

## LESSON 4

### **Practical Helps for Living and Giving**

—Keith Wilkinson—

How to Use this Resource

This resource contains four Sunday School lessons. These lessons can be used as a series or each as a stand-alone Bible study. The Learners' Guide follows with a plan for teaching adults. Teachers should read the Learners' Guide first and then use the Teacher's Guide to prepare.

#### **Principle of Generosity: Giving Ourselves First**

**Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7**

**Key Question: How can giving ourselves first lead to more generous giving to meet the needs of others?**

#### **Scratching the Surface**

Nothing inspires like a good example.

The story is told of a church service in the days when the offering plate was attached to a long pole which the usher extended down the pew for parishioners to give their offerings. Coming to a little boy, the usher hesitated as the boy motioned for him to lower the offering plate. Adjusting its height, the usher lowered it a few inches. The boy insisted that it be lower still. This went on until the plate was all the way to the floor. "I want to give myself," the boy explained.

While this may or may not have happened, it provides a picture of giving that begins with giving oneself.

Recently I revisited the farmstead on which I was born and grew up in a remote area of our state. The farmhouse is no longer there. Nor are the other farm buildings so familiar to my growing up years. Only the barn remains. Two large oak trees are still nearby. Each time I see them I am reminded of the day I made my commitment to answer God's call to ministry. As a boy of 13, I was standing under the shade of those trees wrestling with a sense that God was calling me to give my life in ministry. Like Moses before me, I struggled with my personal shyness and lack of speaking ability. Finally, God broke through with this life-changing truth. "I will not ask you to do anything that I will not equip you to do." That has been a promise I have claimed ever since. That moment under those two oak trees, I surrendered myself to God's call to ministry. Now years later and a few yards from those two oak trees, the astronomy club in my city plans to build an observatory. Soon, star gazers will gather to search the heavens for distant stars and galaxies from the very spot where as a boy, I searched for God's will in my life.

## Digging In

### An Example of Generosity in Spite of Difficulty

#### Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Paul began his appeal to the Corinthians by offering a notable example of sacrificial giving. (BBC, p 58) The “churches of Macedonia” are those of the Roman province of Macedonia in today’s northern Greece. They included the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. These churches manifested the “grace of God” in their giving. Paul in his exhortations did not refer directly to money as the focus of giving. Rather he used terms like “grace,” “service,” “koinonia fellowship,” and “sacrifice.” Giving of one’s financial resources was a part of a larger giving of self in service and love.

The generosity of the Macedonian churches was the product of grace. God’s grace. Grace is God’s great gift of a generosity. Grace is given to believers who must in turn reflect that generosity. Giving generously becomes evidence and testimony to God’s generosity to us.

**Q: How can we enjoy the benefits of God’s grace and be miserly in our giving in return? In what ways has God been generous in your life? How does giving reflect one’s attitude toward God’s grace?**

The Macedonian Christians gave generously in spite of “the most severe trial.” From the beginning the Macedonian believers experienced persecution. (See Acts 16-17). These persecutions involved the destruction of property and the plundering of goods. (Broadman Bible Commentary) These were Christians who probably had very little on which to live themselves, let alone to offer as gifts to others. Their plight was desperate. But God’s grace had a way of triumphing over even the most desperate of circumstances. If they knew “**extreme poverty**” they also knew “**rich generosity.**” Giving was done not only “**as they were able**” but “**even beyond their ability.**”

The Corinthians by comparison lived in relative affluence. They had not faced the severity of persecution that the Macedonians had. Yet, theirs was sometimes a quarrelsome, joyless faith. The church faced many internal problems. It seems, that inward-focused churches and individuals often deprive themselves of the joy of generosity in giving.

There may be little correlation between the income of churches and individuals and the generosity of their giving. Some give grudgingly. They prefer to maximize the amounts that remain for their own use. On the other hand, others give generously, regarding sacrifice as an act of worship and service.

**Q: When you made your last offering, what concerns did you consider as to the impact of that gift on your own needs? What sense of joy did you feel in giving toward something greater than yourself?**

### The Unexpected—Giving Begins with the Giving of Self

#### Read 2 Corinthians 8:5-6

The unexpected happens when one puts his or her priorities in the right order. What might have been simply an appeal for an offering was turned by the Macedonians into something greater. Every act of worship can have unexpected consequences. Each time we pray, praise, read the Scriptures, hear the testimony of believers; absorb the message from God’s anointed, or make a

commitment as believers, something unexpected happens. The Macedonians exceeded expectations!

**Q: What unexpected results have you witnessed as a result of some aspect of worship? In what ways have you responded to special appeals for support for the work of God's kingdom?**

Paul urged Titus to complete the work he had begun earlier with the Corinthians. That work had been interrupted by the various dissensions erupting among the Corinthian believers. It was time for them to get back to the priority work that God had set before them. It is also true for us. Occasionally we, too, need a reminder to refocus on God's priorities. Even churches can get caught up in their own issues to the neglect of the work of the greater kingdom. Generosity has a way of overcoming such pettiness. These Corinthians needed a challenge to look beyond themselves.

When I returned from my last mission trip to a third world country, I was made painfully aware how much we as American Christians focus on ourselves to the neglect of millions worldwide who barely have enough to survive. Mostly, I was touched with how richly God has blessed us. His blessings are not only material, but spiritual in that He has gifted people who can communicate God's loving message to people without hope. When we see the needs of others and also see how the Spirit of God is moving worldwide, our views of faith and giving are altered. We can't but change when given a sense of God's vision for all of humanity. We can no longer be the same.

**Excel in the Grace of Giving!**

**Read 2 Corinthians 8:7**

The Corinthians had a lot to offer. They were blessed with excellence in many areas of the faith. Paul commended their excellence **“in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in earnestness and in your love for us.”** They had it all. The Corinthians were unusually gifted. Unfortunately, spiritual gifts had been one of the areas over which there grew contention. The issue was never that they were lacking in gifts. Rather it was in the abundance of their spiritual gifts that they often fell into dissension.. Paul reminded them that working with excellence should be a good thing. He wanted them to add to their excellence in spiritual matters with an excellence in the **“grace of giving.”** Gifts should always be used in serving others. God had gifted this church not for their benefit alone, but in order that they be a blessing to others. Paul now gave them the opportunity to do just that.

**Q: How has your church been blessed? In what does your church excel? How would you rate the percentage of your gifts given to causes beyond your church? Excellent? Good? Average? Below average? Poor? What about the percentage of giving by members according to their income?**

**Applying Our Discoveries**

Consider these insights:

1. Examples of generosity often come from people who give themselves as an act of God's grace.
2. Generosity in giving sometimes comes from people who face severe difficulties.
3. Giving beyond one's ability gives evidence of the work of God's grace.
4. Excellence in giving is a key element of the best use of one's spiritual giftedness.

## **LESSON 4**

### **Teacher's Guide**

#### **Principle of Generosity: Giving Ourselves First**

##### **Preparation:**

1. Prepare yourself spiritually for this session through prayer and study of the Bible passages.
2. Plan for reports from the previous session.
3. For visual enhancement, create a visual from deposit slips from a local bank.
4. Ask a banker or someone knowledgeable about financial matters to describe the value of compound interest.
5. Enlist a person to give the testimony called for in step 2.

##### **Leading the Session:**

##### **Scratching the Surface:**

1. If money was distributed to members in the previous session (see Session 3), give members time to report on what they did with the dollar bill (or other denomination) which was given them.
2. Call on a member previously enlisted to share his or her experience in giving themselves to God either as a part of their salvation experience or for a particular area of ministry service. You may choose to simply share your own testimony in this regard.
3. Ask members to comment about why giving of self must precede giving of resources?

##### **Digging In:**

4. Read aloud the Scripture passage. Ask members to debate both sides of the issue: It doesn't matter how you give as much as it matters that you give.
5. Use the "Questions" sections to generate discussion as you read the Scripture texts and make comments based in material in the members' guide.

##### **Applying Our Discoveries:**

6. Ask members to privately rate their giving on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being no giving to 3 being mediocre to 5 being excellent. Lead in prayer asking God to guide us toward excellence in giving.