

The Generous Life II

Acts 20:35

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We're just doing a little two week series on stewardship. We will be back in James next week. Last week was more on the stewardship of money and the **oblitunity** we have to sacrificially give to God. *What, you don't know what an oblitunity is?* It's a smashed together, made-up word by yours truly. Obligation and opportunity. *When what you have to do is what you want to do.* For our couples, Valentine's Day provided a major *oblitunity*. Do you have to do something special for your loved one? We could answer that, but it takes all the virtue out of it. The real issue is if you want to. Duty chocolate or duty kisses are empty expressions. It is the desire to do so that fills them with meaning.

We are spending these two weeks on giving. Giving to God is an oblitunity. Do we have to? Yes, it is commanded and to not give is disobedience. But duty-giving is empty. It is love for God that properly motivates our service to Him.

Last week we learned from the widow and her small coins that she gave to God all she had. God delights in our generosity to Him, but generosity to God is not defined by how much we give, but by how much we keep. The widow gave all she had and Jesus said she gave more than all the rest. Why? Her sacrifice was greater. The rich people's gifts were big, but their sacrifice was small. The widow's gift was small, but her sacrifice was great.

Today, I have a very small verse as our text. It is something Jesus said; only it's quoted in the book of Acts, chapter 20. Paul is speaking with the elders of the church at Ephesus. They are on a beach, so think beach scene here. The waves are crashing in the background. Paul is giving his final exhortation to a group of leaders he invested three years into. He knew it was his last time with them. He exhorts them to be good shepherds, watch for wolves, protect the sheep. He gets to verse 33 and says, *I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" (Acts 20:33-35)

His final exhortation to these church leaders is that since our inheritance is with God (verse 32), leaders in the church (and by proxy, every Christian in the church) are not to love or covet money. He gives his own ministry as an example. Then he quotes Jesus with *It is more blessed to give than to receive*. Jesus never says this in the four gospels. Jesus said and did many things the gospels don't record. John says His life was so remarkable a world of books couldn't contain it. (John 21:25). This is the only Scriptural quotation of Jesus recorded outside the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) from His time on earth.

But what does it mean; *It is more blessed to give than to receive?* And how can it be true, since most of us find receiving to be so wonderful?

First of all, let's make sure we understand this in context. This is a general truth applied to ministry given to God or for the kingdom of God. You can't just say, *It's more blessed to give to Uncle Sam than to receive* or *It's more blessed to give your life at work than to receive*. Paul quotes Jesus in the context of Kingdom of God ministry. He was sold out for Christ and this included how he handled himself financially.

Last week we made the point that Jesus makes elsewhere that Christianity is not simply a belief I have about religion; it is an all-encompassing way of life in which the follower of Jesus surrenders every aspect of his life to the will of God. In that surrender, for many people the hardest area is the area of our money. We want a Christian home. We want a Christian marriage. We want a Christian future...But too often we don't want a Christian checkbook, yet it is the way we use our money that Jesus says reveals the true condition of our hearts. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21).

So Paul is saying, *In the context of a kingdom way of life, it is more blessed to give than to receive.* Giving here is **generosity of life motivated by a love for God given to the kingdom of God.** It includes money, but includes so much more. It includes being generous with your time and your willingness to share with others your story, your things, your time, your listening ear. Can you read Paul's description of his life and think that Paul thought the church and the people of the church existed for him? He was a giver in every way. He was motivated by his love for God and he gave himself for the kingdom of God.

There is an irony in Jesus' words. Who receives the greater blessing? The giver or the receiver? The giver. The giver receives more than the receiver receives. The giver is actually the greater receiver. By giving ourselves away we receive MORE than if we are perpetual receivers. Receiving is the motivation for giving. You want to really receive? Give yourself to God and serving Him and all that means.

As we talk like this, I can hear our non-Christian friends bewildered by this - particularly in the US where receiving and hoarding are our national obsessions. Our friends would be shocked to know how much money a Christian gives to kingdom work. Why would we give so much to God?

The Big Picture of Christian Generosity

*But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*** (2 Corinthians 8:7-9, emphasis added)

Paul makes a direct connection between "grace giving" and the redemptive work of Christ for us (Verse 9). In verse 9 he summarizes what Jesus did for us in three stages:

1. Jesus was rich – pre-existent glory

This describes Jesus' experience prior to His incarnation. Before He came to earth, He was the eternal Logos, the Son of God. It is quite an understatement to say that He was rich. He was rich in perfection; rich in triune relationship; rich in complete power and glory. Was He rich? I'd say so.

2. Jesus became poor – incarnate humility

Yet for your sakes he became poor. From eternal glory, Jesus became human. Compared to what was His, this was poverty of experience. He experienced weakness; frailty. Of course, when we consider His sufferings and the disgrace He endured, Jesus was as impoverished in His human experience as a human could be. Bearing the sins of the world; dying a horrible death. That is very low even by human standards. He became impoverishment.

3. His poverty brings us riches

So that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The story of Jesus is a riches to rags story. Our story with Jesus is a rags to riches story. His poverty of experience has brought to us, by faith, incredible riches, the kind that really mean something and will infinitely satisfy us for all eternity.

So Christian generosity makes total sense in the context of the generosity of God to us. Let me show you how this works. If I gave you \$100 what would you be willing to give me? If I gave you \$1000, what would you gladly give me? If I gave you \$100,000, what would you happily give me? If I gave you a \$1,000,000, what would you be delighted to give me?

If I saved you from an eternity in hell by sacrificing my life, so that you could be forgiven and experience eternal life, what would you cheerfully give to me? Wouldn't you say, all of it?

This is why generosity is the only thing that makes sense in light of the big picture of redemption. Christ has been unfathomably generous to us and commands us to be generous to His kingdom. When we receive His generosity, but nickel and dime Him in return, what does that say about us and our faith and whether or not we really get it?

It is more blessed to give than to receive. I think one reason we are so stingy toward God is that we aren't convinced that His blessings are better than the blessings keeping our stuff seem to provide.

How are We More Blessed in Giving Than Receiving/Keeping?

We're doing what we're made to do

All generosity begins with the character of God. Is God generous? We take Him for granted, don't we? We assume that He is going to provide oxygen, food, water, shelter, and sunrises, like He *has* to do these things. He doesn't. At any time He could say, *You want to do this on your own? I'll let you.* The whole universe would implode. But the generosity of God and His love sustains our lives. This is most clearly seen in redemption. It was His generosity that sent Christ to earth to die for us. It was His generosity that pronounced that He would adopt us as His own children and make us co-heirs with Christ (1 John 3:1; Romans 8:17). God is a generous God.

We are made in His image, which means that we were made to reflect God's generosity. It feels good to do what we're designed to do. Even non-Christians feel this when they build a house for Habitat for Humanity or give to some particular cause or walk in a cancer fundraiser. They feel alive. They feel human. They feel a sense of satisfaction, because for those brief moments they are not living for themselves and it feels strangely good and significant to them. Why? They are made in God's image and are designed to be blessed by giving instead of keeping.

As Christians we have the advantage of knowing the One who made us this way and doing our good works for His sake and not just to save a whale or a tree. Do you know that feeling when you have given of yourself in some way, and done something for someone in a generous way? It feels good, doesn't it? Do you know why? We're designed for it and we feel a sense of meaning in giving that receiving will never bring.

The reality of the three-fold blessing

Who gets blessed by keeping? Maybe me as I am able to purchase items I hope will make me happy or feel a false sense of security from the money. The blessing of keeping is very tiny.

What about giving? Who gets blessed in giving? (Author Unknown)

- ***I am blessed*** – I just covered that in the previous point.
- ***The receiver is blessed*** – Jesus didn't say receiving doesn't have a blessing to it. It most certainly does, and when someone gives of themselves to you, it is really encouraging. We feel love. We feel valued. We feel care. So the giver is blessed and the receiver is blessed.
- ***God is blessed – (God loves a cheerful giver - 2 Corinthians 9:7)*** It glorifies Him as the one we are trusting to meet whatever need the sacrificial giving of our gift produces. That is the internal battle we have. Do I believe God will meet my needs or this dollar bill? Money wants us to trust it. God wants us to trust Him. When I do, God is glorified for His trustworthiness. God loves a cheerful giver.

What else can you do that produces so much blessing? Giving does it like nothing else.

Giving preserves me from the emptiness of living for myself

My 5 year old niece Abby was sitting on my sister-in-law's lap in the car while they waited in the parking lot. She caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror and began to look at herself this way and that. She finally said to her Mom, *Mommy, I like me.*

We all do. That's our problem. That's why we feel so empty, because the self-absorbed life is really empty. How do get the focus off of us? Nothing does it better than giving.

The act of giving is a vivid reminder that it's all about God, not about us. It's saying I am not the point, He is the point. He does not exist for me. I exist for Him. God's money has a higher purpose than my affluence. Giving is a joyful surrender to a greater person and a greater agenda. Giving affirms Christ's lordship. It dethrones me and exalts Him. It breaks the chains of mammon that would enslave me. (The Treasure Principle, Randy Alcorn, p. 59.)

Satisfaction of helping God's work/making a difference with your life

This is the opposite truth of point 3. When I live for myself, few things have any meaning. When I get the focus off of me and onto others, things start to matter. Things mean more. I feel concern for something beyond me and it feels good. I am making a difference in the world.

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:23-25)

Could Christianity be any more different from the world than here? How do I actually gain anything that matters? By giving up myself to Christ. By losing my life. By giving it away. I actually gain it. Find it. This is the promised blessing to Christians who give themselves away for God. It is more blessed to give because I discover my life having a sense of purpose. This one little truth that it's not about me has been so radical that millions have read Rick Warren's book to find out about it. It wouldn't sell one copy in heaven (It's not about you... Duh!) I am giving my life to something greater than myself and I am receiving from the giving a blessing that hoarding my life could never bring. Or as one of one of my heroes said it, *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.* (Jim Elliot)

Joyous anticipation of future reward

- *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.* (Matthew 19:29)
- *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Matthew 6:19-21)

We cannot ever forget this verse. Our investments here will be repaid in eternity. That ought to produce joy. If this morning I had a guaranteed return of one hundred percent on an investment to anyone who gave me money and invited you to talk to me afterwards, there would be a lot of checkbooks out and a lot of smiling faces.

When we give to God, it is entirely appropriate to be happy about future reward for our gifts and to give with that as a motivation.

The Wildcard – A Generous God’s Promise of Greater Blessing

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:10-11)

If a poor man came and said to you, In light of your kindness to me, I am going to be generous to you. You’d think, *That’s nice, but what can he do?* If Bill Gates said the same thing to you, you’d be really excited, because if Bill Gates promises to be generous to you, he can be REALLY generous to you. Beloved, here the God of heaven gives a promise to Christians who give to Him. *I will be generous back.* The health and wealth TV preachers will guarantee you material wealth. God doesn’t and I won’t either. However, it might mean that and the testimony of so many who give materially to God is that God blesses them materially back. It might be health. It might be rich relationships. It might be opportunity. I don’t know. Here’s the thing, God can be REALLY generous, because He’s really rich and powerful.

So when Jesus says, *It is more blessed to give than to receive* and that blessing includes a generous really rich God making the promise, it’s the wildcard. I don’t know what God might do for you. All I know is that we cannot out-give God. He is always more generous to us than we are to Him. Test Him. He challenged Israel in Malachi 3:10, *Just try me. Give to me and will I not make your barns overflow?* Many don’t, because they don’t think God’s blessings are better. Don’t be one of them.

In the last message I played out what it might be like for me to meet you in heaven and for you to be mad that as your pastor I didn’t make it clear that stewardship on earth would be so richly rewarded in heaven. Have I made it clear enough for none of you to accuse me of it someday? I hope so.

Churches and Christian organizations have the same responsibility for stewardship that each of us do individually. This is an area of our church that I am passionate about. The church should be an example of how to use money wisely for the Lord; to manage it as He would have us to. The Elders share that commitment and we want you to know that this is important to us. We continue to look at how to be the best stewards we can and have made

steps toward that goal. One new thing is that shortly you will be able to donate online to the church and to set that up automatically. One church I know calls it, *Automatic Faithfulness*. It's just one tool. We'll use technology, teaching, modeling, seminars, reverse offerings, or whatever else we can to facilitate our people stepping into heaven fully invested there.

- *The less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become.* (Hudson Taylor)
- *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* (Acts 20:35)

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