

TONY PAYNE AND
GEOFF ROBSON

THE GENEROSITY PROJECT



LEARN, PRAY AND WORK TOGETHER
TO BECOME THE BIG-HEARTED PEOPLE
GOD CALLS US TO BE

big-hearted | *adjective* | (of a person or action) kind and generous

In Christian circles, ‘generosity’ is often code for giving money. But generosity is about far more than money.

God is lavishly generous towards us in a thousand ways, and most of all in the grace of the gospel. God’s powerful generosity through the gospel not only saves us, but sets us free to live a new, big-hearted life—a life which is no longer turned inwards on ourselves, but which flows out to others with an open, generous hand.

The Generosity Project is a set of resources to help you discover and live this new, generous life. Through this book and its free online videos, you’ll work with a small group of other Christians to engage with what the Bible says about generosity, read or watch input from leading pastor-teachers, and work out what it all means in practice in your life.

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 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Generosity Project

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About *The Generosity Project*

Generosity. Our culture prizes it, and our churches proclaim it. Our lives are better for it, whether we're givers or receivers.

Yet as much as we believe in generosity, we're painfully aware of the powerful lure of greed—in our world, and in our own hearts. Should we look outside ourselves and be generous, or should we look out for ourselves and let the chips fall where they may? We feel this tension, and know that we often fail.

As God's people, we need to pause and listen carefully to what God says to us about generosity. More than that, we need to change—to repent of our selfishness, and to encourage each other to lead generous lives that reflect God's incredible generosity to us.

The Generosity Project aims to help us do just that. It's a 'project' because it's not meant to be a book that we read on our own, but an ongoing task to engage in with

others—where we help each other learn and understand what God is saying about generosity, and then pray for and encourage one other to put it into practice.

So *The Generosity Project* is not designed around an individual reader—it's a framework of content to work through with at least one other person, or with a small group of others.

Apart from part 1 (which has an extra introduction), the six parts of *The Generosity Project* all have three main sections:

- a. a Bible study section, with passages to read and discuss together (this should take around 20-25 minutes)
- b. input that draws the various strands of the Bible's teaching together (you can watch this input via a free online video, featuring Bible teachers from the UK and Australia; or you can pause and read the text version that is supplied, either silently or out loud; either way, the input section will take 10-15 minutes)
- c. questions and case studies to help you discuss and pray about what you've learned, and to apply it to your own lives (this can take 15-20 minutes, or as much time as you want to give it!).

Everything you need to work on *The Generosity Project* is in this book or online at thegenerosityproject.com.

On the website you'll find:

- links for ordering more copies of this book (each person who is taking part will need one)
- seven free videos for the 'Input' sections
- additional free 'Real world stories' videos, giving case studies of generosity in action
- a free downloadable guide for group leaders
- a free downloadable guide for church leaders to help you implement *The Generosity Project* throughout your church—not just as a program for small groups but as part of a wider effort to change the culture of generosity in your church community.

Our thanks to the many people whose hard work and generosity have made this book and the supporting videos and website possible. We are especially grateful to:

- Simon Pillar and the working group he assembled to initiate and drive the project (Richard Borgonon, Jeremy Marshall, Simon Pilcher, Ben Stone and Nicholas Bewes)
- the six Bible teachers who gave so warmly of their time and experience for the input sections (see details on page 9)
- the many people who spoke to us on the street about generosity, or who told us their real world stories of generosity
- David and Ash Tucker from ShowReal, who did such a brilliant job on the videos

- the team at Matthias Media for editing, designing and publishing this book, and for building the website.

With trust in the generous God who makes everything possible, we pray that the result of all of our efforts will be a new spirit of generosity in your heart, and a new culture of generosity that permeates the life of your church.

Contributors

In the second half of 2018, we enlisted the help of six respected Bible teachers from the UK and Australia to help us sharpen and articulate the key ideas of *The Generosity Project*. You'll see them appearing regularly in the 'Input' sections, whether talking in the videos or being quoted in the sections of text. The six contributors are (in alphabetical order):



Tim Clemens, Lead Pastor at Grace City Church, Waterloo, in Sydney



John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (UK)



Jason Roach, Senior Minister at The Bridge (Battersea Community Church) in London



Luther Symons, Lead Pastor at Hope Anglican Church, Leppington, in Sydney



Vaughan Roberts, Rector of St Ebbe's Church in Oxford



Dan Wu, Old Testament Lecturer at Moore Theological College in Newtown

PART 1: A world built on generosity

Introducing *The Generosity Project*

(Watch video 1a or read the following.)

If you stand on a busy street corner or in a park—as I did while preparing to write this book—and ask random passers-by what they think about ‘generosity’, a couple of things strike you pretty quickly.

Firstly, American tourists are very generous in giving their time to talk about generosity, certainly more than Aussies. And as for Brits, let’s just say that getting them to stop and talk on camera is about as easy as finding a public loo in central London.

But among those who did stop and talk, a common view about ‘generosity’ rose rapidly to the surface.

“Generosity is giving back; giving to others.”

“It’s giving of yourself without questioning it, and without thinking of your own needs.”

“It’s doing things for other people that you don’t get a reward for.”

And from an English woman, perhaps the best definition of all: “I think it’s the willingness to give up any of your own resources, whether that be time, money or just advice, to help other people who are in need or who have asked for your help”.

Generosity is not that hard to understand. It’s giving someone more than is expected, like a generous helping of ice-cream. Or it’s kindly giving someone more than you’re obliged to, like stopping to talk to a random stranger on the street about generosity when you have other places to be.

But while generosity may be straightforward enough as a concept, it’s anything but straightforward to display. It’s much easier to describe a generous person than to be one.

A well-known social science experiment in the 1970s illustrated the problem. Some theological college students were asked to prepare a short talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan. When they arrived at class, they were told that they needed to go to another building on campus to deliver their talks. Some were told that their audience was already waiting for them, and that they had no time to lose.

On their way to deliver their talks, the students came upon an actor who was slumped on the footpath, moaning and pretending to be in distress.

You can guess what happened.

Only 53% of the students hurrying to give talks on a famous parable about generosity stopped to help the man. And the variable that had the most effect on whether they stopped or not was how much time pressure they thought they were under to get to the building to deliver their talks.¹

It's easy to approve of generosity, but much more difficult to be generous.

Perhaps this is why we find generosity difficult even to talk about. Vaughan Roberts, Rector of St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, says that in many churches, generosity is the great unmentionable:

We don't tend to talk about money. We don't tend to talk about giving. And I'd love to break that taboo, because the Bible is not embarrassed about these things and nor should we be.²

In many ways, if *The Generosity Project* achieves nothing else but this—to get Christians thinking and praying and talking honestly about generosity—it will have provided a valuable service.

1 John M Darley and C Daniel Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 1, July 1973, pp. 100-8.

2 The quotes from pastor-teachers like Vaughan Roberts that appear throughout *The Generosity Project* are taken from interviews conducted in late 2018 and early 2019. The six Bible teachers we interviewed are listed on page 9.

Of course, an awkwardness or unwillingness to talk about generosity is not our only problem. According to UK Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) Director John Stevens, one very significant issue is that many Christians don't realize how much capacity they have to be generous:

I think one issue we have in our culture is that many people don't actually feel very wealthy, and so life feels pressured. They are trying to pay their mortgage, pay for their cars, care for their children. Although in objective terms, in the light of history and the world as it is today, they are remarkably wealthy, I don't think many people *feel* wealthy. And therefore they don't feel like they have got much they could give.

Then there are the questions that many of us have about generosity:

- How much should we give away, and what is legitimate to keep and use for our own needs?
- What about being generous with our time and abilities—does that count as generosity?
- Where should we direct our generosity when there are so many needs in the world—not only at church and for the spread of the gospel but in the physical suffering and hardship that is so widespread?

And, of course, there is the biggest obstacle of all to generosity: the constant tendency of our hearts to lean away

from generosity and towards selfishness. We can't talk about generosity without also talking about its counterpart and enemy: the greed that wants to *get* rather than to *give*.



The purpose of *The Generosity Project* should now be clear.

It's to help Christians and churches learn about generosity—what motivates and increases it, what blocks and shrivels it, what it might look like in our lives and churches, and where and how we can practise it. But more than this, the goal is to help you learn to *live a radically generous life* in response to the incredible generosity of God, and to do that as part of a radically generous church community in which we can encourage each other to be generous, and work together in generosity to others.

That's why this is a 'project' and not just a book to read. Our prayer is that, as you are confronted by what God says about generosity in the Bible, and reflect on those truths (hopefully in conversation with others), the result will be what God always achieves through his word—the transformation of his people to be more like his Son, the one who “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

3. Read the following Bible passages. What do you learn in each one about God and his creation?

a. 1 Chronicles 29:10-14

¹⁰ Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. ¹¹ Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹² Both riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. ¹³ And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

¹⁴ “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”

b. Psalm 95:3-6

- ³For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- ⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- ⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
- ⁶Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

4. What do the following two passages say about how God *continues* to relate to his creation?

a. Psalm 104:24-30

- ²⁴O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
- ²⁵Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.
- ²⁶There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

- ²⁷ These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
- ²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled
with good things.
- ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
- ³⁰ When you send forth your Spirit, they are
created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

b. Acts 17:24-28

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling

place,²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,²⁸ for

“In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

5. How do you think we should *respond* to God as the generous Creator and Sustainer of the world? (The passages you’ve already read cast some light on this.)

Input: God, the generous Creator and Sustainer

(Watch video 1b or read the following.)

When Bart Simpson is asked to say grace, he says, “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing. Amen.”³

The watching adults gasp. Mr Burns chuckles and says, “Only an innocent child could get away with such blasphemy. God bless them all.”

But Bart’s caustic honesty is funny because, as comedy so often does, it pierces through the veneer of polite sentiment and says aloud what many of the watching adults are actually thinking anyway.

We did go to work. We did earn the money. We did pay for this stuff ourselves. So why all the thanksgiving to a God we can’t see?

The Bible’s answer is that the God we can’t see created everything we can see and touch and hear and feel, including us. He created the molecules that make up our bodies. He gave life and breath to those bodies that go to work to earn money. He provided the power and ability to work, the materials to work with, and the world within which that work is effective and productive and satisfying. He created the plants and animals that we buy as food with our hard-earned money, and the land and the rain and the sun that sustain and grow them. He made

3 *The Simpsons*, television program, season 2, episode 4.

and organized everything and everyone that constructed the house in which we sit to eat the food, the kitchen in which it was prepared, the table and plate it rests on.

All this is obvious enough if we open our eyes and see it.

Senior Minister Jason Roach, who was a surgeon before he became a pastor, puts it like this:

I used to be in medical practice. On the operating table, you'd get to see hearts beating time after time after time. You'd be bowled over by the fact that God is the generous Creator and Provider. More than that, I thought about how our tongues work, and how God provided taste buds with sweet and sour and all kinds of different things. You realize this is a God who hasn't just provided food for us to eat that satisfies us and fills our bellies, but a God who gives us all kinds of food to delight in.

All that we are and have and do comes from an infinitely powerful and loving Creator—from One who is so much above and beyond us that we can barely comprehend his greatness, but One who is loving and generous, and shows us with more than we can ask or imagine. God doesn't have to do any of this. He is not obligated to create or sustain us. It is not something we have earned or deserved. God creates and sustains and provides simply because of who he is, out of his character of love and faithfulness. And this is really the essence of generosity: to give abundantly beyond any expectation or obligation.

The poetry of the psalms often expresses the greatness of God as generous Creator and Provider, along with how we should respond to him. In Psalm 95, for example:

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our
salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs
of praise!

For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

(Ps 95:1-6)

With raucous celebration and thanksgiving on one hand and humble recognition of our place as creatures on the other, the psalmist calls on Israel to recognize and respond to their supremely powerful Maker.

This is the right and basic response to God's generosity as Creator and Sustainer of all things—not that we're all that good at making this response. Vaughan Roberts says:

God delights when we enjoy the rich variety and wonder of the world that he's made. He gives us so much more than we need and so much more than we deserve. God is the giver, and we are the takers. So we take and take and take, but hardly ever stop and say those little words: 'Thank you'. I think most of us, certainly those of us who call ourselves Christians, know very well that God is the great giver, but it's very easy to forget it and live with the illusion of control—as though somehow we are in control of our lives and that we've earned the things we get through our own efforts. We take them for granted. We don't stop to say 'Thank you'. It's ridiculous, because when we stop to think, surely we realize everything we have is a gift of God's amazing grace. He is the definition of generosity.

In this sense, Bart Simpson's declaration of self-sufficiency—we did this ourselves, so why be thankful to God?—is the limited perspective of a child, like the clenched toddler who insists he can do everything *himself*. The toddler doesn't see the larger perspective: that his parents provide *everything* for him, that he is utterly dependent on them, and that there is almost nothing that he can actually do by himself.

Romans 1 says that this is in fact the basic attitude of *all humanity*—a refusal to respond to the obvious truth that God has created and given us everything. Humanity refuses to honour God or give thanks to him as Creator, but turns its honour and love towards created things

instead (Rom 1:18-23).

We'll think further about humanity's negative response to God's generosity in part 2—particularly as it manifests itself in greed—but let's stay positive for the moment. What are the positive implications and responses to God's outlandish generosity to us as his creatures?

Grace City Church Pastor Tim Clemens puts it this way:

Once you see that God didn't have to create us but has generously chosen to create us, and that he is both willing and able to provide for us in an ongoing way... it just changes everything.

So to begin with, it lays a foundation of contentment because now I can have confidence that everything I have is what God intended. If he wanted me to have more, he could have given it to me. He's certainly able to. And so I'm now left in a place where I can rejoice and give thanks to God for what I do have, rather than murmuring about all the things that I don't have.

But then on top of that, understanding how generous God has been to me in creation helps me to become a more generous person, because now I can operate out of faith rather than fear. I don't have to be anxious and fearful about what might happen in the future. Instead, I can have faith, trusting that the same God who so generously provided for me and us in creation will continue to provide for me all of my needs into the future, right into eternity. And that frees me to be generous towards others with all that I have.

‘Generosity’ is a funny word in church circles. It’s often the word that we use when we actually are trying to talk about money. Generosity is about more than money, but it’s not about less than money, because money is really a liquid form of God’s good and generous gift to us in creation.

Tim is right, and we’ll need to talk about money at some point in our thinking about generosity, but now is not that time. For now, we need to pause and reflect on what it means that everything in our lives and our world is built on generosity—the generosity of the Creator—and that the right response to God’s generosity is thanksgiving, contentment, trust and a generosity of our own.

What it means for us

(Talk about one or more of the following questions together.)

1. What insight from the ‘Input’ section struck you most? Why?

2. Do you have an example to share of God's generosity to you? How did your awareness of God's provision affect you? How did you respond?

3. When do you find it hard to remember your complete dependence on God? What practical steps can you take to increase your thankfulness for God's provision and your awareness of how much you rely on him?

4. When are you most tempted to be anxious about your earthly needs? How can the truths we've seen in part 1 help you manage this anxiety?

5. Think of as many examples as you can of wrong or poor responses to God's generosity.

Take some time to give thanks to God for his generosity towards you. Give thanks for specific examples of his goodness.

Going further

If you haven't done so already, read the text or watch the video in the 'Input' section (above) sometime over the next few days. It will help solidify the ideas in your mind, as you continue to think and pray about generosity.