



## CREATED TO BE GENEROUS

Oftentimes when we see or hear about people who are extraordinarily generous, we 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 him *the gift*. But in so acknowledging their gift of generosity, we may actually be giving in to a very subtle deception that appears to excuse 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. While others have to work very hard to become skilled at something, these gifted ones seem to do it effortlessly. And when they exercise their gifts, their skill levels go off the charts.

At some point in your life, you have likely come across a youth who, as soon as they touch a ball for the first time, plays like they have been doing it for years. There's the student who never studies, yet gets straight A's, the person who has never taken piano lessons, yet can play any music they hear, 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 "ungifted" people can never learn how to play ball or 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 whom 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 hardwiring of every one of us.

## 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 from 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 the image of His Son* (Romans 8:29, NASB)—for our image to match His.

We can probably all agree that a dominant aspect of God's nature is that He is generous. This generosity flows out of His love. John 3:16 tells us, *For God so loved...that 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 (NIV), *'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. 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 overlook the lives and needs of others around us. The still small voice of generosity within us, the one 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 lives 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 toward others is the most effective antidote for the deadly disease of selfishness. Yet within every one of us, under this mountain of worldly and materialistic deception, like a smoldering coal buried under the ash of a dying fire, 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-out" 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. Even in our smallest acts of selfless kindness to others, when we bless the life of another in a meaningful way (*'a cup of water in my name,'* as Jesus expressed in Mark 9:4, NIV), we experience a heightened sense of well-being, purpose, and being fully alive. Even in the simplest act of giving, we find ourselves connected to the heart of a generous God and in harmony with His divine nature. It is in this moment that 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 more challenging, fraught with 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. 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* (1 Timothy 6:19, NASB).

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