

## Part Two

Show [John Wesley video](#).

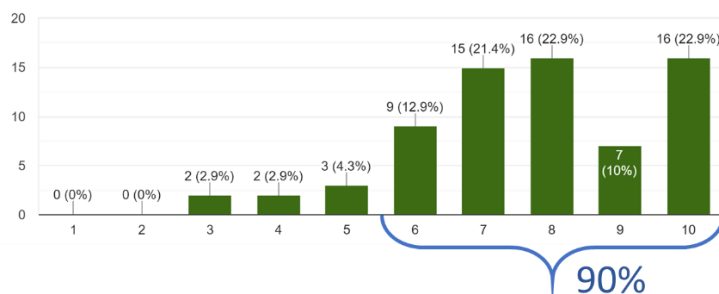
Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Church which has about 40 million adherents worldwide. He wrote more than 6,000 hymns in his lifetime. The word remarkable does not begin to describe his life but perhaps his view of stewardship was a thread that wove so much of it together. This quote is amazing.

“May I not do what I want with my own money? But herein lies the ground of your mistake. It’s not your own, and cannot be, unless you are Lord of heaven and earth.”

We were not so eloquent as Wesley but this is similar to questions we asked on the EQUIP survey. As a reminder or if you weren’t here last Sunday, here is what we uncovered from the survey. We discovered that there is a gap between what we believe about stewardship and what we practice in our generosity. 90% said God owns everything but only 74% believe they are generous at all. So we would agree with Wesley that God does own everything but that belief has not worked its way into consistent behavior.

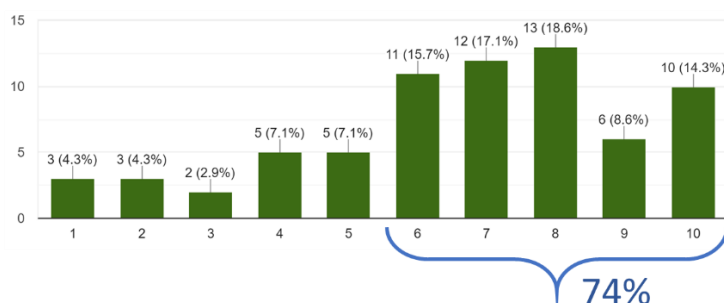
“I understand that God owns everything”

## BELIEF



“I am sacrificial in my giving.”

## BEHAVIOR



Let me remind you of our key principle from last week: Grace always precedes giving. If grace is not the driving force in your giving, then one of two things are likely to happen. Either you give very little or your giving is done with a poor heart attitude. As we recognize the grace poured into our lives, things like money can flow easily out of our lives. There are a lot more principles about generous giving found in this passage, so please follow along as I read the passage.

*We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—<sup>5</sup> and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. <sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. <sup>7</sup> But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.*

*<sup>8</sup> I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

An article in Leadership Journal told of a pastor who was dealing with a lot of conflict in his church. One woman was in his office running through her list of complaints with the pastor. He listened patiently for a while, and finally leaned over to her and asked, “When was the last time you felt joyful?” The woman immediately began to cry and confessed that she could not remember the last time she felt any joy in the Lord. How would you rate your level of joy these days?

## 2. You can have joy despite a severe trial.

In our passage Paul described how the Macedonian church was in the midst of a severe trial. We are not told the exact problem they were facing, but we do know that when the churches in Macedonia were first formed, Paul and his companions experienced tremendous persecution. A few days after they landed in Macedonia, Paul and Silas were thrown in prison. This is where they sang hymns at night and their chains miraculously fell off of them and the Philippian jailer as converted. They went to Thessalonica and were immediately persecuted there. It was not until they arrived in Berea that they finally were welcomed. The severe trial that the Macedonian church was experiencing was probably a continuation of severe persecution. But despite their severe trial, they were able to possess overwhelming joy. How could they do this? The answer to this question lies in the second half of the verse.

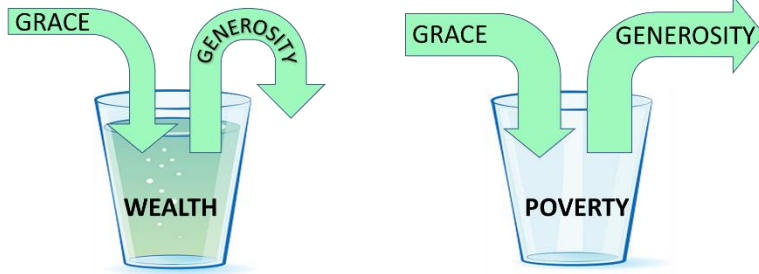
### **3. You can have rich generosity despite extreme poverty.**

Verse 2 tells us that their extreme poverty *overflowed in a wealth of generosity*. These Macedonian Christians were poor, but not all Christians in the first century were poor. Jesus and the 12 disciples didn't have a lot of money, but they were not poor. They had enough money to be able to share some of their money with the poor. But these believers in Macedonia were dirt poor. Paul said they were living in extreme poverty. I'm not even sure what that would look like. Americans who live below the poverty line still have a place to live, enough food, clothing, cell phones and usually internet and large screen TVs. Extreme poverty in the first century almost certainly meant going without some of the necessities in life. But despite their extreme poverty they overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

Now get this—even though they found themselves in extreme poverty, the Christians in Jerusalem were in even worse shape. These believers in Jerusalem were in crisis because there had been a severe famine in the area. Paul and Barnabus had taken an offering to the Jerusalem church several years before this, now Paul was asking for additional help. Verse four paints the story behind this passage. Paul said that the Macedonians begged *us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints*. The saints were poverty-stricken saints in Jerusalem. Persecution was always worse in Jerusalem and it was so bad that believers on the other side of the Roman world were taking offerings to help them. It's likely that it was a matter of life and death for many of them. So here we have the Macedonian churches who are living in extreme poverty, something we cannot even relate to, taking up an offering for other churches who were in even worse shape than them.

Again, v. 2 tells us that their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity. We should think of this like water spilling over a dam. But how can poverty spill over into generosity? Nothing can't possibly swell up and spill over because nothing is nothing. The only way this could happen is based on what we talked about last week—grace. When grace is poured into a person in poverty, if they also have a poverty of spirit, their focus is on the grace that is pouring into their lives. When grace is poured into an empty vessel, there is little concern about what is going out of the vessel. In this sense, the grace freely passes through the person. That is why poverty can overflow into generosity. But if that same grace is poured into a full vessel—a person who is already wealthy—instead of looking at the grace coming in, the wealthy person is concerned about the wealth going out. The effect is that the grace isn't seen for what it is—grace and blessing. The grace gets mixed in with the wealth of the person, therefore that person is more

their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity



likely to want to hold onto to everything they have, rather than serve as a conduit of that freely given grace.

Does this mean that people in poverty are more generous than wealthy people? In fact, this is true. The wealthier a person is, the less likely they are to be generous givers. These are 2007 figures but

the ratios will still be the same. People in poverty give twice as much as others do. The chart below it shows that giving among the wealthy has been decreasing,

## Poor are the most charitable

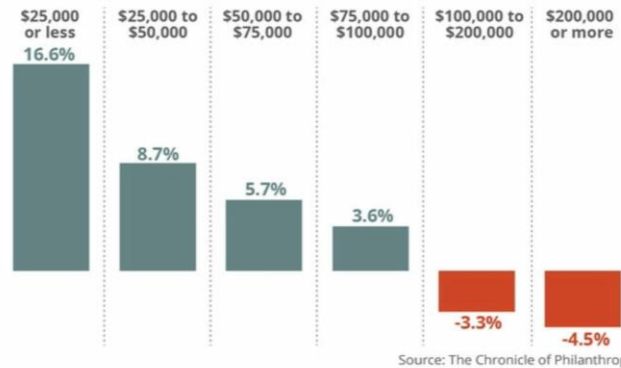
Those in the lowest U.S. income group give the largest percentage of their incomes to charity. Figures for 2007:

Income groups	Lowest	Second	Third	Fourth	Highest	All
Average income*	\$10,531	\$27,674	\$46,213	\$73,460	\$158,888	\$63,091
Income group limit	\$19,301	\$36,070	\$57,944	\$91,297	N.A.	N.A.
Giving as percent of income	4.3%	2.5%	2.7%	2.0%	2.1%	2.2%

\*Pretax  
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### Rich man, poor man

Change in the share of income given to charity from 2006 to 2012



But it doesn't have to be this way. Wealthy people can be generous and poor people can be generous—it all depends on whether they have their eyes on the grace overflowing into their lives or the money going out. Look at the grace and you become more generous—look at the money and money trickles out of your hand. As Randy Alcorn often says, “God prospers you, not to raise your standard of living, but to raise your standard of giving.”

There is nothing inherently good or bad about being poor and there is nothing inherently good or bad about being wealthy. There are many reasons for being poor. Some people don't have or can't get higher paying jobs. Some choose to live a more simple lifestyle, and still others are lazy become dependent on government agencies. There are many reasons why people become wealthy. Some get rich by lying and deceiving. Others are workaholics and neglect their families in order to get rich.

Many simply have a talent for making money. Being poor has its unique temptations just as being rich has its temptations. The key is never how much is coming into your life, but how much is going out of it. By now you know that inventor and businessman RG LeTourneau gave away 90% of his income. I had someone joke with me saying that he would gladly live off even 1% of LeTourneau's income. Maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that the heart of a wealthy man was transformed by the grace of God.

Where do you think our church stands in regard to poverty, wealth and especially generosity? I always heard that Vernon county was the third poorest county in the state but according to the 2010 census, there were eleven others counties below us. But according to 2018 data there were only 9 counties poorer than us. Regardless, that puts us in the bottom 15% of Wisconsin counties. Do you think being in an economically depressed area has a subtle effect on our giving habits? Is it possible that we unknowingly can develop a “woe is me” attitude? “We’re just poor, simple folks—we’ll never be able to amount to much.” Is it possible that such an attitude has crept into our lives and therefore into our church?

A speaker at a conference I attended once told us the story of a man who had lived a simple lifestyle. This man had a big garden to provide his food cheaply. He shopped at thrift stores to keep his clothing budget down. He kind of sounds like the average person in Viroqua, doesn’t he? But then he came into some money and his lifestyle changed quite a bit. He stopped gardening and started eating out quite often at nicer restaurants. He didn’t want to wear clothes that were used, so he only shopped in the nicer clothing stores. One day he confessed to this speaker and said, “I finally realized that I was not living a simple lifestyle because I had a great character, I was living a simple lifestyle because I was poor.”

As we reminded ourselves last week, God does not need our money.

I will not accept a bull from your house  
or goats from your folds.  
For every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:9-10)

I heard one radio preacher pray this way: “Lord, since you own the cattle on a thousand hills, would you please sell a few and send us the money.” God owns everything, he certainly does not need our money, but he wants our hearts, and money is the floodgate that opens up our hearts. If you are materially wealthy but are not generous, then you are spiritually poor. If you are materially poor and are not generous then you are also spiritually poor. God does not care about the size of the bank account but rather the size of the heart. When Christians gaze upon the grace of God, even extreme poverty can well up into rich generosity.

#### **4. Give as much as you are able.**

Any time a message is preached about giving, inevitably the question arises, “how much should I give?” This is related to the tithe question—do I give from my net income or gross income—but it’s a more general question. At least part of the answer to that question is found in v. 3, *For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord.* We should be very careful how we interpret this verse. I could tell you that you should give as much as you are able, and you could sit there thinking—“that’s fine, but I know I am not able to give much. I don’t make very much money. I have a lot of bills and debts. I don’t give very much, but I give what I am able to give.” Do you think that is what Paul meant when he said the Macedonian believers gave as much as they were able? I don’t think so. These Christians not only gave as much as they were able, they gave beyond their ability to give. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century American lives, how can we ever know if we are giving what we are able to give, let alone giving beyond what we are able?

Honestly, we will never know this level of giving because we live in such abundance. Even the poorest Americans are rich compared to first century Christians. They gave out of their poverty but one reason we should give is to break the power of materialism in our lives. I love how Randy Alcorn puts it—Generosity is to materialism what kryptonite is to Superman. How much should we give? We can follow the Macedonian church and give as much as we are able. We can follow Alcorn’s advice and give until it begins to break the power of materialism in our lives.

John Wesley spoke about this very thing. He said “I throw money out of my hands as soon as possible lest it find its way into my heart” John Wesley was a generous giver. If he were alive today, I know he would agree with Randy Alcorn because they are both repeating the exact same truth. How much should we give? Suffice it to say that you should give enough away to break the power of materialism and to make sure that you see the grace of God flowing into your life.

**Rich Maurer**  
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