

# Generosity in the Bible

BY JO-ANNA BRANT

When we read the many scriptural admonitions to be generous with resources, such as this,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.

You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

*Deuteronomy 15:7-8*

most of us, I suspect, pause to reflect upon those occasions when we have met a request with a no rather than a yes. Most of us wish to be generous. The four volumes reviewed here not only demonstrate the centrality of the call to generosity that runs through the biblical canon, they also provide practical advice about how to turn our well-meaning intent into action. While I recommend all of them, let me describe each so you can be informed stewards of your expenditure of time and money.

Craig L. Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, in *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013, 272 pp., \$24.99) presents the most comprehensive coverage of the Bible's treatment of wealth and what we ought to do with it. His work is a solid distillation of biblical scholarship framed for a broad and interested readership.

The first chapter presents the reader with challenging and disturbing facts about Christian giving or the lack thereof. In the next five chapters of the book, Blomberg demonstrates that familiar passages about possessions and money are constitutive of an ethic that is part of the fabric of God's kingdom, rather than something good to do but not necessary to participation in God's redemption.

He walks a careful path between two missteps: on the one side, the simple equation of our wealth with God's approval (the temptation of a prosperity gospel) and, on the other, proclaiming justification by works.

He affirms God's promise of prosperity and places goodness or sin within the arena of what we do with our surplus. Attention to relevant passages in the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation reveals how the first Christians read the Old Testament and prioritized Jesus Christ's teachings on giving.

Blomberg also explores various models for approaching biblical principles of tithing, offering, and payment of taxes.

In the last three chapters Blomberg applies biblical teaching to three levels of stewardship: the individual disciple, the government, and the local church. Each chapter begins with a case study, which Blomberg resolves at the conclusion of the chapter.

When addressing individuals, he does not chastise his readers for self-indulgence but rather reminds them of what brings true happiness and suggests a method of trimming rather than asceticism.

At the same time, he warns the Western reader that what we consider to be necessities can become barriers to true fellowship in Christ within the worldwide Church.

In his chapter on government, still holding firm to his mainstream evangelical views about homosexuality and abortion, Blomberg does not hesitate to challenge the habits of American evangelicals to limit issues of social justice to matters related to the family.

He challenges his reader to not conflate a political economic system with Christian values, but to recognize that the call to care for the poor transcends our political ideologies.

When addressing church stewardship, he focuses upon a more creative use and attitude toward the line item in the church budget devoted to facilities and a more generous understanding of a congregation's ministries.

Blomberg's language and arguments will be meaningful and accessible to students in a college or seminary classroom, to leaders within the church, and to lay readers. I strongly recommend that this be treated as required reading by pastors and church leaders, ranging from board elders to those holding the highest posts in their denomination.

Bruce W. Longenecker is Professor of Religion and W. W. Melton Chair at Baylor University. His *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, 400 pp., \$25.00) is the most scholarly work in this collection insofar as it strives to make an original contribution to scholarship.

Longenecker puts forward the thesis that the Jerusalem Council's admonition to Paul to "remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10) is not a reference to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 16:1).

Instead, their counsel is deeply rooted in their understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. While the Jerusalem leadership is prepared to let go of circumcision as a marker of a true relationship with God, generosity to the poor is a must.

The rigor of Longenecker's argument should not deter a more casual reader. The volume provides a captivating picture of the world of patronage into which the early church entered.

This includes a description of the generous treatment of the poor within Jewish societies in contrast to an ancient world that was generally not so giving. The section on Jewish tradition should be mandatory reading for all pastors who are tempted to use a picture of stingy Jews as a way of framing Jesus' call to generosity.

Longenecker's description of the charitable activities of the early church makes it clear that caring for the poor was a mark of Jesus' true followers.

In a final section, he deals with Paul's rhetorical construction of his communities' economic level, by which the Apostle redefines both what it means to be wealthy and the status of the poor.

One piece of advice: readers will want to bookmark pages 44-45 in which Longenecker presents his short hand for economic levels.

Whether one accepts Longenecker's conclusion about Galatians 2:10 or not, he demonstrates that if we wish to identify with the faith of the early church, we cannot draw a distinction between theology and an ethic of giving. While this book belongs on the shelves of Pauline scholars and students, I would not limit its readership to them.

Nevertheless, for readers just entering the discussion of the place of generosity to the poor, this may not be the volume with which to begin.

Mark Allan Powell, the Robert and Phyllis Leatherman Professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, has made it a habit not to stop at his success as a biblical scholar but to apply his research to spiritual formation.

In *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006, 204 pp., \$15.00), he takes what scholars know about the place of generosity in Scripture and speaks directly to the believer's mind, body, and soul.

I must admit, as I read Blomberg's and Longenecker's overviews of biblical teaching and accounts of early Judaism and Christianity, I felt a bit arrogant as a member of the Mennonite tradition for whom the passages they review serve as part of our canon within the canon. I asked myself, "How is it that all Christians do not know this?" As I read Powell's book, I found myself asking myself, "How can I more truly live generously?"

Powell's concern is broader than giving to the poor.

This is both the book's strength and its weakness. His work is designed to promote a spirit of giving, but he does not provide a biblical ethic for prioritizing who should be the recipients of our generosity or a purpose for giving beyond our own spiritual health.

In the opening chapter, Powell describes the primary purpose of offerings and sacrifices as acts of worship; the good to which our offerings can be put is presented as an afterthought.

While I resist this ordering, I was inspired by his arguments in the first half of the book for treating giving as worship, an expression of love, and a spiritual discipline.

The second half of the book looks beyond giving to the broader picture of our finances, including how we acquire, regard, manage, and spend our money. Powell makes "God-pleasing" the governing principle.

Powell has designed this book for adult study groups by delineating a distinct focus for each chapter and providing pointed questions that should prompt lively discussion and application to our lives.

Timothy Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, a congregation of five thousand regular attendees, approaches the subject of generosity as a justice issue in *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010, 272 pp., \$15.00).

Like Blomberg and Longenecker, he sees biblical doctrine and care for the poor inextricably linked. But his volume stands out from the others described above in a number of ways.

His is what academics sometimes call disparagingly a popular book.

While Keller does present sound argumentation, he does not write for an audience that demands a high burden of proof. He leaves that to scholars such as Craig Blomberg to whom he acknowledges a debt.

To a large extent, Keller consumes scholarship and offers it in more digestible pieces for a lay audience by organizing it not as an argument but as reflections on specific questions such as “Why should we do Justice?” and “Should Christians work together for justice in society with members of other religions or no religion?”

He scatters enough anecdotes to illustrate his thoughts to awaken the imagination of his readers to an application to their own experiences and to new possibilities for their own expression of faith.

As a piece of popular theology, this book lends itself to a group book study, but its lack of scholarly rigor might also make it a controversial choice.

Keller seeks to prevent two tendencies: the first is when concerns for social justice lose their grounding in theology, and the second, when convictions about the gift of grace become excuses for ignoring social justice.

He presents us with a picture of God as the defender of the poor and a definition of justice as a right relationship.

He then asks whether our relationship with God can be sound if we do not care passionately about those things to which God is devoted.

To make his case, he draws from the work of a wide range of theologians from Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century Massachusetts Congregationalist pastor, to Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian founder of liberation theology, without regard for broader ideological or theological dimensions of their thought.

Midway through the book, he turns to the doctrine of justification by faith, informed by the work of Miroslav Volf, to refute the notion that working for social justice signifies a belief in justification by works.

His presentation is swift and dramatic, but it obscures the rigor and complexity of Volf’s account of redemption.

While Keller’s frequent brief summaries of the most significant contributions to the philosophy and theology of justice might inspire a few of his readers to dig deeper by

reading the works he cites, he might also leave his readers overwhelmed or, worse, underwhelmed by their contributions.

Another distinguishing feature of this volume is the breadth of audience for which Keller writes. He directs his work to youth who are devoting their early career to a life of service and to young evangelicals, both in years and heart, who have come to include social justice within their understanding of the mission of the Church.

He responds to two forms of suspicion that linger inside and outside evangelicalism, respectively: the first sees the pursuit of social justice as a distraction from the task of saving souls, and the second sees Christianity itself as a cause of social injustice.

While those who are guided by these suspicions probably will not read this book, those who seek to help others flourish as God intends will find biblical teachings and theological language with which to engage with their detractors and to participate as Christians in the larger discussion of equity in our society.

By the end of reading these four volumes, I became a bit uncomfortable about the fact that three were written by people who share my professional status and probably fall into my tax bracket, and the fourth by a pastor whose Manhattan congregation meets on a very expensive piece of real estate.

While their roles as biblical scholars and pastors are not to be dismissed, something tells me that lessons to the wealthy — that is, anyone who has surplus of the order that Powell describes — ought to be delivered by those with far fewer means who live generously.

On the other hand, these volumes urge us to practice forms of generosity that may lead us to work side by side with people of all socio-economic backgrounds in contexts where we can experience the truth of what they teach.

Verses from the Bible about generosity:

In [Luke 21:1-4](#), Jesus compares the widow's mite to the rich man's gifts — demonstrating that the gifts of all are needed and used in God's economy.

This is a well-known story — you've probably heard or read it many times — yet it never gets old to me. In my world of generous giving efforts, and even the big project I'm working on right now, the most powerful moments are when I hear stories of sacrifice, whether big or small, in people's giving..

[Acts 20:35](#) ESV / 75 helpful votes

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

[Deuteronomy 15:11](#) ESV / 72 helpful votes

For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

[1 John 3:17-18](#) ESV / 57 helpful votes

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

[Proverbs 19:17](#) ESV / 57 helpful votes

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.

[Matthew 6:19-21](#) ESV / 44 helpful votes

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

[1 John 3:17](#) ESV / 36 helpful votes

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

[Luke 12:33-34](#) ESV / 35 helpful votes

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

[Matthew 6:1-4 ESV / 34 helpful votes](#)

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[1 Timothy 6:17-19 ESV / 31 helpful votes \\*](#)

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

[1 Timothy 5:8 ESV / 28 helpful votes](#)

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

[Deuteronomy 15:7-8 ESV / 28 helpful votes](#)

“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

[Matthew 25:35 ESV / 22 helpful votes](#)

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,



[James 1:27](#) ESV / 20 helpful votes

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

[Proverbs 14:31](#) ESV / 19 helpful votes

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.

[Hebrews 13:16](#) ESV / 18 helpful votes

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

[Isaiah 58:6-7](#) ESV / 18 helpful votes

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

[Luke 14:12-14](#) ESV / 17 helpful votes

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.

But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

[Ephesians 4:28](#) ESV / 16 helpful votes

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

[Proverbs 22:9](#) ESV / 15 helpful votes

Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.

### [1 Timothy 6:10](#) ESV / 14 helpful votes

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

### [2 Corinthians 9:7](#) ESV / 14 helpful votes

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

### [Ezekiel 16:49](#) ESV / 14 helpful votes

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.

### [Deuteronomy 15:7-11](#) ESV / 14 helpful votes

“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’

### [Isaiah 58:10](#) ESV / 13 helpful votes

If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

### [Luke 16:14](#) ESV / 11 helpful votes

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

[Leviticus 25:35](#) ESV / 11 helpful votes

“If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

[Matthew 25:31-46](#) ESV / 10 helpful votes

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ...

[Proverbs 28:27](#) ESV / 10 helpful votes

Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.

[Deuteronomy 14:28-29](#) ESV / 10 helpful votes

“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns.

And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

[Acts 4:32-35](#) ESV / 9 helpful votes

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

[Luke 12:33](#) ESV / 9 helpful votes

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

[John 14:12](#) ESV / 8 helpful votes

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.

[Matthew 19:21](#) ESV / 8 helpful votes

Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

[Jeremiah 5:28](#) ESV / 8 helpful votes

They have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of evil; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.

[Acts 9:36](#) ESV / 7 helpful votes

Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.

[Matthew 22:37-39](#) ESV / 7 helpful votes

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[Proverbs 29:7](#) ESV / 7 helpful votes

A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

[Proverbs 14:21](#) ESV / 7 helpful votes

Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.

[Acts 2:38](#) ESV / 6 helpful votes

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[Acts 2:22](#) ESV / 6 helpful votes

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know –

[Isaiah 41:17](#) ESV / 6 helpful votes

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

[Proverbs 31:9](#) ESV / 6 helpful votes

Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

[Jeremiah 22:3](#) ESV / 5 helpful votes

Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

[Isaiah 11:4](#) ESV / 5 helpful votes

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

[Psalm 140:12](#) ESV / 5 helpful votes

I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will execute justice for the needy.

[Leviticus 19:10](#) ESV / 5 helpful votes

And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

[2 Corinthians 9:13](#) ESV / 4 helpful votes

By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,

[Romans 10:9](#) ESV / 4 helpful votes

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

[Proverbs 12:1-28](#) ESV / 4 helpful votes

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns.

No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are just; the counsels of the wicked are deceitful. ...

[Matthew 5:42](#) ESV / 3 helpful votes

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

[Isaiah 25:4](#) ESV / 2 helpful votes

For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall,

[Esther 9:22](#) ESV / 2 helpful votes

As the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

[Deuteronomy 24:17](#) ESV / 2 helpful votes

"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge,

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