

Offerings of Gratitude



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Matt. 6:19–21; Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 4:10; Luke 7:37–47; 2 Cor. 8:8–15; 2 Cor. 9:6, 7.*

Memory Text: “‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’” (*John 3:16, NKJV*).

Our God is a giving God; this great truth is seen most powerfully in the sacrifice of Jesus. “‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’” (*John 3:16, NKJV*). Or in this verse: “‘If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!’” (*Luke 11:13, NKJV*).

God gives and gives; it’s His character. Thus, we who seek to reflect that character need to give, as well. It’s hard to imagine more of a contradiction in terms than that of “a selfish Christian.”

One way to give back what we have been given is through offerings. Our offerings present an opportunity to express gratitude and love. On the day that Jesus welcomes the redeemed into heaven, we will see those who accepted His grace, and realize that those acceptances were made possible by our sacrificial offerings.

This week, we will look at important aspects of offerings. Giving generously—whether from means, time, or talent—is a powerful way of living our faith and revealing the character of the God whom we serve.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.

“Where Your Treasure Is”

Read Matthew 6:19–21. Although we are so familiar with these verses, how can we nevertheless be free from the powerful hold earthly treasures can have on us? See Col. 3:1, 2.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (*Matt. 6:21, NKJV*) is an appeal from Jesus. The full magnitude of this statement can be seen from the preceding two verses, which contrast storing our treasures on earth with storing them in heaven. Three words describe earth: moths, rust, and thieves (*see Matt. 6:19*), all of which imply just how temporal and transient our earthly treasure is. Who hasn’t learned just how quickly earthly things can vanish? “On earth everything is unstable, uncertain, and insecure; it is subject to decay, destruction, stealing, and loss. Heaven is the opposite: everything is eternal, durable, secure, and imperishable. In heaven there is no loss.”—C. Adelina Alexe, “Where Your Heart Belongs,” in *Beyond Blessings*, edited by Nikolaus Satelmajer (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2013), p. 22.

Look at your possessions. Even if you have only a very few, sooner or later most of them will be thrown away. The exception might be an heirloom. But a wise steward should be concerned with putting treasures in heaven for safekeeping. There, unlike here, you don’t have to worry about recessions, thieves, or even plunderers.

Matthew 6:19–21 contains one of the most important concepts on stewardship. Your treasure pulls, tugs, coerces, draws, demands, allures, and desires to control your heart. In the material world your heart follows your treasure; so, where your treasure is remains vitally important. The more we focus on earthly needs and gains, the harder it is to think on heavenly matters.

Professing belief in God but keeping our treasure here on earth is hypocritical. Our actions must agree with our words. In other words, we see our treasures on earth by sight, but we must see our offerings as treasures in heaven by faith (*2 Cor. 5:7*). Although we, of course, need to be practical and provide for our needs (even retirement), it’s crucial always to keep the big picture, eternity, in mind.

Read Hebrews 10:34. What important point is Paul making here about the contrast between treasure on earth and treasure in heaven?

Stewards of the Grace of God

What, according to Ephesians 2:8, is something else God has given us?

Grace is “undeserved favor.” It is a gift you do not deserve. God has poured out His grace on this planet, and, if we would simply not reject it, His grace will reach down and transform our lives, now and for eternity. All the wealth and power of heaven is embodied in the gift of grace (*2 Cor. 8:9*). Even angels are amazed at this ultimate gift (*1 Pet. 1:12*).

No question: of all that God gives us, the grace given us in Jesus Christ is the most precious gift of all. Without grace, we would be without hope. Sin’s doleful impact on humanity is too great for humans ever to free themselves from it. Even obedience to God’s law couldn’t bring life to us. “Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (*Gal. 3:21*). After all, if any law could save us, it would be God’s law. But Paul says that even that can’t do it. If we are to be saved, it would have to be by grace.

Read 1 Peter 4:10. How is stewardship related to grace? Explain how giving to God and to others displays His grace.

Peter said that as we have received the gift of God’s grace, we are to be “stewards of the manifold grace of God” (*1 Pet. 4:10*) in return. That is, God has given us gifts; therefore, we need to give back from what we have been given. What we have received, by grace, is not just for pleasing and benefiting ourselves, but for the furtherance of the gospel. Freely we have been given (which is what grace is all about); freely, then, we need to give every way we can.

Think about all that God has given you. In what ways can you, then, be a steward of the grace you have been given so freely?

Our Best Offering

Read Luke 7:37–47. What does this story teach us about the proper motivation for offerings to God?

Mary entered the room and saw Jesus reclining at the table. She broke the alabaster box of expensive nard and poured it on Him. Some thought her act was improper, considering that the life she lived was illicit.

But Mary had been set free from demon possession (*Luke 8:2*). Then, after witnessing the resurrection of Lazarus, she became overwhelmed with gratitude. Her perfume was the most valuable possession she owned, and it was her way of showing thankfulness to Jesus.

This story captures what truly should be our motivation in the giving of our offerings: gratitude. After all, what other response should we have to the priceless gift of the grace of God? His generosity also prompts us to give, and when coupled with our gratitude, both make up the ingredients of meaningful offerings, including our time, talents, treasures, and bodies.

Read Exodus 34:26, Leviticus 22:19–24, and Numbers 18:29. While the context is completely different from today, what principle can we take from these texts in regard to our offerings?

Our best offerings may seem insufficient in our eyes, but they are significant in God's. Giving God the best shows that we put Him first in our lives. We don't give offerings in order to receive favors; instead, we give what we have out of gratitude for what we have been given in Christ Jesus.

“Entire devotion and benevolence, prompted by grateful love, will impart to the smallest offering, the willing sacrifice, a divine fragrance, making the gift of priceless value. But, after willingly yielding to our Redeemer all that we can bestow, be it ever so valuable to us, if we view our debt of gratitude to God as it really is, all that we may have offered will seem to us very insufficient and meager. But angels take these offerings, which to us seem poor, and present them as a fragrant offering before the throne, and they are accepted.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 397.

The Motives of the Heart

In an earlier lesson, we noted the story of the widow's generous offering. Although minuscule in comparison to other offerings, it was generous because it showed the true nature of her character and heart, prompting Jesus to say, " 'This poor widow has put in more than all' " (*Luke 21:3, NKJV*).

God alone (*James 4:12*) knows our true motives (*Prov. 16:2; see also 1 Cor. 4:5*). It is possible to have the right actions with the wrong motives. To give out of abundance does not require much faith, but to give *sacrificially* for the good of others can indeed say something very powerful about our hearts.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:8–15. What is Paul talking about here in regard to giving and the motives for giving? What principles can we take from these verses regarding stewardship?

Whatever your motive for giving may be, it is on a continuum that ranges from ego to altruism. The fight on this continuum between selfishness and giving is fought more frequently than any other spiritual fight. Selfishness will chill a heart that was once on fire for God. The problem comes when we let selfishness into our Christian experience. That is, we find ways to justify our selfishness and do it in the name of Christ.

The bottom line comes down to one word: love. And love cannot be manifested without self-denial, a willingness to give of oneself, even sacrificially, for the good of others.

Unless God's love is reflected in our lives, our giving will not reflect God's love. A selfish heart tends to love only itself. We must ask the Lord to " 'circumcise the foreskin of [our] heart' " (*Deut. 10:16, NKJV*) so that we can learn to love as we have been loved.

Love is the basis of all true beneficence, and it captures the sum of all Christian benevolence. God's love directed toward us inspires us to love in return, and it is truly the supreme motive for giving.

What's wrong, if anything, with a freewill offering given more out of a sense of obligation than a sense of love?

The Experience of Giving

If Christ came to reveal to us the character of God, one thing should be clear by now: God loves us, and He wants only the best for us. He asks us to do only what would be for our own benefit, never to our detriment. This would include, too, His call for us to be generous and cheerful givers of what we have been given. The freewill and generous offerings we give are as much a benefit to ourselves, the giver, as they can be to those who receive them. Only those who give this way can know for themselves just how much more blessed it is to give than to receive.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7. How does this text so encapsulate what giving should be about?

Giving a generous offering can and should be a very personal, spiritual act. It is a work of faith, an expression of gratitude for what we have been given in Christ.

And, as with any act of faith, giving only increases faith, for “faith without works is dead” (*James 2:20*). And there is no better way to increase faith than to live out our faith, which means doing things that grow out of our faith, that spring from it. As we give, freely and generously, we are reflecting in our own way the character of Christ. We are learning more about what God is like by experiencing Him in our own acts. Thus, giving like this only builds trust in God and the opportunity to “taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” (*Ps. 34:8, NKJV*).

“It will be seen that the glory shining in the face of Jesus is the glory of self-sacrificing love. In the light from Calvary it will be seen that the law of self-renouncing love is the law of life for earth and heaven; that the love which ‘seeketh not her own’ has its source in the heart of God; and that in the meek and lowly One is manifested the character of Him who dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 20.

In what ways have you experienced the reality of how faith grows through giving freely and generously out of what you have been given?

Further Thought: “The spirit of liberality is the spirit of Heaven. The spirit of selfishness is the spirit of Satan. Christ’s self-sacrificing love is revealed upon the cross. He gave all that he had, and then gave himself, that man might be saved. The cross of Christ appeals to the benevolence of every follower of the blessed Saviour. The principle illustrated there is to give, give. This carried out in actual benevolence and good works is the true fruit of the Christian life. The principle of worldlings is to get, get, and thus they expect to secure happiness; but carried out in all its bearings, the fruit is misery and death.”—Ellen G. White, in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Oct. 17, 1882.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What is it about selfishness that makes it so contrary to the spirit of Christ? What are conscious things that we can do to help protect ourselves from what is such a natural attitude for a fallen human being?
- 2 “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, NKJV). The Greek word translated as “cheerful” appears only once in the New Testament and is the word from which we get the English word “hilarious.” What should that tell us about our attitude in giving?
- 3 Make a list of all that you have been given in Christ. Pray about what you write down. What should this list teach us about why we should give in response to what we have been given? At the same time, what does your list teach you about how even our best gifts, given for the best motives, can seem so paltry in the face of what we have received?
- 4 Why is selfishness a guaranteed way to make yourself miserable?
- 5 Think about someone in your own church family right now who is in some kind of need. What could you do, even right now, that could reach out and help minister to this person or persons? What can you do, even if it takes a painful sacrifice on your part?

Tragedy, Cocaine, and Jesus

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Mervan Jaikaran, a machinery operator at a wood factory in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, was unconscious for four days and hospitalized for three months after a devastating car accident at the age of seven.

Jaikaran had been walking along the side of the road when the car struck him and dragged him for 50 yards (45 meters), ripping off the side of his face and inflicting deep back injuries.

“Mommy says I was dead and brought back to life,” said Jaikaran, now 52, whose face is badly scarred on the left side. “I say, ‘Mommy, I was dead in sin, but Jesus brought me back to life.’ ”

Jaikaran, one of nine siblings, was raised by a single Seventh-day Adventist mother after his father deserted the family. At the age of 11, he quit school, unable to study because of brain damage sustained in the accident. He started smoking and drinking at 14 and eventually expanded to marijuana and cocaine. He married at 28 and became the father of four.

But Jaikaran kept using drugs, and his wife finally left with the children.

Jaikaran said he desperately wanted to change. One day, he cried out: “Jesus, I want to change. But I don’t want my wife’s help. I don’t want my Mommy’s help. I want Your help.”

Hours later, he received a call from the director of an Adventist-operated drug rehabilitation center called Love Until Ready Center. He subsequently learned that his sister had contacted an Adventist pastor for help, and the pastor had called the rehab center.

Jaikaran eagerly checked himself in for treatment. He was 46.

Progress was slow, but he claimed biblical promises daily. His three favorites were: “You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You” (*Isaiah 26:3, NKJV*); “I will not leave you nor forsake you” (*Joshua 1:5, NKJV*); and “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (*Matthew 6:33, NKJV*).

He also prayed for the Lord to bind together his family and bind the family closer to the Lord.

At the end of the rehab program, Jaikaran’s estranged wife came to pick him up and drive him to his mother’s house. But when his wife saw he was a new man, she unexpectedly took him home. Both ended up getting baptized.

These days Jaikaran tells everyone he meets about his love for Jesus. He prays daily, “Lord, give me some more so I can talk about you.”

“I believe that the Lord brought me into this world so I can be a witness for Him,” he said. “Nothing is about me. It is all about Him.”



The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Corinthians 9:6, 7*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend the close relationship between a heart overflowing with gratitude and the practice of giving.

Feel: Appreciate the depth of God's merciful graciousness and become excited about opportunities to respond.

Do: Find ways to give.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Giving From the Heart

- Ⓐ How does our use of finances indicate what is really important to us?
- Ⓑ What are some conditions that stimulate us to give our very best?
- Ⓒ How does God measure our giving?
- Ⓓ How is giving related to increasing our faith?

II. Feel: The Heart Experience

- Ⓐ What separates the cheerful giver of whom Paul speaks from the casual or even grudging giver?
- Ⓑ How can we nourish our cheerful-giving side, while “starving out” our grudging-giver tendencies?
- Ⓒ How can we cultivate the gratitude that gives rise to the cheerful-giver experience?

III. Do: Giving Cheerfully

- Ⓐ How does cheerful giving encourage us to give even more cheerfully?
- Ⓑ Why is it impossible to give cheerfully if our hearts are not filled with gratitude?
- Ⓒ What are some practical steps toward, as Paul says, sowing bountifully?

► **Summary:** God delights in the cheerful giver. Such a giver's cheerful attitude demonstrates that he or she continually experiences gratitude for the abundant blessings with which God has blessed His children.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *2 Corinthians 9:6, 7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Because God initiated the process of giving, it is, by nature, the most joyful endeavor that human beings can share with their Creator-Redeemer Friend.

Just for Teachers: While it is abundantly clear that God loves cheerful givers, it is equally apparent that cheerful givers love (delight in) God. That loving relationship activates their cheerful generosity. Non-givers and grudging givers somehow have missed that loving relationship; therefore, for them giving has become financially laborious rather than spiritually adventurous. We cannot overestimate the importance of this “love factor,” because the gratitude that love engenders forms the boundary between grudging attitudes and exuberant munificence.

Opening Activity: Consider the following vocabulary list supplied for this activity. Ask class members to assign each description in the list to the cheerful giver, on the one hand, or to the grudging giver or non-giver, on the other. Invite members to explain their reasoning for assigning the term to either side. Focus on how specific attitudes or outlooks lead to or produce a particular giving pattern. Ask class members which attitudes or outlooks they wish to adopt for themselves.

Vocabulary List:

adventurous	conservative	playful	withdrawn
inspirational	cautious	somber	tenacious
undisciplined	intolerant	balanced	spontaneous
permissive	optimistic	proud	alienated
sensitive	worrier	daring	faithful
considerate	contented	patient	restless
idealistic	independent	fearful	depressed
respectful	liberal	peaceful	suspicious

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Help your students to understand that Scripture distinguishes between tithes and offerings. *Both* are expected, but there are significant differences between the two.

Bible Commentary

I. Tithes and Offerings (Review Luke 2:21–24; Leviticus 12:1–8; 2 Kings 12:4, 5 with the class.)

Tithe, by definition, was a specified amount—10 percent. Offerings were unspecified amounts or graduated amounts. It was understood that wealthier Israelites brought greater (more expensive) offerings. Christ’s birth narrative provides a noteworthy example. Luke 2:21–24 chronicles Mary’s postpartum ritual purification, which took place following Christ’s birth. The standard purification offering (*Lev. 12:1–8*) included a lamb, but exceptions (not exemptions) were established for impoverished persons who could not afford that expense. Mary’s lesser turtledove offering strongly suggests her poverty.

Tithe was ungraduated and uniformly applied to everyone. Offerings, however, were measured against the giver’s discretionary income—wealthier worshipers bringing more, poorer believers offering less. The use of offerings and tithe also might have differed. Tithe was used to support the priests and Levites, the pastoral staff of Israel’s ancient economy.

Offerings might also have supplied the needs of the priests, but special collections, separate from tithes, were taken for restoring the temple (*2 Kings 12:4, 5*). While the sacrificial offerings associated with atonement were appropriated for the priesthood, voluntary thanksgiving offerings could be consumed by the worshiper’s family, *together with invited foreigners, orphans, and widows; that is, poorer classes (Deut. 16:11–14)*. Additionally, in the New Testament, Corinthian believers were commended for their collections for impoverished Christians.

Discuss: Describe the difference between tithes and offerings as defined by the Bible. Why are we expected to bring both to God?

II. The Alabaster Box (Review Luke 7:37–47, 8:2, Exodus 34:26, Leviticus 22:19–24, and Numbers 18:29 with the class.)

God’s absolute unselfishness awakens human generosity. And nowhere do we find that awakening of generosity in the human heart illustrated more beautifully in Scripture than Mary’s act during the feast at Simon’s house.

“At the table the Saviour sat with Simon, whom He had cured of a loathsome disease, on one side, and Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead, on the other. Martha served at the table, but Mary was earnestly listening to every word from the lips of Jesus. In His mercy, Jesus had pardoned her sins, He had called forth her beloved brother from the grave, and Mary’s heart was filled with gratitude. She had heard Jesus speak of His approaching

death, and in her deep love and sorrow she had longed to show Him honor. At great personal sacrifice she had purchased an alabaster box of ‘ointment of spikenard, very costly,’ with which to anoint His body. But now many were declaring that He was about to be crowned king. Her grief was turned to joy, and she was eager to be first in honoring her Lord. Breaking her box of ointment, she poured its contents upon the head and feet of Jesus; then, as she knelt weeping, moistening them with her tears, she wiped His feet with her long, flowing hair.

“She had sought to avoid observation, and her movements might have passed unnoticed, but the ointment filled the room with its fragrance, and published her act to all present. . . .

“Mary heard the words of criticism. Her heart trembled within her. She feared that her sister would reproach her for extravagance. The Master, too, might think her improvident. Without apology or excuse she was about to shrink away, when the voice of her Lord was heard, ‘Let her alone; why trouble ye her?’ He saw that she was embarrassed and distressed. He knew that in this act of service she had expressed her gratitude for the forgiveness of her sins, and He brought relief to her mind. . . .

“The fragrant gift which Mary had thought to lavish upon the dead body of the Saviour she poured upon His living form. . . .

“Mary knew not the full significance of her deed of love. She could not answer her accusers. She could not explain why she had chosen that occasion for anointing Jesus. The Holy Spirit had planned for her, and she had obeyed His promptings. Inspiration stoops to give no reason. An unseen presence, it speaks to mind and soul, and moves the heart to action. It is its own justification.

“Christ told Mary the meaning of her act, and in this He gave her more than He had received. . . . As the alabaster box was broken, and filled the whole house with its fragrance, so Christ was to die, His body was to be broken; but He was to rise from the tomb, and the fragrance of His life was to fill the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 558–563.

However trivial, comparatively speaking, Mary’s humble act of worship may appear to others in the room, it delights Christ. He revels in our heartfelt devotion and praise. Christ asks our best—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Consider This: What does the statement “Your heart will be where your treasure is” (*Matt. 6:21, GW*) mean? How does Mary’s act of love show us both the spirit, and the measure, in which we should give? In what way does Mary’s fragrant outpouring of love serve as a symbol of what Christ did on the cross?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Read the following true account and then discuss the lessons from the story, aided by the thought/application questions that follow.

Applied Religion—A True Account: Years ago, a small suburban community was flooded when a protective levee broke, submerging dozens of homes within hours. One young man in the community, Dean, was anxious to help those who had just lost everything. Not long before the flood, Dean had accepted Christ.

The flood happened to occur right after the American Thanksgiving celebration. Many families had just purchased their children's Christmas presents. Those presents, along with family keepsakes, now lay submerged by nature's fury. Dean's church established a relief center outside a Red Cross shelter, supported by a trailer filled with relief supplies. Dean helped shelter occupants acquire clothing and other necessities from the trailer. As he attended to their needs, one pint-sized schoolgirl, hiding within the folds of her mother's stained skirt, said, "See, Mommy, I told you Jesus would take care of us." About a decade later, the disaster coordinator met a member of Dean's church at a conference and inquired about Dean. Dean, the young new convert, was now first elder of his church.

Application Questions:

- ❶ What does Dean's giving spirit reveal about his heart?
- ❷ How did his generous actions prepare him for spiritual leadership?
- ❸ How might the unidentified little girl's comment have motivated Dean toward further generous actions?
- ❹ How does selfless giving prepare us for spiritual growth and greater responsibilities?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: God is the Example of unselfish giving. Therefore, we should make His loving actions, especially the events surrounding the Crucifixion, our daily meditation and study. By emulating the divine example, our hearts are transformed so that we see with God's eyes and feel with God's heart. We become His hands to heal the world around us. Thus, united with God's suffering and God's joy, we are, grace upon grace, transformed into His likeness.

Activities:

- ❶ Compile a list of literary resources, both inspired and inspirational, that touch your heart with their portraits of God's unselfish love.
- ❷ Plan a personal weekend retreat for the purpose of spiritual reflection, centered on God's gifts.