

In Pursuit of Grace Commitments

A Commitment to Generous Living



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Unit 1



Generous Living is an Evidence of:

Your Level of Contentment

TRUTH

by memory – **Philippians 4:12 (NIV)**

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

in Bible –

The next four units of *The Journey* will address the important subject of *stewardship*. The term *stewardship* is used to refer to the responsibility God has given his people to manage the resources He gives. This week you will study three passages beginning with a well-known parable told by Jesus that will introduce you to the biblical concept of stewardship. The other two passages deal with *contentment*, a related topic that has important implications for how you manage the resources God has given you. Before you begin, you may want to remind yourself of the **PRAISE** approach to personal worship by reviewing Unit 2 of Gospel Living.

Matthew 25:14-30 – In this parable about the Kingdom of God, Jesus uses a fictitious master and his three servants to illustrate the basic principles of stewardship.

Philippians 4:10-20 – Paul wrote this letter to Philippi while in prison. In this passage he is thanking the Philippian Church for their support and reveals his attitude toward money and possessions.

1 Timothy 6:3-19 – Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to advise him on discharging his pastoral duties. This passage from chapter 6 contains Paul's advice about the pursuit of wealth.

to summarize -

These 4 units of *The Journey* deal with the *grace commitment* of generous living. The term *grace commitment* may be new to you so you should know that it is a discipline or commitment that is

motivated by God's Grace. The opposite of a grace commitment is what we have called *performance*. Performance is motivated by a desire to earn God's favor.

The grace commitment of generous living is founded on the biblical concept of *stewardship*. A *steward* is someone who is responsible for managing and developing property and resources for the advancement of the owner. A modern example of a steward is a retail store manager. S/he will have access to and responsibility for inventory, revenue, costs, and staff. Their first responsibility is to manage these so that the store owner makes a profit. Note that the manager owns nothing – not the store, the revenue, nor the inventory. S/he simply manages what is entrusted to him or her. As a demonstration of trust, a wise owner may reward a good manager with a larger salary and more responsibility, but the manager still is not the owner.

As you studied the parable in Matthew 25, you should have noticed that the three servants were not owners, they were essentially an ancient version of managers. The owner entrusted them with his property, held them accountable to increase his worth, and rewarded (or punished) them according to their faithfulness. Perhaps you have already seen how this parable applies to your life. *You own nothing*. Regardless of your net worth, you are only a manager, a steward of God's resources. In fact, all the intangibles that make up your life – skills, gifts, opportunities, intelligence, relationships – are entrusted to you, lent out for the benefit of the owner. Everything in your life is a trust to you so that you can participate with God in the growth of His Kingdom on earth.

Let the impact of this sink in. This may be a radically new and challenging idea for you. Your pulse might be increasing as you ponder the implications of owning *nothing*. You may have to wrestle with this, but if so, wrestle with all your might. For you will find that getting your attitude toward the resources God has entrusted to you (especially the financial resources) in sync with His Kingdom priorities will be a critical component of your spiritual progress. Stewardship is perhaps the most revealing spiritual assessment issue that there is. It is a domino issue. If you are willing to follow Christ in the arena of money management, then other lesser issues fall into place. But, if there is a lack of surrender regarding stewardship, it becomes a significant obstacle to your spiritual growth.

The goal of these four units is to help you develop a grace-motivated spiritual commitment to generous living. But how will you know if you are progressing in this area? – By focusing on the development of four specific factors that relate to stewardship. The first is the foundational issue of your *level of contentment with what God has provided*.

Can you say that you are content with what you have? You may think that depends on how things are going at the moment. How do you think Paul would answer that question? Was his level of contentment subject to the ups and downs of his financial condition? From your reading you learned that this was not the case.

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In Philippians 4, Paul was thanking the Philippian Church for their generous support during his imprisonment. At that time, the Roman prison system required families and friends to provide for the necessities of prisoners. Thus, Paul was completely dependent on the generosity of others. Yet, his motivation for thanking them was not to keep the support coming. He focused instead on two things: first, the benefit they would receive by giving (v 17); and second, and his contentment with God's provision, whether much or little (v 11–12). Paul recognized that God was his ultimate provider and, knowing God's love and wisdom, he was content; that is, *he was satisfied that God had already provided him everything he needed for his present happiness.*

Interestingly, Paul said he had *learned* to be content (v 11). At another time in his life, perhaps Paul was only content with abundance, always wanting more. But the cumulative effect of his life experiences as a Christian had taught him that God always met his basic needs, and with this he was content. What happened? How did he learn contentment? The passage from 1 Timothy 6 gives us a helpful answer. There Paul wrote something of a proverbial truth, "*For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it*" (v 7). What Paul is teaching is that no one is ever an owner of anything. Everything is a gift. And if that is the case, then as far as Paul is concerned, the basic necessities of life like food and clothing (v 8), are great enough gifts to give reason for contentment.

Have you learned to view life this way – that you can be content right now with what God has provided? People who learn that if they have the basic needs of life, they have all they truly need to be happy; these are the people who grow up spiritually. Their level of contentment has a domino effect on other spiritual issues as they walk with Christ.

But let's be clear, contentment is *not* just about being happy with a little. It is being happy with whatever God gives, whether great or small. Notice in Philippians that Paul said he had learned the *secret* of contentment whatever his circumstances, whether having a lot or a little (v 12). Finding contentment with a lot is equally challenging to finding contentment with a little. The writer of Proverbs 30 understood this challenge, and in fact prayed that God would give him neither poverty nor riches, but only meet his daily needs. He said, "*Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.*" (Proverbs 30:9) So, there is no spiritual advantage in having a little or a lot. Both circumstances offer their own unique challenges. The spiritual advantage is in learning contentment so that you can be happy with whatever God's plan is for your financial situation.

So, how will you learn contentment? – Partly by understanding your role as a steward of God's resources. But ultimately, a state of contentment can only be realized through the strengthening power of Christ. In regards to this Paul wrote, "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*" (v 13) In other words, Paul had confidence in the ability of Christ to match any situation

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that he faced. You will experience the power of Christ as you are filled with His Spirit. Remember, this means inviting His control as you acknowledge your union with Christ. Then, anything God calls you to be and do, you can do through Christ, even be content in every circumstance.

Are you complaining about your situations in life? You will find that without Christ's strength, with an attitude of ownership, contentment is virtually impossible no matter how much you have. But if you see yourself as a steward who manages God's resources for His Kingdom, then with Christ's strength you can learn contentment in any circumstance in which He places you. And your contentment will become manifest by your generous living.

online –

Remember to visit <http://perimeter-adult.followers.net/Discipleship.Curriculum> for this week's downloadable audio, video, or print resources.

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EQUIPPING

Think about the Bible passages you studied this week. What did you learn from them about stewardship and contentment? Summarize your thoughts in the space below.

Knowing what you do now, do you view yourself as an owner or a steward? On the scale below, place a mark where you see yourself. Then write two or three sentences that describe why you placed yourself there.



Now, imagine that your view of resources (money, time, skills, etc.) was much closer to the "Steward" end of the scale. How would your life be different? How would your management of finances and time change? How would contentment grow in your life? Be specific.

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MISSION – THE 3 MINUTE TESTIMONY

"...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (I Peter 3:15, NIV)

As an ambassador for Christ, God will put you in the path of opportunity to "give the reason" for your hope in Jesus. So it is wise to be prepared to make the most of these opportunities when they come.

For the last several weeks you have been praying for people on your target list, having mission conversations with them, and thinking about how God could use you to influence these people for Christ. You should also have a written plan for reaching them that you are putting into action now. This week you will begin working on a specific tool that God can use to make you more effective at influencing people for Christ. The tool is as simple as your own story of becoming a follower of Jesus. Last week you summarized your experience by describing your life before you became a follower of Jesus, when and how you became a follower, and what your life has been like since you became a follower of Jesus. This exercise will help you develop those thoughts into a brief, personal, and attractive story about why and how you became a follower of Jesus. This might take you a few minutes, or several days, depending on how much thought you put into it. Keep in mind, this exercise is about *your* personal experience, so you shouldn't try to make it a theological defense of the Gospel.

Steps

1. **Think and Scribble.** The next page is basically a blank space where you can write, scribble, or draw. Use this space to help you focus on what Jesus has done for you and what knowing Him means to you. Some questions are listed as food for thought. Don't worry about organizing your thoughts yet. Just try to get all your thoughts on paper in front of you. Take as much time as needed on this step and use additional pages if necessary.
2. **Review the Tips** to help you organize your thoughts and write a draft of your testimony.
3. **Write** your testimony on the pages following the tips. Remember to keep it short. If you can learn to tell your story in a couple of minutes by focusing on the important points, you will have no problem sharing more details when you have the opportunity.
4. **Practice telling it naturally.** Telling someone why and how you became a believer should not be a formal presentation, so practice sharing it in a casual, conversational style.
5. **Share it with your Discipleship Team.** This will give you an opportunity to receive feedback and coaching that can help you tell your story more effectively.

Tips

- Organize your testimony around this simple outline to make it easy to follow. You may choose to modify the outline if you want to emphasize or de-emphasize a certain point.
 - 1 – Before I became a Christian I was...
 - 2 – When/How I became a Christian
 - 3 – Since I became a Christian I am...
- Write your testimony in the way you speak naturally. You aren't presenting a report or preaching a sermon.
- If you choose to quote scripture, only use a verse or two that relates to the central point of your story and wouldn't require explanation for it to be understood. You may want to paraphrase the verse by using common spoken phrases rather than quoting.
- Avoid Christian jargon (e.g. saved, lost, Christian, sin, born again, converted). These words don't always communicate what you intend.
- Remember that most people you meet will say they believe in God, so you will want to talk about trusting or following Jesus, rather than having a general faith in God.
- Emphasize why you believe Jesus is real and relevant in your life.
- Avoid talking about Churches, Denominations, or Christian groups in a derogatory way.
- Avoid giving the false impression that the Christian life is trouble free.
- You could end your testimony with a simple question in order to elicit a response. (e.g. "How would you describe your spiritual journey so far?")
- Practice telling your story. If you can't tell it in 2 or 3 minutes, it's too long.
- Ask yourself if your testimony would connect with someone on a personal level so that they could identify with your story.

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