GOD'S GIFT OF GENEROSITY

Gratitude beyond Stewardship

KARL B. TRAVIS

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

Want to learn about more WJK books?
Click to sign up for our email list.

WJK WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

"In this long-awaited labor of love, Karl Travis takes readers by the hand and shows them the very nature of God. Travis explores the generosity of God, generosity to God, and, finally, generosity with God, ultimately making the case for how giving from a posture of gratitude can transform the giver's life. The journey described is a gift for all who desire to walk more closely with our generous and loving God."

—Kristine Miller, partner and executive vice president, Horizons Stewardship

"Karl Travis is the perfect pastor to write a book on stewardship, because he genuinely treats all of life as a gift. And he does so because he wholeheartedly believes and trusts in God's goodness, abundance, and graciousness. This book reframes generosity in a robustly theological way, mirroring the generous heart of God. Expect to be inspired and moved toward opening your hands and heart."

—Danielle Shroyer, author, speaker, spiritual director

"Holy cow! If you think, as I thought, that you pretty much understand Christian stewardship and generosity, read this book. You will quickly feel embarrassed, as I did, over your prior conceits. And your grasp of God's generosity will transform yours, which in turn will transform that of those you influence. Karl Travis and his book are gifts of that divine generosity for us all to treasure and share."

—Jack Haberer, pastor, author, former editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook*

"Karl Travis sees with the eye of a perceptive pastor, writes with the verve of a joyous companion, and argues with the existential urgency of a dying man. This is a book bursting with faith, hope, and love, convincing us that God has given us everything we need; but it is also a manual of practical wisdom, contending that generosity is the best investment. Reading this book won't just make you a more effective pastor; it will make you a more profound human being."

—Samuel Wells, author and vicar, St. Martin-in-the-Fields

"If you are looking for a simple how-to manual on conducting a stewardship campaign, you need to keep looking. But if you are looking for an intriguing and in-depth study in generosity and how to bring a congregation along on the journey, you will find it in Karl Travis's new book, *God's Gift of Generosity: Gratitude beyond Stewardship*. Travis takes the reader through a personal and thorough dive into the theology of stewardship, starting with God's generosity. He also handles thorny stewardship dilemmas, including tithing. Pointing to numerous biblical references and intimate stories, he guides us through rethinking tithing.

Many have come to believe that tithing is passé and no longer understood among today's congregations, and thus it should be abandoned. Travis makes the case that if we truly understand God's generosity, the idea of tithing will come naturally. The book encourages the congregation, pastor, and church leadership to spend valuable time studying the depth of God's generosity in order to launch a new methodology of stewardship.

I have had the honor and privilege of walking with Travis through the last decade and have witnessed him exhibit generosity of soul, spirit, and love through a journey that would have made Job quake. His staring death in the imminent face and keeping faith through it all was the most magnificent example of who and what we are called to be.

This book will rock your world in a good way. It is written with humility, humor, and passion. May you be blessed as I was."

—Rick Young, president, Texas Presbyterian Foundation

"Karl Travis's themes of gratitude and generosity crackle with profound examples that remind us in this often-dispirited time that, at its essence, the church is still alive and hopeful. At its very heart, this book beckons us to practice boldly an unafraid discipleship grounded by the keystone of consistent generosity and religious joy. This book is not simply a primer for stewardship committees. More profoundly, it is an invitation to explore the landscape of a deeper faith. Those who love this faith and those who wish to love it more will be blessed by the wisdom within these pages."

—Ted Wardlaw, president emeritus, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Access free resources at
www.wjkbooks.com/Generosity to expand the use
of this book to group study and worship settings.

For my Parents
who gave so much from so little

And for Jaci
whose generosity is impressed across my life

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
Preface xiii

Part One: God's Generosity
1. The Generosity *of* God 5
2. Generosity *for* God 21
3. Generosity *with* God 33

Part Two: The Power of Generosity . . .
4. . . . to Inspire Gratitude 55
5. . . . to Clarify Want versus Need 61
6. . . . to Redirect Our Economic Gaze 69
7. . . . to Dethrone the Chief Idols of the Age 73
8. . . . to Serve as Spiritual Discipline 79
9. . . . to Provide the Believer's Call 89

Part Three: Speaking of Money
10. The Pastor's Internal Dialogue 101
11. The Pastor Speaks with Congregation Leaders 113

Conclusion: Is the Church Theologically Unique? 147

Afterword 159
Notes 163

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I KNOW NOTHING EXCEPT THAT WHICH I WAS TAUGHT, SO I THINK OF this book as a collection of borrowed thoughts—but not stolen ones—a collection of borrowed thoughts resynthesized. My debts are incalculable.

My life and faith have been molded by four congregations, where I learned, worshiped, and served. I was raised within First Presbyterian Church, Tulia, Texas. As a pastor, I served three congregations: Westminster Presbyterian Church, Roswell, New Mexico; Grosse Ile Presbyterian Church, Grosse Ile, Michigan; and First Presbyterian Church, Fort Worth, Texas. To the congregations I served, you laughed when you were supposed to and didn't when you could have. We grew together. Thank you.

More parishioners have influenced and inspired me than I can name, yet several have so fed me that neglecting their names would be akin to a table grace with no mention of food: Jane Berckes, Jeff Bledsoe, Marvin and Veva Byrd, Ron and

Flora Case, John and Nancy Colina, Tim McKinney, Collin and Emily Hadley, Steve Hudgens, Phil and Jeanne Kennedy, Matt Mildren, Herd Midkiff, John Mitchell, Helen Morrison, Fred Oberkircher, Sue Quinn, and Vernon Rew.

God has gifted me with remarkable colleagues, among them Mark Denton, Dana Fickling, Jan Holmes, Robyn Michalove, Kristine Miller, Amy Parker, Mark Peake, Doug Scott, Josh Stewart, Mike Thompson, Rick Young, Michael Waschevski, and Shannon Webster. Their personal faith and professional practices of generosity have given me hope and inspiration.

In fledgling and unformed shape, the ideas in this book have been received however gratefully by conference participants, worshiping congregations, retreat-goers, and magazine readers over the last three decades. My favorite part of writing, speaking, and preaching is listening afterward. Thank you for your critiques and insights.

I owe special thanks to Ron Case, John Colina, Doug Huneke, and Jon Nuelle for their attentive eyes and keen minds while editing drafts. Robert Ratcliff, editor-in-chief at Westminster John Knox Press, was surprisingly open to publishing this book even after an illness-induced respite of seven years. I laughed out loud when he told me that my excuse—dying—was the best excuse for an unfinished manuscript anyone had ever offered him. Bob, thanks for my relaxed deadline.

Kathi and Bill Rito, Raley Talieferro, and Wally Tate are brave and generous for allowing me to share their intensely personal stories.

Sam Wells has been since seminary a gift of inspiration, wisdom, and deep friendship. I owe Sam the rhetorical playfulness in contrasting for and with, though I have deployed it much less deftly than him.

My four siblings—Doug, Jan, Drew, and Kristi—are each church leaders and possessed of enormous generosity. This

is no coincidence, of course, learning as we did from our parents Jane and Murray Travis, whose faith and liberality have influenced far more people than ever they would have acknowledged.

No one could have told me how much I would love my children nor how much I would learn from them—Audrey, Madelene, and Ian—and later, my stepchildren—Rachel and Jacob. They do not realize yet how much I owe them. Please, do not tell them.

My wife, Jaci, is a font of inspiration and support, a partner and a sounding board. Jaci saved my life—literally and figuratively. Without Jaci's insistent encouragement, this book would never have been completed. She is my partner, my coach, and my wellspring.

Since God reads our thoughts, God need not read our books, so it might seem hackneyed to acknowledge God. Yet, any book on generosity must from its first pages celebrate the Divine's lavish provision that ultimately roots and enables all subsequent generosities.

Deo gratia.

PREFACE

I WRITE THIS FROM MY DEATH BED. YOU MIGHT THINK THIS MELO-dramatic, yet it is true that I am writing from a hospital bed delivered to my house when I went on hospice care. My doctors feared a quick dying—no more than 30 days—but that was two years ago.

I was healthy when I contracted to write this book in 2014 and began writing in good faith. Then, my health failed. In a seven-year avalanche, illness swept away my energy, professional life, and mobility, but not my faith, and certainly not my gratitude. In fact, the terminal diagnosis quietly confirmed that I am truly a Christian. I had preached for 29 years, mind you, yet a terminal diagnosis has a way of proving the pudding.

After my will was finalized, we wrote my funeral service, and I finished my family's genealogy, I dusted off the manuscript to discover that what I had written about generosity seems even more relevant to me now, particularly as

COVID-19 leaves the world guessing about the future of the church, wondering if American Christians have been lulled into permanent complacency amidst the pandemic interlude. With the gross domestic product bouncing up and down like a NASCAR speedometer—and unemployment, housing evictions, and church attendance with it—how might COVID-19 impact attitudes toward giving?

My father was also a pastor, as was my father's father, and his father's father. And both brothers, also. (My brother Drew allows that this is not a credential but rather a confession.) Dad once observed sardonically that ministry has become a series of endless meetings punctuated by worship services. Amidst this disjointed, frenetic, and spirit-smudging lifestyle, most ministers seem feverishly in search of quality materials to inform and shorten preparation time. Publishers are happy to oblige, of course, which explains the torrent of beautiful and intriguing advertisements that cross every pastor's desk and email screen, ads detailing programmatic, step-by-step instructions for every variety of institutional task.

I was a pastor. That means that I was also preacher, writer, administrator, supervisor, counselor, caregiver, program planner, project manager, meeting organizer and moderator, leadership guru, and yes: a fundraiser. With so much on my professional plate, I could have been forgiven my temptation to use such packaged programs, particularly those regarding Christian stewardship. Stewardship is, after all, parish ministry's high-wire act; the risk is elevated, and everyone is watching. Any stewardship book or program is enticing if it hands pastors a ready-made vocabulary and an out-of-the-box process for the annual stewardship season.

There are a good many such books out there, too, books on how to conduct an annual stewardship campaign, books on the mechanics of motivating and inspiring parishioners to share God's bounty. Many are quite good.

And yet, as a pastor I longed for something different. The stewardship books which litter my library are not necessarily unbearably slick nor unreasonably mechanical. Rather, it seems to me, they are incomplete. My library is chock-full of helpful books describing how: how to conduct an effective annual effort, how to oversee a capital campaign, how to begin a faithful planned giving ministry. How is important.

But I wanted more. I wondered, "Why?" Why give? For a lover of God, why does generosity matter? This question is more basic and far-reaching than, "Why give to my church?" It is an expansive and bone-deep question: Why give at all, to anything, to anyone, at any time?

Secular philanthropy proffers carefully researched answers detailing why people give. Some people want tax benefits. Some want their names on a wall or in a newsletter. Some want to improve the world, to help a favored group. Some give without conscious motivation at all. Donors offer these reasons and more. But do these answers fully encompass the Christian impulse to give? Do they satisfy the disciple, one who seeks to follow the mystery of divinity? Do followers of Jesus give only for these reasons, or do people of faith act also on a qualitatively different impulse, a more overtly spiritual motive?[1]

Somewhere back in Sunday school we learned the answers to this question, why we give. We know why as well as we know the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm. We give to please God. We give in response to God's grace. We give because God says to. We give to grow. Then, having spat out the theological truisms, we rush to plan the stewardship season.

It's no wonder that those in our pews hear the same threadbare reasoning annually and assume that the entire endeavor has mostly to do with subscribing the church's budget. They do not hear an invitation into the generous heart of God. They do not sense a passionate summons to practice a primary spiritual discipline. They do not hear an excited call to

discover a deep sense of inner and communal joy, a bidding to be enveloped by God's already vibrant and ongoing ministries of redemption and reconciliation, and all of it amidst God's larger endeavor to do nothing less than renew the world.

Surely, I thought, there must be a more intellectually satisfying, a more spiritually gratifying, a more authentically religious explanation for practiced generosity. This book seeks a deeper vision for disciplined, mindful, and joyous generosity.

I have divided its contents into roughly equal thirds. The second and third portions build upon the first. The book seeks to ask in sequence, what? Then, so what? And finally, now what?

The "what" is God—our mutuality with the divine creator, the wellspring of generosity. The "so what" is the practice of generosity in our context—early twenty-first century North America mainline Protestantism. The "now what" discusses several of the thorniest stewardship questions pastors and leaders ask about the church's stewardship practices. In theological terms, this book attempts to relish the timeless nature of God and then faithfully apply its delight in our own time and methods. It seeks to move from orthodoxy (correct doctrine) to orthopraxis (correct conduct), though in our lived experience that movement may go in either direction.

Allow me a word, too, about terms. When I was first contacted, I was asked about writing a book on stewardship. I hesitated. Stewardship, like so many religious words, has been coopted for non-religious purposes. The word has not been so much stolen as it has been massaged, manipulated, redefined. Search the website of any major oil or gas company, of most mining companies, of most major automakers for the term stewardship. Do the same with most capital investment or wealth management firms. You might be surprised by the frequent and elastic use of the word stewardship.

Taking a cue from any of several biblical parables, and particularly from the parable of the Unjust Steward, Christians

have long defined stewardship as the wise management of another's property, namely, God's property. If "the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1), stewardship has been for us the heady task of managing God's stuff. And if the devil is in the details, here the details are about management.

British Petroleum and Fidelity Investments have retained the values of management in their use of the term stewardship, but they have plucked from God's soil the very roots of Christian values and motivations. I applaud the current concern to wed stewardship with environmental and economic sustainability, and yet the singular concentration on stewardship as management has now overwhelmed richer dimensions of the word's deepest meanings. Stewardship has become too singularly synonymous with management, and as such, has been reduced to instrumentalism, minimized to mere utilitarianism.

There is another term which implicitly carries the goals of wise management while exuding the broader and more liberal biblical concept we wish to explore. That word is generosity.[2] If stewardship's verb has become "manage," generosity's verb should be "give." Managing and giving are related, but they also are different. Stewardship and generosity are not synonyms. Though I certainly do not want to eliminate management as a part of stewardship's definition, I prefer the word generosity. If experiencing God's grace and open-handedness inspires us to some particular verb, excites us to some specific behavior, I daresay that managing is part of it, but giving is all of it.

A word about context is also in order. I write as a white male pastor who served middle and upper-middle class mainline congregations reflective of the denomination (the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)) to which they belong. I have tried to write a book useful to people in similar settings, though I do hope that these observations are relevant also in a broader context. If I had written a book aimed at African American pastors and parishioners in, say, Detroit, or targeted to storefront

parishes of migrant workers, I would have emphasized different themes and confronted different obstacles. Since the mainline is my experience and my target, I speak from and to it. By doing so, and as wealth disparity becomes increasingly obvious and indefensible, I am not defending a denominationalism linked to class. I do not argue that such is right. I simply observe that such is real, even while lamenting the church's inability to share resources between wealthier and poorer congregations.

Finally, I rejoice in God's providence that my thoughts emerge from my biography. While I hope that what I have written is true, I celebrate also that all truth is revealed. Truth revealed to any single person emanates from God. As such, truth becomes apparent within relationships, specifically through individual families, invariably in a humanly limited context, always in a solitary lifetime. We are our stories and our stories are us. Alongside ideas about God and observations about the church, I have also shared stories and illustrations from my life, my family, and from my pastoral experience. This book is unique, then, completed in the rich, pensive, and stolen days somewhere between a terminal diagnosis and death, when contemplation is at its richest. It is an unusual fusion, part theological and biblical reflection, part pastoral and personal memoir, part cultural criticism, and part instruction manual.

For the pastor, both preaching and writing balance in the tantalizing equilibrium between "Thus sayeth the Lord" and "It seems to me." If you make it to the last page, I pray that "Thus sayeth the Lord" regarding God's generosity is at least clear enough that you will celebrate your past generosities and commit yourself to becoming ever more generous.

Karl Travis
Lent 2022

Part I

God's Generosity

He couldn't wait to tell me. He knew I would grimace. He was right.

In his travels, one of my parishioners happened into a faraway congregation on the proverbial "Stewardship Sunday." Stewardship Sunday is that once-a-year occasion to talk about money that most churches treat like an annual flu shot—the reluctant willingness to be poked in the body's nether regions, hoping that it will inoculate you for the remainder of the year. The chair of the stewardship committee stood uncomfortably in the chancel, hands in his pockets, his feet shuffling like an eighth grader at his first dance.

"I hate this as much as you do," he began, "talking about money. But we must. The staff hasn't had a raise in four years," he droned on, "and the air conditioner has gotten old. There is a leak in the sanctuary roof. I know that you don't want to hear this, and I don't really want to say it, but the church needs more money. So please, give more."

He sat down much more quickly than he had stood up. There had been no mention of the church's ministries beyond its walls, no calling to mind of the church's role in the world, no allusion to past faithfulness, and no reference to future vision. That volunteer chairperson spoke of the church but not of the believer, talked about the congregation's need to receive but not the disciple's need to give.

And, if all of this was not deadening enough, he made no mention of God.

How many times are similar lectures offered every autumn? My hunch is that across America, otherwise faithful and well-intentioned pastors and parishioners stand before their fellow disciples not much wanting to, not knowing what they should say. They follow the same threadbare reasoning and make the theological pitch we are most accustomed to: stewardship is about the church's need, the church's mission, the church's budget. There isn't much mention of the individual. Worse

yet, if God is mentioned at all, references to God have more to do with guilt and obligation than with joy and generosity.

Have we been doing the wrong thing really well?

Let us reverse the conversation. Let us begin with God.

I've heard it said that American Protestants are Calvinists whether they know it or not. Calvin was the brilliant sixteenth-century theologian who, while only in his twenties, penned his Institutes of the Christian Religion. He began the two-volume tome by telling us that our faith may begin at one of two starting points—with us, or with God. And yet, if we seek self-understanding, it seems best to begin by contemplating God. To better see ourselves, first we contemplate the face of God or, perhaps more poetically, the heart of God, the unimaginably generous heart of God. If our question is, then, "Why are we to give?" our search begins with God, in God. Human generosity finds both its seed and its harvest in God's generosity.

Chapter 1

THE GENEROSITY *OF* GOD

"God so loved the world that God gave…"

—John 3.16

GOD'S FIRST GENEROSITIES

The Bible tells the story of God's burning desire for relationship, for restoration, for redemption. The trajectory of this narrative is so assumed, so implicit to our understanding of God's story, that we must pause even to remember that it was the ancient Jews who invented time, or at least our understanding of it.[1] Before ancient Israel, people thought of time as a circle, the rhythmic order of events happening in cycles, and as such, time was going nowhere in particular. Life was just one thing after another, and then you died.

Ancient Jews, however, heard and sensed God intervening in the world. What is more, they understood God to be taking humanity and history somewhere. They stretched history from a circle into a line, a straight line, a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Among the Hebrews' greatest contributions to civilization, then, is the striking reality that God is

present in the world, that God is taking the world from something to something else, and that a nation's shared life—and an individual's life—can therefore have meaning. Humanity is capable of participating in God's movement and meaning, a story which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The Bible, then, is the compiled drama of God's love for God's people, for all of humankind, and for all God's creation. It is a collection of stories, a narrative of successive accounts describing God's interactions with people across time, a story with meaning, purpose, and direction. Thus, the stories contained in this holy book are commonly summarized something like this: God creates, then humanity falls, then God forgives, then God redeems, and finally, in the future, God completes the plan. Our story with God is one of creation, relationship, and then redemption, reconciliation, restoration, and ultimately joyous generosity. This describes, in general, the Bible's trajectory.

And yet, might there be an additional summary, a complementary interpretation that connects the entirety of God's story to our understanding of Christian generosity? Is the arc of creation, fall, redemption, completion the only way to comprehend the Bible? I have come to believe in my bones that the biblical story outlines the contours of God's nature, and that God's nature is emphatically, eternally, and passionately generous, forever seeking creative relationship with us and the cosmos.

No one worships a stingy God. If "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7), humanity loves a generous God.

People are drawn to God by dramatically different characteristics. Yet no matter how else we relish the divine, generosity is God's universally appreciated quality. For some, God is above all things loving. For others, God is first forgiving. Some are drawn to a God who is just, or merciful, or gracious. No matter your preferred divine quality—loving, forgiving, wise, just, powerful, merciful, creative—what finally evokes your passion is how generously God shares it. God gave, God

gives, God promises to give yet more. Generosity more than describes what God does. Generosity describes who God is. Before and after God is anything else, God is generous.

Someone said that there are only two prayers: *please* and *thank you. Please* precedes God's generosity. *Thank you* is our response to God's generosity.

The entire Bible may be framed as the epic story of God's generosity. Since the Bible details God's generous nature, it opens with a story of generosity, with God creating the world and sharing it with human beings, God's chosen image upon the earth. After God created humankind in his image, "God blessed them, and God said to them, … 'I have given you every plant yielding seed'" (Gen. 1:28–29). God continues. The gifts include all green things, trees and their fruits, too. Adam, Eve, and their descendants are lavishly provisioned.

Though well beyond our scope here, it's nonetheless interesting to read a prescientific explanation of creation which already intuits the insanely lavish, bountiful, dynamic, and incredibly complex biosphere that human beings have found awaiting our exploration. From our cells to the skies, the matrix of life is tantalizing evidence of God's creative generosity.

Following the flood, in a moment of expansive mercy and overwhelming hope, God's disappointment receding with the waters, God surprisingly says to Noah, "just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything" (Gen. 9:3b). Everything. If Adam and Eve received all green things, the plants and trees and produce, God's generosity now grows to include "every bird of the air, everything that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:30). God's generosity is in measure with God's mercy. We expect that humanity's faithlessness will discourage God's generosity. Nonetheless, from destruction comes a second chance. Human failure and folly draw from God ever greater generosity. Now, the human family receives every blessing the earth is capable to provide.

The story continues. God chooses, calls, and makes covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God gives them blessing, promising them descendants as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand. The surprises begin with an unexpected son born late in life, named in joyous gratitude Isaac, "He will laugh."

Next God gives to Isaac and Rebekah—likewise late and against biological odds—twin boys, Jacob and Esau. In surprising and almost comical fashion, the covenant generously continues.

Next God gives to Jacob and his several wives many sons, from which come the tribes of Israel. Joseph is among them, of course, to whom God gives protection in Joseph's strange sojourn into service in the pharaoh's court. Even in Egyptian exile, even away from home, God's gifts abound. Despite a drought, because of the drought, God reunites Jacob's family under Joseph's protection in faraway Egypt. In the space of a generation, however, God's people slide from freedom toward bondage and slavery.

In a retelling of Joseph's story, Walter Brueggemann has shaped a generation of stewardship preachers. Brueggemann reminds us of the story's deeper implications, reminds us that the Hebrew people find themselves in foreign servitude because they forget God's generosity, forget God's promise of provision. Instead, they become captive to, fall prey to, Pharaoh's "myth of scarcity."[2] Forgetting the "orgy of fruitfulness" beginning with creation, God's people become beholden to monopoly, captive to fear, enslaved to the doubt that God will provide. They forget God's generosity.

God's generosity reaches a crescendo in the story of Moses. God calls Moses to lead the people from Egyptian bondage. In their exodus—the paradigmatic event of the entire Old Testament story—God showers his people with two gifts. In one version of his now classic hymn "Spirit," James Manley describes the movement this way:

> You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand,
> And you gifted your people with a law and a land.[3]

God "gifts" God's people with commandments—for the community's safety—and with a home—for the community's prosperity. The Ten Commandments and the promised land join the list of God's generous gifts for God's people.

There is another version of "Spirit," a variant with a distinct and fascinating difference.

> "You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand,
> And you goaded your people with a law and a land."[4]

God "gifted" his people "with a law and a land." God "goaded" his people "with a law and a land." Which is it? Both.

Gifts goad. Gifts provoke. Gifts inspire response.

For the remainder of the Old Testament, the people's fidelity to God is measured by their remembering and responding to the twin provision of commandment and homeland. Every Passover meal remembers God's gifts of flight, freedom, family, and home. Every taste of matzo and bitter herbs recalls and relishes God's generosity.

Remembering God's generosity becomes central to the people's identity and ritual. When the people remember God's generosity, they flourish. When they forget God's generosity, the people wander and stray. Moses, by now an old man, dying, chastises the people not merely for unfaithfulness. Theirs is a particular unfaithfulness, rooted in forgetfulness. They have forgotten God's generosity. "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut. 32:18).

The Hebrew Scripture continues largely in this vein, God's people chastised again and again, one misfortune after another rooted in forgetting God's generosity. It is the message to King David, the greatest king of Israel, not because he is the most

powerful but because he is the most forgiven. It is the message to King Solomon, possessed of wisdom greater than otherwise possible. It is the message as the two kingdoms divide and fail and fall, that the pathway back to God is found by remembering God's prior generosities, trusting them, and responding to them. It is the message as God's people are sent into exile, all the while hoping to return to the promised land. The importance of remembering and responding to God's generosity is the message standing behind every prophet's wagging finger and clenched fist.

The point is clear. Remembering God's generosity inspires God's people to trust and faithfulness. Forgetting God's generosity brings idolatry and isolation, arrogance and exile. God is not arbitrary or punitive, either. God's generosity is given with no strings other than, of course, that remembering it connects the people to their creator, which connects them to their deepest selves. Forgetting God's generosity is akin to forgetting oneself, cutting one's life at the root.

God's generosity is so central to the identity of God's people, so basic, that the foundational Hebrew sin is forgetting it.

This is the arc of God's first generosities. God gives joyously, graciously, lovingly. As God's people remember, they remain attached to God, and they thrive. When they forget, they lose touch with what matters most, and they wither.

Then, as the Old Testament concludes, it is as though God has a choice to make. It is clear that God has every right to abandon the entire project. Will God rest content with God's prior generosities, unappreciated as it appears they have grown? Or, will God repeat the cycle, respond to the people's doubts by showering upon them even greater generosity?

The answer is earthshaking. As God's provision multiplies from Eden to Noah, God will give yet more. The biblical story is a dynamic, sequential adding on of God's good gifts, one atop the other. It is a tale of relentless, dynamic generosity. If

one gift does not do, God will give another. Then another. The Christian story is the saga of a loving creator so compelled by love, so possessed of grace, so hungry for relationship that there seems no end to God's *willingness* to give.

And, there is no limit to God's *capacity* to give. Until, that is, God gives all that God has.

We have arrived at the essence of the Christian faith. In the center of time, at the turning point for all meaning, God gives yet again. This time, God's generosity knows no constraints. It is limitless and expansive, extravagant, and reckless. This time, God gives God's very self. If God's generosity in creation and covenant, in commandment and the promised land, have not yet convinced us of the heart of the matter, God will amplify and complete all of it with even greater generosity. Now, God gives God's own child, Jesus.

GOD'S CENTRAL GENEROSITY

It is perhaps the most memorized biblical passage. People glue it to bumpers, stick it on refrigerators, and scribble it across posters for display at football and basketball games. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16).

What sticks with people, apparently, comes in the second half of the proclamation. It has to do with believing and having, it has to do with everlasting life. This is our culture's dominant focus, the part about our eternal life with God. God's only son came and lived and laughed and taught and died and rose again, and because of that, we may be ushered into eternity. As Huston Smith notes, Christianity's staying power comes from its dealing with the chief dilemmas of human existence, the anxiety of our guilt and the fear of our death.[5] This is indescribably good news. God has dealt with what

haunts us most deeply, what plagues us more powerfully. We cannot repair what most ails us, so God does. Only God can. We will not perish but we will have everlasting life.

We love this message, the second half of John's proclamation. We are like children on Christmas morning, rushing to the tree, ripping the wrapping from our packages, delighting in our gifts. Oh, kids might offer an obligatory over-the-shoulder-glance, a cursory thank-you. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. Then it is back to the gift, time to play, with little thought about the giver's motives, the giver's values, the giver's identity. Parents are rarely offended by the Christmas inattention, of course. Parents delight in their children's delight. That is what parents do. Like kids on Christmas morning, we are so excited by the gift of eternal life that we are wont to neglect the giver.

It is easy to be childlike when reading John's proclamation, easy to rush to the not perishing part, to hurry to the bit about eternal life. But biblically, something comes first. "God so loved the world that he gave." Gave. God gave.

If the Hebrew Scriptures are in essence a narrative about God's generosity, perhaps the whole of the New Testament, and certainly John's proclamation on our refrigerator doors, is a continuation of the theme. In fact, list God's gifts in a litany of thanksgiving and we might well conclude that *give* is the Bible's most significant verb.

God so loved the world that God *gave*. What is striking, what is moving, what is here transformational is the link between generosity and love. God so loved the world that God gave. The cliché has it that love is less a noun than a verb, less a thing than an action. Love unexpressed, unrevealed, untended is something less than love. Generosity, then, is what love does. Love gives. Love does not take. Love articulates itself in giving.

Notice here the Trinitarian movement of God's generosities as each person of the Godhead contributes.

God so loved that God made the world, created the cosmos—planets and plankton, stars and starfish, rocks and hills and oceans.

God so loved the world that God chose to place God's very image upon the earth's surface—human beings.

God so loved the world that God gave a promise to a particular family always to be their God, and to bless all families upon the earth through them.

God so loved the world that God sent prophets to God's people, again and again, prodding them to consciousness and righteousness, inciting their instinct for justice, beckoning them back.

God so loved the world that God gave God's only son. When the world was itself no longer enough, when God's gifts of prophets and land and law had not yet won the hearts and the trust of God's people, then, well, God gave even more. God gave of God's very self, gave a part of God's inner being. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

God so loved the world that God gave Jesus the courage to confront injustice and corrupt, misguided religion.

God so loved the world that God gave Jesus the passion to speak truth to power.

God so loved the world that God gave Jesus the freedom to give, to give even himself, and, crucially, the freedom not to.

Jesus so loved the world that Jesus chose utter faithfulness, chose never to compromise his identity, never to deny his experience of the Father's love. And it got him killed.

Have you ever loved someone so deeply that you were willing to put your very life in their hands? What would you have done, have thought, have felt, if they betrayed you?

This happened to God. God placed God's very self in the hands of imperial power. Torture and crucifixion followed, then death and burial. Jesus gives "his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Next, just as we conclude that any rational God would be finished with the entire endeavor, when we reason that if love spurned is rightly withdrawn, God so loved the world that God gives yet more, even more, ever more, always more: resurrection, redemption, forgiveness, another chance, eternity.

God gave.

The New Testament story continues ceaselessly, joyfully, gladly with God's generosities. God gives the presence of the resurrected Christ. God gives the helper, the comforter, the Spirit. God gives the church. God gives the church's growth.

Framing the biblical story as a narrative of generosity comes as news to no one. That God is giving is as pedestrian an observation as saying that God is loving. It is obvious. Clear. Almost a truism. Yet, the most obvious realities are often those that most need noting precisely because in their general acceptance, they are overlooked, and in their being overlooked, their implications are neglected. It might seem apparent that before exploring our generosity we should contemplate God's. But, truth told, most of us skip right over the obvious. Most churches do. Most sermons on stewardship and generosity do. How many annual stewardship campaigns begin with the pitiful cry to subscribe to the church's budget, to repair the church's air conditioner, to fund the church's mission, with nary a mention of God?

We neglect to mention God's generosity. Or worse, we do not trust it. If so, might our distrust be the natural consequence of our making little conscious effort to recall such generosity to its fullest depth, startling frequency, or ubiquitous continuity?

Imagine a religious community that begins its stewardship conversations not with next year's budget, and not even with an inspiring vision of the individual's need to give, but rather with an exuberant and biblical picture of the generosity of God. Imagine a pastor, dreamy-eyed and visionary, standing tall and straight, speaking convincingly, and personally, and biblically, about the pervasive, decadent, ubiquitous generosity of God. Is it possible to re-root our generosity in the soil of its planter, in the field of the kingdom[6] of God?

RE-ROOTING OUR MOTIVATIONS

How often are you asked to contribute money? Think about the advertisements, the emails, the junk mail that craves your attention, which begs to inspire your generosity. If you are like me, you receive hundreds of solicitations every year, some of it on billboards and in magazines, and much of it personalized and meant especially for you.

If the solicitation comes from the not-for-profit world, and all too often from the ecclesial world, it inevitably shares one common characteristic: it pulls at our heartstrings. Photos show ramshackle huts in desperate need of repair, or flies swarming the face of a bloated child, or dogs languishing behind the wire fence of an animal shelter. The images are intended to evoke. The messages create emotional connection as a strategy to inspire.

Every not-for-profit in the secular sphere competes for our dollars by reminding us of the amazing things they will do with our money. Their assumption seems to be that first we care, then we share. If the Susan G. Komen Foundation, if the American Cancer Society, if our alumni associations can impress us with the work they do, then we might write a check. Care, then share. It is the organizational assumption of every fundraising organization in the land.

And it works. I can hardly walk into a Habitat for Humanity home without reaching for my checkbook. Likewise, every time I hear some bright-eyed 19-year-old speak about getting to go to college against the financial odds, I long to start another scholarship fund. Care, then share. So, no matter the manipulative gist of the pitch, never mind the scheming method, I must be made to care.

Sometimes the plea is not pictorial. Often it is verbal, as in a National Public Radio solicitation that reminds me that listening while not pledging is nothing short of freeloading. Unless I want to be a mooch, I will immediately pick up the phone and pledge.

Either way, the presumption is that caring precedes sharing, that first the heart longs to give and only then the hand responds.

What if this is not the only sequence of generosity? What if spiritually and biblically, Jesus suggests the exact opposite?

Matthew's sixth chapter makes a stunning claim. Jesus is teaching. "Whenever you give alms," he begins, "do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do." He continues with counsel on praying and on fasting (Matt. 6:2–7). Jesus is coaching us on doing the right things and for the right reasons, with a purity of heart. What fascinates me is Jesus' ordering of the tripod of Jewish piety—almsgiving, praying, and fasting. Jesus begins with almsgiving. Only then does he proceed to praying and fasting. Almsgiving precedes the other disciplines of piety. Almsgiving is where we begin the religious life. Common to the three, we are not to seek notice, not to engage these disciplines because we want to draw attention to ourselves. Adulation is not our goal.

Then, at the end of the passage—after his teaching on how to pray—Jesus returns to the subject of material goods (Matt. 6:19–21). We are not to store them up, not to hoard them. After all, moth and rust consume, and thieves break

in and steal. "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (v. 20).

With almsgiving the starting point of piety, Jesus sums up the teaching with perhaps his most startling generosity observation of them all. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (v. 21).

If the secular philanthropic world tells us that first we must care, and only then we will share, Jesus offers a contrarian word. He says, first we share, and then we care. Treasure first. Our hearts follow our dollars and not the other way around.

When I was a teenager, I told my father that I wanted a car. He said, "Great. Get a job and buy one." So I did. I got a job, but somewhere along the way I decided not to spend my earnings on an automobile. I saved instead for college. To this day I appreciate my college degree all the more because I helped pay for it. If we want to care about something, it helps to invest ourselves in it, to contribute to its cost. Hearts follow dollars. Dollars escort hearts.

This is our clue, the smoking gun evidence that God has gifted Christian stewards with a countercultural motivation for being generous. We will return to this idea in part 2, where it reminds us of the power of being disciplined in our giving. For the moment, this truth serves well to remind us that our generosity is rooted in God's generosity. Sending money to feed starving African children is a good thing to do. Doing so brings us joy and satisfaction. There is nonetheless an even greater joy than any emotional connection we may make with the beneficiaries of our giving. After we celebrate helping hungry kids we are driven to our knees in thanksgiving, grateful that we have from God the resources to share in the first place. Our giving connects us to others. Better yet, it connects us to God.

God gives. We respond.

God initiates. We reply.

God acts. We react.

Given this sequence—that God acts first—one single word, one specific posture best describes our response to the generosity of God: gratitude.

Appreciating God's generosity, seeing it and naming it and relishing it, leads to our life-giving reply: gratitude. Gratitude is the seed of all religious trust, the soul's single most powerful tool for reorientation. Gratitude is the capacity to embrace all that surrounds us without the ego-driven insistence that we have earned it, that we deserve it, that it is ours. (Reader be warned: the human proclivity for taking credit has poisoned the spiritual growth of many a "self-made" person.)

The old adage has it that there are no atheists in foxholes. I say that there are no atheists at the Thanksgiving dinner table. To bow one's head in thanksgiving and gratitude, no matter the depth or intensity of one's religious faith—or lack of it—is implicitly to acknowledge that life's blessings come from Another. To bow one's head and say thank you, even if it is but a mutter, a mumbling and hesitant word, is to stare at the sky in wonder and give thanks for the unmerited, unearned goodness of life and all of its awe-inspiring blessings.

Visit a friend in the hospital. In my experience very personally and as a pastor, patients who improve share two habits. First, they keep their ailments in perspective by remembering that somewhere, someone has it worse. With even the direst of diagnoses, wise patients display empathy for those whose illnesses are even more challenging.

Second, they are grateful. The mastectomy patient gives thanks that the cancer has not spread to the lymph nodes. The breast cancer patient whose cancer has metastasized gives thanks that chemotherapy is available. The chemotherapy patient gives thanks for stylish wigs which adorn her now bald head. And so on. Finding cause for gratitude is redemptive because gratitude connects us to the source of all blessing,

links us to the divine. Gratitude is this important. Gratitude is this powerful. Gratitude is the primal spiritual response that joins us to God's generous heart.

Martin Rinkart penned one of the church's great hymns, *Now Thank We All Our God*. Tradition has it that Rinkart was the only remaining pastor, of the original four, in Eisleben, Germany, where he served during the Thirty Years War and a severe plague in 1637 known as the Great Plague. He is said to have conducted over 4,000 funerals that year, including that of his wife. Yet, Rinkart could proclaim in his table prayer,

> Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
> who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices;
> Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
> with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.[7]

Corrie ten Boom's classic story of Christian altruism and Nazi imprisonment, *The Hiding Place*, was among the first books I read as a child. I can never forget the counsel of ten Boom's older sister when directing Corrie to give thanks for the fleas infesting the straw on their beds. Because of fleas, the German guards would not enter the room, and their absence made it possible to openly worship God.[8]

If faithful disciples have found cause for thanksgiving amidst such difficulty and deprivation, how much more powerful might gratitude be among people blessed by abundance and prosperity?

God gives. God's generosity moves us to gratitude. If the Bible records the sequence of God's generosity, if remembering and celebrating God's generosity makes us grateful, we are primed now to move from orthodoxy to orthopraxis, move from "correct thinking" to "correct conduct," from ideas to ethics.

What, then, are we to do? What does faithfulness look like? As we consider our lives, what difference might God's generosity make?

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

Want to learn about more WJK books?
Click to sign up for our email list.