

1 Kings 17:8–16 (CEB)

⁸The LORD's word came to Elijah: ⁹Get up and go to Zarephath near Sidon and stay there. I have ordered a widow there to take care of you. ¹⁰Elijah left and went to Zarephath. As he came to the town gate, he saw a widow collecting sticks. He called out to her, "Please get a little water for me in this cup so I can drink." ¹¹She went to get some water. He then said to her, "Please get me a piece of bread."

¹²"As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any food; only a handful of flour in a jar and a bit of oil in a bottle. Look at me. I'm collecting two sticks so that I can make some food for myself and my son. We'll eat the last of the food and then die."

¹³Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid! Go and do what you said. Only make a little loaf of bread for me first. Then bring it to me. You can make something for yourself and your son after that. ¹⁴This is what Israel's God, the LORD, says: The jar of flour won't decrease and the bottle of oil won't run out until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth." ¹⁵The widow went and did what Elijah said. So the widow, Elijah, and the widow's household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of flour didn't decrease nor did the bottle of oil run out, just as the LORD spoke through Elijah.

John 19:38–42 (CEB)

³⁸After this Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took the body away. ³⁹Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus at night, was there too. He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloë, nearly seventy-five pounds in all. ⁴⁰Following Jewish burial customs, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the spices, in linen cloths. ⁴¹There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²Because it was the Jewish Preparation Day and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus in it.

2 Corinthians 8:1–6 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, we want to let you know about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia. ²While they were being tested by many problems, their extra amount of happiness and their extreme poverty resulted in a surplus of rich generosity. ³I assure you that they gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford, and they did it voluntarily. ⁴They urgently begged us for the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints. ⁵They even exceeded our expectations, because they gave themselves to the Lord first and to us, consistent with God's will. ⁶As a result, we challenged Titus to finish this work of grace with you the way he had started it.

What has God entrusted to you? Are you truly ready to be God's trustee?

The most extravagant gift of all. Such was the gift given by Jesus on that cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. His life. His very life, given out of love for us all. What could Joseph and Nicodemus possibly do to show their love for this man killed by their own friends and acquaintances? Joseph would provide a suitable tomb in which Jesus' body could be laid. A new tomb, unused, belonging to Joseph and his family.

But what about Nicodemus? How could he show his love to this man, this teacher who, long ago, had allowed Nicodemus to come to him in the night. The Pharisee had left Jesus as bewildered as when he arrived, but he had seen in this Galilean the light of God's truth. And now, Nicodemus would see that Jesus received a burial for a king, literally. Don Carson writes:

The mixture of spices brought by Nicodemus, one hundred *litrai*, was a little less than the *seventy-five pounds* specified by the NIV—65.45 pounds, to be more precise. Mention of so large an amount is neither an error nor an exaggeration. Five hundred servants bearing spices participated in the funeral procession of

Herod the Great (Josephus, *Antiquities*. xvii. 199). In the fifth decade of the first century, Onkelos burned about eighty pounds of spices at the funeral of Gamaliel the elder (SB 2. 584; cf. also 2 Ch. 16:14). The implication in the present narrative is that two wealthy men used their servants to carry the spices, help take Jesus' body down from the cross, and then prepare him for burial. At a guess, Joseph saw to the legal steps while Nicodemus secured the spices.¹

The vast expenditures of Joseph and Nicodemus reflect the transformation that they had undergone. It could have been only by the power of the Holy Spirit that these two men of power and prominence became devoted to Jesus. And their devotion was expressed in their extravagant generosity.

It is certainly true that an open heart is expressed in generosity toward others, but it also true that generosity opens up the heart. Generosity doesn't come naturally to our sinful hearts, but it can be learned. And God who is the great teacher reaches out to a starving old woman.

The Lord, the generous giver of life

When Elijah arrives on the scene in 1 Kings 17, he heads immediately for King Ahab of Israel, the northern kingdom. The writer of Kings prepares us for what is coming. We are told that though the kings of Israel and Judah had been a bad lot, Ahab was the worst, for he served and worshiped the Canaanite god, Baal, having been led there by his infamous wife, Jezebel, a princess from Tyre-Sidon.

The first challenge that Elijah lays down before Ahab sets the stage for all that follows. In the arid regions of Palestine, rain was scarce and life-giving. Baal was worshiped as the bringer of rain. Thus, when Elijah promises the Baal-worshiping Ahab a drought, he is saying that Baal is a fraud, that Baal cannot bring rain. Baal cannot give life. Instead, life is God's alone to give and to take away.

You can imagine the king's reaction, so God tells Elijah to flee from Ahab and hide in a ravine. God has ordered ravens² to feed him there. Then, when the brook has dried up for lack of rain, God sends Elijah to see a widow.

However, when Elijah arrives, the widow can't feed herself and her son, much less Elijah. Elijah asks only for some bread and water. But she has no bread. Indeed, she is so desperate that she is about to head out and collect a few sticks for fire-making. She will take the small amount of flour she has left and make one last meal for her and her young son. Then, the two of them will lie down to die – for death is what drought and famine bring.

But Elijah tells her not to be afraid. She should go ahead and make the bread without fear, because she will see that her jars and flour and oil will not run out. God has decreed this. Not only will Elijah be saved, but so will be the woman and her son.

This is God's generous life-giving power at work through the simple means of a meal and a table. Then, just in case we've missed the point, the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Elijah prays over the boy and God restores him to life.

A generous love

God created us out of love, not necessity. We were created to love -- specifically, to love God (Deut. 6:4) and to love our neighbor (Lev. 19:18). As Jesus explained to the lawyer (Luke 10:27), this love is the essence of God's teachings. Further, these loving relationships are to be expressed in faithfulness, in trust. The biblical story is of a God who is utterly faithful to his people even though they run away from God far more often than they walk toward him. God's pursuit is simply relentless.

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 629–630). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

²We always have to be ready for and open to God's surprises. Here, God uses ravens, unclean animals (Leviticus 11:15), to give life to Elijah. There simply is no box big enough to contain God. How has God surprised you in the last week?

In a well-known passage from Malachi, God reaches out to his people yet again, “Return to me and I will return to you” (3:6). Despite the people’s ongoing abandonment of God and the ways of God, he still pursues them, unwilling to abandon them. Though Malachi brings the charge that the people are robbing God by neglecting their tithe, the unpaid tithe is only a surface issue. God’s people rob God when they (we?) deny God their prayers and praise. We rob God when we skip worship. We rob God when we ignore those in need. We rob God when we water down the truth about God. We rob God when we fail to proclaim the Good News of God’s Son.

As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about their participation in the collection for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem, he not only reminds them that “God loves a cheerful giver” but he encourages them toward the generosity that marks a loving heart. Paul lifts up to them the example of the struggling Christians in Macedonia whose “abundant joy” and “extreme poverty” have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.” There is no sense of obligation, no struggling with “pre-tax” or “post-tax.” There is only generosity pouring out of changed hearts. And through it all, Paul points the Corinthians to the example of Christ: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you may become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). My own generosity with my money, even if I gave away all that I possess, would still pale next to Jesus’ willingness to be nailed to that cross.

So the question is this: “What does God want me to do with all that he has given me?” What are our responsibilities with what has been entrusted to us? Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in God’s family/house, we speak of our “stewardship.” In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*.³ This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer.

When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as “a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God,” and as a steward, was required to be “trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Peter reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). Clearly, Paul and Peter knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

But Leonard Sweet⁴ suggests that “steward” is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship. Instead, Sweet suggests that “trustee” is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God’s trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God’s creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God’s wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God’s creation is not ours, we don’t own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). May we be trustees marked by generous hearts.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do the words “steward” or “stewardship” mean to you? Leonard Sweet suggests that “trustee” might be a better way to think of our responsibilities. What does “trustee” mean to you? Do you think that it is a more meaningful way to think about our role in managing God’s assets?

³ This is a compound word – *oikos*, house + *nomos*, law

⁴ From “Freely You Have Received, Freely Give,” by Leonard Sweet.

2. Are you ready to be one of God's trustees? What do you think the job entails?
What can we do make ourselves fully ready for the task?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on being generous trustees*

Monday, 2 Kings 4:8-37 The story of a generous woman

Tuesday, Micah 4:1-5 The final establishing of God's house, his kingdom

Wednesday, Malachi 3:7-12 Do the Israelites dare to steal from God?

Thursday, Matthew 27:57-60 Joseph of Arimathea provides a tomb for Jesus.

Friday, Luke 21:1-4 A poor widow's offering in the temple.

Saturday, 1 Peter 2:1-12 Jesus is the cornerstone of our spiritual house

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Old Testament: Sacred and Strange*