PART THREE

RESPONDING TO GOD’S GENEROSITY

1. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO GOD’S GENEROSITY? Our stewardship response begins when we realize and accept God’s unconditional love for us. We reflect God’s love and demonstrate our thankfulness for God’s gifts when we respond generously to the needs of others - giving freely of what has been freely given to us. Romans 12:6-8 exhorts us to use what has been given to us for God’s glory. Pastor Glenn R. Taibl, a Luther Seminary colleague, says that people often say that they don’t find scripture to be particularly relevant to their lives; they find the Bible to be a document outside of their life experience and of little use in meeting the realities that they deal with on a day-to-day basis. Pastor Taibl maintains that the problem seems to be one of focus. Rather than asking whether scripture is relevant to our lives, Pastor Taibl says that we should ask whether we are living our life in a way that is relevant to scripture. One has the person at the center of the universe of life, the other has God at the center. Are you living a life relevant to scripture? Would your way of living be sufficient to convict you of being a Christian?

A. Our first response to God’s love for us should be that we love others. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11-12). “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20). Jesus told us to love one another as he has loved us. When we do, people will know that we are his disciples (John 13:34-35).
B. Another response should be that we give of ourselves and our property (time, talent, treasure, body, mind, and spirit) in response to God’s love. Paul says that our gifts are motivated by the example of God’s love for us; they are made voluntarily, not exacted as an extortion (2 Corinthians 9:5). Moreover, Matthew advises that our gifts be made in secret, without practicing our piety before others. Our Father who sees in secret will reward us (Matthew 6:1-4).

C. Martin Luther answered the “how should we respond” question by saying that we should be forgiving of our neighbors, thankful to God, and, above all, loving. What does Luther say about each of these responses?

1. **Forgiving.** As we pray The Lord’s Prayer, we should ask God to forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Do we really want God to hold us to this standard? Think about it. Fortunately, God is a lot more forgiving than we are. In the explanation to the Fifth Petition of The Lord’s Prayer, (Luther's Small Catechism, page 14), Luther states that we are not worthy of forgiveness, rather it (and everything else) is given to us by grace so we will forgive others.

2. **Thankful.** Luther says that we are to begin and end each day in prayer and that our prayers should include giving thanks to God for keeping us safe and for keeping sin away (Luther’s Small Catechism, pages 22 and 23). In other words, giving thanks needs to become part of our daily routine, as natural as waking up and going to bed.

3. **Loving.** Luther summarizes the First Table of the Law (Commandments 1-3) by quoting Matthew 22:37: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The Second Table of the Law (Commandments 4-10) was summarized by quoting Matthew 22:39 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Luther’s Small Catechism, page 45).
II. **HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?** Author Ron Vallet in *Stepping Stones of the Steward* says that only as we respond to God’s love, do we form and gain a sense of purpose as Christian stewards. As creator and owner of everything, God doesn’t need our gifts; however, we need to give. We give to acknowledge our blessings and to serve others (pages 9-10). Vallet doesn’t like the phrase “give until it hurts.” He prefers to say “give until you feel good.” Paul urges us to remember Jesus’ words that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Just as the people of Judah and Jerusalem rejoiced when they gave to rebuild the temple (2 Chronicles 24:10), our giving should be with willing and glad hearts. How do we know if our giving is on the right track? One answer is to ask whether or not we feel good about it? If not, we probably have too great an emphasis on what we are giving up and not enough emphasis on what we have already received. When we give, we should include gifts of time – perhaps one of the most precious commodities in today’s busy world.

A. **Tithing.** Tithing was established by God for his people. God urges his people to bring the full tithe into the storehouse (Malachi 3:10). See also Deuteronomy 12:17. If we give a tenth of our income, have we done our part? Have we done enough? Today, tithing is too often seen as the end, the objective. In the Old Testament, the tithe was only one of the gifts that was expected. Rather than being viewed as the end or objective, tithing should be seen as a measure of our progress on our stewardship journey. Pastor G. William Genszler in his book *Pay or Burn* suggests that we need to distinguish “Christian Tithing” from what he refers to as “The Other Kind.”

1. According to Pastor Genszler, “Christian Tithing” begins with Christ; its whole emphasis is upon Him. Christian tithing begins in man’s understanding of the central fact that Christ came into the world to give Himself upon the cross for humankind. Here is giving and love beyond human understanding. If God has been so good to us, how can we do less than show our thanks in every act of life? How can we do less in our giving than setting aside at least one-tenth of our income as a first step? Christian tithing begins in Christ (page 40).
2. Pastor Genszler, states that “The Other Kind” of tithing was an integral part of
the Mosaic law. It was clearly defined as part of what was expected of God’s
people in the Old Testament (Genesis 14:20 and 28:22). Because this type
of tithing is based upon law and mandate, many Christians feel almost
compelled to reject it. “For all too often the tither comes to feel that he has
now obeyed God’s law and therefore has fulfilled his total obligation as a
Christian. And, of course, he hasn’t. One never fulfills his obligation to God.
He can’t. All he can do is to pour forth his gratitude every way possible for
God’s abundant love. The tithe is one way of saying thanks to God - only one
way — a reasonable way” (page 41).

3. If we choose to accept Old Testament tithing as our stewardship standard, we
must understand that the Old Testament required more than just tithes.
Deuteronomy 12:5-6 says to bring your burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes,
donations, votive gifts, free-will offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and
flocks. Therefore, giving was not limited to the tithe; much more was
expected. In 2 Chronicles 31:5-6, the people of Israel respond with
sacrifices, tithes, and first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce
of the field. Although Old Testament giving was not limited to the tithe, it was
very specific about one type of giving — sacrifices of living or growing things. In
Leviticus 1-7 five forms of sacrificial offerings are detailed. They are:

   a. Burnt Offerings (Leviticus 1:1-17)
   b. Grain Offerings (Leviticus 2:1-16)
   c. Well-being Offering (Leviticus 3:1-17)
   d. Sin Offering (Leviticus 4:1-35)
   e. Guilt Offering (Leviticus 5:14-6:7)

4. We should not reject tithing because Jesus did not. Rather, Jesus makes it clear
that much more is expected of us than just money or property. “Woe to you,
scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have
neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is
these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23). In other words, we must give of our hearts, as well as of our time, talents, and treasure. So long as there is injustice in the world, we, as people of God, have not given enough.

B. Three other biblical giving guides. Tithing is just one biblical giving guide. Others are set forth in both the Old and New Testaments.

1. **First Fruits:** Giving the first and best. “… Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field …” (2 Chronicles 31:5). “Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine” (Proverbs 3:9-10). The story of Cain and Abel illustrates the difference between simply making an offering and making a first fruits offering (Genesis 4:1-15). See also Leviticus 23:9-10 for the first fruits of the harvest.

2. **Proportionate Giving:** Giving from blessings received. “All shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you” (Deuteronomy 16:17). Paul says that God looks for a fair balance in our giving when he says that “the gift is acceptable according to what one has — not according to what one does not have” (2 Corinthians 8:12).

3. **Sacrificial:** Giving beyond apparent means to honor God. “For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints — and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us” (2 Corinthians 8:3-5) [emphasis added].

C. The point of Jesus’ talents parable (Matthew 25:14-30) is that we are to accept, use, and risk the gifts God gives us for the sake of this world. Paul encourages us to “… live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time” (Ephesians 5:15-16). Christian stewardship is about more than money; God wants us to invest our whole person in His people — the people Jesus redeemed with his blood. The point is this: Jesus commissions us to “Go therefore
and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). As Christian stewards, our main task is mission: we are called to be stewards of God’s Word in the world. John Westerhoff says that mission is what we do after we say “I believe” (Stepping Stones, page 4).

D. 2 Corinthians 9:6-13 draws it all together: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others….”

E. Because God entrusts us with much, much is expected of us. Jesus says that “from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48b). Jesus says “give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:38). Christian stewards should trust God.

F. Do we need further assurances that God will be generous and respond to our generosity?

1. Jesus said, “… do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.
But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31-33).

2. Jesus said “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you living your life in a way that would convict you of being a Christian? If so, what are you doing that would convict you? If not, why not?

2. Do you advance God’s work by giving of your time, talents, and treasure? Do you do so cheerfully or grudgingly?

3. In what other ways could you “invest” yourself (and your gifts) in God’s world?

4. How does God promise to reward your generosity? Is it hard to believe? Why or why not?

5. What is harder for you to give: your time, talents, or treasure?