



The Virtues and Character Development Project

The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

I Thessalonians 5:24

Generosity – Pre-Activity Curriculum

Note – before reading the content in this module, it is important that *Step 1* has been completed (reading *Overview – a background perspective for parents to get started*). This provides the context on which each virtue module is based. As pointed out in that document, the instructions are written to parents, but they apply to any leader who is working with youth (ages 5 to 25). Since the family unit is the foundational one, the focus of the materials lies here. Previous completion of the modules on *Humility* and *Gratitude* also is helpful.

Many parents begin teaching their children about being generous by having them give gifts at special times, for example, birthdays and Christmas. However, the younger children do not have an income. So, the parents buy the gift, or at least pay for the gift. Then, when the gift is given, the child gets to enjoy the experience of being a giver. The joy on children's faces when someone opens their gift is evidence of this.

While this is a good starting point since it teaches the importance of giving, the child does not have a full investment in the action since there was no cost to the child. The full benefit of being generous comes when someone gives out of one's own resources. This is best illustrated by God through the creation and by giving His Son to bring forgiveness to the whole world. Here we see a model of true giving out of Himself so that others might benefit. This is what we imitate when we give gifts to others.

In this module, we are dealing with the virtue of *generosity*. Before we define this virtue, it may be helpful to understand its use throughout history. The Latin word *generōsus* means *of noble birth*. Until the 16th Century, it was a way of describing someone who was noble. By the 17th Century, it came mean *noble in spirit*, and could be applied to anyone. It also could be applied to land, animals, food, color, and even medicine. By the 18th Century, it was beginning to be more viewed as how people handled their money and possessions. Today, anyone can be generous, although there is a tendency to think of generosity as a higher standard for a select few people.

There are three aspects of generosity: (1) *generosity of the mind*, (2) *generosity of the heart* (or *spirit*), and (3) *generosity of resources*. While most attention typically is given to the 3rd aspect, it is important to grasp how the first two are vital if one is to develop this virtue. *Generosity of the mind* refers to how one thinks about people or things. In the health care field, two terms are often viewed as essential: beneficence (do good) and maleficence (do not harm). When applied to generosity of the mind, it means one should think the best about someone or something (beneficence) and not to think or assume the worst (maleficence). For example, when meeting someone for the first time, we are inclined to have a first impression. A person who is *generous of the mind* will think the best of the person (this is someone who can be a positive influence) instead of assuming the worst (this person will be a problem). *Generosity of the heart* may be described as speaking generously in praise. It is a deeper level than the mind. We might call someone who has a

generous spirit as *big-hearted*. Consider when someone is genuinely saying *thank you*, not merely saying the words. A generous person would be much more expressive, showing gratitude: *I am deeply grateful for the time, care, energy, and thoughtfulness in what you gave me*. Someone who is *generous in the heart* is more readily forgiving. *Generosity of resources* is probably what most people would consider when generosity is discussed. However, usually they are thinking of material possessions, especially money. It will be important to broaden that aspect to understand that one can be generous with many things other than money or material goods: time, skills, service, possessions, connections, and many others. Even a common use of generous to mean plentiful or larger than normal reflects the breadth of this meaning.

We start learning how to give through gratitude – giving thanks to God and to others. As the practice of giving thanks become second nature, one finds a desire to do more than give words of appreciation. One begins to look for opportunities to give something tangible to the person. This expands to a general desire to give to others. Thus, as gratitude becomes part of one's character, this sense of a need to give expands from giving thanks to giving ourselves. This becomes *generosity* as it becomes part of our nature.

Learning generosity occurs best when there are exemplars, individuals who are able to model it for us. Abai Qunanbaiuly taught that virtues are *caught*, then *taught*, then *sought*. By this, he meant that, when children learn by seeing others (especially parents) model the virtue and its actions, they *catch* it. Then, they are ready for parents to *teach* them about the virtue. Finally, children desire to learn more about the virtue and *seek* sources that will help them grow in it. We see an example of generosity in action in Genesis 18 when Abraham had 3 visitors. He invited them into his home. He had Sarah prepare a meal for them before sending them on their way. Another example is when Jesus taught about a widow giving two very small copper coins (Mark 12:41-44). Compared to the rich people, her giving was very little. Yet, Jesus called her *generous* because she gave out of her poverty, and not out of her abundance. Generosity is a disposition of the heart, not a matter of the amount that was given. Paul wrote, *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have* (II Corinthians 8: 12).

Generosity is not limited to a few select wealthy people or people who have ample resources from which they are able to give. Generosity is a way to order our lives, a worldview, a lifestyle, and a divine calling from God (Rob Fick). It should be the lifestyle of every Christian since it is a reflection of God's generosity in giving Jesus to set us free.

As such, it becomes an act of worship, as Luke reported the words of Jesus: *It is better to give than to receive*. As Aquinas stated, people are called to respond in gratitude to God's love by loving God and one another. One way to show this love is through giving. Michael Blue writes in *Free to Follow*,

The physical act of generosity has a powerful way of forming our faith and deepening our understanding of who God is. It deepens our understanding of grace and eternity and permits us to tangibly display this understanding. A proper understanding of grace leads to an overflow of gratitude for the undeserved forgiveness poured out at the cross. Grace, when properly understood, leads us to generosity. Grace is freedom from our selfishness. The clearest way to demonstrate

this freedom is by giving sacrificially out of what we didn't deserve in the first place. We weren't given grace to fall back into selfishness.

How do we decide who should receive our gifts? Should we freely give with no consideration of the one who will receive? Giving should be according to those in need, but how should we determine who receives? Aristotle taught that *giving to those who lack good character, or to those who respond with flattery, is not true generosity*. Clearly, discernment is needed. We do not consider it to be generous to give someone what is owed. That would be nothing more than paying wages. Someone who gives with mixed motives may appear to be generous, but may be giving to get a personal benefit. This giving to receive something in return is not considered as being generous. (Aquinas taught that this is a form of selfishness.)

Why are so many people hesitant to give? Are they just greedy? This often is not the starting point, although that may be the result. This world has limited resources. Because we typically view life from our physical perspective, we accept the view that there never will be enough. This is a *scarcity mindset*. On the other hand, we have a God who is abundant in His nature. It is clearly evident that He created the world with abundance. When we come to believe in this abundant God, we develop an *abundance mindset*. For the person with a *scarcity mindset*, whatever one has must be kept out of fear that there will not be enough when a need arises. It even might transition into being greedy, where one not only holds onto what one has, but also wants what others have. This individual is not able to give to others beyond a minimum, if at all. However, a person with an *abundance mindset* has come to realize that God is abundant, without limitation, and He will always provide what is needed. *The God whom we worship is a God of abundance, and not a God of scarcity* (Rob Fick). The person with an abundance mindset is free to give as God provides opportunity. Dallas Willard said, *Today, I have God, and He has the provisions. Tomorrow, it will be the same*. We are in a better position if we have God as our provider than if we have our own hoarded resources. In Matthew 5:39-42, Jesus taught us to give generously in our resources and our attitude, going far beyond the least that we do in dealing with others.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Paul described giving as a grace.

But since you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you — see that you also excel in this grace of giving (II Corinthians 8:7).

When we studied gratitude, we found that social science research provided evidence that there were physical health benefits to people filled with gratitude. Similar findings on generosity indicate the same types of benefits for generous people. This truly reflects the outcome that Jesus indicated when He spoke of an abundant life (John 10:10). As one develops virtues that lead to godly character, one's own life is better. Often, people think of a life that acts as a channel through which God's blessings flow to others in the community. It might be more accurate to relate this to

a blood vessel, which grows wider and stronger as blood flows through it. As a person grows in godly character, that individual is able to allow more of God's grace to flow through to others. Proverbs 11:24-25 confirms this growth is more than physical.

The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller (The Message). The generous prosper and are satisfied; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed (NLT).

When we consider *generosity* as a virtue, it is important that we recall that virtues are developed and lived out in a community. Therefore, *generosity* is to be practiced for the good of others, as well as achieving one's own true long-term good. As such, it is a spirit of giving as well as the act of giving itself. George Barna reported that there is a virtuous cycle of generosity – people who have been given something are more likely to give to someone else. So, generosity spreads through a community. This occurs best when the members of the community are shown examples and are taught about giving in all three aspects (mind, heart, and resources). While it has become common in churches to encourage online giving, children do not see giving modeled by the adults. Having opportunities for families to model giving, even allowing the children to participate in the donation, will help them. R. Scott Rodin, in *Christ-Centered Generosity: Global Perspectives on the Biblical Call to a Generous Life*, tells the story of a father who made a lavish donation to the local charity. He asked his son to take the check on his behalf. The son was participating in the giving, although the resources used came from the father. In the same way, a generous person can participate in God's generosity by being generous with what God has given that individual. Rodin defines this *Christ-centered generosity as the disposition of a heart that is rich toward God and is a defining characteristic of the life of an obedient and joyful steward*. As P.K.D. Lee states, *every decision you make in life is ultimately a decision between serving God or serving money*. Ultimately, it is our absolute, total surrender to the Holy Spirit that frees us to be generous.

Our generosity is rooted in the self-giving generosity of God. As we become generous in our nature, we reflect the abundant giving of God who gave His Son for us. God has promised to supply all we need, day after day. On this we can depend. This will allow us to mature in generosity that linked to being rich in good works (I Timothy 6:18). Our generosity fosters continual gratitude and praise to God. This results in a *richness of being* instead of a *richness of having*. One exemplar of this is George Muller, who demonstrated this in his life and ministry to orphans in England. He depended on God to supply what was needed each day, and considered himself as God's steward.

Turn next to the list of activities for the *Generosity* module, which provide both general and age-specific options for families. Again, these are intended to assist you in developing habits in your children. It is possible that you will create your own ideas that would be better for your family. Since you are working on developing habits, repetition (daily, weekly) will be very important. As you know, it is necessary to repeat the actions over and over until they become *second nature*.

May God bless you as you work on formation of the virtue of *Generosity*.