



**what
makes the
WORLD
go round?**

LESSONS FROM COLOSSIANS

Stewardship Series 2020



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What Makes the World Go Round?

“And that’s what makes the world go round.” We have all heard this sentiment expressed in some form or fashion. Usually, it is “money makes the world go round,” or for the less cynical and more romantic it is “love makes the world go round.” A graduate student might suggest that it is “coffee makes the world go round,” while a musician could postulate that it is “harmony” or “good vibes” that keep us spinning. A calculus teacher would say that “math makes the world go round,” and if you ask a scientist what makes the world go round she would explain: “A cloud of gas and dust started to collapse due to its own gravity, and then started spinning, thus flinging our solar system into being. The Earth started spinning too and will keep spinning because space is a vacuum with no friction to stop the spin.”

I’ll take another spin on that: “And God said, ‘Let there be’... and there was.”

This is not to suggest that God created without leveraging gravity, centripetal and centrifugal forces as well as other natural laws (after all, God created those laws too!), but it is to suggest that God is a Giver! God gives life. God gives breath. God gives love. God gives grace. God does not need anything—not you, not me, not the world. But in the core of God’s character is a generous, giving nature that spins everything into being. It is God’s giving that makes the world go round.

At Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church we explore this deep truth, God the Giver, in our annual Stewardship Series. This year is no exception. We will turn the pages of Paul's wonderful letter to the Church at Colossae and consider its messages of grace, gratitude, and generosity.

This booklet is designed to be a journal for you personally as well as a conversation guide for each of our community groups. Each week you will find an exercise for you to interact with individually, and a set of questions to prompt group discussion. I begin here with a couple background questions, and then we will move into the four teachings that correspond with the four messages in our Stewardship Series.

The Background Questions:

- What is the book of Colossians all about?
- What is "Stewardship"?
- Why do we have a Stewardship Pledge Campaign?

The Four Teachings:

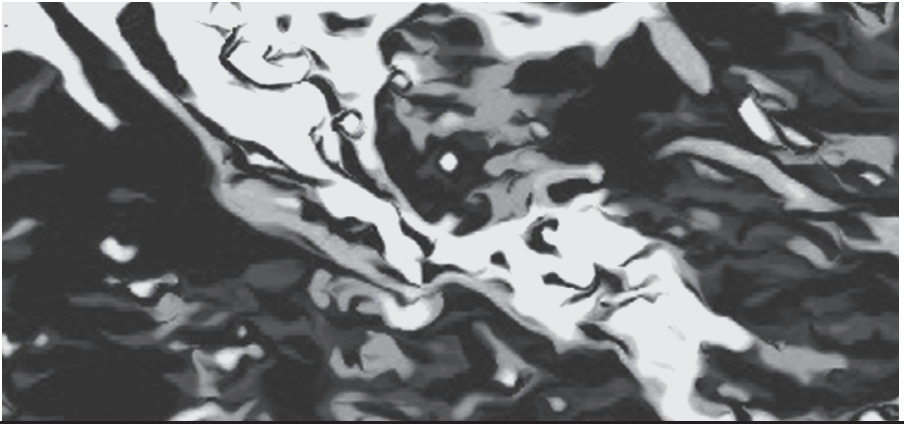
- God the Giver- Week 1- Colossians 1:15-23
- Receiving Grace- Week 2- Colossians 1:1-6
- Responding with Gratitude- Week 3- Colossians 3:12-17
- Cultivating Generosity- Week 4- Colossians 4:2-18

As we embark on this journey together I will be praying over you, and hoping that you will rest in the knowledge (1) that you cannot outgive God, (2) that God's grace is always sufficient, (3) that there's nothing better than gratitude, and (4) that generosity is something God wants for you not from you.

With Prayer and Devotion,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bart Garrett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pastor Bart



**the
background
questions**



What is the book of Colossians all about?

The city of Colossae was located nearly 100 miles from Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus, where it once stood alongside two other important cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Hierapolis and Laodicea stood on either side of the valley with the River Lycus flowing between, only six miles apart and in full view of each other; Colosse straddled the river twelve miles further up. When this letter was written the region was under Roman Rule and called Asia Minor.

This letter was written to a church full of brand new Christians. Having recently converted from other religions and value systems, these new believers were encouraged toward becoming mature in Christ. Colossians is an exhilarating letter, written by Paul, a man who discovered the treasures of the Gospel of Jesus Christ later in his life, and with great zeal, then desires to impart that knowledge to others.

Paul more than likely wrote this letter somewhere between 52 and 56AD while working in Ephesus (see Acts 19:8-10) or while imprisoned there. It is unclear if Paul's reference to being "in chains" (4:3) is metaphorical or might be a description of literal imprisonment, thereby connecting this letter to other letters that he wrote while in prison (Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians).

Theologian N.T. Wright, in his commentary on Colossians, unpacks the theological thrust of the letter quite beautifully:

“Paul has written a letter in which he has distilled his understanding of some of the greatest themes in theology.... God has done what the law, and ‘Wisdom’, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to achieve reconciliation, he dealt with sin on the cross, so that the life which the law had sought to give, the true life of God’s people, might be brought to expression in those who, through faith and baptism, belong to Jesus Christ. The church need look—must look—nowhere else for forgiveness for the past, for maturity in the present, or for future hope.”

We might say that a life lived this way is a life that is stewarded under God, which leads us to our second background question.

What is Stewardship?

At first glance, “stewardship” is a bit of a strange word isn’t it? It sounds arcane, or if you did grow up in church, it sounds BIBLICAL (all caps intentional). You are probably imagining a stodgy, old, bespectacled white guy teaching Sunday School, looking down his nose and muttering underneath a frown: “Today we will talk about stewardship.” Yet, this word has picked up a little steam over the past ten to fifteen years. For instance, as companies have begun to pay more attention to a triple-bottom-line, there is talk about being good stewards of the profit, the people, and the planet. And REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc.) puts out an annual “Environmental Stewardship Report.”

And so, all of us might all be acting “Christianly” without realizing it! Because, yes indeed, stewardship is a term found in Scripture and is a concept grounded in Judeo-Christian belief. In Psalm 115:16 the Psalmist exclaims: “The heavens are the Lord’s, but the earth he has given to the human race.” Wow! And the poetry penned in the Psalms connects all the way back to the first story of Scripture, the story of the Garden of Eden. There, Adam and Eve were charged by God to “exercise dominion” (stewardship) over all that God had created (Genesis 1:28), and they were placed in the garden to cultivate it (Genesis 2:14). Is it even possible to overstate how tremendous is this responsibility and opportunity? That we are accountable to God to preserve the welfare and to maximize the potential of all the earth!

At the risk of running right past this, let me stop to say it plainly: Stewardship is Ownership's opposite! Ownership says that what we have we earned. Stewardship says that what we have is a gift from God. Ownership says that what we have we must cling to. Stewardship says that what we have is available to others. Ownership says that I am a reservoir. Stewardship says that I am a river. Ownership says to spend or save in order to pursue status or security. Stewardship says, first, you share. Ownership says that I own my life. Stewardship says that my life is on loan from God: "That I am not my own, but that I was bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).

We will go into more detail on stewardship in the four teachings that follow. For now, let me simply suggest that most of us have a long way to go in understanding who we are as stewards rather than owners. But the more we become stewards and the less we become owners, then the less guilty we will feel and the more free we will be. It sure does take the pressure off when we know all we have is a gift from God. It sure does cause anxiety to dissipate when we trust in God's extravagant giving rather than on our earning potential. It sure does make joy abound when we experience how generosity makes our heart three sizes too big rather than three sizes too small!



Why do we have a “Stewardship Pledge Campaign”?

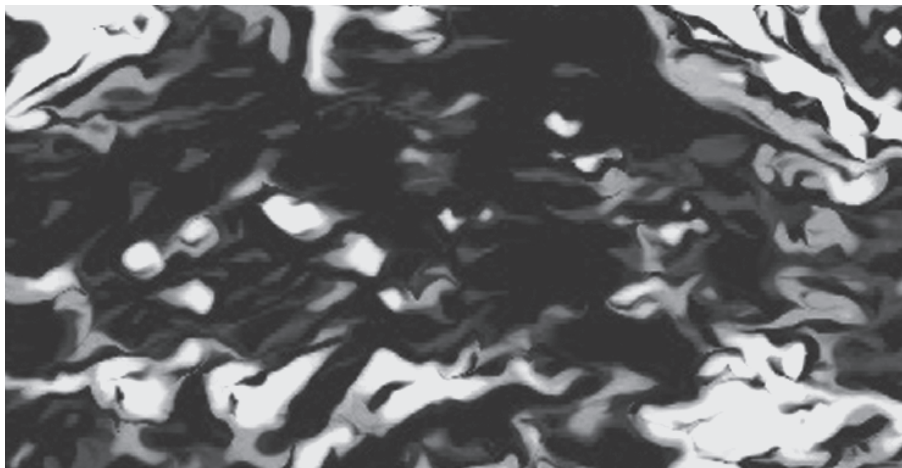
Perhaps you have experienced a Capital Campaign in another church—the church was raising funds to build a community center, to improve the sanctuary, or to expand the Fellowship Hall. You gave a gift in response to a particular vision or unique need. You may have also experienced capital campaigns in schools and nonprofit organizations.

A Stewardship Pledge Campaign is not a Capital Campaign. Instead, a pledge campaign happens every year and maximizes our church’s “everyday” giving toward the general fund budget. Each November, every person that calls WCPC their home church submits a giving pledge for the following calendar year (January through December). This pledge is a “pledge of intent”—what you intend to give for that year. Sometimes unforeseen events or circumstances might cause you to need to give less, while at other times, they may allow you to give more.

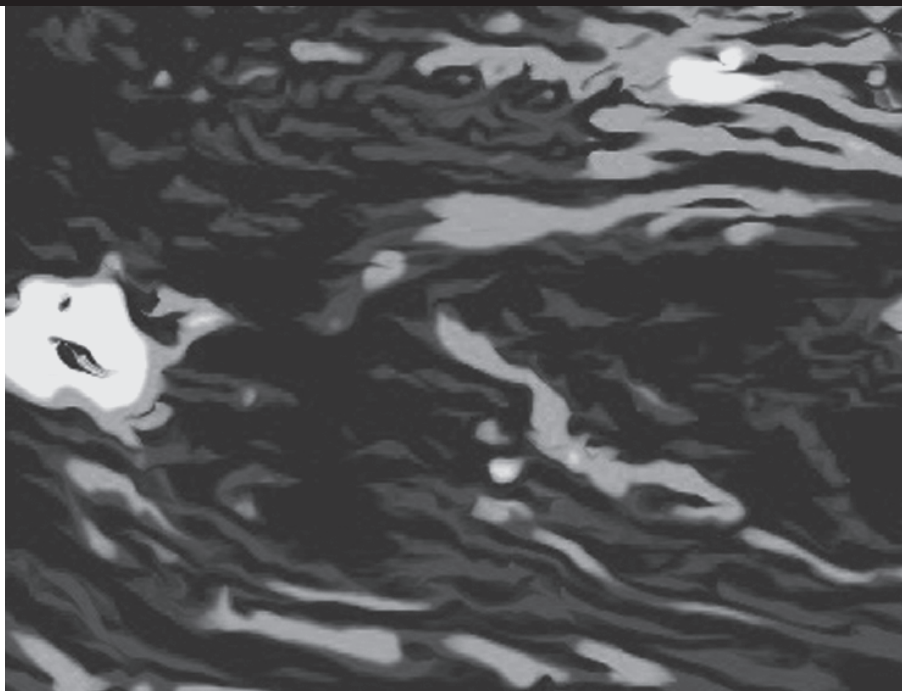
Taking time to complete a pledge card is a faith commitment. It allows you as an individual, as a couple, and even as a family to invest some intentional time, effort, and prayer in determining how much you will be able to give. This exercise may put you on the journey of giving for the first time, or on the path toward giving more consistently, generously, sacrificially, and joyfully.

The pledge campaign not only helps you to plan well, but it also allows your church to be both prudent and faithful in the building of a budget. Every sound church budget includes provisions for both nutrition and exercise—we need to be nourished in the faith, and we need to exercise our gifts in ministry and mission. An annual pledge campaign will help to ensure that we aren't merely surviving year to year, but thriving—not clinching our fists while holding on for dear life, hoping that we “make budget,” but rather, open-handedly building our budget wisely. Our general fund budget is built to support our local congregation – as we care for the sick and hurting, support children and families, challenge and encourage our students with the gospel, provide excellent and reverent Sunday worship, train in Christian formation, and equip for ministry as we love and serve our city and world. Included in the General Fund are our operating expenses plus our support for local and global ministry partners.

In the pages to follow and in the weeks to come, you'll hear more about how to pledge, how to discern how much to pledge, who will see your pledge, and how much of your giving should go to your local church and how much goes to other ministries.



the four teachings



Colossians 1:9-23

⁹ For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. ¹⁴ In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

²¹ Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds as expressed in your evil actions. ²² But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through his death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before him— ²³ if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a servant of it.

You cannot outgive God!

It has already been suggested that it is God's giving that makes the world go round. God the Creator gives love and life. God the Redeemer gives grace and peace. This passage in Colossians 1 contains one of the first songs of the early church, written as a doxology to a Giving God. It is a song that exalts the person and work of Jesus, who is not just the image of the invisible God, but also the second person of the Trinity, and the one who was incarnated as a human being so that we might know him personally. Through the gift of the person and work of Christ we learn that we cannot outgive God!

Notice what God gives in this passage: God gives knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding (v9). God gives power and might to strengthen us, granting us endurance and patience that flows into a joyful gratitude for an inheritance, that, not surprisingly, God also gives to us (v11,12)! God gives us rescue from darkness, transfer to light, and God gives a redemption that is manifested in the forgiveness of sins (v13,14). By the time we get to the hymn about Jesus in verse 15, Paul has already chronicled at least fourteen gifts that we have been given!

The hymn itself (v15-20), praises Jesus (a gift from God the Father!), and extols his giving in Creation and Redemption (or, Re-Creation). We could spend much more time on the theological concepts in this song that would make for a meaty main course no doubt, but here, I would like to draw your attention to one refrain: He is before all things, and by him all things hold together (v17).

Has someone ever said to: You've got to hold it together. You've got to pull yourself together! Well, here is another gift God gives to us: You don't! You can't! In fact, what might be most unique about Christianity as compared to other world religions and cultural value systems is that becoming Christian begins with simply admitting to God that you cannot pull yourself together!

We live under the immense pressure to "make something great of ourselves." But as our Creator, God has already made something

**God has already made
something great out of us.
What a gift from a great giver!**

great out of us. What a gift from a great giver! He created us in his image and then said, "It is very good!" When we fail, we live under the immense pressure to "make it right" or "pull yourself back together." But, as our Redeemer (Re-Creator, Forgiver), it is Jesus who makes it right for us; it is Jesus who puts us back together again.

Imagine what it would be like to wake up each day with the pressure off: You don't have to make something great of yourself.

**You don't have to make
something great of yourself.
God already did! You don't
have to hold it all together.
God always does!**

God already did! You don't have to hold it all together. God always does! God is a Great Giver!

And, in the coming weeks, as this assurance hopefully seeps in more and more, and as you grow up in the faith more and more, and as this causes you to give more and more of your time, talent, and treasure to the service of this Great God, might you rest in this promise: You cannot outgive God! Don't be afraid. At God's hand are eternal pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16).

JOURNAL REFLECTION

In what moments in life have I truly experienced the grace of God?

What sort of practices assist me in truly appreciating the grace of God?

How do I, at times, live in the flesh?

How do I, at times, live under the law?

What does it look like when I live by the Spirit?

How would my closest relationship look if I were more able to truly appreciate the grace of God?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Introduction:

- Practice the Scripture Memory Passage for this series (Colossians 3:12-17).
- Answer the question: How did the practice or collective action committed to last week draw you closer to Jesus and more deeply into His mission?
- Read this week's passage two times through.
- Pray: Ask God to illumine your heart and prepare your mind for discussion.

Questions for Exploration:

- What stands out to you / disrupts you / grabs your attention in the Scripture? (Everyone who would like to, share. Please take less than 1 minute per person to share as this section is intended to be brief.)
- How is God's Word connecting to your life / your work / your neighbors in this moment? (Read this question and then read the Scripture passage again for a third time. Take a moment to ponder the passage. Then, take 1 minute each to share.)

Particular Questions for this week's discussion:

- Would you be willing to share one reflection from your Journal Reflection?
- "You cannot outgive God." What does it mean to wrestle with this truth as a fearful or anxious person? What does it mean to wrestle with this truth as a person who might tend to overcommit or overextend? What does it mean to wrestle with this truth when it comes to your personal/family budget?

Questions for Discernment:

- What themes are arising for the group? How might the Holy Spirit be raising something to your collective awareness?
- In light of this week's passage and theme, what action or spiritual practice is God calling you to that you can commit to individually or collectively this week?
- Pray through Colossians 3:12-17 each week.

week

2

RECEIVING GRACE

Colossians 1:1-6

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy our brother:

² To the saints in Christ at Colossae, who are faithful brothers and sisters. Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints ⁵ because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. It is bearing fruit and growing all over the world, just as it has among you since the day you heard it and came to truly appreciate God's grace.

Nov 8

Do you truly appreciate God's grace?

Sometimes grace defies definition because it is described in myriad ways or becomes so multifaceted that it appears to lose its luster. Indeed, the grace of God is unfathomable in its depth, and it reaches way beyond the ever-expanding edge of the cosmos. Yet, we must seek to define it clearly so we can endeavor to apprehend it, or better stated, be apprehended by it. There is an acronym often passed about that has stood strong for ages:

**God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense**

Paul begins this letter to the church in Colossae by describing the Gospel that is bearing fruit and growing all over the world (v6). The Gospel, the "good news," is that "Christ is Lord." In the Roman Empire where the proclamation, "Caesar is Lord," was engraved on the currency, Paul is heralding a new King that doesn't brandish a sword, but bears a cross. The cross of Christ was used by God as payment for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). And the impending Resurrection was not only the validation of the merit of that payment, but the downpayment of the promise of God's future (and ultimate) restoration of all things.

Before Christ came, there were two ways to live: One could live "in the flesh" (see Galatians 5:17; 6:8; Romans 7:5) or one could live "under the law" (see Galatians 3:10; 4:4-7, 21). In the flesh was Paul's description of humanity's plight apart from God. Adam

and Eve wanted life without God; they wanted to be their own king and queen, and the rest of humanity followed suit. And yet, to live in the flesh is eventually to become captive to deceptive beliefs, hollow practices, and empty pleasures. The Jewish people, chosen by God to be a light to the world, no longer wanted to live in the flesh, but were called to live under the law. The law was not a bad thing in and of itself. Paul calls it a pointer and a tutor (see Galatians 3:24)—it can ultimately point and lead us to Christ. However, for the law to fulfill its work, it must cause us to come to terms with the bitter reality that we can never keep the terms of the law ourselves. It breaks us as we fall short and miss the mark.

Therefore, living under the law becomes a curse to us. Enter Jesus: Jesus becomes that curse for us (see Galatians 3:13) as he goes to the cross to pay the penalty of our law-breaking. That's GRACE: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Christ pays our debt with his life, and we receive the riches of healing and wholeness, cleansing

Christ pays our debt with his life, and we receive the riches of healing and wholeness, cleansing and forgiveness. That's grace!

and forgiveness. That's grace! And it is "by the Spirit" (see Galatians 5:16-23) that we receive and live into this grace.

This week our "Big Idea" is a question: Do you truly appreciate God's grace (Colossians 1:6)? I am using Paul's word, appreciate, but we would do well to also use words like "amazing" and "astounding" and "awe-inspiring." Imagine waking up every single day without feeling enslaved to your flimsy desires and empty passions, not living in the flesh, but by the Spirit. Imagine waking

up every single day without experiencing the guilt and shame of not measuring up, not living under the law, but by the Spirit. This journey begins by being awe-struck by God's amazing Grace.

JOURNAL REFLECTION

At what time in my life have I most experienced God, the Giver?

What sort of emotions did that produce in me?

Where am I most feeling the pressure or strain to hold it all together?

What would it look like to allow God to relieve me of that burden?

In what areas of my life am I fearful that I might outgive God?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Introduction:

- Practice the Scripture Memory Passage for this series (Colossians 3:12-17).
- Answer the question: How did the practice or collective action committed to last week draw you closer to Jesus and more deeply into His mission?
- Read this week's passage two times through.
- Pray: Ask God to illumine your heart and prepare your mind for discussion.

Questions for Exploration:

- What stands out to you / disrupts you / grabs your attention in the Scripture? (Everyone who would like to, share. Please take less than 1 minute per person to share as this section is intended to be brief.)
- How is God's Word connecting to your life / your work / your neighbors in this moment? (Read this question and then read the Scripture passage again for a third time. Take a moment to ponder the passage. Then, take 1 minute each to share.)

Particular Questions for this week's discussion:

- Would you be willing to share one reflection from your Journal Reflection?
- "Do I truly appreciate the grace of God?" Spend time as a group sharing the spiritual practices that best allow members of the group to truly appreciate the grace of God. Allow time for each person to select one new practice to try for a month.

Questions for Discernment:

- What themes are arising for the group? How might the Holy Spirit be raising something to your collective awareness?
- In light of this week's passage and theme, what action or spiritual practice is God calling you to that you can commit to individually or collectively this week?
- Pray through Colossians 3:12-17 each week.

week

3

RESPONDING WITH GRATITUDE

Nov 15

Colossians 3:12-17

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

There's nothing better than gratitude!

Bertrand Russell, British philosopher, and perhaps the most famous Atheist of the 20th century, was once asked in an interview: "What do you miss most in not believing in God?" Russell folded his hands together and remarked with no hesitation: "Not having someone to thank." We are built to say, "Thank you." God designed us this way!

Our passage for the week, Colossians 3:12-17 (our church memory verse), is punctuated by gratitude: "And be thankful" (3:15). "Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (3:16). "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

Notice in this passage that the thankfulness flows toward God. Because God is Giver, and God gives grace upon grace already given (see John 1:16), when we are focused on God and these gifts we cannot help but be grateful. Yet, we retain proclivities of self-focus and even self-absorption. We take our eyes off of God and every good and perfect gift that comes from Him (James 1:17), and dissatisfaction begins to seep in, and our hearts, beat by beat, begin to become ungrateful.

I will take this occasion to admit that gratification can sometimes get in the way of gratitude. I seek to be gratified by the approval of others or by a selfish sense of accomplishment, and the gratitude I seek to hold in my heart toward God, slips away. The longer I follow Jesus the sooner I recognize the disastrous effect that my pursuit of gratification can have on my soul. Appeased for a moment of self-congratulation, I then begin to slip into an abyss

of dissatisfaction and ungratefulness. A practice I have found

A practice I have found helpful is to remind myself that, “It is right to give God thanks and praise.”

helpful is to remind myself that, “It is right to give God thanks and praise.” I begin to enumerate all of the gifts that God has given to me, and gratitude begins to take root and grow again.

Our Big Idea this week is this: “There’s nothing better than Gratitude!” This is true for two principal reasons: First, gratitude bubbles up into worship and worship is what we are created and called to do. Second, gratitude bubbles over into compassion and kindness towards others, and as we will see next week, this effervescence becomes generosity.

On the first point, G.K. Chesterton, often the master at turning a phrase, writes: “Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” The image this evokes for me is of a small child simply rolling around the floor, clutching her sides as she belly laughs uncontrollably. And she is doing this in the presence of God, simply tickled by God’s amazing grace, and her requisite glee is a simple act of worship.

On the second point, dissatisfied and ungrateful people who live for self-gratification struggle with being kind and compassionate. Not so with the grateful ones! I cannot put words to this as can Henri Nouwen and Cornelius Plantinga, two writers who have, for many years now, provoked me to be grateful. I close with their words:

“Gratitude is a response to grace. The compassionate life is a grateful life, and actions born out of gratefulness are not compulsory but free, not somber but joyful, not fanatical but liberating.”

-Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*.

“Since faith fastens on God’s benevolence, it yields gratitude, which in turn sponsors risk-taking in the service of others. Grateful people want to let themselves go; faithful people dare to do it. People tethered to God by faith let themselves go because they know they will get themselves back. Grateful people overflow a little, especially with thanksgiving and passed-on kindness. But they do not therefore lack discipline. In fact, self-indulgence tends to suppress gratitude; self-discipline tends to generate it.”

-Cornelius Plantinga,
Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin.

JOURNAL REFLECTION

When have I felt most grateful in my life? To whom? For what?

What does gratitude feel like to me?

When I am not in a season or spirit of gratitude, what does that feel like? (Put words to those feelings. Words like dissatisfaction or discontent.)

Is it hard for me to be grateful toward God? Why? Or, why not?

Who is someone in my life that I should say “thank you” to right now? Give them a call or write them a letter.

I will set a timer for ten minutes, and make a list of everything that God has done for me. I won’t stop until the ten minutes are up. Then I will pray that list back to God. What did this experience evoke in me?

I am noticing that I have Stewardship Pledge
Campaign Homework this week.



Stewardship Pledge Campaign Homework

Because our church has not done a pledge campaign in quite some time, and because giving a gift or giving in this way may be new to you, please feel free to read ahead into next week's lesson, Cultivating Generosity. As you settle into this homework, it might also be helpful to approach it much like you approach other financial considerations in your life. For example, if you are attempting to get out of debt, save for retirement, or buy a car or home, then you will likely sit down with your spouse (if applicable), a financial advisor, your bank, a friend who is good with money, or with parents and grandparents. They might help you set some goals and will offer necessary perspective. How odd that most of us never even bother doing this with our giving. But what if you were to sit down with your spouse, or good friend, or community group leader, and have a conversation about setting goals that will help you become a generous giver? Don't be afraid to try it!

Spend 10 minutes in prayer each day over your pledge commitment (card provided).

DAYS 1-3

Have a conversation with your spouse (if applicable) about next year's pledge of intent. If you are not married, consider having this conversation with a trusted friend in your community group. Pray together.

DAY 4

On a scratch piece of paper, write down the amount that you intend to give weekly, monthly, or annually for 2021. Determine if this makes you a first-time, consistent, generous, sacrificial, and/or joyful giver.

DAY 5

Revisit the amount and ask God: Does this seem like the appropriate amount? Should I consider giving a bit more? Or a bit less? Write down the final amount on the card.

DAY 6

Bring your card to church on Sunday, November 22nd and 29th at any service and drop in the blue offering box. Alternatively, you can go online at wcpres.org/give to pledge, drop in the library dropbox on campus, or mail it to the church office. We will offer a special prayer over all of the pledges.

DAY 7

GROUP DISCUSSION

Introduction:

- Practice the Scripture Memory Passage for this series (Colossians 3:12-17).
- Answer the question: How did the practice or collective action committed to last week draw you closer to Jesus and more deeply into His mission?
- Read this week's passage two times through.
- Pray: Ask God to illumine your heart and prepare your mind for discussion.

Questions for Exploration:

- What stands out to you / disrupts you / grabs your attention in the Scripture? (Everyone who would like to, share. Please take less than 1 minute per person to share as this section is intended to be brief.)
- How is God's Word connecting to your life / your work / your neighbors in this moment? (Read this question and then read the Scripture passage again for a third time. Take a moment to ponder the passage. Then, take 1 minute each to share.)

Particular Questions for this week's discussion:

- Would you be willing to share one reflection from your Journal Reflection?
- "There is nothing better than gratitude!" Discuss this Big Idea.
- Spend a few minutes talking about the Stewardship Pledge Campaign homework and what that experience was like for those in the group.

Questions for Discernment:

- What themes are arising for the group? How might the Holy Spirit be raising something to your collective awareness?
- In light of this week's passage and theme, what action or spiritual practice is God calling you to that you can commit to individually or collectively this week?
- Pray through Colossians 3:12-17 each week.

Colossians 4:2-18

² Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving.

³ At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains, ⁴ so that I may make it known as I should. ⁵ Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

⁷ Tychicus, our dearly loved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and so that he may encourage your hearts. ⁹ He is coming with Onesimus, a faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you greetings, as does Mark, Barnabas's cousin (concerning whom you have received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), ¹¹ and so does Jesus who is called Justus. These alone of the circumcised are my coworkers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. He is always wrestling for you in his prayers, so that you can stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills. ¹³ For I testify about him that he works hard for you, for those in Laodicea, and for those in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke, the dearly loved physician, and Demas send you greetings. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her home. ¹⁶ After this letter has been read at your gathering, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And tell Archippus, "Pay attention to the ministry you have received in the Lord, so that you can accomplish it." ¹⁸ I, Paul, am writing this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Generosity is something God wants *for* you, not *from* you.

This might feel strange: The fourth and final week of our annual stewardship series is entitled, “Cultivating Generosity,” yet the fourth and final chapter of the book of Colossians does not even mention the word generosity. But don’t be alarmed. I am not shoehorning this in—actually, Chapter 4 is chock full of the generous outcroppings and overflow of the grace of God and the response of gratitude. All of the prayers mentioned. All of the people mentioned. All of the churches plopped across the landscape. Chapter 4, in response to grace and with gratitude, is a web woven together in generosity.

Go back and read the passage again. If you get distracted or stumble over the Jewish and Greek names, substitute “Brian” and “Camille,” “Nathan” and “Claire.” As you read, can you feel this passage brimming with life—the generosity of lives well lived seems to cascade right off the page. These fellow servants of Christ are generous with one another in their prayers, provisions, comfort, love, and joy. And their church planting mission is built on the desire for “God to open doors” (4:3) so that many friends, neighbors, and coworkers might embrace the Christian faith. Generosity!

And notice what is not present in this passage: Hoarding, envy, greed, jealousy, malice. These are not people who are building up their wealth for status or security. They are not making a name for themselves, but they are serving under the name of Jesus. Note Epaphras (“Brian”), a man generous enough to “wrestle in his prayers” for people that he doesn’t yet know personally!

To find yourself in a chapter like this, in a story like this, one of the first truths that you will need to embrace is this one: Generosity is something that God wants for you, not from you. Think about it. God, who created the heavens and the earth with the power of his word, and who “possesses every animal in the forest, and who owns the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:10), does not need anything. He has it all! God could have chosen to meet every need and serve every person with his own resources and in his own strength. But he did not! Instead, like Luke the physician (4:14) and Nympha (4:15), who hosted church in her house, you and I are called by God and commissioned into service as generous

**...you and I are called by God
and commissioned into service
as generous people.**

people. God wants generosity for us. God knows it is how we were designed to live because God designed us to live this way!

Theologian N.T. Wright, in *Dancing Trinities*, presents this so well:

“In the normal and healthy Christian life, everything proceeds from God’s generosity, and everything returns to God in thanksgiving. Grace, generosity and gratitude: these are not optional extras of Christian living, but are the very heart of it all.”

After practice and repetition, Generosity can become a rhythm and pattern to your life that will buck against the world’s patterns of spending and consumption. Tracy Chapman captured it well in one of her many storytelling ballads of the 1980s:

*Consume more than you need
This is the dream
Make you pauper
Or make you queen
I won't die lonely
I'll have it all prearranged
A grave that's deep and wide enough
For me and all my mountains of things*

-Tracy Chapman, Mountains of Things, 1987

We know that we cannot take it with us. I have never seen a hearse pulling a U-haul. And so, generosity works much like a dialysis machine—it cycles money out of your life and removes impurities like greed, envy, guilt, fear, and pride often attached to it. Generosity will allow the eulogy at your funeral to recount your large-spirited, compassionate way with people rather than half-way hide the notion that “he meant well.”

I conclude our Week 4 Lesson by answering two questions I often receive as a pastor:

- How do I become generous?
- But why should I give to the local church?



How do I become generous?

Here are my suggestions:

● **START EARLY**

Generosity does not begin when you are moving up the ladder in your late 30s. It begins when you are in college or when you take your first job at hardly minimum wage. This practice will allow you to build a habit that will last a lifetime. Being generous with your giving at an early age will also train you to not live up to the very limits of what you have. To live over your means is to get in “debt to debt.” To live within your means is to be prudent. But to live well within your means is to create space for generosity. And, it is actually easier to give when you have less to give. If you were to take the tithe, the giving of 10% mentioned below, as an example: It is much easier to give \$10 of \$100 than \$100 of \$1000 than \$10,000 of \$100,000 than \$100,000 of \$1,000,000 because there is a lot more you can do, buy, or be with \$10,000 than with \$10!

● **START YOUR KIDS EARLY**

As a parent of three teenagers, my most consistent hope and prayer for each one is that they would know the grace of God, would respond in gratitude, and would lead generous lives. Each of my three daughters had three jars ordered and labeled in this way: Give, Save, and Spend. The first part of every dollar went into the “Give” jar. And this leads me to my next piece of practical advice...

● **GIVE FIRST**

If you were hosting a celebrity or dignitary in your own home for dinner, I would imagine that you would not rifle through the fridge to find the leftovers stacked in the back—yesterday’s roast beef or

last week's cottage cheese. Instead, you would give of your best and first fruits—you would plan the menu weeks in advance, and shop at the "fancy" grocery store. God wants your first and your best, not your last and leftover. Consider making your generous giving the first check you write or first autopay draft after you receive your paycheck. Cultivate the practice of over-giving rather than over-spending or over-saving.

● **CONSIDER 10%**

There are plenty of complex, biblical interpretations that endeavor to erase the "first-fruits giving of 10%," called the tithe. These teachings view the tithe as "old school"—under the law of the Old Testament rather than the grace of the New. And yet, the plain and simple reading of most texts (e.g. start with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount) might suggest that the giving of 10% is actually "the floor and not the ceiling" (Tim Keller) of generosity, the "training wheels" (Randy Alcorn) of generosity. Here is a suggestion: Make this a five to ten-year goal for you and see what happens. You might even find yourself one day stretching well beyond the tithe.

● **START SOMEWHERE**

It might be a mistake on your part and unloving on my part if I were to suggest that you must start with the tithe. You might have a lot to sort out concerning your finances, so don't be paralyzed by what might feel like a large number, an unattainable impossibility. Instead, start somewhere! Give 1% this year, and try to give 2 or 3% the next.

● **TELL STORIES**

If you are a "seasoned veteran" in our church, please tell us your stories of generosity! People in their 40s, 30s, 20s, and teens need to hear that God provided for you—that He cared for you every step of the way. We need to be inspired by stories of sacrificial and joyful generosity. Tell us all about it. We want to listen!



But why should I give to the local church?

I readily acknowledge that the church can have a littered history of financial malfeasance. As with any institution, the church can be riddled with sin and evil that becomes greater than the sum of its parts. And when the church fails, she should ask forgiveness. Yet, when she is singing the way Jesus intended her to sing, the church can do mighty things. In fact...

The Church is God's ordinary means of doing extraordinary things!

Jesus built the church and pledged that even hell itself would not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18). Jesus loved the church so much that he gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). And, the Apostle Paul was on a mission to change the world. Paul's world was more war-torn and impoverished than ours. There were fewer educational opportunities for all, there was poor sanitation in the cities, there was more injustice in the streets. And what did Paul do to address these ills? He planted churches all over the known world. Paul knew that the church was not merely a limited "Social Service Provider" (SSP) as she is called in our day, but instead, was a "Direct Service Provider," a DSP that offers baptism (re-creation), communion (restoration), teaching, pastoring, counseling, the formation of children and students, service and outreach both locally and globally, and the list goes on and on.

Further, the church is both sustainable (a 2000 year organizational history) and strategic (the premiere social network!), making her a worthy investment. Malcolm Gladwell once wrote that social networking online does not bring full revolution because the ties

are too weak; instead, activism must involve “strong ties and real presence.” Look no further than the church: The church builds social, relational, emotional, financial, and spiritual capital that grants strong and lasting impact generation after generation.

And, just in case you are wondering, people that give to their local church are far more generous to other causes (see Robert Putnam’s *American Grace*). Yes, you read that correctly. Christians that prioritize giving to their local church give more generously to many other noble causes. Why? Because generosity begets generosity. It’s contagious.

Ron Sider’s challenge in his book review of “*Passing the Plate: Why Americans don’t give away more Money*,” is a fitting conclusion:

“Imagine what Christians could accomplish if they would just tithe. If just the ‘committed Christians’ (defined as those who attend church at least a few times a month or profess to be “strong” or “very strong” Christians) in America would tithe, there would be an extra 46 billion dollars a year available for kingdom work. To make that figure more concrete, the authors suggest dozens of different things that \$46 billion would fund each year: for example, 150,000 new indigenous missionaries; 50,000 additional theological students in the developing world; 5 million more microloans to poor entrepreneurs; the food, clothing and shelter for all 6,500,000 current refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; all the money for a global campaign to prevent and treat malaria; resources to sponsor 20 million needy children worldwide. Their conclusion is surely right: ‘Reasonably generous financial giving of ordinary American Christians would generate staggering amounts of money that could literally change the world.’”

JOURNAL REFLECTION

Something in this week's lesson rubs me the wrong way. What is it? Why does it bother me? What might this friction teach me about myself?

Would I consider myself to be a generous person? Would those closest to me agree?

What do I hope people will say of me at my eulogy?

What might be inhibiting me from cultivating a growing generosity?

“Generosity is what God wants for me and not from me.” Do I agree with this statement? Why or why not?

What sort of practical suggestion in this lesson might I take to heart and seek to implement in my life?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Introduction:

- Practice the Scripture Memory Passage for this series (Colossians 3:12-17).
- Answer the question: How did the practice or collective action committed to last week draw you closer to Jesus and more deeply into His mission?
- Read this week's passage two times through.
- Pray: Ask God to illumine your heart and prepare your mind for discussion.

Questions for Exploration:


- What stands out to you / disrupts you / grabs your attention in the Scripture? (Everyone who would like to, share. Please take less than 1 minute per person to share as this section is intended to be brief.)
- How is God's Word connecting to your life / your work / your neighbors in this moment? (Read this question and then read the Scripture passage again for a third time. Take a moment to ponder the passage. Then, take 1 minute each to share.)

Particular Questions for this week's discussion:

- Would you be willing to share one reflection from your Journal Reflection?
- We seek the counsel of financial planners and investors. But do we seek counsel on giving? What would it look like if our community group desired that every participant become more like Jesus in their ability to be generous?

Questions for Discernment:

- What themes are arising for the group? How might the Holy Spirit be raising something to your collective awareness?
- In light of this week's passage and theme, what action or spiritual practice is God calling you to that you can commit to individually or collectively this week?
- Pray through Colossians 3:12-17 each week.



Works Explored

William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*.

F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*.

James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*.

N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.



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