

## STUDY GUIDE: LIVING THE GENEROUS LIFE (MODULE 103)

### Lesson #1 – Generous Nature: Created To Be Generous

*Most of us lack the gift of generosity, but all of us possess the nature of generosity. And it is this God-like nature of generosity that we must diligently cultivate and develop.*

#### CREATED TO BE GENEROUS

Often times when we see or hear about people who are extraordinarily generous, we willingly credit them with having been given the *gift of generosity*. We know Paul's teaching: "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. ...if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously..." (Romans 12:6, 8 NIV). We point to that generous person and conclude that God obviously has given them *the gift*. But in so acknowledging their gift of generosity, we may actually be giving in to a very subtle deception that simultaneously excuses us for not being generous because we *don't* have *the gift*.

#### THE GIFT OF GENEROSITY

Gifts, like the ones mentioned in Romans 12, are simply abilities that people have been given which allow them to naturally be better at something than they should be considering the amount of time and effort they have put into it. You certainly know people who are gifted in certain areas like music, art, athletics, academics, public speaking, leadership, etc. What others have to work very hard at to become skilled, these gifted ones seem to do it effortlessly. And when they exercise their gifts, their skill levels go off the charts.

It is likely at some time in your life you have come across a youth that, as soon as he touches a ball (pick your sport) for the first time, plays like he's been doing it for years; or the student who never studies, yet gets straight A's; or the person who has never taken piano lessons, yet can play any music he or she hears; or the beginner who gets up to speak for the first time and communicates like an experienced orator. Those are gifts from God.

Does this mean that the rest of us "un-gifted" people can never learn how to play ball, the piano, get good grades, paint, skillfully speak, or lead others? Not at all. But what it does mean is that some people have been "super-charged" by the Holy Spirit with a gift and the rest of us mere mortals have to work very hard to match the results these blessed ones are able to achieve so naturally. We may see people who freely, abundantly, joyfully and even sacrificially give of themselves and what they have without any apparent reluctance, hesitation or fear. In comparison to their giving, ours is never as liberal or joyful. It is here that we can be deceived. We can mistakenly conclude that because we are not as good at giving as these *gifted* ones, we need not even try to imitate their example. If this is our thinking, we have come to the wrong conclusion.

Those that God has gifted with generosity are here to inspire and motivate us – to give us a glimpse of the incredible joy, impact and blessing that comes from being generous. God has given the gift of generosity to a few so they can serve as lighthouses to show the rest of us the way and to reassure us that it is not only safe to travel in that direction, it

is absolutely the most exciting and fulfilling way to go! The generous ones are there to encourage us to follow the trail they have blazed! The point is that generosity is not the exclusive domain of those *gifted* to be generous. Generosity is part of the hard-wiring of every one of us. Consider this:

## **CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE**

Genesis 1:26-27 and 9:6 tell us that we have been created in God's image. We are in our very essence different than everything else that God created because we have the stamp of God's nature on us. And our goal in the Christian life is to allow ourselves to be "conformed to His image" (Romans 8:29) – for our image to match His.

We certainly can all agree that a dominate aspect of God's nature is that He is generous and this generosity flows out of His love. John 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved...He gave..." And this never-ending, unconditional love is demonstrated in His giving to us. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) Jesus said it this way in Matthew 7:11, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" Simply stated, our God is an extraordinarily generous God. So, by the fact that we are created in God's image and God is a generous giver, we have all been created to be generous givers too!

## **OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES**

Sadly though, because of our fallen state, we routinely smother our God-given generous nature. We cover it over with the lies of greed, self-interest, pride, fear and insecurity. We often find ourselves so bedeviled by our obsession with ourselves that we routinely overlook the lives and needs of others around us. The still small voice of generosity within us – that invites us to ascend to a higher place, to a higher good – is tragically drowned out by the noise of our attention-consuming, selfish pursuits.

Paul, aware that selfishness is the core sin in our life that cripples, blinds and disables us from being conformed into the image of our loving and generous God, twice (in Romans 12:3 and Philippians 2:3) instructs us to think of others as more important than ourselves. He knew that generosity towards others is the most effective antidote for the deadly disease of selfishness. Yet, under this mountain of worldly and materialistic deception, like a smoldering coal buried under the ash of a dying fire, within every one of us still remains a glowing ember that knows the most abundant, most fulfilled life is found not in what we have, but in what we give.

And if we will clear away the ashes of our "burned up" lives and give this ember of generosity some fresh air and new fuel, it will spark a blazing fire within us that will provide both light and warmth, transforming us into what God has created us to be. We have all experienced even in our smallest, selfless acts of kindness to others ("even a cup of cold water in my name..." [Matthew 10:42]) a heightened sense of aliveness, well-being and purpose when we bless the life of another in a meaningful way. Even in the simplest act of giving we find

ourselves, albeit often briefly, connected to the heart of a generous God and in harmony with His divine nature. It is at this moment we are being conformed into the image of God and experiencing the joy of being like Him.

From our vantage point, people with the gift of generosity just seem to effortlessly “get it” and “do it.” But for those of us who are not naturally gifted to be generous, we are still called to the same end – an extravagant life of generosity. Without a doubt our path to a generous life will be much more challenging, fraught with many more obstacles, cluttered with many additional opportunities to “backslide.” It may also demand of us much greater spiritual, emotional and physical exercise to successfully ascend the same heights of generosity as those who have the gift. Nonetheless, it is the road we are all called to travel.

Most of us lack the *gift* of generosity, but all of us possess the *nature* of generosity. And it is this God-like nature of generosity that we must diligently cultivate and develop. And in so doing, the world will see the image of our generous Creator living and giving in us; and we will, like the gifted, find “life indeed” (I Timothy 6:19 NASB).

## STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. What is your initial reaction to the message of this lesson?
2. Do you feel like you are a naturally gifted generous giver? If not, how do you struggle in this area of giving?
3. What are the things in your life that tend to smother your God-given nature of generosity?
4. How does our fallen, selfish nature prevent us from being as naturally generous as God created us to be? What can we do to make others more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3)?
5. Share about someone you know who seems to have the natural gift of generosity? What does that look like being lived out in their life?
6. What is your reaction to this statement, “Yet, under this mountain of worldly and materialistic deception, like a smoldering coal buried under the ash of a dying fire, within every one of us, still remains a glowing ember that knows the most abundant, most fulfilled life is found not in what we have, but in what we give.”
7. When you do give, how does it make you feel? Share the most personally fulfilling gift you have ever made?
8. What situations and what types of people most motivate you to be more generous?
9. What is your response to this assertion: “Most of us lack the gift of generosity, but all of us possess the nature of generosity.” What does this say to those of us without the “gift”?
10. What is going to change in your life because of what you have learned in this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?