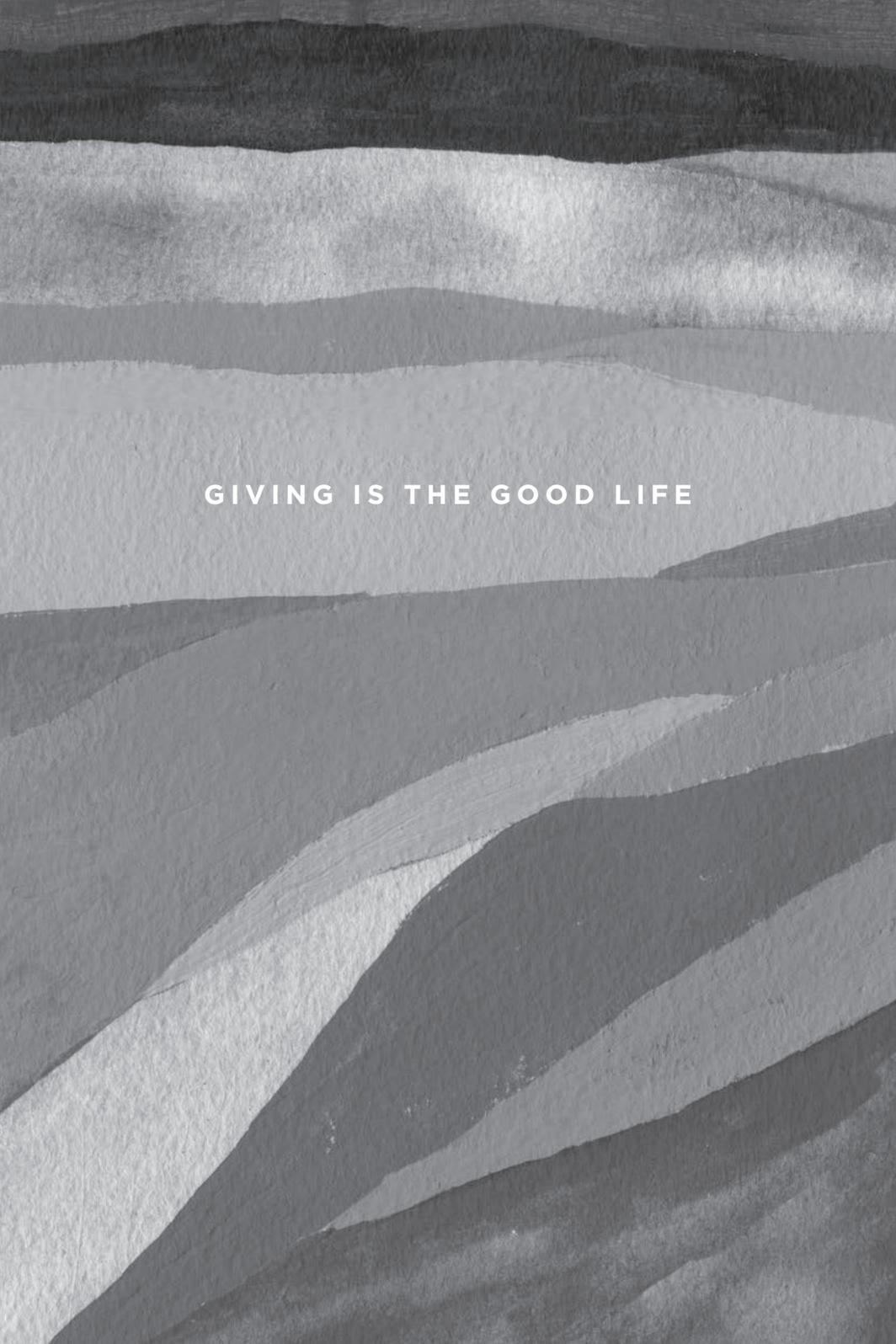


Randy Alcorn

GIVING
IS THE
GOOD
LIFE

The Unexpected Path to
Purpose and Joy



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Giving Is the Good Life: The Unexpected Path to Purpose and Joy

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*To Paul and Michele Norquist and their wonderful children,
for making our personal lives and our church a much richer place; for serving and
honoring Jesus and shepherding God's people with pure and humble hearts.*

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precious sister.*

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE GOOD LIFE?

.....

Not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued.

SOCRATES

*The good life is reserved for the person who fears God,
who lives reverently in his presence.*

ECCLESIASTES 8:12, MSG

Are you living the good life? If not, I know you wish you were.

People define the good life in different ways, but *everybody* wants to live it. After all, what's the alternative? Living a bad life? A pointless, guilt-ridden, or miserable life?

We'd all choose the good life any day, and yet we often don't understand how to make it happen.

A quick online search reveals that most people's idea of the good life includes happiness. That makes sense—nobody wants to be unhappy. Most of us also want to make other people happy and help them if we can. But when it comes down to it, even Christ-followers suspect that spending our lives serving God and others might cost us our happiness.

Wouldn't it be great if we could do what pleases God *and* what's

best for others, while at the same time enjoying happiness and deep satisfaction?

But that's not possible, you may think.

Or is it?

What if we really can live the good life without being selfish? What if God not only wants us to live life more abundantly, as Jesus put it (John 10:10), but also provides clear instructions for how to actually experience it? What if it's possible to discover what to embrace and what to avoid so we can live a meaningful and fulfilling life—*the good life*—even in this broken world?

Does that sound too good to be true?

Actually, it's both “too good” *and* true.

That's what this book is about.

The Good Life Is Countercultural

We live in a world that screams, “Make lots of money and spend it on yourself, and you'll be happy. *That's* the good life!”

There's just one problem. It's a lie.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus repeatedly turned our definition of the good life on its head. For instance, he said, “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving” (Acts 20:35, GNT).

Jesus told us that parting with money to help others will bring us more joy than hanging on to that money. Counterintuitive as it may seem, our greatest good, and the happiness that accompanies it, is found in giving, not receiving.

In other words, generosity is the good life.

This idea that giving away money and possessions equals happiness is a paradox. Human reasoning says that spending money on ourselves is in our best interest—and to a degree, that's true. We all

need food to eat, a place to live, clothes to wear. But once our basic needs are met, money can easily stop helping us and start hurting us.

According to CreditCards.com, the average American has nearly \$16,000 in credit card debt. The average college student graduates with \$40,000 in student loans, and some with far more. Almost 40 percent of Americans carry credit card debt month to month, continuing to spend more than they have and remaining in financial bondage. Debt is routinely incurred in pursuing the good life, yet psychologists attest that the debt-funded lifestyle leads to depression, anxiety, resentment, stress, denial, anger, frustration, regret, shame, embarrassment, and fear.¹ This is the very opposite of the good life. It's the terrible life!

Here's a truth that can set us free: "living large" actually makes us smaller. Living "the good life" (as our culture defines it) results in *missing* the best life.

Deep down, we all know it's true: you can spend every last cent you own on yourself—and, through credit, far more—and still end up miserable. In fact, if you want to be miserable, greed and stinginess are the perfect recipe. Those who hoard their money, like those who spend it all on themselves, are the unhappiest people on the planet. Jesus calls us to do something radical: love others by giving away our money and time. That sounds like loss, not gain. Yet in God's economy, that's exactly how we can expand and enhance our own lives.

Generosity Pays Off

This book really *is* about living the good life. I say this because you may wonder if I'm trying to make the generous Christian life sound easier and happier than it really is.

First, I'm not suggesting that giving always comes easily or without sacrifice. What I *am* saying is that in God's providence, the payoff far outweighs the sacrifice. Generosity is God's best, designed just for us. This is always true in the long run, and usually it's true in the short run too.

Suppose I give up some vanilla lattes and two lunches out each month in order to support a child in Haiti. There's nothing wrong with lattes or meals out, and I may miss them, but thoughts of how the money helps a needy child flood me with happiness greater and far more enduring than twenty minutes of pleasure from a drink or eating out. My life has a purpose beyond myself, and as I say no to that small thing, my day is put in perspective. That gladness and perspective don't disappear when I finish the meal or toss the coffee cup in the recycle bin.

This book is about that kind of joy-filled, openhanded adventure of following Jesus, which brings us lasting pleasure and reaches far beyond this life to the next.

So what's ahead? In part 1 we'll explore the good life as God defines it and discover what Jesus meant when he said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10, NKJV). The first step to finding life is clear: we need to place our trust in Christ. That's where eternal life—the ultimate good life—begins. Jesus said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

Once we believe in Christ, what can we do to experience the abundant life—a life overflowing with vibrancy, satisfaction, and contentment?

Though we've been granted eternal life, many Christians don't fully experience what Jesus came to give us. The stresses



THE BEST CHRISTMAS EVER

While shopping online for a bike as a present for her dad, ten-year-old Riley and her mom followed a video link about an organization that provides specially engineered bicycles for individuals with disabilities. Seeing the happy faces of people riding the bikes, Riley told her mom, “I’m going to buy a bike for one of those kids.”

Riley’s mom loved her daughter’s heart, but the cost of just one special bike was a few thousand dollars. Two days later, Riley showed her mom a letter she’d written explaining how the bikes could help those in need and requesting donations.

After Riley sent the letter to seventy-five relatives and friends, money started pouring in. Word spread, and as Christmas neared, more donations came. On Christmas, Riley donned a Santa hat and delivered bicycles to three girls: thirteen-year-old Ava, who has spina bifida; fifteen-year-old Jenny, who has cerebral palsy; and four-year-old Rose, who has a rare genetic disorder.

“This is the best Christmas I ever had,” Riley declared.

She ultimately raised enough to pay for seven bikes, each given to a grateful recipient.

Riley says that when she rides her bicycle with one of the girls she gave a bike to, “I like to go fast, get sweaty, and feel the breeze. . . . So does Ava. She pumps with her arms, not her feet, but she really flies.”

Riley plans to continue raising funds for bicycles every Christmas. She says, “I want kids to feel the wind in their faces.”*

* “Project Mobility Cycles for Life Riley Christensen 2010 Adaptive Cycle Giveaway,” YouTube video, 1:46, posted by Project Mobility, December 16, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbuhnHXXoF8>. See also Gary Sledge, “5 Stories That Celebrate the Spirit of Giving,” *Reader’s Digest*, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/5-stories-that-celebrate-the-spirit-of-giving/>.



and pressures of life weigh us down and leave us feeling like we’re missing something. We lose both joy and purpose. Life becomes a drudgery, not an adventure. It’s a shrunken life, not a flourishing one.

If that's where you find yourself, take heart. True, it's not possible to eliminate difficulties and challenges until we're living at last in the world we were made for (the New Earth, not this one). But we certainly don't have to wait until we die to experience the abundant life Jesus promised.

Part 2 of this book delivers the bad news and the very good news about money, as described in 1 Timothy 6. The bad news is that loving and serving money will destroy us and rob us of life and happiness. The good news is that if we recognize God's ownership of everything, we'll steward our resources to help meet physical and spiritual needs. Our reward will be both future rewards and present contentment, purpose, and what Scripture calls "the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19, NIV).

Giving Is an Eternal Investment

Okay, you might be thinking, I understand that giving to others can bring me happiness. But is there really any benefit beyond that initial good feeling I get when I help someone?

One of the biggest misconceptions about giving is that the money we part with to help the needy or to spread the gospel just disappears and is gone forever. While we hope others will benefit from it, we're quite sure *we* won't. We even buy into the devil's lie that giving will rob us of the good life.

We couldn't be more wrong.

Jesus told his disciples that when they gave money away, their hearts would follow the treasures they were storing in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-21). He also said that at the Resurrection, God would reward them for helping the needy (Luke 14:14). Somehow we're forever connected to what we give and the people we give

it to. Martin Luther has been credited with saying, “I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.”

The Bible shows that anything we put in God’s hands is an investment in eternity. But that doesn’t just mean that *someday* our giving will bring us good. It will actually do us good here and now—at the same time it does good for others. That’s why the good life is inseparable from generosity.

I once heard a longtime Christian say, “I always used to tithe, checking off the box of spiritual duties. I never got excited about it. Then, as my wife and I learned about generosity, suddenly giving became fun. My wife told me that until then she’d never seen me write a check with a smile on my face!”

Does this seem too good to be true? Keep reading, because as we’ll discover, the truth is far better than we could ever imagine.

Generosity Is Good for Everyone, Not Just Christians

Even outside the Christian world, there’s a great deal of emphasis on philanthropy. Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and various actors, musicians, and athletes have championed giving to various causes. It’s not uncommon for people who don’t profess Christ to believe in helping the poor and advocating for the oppressed.

In fact, modern research has much to say about the benefits of generosity. In their book *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*, sociologists Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson write about Smith’s findings on giving, which are based on years of careful studies. His conclusions may seem unexpected, but they shouldn’t be at all surprising to those who understand

we're created in the image of a generous God. They write, "Those who give, receive back in turn. By spending ourselves for others' well-being, we enhance our own standing. . . . This is not only a philosophical or religious teaching; it is a sociological fact."²

Smith's extensive research, which included more than two thousand surveys of American adults and many personal interviews, reveals this:

Giving money, volunteering, being relationally generous, being a generous neighbor and friend, and personally valuing the importance of being a generous person are all significantly, positively correlated with greater personal happiness, physical health, a stronger sense of purpose in life, avoidance of symptoms of depression, and a greater interest in personal growth.³

In her book *The Giving Way to Happiness: Stories and Science behind the Life-Changing Power of Giving*, Jenny Santi shares the results of a 2008 study by Professor Elizabeth Dunn of the University of British Columbia. Participants received an envelope with either five dollars or twenty dollars. Some were instructed to spend the money by the end of the day; others were told to give it away. "Participants who were instructed to spend the money on a gift for someone else or for a charitable donation reported greater happiness than those who were instructed to spend the money on themselves."⁴

These are not isolated examples. Scientific studies back up what God's Word has been saying for thousands of years: generosity pays immeasurable dividends. God rewards people for generosity in this life as well as in the life to come. He does this because he is a God of grace and a lavish giver himself.

Generosity Benefits Recipients *and* Givers

Surprisingly, the Bible doesn't talk that much about how giving changes the lives of its recipients. More often, it talks about what giving does for *the one who gives*.

I could have filled this book with stories of how the hungry are fed, how clean water saves children, and how people weep for joy when they receive God's Word in their heart language. While I've included some of those vital stories, I'm following the example of Scripture by focusing on the giver's happiness and spiritual transformation.

GOD'S BONUS

Jack Alexander says, "Our giving went to a whole 'nother level when one day I got my first bonus ever. It was \$5,000. I organized a dinner at Wendy's with Lisa and my two little boys to tell them."

When he shared the news with his family, Lisa responded, "You won't believe what happened today." She said they had received a letter from a nurse in Sudan who needed to buy a Jeep. The cost of that vehicle? Five thousand dollars!

Jack's initial response was, "Nooooooo . . ."

But Lisa said these fateful words: "Will you pray about it?"

"God met me in that prayer, and he showed me two things," Jack says. "First, he showed me . . . the value of probably hundreds of kids who could get inoculations, and people [who] could be helped. I was just overwhelmed with what a great investment it was to give that money away. The second thing I really knew was from the Holy Spirit because I got this overwhelming sense . . . that this was a privilege, that God . . . had chosen us to do it and join his work. And we gave the money away."*

* "Jack and Lisa Alexander: 2015 Celebration of Generosity," Vimeo video, 20:25, Generous Giving, April 25, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/126023293>.

This small book isn't big enough to explore the extent of the world's needs. While I briefly summarize the facts of poverty, injustice, and unreached people groups, you are probably aware of those needs already or you can learn about them elsewhere. I believe the best way I can serve the needy is to show God's people the wonder and joy, as well as the present and future rewards, of generous giving.

This book is full of stories of people who have put into practice the life-changing biblical principles of generosity. Each story is a practical example that can help stimulate your imagination and expand your dreams of serving Jesus in fresh ways. These real-life models give you not just words to remember but footprints to follow. In turn, as you apply these principles in your own unique way and place, you will become an example to others, "a letter from Christ . . . written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God . . . carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3, NLT).

I'm excited about how we can change others' lives through our giving. But I'm also excited about how giving can change *our* lives, for God's glory and our good.

I pray that this book will give you a bigger view of God and of generosity—one that stretches far beyond this present life. And in the process, I pray that you will understand more than ever what the good life is really all about.