

Introduction

One week from today, folks, and what is for many that most anticipated day of the year will be here again, already. It is that close! For over a month now in our family we have been asking each other, "What do you want for Christmas?" We've been ordering and shopping and wrapping presents for the big day. With nurses in our family, both of which work on Christmas Day and two preachers both of whom preach on Christmas Day, we decided to wait an extra day to celebrate so everyone can be there. So on the day after Christmas we will rise early in the morning have a wonderful big breakfast and tear into presents. This is the season of giving and receiving. As you look back, there may be a Christmas that stands out to you because of what you received. There probably will also be a Christmas that stands out because of what you gave. I remember the year I got that stereo system. And I remember the year my sister and brother and I gave our mother a silver sugar and creamer set.

It's the season of giving and receiving. Pondering this aspect of Christmas, the words of Jesus came to mind: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." I thought, "what an appropriate statement to consider during these days." Oddly enough these words do not appear in any of the gospels. The channel through which we learn of them is not one of the original disciples but the Apostle Paul. He mentioned them in a most interesting context. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul was passing near the city of Ephesus where he had spent a considerable amount of time in planting a church. He called for the elders of the church to come and meet with him for what would be the last time. He had a parting word for them. This is the context of this striking beatitude spoken by the Lord. We read the context and the beatitude in Acts 20:17-35.

[Read Text and Pray]

This is one of my personal favorite texts in the Bible. I can sense the deep affection of Paul and the depth of concern he has for these elders and the church over which the Holy Spirit has set them. He expresses to them how he was willing to be spent for their well-being and now he exhorts these elders to do the same. He culminated his exhortation with this statement of blessing, which is why we call it a beatitude. "Remember these words of the Lord Jesus how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Recall the beatitudes in Matthew's gospel. Jesus declared, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted; blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth;" and on he went. They are all striking for the fact that they pronounce blessing on people in conditions that the world does not consider blessed. Every one of the beatitudes goes contrary to the thinking of the world.

And here in Acts 20 the same holds true. What do you mean "it is more blessed to give than to receive"? To the mind of the world it does not make sense. To the worldly mind it is always happier and more satisfying to get than to give. And it is particularly true if you think in terms of a whole life. The explanation for so much conflict, quarreling, hostility, and discord in the world is because people believe that they will be happier and more fulfilled if their life for the most part is one of getting not giving. But Jesus says it is the other way around, and Paul is a living testimony of what he said. To the extent that we really believe what Jesus said, it will revolutionize our lives. I want to you gain from our study this morning the firm conviction that a life of everyday giving is far more blessed than a life of receiving. Your purpose and mine is to be a channel through whom God works

for others and for his glory. And when we fulfill that purpose, we will know great happiness and satisfaction.

I. The Blessing of Receiving.

It would be mistaken to think that Jesus is condemning those who receive. You can't have a giver without someone to receive what is given. So Jesus is not saying that it is not blessed to receive.

Those in need who receive from the generosity of those who give are blessed. I mean Paul says right there in verse 35 that by working hard we may help the weak. When the weak are helped, they are blessed. When needy people receive what they cannot procure themselves, they rejoice. In my days as a poor seminary student, my car needed an expensive repair. I was working 30 hours a week to pay my rent, put "beanie wienies" in my mouth, and pay my tuition. I could not afford the repair. But God! He connected me with a family that operated a repair business. They fixed my car and fed me supper and I was blessed! It is blessed to receive.

If it were bad or wrong to receive, all of us would be in a world of hurt! Salvation itself is a gift. Neither you nor I can have salvation without receiving it as a gift. "The wages of sin is death, but the free GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." God is the provider, Jesus is the accomplisher, the Holy Spirit is the one who applies the gift. The forgiveness of God is not up for sale. It is a present bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus. And you can't have it unless you are willing to humble yourself to be a receiver of that gift. It is received by faith. What must you do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. For by grace are you been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And those who receive God's gift of salvation are blessed indeed. You cannot be blessed as a giver unless you are first blessed as a receiver of God's great gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

II. The Greater Blessing of Giving.

I do think that what Jesus is saying here is meant to be taken on the human-to-human level. We actually can't give God anything. Anything we give God first comes from God. Our praise itself that we give to God is God's own gift to us. For from him and through him and to him are all things. So the greater blessing of giving is not a blessing greater than what God gives to us, but it is a greater blessing to give to other people than to receive from other people.

To be blessed is to be praiseworthy or commendable but also carries with it a component of happiness and satisfaction. It delights God that the weak and poor receive what they need. But it is even more delightful to him that the prosperous and strong share their plenty. And not only does God delight in it, those who give in this way with the right attitude experience a greater level of joy in the giving than do those who experience the receiving.

It is illustrated well in the case of the impoverished Macedonian believers about whom Paul spoke to the Corinthians. To them he wrote, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." (2 Corinthians 8:1-4)

Many times when people give, they do not experience greater joy. It is because they do not see it as a favor the way the Macedonians did. They rather have their hearts set on what they are giving and would prefer to keep it for themselves. Last Christmas I took a drone down to the Layne family gift exchange intending to bring it back as my own. But my sister wound up with it. And I am still a little salty about that. If you love the world and the things in the world, then your giving will not be joyful. But if the love of the Father is in you, you will rejoice to be able to relieve the sufferings of the weak and those without. You will have joy in generosity and God will be pleased. For God loves a cheerful giver. So let go of the world and fasten your heart to generosity for the privilege of blessing others and glorifying God.

But I want you to see that this truth is about far more than merely where you contribute your money or presents you give. It is what you do with your life. And the failure to apply this beatitude more broadly may be the greatest evidence that many, many times we do not really believe that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We may give money here and there but what about our preferences when they conflict with the preferences of others? Are you willing to give place to the preferences of others? What about our comforts when our comforts are the discomforts of others—when we have our way, it compromises what is comfortable for others? What about the matter of who is going to serve and who is going to be served? Are we willing to serve for the benefit of others even though it costs us something? These are the kinds of situations in which this beatitude is often rejected.

If it were truly believed and embraced, there would be many fewer squabbles in marriages, far fewer marital counseling sessions, less complaining. If it were believed, we would be falling all over ourselves to be sensitive to one another and to serve one another. There would be fewer wrecks on the road, fewer expletives spoken about other drivers. There would be more peace and unity in the church and fewer ruffled feathers. There would just be a whole lot more joy. And so let us repent of our selfish ways and let us resolve and determine to lean in to the Holy Spirit in this regard and seek the mercy and grace and power of God for our hearts to be changed, for peace to be more prevalent, for our joy to be expanded, and the glory of God to be magnified.

Before finishing up today, I want to look at the context in which Paul reminds us of this saying of Jesus. It comes as the conclusion to his exhortation to the elders from Ephesus. In this context we see manifested in Paul himself . . .

III. The Character Corresponding to Giving.

Of course Jesus is the consummate example of the greater blessedness of giving. Christ, loving the church, gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her and present her to himself in splendor. In this way Christ nourishes and cherishes the church.

But Paul exhibits in this context, I count, ten characteristics which correspond to the words of Jesus. These present a portrait of the lives of those who truly believe and live out that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

A. They see giving to others as serving the Lord. You will see this phrase in verse 19. As Paul recalls the entire time he spent in Asia doing what he was doing, he says he was serving the Lord. His efforts, his sacrifice, his preaching and teaching, admonishing, and contending for the gospel and the souls of the believers, more than anything was serving the Lord. He was serving the people for sure, but more fundamentally, he was serving Jesus. This is what every disciple is called to—a life of serving Christ. Paul addresses slaves in Colossians. And he says that in everything they are to obey their earthly masters with sincerity. They are to do their work as to the Lord, for he says, they “are serving the Lord.” If that’s the way slaves were to serve their masters, then husbands are to love

and serve our wives as serving Jesus. Wives are to submit to husbands as a service to Jesus. Brothers and sisters in the Lord are to relate to and love one another as serving the Lord. You know, Jesus pointed out this principle when he told the parable of the sheep and the goats and the truth of final judgment. The King separates all people into two groups the sheep and the goats. He welcomes the sheep to inherit the kingdom saying, "you gave me food; you gave me drink; you welcomed me; you clothed me; you visited me." They ask, "when did we do that?" And he replies "as you did it to the least of my brothers, you did it to me." When we bless the people of God, we are serving God. When we give money, time, preferences, comforts, privileges, whatever for the sake of others, we are serving Christ. And what wouldn't we do for the one who died for us?

B. Next, the lives of those who enjoy the blessing of giving are marked by humility. Paul says while he was there in Ephesus, he was serving the Lord with all humility. That is he was taking the place and role of a servant. He was considering others more important than himself. When we are humble, it is simply an honest appraisal of who we are. Over and over in his letters, Paul refers to himself as a slave of Christ. He has been bought with a price. He belongs to Jesus. The only good he has is Jesus. There is nothing Christ can ask of him that he won't be willing to do—nothing he wouldn't give up and nothing he wouldn't seek to do. Others are more important than himself.

C. Third, Paul says he shed tears. He served the Lord in the midst of the Ephesians with tears and trials. It was hard. And there were tears. I am sure that the tears were there for the pain but also for the earnest longing he had to see these believers grow in the Lord. He was willing to spend himself because of the great value of the progress of these new believers.

D. Fourth, Paul exhibited determination. We need the determination that the Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers. We will all face trials. We will all face obstacles that test our resolve and perseverance in doing well. Giving will never be without some measure of sacrifice. Those who live with the spirit of giving and know that it is more blessed to give don't let their trials get in the way.

E. A fifth character quality that corresponds to a giving spirit is profitable speech. Paul's work as a missionary and church planter in Ephesus involved a lot of talking. He says he declared; he taught; and he testified. Paul communicated what was profitable to the people. One of the ways we give to others is through our speech. Speaking the truth in love we grow up into Christ. We serve each other well by words that instruct, words that encourage, words that remind each other of God's greatness and his wisdom.

F. Sixth, those who live out and experience the greater blessing of giving are focused on Jesus. This is true for all disciples of Christ. We see it in the example of Paul while in Ephesus. He says he testified of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The hope of believers, the strength of believers, the testimony of believers, and the hearts of believers are all energized by Jesus. Fixing our eyes on JESUS let us run the race that is set before us. We can't do it any other way. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we fix our eyes on the one who knows better than anybody that it is more blessed to give than to receive. You can't give more than he gave, and yet, the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus went to the cross for the JOY set before him. To be one who experiences the greater blessing of generous giving, we must look to Jesus and point others to Jesus.

G. The next and seventh characteristic we see here in Paul the giver is selflessness. Paul informs those elders that the road ahead of him is going to be challenging. Look at verse 22. He said to them, "I'm going to Jerusalem bound by the Spirit. And I don't know what will happen to me there, except this: imprisonment and afflictions await me." So then why are you going Paul? This is what

we all want to know. He is going because he is constrained by the Holy Spirit. He can't do other than what the Holy Spirit is leading him to do. And besides (look at verse 24), besides, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."

Let me read that statement again. "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus." This statement staggers me. It has done so for a long time. Jesus said that if we lose our lives for his sake we will truly find them. Paul declares here that he has lost his life for Christ's sake. His life is not his own. He has been bought with a price and all that matters is being used for the purpose for which he was brought to Christ. This statement should be every Christian's daily motto. And this orientation is the foundation of a life that lives to give.

H. Characteristic number eight is paying careful attention to others. Paul turns his attention to the elders from Ephesus and exhorts them to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock. He was urging them to be watchful against false and destructive teaching. But their attention needed to be bi-directional—they needed to watch themselves but they also needed to have their attention on others under their care. It is so easy to get wrapped up in ourselves. It is our natural tendency. We have to purpose to be tuned in to others—to their circumstances and needs. It takes intentionality and watchfulness. Who needs help? Who needs my prayers? Who can I encourage? Givers are asking themselves these and similar questions as they look beyond themselves.

I. We have now arrived at number nine. Paul made a point of reminding the elders from Ephesus of the way he lived among them. He says he coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Paul was satisfied with what God allotted unto him. He was not envious or jealous of the possessions that others had. He was content. He did not love the world and the things in the world. Paul's focus on wealth was the wealth that belongs to all believers. It is the inheritance God has for us in glory. The possessions of this world are fading away. They wear out. They rust. They break. And they are destined to burn. True treasure is what lasts forever. And that is reserved in heaven for the family of God. If we are to experience the greater blessing of giving over receiving, our focus must be set toward heaven. When it is the case, we can be freed to be generous toward others.

J. Finally, characteristic number ten is hard work. I am struck that Paul was a full-time missionary who supported himself AND those who were with him by the work of his own hands. Look what he says in verse 34. "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities AND to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus." One of the facets of the life of a disciple of Christ is that we recognize the value of hard work. We should not be sluggards. We should not be satisfied to work a little. God is an industrious God and he wants his people to be industrious as well. When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, he instructed former thieves this way. He said "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need."

Paul is not prideful as he talks about his work. He is basically saying "Follow me as I follow Christ." We live in a society that thrives on rest and recuperation and recreation. We just want to take it easy. Now we need rest and we need to be refreshed to keep going, but think, do we take taking it easy to excess sometimes? And is the result not being able to give as generously as we otherwise could to those who are in need? These are questions we need to consider if we want to experience the greater blessedness of giving over receiving.

Conclusion

You and I are privileged to live in the richest nation in the world. We are wealthy. We are blessed. And we are about to engage in a season of giving and receiving as a tradition in this country. I just want to encourage us during this season to be mindful of the greater blessing of giving. And I want to exhort us to think in these terms not just in regards to Christmas gifts, but to look beyond the giving of Christmas gifts to living every day life in the shadow of Christ's cross. For the joy set before us let us learn the delight of giving our time, our preferences, conveniences, and selfish delights in the name of the king of kings, Jesus.