

Session 5 Leader Guide

Read

Generosity and selfishness are at odds with one another. When faced with an opportunity to give, our hearts will gravitate either one way or the other. God is generous and Satan is selfish.

We are born selfish. In fact, one of the first words that a child learns to say well is "Mine!" And a child learns to say it at such a pitch that it will hit a nerve in the back of your neck. You'll be watching a sporting event or something else, and here's what you will hear from the other room: "Mine! Mine! Mine!" Normally this happens when a younger child pulls something away from an older child. The truth is we are all born selfish. The good news is that when we are born again, we are born generous. This doesn't mean Christians are always generous. But it does mean that instead of desiring to be selfish, we at least a desire to be generous. You still must crucify the "old man" and renew your mind so that you will grow in generosity the way God wants you to.

The Bible contains a great account that contrasts extravagant giving with a heart of selfishness:

John 12:1-8 - Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always".

This amazing story demonstrates a sharp contrast between two kinds of hearts: The heart of Mary and the heart of Judas. The Gospel writer displays generosity and selfishness for us in one incident.

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There's an incredible selfishness at work in Judas' heart in this account. He shows it in his comments about Mary's offering. Judas didn't actually care for the poor. He was a thief! Judas pretended that he was thinking about others while he was really only thinking of himself.

This same false spirituality shows up in similar comments we may hear today. "How could anyone in good conscience drive a car that expensive?" "She sure could have helped a lot of people for what she spent on that purse." Or, "I could do a lot of good with the money they spent on that [insert name of the item here]." Remarks such as these are invariably based on envy, jealousy, and selfishness dressed up as religious superiority-and it's the same spirit Judas had. As long as we can say, "Someone else isn't doing what they should be doing," and we don't even really know what they're doing, then we don't have to look inside of ourselves to see if we're generous or if we're selfish.

Jesus knew Judas was a thief, but He allowed Jesus to be in charge of the moneybox. Isn't that interesting? Jesus could have chosen any of His disciples to do that task. Then why did He choose Judas? Jesus didn't do this so Judas would fail; He did it so Judas would have an opportunity to pass the test. God will never tempt us, but He will test us. He will test us so we have the opportunity to succeed. God will actually test you in your finances and give you an opportunity to be successful.

Generosity is extravagant. God is an extravagant giver-He gave Jesus His Son for us. That kind of extravagance is difficult for our human minds to understand. There are examples of many other extravagant gifts in the Bible. David gave God the equivalent of 21 billion dollars. The widow who gave her two mites was an extravagant giver. She gave all she had. It is not the size of the money that counts, but the size of the heart in the offering.

When Mary gave the gift to Jesus in John 12, it was extravagant. Three hundred denarii was a very large sum of money. It was roughly equivalent to an entire year's wages. Of course, what constitutes a lot of money is relative depending on each person. What seems like a lot to the average person may not seem like much to a multimillionaire. But a year's income is a year's income, regardless of your income.

To understand the magnitude of this gift, think about your annual household income and imagine spending that amount on some perfumed oil. Now, imagine taking it and pouring it

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onto someone's feet. You are never going to get it back. It's been poured out. It's gone. However, it always makes sense to be generous toward God because He is always generous toward us. Actually, He is more than generous in His love toward us-He is extravagant.

How can we give an extravagant gift to God when He owns everything. Even boxes of gold would only be heavenly asphalt to Him. The gift of giving ourselves, our hearts, and our lives to God can be extravagant. It's the attitude. It's that you've given your heart to Him. And you can't say you've given God your heart if you haven't given Him your money. Scripture is clear that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So when God gets your heart, the fruit of that is visibly shown as you give to Him.

There are actually three levels of giving: tithes, offerings, and extravagant offerings. Some people joke that extravagant offerings are painful offerings. Only five to seven percent of Christians usually even get to the first level-that is shocking! The great news is that if you can get past the first level and tithe, the curse is broken and God generously blesses you, and it becomes easier to give offerings and even extravagant offerings.

When Mary poured the costly oil on Jesus' feet, it was an extravagantly generous offering. Why did she do this? Why did she give such an extravagant, generous gift to the Lord? Mary had a generous heart. She was grateful for all that Jesus had done for her. Just two months earlier, Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. If one of your family members were raised from the dead, would you be grateful? All who believe in Jesus have been raised from the dead because we were all dead in our trespasses and sins. If you or anyone in your family has been born again, then all of you have been raised from the dead and have eternal life with Jesus in heaven. That is something to be grateful for!

Mary came to Jesus with a heart overflowing with gratitude and love. That love translated itself into worship through an offering that cost a great deal. In a similar way, we show God each week how much gratitude and love are in our hearts. So ask yourself this revealing question: "What do my offerings say about my level of gratitude and love for God?" We all battle selfishness. Generosity must always overcome selfishness in us. Real generosity is extravagant.

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Discussion

1. As any parent can testify, children are born knowing how to be selfish. Selfishness comes naturally, but generosity must be learned and cultivated. Describe one of your earliest memories of wrestling with your own selfish nature.
2. We usually find it easier to be generous in some areas of our lives rather than others (e.g., time, money, possessions, credit for accomplishments, etc.). In what areas of life have you found it easiest to be generous? In what areas have you found it most difficult?
3. When the Holy Spirit prompts you to give an extravagant gift to the Lord or to His work, what kinds of emotions and thoughts rush in to discourage you from obeying?
4. Robert Morris said the most extravagant gift we can give to God is ourselves. Do you agree or disagree? What does this look like for you personally in your daily life?
5. Describe an extravagant gift that you have given to another person or received from someone. What made it extravagant? What was the impact?