

On Generosity

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Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away.

— Matthew 5:42

Give to every man that asketh of thee and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again.

— Luke 6:30

And if you lend to them of whom you hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend hoping for nothing again.

— Luke 6:34-35

And him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.

— Luke 6:29

And whoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain

— Matthew 5:41

But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret.

— Matthew 6:3-4

And he looked up and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said: Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all; for all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had.

— Luke 21:1-4

Whatever your religious orientation, or even if you have none, the sayings and stories of Jesus of Nazareth present insightful and provocative ideas about how to live and how to behave toward others. Some of his challenging teachings are about the issue of generosity and what it means to be a generous person.

Many people believe that the standard for our behavior toward others is what is called the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. There is no doubt that this is excellent advice and the world would be a much better place if the members of all the religions and spiritual philosophies that include that idea actually followed it. However, the statement implies what is often referred to as “reciprocal generosity”—I will treat you well if, or so that, you will do the same to me. Even though Jesus gives his version of the Golden Rule, other sayings and stories in the gospels make it clear that reciprocal generosity is not the standard of conduct he has in mind. He is asking us to do more, much more.

Generosity is usually defined as doing something to a greater degree than might normally be expected, and doing it for an altruistic reason; that is, for the benefit

of others not for the benefit of yourself. It is most often thought of in terms of money, but it is equally applicable to time and knowledge. The sayings and stories in the gospels illustrate several aspects of generosity and suggest four characteristics of a generous person.

“Give to every man that asketh of thee” is such an excessive statement it is hard to believe it is intended to be taken literally. The statement about lending urges us to lend without being concerned about whether we will be paid back, advice that probably would have been considered foolhardy by Jesus’ audience and by most of us today. To him who asks for your cloak, give your coat as well (paraphrasing), and of the one who steals your goods do not ask for them back, is advice that few would consider sensible. The saying, “whoever shall compel you to go a mile, go with him two” seems mild to us, but would have had a more challenging meaning for Jesus’ audience. Historians say that Roman soldiers were allowed to ask civilians to walk a mile with them and carry their equipment. Thus, to be willing to walk two miles would not only be doing more than required, but it would also be doing it for someone who if not an actual enemy was at least not friendly to the Jewish people. All of these statements make it clear that the fundamental characteristic of generosity is doing more than might normally be expected—and imply doing it

willingly, without hesitation or complaint.

My favorite example of being willing to do more than expected—and of giving your coat and cloak as well—comes from the film, *Peaceful Warrior*. Dan, a college student, meets a mysterious man whom he calls Socrates who becomes his spiritual teacher. At one point Dan and Socrates are held up at gunpoint in an alley by men who ask for their wallets. Dan chides Socrates, who has demonstrate unusual skill in martial arts, to take care of these guys, but instead Socrates hands over his wallet and tells Dan to do the same. As the robbers are about to leave, he asks “What about our watches, don’t you want them, too?” Of course the robbers say yes. “What about our coats?” he asks. And so it goes on. Dan is irate and the robbers are perplexed. The final scene shows Dan and Socrates walking home barefoot in their underwear having given away not only their wallets, but their watches, coats, shoes and socks, pants, and shirts as well.

The second characteristic of generosity is illustrated most clearly by the statement about lending, but is implied by the other statements as well. Each suggests that you should not expect anything in return for your generosity. If you give to whoever asks, you will undoubtedly be giving to strangers, people you may never see again and from whom you cannot expect anything in return. The Roman soldier for whom you walk an extra

mile is not likely to turn around and offer to do you a favor. Giving without expecting anything in return is an essential aspect of generosity and central to its altruistic nature. In my essay *On Love*—a companion to this one—I indicated how these two characteristics of assisting others without expecting anything in return were important aspects of Jesus’ definition of love. To the extent that generosity shares these characteristics it is clear that to be generous is an act of love, an action that comes from the heart. But in his sayings about generosity Jesus’ adds two characteristics that give generosity a distinctive character of its own, and may also contribute to expanding the definition of love

When he says not to expect “anything” in return, he really means *anything*. The statement don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing—that is, to give in secret—sets a high standard few of us observe. To give in secret means to give anonymously. That is, not to expect or seek recognition or even thanks in return for your gift of money, time or knowledge.

The other characteristic is illustrated by the story of the wealthy men and the poor widow making donations in the Temple. The story says that the woman’s gift was greater than the men’s because she gave from “all the living she had” whereas the wealthy men gave out of their surplus—the implication being that even the little

the woman gave required a considerable sacrifice on her part or on the part of her family. For the wealthy men, even a large gift would have had little impact on their daily lives. While we often think that generosity is measured by the magnitude of the gift, Jesus makes it clear that the true measure of generosity is the magnitude of the sacrifice.

The Muslim scholar, al-Ghazali, makes a similar point in his treatise *On the Duties of Brotherhood*. He uses the term “brotherhood” to mean all those united in faith, much the same as Jesus does when he says, my brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and follow it. In talking about the use of resources—that is, of generosity—al-Ghazali says the lowest level is to give from your surplus. He equates that with the way you would treat a servant. The highest level, for those “united in spiritual love,” is to put your brother’s needs ahead of your own. Clearly to give in that manner requires a willingness to accept some degree of sacrifice, hardship or inconvenience for yourself, even if only of temporary duration.

Several of al-Ghazali’s other comments help clarify an aspect of what Jesus means when he says, “give to whoever asks.” In al-Ghazali’s words:

“If you say to your brother, ‘Come along,’ and he asks where, then do not make him your fellow.” And, “If

you ask your brother for money and he says, 'What are you going to do with it?' he has abandoned the duty of brotherhood."

For both al-Ghazali and Jesus the response to the person who asks is always "yes" regardless of the nature of the request or the consequences for yourself. This does not mean that you should neglect yourself or your family; rather it means to challenge yourself to share your resources with others to the fullest extent possible.

Jesus' ideas about generosity are illustrated in a remarkable way in the story called "the Good Samaritan." For me, this is one of the most interesting parables in the gospels because it can be interpreted in several different, but seemingly equally valid ways. While it is presented as a definition of what it means to be a neighbor, in my essay *On Love* I showed how it illustrates Jesus' concept of love. Viewed as an illustration of generosity, it shows the practical application of the characteristics of a generous person in terms of both time and money.

The story is familiar enough that it doesn't need to be repeated in its entirety. With respect to being generous with your time there are many examples: The Samaritan stops to help the beaten man unlike two others who pass by. In doing so he undoubtedly delays his own journey and suffers at least some inconvenience. But he doesn't just stop to see if the man is all right; he treats



his wounds, he puts him on his donkey, finds an inn to take him to and stays overnight (further delaying his journey), perhaps to make sure the beaten man—who is described as “half dead”—recovers or at least doesn’t die. When he leaves in the morning he asks the innkeeper to look after him. He spends far more time and effort taking care of the man than might normally be expected.

Most paintings of this story depict the Samaritan comfortably treating the beaten man lying on the road. By choosing a different scene, Aimé-Nicholas Morot dramatically portrays how difficult it would have been to help a “half dead” naked man and move him to an inn, thereby giving a strong indication of how much hardship and inconvenience the Samaritan was willing to accept in order to help.

With respect to money—not only does he pay for the one-night stay of the man (and himself), but he gives the innkeeper an open-ended commitment to pay the rest of the man’s expenses when he returns—the equivalent of my taking a man I found on the street to a hotel, giving the manager my credit card, and telling him to charge whatever is necessary. In doing this, the Samaritan demonstrates not only generous deeds, but also a generous spirit by trusting the innkeeper and the man not to run up unreasonable expenses or include fake charges. When he leaves in the morning, he doesn’t

even leave his name or any way for the beaten man to contact him to thank him or repay him. He expects nothing in return for his assistance, and makes his gifts of time and money anonymously.

If someone complimented the Samaritan on his good deed I believe he would find this strange. From his point of view, he did nothing out of the ordinary—that is, nothing out of the ordinary for a person living in the kingdom of God, as Jesus calls living by the higher standards he espouses. For a person living by those standards, what may seem exceptional to others is normal for that person; he acts out of an inner conviction of what is right, responding to the situation he finds in a obvious and practical way. In many respects his actions fit the definition of generosity offered by the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa:

*“Generosity is a willingness to give, to open without philosophical or pious or religious motives, **just doing what is required at any moment in any situation**, not being afraid to receive anything.”*

The fact that the story of the Good Samaritan can be interpreted both as what Jesus means by love as well as what he means by generosity reinforces the idea that generosity is an act of love and shares many of its same characteristics. It is not a one-time or occasional event, but a consistent and constant way of life, a part of the

nature of a person living in the kingdom of God, manifested in our behavior toward others.

The next time you think about what it means to be generous, remember what these sayings suggest about its true meaning, and how the story of the Good Samaritan demonstrates their practical application: A willingness to do more than might reasonably be expected, to assist anyone who asks (or is in need) to the fullest extent that you can—even if that requires sacrifice, hardship or inconvenience for yourself—without expecting or looking for anything in return, not even thanks or recognition.

Then try to follow the advice given to the man to whom the story of the Good Samaritan was told:

“Go thou and do likewise.”

ILLUSTRATION

The Good Samaritan

Aimé-Nicholas Morot, 1880

In the collection of the Petit Palais, Paris, France; image
retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

QUOTATIONS

The King James Version of the New Testament

On the Duties of Brotherhood

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Andrew Gallery lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he is a member of the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This essay is based in part on his book, *Living in the Kingdom of God*, which describes John's ideas about the core teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and is a companion to his essay *On Love*. For more information about John and his spiritual writings, or to obtain additional copies of this booklet and the booklet *On Love*, go to www.johnandrewgallery.com.

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