

PERSPECTIVE



DECEMBER 2020

A

**GENEROUS
PEOPLE**

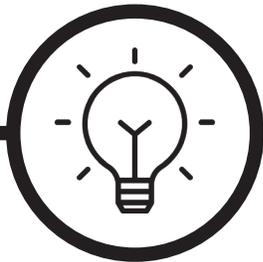
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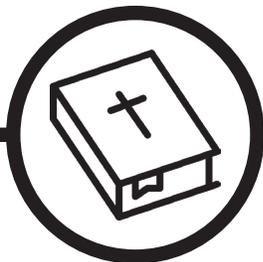
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A Generous People
Aaron Menikoff



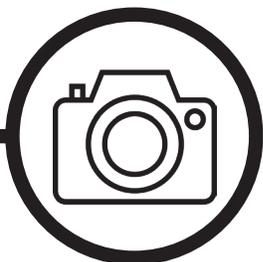
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A Generous People

This year at Mount Vernon we adopted a focus and aimed to meditate on this one idea, as a church, for twelve full months. I hope you know by now we've been thinking about generosity! I've defined generosity as being joyfully open-handed with what you have for the sake of those you love—family, church, community, and world. It might not be a perfect definition, but it's laced with biblical truth.

We are to be *joyful* in our giving. "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). If I'm hungry and in need of bread, I don't very much care about your heart attitude. I need food; I can't think past my stomach. But God very much cares. He's quite interested in your attitude. To give reluctantly, in God's mind, isn't really giving at all. On the other hand, when you give joyfully, your heart sings at the thought of how your gift might genuinely serve someone else.

Someone who is *open-handed* with his possessions is clinging loosely to the things of this world. She recognizes God is Creator and, as Creator, all the cosmos belongs to him. Since we are simply guests in God's creation, nothing we own is finally ours. It all belongs to God. Any child watching Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* understands how foolish Scrooge looks counting all his gold when in a few short years he'll be lying flat in a casket. The words of Helen Lemmel in the hymn, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," come to mind:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace*

The earth—and all the "things" it offers—just isn't as sparkly after you've encountered Jesus Christ. To know him and his glory and to experience him and his grace is to realize you don't finally need anything except him. It's impossible to be open-handed with what you have when you are overcome by "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions" (1 John 1:16).

We're to be joyfully open-handed with what we have *for the sake of those we love*. I wanted a definition of generosity rooted in the gospel. Understandably, John 3:16 came to mind: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We see here that God's generosity to us is rooted in his love for us. Generosity and love are inseparable twins. Of course, we tend to love those closest to us, those we have an obvious reason to love, like parents or kids, family or friends. But this love is expected, it's

natural. What's not expected is the kind of love we find in John 3:16. No one would expect God to love a rebellious, blaspheming creation! We can't understand the gospel until we recognize God set his love upon us "while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:8). Our love needs to have that flavor, too. In this definition I sought to clarify whom we are to love. Not merely our family. Not merely our church family. We're to love the community—all of our neighbors. We're to love the world—all of the nations.

MORE THAN MONEY

It saddens me to think that when the word "generosity" is uttered in a church, money is typically the first noun that comes to mind. This line of thinking can lead to all sorts of spiritual problems. If you think that simply cutting a check to a ministry makes you generous, you've missed the mark terribly. That's why I love the conclusion drawn by pastor David Gibson about Ecclesiastes 11:1–2, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days." Gibson, like many commentators before him, sees in this verse a call to full-throttled, robust generosity. It's a countercultural exhortation to give of yourself with no expectation of anything in return.

Here is wisdom you will not hear anywhere else: take the best of what you have and the best of what you are and give them away. Hold them out in open hands to God and to others. Worldly wisdom builds bunkers and barns to prepare for disaster. Biblical wisdom throws open the windows and doors of our homes and builds schools and hospitals and churches, and sees rich Christians become much, much poorer than they might otherwise have been. Ecclesiastes-type wisdom, Christlike wisdom, grows believers who spend their life on living in the world rather than on living in the world so as not to die.¹

The "best of what you have" isn't always your dollars. Sometimes it's your time. Sometimes it's your guestroom. Sometimes it's a unique gift God has given you like wisdom or skill or simply a kind, listening ear.

I don't know if you read this monthly journal, *Perspective*, regularly, but if you do, I trust you've noticed each article this year has been devoted to the topic of generosity. The main theme we've tried to hammer home is that generosity is about so much more than dollars and cents.

In February, I wrote an article called "Generosity and Our Work." I made the point that God has given us a vocation and that work is a sphere in which we can be biblically generous. Showing up on time, contributing to the team, working hard, standing up for what

is right—all these actions are forms of generosity.

Ryan and Griffin James co-authored an article in March called “Generosity and the Gospel.” Would any true Christian deny that our most valuable possession is the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ? To sit on this good news is tragic. As our Lord said, people don’t “light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand” (Matt. 5:15). Thus, a generous Christian life is one constantly striving to share the gospel with those who have never heard it before.

Generosity plays itself out in our church life as well. Back in April, Chad Ireland wrote, “Generosity and the Church.” He walked through some very practical (and yet often neglected) ways of thinking about generosity among your brothers and sisters in Christ at Mount Vernon. He encouraged us to simply be together—to share yourself by being present. Singing loudly is also a way to be generous. The blessings of congregational singing are too often overlooked in a generation that has turned corporate worship into a performance. Finally, roll up your sleeves and get to work by finding a place to serve.

Recognizing that elders are a unique example of God’s generosity to the church, Dustin Butts wrote an article called, “Generosity and the Elder.” Maybe this exhortation to wise eldering seems out of place in a series on generosity. But consider the fact that elders are our examples. The more generous they are with their time and skills, the more generous we will be. After all, Jesus said in Luke 6:40, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.” Our elders are teaching us. They are training us. We will become like them. The more generous they are, the more generous we will be.

Pastor David Platt once said if the elders are the servant leaders of the congregation, deacons are the leading servants. Serving is at the heart of their job description. At Mount Vernon, the diaconal ministry is responsible for organizing a legion of volunteers. Brad Thayer’s June article, “Generosity and the Deacon,” is an important word about how deacons—and everyone who serves with them—practice generosity in a local church.

In July, Kyle Gross penned, “Generosity and Our Home.” Kyle and Trisha live in Smyrna and have done a tremendous job of getting to know their neighbors by practicing the art of hospitality. They are a model for all of us. In a world where the institutional church is looked at with skepticism by so many of our unbelieving neighbors, our homes may be the only place they see Christ-like generosity.

We all have time. In fact, we all have the same number of hours in a year even if we don’t all have the same number of years. Time may very well be our most precious commodity. How you spend your time speaks volumes about what you truly value. Jesse Brannen wrote “Generosity and Our Time” in August. These words are coming from a brother preparing to move his family to the United Arab Emirates so he can spend his time reaching that nation for Christ. This is an important article to read.

When you think of generosity, have you considered your gifts as a reader, thinker, or teacher? In “Generosity and Our Mind,” Dustin Butts argues that the more our mind is saturated with the truths of God’s Word, and the more we are able to engage with the Bible, the more we will bless those around us. In other words, devoting our minds to the careful study of God’s Word is one way to edify those around us. Just last night, a brother told me how much he appreciates it when other church members initiate conversations with him about the Bible. He spends his days crunching numbers, but he loves God’s Word and wants to talk about it. I don’t think he’s alone. Many of us are and all of us should be excited about talking through Scripture with one another. One way we can be generous with others is by struggling to understand what God means in his Word and engaging with others in conversations about what we’ve found.

In October, we finally got around to the article “Generosity and Our Money.” Brad Thayer does a superb job introducing us to the topic of tithing. He says it’s less about how much you give and more about the heart behind it. This is a very practical article and a good resource to turn to again and again.

If you haven’t read this year’s *Perspective* articles, maybe this overview will encourage you to find them online², read them, and learn from these Christian writers. Generosity is about so much more than our money. God has given us so many unique gifts. To hoard any of them is to distort the picture of the gospel our lives are to display. The Father did not spare his own Son (Rom. 8:32). Let’s be careful not to spare any good gift we have for the sake of others. These works of generosity are not done to earn our salvation; they are the natural outpouring of those who have been truly saved.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

It’s December. December of 2020 no less. You’ve heard it now 1,000 times: it’s been a hard year. Marjorie Roberson reminds us in November’s article, “Our Generous God”, that when we are generous with everything we are and everything we have, we are simply reflecting the character

of God who “has given us everything—most importantly, himself.” It’s crucial we remember this as 2020 comes to a close. You may be disheartened by division you see in the country, even the church, but there is always hope if it is true that God has given himself to us. To us. The moment we forget this, our generosity turns into legalism. If we ever think the heart of generosity is our giving to others, we’re on the road to becoming Pharisees. Therefore, let’s heed Marjorie’s counsel and meditate upon our generous God. He’s so very good.

One of the most beautiful pictures of generosity in the Bible—and there are many—is found in Matthew 2 where the “wise men from the east” find themselves kneeling before Jesus Christ. They can’t understand fully who he is. Did they really know he is God in the flesh? But they knew enough to fall down on their faces and worship him. They committed their lives to him. A demonstration of this fact is found in the way they opened up their treasure chests and “offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Matt. 2:11). Like Mary who poured expensive oil on Jesus’ head, their gifts could have been sold and given to the poor. But we get the point: Jesus is to be worshiped at all costs.

As we close this year thinking about generosity, let me ask you a question: What does it mean to you that Jesus is Christ, the Messiah? These wise men came from the east. As they made their way to Bethlehem they passed through Jerusalem where they met with the Jewish king, Herod. He was a religious man who devoted himself to building God’s temple, but would anyone say Herod was generous? Andreas Köstenberger and Alexander Stewart rightly argue the answer is no. Herod may have used his time and his skill to build a temple for God, but he refused to bow before God. God doesn’t need anything from us, but he demands all of us.

Herod powerfully illustrates the fact that it’s not enough to identify outwardly with God’s people. It’s not enough to give sacrificially of your funds and energy to build God’s house (or temple) and to help others worship. It’s not enough to learn about God and his plan through the Scriptures. Every one of us is confronted daily with a choice of our will: Whom will we serve? For whom will we live? This is not the kind of decision that can be made once and for all (“I gave my life to God when I was a child”) or that can be determined by past or even present performance (“I have gone to church every Sunday for the last twenty years and regularly give money to the church”). It’s the kind of decision we must make afresh every day, and that entails more (but not less) than mere outward actions. For whom are you living today?³

God doesn’t need anything from you. However, it is wrong to think you can even begin to be generous with others if you haven’t first settled in your heart whom you love more than anyone or anything. Paul says “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). What’s most important in life is not the multitude of gifts we give in the name of God to others. What’s most important is true worship of our glorious Savior, Jesus Christ. Our only hope of being generous is to begin with the truth Jesus is worthy of all our praise. A generous people are submitted, first and foremost, to a gracious God.

– Aaron Menikoff

REFERENCES

- ¹ David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Crossway, 2017), 126.
- ² Past *Perspective* articles can be found on the church website at mvbchurch.org/resources/perspective-journal/
- ³ Andreas J. Köstenberger & Alexander E. Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus* (Crossway, 2015), 175–76.

Work and Our Labor in the Lord

Written by James M. Hamilton Jr.

Why do we work and what does it mean to work for God? When work today is often marked by pain and frustration, what should be our response? James Hamilton's *Work and Our Labor in the Lord* answers these questions through a Biblical framework. In order to fully understand work as God intended, Hamilton guides the reader through the timeline of salvation history and incorporates Old Testament Wisdom Literature to paint a full picture. The book is organized into the four sections: Creation, Work After the Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, with key takeaways in each.

First, Hamilton makes it clear that work is ordained by God from the very beginning. Intrinsically, work is something good to be done as a reflection of God's character. As Hamilton writes, "Work is neither punishment nor cursed drudgery but an exalted, Godlike activity." (p.18)

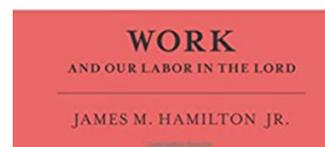
Second, the author addresses work outside of Eden. Though sin and death make work futile in the temporary sense, we see that our work should still point to God. Hamilton pulls from teachings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes that provide instruction on how to navigate this, as well as providing examples from Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Ruth.

Third, we gain an understanding of what Christlike work should look like and the pitfalls of idolatry by examining passages from the Pauline epistles and James. Christ's redeeming work frees us to work rightly for God's glory and to love God and others.

Finally, Hamilton investigates what the Bible says about work in the context of restoration. Hamilton weaves the message of the gospel through each chapter as he brings us through all of Scripture, culminating in the final hope of what work will look like after Christ returns.

I would recommend this book to all Christians, as good theology is essential to working in a way that glorifies God. The methodical nature of Hamilton's study on this important topic made this book easy to understand and digest. It certainly spurred me to think more deeply about my work as an expression of love for God and my neighbor and the hope we have in Jesus. I long for the day when Christ returns, and we can do the work we were created to do.

— RECOMMENDED BY TIFFANY SETO



Excerpts From the Book

1

"[W]e are here to reflect the character of God in the way we subdue the earth and exercise dominion over the animal kingdom under the blessing of God. Doing these things as the image and likeness of God means that our task is to bring the nature and character of God to bear on all living things in the world that God made."

— Creation, p.21

2

"As we wait for the redemption of our lowly bodies and resurrection from the dead, Christians are to work in ways that show love for God and neighbor. So doing will enable us to live out the image and likeness of the true and living God. We are, after all, being transformed from one degree of glory to another into the image of his Son (2 Cor. 3:18). Walking with God in this way will allow us to flourish in the midst of fallen futility."

— Redemption, p.88

3

"God will bring to pass the purposes he set out to achieve when he spoke the world into existence. God has not trashed his first failed attempt and started over. To the contrary, what he set out to do when he made this world he will bring about when he makes it new. God will make the world new, and we will do the new work."

— Restoration, p.91

Church: Do I Have to Go?

Written by J. Garrett Kell

In this time when we are asked to reconsider our interactions with people and in a culture where rebelling against the normative is considered noble, traditional views of church are being challenged. This cultural context highlights our need to contemplate the function, purpose, and role of the church. J. Garrett Kell helps us do this in his short book, *Church: Do I Have to Go?* In a simple, down-to-earth style, Kell leads the reader through the foundational principles and components of a church and thereby lays the groundwork for a robust ecclesiology – the theology of church.

Kell begins with the fundamental understanding that the church is not a place, but rather *the people of God*, marked by his love, called to holiness. As part of this calling, we as a church gather together to not only worship him and receive his Word, but to interact in serving and loving each other as part of his body. But in the face of this apparent unity, why do we see so many different churches whose interactions are not always cordial? Here Kell tactfully delineates the importance of discerning true churches from false churches while still acknowledging the legitimacy of geographic, linguistic, and theological barriers that are valid reasons for differences in gospel-preaching churches.

Finally, Kell dives into the practices of a true church by exploring how we worship God through church ordinances, membership, leadership, and discipline. Through these discussions, Kell focuses on God's heart for the protection and growth of his people undergirding each of these practices. In his culminating conclusion, Kell reminds his readers of the mission of the church as God's chosen vehicle for spreading the gospel to all people – from the congregation to the ends of the earth.

The straightforward approach and interactive format of this little book lends itself to anchoring new believers in their understanding of the church. It can also be a reminder for the mature believer of our own need for the church, God's love for his church, and his kindness and grace in placing us together with a gathering of fellow sinners to spur each other on to wholeheartedly pursue Christ.

– RECOMMENDED BY KEATON SCHEPEREEL



Excerpts From the Book

1

“Differences [in culture, style, and expression] provide an opportunity for the church to show the world what true unity really looks like. In a day when disagreement is perceived as hate, believers have an opportunity to show humble, charitable, kingdom-cooperating love. This sort of unity requires energy, effort, prayer, instruction, confession, and repentance, but it’s worth it.”

– Why Are There So Many Different Churches?, p.67

2

“God uses the voluntary, intentional, accountable, and committed relationships of church membership to help us persevere in faith. It makes straying into sin more difficult because you have people who are committed to love you and come after you if you leave. But it also puts you in a position to care for others and help them persevere as well.”

– Church Membership, p.100

3

“Apart from the weekly proclamation of the gospel and careful expositing of God’s Word, I believe there are few if any ordinances of the church that bring the gospel more to bear than the proper practice of church discipline.”

– Church Discipline, p.134

DECEMBER

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

December 1	Isaiah 31:1–9	December 16	Luke 1:39–56
December 2	Isaiah 32:1–8	December 17	Luke 1:57–80
December 3	Isaiah 32:9–20	December 18	Luke 2:1–7
December 4	Revelation 4	December 19	Luke 2:8–21
December 5	Revelation 5	December 20	Luke 1:1–38
December 6	Isaiah 31:6–32:8	December 21	Isaiah 9:1–7
December 7	1 Thessalonians 1	December 22	Isaiah 40
December 8	1 Thessalonians 2	December 22	Matthew 1:1–17
December 9	1 Thessalonians 4	December 23	Matthew 1:18–23
December 10	1 Thessalonians 5	December 24	John 1:1–18
December 11	Genesis 12	December 25	Matthew 2:1–12
December 12	Genesis 15	December 26	Mark 8:1–10
December 13	1 Thessalonians 1:8	December 27	Mark 8:1–10
December 14	Luke 1:1–25		
December 15	Luke 1:26–38		

***Sermons in bold**

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Denis Garcia



Will Tuomey



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH