

CITY CHURCH HOUSTON

*re*NEW

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The Generous Heart of Life Together

City Church Houston | Devotional & Study | April 2024



# reNEW: The Generous Heart of Life Together

City Church Houston | Small Group Guide | April 2024

“The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call ‘ourselves,’ to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be ‘good.’ We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do.”

*C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity*

“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

*Corrie Ten Boom*

## Renewal Starts Here

In August of 2015, City Church hosted its first-ever Sunday service at the House of Blues in Downtown Houston. As with many gospel-centered endeavors, our mission was both disarmingly simple and unquestionably complex. City Church was planted to “Renew Houston by Bringing Beauty into Broken Places.” At the very origins of our community was an explicit and expressed goal to bring “renewal.” This is no small task given the obstacles we face in cultivating the beauty of hope and purpose in our very souls—much less in our work, our relationships, and our chaotic, day-to-day lives.

In April of 2024, we find ourselves on the precipice of an exciting new chapter. Having closed on the property that will serve as our future, permanent home, we are in the unique position of renewing our commitment to renewal, reminding ourselves and others of the vision that led to City Church’s founding.

Over the next several weeks, as we focus our collective attention on the theological and financial foundations that this move requires, our prayer is that this devotional and study offers a chance to reflect on subjects that significantly shape our spirituality but are often avoided in conversation. If you are new to City Church and still exploring who we are, we hope this study is a chance to learn more about precisely who we are and what we value. Whether you are participating online or joining us in person, we’re honored you are joining us for these weeks of study and reflection. Just as all are welcome at City Church, all are invited into this season of renewing vision.

## Renewal (and Ruin) Is All Around Us

Look out any window. Renewal is baked into the language of nature: our days and our seasons are reminders of the way in which this physical reality is ever caught in the interplay of decay and renewal, death and rebirth. (In fact, as I write some of this material, it is the first day of spring, March 21<sup>st</sup>.) The great environmentalist Rachel Carson observes:

There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.<sup>1</sup>

These “repeated refrains” are also witnessed in our communities, our culture, and our churches. As City Church embraces this next evolution in the life of its mission, it will mean just such an ebb and flow, the ending of one season and the beginning of another. Constant, though, is our commitment to *renewal in every season*.

The assurance of renewal is one of the fundamental promises of scripture. As Isaiah reminds us, “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Is. 40:31).

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1. Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 88–9.

Or, take Paul in his letter to the church in Rome: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing* of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2). Perhaps most illuminating of all is Paul’s reminder to the Colossians that one of the telltale signs of our spiritual renewal is a restored honesty and openness with one another: “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3:9–10).

We all share portions of our life with others, but the call of the church is to live generously and openly with one another, as well as with the world beyond the walls of our congregations. Oft-referenced though it may be, Jesus spoke more about money than any other subject—with the one exception being the Kingdom of God. But even the Kingdom of God is frequently addressed in terms of resources and finances, that is, in the language of deposits and investments (e.g. Matt. 13:31–35 and Mk. 4:26–33). Christ was not concerned with his churches acquiring material wealth, but rather with using the subject of resources and money to serve as a litmus test for our own connection to his Father. Many trust God with their lives, but some find it harder to trust him with their finances. (The author would like to add, about himself: *guilty as charged*.)

What if our collective sense of community and our personal resources are like a double helix, strands of our identity that weave together and overlap? For most of us, it is hard to practice generic and faceless generosity. But when we love one another, when we share a mission or common passion together, it is far easier to see clearly who and why we are serving. What if instead of approaching our giving as a contribution to an “institution” or a “building,” we think about it as a participation in a community, a mission? In one of his most famous commencement addresses, the novelist Kurt Vonnegut once proposed, “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”<sup>2</sup>

The daring work of building stable communities can happen in a variety of ways, but it is one of City Church’s reasons for existence. We consider small groups a front door to the life of our church, and we hope that this brief, three-week study will show how we desire the heart of the gospel to flow through more than Sunday mornings. We hope these conversations shape each and every member of our communal orbit—through time in scripture as well as through time for dialogue. It can be awkward, if not off-putting, to discuss money in the church. And there is no doubt that church history has no shortage of episodes in which the church has abused its authority and resources. Still, to avoid the subject altogether as a never-ending *mea culpa* serves only to silence conversations that are indeed central to our personal and collective futures.

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2. Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York: Dial Press, 2011), 191.

## The Contours of Renewal

As a concept, renewal reveals the brute fact of decay. One only needs to renew that which has lost its “newness.” We only restore those paintings whose original beauty and character have been ravaged by the forces of time and pollution. *So, the first step toward renewal is admitting that renewal is necessary.* And the first place to look for that necessity is in our relationships. To be human, and to navigate life with other humans, will quickly reveal the reality of brokenness. And yet, few powers are better able to counteract the feelings of despair or isolation like the power of generosity. Have you ever had someone do something absurdly generous for you? How did it make you feel? How did it shape your thinking?

Generosity is indissoluble from the concept of community, just as true and lasting renewal is inseparable from the promise of resurrection contained in the message of the gospel. We are co-workers in building a world of goodness, of belonging, and of purpose. As the Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks reminds us,

we are each other's  
harvest:  
we are each other's  
business:  
we are each other's  
magnitude and bond.<sup>3</sup>

That “we are each other’s business” is more than a colloquial way of saying we should be involved in one another’s lives. Brooks actually means that we are tied to each other through the overlapping forces of economy and culture. To live alongside and love others means to see members of our community as our “business,” our “bond,” and the means by which we all grow (“magnitude”). We become greater *together*, and together we find the true meaning of wealth—the wealth of stable and trust-filled relationships.

Consider this study a twinned invitation: to think about the call to generosity as a sound that is echoed in the powerful answer of community. We give not to earthly institutions or powers if we hope to see the gospel advance. We give to the ideals and visions that organize the collective identity we call the church, the very Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). And when it comes to City Church, this season is far less about any single building or purchase than it is about magnifying the gospel in gratitude for the generosity God has shown to us. We give out of the surplus of the goodness of God; we serve out of the fullness of God’s servant-minded Son; we love out of a supply that fills our very hearts the moment we discover that he “first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19).

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3. Gwendolyn Brooks, “Paul Robeson,” in *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Elizabeth Alexander (New York: Library of America, 2015), 113.

## A Guide to this Guide

This three-week devotional and study corresponds to our sermon series and capital campaign, “reNEW.” Each week, these reflections will generate opportunities for personal reflections and group conversation—as we explore the verses that will inspire that coming week’s sermon. In other words, you will be spending three days each week diving into these biblical passages and then, on Sunday, those passages will be explored through the sermon and liturgy. Choose any three days you like, or slow down and read the passages more slowly over additional days.

Extending beyond the ministry and mission of City Church, this study is intended to invite everyone into a season of spiritual renewal. Some may feel they are already in such a season, but ministry has taught me that the vast majority of us are far too busy, far too tired, far too human to exist in a state of perpetual renewal. In fact, who could claim to live like that?

Here begins a short, personal journey to ask God—through prayer and community alike—for a clear vision of renewal for you, your relationships, your home, and your church. The Christian mystic Thomas Merton once mildly pushed back against the sometimes ambiguous language of rebirth in the Christian world, writing,

There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes our lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, *but to become ourselves*.<sup>4</sup>

It’s not simply that the gospel gives us new life, but more pointedly, that it restores to us the original life that God intended for us. To be renewed is to discover who we *really* are in Christ Jesus. And insofar as this should be the goal of every community who claims to follow Jesus, we pray fervently that this will be a season of rediscovery, recommitment, and, yes, renewal.

*While this devotional can be completed on its own, we strongly encourage you to use this time as a chance to check out or re-explore our small groups. For the next few weeks, we will all be “on the same page”—discussing these same passages and starting from the same point. This is a perfect time to learn more about these groups. Visit the Small Groups page at [citychurch.org](http://citychurch.org) to learn more; or, email our Community & Care Pastor Clint Wilson ([clint@citychurch.org](mailto:clint@citychurch.org)).*

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4. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 196.

## **WEEK 1: INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE**

Matthew 6:19–26; 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19

### **Matthew 6**

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

24 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

### **1 Timothy 6**

6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.



### **Meditation for the Week:**

*Moths and Vermin.* What an image we find in Matthew 6:20. When Jesus talks about treasures being destroyed by “moths and vermin,” he is talking about two kinds of destructive forces: time and nature. Moths destroy our belongings slowly, over time. We may retrieve a sweater from our closet (admittedly, a rare occurrence here in Houston) and discover what has taken place in the shadows over the course of many seasons. Alternatively, if you have ever dealt with rodents or water damage or other kinds of sudden disaster, you will know that some destruction arrives without delay. Beset on all sides by risk and potential loss, the temptation to store up a reservoir for our future security is certainly great. Jesus is reminding us that while there is nothing wrong with saving, it is our heart that he is interested in. *Do we trust him with our uncertain future?*

Whether in the short-term or the long-term, our lives are subject to all kinds of loss and damage. And regardless of our willingness to acknowledge the fact, our best efforts to insulate ourselves from risk are imperfect at best. Like the author of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes, Jesus reminds us that the things we build and protect in this life are no match for the power of time and entropy. Part of what makes faith so challenging is that believing in the ultimate renewal of our bodies and souls—in the joy of everlasting life in the presence of our Maker—runs counter to the general way of things in this life.

But let’s not miss a final destructive force: “thieves [who] break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20). Brokenness exists even within our social relations. We all know this sad fact to be true, but we often live in denial of the reality of such hazards. While it’s not a comprehensive list, Jesus’ teaching emphasizes the extent to which our lives are subject to forces far beyond our ability to control or even manage. Each and every day we entrust our lives—and, as believers, our souls—into the hands of God. In a recent viral video, a hawk crashes into a car window intending to scoop up a little kitten. The kitten is slightly startled but mostly oblivious to how a thin layer of glass protected its life from certain disaster. God is the barrier that holds our lives in the balance, who lovingly protects us as we go about our daily motions.

Taking Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6 to heart is the first node in a journey toward living yet more generous lives, the fountainhead from which the waters of generosity spring. All that *is* belongs to God, and all that we are is an offering to his goodness and glory. More than that, however, Jesus reminds us that storing away our riches in this life is subject to not only spiritual decay, but also the natural cycles of disaster, disease, and decay that have left even the greatest civilizations in rubble. We give because it is our spiritual privilege to do so, but also because, as Paul explains, “we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Tim. 6:7).

## Day 1

*Read:* Matthew 6:19–24.

*Reflect:* Take a moment to take stock. If you can imagine a future archaeologist stumbling upon your home in 1000 years, what would they find? What would remain? What prized possessions or major investments do you think would last? What does this exercise reveal to you in terms of where you are investing your time and resources?

*Pray:* Creator God, everything we have comes from you. Teach us to turn our hearts toward generosity as an expression of our gratitude for the uncountable gift of life, and as a way of participating in the human community. You are a God who promises renewal and flourishing. May our lives be testaments to the power of your transforming grace, and may our giving spirits sing ever of your greatest gift, that of your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. *Amen.*

## Day 2

*Read:* 1 Timothy 6:6–19.

*Reflect:* In his first letter to Timothy, Paul is aware of how divisive money can be within our church communities. Echoing the insights of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, Paul draws attention to the fact that worldly riches will not and cannot pass beyond the veil of this mortal life. So, he encourages those who have been granted riches "to be rich in good deeds" (1 Tim. 6:18)—which is, of course, something any of us can do, regardless of our specific financial circumstances. Knowing your own life and situation, what does it look like for you to be "rich" in the way you serve others? Giving involves far more than money, so what might you share with your community in order to "enrich" those around you?

*Pray:* Christ Jesus, you did not consider the riches of your heavenly realm so great that you were unwilling to depart from it, entering into our world of moth and vermin, of theft and deception. You came and lived among us so that we might know and experience the incomparable wealth found in a relationship with your Father, our God, whose generosity of spirit knows no bounds. We thank you for being so rich in mercy that we will never know a day where your hand does not hold together the fraying fabric of our broken world. *Amen.*

## Day 3

*Read:* Matthew 6:25–26.

*Reflect:* Jesus' attention to anxiety is a natural conclusion of his preaching on worldly wealth. We pursue financial gain for many reasons—and, of course, many of those reasons are moral and reasonable—but the base root of our desire for money is *security*. We long for stability and security in a life that can feel, at times, chaotic. With what image does Jesus

comfort our anxious hearts? Is this a helpful example for you? If you are someone who can obsess over financial security, have you ever reached a point where you feel fully secure? What would it take to get there? Take a moment to write your definition of security.

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*Pray:* Holy Spirit, without abandoning our call to be good stewards and wise planners, will you help us to loosen our grip on our often exhausting need for control? Remind us that you alone are God and that you alone know our futures. It can be frightening to trust you, but your mercies are new every morning. Our ultimate renewal is found not through the things of this world, but only in our relationship with you. *Amen.*

## Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. What aspect of your future is hardest for you to let go of? Over what facet of your life is your grip the tightest? What does this tell you about where your faith has room to expand, or does it tell you anything like that? Be as specific as you'd like to be!
2. Jesus tells us that “we cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). What do you think that means? And, turning to the next verse, why does he begin with “Therefore” (6:25)? How are these two ideas related—our status as servants and our anxiety when facing the pressures of this present world?
3. In 1 Timothy 6:17–18, Paul gets a little clever with his wordplay (using the word “rich” or its derivatives in at least three ways). What are those, and how would you summarize Paul’s point here?
4. How do we know where to begin with generosity? The way we talk about money and giving can sometimes feel so vague and ambiguous. How do we determine, for ourselves, how to live out the call and teachings of Jesus?

After each week’s devotional, we will provide a few specific FAQs about our capital campaign, “reNEW.” If you would like to interact more on any of these materials, please always feel free to reach out to our Community & Care Pastor, Clint Wilson ([clint@citychurch.org](mailto:clint@citychurch.org)).

## **reNEW: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS for WEEK 1**

### **WHY ARE WE MOVING?**

*While the House of Blues has been a generous and wonderful host for City Church, having control over a permanent property will allow us to expand our reach, improve our ministries, and better support our mission partners all over the city of Houston. While it may feel as if we are moving into one neighborhood, we feel that centralizing at one intersection will actually allow us to live more fully into the mission of being a church for the whole city. This building will provide us with spaces to meet, host events, offer childcare, and partner with others in a way that our current ministry cannot. To take but two examples, we are excited to see how this building allows our City Kids and City Youth ministries to grow yet further.*

### **WHEN ARE WE MOVING?**

*Ah, the million-dollar question, give or take. Having closed on the property, now begins the work of designing and constructing our new home. The structure and interior rooms have suffered from decades of deferred maintenance, not to mention some layout issues that would not serve the current needs of our congregation. Therefore, the renovation is a complete, ground-up reimagining of the majority of interior spaces at this new site. We hope that, should we maintain the expected general schedule for this next phase, we will be able to begin our next chapter of 201 E. 9<sup>th</sup> Street by fall 2025.*

### **HOW CAN I THINK ABOUT GIVING WHEN I AM OVERWHELMED BY MY OWN FINANCES?**

*There is no doubt that finances are a source of personal stress and relational strife. Distressing data suggests that people not only avoid discussing money with their friends, but they also often avoid or otherwise misrepresent their feelings about finance even within core relationships and family units. Our prayer is that this season will actually be an invitation into more honest conversations within our community and within our closest relationships. In fact, we will be hosting a practical "Money Matters" seminar on Sunday, April 21 after the service—where qualified, financial experts will offer to help those thinking (or rethinking) about their holistic approach to stewardship and financial planning.*

### **WILL CITY CHURCH STILL BE A CHURCH FOR THE "CITY," OR JUST FOR OUR NEW NEIGHBORHOOD?**

*Neither our name nor our mission will change. We still intend to be a church in the city and for the city of Houston. And if anything, we hope that our original vision will only be amplified in this chance to reintroduce ourselves through our new space. Although we do hope that our presence in the Heights will be welcome news for those who live in this area, we remain committed to hosting events in public spaces throughout the city, to supporting the arts and artists wherever they can be found, and to cultivating deep pockets of community through our small groups that meet in many different areas around Houston.*

# BONUS TRACKS

Connecting to Sundays @ City Church!



## THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT & JOY AND ANXIETY

Consider listening to two messages from our 2021 sermon series, “Rediscovering Joy”: Ayo Omopariola’s “The Secret of Contentment” and Clint Wilson’s “Joy and Anxiety.” Search for “Rediscovering Joy” in the “Sermons” tab at [citychurch.org](http://citychurch.org). If you’re reading online or on a PDF, [simply click here](#) for Ayo’s sermon and [click here](#) for Clint’s sermon!

## WEEK 2: SACRIFICE IN THE PRESENT

Luke 21:1–4, 2 Corinthians 8:1–9

### Luke 21

1 As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 3 “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 4 All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

### 2 Corinthians 8

1 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

### **Meditation for the Week:**

It might be easy to read Jesus' celebration of the "poor widow" as symbolic or hyperbolic, but what if we think about his words quite literally? What need has God of earthly riches, material wealth? What if, in the economy of God's Kingdom, the widow's "two very small copper coins" is *literally* "more than all the others" (Lk. 21:3)? I think it is liberating to realize that God can see the state of our hearts and their unseen desires, even when others see only the outward appearances. On the other hand, the fact that God can see into our hearts is also exposing.

What Jesus teaches us in Luke 21 is that true giving is measured in terms of sacrifice, just as the true gift of Christ's love is measured in terms of his willingness to sacrifice his very life on the cross so that we might be restored to union with God. When Paul exhorts us to "offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1), he is calling to mind the vital command of Christ that following him in fact *requires* sacrifice. Here's what Jesus says in Matthew:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Matt. 16:24–26).

Self-denial and sacrifice are at the very root of the Christian life, and that sacrifice is grounded in Jesus' strong words that no "gain" will ever measure up to what we find by handing our very lives over to the God and the work of his Kingdom. As C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ." Indeed, giving of oneself over to Jesus can sometimes feel impossible. And yet, "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

Out of his own love, Paul encourages us to "test the sincerity of [our] love" for one another (2 Cor. 8:8). One way to assess where we are in the process of handing our life to Christ is to see how hard generosity feels for us. It serves as a litmus test, of sorts. Have we heard the message of Jesus, that the richest of all beings, God himself, made himself poor *for us*? If we have heard this message, then what else do we need to possess, what belongings or future do we need to secure. We are *secure* in the riches of his love. That is something the widow understood.

Like Jesus' disciples, we can sometimes be quite opinionated about how others spend money (whether we think they are self-serving or even unwisely open-handed). The "test" is not how much we are giving, or what we are giving, or how we are giving. The "test" is how comfortable we are with sacrifice, knowing that nothing we have *belongs* to us, knowing that we would have *nothing* were it not for the beneficence and lavish charity of God himself.

## Day 1

*Read:* Luke 21:1–4.

*Reflect:* One can, no doubt, imagine how a passage like this one could be abused. If the widow truly put in “all she had to live on” (Lk. 21:4), then many of us might feel uncomfortable with the precedent such a moment seems to set. Surely, we are not supposed to give all we have? If a friend were to ask you to explain how we should apply this passage, what would you say?

*Pray:* Jesus, Son of the Most High God, teach us to be like the poor widow, who sacrificed her little worldly security so that she might have eternal and lasting joy in you. Compel us to cease chasing after fleeting hopes and happiness, so that we may find the room to truly seek your presence and counsel. Convict us of where we have turned our possessions into idols, and direct our hearts to seek after only your way—the way of love and of sacrifice, of heavenly treasure rather than worldly wealth. We pray these things in your holy name.

*Amen.*

## Day 2

*Read:* 2 Corinthians 8:1–7.

*Reflect:* What a beautiful verse: “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2). That Paul finds both joy and poverty is no insignificant observation in a world as precarious and unkind as the ancient cities of Macedonia. Paul celebrates these churches for not wedding their joy in Christ to their material circumstances—a temptation that we all, I think, face. If pressed, what do you feel like you need to be joyful, really? Make a list of things that bring you joy in your life in one column. In the other column, make a list of what threatens that joy. What do these lists reveal to you?

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_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

*Pray:* Our joy is in you, oh Spirit of the living God, for only in your presence can we find peace. Please, for the glory of your name, shape us into a people who can recover and preserve joy in the midst of trial, who can practice generosity in the throes of insecurity. Lead our hearts and hands to reflect the heart and hands of Jesus, who promised to send



you, Spirit, as a help and guide in this world so desperately in need of renewal. In Christ's name we pray. *Amen.*

## Day 3

*Read:* 2 Corinthians 8:8–9.

*Reflect:* Consider also reading Philippians 2, Paul's masterful and poetic description of just how Christ became poor for us, "taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). Notice that Paul does not command the churches in Corinth to give, but rather to use the process of giving and sacrifice as an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of spiritual growth. Irrespective of the subject of generosity, where are some areas where you feel like you need to grow spiritually?

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Could any of these areas of growth be "tested" or examined by exploring ways to be generous toward others? Is God calling you to release your grip on some aspect of our material or spiritual life, and if so, how?

*Pray:* God of the Ages, our Alpha and our Omega, grant that we may see our life along the continuum of your being. We are first the recipients of the gift of life and the yet greater gift of new life in Christ Jesus. We spend our present days sacrificing as an expression of our devotion to Christ. And we are those who entrust our entire lives, future included, to the care of your provision. May all that we have and all that we are point ever toward your glory and your perfect plans for this world. *Amen.*

## Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Let's talk about this poor widow who gives virtually all she has. Isn't this gift really unwise for her financial and physical future? How would you respond to a skeptical reader who feels that this passage is confusing at best, or manipulative at worst? What is the lesson for us as readers today?
2. The Corinthians are able to hold poverty and joy in tension. How hard does that sound to you? When we really think about it, why do we normally associate financial security with joy, or at least happiness?
3. A major theme of money and generosity in scripture is that these ideas serve as a "test" of our spiritual condition (2 Cor. 8:8). What does Paul mean by that at the end of this passage? Have you ever noticed these tests in your life?
4. Sacrificing our resources can honestly feel impossible. Reread the Luke 21 passage together. How does the sacrifice that rests at the center of the gospel hold the power to melt our hearts and allow us to do the impossible—even in areas where it may feel far from instinctual or natural, like giving?

After each week's devotional, we will provide a few specific FAQs about our capital campaign, "reNEW." If you would like to interact more on any of these materials, please always feel free to reach out to our Community & Care Pastor, Clint Wilson ([clint@citychurch.org](mailto:clint@citychurch.org)).

## **reNEW: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS for WEEK 2**

### **HOW DO I KNOW IF I SHOULD GIVE? HOW DO I KNOW HOW MUCH TO GIVE?**

*God alone searches our hearts and leads us to the clarity of his vision for us and our communities. And yet, scripture reminds us that the model of Christ was one of self-denial in service of greater beauty: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). If you consider City Church your spiritual home, we hope that you will consider participating in the campaign to help establish our footprint in Houston. How much one gives is based solely on that person’s personal searching in the counsel of God and his or her family. We pray that these acts of generosity lend to each person a greater sense of personal investment in this community and its future.*

### **MONEY MAKES ME ANXIOUS, AND, HONESTLY, IT SOMETIMES MAKES ME FEEL SMALL WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE RESOURCES THAT OTHERS HAVE. WHAT DIFFERENCE COULD MY GIFT MAKE, REALISTICALLY?**

*This is one of the more common questions that is raised when it comes to so many fundraising efforts. And it is a very reasonable question. We will do our best to spare you the platitudes you know too well—though it is true that every gift genuinely matters. Rather, we view this capital campaign as a communal and spiritual exercise in which we all must lean on the Lord for his provision and guidance. As a staff, we are entrusting God with the future of his church, City Church, as well as these ambitious renovation plans, even though they produce more than a little anxiety as we wait to see how those next steps will play out. Likewise, we imagine this will be a time for those across the City Church world to reflect on their investment and commitment to the mission, in hopes that we all come to the same conclusion: this is Christ’s church, and as Psalm 127:1 tells us, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”*

### **IS THE ANNUAL MINISTRY BUDGET DIFFERENT THAN THE CAPITAL CAMPAIGN? SHOULD I GIVE TO BOTH?**

*Our ministry budget will remain the same throughout the coming year, and has in fact increased to help cover the “carrying costs” of the property while we renovate (costs like utilities and other maintenance). This is a unique time in the life of City Church, when we need to continue promoting the marquee values and events that have defined our community, while also wisely projecting where and how we will be growing in light of this exciting property news. With all that in mind, it is important and responsible to think of these costs as separate: one for our ministry and another for our facility renovations. We ask that you continue to support our mission as you would normally and ask how you can support the campaign investing in the new property in addition.*

# BONUS TRACKS

Connecting to Sundays @ City Church!



## THE STAIRWAY

Consider listening to Leo Schuster's sermon called "The Stairway"—from our 2023 sermon series, "Wrestling with God." Search for "The Stairway" in the "Sermons" tab at [citychurch.org](http://citychurch.org). If you're reading online or on a PDF, [simply click here!](#)

## WEEK 3: WORSHIP FOREVERMORE

1 Chronicles 29:9–20, Luke 19:1–10

### 1 Chronicles

9 The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly.

10 David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying,

“Praise be to you, LORD,  
 the God of our father Israel,  
 from everlasting to everlasting.  
 11 Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power  
 and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,  
 for everything in heaven and earth is yours.  
 Yours, LORD, is the kingdom;  
 you are exalted as head over all.  
 12 Wealth and honor come from you;  
 you are the ruler of all things.  
 In your hands are strength and power  
 to exalt and give strength to all.  
 13 Now, our God, we give you thanks,  
 and praise your glorious name.

14 “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. 15 We are foreigners and strangers in your sight, as were all our ancestors. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. 16 LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. 17 I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. 18 LORD, the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. 19 And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.”

20 Then David said to the whole assembly, “Praise the LORD your God.” So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed down, prostrating themselves before the LORD and the king.

### Luke 19

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was,

but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

### **Meditation for the Week:**

*David, Zacchaeus, and Jesus.* At first blush, seeing Zacchaeus in the midst of two stories that feature none other than King David and Christ Jesus, who was also known as the “Son of David” (Mk. 10:48), may seem startling. David beautifully demonstrates what an overflow of worship looks like when spurred on by the people’s generosity. Jesus beautifully demonstrates what an overflow of generosity looks like from our “prodigal God”—as Tim Keller would label him—who gives the greatest gift imaginable in his Son, inspiring worship within those who receive this good news.<sup>5</sup>

But the gospel is not just for kings and insiders. In fact, quite the opposite. Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector who would have been hated by the population around him, is utterly transformed by Jesus’ willingness to speak to him. But Jesus does more than speak to him: he *calls* to him, calls him into action. With urgency, Jesus invites himself into not only Zacchaeus’s life, but also his very home. The breach of hospitality etiquette here is part of the point: in ancient cultures, one was expected to be hosted, but such a demand would have been shocking!

Shocking, too, is Jesus’ entrance into our lives. Jesus calls out to us hanging onto the tree limbs of our existence, asking not for permission to enter our story, but for a place to stay. For his part, Zacchaeus both complies and extends his gratitude into acts of service and generosity: “Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor,” he reports (Lk. 19:8). What Zacchaeus is doing is *worshipping* Jesus by “putting his money where his mouth is.” To be transformed by Christ is to have our whole lives transformed, not just our private beliefs and opinions. Likewise, with David, seeing the generosity of the people of God is cause for celebration—not simply of their willingness to give, but of the God who has granted such riches that our giving becomes possible.

If you have paid attention to the titles of each week’s study, they have been intended to think through how generosity spans the entire arc of our earthly lives—and even beyond our earthly lives! We invest for a future with God, we sacrifice as a present-tense way of living our lives for Christ, and we worship in such a generous and expansive way that it traverses the entire length of our days. Zacchaeus’ journey only begins with this story, just as our journeys only begin when we hear the call of Jesus. All good things come from God, and our praise and our worship flows back toward him in a cycle of renewal that lends to us an everlasting purpose in his name.

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5. See Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

## Day 1

*Read:* 1 Chronicles 29:9–20. In fact, I would encourage you to pray these words as a personal reflection on the generosity of God for each of us.

*Reflect:* David's joy is infectious and captivating. It is all the more compelling when we see that his joy is not in the people of Israel, whose faithfulness often waxed and waned, but in God's gracious toward his people, which never ends. He is moved by Israel's giving, but without missing a beat, he moves to the grounding goodness of God. How quickly are you able to move your heart from good news to gratitude, from good outcomes in your daily life to the good God who oversees all our days? When you get disrupted in worshiping him, what usually gets in the way?

*Pray:* May the LORD bless us and keep us; the LORD make his face shine on us and be gracious to us; the LORD turn his face toward us and give us peace. *Amen.*

## Day 2

*Read:* Luke 19:1–6.

*Reflect:* Aside from being such a delightfully *visual* story in the gospels, the narrative of Zacchaeus shows the sheer breadth of God's love (ironically coded in its ability to detect even a lone man in a tree). That Christ saw Zacchaeus and chose to privilege time with him shows that God always seeks and saves the lost—even tax collectors who would have been very unpopular in the eyes of the crowds. Jesus is not working for the crowd's approval, of course, but rather serving the will of God. The call to generosity is much the same: we should seek the will of God in ourselves and then live into the high calling of sacrificial, open-handed life together.

*Pray:* Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. *Amen.*

## Day 3

*Read:* Luke 19:7–10.

*Reflect:* The crowds are always so dialed into Jesus' choice of companions (this is not the only time they note that he eats with "sinners"). The Zacchaeus episode shows that outsiders can come in all forms—from all classes and backgrounds and predispositions. Clearly Zacchaeus was not thought highly of, but it was possibly this reality that made Zacchaeus' heart so willing to welcome Jesus into his home and to hear his message of hope. Zacchaeus signals his change by immediately addressing where he had sinned in his past (with money). The same will be true of us: Christ wants us as we are, loves as we are, but will not leave us as we are. Where are you being called to be transformed, renewed?



*Pray:* Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. *Amen.*

## Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever felt like a Zacchaeus—invisible in the crowd, simply fighting for a view of God? In seasons where you feel this way, what has been helpful? Have you ever experienced the generosity of God in your life, and if so, how?
2. Compare David and Zacchaeus (I know, an unusual pairing to be sure!). What similarities do you notice? What differences? What is so transformative for them in these stories?
3. David sings God's praises with these words: "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity" (1 Chron. 29:17). Look back to last week's discussion of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:8–9. How are these passages similar? Why might both Paul and David frame generosity in terms of a *testing* or an examination?
4. What can we learn about God's perspective of our resources from the language of David's prayer in 1 Chronicles? Pay attention to particular words and phrases. What stands out to you?
5. How exactly is generosity an act of worship? Do you think of giving gifts, hosting others in your home, or sharing life together as an act of worshiping God? Why or why not?

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## **reNEW: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS for WEEK 3**

### **HOW DO I GIVE? WHEN DO I GIVE?**

*On April 28, City Church will host a special worship service highlighting both the intimate connection between worship and giving as well as encouraging financial commitments toward the new property—what we are calling “Commitment Sunday.” Thinking in terms of commitment and investment is our way of signaling that this gift is about more than immediate, financial needs. We are encouraging people to think about this gift as the beginning of a pledge to both the campaign and the future of City Church as we embark on this next chapter. On Commitment Sunday, you will have the opportunity to make a pledge that can be spread over three years (2024–2026).*

### **HOW IS GIVING AN ACT OF WORSHIP, REALLY? WORSHIP FEELS LIKE SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT TO ME.**

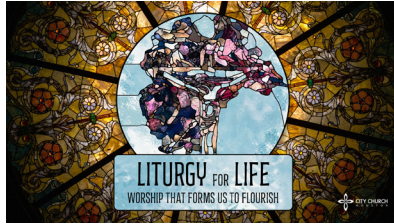
*When Jesus taught his followers to pray, he shared with them this line: “Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:11–12). The radical ethic of Jesus reveals itself in the Lord’s Prayer, where in praising his Father, he reminds us all that even our “daily bread” is a gift of God’s bounty. Just as we are to forgive other’s debts as a reflection of the debt that we have been freed from in Christ Jesus, we are to give freely to others (including those outside the church, of course) as an act of worship reflecting the free gift of God’s only, precious Son. In a certain light, giving (of time, of self, of resources, and of relationship) is the fundamental practice of worship. As worship is a privilege, giving back to God what he has given us is a privilege.*

### **WHAT NEXT? WHAT NOW?**

*For our leadership, the process of redesigning the property at 201 E. 9<sup>th</sup> St. has already begun. We are in a season where we are certainly open to input, and our architects and engineers are moving forward quickly with hopes of breaking ground on the project as soon as possible. Over the next year, we will be providing regular updates to all those in our orbit at City Church, and our ministry will be intentional about hosting events and dialogues that continue to highlight our mission of renewing Houston by bringing beauty to broken places.*

# BONUS TRACKS

Connecting to Sundays @ City Church!



## SACRIFICIAL GENEROSITY

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