

PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2020



a culture of
GENEROSITY

CONTENTS



ARTICLE 1
A Culture of Generosity
Aaron Menikoff



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 5
Doubt: Trusting God's Promises
by Elyse Fitzpatrick
Recommended by Jim Clayton



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 6
Safe & Sound
by David Powlison
Recommended by Meg King



BIBLE READING PLAN 7
Take Up & Read
January

A Culture of Generosity

Few (including myself) have read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, but many know the story of the candlesticks. Jean Valjean, recently released from prison, spent the evening with Monseigneur Bienvenu, a bishop. The bishop fed him and gave him a place to stay. How did Valjean repay the man? By stealing his silver cutlery. In the morning, when Madame Magloire discovers Valjean's treachery, she is offended, "Ah, the abomination! He has stolen our silver!"

The bishop, however, has a different response: "And, in the first place, was that silver ours?" She is speechless, but the bishop continues, "Madame Magloire, I have for a long time detained that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man, evidently."

When the police find Valjean and bring him to the scene of the crime, the bishop pretends to be surprised—not that Valjean is back, but that he failed to take the most precious gift: "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks, too."

"WAS THAT SILVER OURS?"

Bienvenu had the proper attitude even if his theology left more than a little to be desired. No, the silver did not belong to him. Neither did it belong to the poor. The silver belonged to God, the Creator. Monseigneur Bienvenu and Madame Magloire served merely as caretakers, giving the silver a home until God decided to give it a better one.

The Christian view of wealth—be it in the form of money, time, or influence—is remarkably countercultural. We live with the biblical conviction that God is the Creator, the Creator of all things (Gen. 1:1). God gave Adam and Eve "dominion" over his creation (Gen. 1:26). He placed all the resources of this world into our hands. He told us "to work it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). We are now caretakers of the world. But this is the key: the world is not fundamentally yours. It belongs to God. He is the owner. It is for him.

This truth, that God owns everything, makes it less surprising to learn that "all things were created through [Jesus Christ] and for him" (Col. 1:16). The purpose of all that exists is the glory of Christ. In the same letter, just a few paragraphs later, Paul applies this truth to our vocation. When we work, we aren't working for ourselves, we are working for Christ: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23–24).

No, the silver did not belong to Bienvenu and Magloire.

No, your house does not belong to you. No, your time does not belong to you. Neither your job, nor your degrees, nor your reputation, nor your social network belong to you. I'm not implying you didn't work for all these things. Nor am I denying that in the eyes of the State your property is just that, *your* property. I'm simply making what I hope is an obvious statement to the mind of any Christian: it all belongs to God. He is the Creator, we are the caretakers. He is the sovereign, we are the stewards. In that sense, we really have nothing to give. It's God's *to give*. It's simply up to us to determine when to let go, much the way Bienvenu let go of the silver.

BREAKING THE 80/20 RULE

Back in 2010, Mount Vernon's first body of elders spent a couple days together on a retreat. We asked the question, "Where would we like to see Mount Vernon in five years? We had a whiteboard of goals, but this may have been the most audacious: *we want our church to break the 80/20 rule.*

This "rule" goes all the way back to a nineteenth-century, Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who noted about 80 percent of the land in Italy was owned by 20 percent of the people. But since then, all sorts of thinkers have applied this principle to various problems. For example, how often have you heard it said 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work? In modern churches, the principle holds true: 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the serving.

I'm not sure why our elders in 2010 started talking about the 80/20 rule, but I'm glad we did. Worldly wisdom may say it's easier to break a wild stallion than this principle. But we have the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit gifts his church in spectacular ways. We don't all *do the same thing* but we all contribute. In God's economy, we operate under the 100/100 rule—one hundred percent of gospel work is to be done by 100 percent of gospel people.

Just think of the many passages in Scripture that describe the church as a body filled with members wonderfully gifted to serve the Lord, the church, and the lost.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads; with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6–8).

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities,

but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4–7).

And he gave the apostles, the prophets and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11–14).

These passages warrant careful consideration, but take note of a few simple observations:

- ✦ There is no cookie-cutter Christian. We are all different; spectacularly made by a creative God. He has gifted his children differently.
- ✦ There is one Holy Spirit empowering every Christian. Though we are all different, we are filled with the same Spirit of the Lord. He will ensure our work is executed to the praise of Christ's glorious grace.
- ✦ There is a biblical expectation every Christian will be generous. We all work for the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). We are all "saints" equipped for the "work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12).

Ponder the myriad of implications. The widow who can't leave her home because her legs are too weak is not pushed aside. She is an active member of the church of the living God if she is relying on the Holy Spirit to pray fervently for the body of Christ. The brother with Down's Syndrome who cannot teach is serving the body of Christ as he lifts up his hands and sings—modeling a life of joyous, raucous praise. The business owner who is blessed financially serves the church as he passes along what he has received from the Lord. So does the landscaper who has less financially but just as faithfully serves the church, passing along what he has received from the Lord (remember the widow's mite – Luke 21:1–4). One church member might be an unusually good evangelist. The other church member may be especially gifted at connecting believers with one another. The former must still be a disciple-maker. The latter must still be an evangelist. But put together, God's people exercise their gifts for the building up of the church.

Long story short: the 80/20 rule does not have a home in the church of the living God. Every Christian is called to a life of generosity.

WHAT IS GENEROSITY?

Each year we try to quietly but consistently emphasize one aspect of the Christian life worthy of special attention.

This year, we are focusing on generosity.

When you hear the word "generous," you probably think of financial generosity. This would be a mistake. Generosity, like coveting, is about far more than money. The heart issue is idolatry. When we long for someone or something more than God, we have placed it, him, or her above God. We have become idolaters. This is why Paul writes, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). There are thousands of ways to replace God in our hearts. Generosity can't be boiled down to a year-end financial gift to a church in need. May it never be! Generosity is a matter of the heart, and it affects every corner of our lives.

So, what is generosity? *Generosity is being joyfully open-handed with what we have for the sake of those we love—family, church, community, and world.*

We find an instructive picture of generosity in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. He urges these believers to take the Christians in Macedonia as an example. The Macedonians didn't have a lot, and the little they had dwindled as they faced severe persecution. But when the Macedonians heard their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem suffered even worse, they found a way to give. Paul informs the Corinthians:

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints (2 Cor. 8:1–4).

Our English word, "generosity," doesn't have a direct counterpart in Greek, the original language of the New Testament. The word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 8:2, *haplotes*, can mean "sincerity," "simplicity," or "singleness." It's a word that gets right to the heart of the believer. Someone who is generous is, quite literally, "simple"—not simple in the sense of slow or dumb, but simple in the sense of pure and righteous, someone with an undivided mind. One who is generous "is full of integrity and not duplicitous."¹

A chapter later, Paul uses the same word when he promises that those who give "will be enriched in every way for all your generosity." To give, as one commentator put it, is to live life with an open hand, passing along what has been received:

Paul understands giving as a reality of receiving and

giving forth, an openness to God and to one's neighbor, in which there are no hidden motives of personal gain. It is entirely to his point that he characterizes giving as "simplicity." This "simplicity" is life with an open hand to receive from God and to give forth to one's neighbor. The concept of giving thus is reserved for God alone.²

In that sense, a generous life is a "simple" life—passing along what we have received. God is the only true owner. Perhaps the key text for generosity is James 1:17, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." God is the Maker and he is the Giver. We are simply those who deliver.

You might picture Santa making toys to give to the children of the world. He is the craftsman, the source of the gifts, depositing them in homes at night. In the morning, the parents pass along Santa's gifts to their kids. When it comes to a Christian view of generosity, we are like parents passing gifts along. Technically speaking, we aren't *giving* anything—God is the giver, we are the deliverers.

In the key chapters on generosity, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, we see this is the kind of giving Paul encourages. It's no wonder Paul begins by telling the Corinthians the churches in Macedonia (who gave generously) had already received "the grace of God" (2 Cor. 8:1). His point from the start is that the Macedonians had already received everything they truly needed. Giving for them, in that sense, is quite simple—it's passing along riches that didn't even belong to them in the first place.

Being a deliverer of God's gifts is a privilege. The Macedonians took it to be a blessing. Paul says they begged him to allow them to participate in the honor of collecting money for "the relief of the saints" (2 Cor. 8:4). Can you imagine members of our churches and contributors to the non-profits we hold dear, *begging* to write a check?

To encourage the Corinthians to give, Paul reminds them of their wealth, albeit not financial. They "excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness" (2 Cor. 8:7). Being so *spiritually* wealthy, they are free to sincerely or *simply*—to generously—pass along their *material* wealth, however meager it may have been. Let that sink in for a moment. The only way to be generous is if you are filled with spiritual gifts. The fruit of the Holy Spirit comes first, generosity comes second.

To drive home the point, Paul clarifies that giving is evidence of genuine love (2 Cor. 8:8). It is foolhardy to say you love God if you are unwilling to live a generous life. It is ridiculous to say you love your brother or your

neighbor and in no way provide for him or her. James 2:16, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (James 2:16)

Consider Jesus. What a generous Savior he is! Christ gladly gave up his riches for our sake. At the heart of Paul's call to generosity is a reminder of the gospel itself: "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" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Christian, make no mistake: you are rich; probably not with gold and rubies, stock portfolios and cars—you are rich with grace. This is the grace that allows you to be "simple" or generous—joyfully open-handed with what you have for the sake of those you love—family, church, community, and world.

IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN MONEY

I'll never forget living in Louisville, Kentucky, and not knowing where the Lord would take my family and me. At that moment, I needed a friend. I phoned up someone I trusted, gave him the run down on what I was thinking, and before we finished the conversation he said he was coming through town and we could have lunch together.

Coming through town.

He must have driven *a couple hundred miles* out of his way to meet with me. Proverbs 18:24, "there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." My friend didn't give me money, he gave me something even more precious, he gave me time. Of course, that time didn't *belong* to him. Not really. He was just a caretaker, a steward of that time. At that moment, he had to decide how best to use the time God gave him. He chose to be "joyfully open-handed." He gave his time to me. Some have even argued time is more important than money:

In actuality, being a steward of our time is a far greater responsibility than stewarding our money . . . [T]he richest man or woman on earth cannot buy more time, which would make time more valuable than money. Therefore, to actually sit back and think about the reality of sitting in front of an infinite, holy God and giving an account for the ways in which we spend our time is quite sobering.³

The co-founder of Microsoft, Paul Allen, died of cancer in 2018. At his time of death, he had a net worth of \$20 billion dollars. He was only 65 years old, and I have no doubt that if a few billion would have given him another

year, he would have gladly spent it.

When you think about generosity, please, please, please, think about more than your money. As you head into 2020, consider the many things God has entrusted to you:

- *The Gospel.* God has given you Good News which is more precious than anything. Are you generous with the gospel? Don't just wait for opportunities to share the gospel, make opportunities.
- *Your Vocation.* God has given you a job. Perhaps you are a student, stay-at-home mom, salesman, or an executive. Your job is a gift. You work for Christ. Are you generous at your job? That is, do you see your work as a means to an end—a salary or a promotion? Or are you joyfully open-handed, looking for opportunities to honor the Lord and bless those with or for whom you work?
- *Your Church.* God has given you a church. It's the body of Christ. Are you generous in your church? Do you come merely to receive—a good sermon, time with friends—or do you come to give? Where does the congregation need help? Whom can you greet? How can you serve?
- *Your Home.* Maybe it's a small apartment. It could be a large estate. You know it belongs to the Lord. Are you generous with your home? Is it a place of hospitality for Christians and neighbors alike?
- *Your Time.* For many of us, time is the most precious gift of all. It belongs to the Lord. Are you generous with your time? Are you joyfully open-handed with the hours and minutes God has given you? This may mean carving out an evening with a friend or making a much-needed phone call or giving a few hours each month to a strategic, local mercy ministry.
- *Your Mind.* Yes, your mind is a gift from the Lord. He has generously given you the ability to think. Are you careful to use your mind well, to study the Bible carefully, and to know as much about God as you can? As you invest in your mind—the mind God gave you—you will be better equipped to be a spiritual blessing to others. Spending time alone in God's Word is actually preparation for being spiritually generous to others.
- *Your Money.* Are you generous with your money? Your lifestyle does not have to match your income; you can live below your income, allowing you to be

even more open-handed with your resources. This could mean increasing the percentage of income you give to the local church, giving more regularly, or simply giving more joyfully.

Monseigneur Bienvenu had the right idea. He knew the silver didn't belong to him. It didn't belong to the poor, either. His silver belonged to the Lord. The deeper this truth sinks into your heart, the easier it will be to practice the art of generosity. Generosity is being joyfully open-handed with what we have for the sake of those we love—family, church, community, and world. Is that you?

As Mount Vernon spends a year meditating on the topic of generosity, please join me in praying that we would be known as a generous church: generous to the nations, generous to our neighbors, generous to the poor, and generous to one another.

– Aaron Menikoff

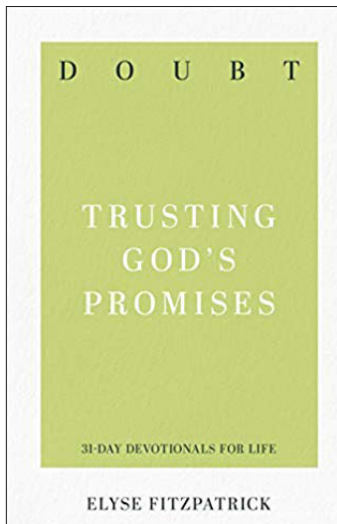
¹ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2005), 563.

² Mark A. Seifred, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Apollos, 2014), 362.

³ John Perritt, *Your Days are Numbered: A Closer Look at How We Spend Our Time* (Christian Focus, 2016), 68.

Doubt: Trusting God's Promises

Written by Elyse Fitzpatrick



Doubt: Trusting God's Promises contains thirty-one days of devotionals with a goal of providing a Christian with encouragement concerning doubts (of various types) he or she might have about God's promises and provision. Fitzpatrick, through these thirty one devotionals, makes her case against doubt – *God's promises are real, and these promises can be trusted*. Even if you do not consider yourself a “doubter” (I imagine we all are from time to time), you will find this book beneficial. The thirty-one days are divided into six sections – “Doubters in the Bible”,

“Proof for Your Faith”, “Sinners Who Believe”, “The Confidence of Faith”, “Enduring Trials and Suffering”, and “Be of Good Courage”. After the last section is the helpful appendix, “Truths for Doubters”, a condensed version of the devotionals.

Each devotional begins with a passage of Scripture, and Fitzpatrick expounds upon that passage using biblical context and examples from today. She does a fine job building to a “crescendo” to “Truth for Doubters”, which serves as a summary. I appreciated that Fitzpatrick never tried to scold the reader concerning doubt, but presented factual proofs from the Bible to fortify the believer, show them they are not alone in their doubts or concerns, and generally provide assistance.

In reading these devotionals, I have learned I am in good company when I doubt. From Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, to John the Baptist, and Peter, the Bible is full of doubters. Fitzpatrick draws the reader to see how Jesus treats doubters – with love, care, and compassion. In our sinful condition, though we are considered righteous by God as Christians, we are prone to doubt. These trials through doubt are not in vain. They produce humility, patience, and other fruits of the Spirit in the life of the believer who clings to truth. (A number of the devotionals discuss the molding process of sanctification.) This book is a useful and helpful resource in times of need.

– RECOMMENDED BY JIM CLAYTON

Excerpts From the Book

1

“And then John was tossed in prison. Had he been wrong about the identity of the Christ? So he sends word to Jesus to ask, ‘Are you the One... or have I been wrong?’ Jesus didn’t respond to John by shaming him. [...] Then Jesus bragged about John: ‘Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.’”

– Day 5, p. 24

2

“If ever a man was justified in having doubts about his future, it was the thief in Luke 23. [...] Reflect on the thief’s brief words, ‘Remember me,’ along with the first words of faith that you spoke to the Lord. Does the fact that his brief prayer was enough for Jesus encourage or discourage you?”

– Day 13, p.43

3

“That’s what James is getting at when he writes that suffering changes us. It matures us. [...] The Lord who loves us is after something more in our lives than our pleasure in the here and now.”

– Day 24, p.70

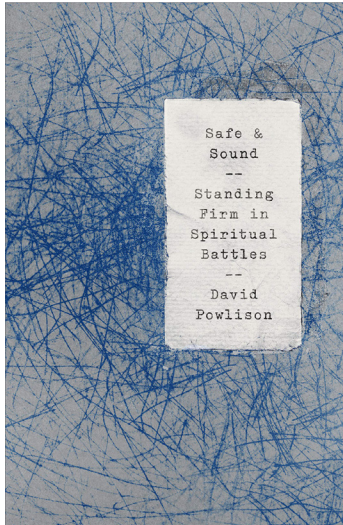
4

“[I]n fact, nothing in all creation – can separate you from God’s forgiving, pursuing, faithful, sustaining, gracious love. Not even the weakness of your faith, the inconstancy of your love, or your failure to live a completely successful Christian life can sever you from his devotion to you.”

– Day 30, p.83

Safe & Sound

Written by David Powlison



David Powlison, a biblical counselor and prolific author, died in 2019 after battling pancreatic cancer. Before he died, God allowed him the time and capacity to write one last book on a surprising topic: spiritual warfare. I originally picked up this book because the subject intrigued me and I was curious to read what such a faithful biblical counselor would consider so important. This book has changed the way that I think about spiritual warfare, and I heartily recommend it. Here are three of the ideas from *Safe and Sound* that have impacted me most.

Spiritual warfare is real and constant. Because we can't see Satan lurking behind the kitchen counter, we often forget that the Bible teaches that we *are* involved in spiritual warfare. We choose to serve darkness by cherishing sin, or we chose to invade darkness with light by fighting individually and corporately for righteousness.

God is on the offensive side, not the defensive. One of the richest parts of this book was David Powlison's teaching through the armor of God text in Eph. 6. I had previously viewed the armor as defensive, but Powlison offered an astounding corrective and biblically re-envisioned the armor of God as offensive by showing Christ utilizing the different pieces of armor offensively in passages from Isaiah and the Psalms. The striking image of Christ in his armor leads readers to fight and pray with renewed strength.

Fighting spiritual battles is profound and profoundly simple. Of the many examples of how we can fight spiritual battles in Christ's strength, perhaps the most impactful comes in looking at Jesus' own life. Jesus knew the devil was significant and actively working around him. Yet, he didn't address Satan very often; he addressed the heart of his listeners. Jesus was teaching that spiritual battles are fought and won in the heart by people choosing to follow Christ in salvation and sanctification.

In his last chapter, Powlison shared as he is faced his own death, which he knew was very near. Even though the book addresses some of the more abnormal aspects of spiritual warfare, the most captivating part of this book is the real-life example of Powlison staring death in the face with hope and joy. Whether or not you've thought much about spiritual warfare, read this book, talk to others about it, and thank God that we get to fight and win with Him.

– RECOMMENDED BY MEG KING

Excerpts From the Book

1

"Spiritual warfare is our participation in the Lord's cosmic war with darkness. The Lord is the warrior. The weapons describe his strength and what he does. By his strength, we participate in what he is doing. Ephesians 6:10-20 shows us how."

– How Paul Envisions Spiritual Warfare, p.21

2

"Often when people envision spiritual warfare, they think 'I'm under attack' and that is true. Satan does have his wily ways and he is out to get us. But we are God's invading army, and we are on the attack. We are bringing light into a dark world."

– How Paul Envisions Spiritual Warfare, p.23

3

"Because prayer is a vital part of how we fight against the powers of darkness, Paul ends his discussion of spiritual warfare in Ephesians in prayer. Leaving the weaponry metaphor behind but continuing his warfare, Paul prays for others... These warfare prayers do not speak of or to Satan, but instead address our deepest need for Christ's presence and help."

– Strength and Guidance for Personal Ministry
p. 45

4

"Now, I am staring death in the face... At times I am tempted to lose heart. But my good Shepherd is leading me towards life, not death... That is the gospel of peace. My feet are fitted for this final battle with my final enemy. So I do not lose heart."

– The Last Battle, p. 83

JANUARY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

January 1	Psalm 111	January 17	Leviticus 19:1–18
January 2	Psalm 113	January 18	Acts 4:1–22
January 3	2 Corinthians 9	January 19	Acts 15:22–35
January 4	Psalm 114	January 20	Acts 15:36–41
January 5	Psalm 112	January 21	Acts 4:23–31
January 6	Acts 15:1–21	January 22	Acts 4:27–37
January 7	Acts 1:1–11	January 23	Acts 5:1–11
January 8	Acts 1:12–26	January 24	1 Samuel 17:55–18:5
January 9	Acts 2:1–13	January 25	Acts 12:1–32
January 10	Amos 9:9–15	January 26	Acts 15:36–41
January 11	Acts 2:14–41	January 27	Acts 16:1–5
January 12	Acts 15:1–21	January 28	Acts 5:33–42
January 13	Acts 15:22–35	January 29	Acts 6:1–7
January 14	Acts 2:42–47	January 30	Acts 6:8–15
January 15	Acts 3:1–10	January 31	Genesis 17:1–16
January 16	Acts 3:11–26		

***Sermons in bold**

TAKE UP & READ



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH