



## The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

### BOOK REVIEW

#### ***The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose***

Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson

In 2009, the University of Notre Dame launched the Science of Generosity Initiative, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson used the findings as the basis for their book, *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*. Here, they examine generosity through an analysis of more than 2,000 Americans. They discuss the paradox of generosity, what it means, what is the impact on people, and why people give and why they do not. They also provide insights about living out generosity from various religions and philosophies.

Generosity has a paradoxical aspect in that, when one gives, that person also receives. On the other hand, when someone holds to what one has, a loss results. These are examined using five measures: happiness, bodily health, purpose in living, avoidance of depression, and enjoying personal growth. Within each measurement, 9 subcategories were explored: *Voluntary Financial Giving, Volunteering, Relational Generosity, Neighborly Generosity, Self-Evaluated Financial Generosity, Self-Evaluated Volunteering Generosity, Self-Evaluated Relational Generosity, Personal Importance of Generosity, and the Logic of Non-Findings or the Non-Significant Forms of Generosity*. It was learned that changes in the individual are the result of practices, not single acts. For example, regular giving produces a positive impact on the person, whereas a one-time gift does not, even if the amount given is greater in the latter case. Similarly, gifts that require recurrent intention and attention are more impactful.

The authors consider the causes of the changes observed by asking: Does generosity foster and reinforce positive emotions and reduce negative emotions in givers (which tends to lead to greater happiness and health) or is the reverse cause-and-effect true? Their conclusion is that generosity and effect on the giver is bi-directional, i.e., giving leads to positive outcomes as well as positive outcomes leading to generosity. Scientific evidence shows a biological effect: *triggering chemical systems in the brain and body that increase pleasure and experiences of reward, reduce stress, and suppress pain, which tend to lead to greater happiness and health*. They also found that *generosity increases personal agency and self-efficacy, which tends to enhance happiness and health*. The very practice of generosity leads to greater happiness and health by reducing negative outcomes, better relationships, and stronger social network relational ties.

The question of why Americans give or do not give was examined through 5 aspects: financial giving, volunteering time and talent, relational and neighborly generosity, giving blood and donating organs, and estate generosity. They concluded that generosity has a greater positive impact on the person when the acts are repeated frequently. When a person thinks about giving, in any realm, the result is more evident than if someone merely gives without much consideration of the cost or the impact.

Specific case studies are presented as a way to demonstrate what Americans who are not generous think about generosity. The stories show the impact on their lives. Similarly, specific case studies are used to show how generous Americans live lives that are healthier and have better well-being.

Here are some examples of the wisdom and proverbs presented in sidebars in the book.

<p><b>Ecclesiastes 11:1</b> – <i>Cast thy bread upon the water; for after many days thou shalt find it.</i></p>	<p><b>German proverb</b> – <i>He who lends to the poor gets his interest from God.</i></p>
<p><b>Acts 20:35</b> – <i>Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”</i></p>	<p><b>Traditional proverb, unknown origin</b> – <i>That which a man willingly shares, he keeps. That which he selfishly keeps, he loses.</i></p>
<p><b>Saint Paul of Tarsus, II Corinthians 9:6</b> – <i>Whosoever sows sparingly also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.</i></p>	<p><b>Farmer’s Gazette</b> – <i>It’s an easy matter for a stingy man to get rich, but what’s the use? It’s better to tell your money where to go than to ask where it went. You only take with you what you gave away. Charity ever finds in the act reward, and needs no trumpet in the receiver.</i></p>
<p><b>St. John Chrysostom</b> – <i>Helping a person in need is good in itself. But the degree of goodness is hugely affected by the attitude with which it is done. If you show resentment because you are helping the person out of a reluctant sense of duty, then the person may receive your help but may feel awkward and embarrassed. This is because he will feel beholden to you. If, on the other hand, you help the person in a spirit of joy, then the help will be received joyfully. The person will feel neither demeaned nor humiliated by your help, but rather will feel glad to have caused you pleasure by receiving your help. And joy is the appropriate attitude with which to help others because acts of generosity are a source of blessing to the giver as well as the receiver.</i></p>	

This book provides evidence that supports the conclusion that health and well-being result from being a generous person, as Jesus offered in John 10:10 – *I can come to give you life, and to give it more abundantly.* The life of a person who has godly character is truly abundant. Reading this book will help those who desire to grow in the virtue of generosity by showing ways that the act of giving can be transformational.