



# First Focus

## On Jesus' Generosity

The definition of generosity is **the quality or fact of being plentiful or large**. Let's attempt to go to the 50,000 foot big picture view of this definition. Doesn't that describe something central to the being of God? But when we experience the vastness of God, we instantly sense his "*set apart-ness*" (holiness) in a profound way. It takes experience to practically sense that God is **plentiful**. Part of spiritual growth is learning to function from the posture that God is bigger and more generous than we imagine. God is **plentiful**. To see the centrality of God's generosity, let's briefly look at 5 passages of Jesus. The idea of generosity is so tied to money in our minds. This simple exercise will help us transcend our small human economy and see that God functions from a **vast abundance**.

### **ABUNDANT SPIRIT - (LUKE 17:20-21)**

*"Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."*

So when someone once asked Jesus, "when will the kingdom of God come?" He answered, "The kingdom of God doesn't come if you watch for it. It isn't in heaven. It doesn't come after you die. No one can point and say, 'It is here' or 'It is there.' For the kingdom of God is within you." If the kingdom of God is within us, it may seem small or lacking, however the Spirit is a source of eternal water. Jesus shows us that God's generosity may very well be hidden within us and we just don't see it, because we are not seeking the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit within us cannot be drained or extinguished.

### **ABUNDANT LIGHT - MATTHEW 5:14-16**

*"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

When you feel God's love, don't hide it. It should shine out from your heart and give light to everyone around you. The more love you can give, the more you will receive." This is a common theme in Jesus' teachings whether through prayer, in responsibility or even judgment.

The metaphor of being the light of the world implies many things but don't miss that light is plentiful. Jesus is pointing us to be a reflection of the abundance of God's goodness. Being a light is about functioning from a posture of God's plentiful abundance and not a position of scarcity.

### **ABUNDANT REWARD MATTHEW 6:5-6**

*"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

There is a similar passage that preceded this one along these lines: "When you give to charity or perform any charitable act, keep it to yourself. Again, *"the Father in heaven"* sees what is secret and will reward you. Jesus focuses our attention on our hearts. The

hypocrites function from a place of scarcity seeking to gain, hoard, or earn. But we are to trust in God's eternal grace who is **plentiful** and large enough to reward anyone and everyone with a fertile heart.

### **ABUNDANT DOORS - MATTHEW 7:7-9**

*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?"*

Could such a statement, that God offers us whatever we seek, really be true? I say yes but with a huge caveat—what you ask for must fit into your life path and not only be good for you but for others around you in His plan. Why? Because God is generous not just to us but everyone. God is a vast, **plentiful** God that we cannot box in human framework.

### **ABUNDANT GRACE - MATTHEW 7:1-3**

*"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"*

If you don't condemn, you will not be condemned; If you forgive, you will be forgiven; If you give, many things will be given to you. For the more you give, the more you will receive. Can you see that the more we look at Jesus, the more we see a generosity that is **abundant** and never in scarcity.

# On the Kingdom of God

Jesus is inviting us not primarily into correct beliefs, an eternal destination, or behavior modification but rather into participation in a living, eternally present reality. **This living and eternal present reality is what Jesus called the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven.** This is the key idea in understanding the New Testament. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the activity of **God as King in saving sinners and overcoming evil, and the new order which is thus established.**

The kingdom of God is undeniably central to Jesus' teachings and message. In fact, the Greek word for "kingdom" (*basileia*) is found fifty-five times in Matthew, twenty times in Mark, forty-six times in Luke, and five times in John. According to Matthew, John the Baptist also spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven in words that anticipated those of Jesus. This helps us understand that the mission of God for Christ was the proclamation of the **Kingdom of God.**

In Dallas Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy*, he says it better than anyone, "through Christ, we get to join the redemption and restoration of all things. God has not given up on the world. Instead, God invites every one of us—in the way of Jesus and through the power of the Spirit—into the divine conspiracy of overcoming evil with good."

**The kingdom of God is here. It is now.** Scripture reads that "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you" (that is, here) and "at hand" (that is, now). The Kingdom of God cannot be understood to be the place we go to when we die.

This over simplistic understanding misses the message of Jesus. However, when we are the in full presence of God (Heaven), the Kingdom of God will be a **complete reality.**

Here are three main connections within Jesus' teachings, we miss out on when we assume the Kingdom of God equals Heaven:

**[1] We miss our great privilege of our participation in the work of God now.**

**[2] We miss the heartbreak of God for our world.**

**[3] We miss the better way of Christ in actively loving the world.**

Correct beliefs are important, but what happens when we are more educated than our level of obedience? Our eternal destination is important, but what happens we view Christ as a "ticket to get out of Hell free" card? Our moral behavior is important, what happens when we truly see the depths of our distorted attempts at good? What needs to be embraced and practiced is the Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God.

**We must seek first the Kingdom of God and all its justice, wisdom and righteousness.** This is the primary teaching of Jesus, we cannot be so assuming and careless to make such a confusing distortion.

## On Silent Prayer

**Have you ever attempted to pray in silence?** Not only where your environment is silent, but you yourself are silent? Does that sound like an oxymoron? A major issue with any prayer discipline is a difficulty everyone faces but hard to own up to. Our minds act like crazy monkeys and jump from one branch to another and refuse to be still. The harder we try to calm our monkey mind down, the more fidgety it becomes.

**So how would we even attempt to pray in silence?** Our goal is to follow Christ. Christ himself gives us His Spirit to guide and enlighten our hearts to the work of God in this world. This Spirit is dynamic, which means that we can interact with Him. So how would we even attempt to be in silent prayer? Focus on slowing down your mind as if you are meeting with someone you really want to

listen to. **The goal of silent prayer is to listen.** Imagine if Jesus were in the room with you. Then slowly attempt to contain your monkey mind. Please note if you hold down any monkey, it will run and race faster. The gracious goal is containment and focus on the presence of Christ in the room with you. Then be patient. It is not a big deal if other thoughts come to your attention, just be gentle and **release the thoughts when you realize you are thinking about something else.**

I like to think of this part of my prayer time as 'sitting with Jesus.' It is not complex or hard, but it is extremely helpful in making sure we are listening to the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit is bigger than any vocabulary that we can create. We know this outside of our relationship with God. We often use the phrase, "you just

have to experience it for yourself" or "my words do it a disservice." Pray that we would be available to God.

Our prayers should reduce obstacles to the development of one's relationship with Christ to the point of communing with God beyond word, thoughts, and feeling. Silence helps draw us together when we live in a fragmented existence. It helps us to concentrate on a purpose that really corresponds not only to the deeper needs of our being, but also to God's intentions for us. Supplication and intercession has a great place in our prayer life, but even in those moments we have to realize that our prayer disciplines are to shape us and participate in His power and not try to assert our faux power upon God. **"Be still, and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10**

# On Our Relationship With Time

Church ministry volunteers come in all shapes and sizes, but they tend to have at least this one thing in common: **they are busy!** Church volunteers are some of the busiest people on the planet, trying all the time to navigate the busy schedules of families while also maintaining their regular scheduled programming. When it comes to time, there's just never enough of it.

It's true for just about everyone, as Henri Nouwen put it, *"Time constantly threatens to become our enemy. Time enslaves us..."* (Spiritual Formation, p.8). Elsewhere, Nouwen writes, *"Our calendars are filled with appointments, and our years filled with plans and projects..."* Sound anything like our church ministry calendar? *"There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing"* (Way of the Heart, p. 12). Did that hit you like a ton of bricks? It literally made me think of bricks. Then a Spirit in my soul reminded me of Pharaoh's bricks and contrasted it with the rest for the weary of Jesus.

We should stop and think not only of whether what we're doing is worth doing, but **we should also think about how our relationship to time is forming us and shaping our ministry.** How can our kids and students workers who are always too busy

ever hope to offer an alternative to a younger generation who are themselves pressured by time and over-scheduled?

Our relationship with time doesn't need to be so violent. The problem is that we are dominated by a particular kind of time, one that is historically new– the time defined by the clock. It has quite distinct features. It is assumed to be linear, dynamic, and forward facing, measurable and controllable.

**We think that time is a commodity,** ultimately something we use for productivity and achievement. This view of time is the product of **industrialization.** We value time for what it allows us to produce, for its potentiality, for what it can give us. And, subsequently, we value human beings for their ability to inhabit this time. To be able to handle the economics of time efficiently in a world that **adores speed, loves intellectual effectiveness, and sits comfortably at the altar of competitiveness, productivity, and self-sufficiency.**

We end up with just no time for other people, especially those who cannot benefit us or our own productivity.

Church workers also have a tendency to instrumentalize time. We invest more time in the people who will best contribute to the success of our ministry. But as

followers of Christ, we need to see time differently.

**We need to stop slaving for the time of the clock and start living in God's time.** God's time is not a commodity. **It is fundamentally a gift.** God's time is slow, patient, and kind and welcomes friendship; it is a way of being in the fullness of time that is not determined by productivity, success, or linear movements toward personal goals. **It is a way of love and a way of the heart.**

The move from "*clock time*" to God's time is a move from using time for productivity **to receiving time as a gift from God.** When we see time as a gift, and cherish it as such, it fundamentally transforms the way we inhabit it and it opens us up to other people, even to the people among us who may not be the "success stories" and it inherently offers an alternative, an invitation into a different way of living in the world.

**If time is our friend and not our enemy, then we are free,** for freedom is the shape of friendship. We are free to slow down, to live gently, and to adopt the attitude of Jesus *"who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."* (Philippians 2:6-7)



# On Reading Scripture Afresh

Allowing the Scripture to breathe God into our lives is a daily task in our relationship with Christ. **Here are seven tools to add to your spiritual toolbox to help scripture speak new life into your spiritual life.**

**1. Read Scripture in small bites.** Think of scripture as your diet. Don't digest it too fast or it may give you indigestion. Don't overeat because that is unhealthy. This is not a problem with scripture but how we use it. Just like when we overeat, it's not the food's fault. If you learn to absorb scripture by spending a longer and slower time processing, the heart of the scripture will not just be known intellectually but **wholistically second nature of yourself.**

**2. Read the Scripture in community and not just alone.** This is a spiritual discipline. Let the Holy Spirit be your tutor and teacher but also remember that the Living Christ meets us where two or three are gathered together. **The Spirit will speak through others if we are willing to listen.** Scripture was written in community and needs to also be mediated upon in community.

**3. Read Scripture spiritually and not just literally.** The literal is the surface reading of the scripture. But God also wants us to go deeper like a deep sea diver looking for lost treasure in the ocean of truth. This

is not playing loose with the text but pursuing to experience more of God! The context grounds us, but scripture invites us into mystery with powerful metaphors. We should appreciate the literal but never stop there on your spiritual journey. **God invites us to swim into much deeper waters into a revelation of who God is.**

**4. Read the Scripture slowly and not quickly.** We do not gain biblical understanding by reading the Bible on our "fortune cookie" terms. It is about a radical life change, and not neat and simple cosmetic adjustments. Take the scripture in slowly and carefully. Meditate on God's Word and slowly marinate in it. **Let go as it immerses you into its own world.**

**5. Read the Scripture with your imagination and not just your mind.** The mind wants to exercise human logic, reason, and uniformity but **scripture has so many more dimensions and layers to it.** We need to not just ask questions of logic of the Bible but we need to imaginatively enter into its story and let that story shape and direct our hearts. Learn to feel what the story is saying. Imagine yourself in the story. How does that perspective change what you see? How does it change how you see?

**6. Read the Scriptures with your emotions and not just your will.** Take the Prodigal son story for

example. Do we identify with the younger or older brother? And what about the Father? What is it like to love a child that has gone out into the far country? What it's like to feel the Father's pain when his children does not appreciate how good they really have it at home? **When we enter into the Bible with all our heart, mind, emotions, and soul, then reading the Scriptures goes from being a duty to turning into a delight. Then the layers of the scripture work together because it is meant to ultize the heart.**

**7. Read the Scripture out loud and not just in silence.** Read the Psalms out loud while walking or standing. Go outside and read scripture out loud! Read God's promises and shout them out. **This creates bold passion.** Being expressive in our disciplines forms and shapes us in what God dreams for us to be. This is the very reason to do our spiritual practices. There will always be times of silence in reading and reflecting on Scripture but to read Scripture with your own voice and while you hear **your voice**, but something **mysteriously** is telling you things you would never tell yourself.

May God speak to us and reveal Christ in his word and shape us to be more like Him.

"So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him."

Matthew 7:11 NLT