**Learning Together Unit Two – Generosity – Part 1 of 1**

When you hear the word generosity, what comes to mind? Finances? If that’s your first thought, you are not alone. Generosity and money are usually connected in this context. But, what happens when you unleash generosity from the confines of money?

When I use the word generosity I mean generosity of spirit which refers to time, talent, resources…the list could go on. What is generosity? What would you have to be like and do in order to be considered generous? Sometimes you can see the actions of someone and think, ‘they are a very generous person’ and you might feed back to them your admiration of their generosity and they say, “No I am not.” **By my standards you may look generous but by your standards you may not feel generous.** So how is it measured?

**Etymology:** The modern English word *generosity* derives from the Latin word *generous*, which means "of noble birth". Most recorded English uses of the word *generous* up to and during the sixteenth century reflect an aristocratic sense of being of noble lineage or high birth. To be generous was literally a way of complying with nobility. During the 17th century, however, the meaning and use of the word began to change. *Generosity* came increasingly to identify not literal family heritage but a nobility of spirit thought to be associated with high birth—that is, with various admirable qualities that could now vary from person to person, depending not on family history but on whether a person actually possessed the qualities. In this way *generosity* increasingly came in the 17th century to signify a variety of traits of character and action historically associated (whether accurately or not) with the ideals of actual nobility: gallantry, courage, strength, richness, gentleness, and fairness. During the 18th century, the meaning of *generosity* continued to evolve in directions denoting the more specific, contemporary meaning of open–handedness, and liberality in the giving of money and possessions to others. This more specific meaning came to dominate English usage by the 19th century. **Over the last five centuries in the English speaking world, *generosity* developed from being primarily the description of status pertaining to the elite nobility to being an achieved mark of admirable personal quality and action capable of being exercised in theory by any person who had learned virtue and noble character.**

**Definitions:** Generous: Noble minded, not mean; free in giving, liberal; abundance, copious. A willingness to give more than is usual or expected. (Australian Oxford Dictionary)

## Generosity is the virtue of being unattached to material possessions, often symbolized by the giving of gifts. (Wikipedia)

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| According to Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance the Greek word: εὐμετάδοτος, translated generous has the short definition of **willing, sharing, ready to impart.** For example:   |  | | --- | |  | |

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| *Eumetádotos* (“give over, impart") – give from a liberal (*generous*) attitude that is *ready to share* (reach out). Or  ("Giving over what is good") refers to *spontaneous*, *willing giving* and emphasizes being ready for *outreach*. Or,  Descriptive of someone who "open-handedly" (willingly) shares, i.e. stands "ready to impart". Or,  "Liberality”, or the ease and joy with which one makes one's wealth useful to *others*, passes *on* without regret that which is gained, *without afterthought*.  Page 1 of 6  **Sociological Research:**  According to the book **‘The Paradox of Generosity’**, published in 2014, sociologists Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson surveyed 2,000 individuals over a 5 year period and found that Americans who volunteered an average of 5.8 hours a month described themselves as ‘very happy’ while those who described themselves as ‘unhappy’ volunteered just 0.6 hours per month.  The authors also tracked the spending habits of 40 families from different cities and cultural backgrounds and found lower depression rates among those who donated more than 10% of their incomes and those who are very giving in relationships – being emotionally available and hospitable – are more likely to be in better health than those who are not.  To gain these benefits, the authors concluded, generosity need to be a **“practice or lifestyle…one off things don’t affect us that much whereas generous gestures that we repeat, gestures that are sustained as part of our life choices have a tremendous beneficial effect.”**  What stops generosity? **“Fear and insecurity,”** say Smith and Davidson, **“when people don’t think they have enough money or time they are afraid that any level of generosity would result in a loss.”**  In 2014 leaders from across the charities sector of Australia came together to discuss the Australia they would like to see. The value that was prioritised above many others was generosity. In 2016, when the Community Council of Australia (CCA) researched the data around giving and donations it became clear that despite our big support of one-off appeals (telethons) and raising large amounts to support victims of fires, floods and natural disasters, Australians are not a very generous people, in relation to giving by the wealthy or regular giving to a cause. The tax office (ATO) data suggests our giving has declined as a percentage of our income by over 20% since 2009.   * According to the September 2017 Charities Aid Foundation’s World Giving Index when it comes to giving, Australia ranks behind Myanmar and Indonesia and Kenya. Australia’s median wealth is more than double most of the countries above us on this scale. **(See Index Table on next page)** * US wealthy families contribute four (4) times as much to charities as do wealthy families in Australia. * Australians on average spend twelve (12) times as much on their gambling as they do contributing to charities and spend five (5) times as much buying coffee. * Most Australians do not give regularly. * One third of our richest Australians – those earning over $1 million – made no donation to charity.   While most Australians see giving as a desirable activity most do not give. The reason! The same one as the American research has shown…fear and insecurity. What a contrast to the words of Solomon as found in Proverbs 11:24, ‘One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly but comes to poverty’, (NIV) or as the Message paraphrases it…‘The world of the generous gets larger and larger, while the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller.’  Page 2 of 6  <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CAF-Giving-Index-2017.png>  Timothy L. Smith has over 35 years of experience of fund raising with Non-Profit Organizations. At the time of writing his book **‘Donors are People Too’**, he was the chief fundraiser for the building of The Museum of the Bible which opened in Washington DC on the 17th November, 2017. In the book he develops 9 characteristics of generous people.   1. **Generous people often give more than they are asked to give.** In Exodus 36:1 – 7 we see God’s people bringing more than enough to meet the need – to the point where Moses must tell them to stop. Over funding of a project born out of generosity can have benefits beyond the original need. Smith recalls working on a project in response to the tsunami in Indonesia. “People’s response was so great that we were able to establish long-term community development in that region of the world. Long after the disaster relief, we were still there, helping the people most affected.” 2. **Generous people give in response to great need.** In 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 we see the church in Corinth giving faithfully in response to a community of believers gripped by famine whom they had never met through a third party whom they trusted. Sponsoring a third world child through an agency that we believe to be trustworthy would be an example of this principle. We may never meet the child but we read the health and education progress reports and glean information about the work of the agency from their literature which in turn builds trust in the organization.   Page 3 of 6   1. **Generous people give out of their substance, whether large or small.**   Smith says in relation to his then current project…“I have seen young children give of their allowance. I have seen people of means reach for the largest gift they have given to take a stand for the Bible. Among many major givers these days, there isn’t actually much sacrifice involved in their giving. In spite of the volume of their contributions, their giving is small relative to their total capacity. When you come across a person who sets something else aside in order to help accomplish a key task or vision – that is a special gift!”   1. **Generous people give more than their money.**   In Luke 10:30 – 37, Jesus tells the classic parable of the Good Samaritan – one who gave empathy, time, resource and skill to meet the need of a stranger left for dead beside the side of the road. The Samaritan, in that moment, made himself vulnerable and available and as a result made a hospitable choice to make room for this stranger. Generosity and hospitality are often closely linked.  Smith says, “In today’s culture I see more and more that generous givers want to give of more than just their financial resources. This is especially true of younger givers. They want to get their feet on the ground with causes they are supporting.” (Sociological research of the so called selfie-generation bears this out.) “Volunteering with an organization you are passionate about is a great way to find deeper connection to the cause.” Sometimes, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, the opportunity is right there in front of you. “Jump in with whatever you have to give – resource, time, and skills - and see what God will do both in and through you.”   1. **Generous people give even when it doesn’t make sense.**   In Genesis 45 we find Joseph responding graciously and generously to his family even when human logic would tell him not to. Sometimes giving to a project or cause makes no sense to anyone but you. Like Joseph, you may have been mistreated or disillusioned by an organization or cause yet you still believe in the mission or worthiness of the organization as a whole, but there are hard feelings to be resolved. “This is a real test for me”, Smith says, “a grace check if you like. It gets to the heart of my commitment to being a generous person. Moving beyond our human feelings is the hardest thing to overcome. Setting aside differences in order to help do the right thing with your generosity is an act of real maturity and true Christ-likeness.”   1. **Generous people give to see the impossible become possible.**   A child offered Jesus his meager lunch of a few loves and 2 fish in Matthew 14:14 – 21 when there were at least 5,000 hungry mouths to feed. But gifts in the hand of God can be – and often are - divinely multiplied to meet the demands of greater works. This story is a beautiful story of faith and generosity. The boy risked his own provision and comfort, in the hope of helping others and as a result set in motion an amazing miracle. Smith concludes from this characteristic that “sometimes we have to imagine something much greater than ourselves in order to get behind a project.”  Page 4 of 6   1. **Generous people give a as byproduct of their own transformation.**   In Luke 19:1 - 10 we have the story of Zacchaeus, the transformed tax collector, who forsakes his past behaviors after being moved by Jesus call to change his behavior. Smith says, “…perhaps the most deeply satisfying stories are those of people who have been radically transformed in their giving due to a spiritual transformation. I have seen this repeatedly with givers who, at some extraordinary moment in time, suddenly realize why they are here: not simply to exploit their ability to accumulate wealth, but to create a story much greater than themselves. This in a way is a picture of redemption – as people rise above their personal limitations and see the supernatural potential of their own lives through their generous giving.”   1. **Generous people give out of their own poverty.**   We find in Luke 21:1 – 4 Jesus’ observations about the widow giving her gift at the Temple. He saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. **“Truly I tell you,” he said to his disciples, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”**  Several years ago I and others had opportunity to work with a catholic priest among some of the most impoverished people in Jamaica. We spent our time with them working shoulder to shoulder in the morning and administering a vaccination/health programme in the afternoon. At the end of our few days in this community I witnessed the generosity of people giving out of their own poverty. They came to farewell us with a meal of roasted goat, vegetables and fruit. They would not have eaten so well on that day or probably any day but were open-hearted and joyful in their giving to us.   1. **Generous people give when others will not.**   In Philippians 4:15 & 16, the apostle Paul laments the lack of response from the churches he has encountered while at the same time recognizing and commending the church in Philippi for sharing in the ministry with him through their giving. “Most givers I know”, says Smith, “like to be a part of a larger giving community. It is satisfying, perhaps comforting and reassuring to know that you are one of many giving towards a project. Yet sometimes we are called upon as generous people to stand alone, to see a project through to completion even when others have fallen away. The day may come when you find yourself here too, but something inside you says, ‘Go for it’. Your personal impact can be enormous and your personal journey can be enriched for the experience.”  **What might be the take away point?**  There is a story told of a visitor to Mother Theresa’s institution when she was visiting India. She reported that a man came to tell Mother Theresa of a family of 8 who were starving and he knew that they hadn’t eaten for a week. Mother Theresa went to visit them and found them all in a high state of malnutrition and she gave them a sack of rice. As she was about to leave and go out the door, the  Page 5 of 6  mother of the family measured out half the bag of rice for themselves and rushed out behind Mother Theresa and down the street with the other half bag of rice. Mother Theresa jumped to the conclusion that she was going to sell the rest of the rice. In a short time the mother returned and Mother Theresa asked, “Where did you go?” The mother answered, “To my neighbours, they are hungry also.”  Mother Theresa’s response to this is recorded as**, “I wasn’t surprised that she gave the rice to her neighbour. The poor are usually very generous. I was surprised that she knew that they were hungry. As a rule, when we are suffering we’ve no time to understand the lives of others.”**  You have to discipline yourself to see beyond your circumstances, especially when you are in a painful situation or a challenging time. It takes courage, discipline and grit to deal with your world as well as being conscious of the bigger world of others and their needs and make the choice to move to the front foot and act generously.  The article from which the Mother Theresa story comes goes on to say, “The Bible teaches that when you focus on the needs of others God will make sure your needs are met too. Jesus said, **“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure; pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Luke 6:38**  This verse reminds me of a story a past resident used to tell of when she was a little girl growing up in India. She would tell of a lady who used to sell rice at the end of their street. Liz would be sent by her mother with a tin container to buy rice. She knew this lady was very poor and if this lady for some reason was not around the other traders further down the street would skimp on the measure of rice by making the container look full when it really wasn’t. However the lady at the end of the street would scoop the rice in and keep scooping it in pushing it down as hard as she could and scooping some more in and pushing and scooping until it was packed tight. A lovely image of… pressed down, shaken together, running over, given in good measure.  I am beginning to conclude that if we give without thought as to whether we have enough to be generous with, something happens in or as a result of that action that brings blessing not only to the receiver but also the giver. As we find causes to take us out of our own self-interest we start to see clearly the world of others even when our own is unsettled or painful and blessing occurs for the receiver and the giver.  **I think the spirit of generosity can be measured by the attitude summed up in the image of a tin rice bucket.**  **For reflection.**  How are you generous? Can you recognise your own generosity?  What prevents you from being generous?  What does generosity look like in context to our life in community?  How can these thoughts inform us and spur us on to generous action?  Page 6 of 6 |
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