



**BIBLE STUDY SESSIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS
FOR USE DURING LENT 2017**

40ACTS 2017

WEDNESDAY 1 MARCH TO SATURDAY 15 APRIL 2017

40ACTS THEME 2017: ROMANS 12 – A LIVING SACRIFICE

40acts.org.uk



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WELCOME TO 40ACTS

What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2017. The acts or challenges are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way.

They can be done by individuals or done in groups but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

How to use this resource

- This course is divided into seven separate sessions and provides adaptable meeting guides, activity ideas, prayers and songs.
- The Bible studies follow the same scripture passages as the sermon series, which can be used as additional research/information for the small group leader.
- This Bible study series can stand alone, but has also been designed to be used alongside the sermon series; it doesn't matter which happens first, sermon or small group.
- Each session is designed to last approximately one hour.
- This resource has been designed to suit a wide range of ages and interests. Group leaders should feel free to adapt each study to suit the needs and interests of their particular group.

All biblical quotes are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

About this series

40acts 2017 takes its inspiration from Romans 12, part of Paul's letter to the burgeoning church in Rome which delivers Paul's understanding of the essential elements of the Christian faith. In chapter 12, Paul focuses on three key themes: sacrifice, service and love in action. Generosity is in our DNA – the gift of a generous God.

Romans 12 tells us why and how we should use that gift. In essence, it answers the question 'What does giving our best look like?' The whole chapter is concerned with the way that we live, in the light of everything that Paul has expressed about our salvation in the previous 11 chapters. Beginning with a therefore, we know that we'll need a clear view of God and all his mercies to us before we launch into attempting all the instructions in the rest of the chapter.

There's a danger of feeling overwhelmed when reading very instructional passages like Romans 12, wondering how we can live up to it all. This is why we need a full understanding of our position before God. Our salvation is nothing to do with what we can 'achieve' by good works (Romans 3:21–31) but is about what Jesus has achieved for us through his death. When God looks at believers he sees the purity of his son instead of our sinfulness. There is nothing we can do to change or affect that.

Each week the notes explore a particular aspect of giving our best, taking the passage verse by verse. The 40acts challenges for each week are designed to complement the theme of that week and become a practical outworking of it. How you choose to engage with the challenges is up to you (more of that in 'Complementary materials' below) but the connection between the two is important.

Complementary materials

These Bible studies can be used alongside the 40acts sermon notes. In a small group setting, people can examine more closely what it means to give our best and have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing their experiences with each other.



The challenges are released daily during Lent and offer different levels of engagement to allow for individual circumstances, so people can choose what suits them best. There will be a complementary reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight, and there will be various ways for

people to interact with 40acts via social media platforms if that's their preference.

However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what it means to 'give your best'.

Welcome to 40acts 2017.

Romans 12

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. 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.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love in Action

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.



WEEK ONE: PREPARING TO GIVE OUR VERY BEST

→ Introduction

In the first verses of Romans 12, God invites us to give our lives over to him as a 'living sacrifice'. In return we get something incredible – a transformed life which carries the personality of Christ. With Christ's personality, we see that the challenge of generosity doesn't need to be overwhelming. As we step into God's invitation in these verses, he makes us refreshed, cheerful, and ready to start.

→ The aim

- To relax in God's goodness at the start of Lent.
- To discover what it means to present ourselves as a 'living sacrifice', and to work through the tension between conforming to the world and being transformed.
- To step further into whole-life worship.

→ Preparation

You'll need a big piece of paper and thick pens – everyone in the group should be able to see what's written down.

Activity/icebreaker

10 minutes

Ask the group to call out words and ideas that come to mind when they think about 'generosity'. They can be words that express feelings at the start of 40acts, or more general reflections. Encourage the group to share words even if they're negative and encourage them to be as quick-fire as they can – keep the pace fast.

Once everyone's finished, take a couple of the most interesting words, or the ones that seem to strike a chord with the group, and open them up for discussion.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:1–2 NIVUK

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. 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.

Reflection

10 minutes

What is a *living sacrifice*? In the Bible, a sacrifice is simply anything offered to God. It leaves our hands and becomes his. In these verses, Paul is urging us to offer up our whole selves as sacrifices, in response to Jesus' unspeakably generous once-and-for-all-time sacrifice (described in the previous 11 chapters). We don't do this because we have to; we do this because we've taken on board just how generous God's already been to us.

What does this look like? It looks like putting ourselves in the way of God, every day. Looking at his goodness, his character traits, his laws and principles, and determining in our hearts 'I want to live exactly like that.' It's an inner posture that we take seriously, and one that means we no longer conform to the ways of the world. The Bible calls the results

of this kind of living *true and proper worship*.

When we offer up our lives as sacrifices, verse 2 tells us, God will rewire us and makes us able to see what he's doing on the earth. We become far from ordinary. Suddenly we have power to be generous where before we were just tired. We find ourselves surprisingly refreshed, cheerful, and ready to meet the challenge of generosity.

So, today, before we move out in action, let's move towards God.

Questions

20 minutes

Vital question:

- What would it take for you to reach that inner posture of a 'living sacrifice'?

Reflective questions:

- Are there ways – overtly or subtly – that you've been conforming to the world around you?
- In what three ways does Paul describe God's will at the end of verse 2? Why does he emphasise this?
- Can you pin down a moment when you decided to agree with a way the world does things rather than a way the kingdom works? For example, this could be an attitude towards money, or the career ladder.
- Often we think that we have to act in ways that are 'authentic' and 'true to ourselves'. 'Renewing your mind' suggests that this isn't the case. How would this change how you act?

Practical questions:

- As you step away from being conformed to the world and answer God's invitation to be transformed into the personality of Christ, what does that look like, practically, today?
- In what ways is it possible to renew your mind and be transformed? Habits? Meditation? Scripture?
- To be true to God and his plan to renew your mind, what one habit or thought pattern could you give up this week?

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'How Great Thou Art'

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder

Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power throughout the universe displayed

[Chorus]

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee

How great Thou art, how great Thou art

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee

How great Thou art, how great Thou art

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,

Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in

That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin

'Consuming Fire' – Hillsong United

There must be more than this,
O breath of God come breathe within,

There must be more than this,
Spirit of God we wait for You.

Fill us anew we pray,

Fill us anew we pray.

[Chorus]

Consuming fire fan into flame,

A passion for Your Name,

Spirit of God fall in this place,

Lord have Your way,

Lord have Your way with us,

Come like a rushing wind,

Clothe us with power from on high,

Now set the captives free,

Leave us abandoned to Your praise.

Lord let Your glory fall,

Lord let Your glory fall.

Stir it up in our hearts Lord,

Stir it up in our hearts Lord,

Stir it up in our hearts Lord,

A passion for Your Name.

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, we love you. We love how generous you've been to us, when we didn't deserve it and when we were far away. In the next 40 days, we want to try to show our communities something of that kindness. Would you help us? Please transform our desires from competitiveness to selflessness, from neediness to helpfulness, from vanity to preferring others. And please give us the freshness and readiness we need at the start of this Lent season.

In your name, and for your sake,
Amen

This week's 40acts

Wednesday 1 March: Set out

Thursday 2 March: Likewise

Friday 3 March: Local

Saturday 4 March: Real world





WEEK TWO: GIVING OUR BEST TO OTHERS IN THE CHURCH

→ Introduction

Living selflessly starts with the Church: our family. Most of the New Testament instructions to love others are about other Christians. This isn't because God doesn't want us to love people outside the Church. No, it's because it's so important to him that we begin by recognising the glory he's placed on the body of Christ: our brothers and sisters.

→ The aim

- To understand our identity as part of a family.
- To explore where each of us, as part of that family, can use our gifts to be generous to other members.

→ Preparation

Find a free online personality test – something like 16personalities.com/free-personality-test or sdrock.com/giftstest. Don't worry about finding something scientifically sound or especially accurate – the point is just to get the group thinking about their gifts.

Either print off the tests or get people to look at them online on their phones, if they have them (some tests will only give results if you take them online).

Activity/icebreaker

10 minutes

Split the group into pairs. Have each pair take a personality test – one person questioning, the other answering, then vice versa. If this takes too long, have everyone take

the test individually (though this is less fun).

This should lead naturally into discussions within the pairs, so shouldn't need too much guidance. Explain at the end that this wasn't supposed to be a scientific test, but that the aim was to get everyone thinking about their own gifts and where they might be helpful. You could even ask whether anyone has taken a similar test before, and whether that helped them know what they could offer others.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:3–5 **Humble Service in the Body of Christ**

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Reflection

10 minutes

The Church was made to be a family that models incredible, life-changing generosity. We call it a family for good reason: John 17 shows us that God has put his glory on us as individuals in order to draw us closer together, many individuals becoming something bigger as they generously give to each other.

How do we discover that connectedness? As we continue into Romans 12, we see how. In verses 4–5 Paul uses the picture of a human body. We who are many are one body in Christ. Because God sees the big picture, he understands how each individual forms part of the whole church – what gifts they have, what functions they have, what purpose. Each of us is different, but connected through how we use those gifts for others. This means that where we thought our differences were just quirks, now we see they're part of God's careful plan for his family. It's tempting to want certain skills or tasks. But the ones we have are purpose-built for us, and as we use them for the sake of others in the church, we discover our destinies. Equally, God has made it so that in his Church, without each other, we can't do much.

Do we view church as a Sunday activity, a social club, or somewhere purely to think about God that's detached from the rest of our lives? These verses should challenge us. We discover our purpose as individuals as we generously give to each other and our view of our church family grows bigger.

Questions

20 minutes

Vital question:

- Where do your gifts overlap with a need in your church?

Reflective questions:

- How can you encourage someone else in the outworking of God's gifts in their life?



- How aware of your own gifts are you? Have others' observations on your gifts surprised you?
- Are you using your gifts in your church community, and if not, why do you think this is?
- Have you considered how your gifts might work with other people's gifts, for the benefit of the whole community? For example: how your gift of, say, healing might work with a friend's gift of hospitality?
- Are there any personality quirks you've overlooked that you're now realising may be spiritual gifts?

Practical questions:

- The last verse says we should belong to each other, but what does this actually mean?
- What 40acts challenges can you take for those in your church, this week?
- Could you meet with someone who you know has a particular spiritual gift, and discuss ways you could help your church community?

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'Build Your Kingdom Here' – Rend Collective

Come, set Your rule and reign
 In our hearts again
 Increase in us we pray
 Unveil why we're made
 Come, set our hearts ablaze with hope
 Like wildfire in our very souls
 Holy Spirit come invade us now
 We are Your church
 We need Your power in us

We seek Your kingdom first
 We hunger and we thirst

Refuse to waste our lives
 For You're our joy and prize
 To see the captive hearts released
 The hurt, the sick, the poor at peace
 We lay down our lives for Heaven's cause

We are Your church
 We pray: revive this earth

Build Your kingdom here
 Let the darkness fear
 Show Your mighty hand
 Heal our streets and land
 Set Your church on fire
 Win this nation back
 Change the atmosphere
 Build Your kingdom here
 We pray

Unleash Your kingdoms power
 Reaching the near and far
 No force of Hell can stop
 Your beauty changing hearts
 You made us for much more than this
 Awake the kingdom seed in us
 Fill us with the strength and love of Christ

We are Your church
 We are the hope on earth

'Lord, I Need You' – Matt Maher

Lord, I come, I confess
 Bowing here I find my rest
 Without You, I fall apart
 You're the One that guides my heart

Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defence, my righteousness
 Oh, God, how I need You

Where sin runs deep, Your grace is more
 Where grace is found is where You are
 And where You are, Lord, I am free
 Holiness is Christ in me

Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defence, my righteousness
 Oh, God, how I need You

Teach my song to rise to You
 When temptation comes my way
 And when I cannot stand I'll fall on You
 Jesus, You're my hope and stay

Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
 Every hour I need You
 My one defence, my righteousness
 Oh, God, how I need You

You're my one defence, my righteousness
 Oh, God, how I need You
 My one defence, my righteousness
 Oh, God, how I need You

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, would we all be one, just as you are with your Son. Would we also be one with you, so that the world would believe that you've sent Jesus to them. Thank you for the glory you've given us – help us to not stop at thanks, but to move to unity as we serve each other, so that the world would know that you are in us, and so that we would be brought to complete unity.

In your name and for your sake,
 Amen

This week's 40acts

- Monday 6 March: Captive
- Tuesday 7 March: Listen
- Wednesday 8 March: Undivided
- Thursday 9 March: Pause
- Friday 10 March: Lean
- Saturday 11 March: Shared spaces



WEEK THREE: GIVING OUR BEST WITH OUR GIFTS

→ Introduction

Bringing glory to God through using our gifts is our most rewarding work. It's part of what God calls our spiritual worship (remember Week 1?). These verses are an exhortation to go after our gifts wholeheartedly; to throw our all into developing the gifts we have – and into celebrating others' gifts.

→ The aim

- To get a clearer picture of our spiritual gifts.
- To see how we can give our all to developing those gifts.

→ Preparation

None.

Activity/icebreaker

15 minutes

Going around, encourage the group to share stories of the time when they felt most alive in their gifts, or to describe a time when they felt closest to their calling.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:6–8

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,

do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Reflection

10 minutes

Paul's writing here is unusually repetitive, but if we turn to the ESV translation we start to understand why he's using so much emphasis:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Repeating the word 'in' before each gift emphasises that we're to be totally absorbed in that particular service – not looking longingly at other gifts and veering into areas that aren't our gifting. Paul's saying, 'Just do it!' He's urging us to practise, and dedicate ourselves, and put theory into action, over and over again, to the best of our ability. When we're wholehearted with our gifts, the body of Christ becomes astonishing in its effectiveness, and clear in its representation of Christ on earth.

How do we become wholehearted in our gifts? We look at Jesus. Every gift shows a different side of the person of Jesus – in his prophecy, his serving, his teaching, his exhorting, his generosity, his leadership, his mercy. He shows us the way forward in all the gifts laid out here, which is particularly helpful when we're struggling to know what to do with them. We aren't being asked to be anything that Jesus hasn't already

been for us. So, as we try to be wholehearted, we can know that we have a kind and generous teacher who'll show us the way forward.

Questions

15 minutes

Vital question:

- How can you serve somebody this week with the specific talents that God has blessed you with?

Reflective questions:

- Why does the word 'grace' appear here in the first sentence?
- Paul lists a set of gifts in this passage. Consider how each one is used, and ask: am I using my gift?
- Paul describes both practical and spiritual gifts. What does this imply that we should be doing?
- Do you think of enthusiasm when you think of spiritual gifts? How enthusiastically are you applying yourself to your gifts?
- Recalling the time when you felt most alive in a gift, what could you do to reach that place of aliveness again?

Practical questions:

- If you're still not sure of your gifts, do you know someone who might help you to reach a better understanding?
- Look over the ways you're currently serving. How could you prune or completely change them so they reflect the gifts God's given you?
- Can you seek someone out in church who shares your gift but has journeyed with it for longer? See if you can learn from them: talk with them, shadow them, pray with them.

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'Christ Is Enough' – Hillsong

Worship

Christ is my reward
And all of my devotion
Now there's nothing in this world
That could ever satisfy

Through every trial
My soul will sing
No turning back
I've been set free

Christ is enough for me
Christ is enough for me
Everything I need is in You
Everything I need

Christ my all in all
The joy of my salvation
And this hope will never fail
Heaven is our home

Through every storm
My soul will sing
Jesus is here
To God be the glory

I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back

No turning back

The cross before me
The world behind me
No turning back
No turning back

'To God Be the Glory' – hymn

To God be the glory, great things He
hath done,
So loved He the world that He gave
us His Son,
Who yielded His life our redemption
to win,
And opened the life-gate that all may
go in.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the earth hear His voice;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the people rejoice;
Oh, come to the Father, through
Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory; great things
He hath done.

Oh, perfect redemption, the
purchase of blood,
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon
receives.

Great things He hath taught us,
great things He hath done,

And great our rejoicing through Jesus
the Son;
But purer, and higher, and greater
will be
Our wonder, our transport when
Jesus we see.

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, would you show us
where you're making us like your
Son, in giving us gifts that reflect
him. Raise our eyes so that we see
the dignity you've placed in us. Help
us to see that dignity in others, too.
This week, we ask that you'd reveal
more of our giftings to us and give us
opportunities to use them to help
others in our churches, and to build
for your kingdom.

In your name and for your sake,
Amen

This week's 40acts

Monday 13 March: Talented

Tuesday 14 March: Chocolate
Tuesday

Wednesday 15 March: First fruits

Thursday 16 March: Boss

Friday 17 March: Influence

Saturday 18 March: Beyond





WEEK FOUR: GIVING OUR BEST WHEN SERVING OTHERS

→ Introduction

In these verses, we see that love is an inner posture. What is that posture? The standard God sets isn't a cold dispassionate ticking of boxes, but a life which is a full-bodied, wholehearted expression of love. We can act out kindness for people, but if it's not coming from a place of love – a determination held close to the heart – it's not worth much. Far beyond merely giving lip service to God's way of love, we're to glue ourselves to goodness and outdo our friends in showing kindness to each other.

→ The aim

- To understand what 'agape' love is.
- To kick our generosity up a notch.
- To go further in love with this week's 40acts challenges than we have before, and match that with spending more time at rest with God.

→ Preparation

You'll need bibles, recent copies of your local newspaper, a large sheet of paper (the larger the better) and marker pens. Before the meeting, draw a simple outline of your locality on the sheet of paper (key streets and areas).

Activity/icebreaker

15 minutes

Introduce the map of your locality to your group. Ask people to mark the place where they live. Then ask them to flick through the newspapers, cutting out pictures, headlines or stories that show injustice, need or

poverty in your area. Add them to the relevant parts of your map. Do the same thing for any stories that show positive examples of building community in your area: churches, youth groups, libraries, shops, etc.

Next, encourage people to think about the resources that they have – both individually and collectively. The list might include things like money, clothes, toys or household items they could donate, time they could use to support people, and so on. Suggest people add these resources to the map. Take time, either now or at the end of your session, to pray for the needs you have identified in your community and for the groups and organisations that are working to build community in your area.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:9–13

Love in Action

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

Reflection

10 minutes

Today's passage talks about the need to persevere in keeping love real. It can be easy to pretend – in shallow smiles or an act of generosity done to get it over with. When you've been pushing into sustained generosity for a long period, it's tempting to shift back to self-care

mode. In some ways, this is fair enough. It's emotionally draining and creatively challenging to sustain a life of radical kindness. But today's passage shows that this moves us away from the type of love that fuels our lives.

Love *must* be sincere. There are no two ways about it. To shrink back into a faked kindness that holds others at arm's length is to protect yourself. God's type of love says, 'Do not lag in zeal': this accepts that there's courage in continuing to love when you're worn out. We can't sustain kindness until we've discovered a rhythm of life like the one we discussed in Week 1.

To love sincerely, we need that continual renewing of our minds, reminding ourselves daily of how much Jesus has done for us, and thinking about his character. 1 John 4:19 spells it out to us: 'We love because he first loved us.' And the more that message sinks in, the more our generosity will spring from a genuine response to who God is.

Maybe you feel you have little to give this week because you're struggling with difficulties, or exhausted and low on enthusiasm. Begin by reminding yourself that God loved you first, with an incredible love, and then let him restore you.

Questions

15 minutes

Vital question:

- God's 'agape' love is far stronger than any love we could conjure up by ourselves. In what ways would God's agape love – gracious, selfless, unending – be the best foundation for all other forms of



love? (Some examples: love between husband and wife, love for family, love in a community.)

Reflective questions:

- How is it possible for us to authentically express agape love without falling into the trap of only trying to appear loving?
- What is the difference between practising love and pretending to love?
- What does it mean to honour one another above ourselves?
- These five verses are incredibly challenging. Are you comfortable with what Paul is asking of us? Consider what stands out, and take time to examine where the challenges lie for you.

Practical questions:

- What resources or time could you give to those places you highlighted on the map earlier?
- We are asked to share with others in need; what kind of 'needs' do you have in your church and community, and how can you meet them?
- Take the temperature of the room: ask questions like 'Are we ready to kick generosity up a notch?', 'What would that look like in your week?', 'Are you tired?'
- If you feel as if you're giving out of a place of emptiness, what kind of prayer would help you receive from God?
- This passage ends with two words: 'Practise hospitality.' What do you think Paul means by practising

hospitality? What might that look like for you?

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'Set a Fire' – Will Reagan and United Pursuit

No place I would rather be
No place I would rather be
No place I would rather be
Than here in your love, here in your love

Set a fire down in my soul
That I can't contain, that I can't control
I want more of You, God

'How Great Is Our God' – Chris Tomlin

The splendour of the King, clothed in majesty
Let all the earth rejoice
All the earth rejoice
He wraps himself in Light, and darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice
Trembles at His voice

How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God

Age to age He stands
And time is in His hands
Beginning and the end
Beginning and the end

The Godhead Three in One
Father Spirit Son

The Lion and the Lamb
The Lion and the Lamb

Name above all names
Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing
How great is our God

How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, thank you that you did not lag in zeal when you came to rescue us. Thank you, Jesus, that you were generous even when it was emotionally, physically and mentally draining for you. Thank you that, for the joy set before you, you endured the cross. Thank you, Spirit, that it's your joy to show us kindness every day, in countless small ways that we don't always even recognise. Would you help us to have the same consistency and zeal as we push into a life of radical kindness?

In your name, and for your sake,
Amen

This week's 40acts

Monday 20 March: Generation
Tuesday 21 March: Pray
Wednesday 22 March: On Time
Thursday 23 March: Restock
Friday 24 March: Refuge
Saturday 25 March: Mother's Day: Origins





WEEK FIVE: GIVING OUR BEST DESPITE OUR FEELINGS

→ Introduction

It's natural to regularly bump up against the limits of our generosity. We start to feel tensions and frustrations around it – maybe we're unable to be positive towards certain people, or find we can't celebrate with friends when things go well for them. It's fine to feel these things. They're just signs that God is getting us ready to take our generosity to a new level.

→ The aim

- To discover fresh generosity at the points where we find it most difficult.
- To see what it takes to be generous when encountering people or situations we find difficult.

→ Preparation

Prepare a few of the following scenarios, or come up with your own. They could include: 'A friend has just taken a promotion for a job you've been hoping to get'; 'You offer to buy a coffee for someone who turns out to be combative and suspicious'; 'You're approached by an old acquaintance who angrily demands you repay a small amount of money you borrowed years ago'; 'You meet someone who has been spreading malicious gossip about you (or your family)'; 'You've been invited to a friend's engagement party/anniversary celebration when you've just been dumped/you're going through a difficult time in your relationship'; 'At the office Christmas party the only spare seat is next to the office bore'.

Mark one end of the room as 'easy' and the other end as 'impossible'. In between are 'mostly comfortable', 'not bothered' and 'difficult'.

Activity/icebreaker

15 minutes

Read out the scenarios, and ask people to stand beside the appropriate sign according to how they feel they would respond to each scenario. After everyone has lined up, ask them why they chose to stand where they did.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:14–16

Love in Action

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Reflection

10 minutes

Inevitably, while we're growing in generosity, we'll hit walls – as we try to bless those who are against us; as we try to share life with those we might have once considered beneath us. When we get frustrated with our ability to be generous in difficult situations, it can be discouraging. But this is actually a great place to be. It's helpful to sit with the frustration. It's a sign that God's getting you ready for more generosity than you were able to handle before.

The best way forward is to pray through the frustration and discover the character of your Father God,

who had endless love and acceptance for you when you persecuted him; who willingly associated himself with you when you were in the lowest place you could've been. He could've seen you as against him, but he still chose to be for you. He could've seen you as beneath him, but he didn't.

In today's verses, Paul was writing to Christians who were being persecuted in a very real way, unlike many of us in the Western Church today. He emphasised it strongly, telling them not once but twice: bless your persecutors. Their challenge was huge. But he was confident that, with Jesus, they could meet it – not just tolerating those who hated them, but actively blessing them. In our 40acts, let's step up to the challenge to do good not only to our friends but also to those beyond our comfort zone. We don't need to fear rejection when we're safe in the knowledge that we already have the friendship and love of our Creator.

Questions

15 minutes

Vital question:

- Above all else, God's love is relational, and this means agape love is not just for those we love and get along with. It's also for those we encounter along the way, who may not only dislike us but go out of their way to persecute us. How is Paul asking us to live with persecutors and those hostile to us?

Reflective questions:

- What walls of generosity have you been hitting recently?



- Has there been a time when you received generosity instead of the judgement you expected?
- Describe some of the occasions when Jesus' love for others showed through his deep identification with their sorrow or joy.
- What characteristics did Jesus display?
- If you can't agree with someone in your church/family, how do you resolve the situation?
- Paul commands us not to be proud or conceited. Pride can take us by surprise in many ways. Why is it such a dangerous sin?

Practical questions:

- Could your first step of generosity be something as simple as calling someone up to forgive them?
- What move can you make to show generosity to a person you find difficult this week?
- Who is someone you could show love to by identifying with their sorrow or joy?
- Create a prayer journal for your group and identify prayers about things you need, and prayers about things to thank God for. Jot them down each week and pray for one another. After a time, look back collectively and see God at work.
- If you've hit a wall with generosity recently, how could you step over it this week?

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'You Alone Can Rescue' – Matt Redman

You alone can rescue, You alone can save
 You alone can lift us from the grave
 You came down to find us, led us out of death

To You alone belongs the highest praise

Who, oh Lord, could save themselves,
 Their own sin could heal?
 Our shame was deeper than the sea
 Your love is deeper still

You alone can rescue, You alone can save
 You alone can lift us from the grave
 You came down to find us, led us out of death
 To You alone belongs the highest praise

You, oh Lord, have made a way
 The great divide You heal
 For when our hearts were far away
 Your love went further still
 Yes, your love goes further still

You alone can rescue, You alone can save
 You alone can lift us from the grave
 You came down to find us, led us out of death
 To You alone belongs the highest praise

We lift up our eyes, lift up our eyes
 You're the Giver of Life
 We lift up our eyes, lift up our eyes
 You're the Giver of Life

'Before the Throne of God Above'

Before the throne of God above
 I have a strong, a perfect plea
 A great High Priest whose name is Love
 Who ever lives and pleads for me

My name is graven on His hands
 My name is written on His heart
 I know that while in heaven He stands

No tongue can bid me thence depart
 No tongue can bid me thence depart

When Satan tempts me to despair
 And tells me of the guilt within
 Upward I look and see Him there

Who made an end to all my sin

Because the sinless Saviour died
 My sinful soul is counted free
 For God the just is satisfied
 To look on Him and pardon me
 To look on Him and pardon me

Behold Him there the risen Lamb
 My perfect spotless righteousness
 The great unchangeable I AM
 The King of glory and of grace
 One with Himself I cannot die
 My soul is purchased by His blood
 My life is hid with Christ on high
 With Christ my Saviour and my God!
 With Christ my Saviour and my God!

One with Himself I cannot die
 My soul is purchased by His blood
 My life is hid with Christ on high
 With Christ my Saviour and my God!
 With Christ my Saviour and my God!

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, thank you that before we ever made a step in your direction, your heart was filled with kindness towards us; that when we were still far away, you determined to show us mercy. We ask you to show us more of that amazing truth, this week. Please help us to be more like you; to give more of ourselves to others than we think they deserve – in our time, space, energy, and vulnerability – and to take steps of generosity towards those whom we might consider 'beneath us' or 'against us'.

In your name and for your sake,
 Amen

- Monday 27 March: Boost
- Tuesday 28 March: Date
- Wednesday 29 March: Stuff
- Thursday 30 March: Grateful
- Friday 31 March: 2:1
- Saturday 1 April: Outrageous





WEEK SIX: GIVING OUR BEST WHEN IT HURTS

→ Introduction

We're learning to be generous. We're transforming our desires – slowly, stumblingly – towards radical kindness. To do this in certain areas of life, though, can be deeply challenging. But it's in these areas that generosity becomes utterly transformative – when we direct it at those who have hurt and betrayed us. As we carry to Christ people who appear relentlessly negative, he releases hope and transformative grace to us. Our challenge is to let this grow our capacity for generosity beyond what might seem possible.

→ The aim

- To discover a way forward in loving those who have hurt us.
- To discuss what to do with feelings of revenge and bitterness.

→ Preparation

None, though be prepared to manage a conversation with sensitive stories being shared.

Activity/icebreaker

15 minutes

In smaller groups, suggest people share stories of when they feel they've got forgiveness 'right' and when they've missed the mark – when feelings got in the way; when they felt they couldn't manage it; and so on. The aim here is simply to help people gauge where they're at with forgiveness, and where God can help them grow. Encourage people to discuss how they've dealt with feelings of anger and revenge, if the topic comes up.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:17–20

Love in Action

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

Reflection

10 minutes

Loving our enemies is the most radical way we can show that our capacity for goodness has a supernatural source. We're putting aside our natural instinct to 'do to others as they do to us', and taking up our Father's heart of kindness that leads people to repentance. Verse 19 shows us that we can be satisfied God will deal with injustice. But in the meantime, God holds out hope for wrongdoers, abundantly and patiently, longing for them to repent (2 Peter 3:9) – and he wants us to do that, too. We're given permission to leave people who've wronged us in God's hands.

We're not asked to sadistically long for his wrath to be poured out on them. Just as it's God's kindness that leads to repentance, God wants us to offer them gentleness. In doing so, this chapter says, we'll be 'heaping burning coals' on their heads. This could be a reference to an old practice of heaping coals onto metal

to soften and reshape it. Our gentleness or unexpected generosity can disarm those who've hurt us and soften their hearts towards us – remembering that 'a gentle answer turns away wrath' (Proverbs 15:1) – and break the cycle of hurt.

A heart that can do this really has a supernatural capacity for goodness – and that's why we want to keep the ideal of loving our enemies in our sights, no matter how unrealistic it may feel at this stage in our journey.

Questions

15 minutes

Vital question:

- How much have you relied on God in loving others when it seemed impossible?

Reflective questions:

- Have you ever considered loving your enemies as an expression of generosity?
- Why is evil best overcome by responding to it passionately with what is good?
- We are not only to forgive our enemies but to actively respond with good. How might this be possible?
- What types of situations require you to seek peace with others, even though it's unlikely they'll do the same?

Practical questions:

- This week, what's your first step towards showing love to those who've hurt you? Gentleness? Forgiveness? Offering up feelings of bitterness to God?
- Is there a 'first step' you need to take now?



- In the light of this passage, think through how you might respond next time you feel wronged. How might this differ from your instinctive response? Sometimes our instinct to fight back is called the 'fallen first instinct'. What strategy could you take to reach past this 'fallen first instinct' to fight? A pattern of thought? Counting? Breathing slowly?
- Describe a real-life situation where you would need to deny the natural instinct to retaliate and instead follow in the footsteps of Christ.
- Can you share an example with the group of where you've achieved this? You could also think about examples of where you've made an enemy a friend, or where someone has changed their mind as you've shown love rather than anger.

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'Mighty to Save' – Hillsong

Everyone needs compassion
A love that's never ending
Let mercy fall on me
Everyone needs forgiveness
The kindness of a saviour
The hope of nations

Saviour he can move the mountains
My God is mighty to save
He is mighty to save

Forever author of salvation
He rose and conquered the grave
Jesus conquered the grave

So take me as you find me
All my fears and failures
Fill my life again
I give my life to follow
Everything I believe in
Now I surrender

Saviour he can move the mountains
My God is mighty to save
He is mighty to save
Forever author of salvation
He rose and conquered the grave
Jesus conquered the grave

'Christ is Risen' – Matt Maher

Let no one caught in sin remain
Inside the lie of inward shame
We fix our eyes upon the cross
And run to Him who showed great love

And bled for us
Freely You've bled for us

Christ is risen from the dead
Trampling over death by death
Come awake, come awake
Come and rise up from the grave

Christ is risen from the dead
We are one with Him again
Come awake, come awake
Come and rise up from the grave

Beneath the weight of all our sin
You bowed to none but Heaven's will

No scheme of Hell, no scoffer's crown
No burden great can hold You down

In strength You reign
Forever let Your church proclaim

Christ is risen from the dead
Trampling over death by death
Come awake, come awake
Come and rise up from the grave

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, please heal us where we've been hurt by others. Help us not to let offence harden our hearts. Particularly where it's difficult – with those who have hurt us – please give us soft hearts and gentle approaches. We ask that you would restore broken relationships, even this week, and draw wrongdoers to you, through our gentleness and generosity.

In your name and for your sake,
Amen.

This week's 40acts

Monday 3 April: Holiday
Tuesday 4 April: Step out
Wednesday 5 April: Gulp
Thursday 6 April: Forgive, part one
Friday 7 April: Forgive, part two
Saturday 8 April: Flow





WEEK SEVEN: GIVING OUR BEST WITH OUR WHOLE LIVES

→ Introduction

We're becoming people who live generous lives that overcome evil with good – in our entire lives, not just 40 days a year. God's strategy for overcoming evil isn't with weapons, or arguments, or power-plays. Through Jesus' victory over death, we're released to overcome evil with acts even as small as a cup of cold water, a kind word, an invitation to dinner.

→ The aim

- To see the deeper consequences of generosity.
- To get equipped for a life of generosity beyond Lent.

→ Preparation

A chair in the middle of the room.

Activity/icebreaker

15 minutes

Ask one person to sit in the middle and invite the rest of the group to call out the good that they see in them – character traits, special moments, gifts, things they've discovered about the person in the last few weeks. Then bring in another person, and so on, until you've covered the group (if that's not practical, three to four people is a good number).

Finish by talking about the significance of such a simple (and at first awkward) generous action.

Read

5 minutes

Romans 12:21

Love in Action

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Reflection

10 minutes

There are huge consequences of our simple acts of generosity. If you've been taking part in 40acts this year, you may already be seeing some of them in your friendship circles and neighbourhood. That's because in God's kingdom simple acts of goodness have an outsize impact.

Jesus promises us that the same power that brought him back from the grave is in us (Ephesians 1:19–20; Colossians 1:29; 1 Peter 4:11). So when we do generous acts, we have the power of heaven backing us up – our kindness is no longer our own but has something of the personality and power of Jesus in it. That goodness is powerful enough to overcome evil. Evil isn't just on the news; it's all around us in our communities. But God doesn't want us to overcome it with weapons or arguments. He promises power when we overcome evil with Christ's personality traits.

As you let generosity transform your mind, you carry Christ's personality around with you. It's infectious. A group of Christians who are being transformed like that, moving out into their communities, aren't just overcoming their own self-centredness; they're overcoming the powers of darkness in that area. That may sound over-dramatic when we're talking about giving someone a

compliment or a chocolate bar, but a serious commitment to a generous life really can change a community.

Questions

15 minutes

Vital question:

- What's been the most significant or transformative moment in your 40 days of exploring generosity?

Reflective questions:

- Often we focus too much attention on confronting evil. Paul points out that one of the most powerful forces against evil is to do good. Can you think of any examples when goodness has overcome evil?
- Have you considered how acting with even the simplest of Jesus' personality traits carries real power?
- Can you remember a time when overcoming your self-centredness changed things for the better for others around you?
- How has focusing on generosity for the last 40 days changed how you think about it?

Practical questions:

- Share some examples of where someone, or a group, has been truly generous to you. How have they affected you?
- What bothers you the most about your community or area? How might your skills and gifts overlap with that exact need?
- 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that without love our acts mean nothing. Have you experienced this in 40acts – the difference between heartfelt acts and dutiful acts? With that in mind, how can you cultivate more of the first kind than the second?



- What habit will you be taking into the rest of your year?
- Creating a generous mind and outlook always means putting others first and yourself second. Can we do this all the time? What can you put in place to sustain generosity?

Worship idea

10 minutes

Invite the group to listen to or sing these songs.

'Jesus at the Centre' – Israel

Jesus at the centre of it all
 Jesus at the centre of it all
 From beginning to the end
 It will always be, it's always been You
 Jesus
 Jesus

Jesus at the centre of it all
 Jesus at the centre of it all
 From beginning to the end
 It will always be, it's always been You
 Jesus
 Jesus

Nothing else matters, nothing in this world will do
 Jesus You're the centre, and everything revolves around You
 Jesus You

So Jesus be the centre of my life
 Jesus be the centre of my life
 From beginning to the end

It will always be, it's always been You
 Jesus
 Oh Jesus

Nothing else matters, nothing in this world will do
 Jesus You're the centre, and everything revolves around You
 Jesus You

From my heart to the Heavens
 Jesus be the centre
 It's all about You
 Yes it's all about You

Jesus be the centre of Your church
 Jesus be the centre of Your church
 And every knee will bow
 And every tongue shall confess You

'Break Every Chain' – Will Reagan and United Pursuit

There is power in the name of Jesus [3x]
 to break every chain, break every chain, break every chain. [2x]

There is power in the name of Jesus [3x]
 to break every chain, break every chain, break every chain. [2x]

All sufficient sacrifice
 So freely given
 Such a price
 Bought our redemption
 Heaven's gates swing wide

There's an army rising up [3x]
 to break every chain, break every chain, break every chain. [2x]

There's an army rising up [3x]
 to break every chain, break every chain, break every chain. [2x]

There is power in the name of Jesus
 to break every chain, break every chain, break every chain.

Pray

5 minutes

Father God, thank you that you won the most important battle on the cross, and in the grave. We live in the wake of your resurrected life, with new power to overcome darkness through the victory you won. Help us to demonstrate that new life to those around us, and to know that it really matters – for our journey with you, and for those who are waking up to you. As we commit to lives of generosity beyond this month, show us how to overcome our own self-centredness and overcome evil with good.

In your name and for your sake,
 Amen.

This week's 40acts

Monday 10 April: Against the tide
 Tuesday 11 April: Habit
 Wednesday April: Content
 Thursday 13 April: Wash day
 Friday 14 April: Testimony
 Saturday 15 April: Delivery



Acknowledgements

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Joel Leakey is a freelance writer based out of Northern Ireland. You can follow him on Twitter at [@joelleakey](https://twitter.com/joelleakey), but he warns you; its mostly puns.

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