

A Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church Publication



first fruits
A Stewardship Study Guide

Dear Friends,

As followers of Christ, what God has in store for us is truly beyond anything we could ever imagine. What we do know is that He has called us to community and discipleship as we partner with Him in accomplishing His plans and purposes for our world. As we accept His invitation to join Him on mission, we become part of an amazing and exciting journey of transformation.

God has provided generously for us as a congregation and we have been richly blessed. We have a strong and faithful staff leading us into the future. They work alongside an army of dedicated volunteers who serve in ministries that care for those in need of hope and healing. Together we are able to share Christ with people near and far. From our Stephen Ministry to our new iCare network, from feeding the homeless to building homes with Austin Habitat for Humanity, from Vacation Bible School and rocking babies in Nicaragua to picnics in prison, God's gifts enable us to make an impact in our community and around the world. All of these are made possible through your generosity in giving of your time, talent and financial resources.

Our stewardship theme this year, *First Fruits*, brings to mind "the cream of the crop," the very best there is. Scripture tells us that we are God's first fruits, the first among His creatures. We are also reminded that everything we have is a gift from Him. Life and all parts of it belong to God; you and I are merely stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to our care. God invites us to respond by gratefully offering back to Him the first and best of what He has given us, our own first fruits. He promises that He will provide everything we need and responds to our giving by "throwing open the floodgates of heaven to pour out so much blessing that we will not have enough room for it" (Malachi 3:10).

As we make plans for 2011, our session elders have prepared *First Fruits: A Stewardship Study Guide* to encourage you as you consider your commitment for 2011. God's Word and the Holy Spirit provide the tools we need for a wise and faithful stewardship characterized by generosity and sacrifice, praise and gratitude, gladness and grace. As you read through the daily devotions, we ask that you reflect and pray not only about your stewardship pledge for the coming year, but also about how you will nurture your own relationship with God, with one another, and with our neighbors and the world in the days ahead.

Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love...You did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:9,16-17).

Bountiful blessings!
Sarah Wehner
Elder & Session Clerk



HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

As Christians, we believe that all we have – our talents, our time, our material possessions – are gifts from God. And yet, how often in this modern culture do we end up offering the Lord what's leftover once we've covered our own needs and wants? This year's stewardship theme, *First Fruits*, takes us back to the Old Testament teaching that the first crops from the harvest and the first born of the livestock were set aside for God.

Money is a sensitive issue in our culture, and especially so in these uncertain economic times. But God is clear and consistent throughout Scripture calling us to be good stewards of His gifts, and providing instruction in how to respond to the greatest, and only gift we really need – the grace that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This guide prepared by the Session elders of WHPC provides twenty two daily readings. Each devotional explores God's call to Christians to become better stewards of His bountiful provision. They are intended to encourage, inspire and instruct us and yes, at times, challenge and rebuke us.

Each day's reading has four parts. Expect to spend 10-20 minutes reading, reflecting and praying. As God calls us to be in relationship with one another, we would encourage you to think about pursuing this study with a friend(s)/spouse or someone else in your 'community' – perhaps your Bible study group, Tuesday Morning Men's gathering, renewal partners or Sunday school class.

READ Slowly read the passage listed. If you do not understand something, you might refer to your Bible's study notes.

REFLECT Consider the brief interpretation provided in light of the passage. What is the biblical writer trying to say? What is the main point? Using the thought-provoking reflections and questions, seek the Spirit's guidance regarding your own response to this passage. Slow down and take your time as you meditate on the truth God is teaching you. How does the passage apply to your life? Where do you need to grow or change? How has Christ already changed you?

PRAY Pray for a genuinely transformed life that you might live as Christ lived. Pray for the WHPC community as we seek to together become better stewards of His provision. Praise God for His goodness.

DO Apply the day's devotional to your daily life using the suggestions offered as together we seek to honor God with how we spend our time and our money.



DAY 1: Where Is Your Treasure?

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
- Matthew 6:21

READ

Matthew 6:19-21

REFLECT

Have you ever noticed how many storage facilities there are in Austin? Clearly there is a demand and a market; people need a place to keep their stuff and are willing to pay for it! In this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus challenges us to think about our stuff and to consider where we’ve placed our loyalties.

Are we committed to investing in God’s work in the world, a work that has eternal value, or are we intent upon accumulating earthly treasures that do not last? The true indicator of our loyalties resides not in what we say, but in how we use our time, talents and money. Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the U.S. Senate, has written. “When it comes to a man’s real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a man’s true character. All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a man’s character and how he handles his money.”

It is good to be on this journey together! Let us seek God in prayer as we study.

PRAY

Almighty God, as we begin this study I ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to help us see where our treasures are and how we might better use them for Your purposes. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.

DO

Take five minutes to examine your calendar and checkbook. Where do you spend the bulk of your time and your money? Do you think you “spend” your treasures any differently than someone who does not believe in God? Why or why not?



DAY 2: Whose Earth?

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”

- Psalm 24:1

READ

Psalm 24, Psalm 50; 1 Corinthians 10:26

REFLECT

These passages from the Old and New Testament remind us that God is the creator of our world. Everything in it is His for everything comes from His hand. The scriptures also make it clear that God doesn’t need our talents, time or our treasure since everything we have is already His. It is out of love for us that He invites us to join Him as stewards of His creation.

God extends the invitation, but you and I are free to choose how we respond to His many gifts. We can respond from a human perspective and be self-satisfied with our accomplishments, proud of what we have accumulated and unwilling to acknowledge their source. Or we can respond from a spiritual perspective and recognize that we are blessed and that everything we have is a gift from God.

When we choose to return to God a measure of what we have received, we express our gratitude and affirm His love for us and His sovereignty over our lives and our possessions. By joyfully returning our first fruits we give God a thank offering.

PRAY

Gracious God, creator of the universe and source of all that we have, may our hearts be filled with Your spirit so that we more fully experience Your incredible love for us. Thank You for allowing us to be stewards of Your creation. It is with joy and thanksgiving that we return to You the first fruits of that stewardship. Amen.

DO

How can you express your thanksgiving to God today for all that He has given you?

DAY 3: What Makes You Different?

“For who makes you different from anyone else?”

- 1 Corinthians 4:7

READ

1 Corinthians 4:1-7

REFLECT

Everything good in our lives comes from God: our abilities, our upbringing and even our educational background. Theologically, there is no such thing as good luck. As “The Doxology” says: “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”

How do we as Christians respond to this truth? Who makes us different from anyone else? There are many good and kind atheists in the world doing a lot of good and kind service. If we only give and volunteer when it is convenient, what makes Christians different from anyone else? Who will see the hand of God in how we live? But if we deepen our understanding that God is the source of all our blessings, and live that commitment by turning our finances, our time and our talents over to God, we will distinguish ourselves as Christ’s disciples.

“God causes his sun to shine on the good and the evil and sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). This is often referred to as “common grace.” As Christians by the grace of God and through God’s gift to us of faith, we also receive God’s “special grace”, God’s love made incarnate in Jesus who died for *you*, bearing your sin and giving you His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). God wants us to spend our lives glorifying Him and *enjoying* Him forever.

What if someone gave you \$500,000 and asked you to take what you need to support yourself and then to use the rest to show love and mercy to those around you? Would we resent the giver’s request? Would we comply? God gives us the things of this world to steward on His behalf. He didn’t have to, but God loves us and gives us not only what we need, but also what we can employ to further His kingdom, to make His grace manifest.

PRAY

Gracious God, You have given so much to me – my cup overflows! Help me to discern how best to use my time, my money and my talents for You. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

DO

Think of ten big purchases that you’ve made in the past year or so. Mentally label them “Provided By and Belonging to God. For The Master’s Use.” [Exception: as to your tickets for a UT or A&M game, if God has not appeared to claim the tickets 30 minutes before game time, you can presume that God is using His skybox tickets, and it is okay for you to use the ones He has given you. Please excuse the frivolity, but it is okay with God if we laugh!]



DAY 4: Responding To God

“Honor the Lord with your wealth.”

- Proverbs 3:9a

READ

Proverbs 3:9-10

REFLECT

In these verses we find another wonderful promise of God. We are told that if we honor God with our material belongings and put Him first, we will be blessed with plenty.

Verse 9 tells us to worship and honor Him with our substance, by bringing our tithes and offerings (see Ex. 23:19; Mal. 3:7-10). God, who is the first and best, deserves the first and best of everything we possess. By honoring the Lord with a tithe of all we earn, we acknowledge that God is first in our lives

Verse 10 identifies one of the blessings promised to those who are obedient (Deut. 28:1-2, 8). No one becomes poorer for honoring the Lord. He shall more than repay that which is given to Him when it is given with the proper attitude. In other words, the promise is not given just to those who “give” to the Lord, but to those who “honor” the Lord with their possessions. There can be a difference.

PRAY

Most generous and blessed Lord, thank You for always honoring me with Your first and best. Bless me with a generous heart so that I may know the joy of honoring You with the first and best of my time, talent and treasure. Help me to be faithful in giving and serving and to trust that I shall never lack the things I really need. In You I place my trust. Amen.

DO

Make a list of the times God has come to your rescue, blessed you with great abundance, opened a window when all the doors seemed to be closed, comforted you in sorrow, healed your body, given you a solution to a problem that seemed unsolvable or given you courage when you were afraid. After reflecting on your list, do you believe God honors you with His first and best or that He simply gives you what is convenient and what is left over on His plate?

Consider our own patterns. How much time each day do you spend praising God, praying, studying or sharing God’s Word or serving others in His name? How much time a day do you spend reading the newspaper or a good mystery, watching TV, texting or phoning friends and family, gossiping at work or shopping? Compare the time spent per day on the two lists. Are you honoring God with your first and best?

The next time you look at your budget, make note of where “giving” to God’s work shows up? Is it at the top of what you plan to spend? Are you honoring God with your first and best?



DAY 5: It Is Holy

“And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord.”

- Leviticus 27:30 (Amplified Bible)

READ

Leviticus 27:30-34

REFLECT

As you have already heard, everything we have been given belongs to the LORD. Even the tithe or tenth of what we have, our “first fruits” offering is holy for it too belongs to God.

So why is it so hard for us to give a tenth back to God? After all we can keep the other 90%! Tithing is seen by many to be too great a sacrifice. After all, there are many things we could spend that ten percent on! Oftentimes it is viewed as a risky and unreasonable step of faith. It means we have to trust that God will continue to provide for us in the future.

But when we do give sacrificially and step out in faith, we are demonstrating that God is first in our lives and that we trust and believe in Him. As you continue to pray about your offering, reflect on the idea that tithing is an act of worship, a spiritual demonstration of your commitment to trust God and an acknowledgement that He is your provider.

PRAY

Dear Heavenly Father, quiet my mind so that I may be filled with Your Holy Spirit to respond as Your Old Testament saints did, to worship You with my tithe offering. Help me, Lord, to continue to give You praise through the first fruits I offer to You as a sign of worship and thanksgiving that You are my provider and of the abundant life I live as I follow Christ. It is in Your Son’s name, Jesus Christ, that I ask these things. Amen.

DO

In what way do you acknowledge God as your provider? In what ways do you give Him His tithe? Is your offering sacrificial or just comfortable?

Ponder the models set before us in the examples of the witness the Old Testament saints and see how their tithes were acts of worship. See Gen 4:4; Gen 14:18-20; Gen 28:20-22; Numbers 18:20-32; Deut 14:22-29.



DAY 6: The Widow's Offering

"She, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on."
- Mark 12:44b

READ

Mark 12:41-44

REFLECT

In this story we can again see how everything is "upside down" in God's economy. The wealthy Jews made a big racket when they threw their heavy gold and silver coins into the collection vessels so everyone present would be impressed by the outward demonstration of generosity and "holiness". They wanted to look good. But God doesn't look at external appearance, God looks at the heart. The impoverished widow gave an insignificant amount of money (the equivalent of about 10 minutes of a working man's wages), but it was all that she had. All that she had? How could she do that? Couldn't she have kept one of her two last coins?

The widow's act demonstrated that she had total faith in God. She was confident that God would provide for her needs. (Remember "Give us this day our daily bread.") It seems obvious that the Creator of the universe, the One who "owns all the cattle on a thousand hills," does not need our money. God desires our hearts. He wants us simply to trust and obey Him, to bring Him what we have however insignificant as it may seem. He can do amazing things. Remember how with just five loaves and two small fish, He fed over 5,000 people.

PRAY

Loving God our Father, we thank You for all that You have provided for us. We are blessed beyond our wildest imagination. Help us this day to believe in Your promises and to have the faith, the trust and the obedience that will be pleasing to You. We believe, but please help our unbelief. Transform our hearts through the guidance of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us so that we can grow Your upside down economy and experience the joy of sacrificial giving. It is in Jesus name that we pray, Amen.

DO

Does God really want us to give everything we have to the church like the widow did? Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give the proceeds to the poor and come and follow him. Jesus not only paid for all our sins but that cost Him His very life! I don't think God calls all of us to give up everything but He is looking at our hearts. We need to be making progress in the trust and obey category if we want to grow spiritually.



DAY 7: Radical Generosity

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor.”

- Luke 19:8

READ

Luke 19:1-10

REFLECT

Zaccheus offers us a compelling example of radical generosity inspired by his experience of connecting with Jesus. As one of the head tax collectors, Zaccheus was disliked because of his profession and because of his powerful position at the top. Yet even with his great wealth and power, he wanted to see Jesus and was willing to go to great effort (even climb a tree) to do so. When this short and much hated tax collector heard Jesus say to him, “Zaccheus, I’m going to your house today!” his life was changed. In the culture of first century Palestine sharing a meal with someone was a sign of friendship. Jesus chose to befriend the hated tax collector and, in the process, Zaccheus got a taste of God’s grace - up close and personal. God’s grace had nothing to do with Bible study, prayer, achievement or good works; it was the unearned, free gift of God. And what was Zaccheus’ response? Immediately he began sharing his most prized possession, generously and in abundance, and promised to give half of his possessions to the poor. Radical then, radical now.

Zaccheus’ life was changed because of his relationship and connection with Jesus. While the Mosaic Law required a ten percent tithe, Zaccheus’ experience of God’s amazing grace and abundant love prompted him to ignore the minimum requirement of the tithe and instead give generously from his grateful changed heart.

1. What are some actions in your life where you went out of your way, “climbed a tree”, to connect with Jesus?
2. What typically motivates your giving? Duty? Guilt? Expectation of God’s blessing or gratefulness?

PRAY

God of radical grace and radical generosity, help us at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church to follow in Zaccheus’ footsteps by being radical in our giving, in our serving and in our loving. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

DO

Take some cash today and joyfully give it away - no receipt, no deduction, no strings attached. Next, try giving away 30 minutes of your time.



DAY 8: How Much?

*“From everyone who has been given much,
much will be demanded.”*

- Luke 12:48

READ

Luke 12:42--48

REFLECT

When we think about the many gifts God has given us, some are more readily apparent than others. Some that appear to be more of a burden, may turn out to be a gift and what appears as a gift may in the end be more of a burden. This passage from Luke's Gospel reminds us that as our financial resources grow, we are expected to glorify God by sharing more with others. Financial gain, however, often increases the temptation to focus more and more on building our wealth rather than sharing it. Often as we begin to accumulate resources, we also begin to place our trust in those resources. Additionally, we may try to rationalize an unwillingness to increase our giving because of our need for financial security and/or the development a sound retirement plan. God wants us to be good and wise stewards. Saving money and developing a plan for retirement does not need to preclude a commitment to generously share God's gifts. If we earnestly seek God and His Kingdom first, He will help us separate our selfish desires from reasonable planning.

When decisions are made regarding long-term savings and eventual retirement, do we also earnestly set aside specific amounts for charitable giving? We need to look to the Holy Spirit to help us discern the amount of charitable giving our financial resources justify and support. We also must remember that as our resources grow, our giving should likewise grow. When we make everyday purchases or investments those decisions impact the available resources we can later share with others for the glory of God. I once heard it said in a sermon that “tithing decisions aren't made in the church pew, they are made on the car lot.” If we squander His gifts through frivolous actions, we hinder our ability to use those gifts for His Glory.

PRAY

Lord, I recognize that I have been given so much. Help me to steward well what You have entrusted to my care. May I give wisely and sacrificially in large and small ways that I may generously share the gifts You have bestowed upon me. Amen.

DO

Spend some time reflecting on the gifts you have received and the talents you've been given. Think of one gift you can share today.



DAY 9 Willing To Share

*“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds,
and to be generous and willing to share.”*

- 1 Timothy 6:18

READ

1 Timothy 6:3-19

REFLECT

There is an interesting and, I think, intentional linkage in these verses between the ideas of generosity and contentment.

Paradoxically with money (and other forms of wealth and material possessions), the more one accumulates, the more one wants and the greater the desire to accumulate more. Conversely, the more one gives away (practicing generosity and being willing to share), the more one experiences contentment and freedom from the need for more.

Intentionally engaging with God in a multidimensional relationship of worship, prayer, service, study, submission and obedience (what Paul describes as “godliness”) cannot help but cultivate in us a generous spirit...a spirit that longs to “do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share.”

I have experienced my greatest sense of contentment on those admittedly rare occasions when I have harnessed whatever modest resources I have...financial, intellectual or emotional...and deployed them in a way that is God honoring and true to my sense of calling. These experiences have offered me a glimpse of what it means to “take hold of the life that is truly life.” That’s the kind of life I want to live!

PRAY

Loving God, You know my desire to take hold of the life that is truly life. Help me today to take advantage of every opportunity to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and eager to share. Amen.

DO

Before you sleep tonight, go back and reflect on the opportunities God gave you to do good, to be generous and to share. How did you do?



DAY 10: As Much As They Were Able

*“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able,
and even beyond their ability.”*

- 2 Corinthians 8:3

READ

2 Corinthians 8:1-7 and Deuteronomy 26:1-11

REFLECT

Missionary Jim Elliot once said “He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The Macedonians described by Paul in this letter to the Corinthians understood this; they knew that their real treasure was in heaven. Despite living in trying times and in deep poverty, they gave joyfully and generously. They had faith that God would meet their needs.

God wants us, too, to be joyful and generous givers. In Deuteronomy, we read how the people of Israel were called to bring their “first fruits” to the Lord. This meant that they were to bring not only the first of the harvest yet to come in, but the best as well. We, too, are called to give the first and the best to God trusting that God will meet our needs in the future.

I am reminded of the Pepsi Refresh campaign currently running. Pepsi is asking the question, “What do you care about?” By raising money not only to provide relief to the Gulf States, but also for other projects suggested by Pepsi fans - up to \$1.3 million per month - Pepsi wants people to “refresh” their communities. God wants us to refresh our communities as well. In fact, Jesus gave His life to “refresh” ours - offering us abundant life with God so that we in turn might generously sharing our blessings with others.

PRAY

Lord, I am challenged by the example of the Macedonian Christians. Help me to be joyful, willing and generous, giving as much as I am able. Help us as a church to be a means of refreshment for our city, our country and our world. Amen.

DO

How would you answer the question, “What do you care about?” How are you using your money/time/talent to demonstrate that care and to “refresh” others?



DAY 11: For Your Sakes

“Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor”
- 2 Corinthians 8:9b

READ

2 Corinthians 8:8-9

REFLECT

Paul uses the generous and joyful giving of those in the church in Macedonia, despite their poverty, as a motivation to the church members of Corinth. He encouraged them to give similarly through their offering to those in need. The Macedonians “gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.” They even begged to give more! Paul describes them as incredibly happy, though extremely poor.

Because of His amazing love for us, Jesus, both God and man, gave ALL. He gave His human life as well as His godly riches so that we may know Him and live life to the fullest.

Once we fully understand what Christ sacrificed for us – the price that He paid – we realize that our security isn’t found in money or wealth, but in God’s amazing love and provision for us. Our hearts and minds are changed by our deepened understanding of our salvation. As a result, it changes our desires and our view of money and the world. We are free to give generously, even beyond our ability. We might even beg to give more.

PRAY

Loving God, today I ask for a deeper understanding of my security in You. Help me to develop a lifestyle that places a priority on giving that You might be glorified through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DO

This week, give something away (other than cash or a check and not your “leftovers”) simply because you love Jesus. Don’t let anyone know about it and don’t claim it on your taxes.



DAY 12: Not Too Much And Not Too little

“At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.”

- 2 Corinthians 8:14a

READ

2 Corinthians 8:13-15

REFLECT

This is one of the more difficult passages to live into. Many of us have a tendency to feel that we have worked hard to achieve what we have while others have not worked so hard or perhaps have made poor choices. Over time we may have become convinced that we have earned what we have and, therefore, we don't need to generously give to others.

Reflect for a moment on those who live in poverty, perhaps products of broken families or unemployed for reasons beyond their control. Think of the children here in the U.S. and around the world who lack adequate food, shelter, healthcare and education. Is that fair? Think about everything you have been given far beyond what you have earned or deserved.

PRAY

Lord, forgive me for not considering the long hard road that others are traveling. Help me focus on others and less on myself. Amen.

DO

As you read the newspaper or watch the news on television today, take the time to actually see people – men and women, girls and boys - in need. Stop long enough to actually imagine what they are going through. This will help you shift your internal focus to an outward one. Pray for at least one of those news stories asking for God to send His people to help.



DAY 13: Giving Cheerfully

“God loves a cheerful giver.”
- 2 Corinthians 9:7

READ

2 Corinthians 9:6-10

REFLECT

People don't come into this world with a natural predisposition to be generous. Children have to be taught to share with others; they tend to be quite selfish. Some people learn the lesson faster and better than others! As Christians, we have a wonderful role model in Jesus and His Heavenly Father. The Bible makes it very clear that we are to give. That is often the easy part. The harder part is to give for the right reasons. How much we give may be important, but God cares much more about the motivation behind our giving than the actual amount. When we attend church, our primary focus should be worship – we should not be asking the question “What am I going to get out of this service; will I like the music; what will this sermon do for me?” Instead we should be asking ourselves, “What am I bringing to God's altar today; and how am I expressing my gratitude for all He has given me?” The Greek word for the term “cheerful” is *hilarion*, from which we get the word *hilarious*. How joyful would our church services be if everyone approached God's altar with that kind of generosity!

1. Do you consider giving to be a joy-filled experience, or a necessary, but bothersome part of church membership? What can you do to make it a cheerful act of worship?
2. Do you desire to give more of your time and money than you do now? What prevents you from giving more?

PRAY

God of joy, help me to have a clearer sense of all You have given to me. Deepen my awareness of Your boundless grace and foster within me a greater understanding that I am simply a temporary steward of the possessions You have entrusted to my care. Fill me with Your joy as I give to others. Amen.

DO

Decide this very day, in your own heart, what you will give to God, both of your time and of your money, and make every gift an act of worship.



Day 14: Courageous Giving

“You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion... your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”

- 2 Corinthians 9:11

“God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done...so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.”

- 2 Corinthians 9:11(The Message)

READ

Psalm 112:9 (The Message)

He throws caution to the winds,
giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
His right-living, right-giving ways
never run out, never wear out.

REFLECT

God has been more than generous with us, giving us all that we need for our lives and for our salvation! How can we follow His gracious example and give ourselves to God and to those around us both inside and outside our worshiping community? Does your heart fill with praise and joy when you think of the wonderful gifts of grace you’ve received from God? Imagine that praise and joy multiplied around Westlake, Austin and the world as others experience God’s generosity and share His generous blessings. You’ve heard the saying that time is money. Sometimes I think our challenge is to be as generous with our time as we are with our money. We have the opportunity to invest for the Kingdom of God as we share our lives and our time and together grow in faith and actually learn how to love and follow Jesus. Obeying Jesus’ command to “Go and make disciples of all nations” requires a full and courageous investment of our time, talent, and financial resources.

1. Are you content enough in all situations to willingly be generous “on every occasion”?
2. How does giving more of yourself to God’s kingdom encourage greater giving financially? How does giving of your financial resources encourage greater giving of your whole life to God?
3. Looking back, what has been the greatest lesson that you’ve learned? How do you think and act differently toward God, toward others?

PRAY

God we come to You asking for You to renew our hearts that we as a church might be courageous givers, free to risk everything for the sake of the gospel. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

DO

Practice courageous giving. Pick some people to whom you ‘give your life,’ for the sake of God’s kingdom, so that both your heart, and theirs, are deeply touched. Try giving more than normal, just to break out of old patterns.



DAY 15: A Caring Community

“All the believers came together and had everything in common.”
- Acts 2:44

READ

Acts 2:42-47

REFLECT

Luke describes a community which shared a life together much like a large family – voluntarily sharing their possessions so that no one had either too much or too little. While they lived in their own houses, they lived as a community - praying, breaking bread and studying the teaching of the apostles together. This was *koinonia* - the fellowship of sisters and brothers bound together in Christ and committed to living out their faith in the example of Jesus. They shared their time, their concerns and their possessions and the Spirit was very much at work in their midst.

I sometimes think we live with a distorted view of what constitutes “normal”. Those distortions become very clear after we have spent time in a culture or in a place where there is less “stuff” and return to our rich and complex lives here. In our busyness we struggle to find time for God and for each other. Imagine how different our lives might be if we were gathering more regularly as a community to pray, share meals and engage in regular and challenging teaching. Could the Spirit move as powerfully today as in the days of the Early Church?

1. Do you believe that Christians today would be willing to share their possessions as did they did in the days of the Early Church?
2. What kind of an impact might we have in this city if we were to gather and live as did the church of Acts?
3. What kind of changes would you have to personally make to live in this kind of Christian fellowship and commitment?

PRAY

God of Compassion, open our eyes to see the needs of our neighbors, our ears to hear the call to community, and our hearts to respond with a generosity flowing from our joy for the blessings and opportunities You have given to us. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

DO

Re-examine what “normal” means for you and your family, and how you might best use and share your time, money, and possessions.



DAY 16: The Blessing

"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

- Acts 20:35

READ

Acts 20:32-35

REFLECT

We probably first heard this verse when we were children, in a nudge from a parent to share a snack with a school friend who had forgotten his, or as a reminder to be generous with someone when nothing was coming in return. I remember my grandmother telling me as a boy: "If you have anything at all, you have enough to share. Always share." As adults, though, we often do the opposite. We act as if our possessions, our money, our worldly goods, are ours alone. Why give away what we have worked so hard for?

As we've journeyed through this stewardship devotional, we've been reminded that the Scriptures are clear on giving. This verse from Acts reminds us that God's Word also speaks of the blessings that giving brings. God promises to reward us for giving (Luke 12:33). In fact, we discover that to give is not to throw money away, but rather to invest it for a staggering return.

Giving brings great blessing both to the recipient and to the giver. A blessed giver experiences the joy of giving. Giving no longer feels like a burden but a pleasure. A blessed giver models Acts 20:35b actually preferring giving over getting. A blessed giver lives and gives with an eternal perspective, his/her attention is on the age to come. A blessed giver recognizes that God owns everything and, therefore, seeks to put God's money where God wants it. A blessed giver offers gifts as an act of worship. The driving motivation is neither self-concern nor love for others, but love for God. This love for God is born out of the foundational truth - God's saving love in Christ. We give in order to thank and honor God.

PRAY

Lord, You are the Master Giver because You are the Master Lover! I am so thankful for the forgiveness and new life You have offered me in Christ and it is my desire to thank and honor You. Help me to become a blessed giver. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

DO

Count your blessings! Make a list and thank God for the ways He has blessed you. Then, make another list of ways in which you can specifically bless someone else. Choose one and act on it today.



DAY 17: God and Money

*"You cannot serve both God and Money."
- Matthew 6:24*

READ

Matthew 6:24-27

REFLECT

Who do we worship? As professing Christians, we would all promptly answer, "We worship God," but I wonder if our actions support that response. The truth is we tend to worship that in which we have put our faith. The Oxford Dictionary defines faith as "complete trust or confidence in someone or something." As Christians, we would identify the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit as that "someone or something" in whom we have placed our confidence. On Sunday mornings when we gather for corporate worship, we proclaim our faith in Jesus and declare Him our God and King, but oftentimes during the week we worry (and how many of us worry?). In so doing we demonstrate a lack of faith and a lack of confidence in God's ability to handle our situation. You can almost sense the frustration in Jesus' voice when He says, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

The truth is not one of us knows what tomorrow holds. Making any kind of commitment including a financial pledge to the church requires faith. Jesus invites us to trust Him.

1. Do we spend more time each day praying that God's will be done or worrying about the future?
2. If you worry about the future, does that demonstrate a "complete trust and confidence" in God?

PRAY

Lord, I confess that I do worry even when I have experienced Your trustworthiness again and again. Help me to place my complete trust and confidence in You, not just in word, but in deed and help me make the commitments that You want me to make. Amen.

DO

Each time that you find yourself worrying about the future, turn it into a prayer asking God for complete trust and confidence that He is all powerful, all knowing and that His will is divine.



DAY 18: God's Provision

"Give us today our daily bread." (New International Version)

"Give us this day our daily bread." (King James Version)

"Give us this day our daily bread." (English Standard Version)

"Our appointed bread give us today." (Young's Literal Translation)

"Keep us alive with three square meals." (The Message)

- Matthew 6:11

READ

1 Timothy 6:17-19

REFLECT

How many times have you said the Lord's Prayer out of memory with no thought as to what you were asking or of what was expected of you? Christ taught us with that prayer to ask Our Father in Heaven for our daily sustenance as well as for other things. I wonder if God ever failed to provide "daily bread" for you?

Jesus also instructed His disciples to pray in private so as not to draw the attention of others (Matthew 6:5-15). We are called to take time in solitary prayer to form and sustain our relationship with the Almighty. He already knows our heart (Matthew 6:8) but what He wants is a relationship with us. At the same time, we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are the light of the world and Christ's light should shine through us (Matthew 5:14-16). We should use our time and talents for His glory. This will mean something different for each of us, but it could mean intentionally mentoring another person, opening a door for someone in need, listening with compassion to a stranger, helping build a Habitat home, serving on a committee or teaching Sunday School.

We should also use our financial resources for God's purposes. When we give to the church through our tithes and offerings, the goal is to glorify God and not ourselves. We are to give generously, but not boastfully as our boastful actions may draw attention away from Him. After all, if the outcome of our giving is PR for ourselves, we have defeated the purpose (Matthew 6:2-4).

1. Do you take ownership of your good fortune and take what God provides for granted? Why?
2. Do you struggle with one or more of the following?
 - a) Spending solitary time with and acknowledging God all day
 - b) Intentionally spending your time serving others through your actions
 - c) Joyfully giving out of your "First Fruits" to Him rather than out of what is left over

PRAY

Dear God, continue to draw me to You that my heart might be transformed. Help me to be prayerful and committed to offering You my best. Amen.

DO

Think of the things we ask of God and how He delivers. How would changing one thing in 2) above affect you and those around you and glorify God instead of ourselves?



DAY 19: Contentment

“But godliness with contentment is great gain.”

- 1 Timothy 6:6

READ

1 Timothy 6:6-10

REFLECT

The Bible speaks of love, constantly showing us that God truly loves us. At the same time, Scripture instructs us in how we should love. When challenged about which was the greatest commandment, Jesus offered two: (1) “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind;” and (2) “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38-39). With these words, God urges us to love Him and others who were made in His image.

The love that Jesus describes is not self-centered or exclusive. After all, Jesus said “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” (Matthew 5:44, 46). Jesus also emphasized that our love for others should be reflected in our service. In Matthew we read that on Judgment Day the righteous will say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in...’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:37-40). Our love for the Lord and for others should be reflected in our acts of service and generosity. Without such deeds, according to James, our faith is “dead” (2:26).

This passage from First Timothy can be viewed through the lens of love. We are called upon to serve, but the truth is we “cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). When we put money at the forefront, the Apostle Paul writes we will be led to “foolish and harmful desires” that will “plunge us into ruin and destruction.” The love of money may cause us to “wander” from our faith, cause many “griefs” and separate us from God. This is why money has been called the “root of all kinds of evil”. The Christian walk is to bring us closer to the Lord, not to separate us.

PRAY

Lord, You have offered Yourself that we might not be separated but live in union with You. Protect me from the love of money and from everything that would separate us through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

DO

Prayerfully consider:

1. Does your everyday life reflect that you love God with all of your mind, soul, heart and strength?
2. In what ways have you recently shown that you love your neighbor as much as yourself?
3. Have you recently demonstrated a love for your enemies or prayed for those that have mistreated you?





DAY 20: Enough!

*“Keep your lives free from the love of money
and be content with what you have”*

- Hebrews 13:5

READ

Hebrews 13:1-6

REFLECT

From the time we are babes, we hear the word **more**. More milk. More food. More sleep. As we grow, the desire for more is fed by seeing what others have that we don't, by the variety and plenty displayed on store shelves, by advertisements on television and in magazine, by the lure of purchasing anything and everything online and by our own covetous hearts. By the time we are adults, it seems that even more is not enough.

Always wanting more makes us feel discontented. It causes an angst in our bellies that can't be filled. Instead of wanting more, we should be crying out, “Enough!” I have enough! But I wonder am I giving enough? Do I give enough of my talents, my time, and my resources to those who truly need more?

Paul warns us to stay away from the love of money, but the truth is we can never love money just a little. Loving money even a little always grows us in the wrong direction: away from Christ. Only God can give us the strength to turn from the love of money to trust Him and be content with what we have. And what do we have as Christians? We have Him and He is everything! God is the One who we can count on; He will fill us up and He promises us that He will never leave us; never. He is our more. He is all we need.

PRAY

Lord God, thank You for loving me so much. Thank You for the promise of never leaving me. What assurance, comfort, and joy that brings me. Forgive me for longing for the things of this world. Father, please take the love of money from me and replace it with a bigger measure of faith, trusting that You will always be there for me. Help me to be content with what I have and enable me to give freely to those who don't. In the name of the One who gave more than any of us can give. Amen.

DO

1. When the urge for more hits, examine it. Is it necessary or am I lusting after something that might fill me up for a bit but will eventually only lead to me wanting more?
2. Is my faith and trust in God, the giver of all, enough to let go of the love of money? Do I truly believe from my heart that God is sufficient?

DAY 21: All That We Need

“ . . . But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.”
- John 14:17

READ

John 14:15-21

REFLECT

We need not fret about how much we can or cannot afford to give to the Church. Plan wisely, yes; but there is no need to fret. We also do not need to concern ourselves with how much we must give to purchase our eternity or curry favor from the Lord.

All that we need has already been given to us by Jesus Christ. All that we will have in the future is also already present within each of us now. So, we can give from the abundance we already have and will have. And, we can do so joyfully knowing that we are already in Christ and He is already within each of us. Indeed, Christ lives with and in us now.

1. Count all your many blessings today. In particular, recall the biggest gift you already have in Christ - grace.
2. Give to the Church in joy just as you give to your beloved.

PRAY

Spirit of Truth, we come with thankful hearts for Your active presence in our lives. We pray for the peace that comes with the understanding that we are in Christ today. Amen.

DO

Live practicing the presence of the Lord today and every day.



DAY 22: Rejoicing

*"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."
- Philippians 4:15*

READ

Philippians 4:10-20

REFLECT

As I read this letter from Paul to the Philippians, I marvel at how humble Paul was and how thankful he was for the outpouring of generosity he received. Although Paul had suffered greatly, he had discovered that the secret of being content in all situations was a deep personal sense of living in Christ. Often, when I find myself discouraged with everyday pressures and expectations, I think to myself, "Lord I am doing my best, what more can I do?" Then I feel a great peace as I pick myself up and realize that I have never been given a problem that God cannot solve. His grace really is sufficient. It may be a hard road to travel and there may be sorrow and frustration along the way, but I have never had to travel alone.

That is something that not everyone can say. I find strength in our Lord, my family, my friends, my neighbors and the WHPC community of faith. Every time I walk into our church, attend a WHPC sponsored event or help with a community mission project, I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is everywhere and like Paul I am so thankful for the support I receive through the Body of Christ.

However, I cannot always take. I must also give. Our church depends on every one of us giving our money, giving our time and giving our talents. What a blessing it is for us to be able to give back.

PRAY

Loving God, thank You for the WHPC community and for the opportunity to worship, serve and grow together. As we complete our stewardship study, may there be lasting fruit. May we become more and more like You.

DO

Review some of the lessons of these past 22 days. Which ones stand out? What is one way in which the Holy Spirit has spoken to you? How have you responded?