

LESSON ONE  
*Our Generous  
God*

**FOCAL TEXT**

Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100;  
John 3:16;  
2 Corinthians 8:8–9;  
Philippians 2:5–8;  
James 1:17–18

**BACKGROUND**

Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100;  
John 3:16;  
2 Corinthians 8:8–9;  
Philippians 2:5–8;  
James 1:17–18

**MAIN IDEA**

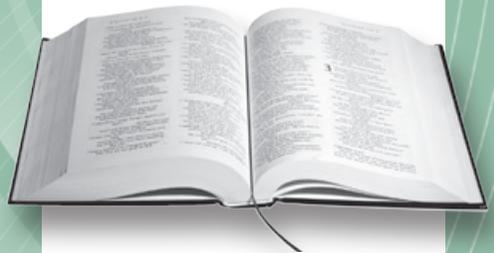
All the Bible reveals  
God's generous nature  
and actions in creation,  
redemption, and all of life.

**QUESTION TO EXPLORE**

Is the God you believe in  
uncaring, stingy, or generous?

**TEACHING AIM**

To lead adults to acknowledge  
God's generous nature and  
actions and to state what God's  
generosity means for their lives



**UNIT ONE**

**Beginning with Grace**

## BIBLE COMMENTS

### Understanding the Context

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The first lesson in this collection of studies on *Living Generously for Jesus' Sake* begins exactly where we must start when we think of generosity. We must begin with God. These lessons explore models of generous living in Scripture, samples of biblical warnings about the consequences of failing to live generously, and finally, instructions on how we can live generous lives. Yet, no matter which avenue we pursue in considering the biblical teaching about generosity, we always end up at the source: our God is generous.

Of course, we can read nearly any passage of Scripture from any of the sixty-six books in our Bible to find evidence of a generous God. Throughout the biblical account, God very freely offers his abundance at every opportunity. However, the verses in these lessons highlight the *climactic texts* concerning the generosity of God. They capture the essence of our intensely generous God.

Since God's generosity is lavishly abundant, there is certainly no way that such bounty can be earned. The catalyst for God's extravagance is certainly not the recipient's behavior, deserving such treatment. It almost sounds silly to think of what humanity might have done to earn creation. Our theology instructs that fallen people can do nothing to earn salvation, but rather "it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).<sup>1</sup>

Why, then, is God so generous? The answer is simple, yet profound: grace. By his grace, God's children experience the kindness of the Father. There is nothing earned, nothing deserved, only received. Our generous God begins with grace.

In this first lesson, God gives both through his creation and through his redemption of the fallen creation. Through it all, a generous grace provides the background to how God's people are called to live.

## Interpreting the Scriptures

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### Our Generous God Creates (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100)

**Genesis 1:1.** Our history begins with God. In no uncertain terms, Genesis declares that before anything, there was God. As the Author of all things, God created the setting for his masterpiece in humankind.

The verb “created” translates a special Hebrew word that describes the action of God in Scripture. People do not create in the sense that God creates. We may build, form, sculpt, design, plant, manufacture, invent, or construct, as our best imitation; but only God originated or truly “created” as he summoned the world into existence.

The uniqueness of the word is tied to the action of God. In the context of these lessons, that distinctiveness of creation includes the truth that God did not need to create the world (see Acts 17:24–25). God did not create the “heavens and the earth” because he was in need of something that the creation could provide him. God created because of his generous grace.

**Psalm 100.** This psalm of thanksgiving summons worshipers to praise the Lord with joy because the good God has made his people, and he cares specifically for us.

This time, the idea of God’s act of creating is a broader word than the one in Genesis 1:1. This word that is translated “made” can describe forming something out of oneself. Since God was before anything else, then all things that God made ultimately came out of the generous spirit of God himself.

The psalmist adds that not only did God make his people, but God also cares for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. God’s generosity in his creation continues into his faithfulness throughout all time.

### Our Generous God Redeems (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 8:8–9; Philippians 2:5–8)

**John 3:16.** As the first verse that most young students of the Bible learn, these words describe the greatest example of God’s generosity. Could it be by divine plan that one of the most memorized verses in the Bible is also one of the most descriptive of God’s abundant action in redeeming

his people? When a small child recites these words, he or she professes the greatest significance of the generous nature of God.

The context of the verse further supports this contrast between simplistic faith and complex generosity. Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling body, sought answers from Jesus under the anonymity of night. When he asked Jesus to explain what Jesus meant when Jesus called for people to be born again, the Savior offered the profound words of this verse. Their meaning describes the most astoundingly generous gift in the history of the world, and yet they are spoken to answer a childlike question about the nature of being born twice.

No greater example of the generosity of God exists than God's giving of "his one and only Son." God could have fashioned another mountain and declared salvation to any who could climb it. He could have designed another species of fish and announced that everyone who caught one of the fish would be saved. Instead, God gave the one gift that he could not re-create. God gave what could not be replaced. God gave his only Son. He gave that of which he had only one.

In God's redemption of our souls, we witness the greatest act of generous grace possible.

**2 Corinthians 8:8–9.** In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he challenged them to reveal the willingness of their giving in light of the generosity of the Macedonian churches. Even though the missionary praised the sacrificial way in which these churches supported his ministry in the first seven verses of the chapter, it is never enough to match one's giving to that of another congregation. Even if the Corinthian church had given equal or above the other churches, the ultimate standard for their sacrifice was much higher. They must measure their giving by the gracious giving of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was "rich," abundantly filled with everything, in need of nothing. He became "poor," completely destitute and impoverished, denying what was rightly his. He generously deprived himself that we "might become rich." God's generous gift of his Son leads to our becoming the beneficiaries of his abundance.

Once more, everything goes back to our giving God. In this case, Paul even suggested the "sincerity of your love" is connected with embracing the generous grace of God through Jesus Christ.

**Philippians 2:5–8.** These verses expand on how Jesus became “poor” for us. He “made himself nothing.” Indeed he “became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” There can be no greater gift.

### Our Generous God Originates Generous Giving (James 1:17–18)

The Letter of James is often construed as solely a directive on the ethical behavior of believers. Certainly, this letter provides a great deal of instruction on how we ought to behave. Yet, a reading of this book should always include these two verses as the source for our expected faith and works.

In this section, James describes the character of God, a nature that becomes the basis for what James wrote throughout his letter.

God is the source of “every good and perfect gift.” “Good” describes the quality of the gift as being excellent and useful. “Perfect” denotes the ultimate nature of the gift. God’s gifts never lack anything, but rather complete everything else.

With all of the expectations that would follow in the Letter of James, it is important here that it clarify that God is the source of what is good. We may learn not to show favoritism (James 2:1). We may live a life where faith is complemented with action (James 2:17). We may even acquire the important ability to tame our tongue (James 3:2). Perhaps James sensed that if these behaviors were actually lived, we would boastfully start believing in our arrogance that we were the source of what was good in our lives. Not so, generous grace always comes from God.

Note the reference again to God’s creation. He “chose to give us birth.” Taking the generosity of creation one step further, James describes the creation of humankind as the “firstfruits” of the entire creation. When God made male and female, God formed the best of the crop.

### Focusing on the Meaning

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Of course, these six selections do not intend to exhaust the revelation of God’s generous nature in Scripture. The entire Bible provides evidence of this nature of the divine. Yet, in spite of the biblical evidence, God’s people have developed their own ideas about God’s nature over the centuries. That practice has not ended with the current generation.

Explore the various ways in which your students perceive the giving nature of God. When they think of the way God gives, do they envision a God who is uncaring, stingy, generous, or something else? Naturally, our perception of God is usually based on our personal experiences. We define the nature of God by our experiences with God. Perhaps a sense of loneliness when we needed a miracle resulted in the belief that God did not care. Maybe our struggles with finances and lack of monetary stability have left us with the opinion that God is rather sparing with his abundant resources. Or, it could be that we think of God as extremely generous because of the abundance of material blessings in our lives. Our individual circumstances often dictate our observation of God.

What might change about our experiential thoughts of God if we took seriously the truth that the entire Bible reveals the generous grace of God? Instead of thinking that our personal experiences define the nature of God, we ought to allow the nature of God to define our personal experiences. At God's very core, God is a generous God. Without this basic nature, we would have nothing.

## TEACHING PLANS

### Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

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#### Connect with Life

1. Prepare the following statement strips and ask each class member to select a strip as he or she enters (add your own ideas on how one might show generosity).
  - Deliver a meal to a sick friend
  - Give a few dollars to a needy person on a street corner
  - Share your home with a friend who has a temporary need
  - Drive a neighbor to the hospital
  - Give a sacrificial mission offering through your church
  - Serve once a month at a local food bank or clothing shelter

- Serve in Vacation Bible School
- Teach a class
- Give Christmas gifts or provide a thanksgiving meal for someone in need

(A copy of the statements is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).) Invite members to listen for a common theme as each person reads his or her statement aloud. Then point out that the overall theme suggested by the statements is *generosity*.

2. Comment that the three lessons in this unit will remind us that the beginning place and sustaining strength for living generously is God’s grace. Enlist someone in advance to summarize the *Study Guide* article “Introducing Living Generously for Jesus’ Sake,” which introduces the study as a whole.

### Guide Bible Study

3. Call attention to the following statement (write it on a markerboard or poster): *From beginning to end the Bible confirms that God is a giving God!* Point out that that today’s study will include six Bible passages to help us explore this statement.
4. As class size allows, form discovery teams and assign each team one or two of the focal passages. Ask them to read their passage and use material in the *Study Guide* to discover the following:
  - What is the context (background) of the passage?
  - What did God *do* in the passage?
  - How did God demonstrate his generosity?
  - How does God’s generosity, as shown in this passage, impact our lives today?

(A copy of the assignment is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).)

5. Allow time for discovery, and then invite teams to share their findings aloud. Use the following questions to stimulate conversation from the entire class as presentations are made:

- Genesis 1:1. *What does this verse suggest to us about God’s generosity? (See the Study Guide article “Introducing Living Generously for Jesus’ Sake” under the heading “The God We Worship” for insights.)*
  - Psalm 100. *How would you describe God’s nature?*
  - John 3:16. *How do you define love? What is an example of love?*
  - 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. *How did Jesus demonstrate the nature of God?*
  - Philippians 2:5–8. *What does it mean that Jesus “emptied Himself” (NASB)?*
  - James 1:17–18. *What is the best gift you ever received? Was it perfect?*
6. Call attention again to the statement used in step 3. Ask participants whether they understand the statement better and perhaps agree with it more deeply after examining today’s biblical passages. Allow time for response.
7. Direct members to John 3:16 once again, informing them that when John uses the word “world” it is often in contrast with the kingdom of God. Invite members to consider the many contrasts between the way the world loves and God’s love. Ask a member to record responses on a markerboard (several examples are listed).

### **World’s Love**

Temporary  
 Selective  
 Takes from others  
 Based on feelings  
 Selfish

### **God’s Love**

Forever  
 For all  
 Gives to others  
 Based on relationship  
 Generous

## **Encourage Application**

8. Read the following statement from the *Study Guide*: “It takes a bold, counter-cultural stand to resist our culture, which may be defined by its grasping nature.” Share two questions (also from the *Study Guide*) that help us gauge how well we resist culture:

- Do we spend all of our time on our own pursuits, ambitions, and entertainment, or do we invest our lives in ministry to others?
- Do we max out every ounce of income for consumption and for our own needs and desires, or do we give generously as our giving God gives?

Ask, *What are some truths these Scripture passages suggest for your life?*

9. Conclude the lesson with the following story: A modern parable tells how ancient people would catch a monkey. They would cut a small hole in a coconut, just large enough for a monkey to get its hand in. They would then fill the coconut with sweet treats and tie it to a tree. When the monkey would discover the treat, it would reach into the coconut to grab the treat. The monkey would actually trap himself because he was not willing to relax his grip in order to get his hand out of the coconut. We laugh at the stupidity of the monkey, but we so often find ourselves in the same place. It is often easier to grasp rather than to give!
10. Close with prayer, thanking God for his example and gift of generosity.

## **Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions**

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### **Connect with Life**

1. Introduce unit one by developing and sharing a contemporary version of the story found in Matthew 18:23–35, the unforgiving slave (you may want to pre-enlist a member to help with this). Point out that while we are appalled at the slave who was unforgiving after receiving his master’s generosity, we are often guilty of living the same way and failing to recognize the generosity extended to us.
2. Introduce the three-session study, “Beginning with Grace,” by asking these questions:
  - When is it easy to give grace to others? When is it difficult?
  - When is it easy to forgive someone? When is it difficult?
  - How does God’s generosity shape your ability to be generous to others?

3. Refer to and summarize the *Study Guide* article “Introducing Living Generously for Jesus’ Sake,” which introduces the study as a whole. Comment that at the core of God’s relationship with us lies a relentless and consistent generosity. We can be generous because God is generous.

### Guide Bible Study

4. Call attention to the following outline from the *Study Guide* (you may want to write it on a markerboard):
  - Genesis 1:1. *Ex Nihilo* (From Nothing)
  - Psalm 100. Shout to the Lord
  - John 3:16. A Depth of Love
  - 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. Role Reversal
  - Philippians 2:5–8. Downward Mobility
  - James 1:17–18. Every Perfect Gift
5. Invite participants to turn to Genesis 1:1. Ask members to read or say the verse aloud with you. Then ask the following questions for discussion:
  - What does the phrase, “In beginning, God” imply? (God’s preexistence)
  - What is God’s first act that we know about? (creation)
  - From what did God create the world? (nothing)
  - Why is that significant? (He is the source of all and is generous.)
6. Ask a member to read Psalm 100 aloud. Refer to the brief study of the Hebrew word, *hesed*, in the *Study Guide*. Follow up with these questions:
  - Why can we shout joyfully and serve the Lord with gladness?
  - What does it mean to be “the sheep of his pasture?”
  - What assurance can we have from this passage?
7. Invite class members to recall John 3:16. Ask them to consider the following words as you read the passage aloud – *God, loved, world, gave, only, Son, whosoever, believes, perish, eternal life*. After a brief discussion of the words, ask, *How does this verse demonstrate God’s generosity?*

8. Direct participants to 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. Ask the following questions:
  - How was Christ rich?
  - How did he become poor?
  - How do we, in our poverty, benefit from Jesus’ willingness to become as we are?
9. Call upon a previously enlisted member to read Philippians 2:5–8. Explain these verses briefly, using information in the *Study Guide*. Emphasize Jesus’ willingness to empty himself even to the point of death. Call attention to the small article in the *Study Guide* titled “*Kenosis*.” Remind class members that God gave all; he held nothing back!
10. Call attention to the last passage in today’s study, James 1:17–18. Read the passage aloud and ask the following discussion questions:
  - How does James describe the giving heart of God?
  - What kind of gifts does God give?

### Encourage Application

11. Ask, *How has God’s generosity impacted your life?* Allow time for discussion, and then ask, *How can you demonstrate thankfulness for God’s generosity?*
12. Call attention to the questions in the *Study Guide*. Encourage students to share responses and thoughts aloud.
13. Invite members to respond to the following statement: *Generosity is not complicated, but it is difficult!*
14. Close with prayer, thanking God for his generous gifts as shown throughout Scripture.

### NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 and 11–13 are from The Holy Bible, New International Version (North American Edition), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society.