write off? How about a private foundation? Do I want recognition for my gifts? But here is Jesus taking us deeper. Watch Him poke at those tiny sensitivities that exist in all of us.

If someone hits us, we want to hit back. If someone wants to fight us in court, we want to fight back. If someone makes demands upon us, we want the right to say no. And if someone keeps begging for money, we would like to refuse them. Our internal wiring points in these directions. And here is Christ saying to renounce this kind of thinking.

Are we discovering something more about the spiritual makeup of the would-be generous giver? That he is called to a much deeper life: one that could gladly, if prompted by God's Spirit, actually do what Jesus has said here? To do this, one must be willing to spend much more time in the presence of the Lord learning what this all means, how it is done, and overcoming the resistance within that thinks this absurd. These are not easy words ... for any of us.

Application Questions:

1. Do I always insist on just deserts? Did God insist on just deserts with me? Why is my attitude what it is?
2. Is my charitable giving hung up on the technicalities? Do I only give what I think people deserve? Or is my giving truly gracious? What are my criteria for giving to someone?

Day 4: Cultivating a Heart of Compassion

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick (Matthew 14:14).

Thousands of people gathered that day in the countryside. It was evidence to the face that the reputation of Jesus was growing throughout the entire area. And it was also evidence of how spiritually empty most people felt, how open they were to new ideas spoken by a charismatic figure.

But now they were out there in the middle of nowhere, and they were hungry. The good news was that they were there; the bad news was that no one had thought through the implications of being so far from sources of food.

“Jesus had compassion on them,” Matthew writes.

Jesus saw their needs. He saw sick and diseased people, empty stomachs and empty hearts. And, more than anyone else, He knew that you can’t fill the vacancy of the soul if hunger and sickness are gnawing realities. Compassion—the act of feeling as another feels and wanting to do something about it—was Jesus’ dominant perspective at the moment. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the disciples.

A few years later it would be different. Perhaps those men who later led the early church first learned compassion in this event. Who knows? But we need to look at them in the harsh light of their disinterested perspective that day. Jesus healed. What they did is not mentioned. Later the best these well-intentioned men could say was, “It’s getting late; there’s no food here; get the people out of here.”

Here’s a key thought for would-be generous givers. Great giving is certainly strategic (or should be). But strategic thinking is not where it all begins. Compassion is the starting point. And compassion is not instinctive with most of us. It is a perspective that we will have to acquire. How? By asking God repeatedly for it; by disciplining ourselves to renounce self-centeredness; by intentionally extending ourselves and entering the lives of others by listening, watching and learning what human need looks like and what can be done about it.

Slowly the heart gets the message. It must generate genuine—not pretended—compassion. The heart develops spiritual antennae that hone in the cries of humankind and sets in motion the appropriate response.

Watch Jesus from this perspective. His is the model heart. He takes in this crowd of 5,000 and perceives accurately what the collective needs are. And not only does He set out to do what He can, but He does it in the correct order—and without making a big deal of it.

This story is an important model for the generous giver. In it he sees perfect opposites: what compassion looks like and what it does not look like.

Application Questions:

1. What is my internal response to people in need? Do I have Christ-like compassion? Why or why not?
2. What is my attitude in giving? Do I have a posture of compassion? Or is my giving nothing more than a fiscal transaction? What would people who know me say about me?

Day 5: The Principle of Human Need

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy (Luke 14:1-2).

Those who plan parties and dinners say that the first mark of a great party is the guest list. Make sure it includes people who are pleasant, convivial and socially skilled. Invite the curmudgeon, the bore or the oddball, and the party may go downhill fast.

Jesus was someone a Pharisee invited as a dinner guest only after careful consideration. Not that Jesus was socially unskilled—far from it! At the same time, inviting Him to a dinner party pretty much ensured that someone would be put on the spot during the course of the evening.

This Pharisee learned that lesson the hard way. He had invited the Lord to dine with him and his guests on the Sabbath day, presumably so that Jesus could be observed, studied and, eventually, neutralized when they found out His vulnerabilities. Instead, Jesus studied them. And, according to Luke, He made at least three salient observations that undoubtedly left people a bit off balance.

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” At the party, Jesus was presented to a man who suffered from dropsy. It is not clear whether the Pharisee arranged for this man to be placed (as Luke puts it) “in front of Him.” However, the test was clear: Would Jesus, the healer, heal on the Sabbath day? Or was healing a form of work, to be avoided on the Sabbath?

Jesus raised this very question to the people present at the dinner. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? And no one answered. They had always assumed that it wasn't lawful, but now that Jesus had asked, no one was sure. They just knew they'd not seen it done before.

So Jesus healed the man and sent him on his way. Then He pointed to a relevant piece of the law as the basis for a continuing discussion: If a boy or an ox falls into a well on the Sabbath, do you leave him there or pull him out? As soon as the question was raised, the momentum shifted. There was no further need to make the point.

Genuine human need comes before anything else: before religious ceremony, before prohibitive laws and legalisms, before one's own convenience, before one's right to hoard and possess even those things that are rightfully ours. Human need requires a loving response.

The would-be generous giver must master this principle. We must understand that when human need rises up before us and declares its presence, the party must stop. We must lay down our glass, set aside our knife and fork and ask, “What can I give? What can I do?”

Application Questions:

1. Have I ever been in serious need? What was it like? How did people respond?
2. What is my attitude toward human need? Where does it fit in my priorities? What do my checkbook and calendar say about my priorities?

Day 6: Giving to the Church, Sustaining God's Work

[The Lord said to Moses,] "With his own hands he is to bring the offering made to the Lord by fire" (Leviticus 7:30).

Leviticus is hardly the book most people would want to read for a spiritual jumpstart on a new day. It is filled with long, detailed descriptions of various laws and rituals, which Moses taught to the Israelites during their sojourn in the desert. Yet by reading it, we learn something about the themes that were important to the first generations of people headed to the Promised Land, which in turn set in motion a new way of life and conviction for the people of God.

The first several chapters, a certain phrase appears again and again that will interest the generous giver: "Bring an offering." These chapters detail many of the ways people were asked to give to the Lord, along with a description of how that offering should be presented, what it meant, and what the priest would do with it.

Leviticus 7:28 describes the fellowship offering—an expression of thanksgiving or gratitude—to be brought to the tabernacle "with (one's) own hand." In other words, it is not something to be delegated or done impersonally. Someone who wanted to acknowledge that he has been blessed with abundance expressed his thanks by carrying his offering himself to the priest. Through it, the Israelites were reminded of a deeply personal element to their expression of faith and generosity.

Part of this offering was to go to the priests, who were charged with maintaining the spiritual life of the community (Leviticus 7:31, 35-36). The message? At the core of the spiritual life of any group of people, there must be some organization and some appointed people to keep it going. Giving to the Lord and to His purposes means giving toward this "spiritual overhead."

What is most interesting about the detailed instructions that dominate Leviticus is how seriously the act of generous giving is taken in their corporate spiritual life. As the architecture of their walk with God is developed, giving and the way it is to be done are at the center of faith.

Application Questions:

1. What are my offerings to God like? Do I bring them thoughtfully, or in an offhanded way?
2. What is my attitude toward giving to the church? Do I resent it? Am I suspicious of my church leaders? Or am I glad to submit to them and support them with my gifts?

Day 7: The God Who Sees and Calls

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So have come down to rescue them" (Exodus 3:7-8).

These are monumental lines in the biblical literature. They reveal something highly significant about the God of heaven and earth: The Creator of the universe has not distanced Himself from the people He has made, nor is He disinterested in their fate. He is aware! He seeks involvement! He is a rescuer!

Those of us who have lived in the biblical tradition all our lives can scarcely appreciate the significance of these statements. We are accustomed to hearing of a God who is present to His people. But Moses lived in a day when the gods were presumed to be dispassionate, disinterested, capricious and inured to the sufferings of people. The gods didn't care. God, however, did!

At the core of the thinking and convictions of every would-be generous giver must be an awareness of the heavenly Father, who is greatly moved by human need and who desires to act on it.

The cry of the Israelites has reached me. ...I am sending you. Moses, aged 80, was the man of the hour. The call, the assignment and the delegation of responsibility set in motion the events that would lead Israel out of Egypt.

Part of the making of a generous giver is an experience not unlike the one Moses had: an experience of calling. Perhaps ours will not be quite as dramatic, nor will the magnitude of the call be as great. But the assignment is just as real. *We must assume that God has, for each of us, a part to play in His grand scheme of redemption.* Through our giving and the investment of our skills, God anticipates that we will play a seminal role in reaching people in their hour of need.

Until that vision is clear and until it has attached itself to our hearts, we remain only marginally useful. But when we have heard God speak, everything changes. Like Moses, we head for our Egypt. Do you know where your Egypt is?

Application Questions:

1. Have I experienced God's call on my life? If not, why not? Is it possible I am not listening? How would I recognize His call when I heard it?
2. Where is my Egypt? What is it that God would have me do to serve Him?