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## HOW TO RECEIVE FROM GOD

Luke 1:53

By

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Special Christmas Message

## How To Receive From God Luke 1:53

"Am I mentioned in the will?" the nephew asked anxiously. "You certainly are," replied the lawyer. "Right here in the third paragraph your uncle says, 'To my niece Sarah, I bequeath \$100,000; to my cousin Janice, \$50,000; and to my nephew Charles, who was always curious to know if he was mentioned in my will, I say—Hi, Charles.'" (*Reader's Digest* [11/77], p. 44.)

Well, I've never had a rich uncle or a rich relative of any sort. The only thing I've ever inherited was an old TV set from Marla's grandmother. But if I did have a rich uncle, I'd want to be on good terms with him so that I'd be at least on his Christmas list, if not in his will.

We all enjoy receiving gifts at Christmas. But the greatest gifts we can receive are not from rich uncles, but from God. He made us; He alone knows what we all need most. As a loving God, He is ready to give us the best gifts. But He does not give His gifts indiscriminately. Both in the Bible and in our experience we see that some receive the blessings God offers while others go away with nothing. We would do well, therefore, to understand clearly how to receive from God so that we are not among those who miss out on the best gift of all.

The virgin Mary was one who received God's blessings. In reference to her being chosen to be the mother of our Lord, she exclaimed, "For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1:48-49). What a great thing to know, that future generations would count you blessed because God has done great things for you! Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55, called the Magnificat, from the first word in Latin) tells us how to receive God's blessings as Mary did. In an earlier study of Luke, I covered the whole song. Today I'm going to focus only on verse 53: "He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed." This verse tells us how to receive from God:

God satisfies the spiritually hungry  
but He sends the self-satisfied away empty.

This is a basic spiritual principle that runs throughout Scripture. It is often expressed as God humbling the proud and exalting the humble (Luke 1:51-52). Dozens of verses emphasize this truth, but let's look at just a few.

Mary's song is similar to Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), which expresses Hannah's praise after God answered her prayer for a son. God wanted to give Hannah a son because Israel needed a prophet to speak God's word to His people. Hannah's rival, her husband's other wife, had many sons and daughters (1 Sam. 1:2, 4), but Hannah was barren because God had closed her womb (1:5). Closing Hannah's womb may seem like a strange way for God to provide her with a son. Yet that is often the way God works. He promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but He waited until after they were well past childbearing years to give them Isaac. The principle is that God brings us to the end of ourselves, where we have lost our proud trust in our own ability. Then we cast ourselves on the Lord and He provides to show us His grace [read 1 Sam. 2:4-7].

The same theme governs Psalm 107. It shows four vignettes of people whom God put in impossible situations so that they would come to the end of themselves, call out to God, and then praise Him for His lovingkindness when He delivered them [read vs. 4-9, noting vs. 9]. Jesus taught the same truth in the Beatitudes, where He said that the mourners would be comforted, the hungry filled, and the meek would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3-12). Paul expressed the same principle when he said that when he was weak, then he was strong, because his weakness forced him to rely on the Lord (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The reason I emphasize this principle so much at the outset is that it runs counter to what most people think, that "God helps those who help themselves." That familiar "verse" is not in the Bible. It is based on human pride and runs counter to the biblical principle that God helps those who come to the end of themselves and cast themselves upon Him. I often read articles that promote the popular view, that you've got to believe in yourself. Sadly, many Christians buy into this sort of thinking. But Scripture pointedly states, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and

makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord" (Jer. 17:5). To trust in yourself is to turn away from trusting in the Lord!

Trusting in God does not mean that we sit around and do nothing. But it does mean that before we can do anything for God, we must recognize our own inability and rely on God for His grace and strength, so that He gets the glory. That's the principle Mary expresses in Luke 1:53. Let's examine the first half of the proposition:

1. God satisfies the spiritually hungry.

Mary is not speaking primarily of physical hunger or riches, but is using metaphorical language to speak of the spiritually hungry and the spiritually rich, or self-satisfied. Mary clearly saw herself as spiritually needy. She was not born without sin. She recognized God as her Savior (1:47), implying that she was a sinner. God didn't chose Mary to bear His Son because she was without sin. She mentions her humble state (1:48) and God's mercy (1:50). Mary was a spiritually hungry woman whom God had sovereignly blessed because of His mercy. Note three things:

A. The ones God satisfies are marked by *spiritual hunger*.

That is the qualification to receive from God—to be spiritually hungry. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6). Righteousness refers to God's holiness as personified in Jesus Christ. In reference to the Christian, it refers both to justification—to be declared right before God, which happens the moment a person believes in Christ; and, to sanctification—to live rightly before God, which is progressive over a lifetime and is never perfected until we stand before Christ. Jesus was referring to the person who has a deep desire to be like Him, to live a holy life in thought, word, and deed. That person will be satisfied.

There are many people, even many professing Christians, who desire happiness, but not righteousness. If God can make them happy, they'll follow Him; but if not, they'll look elsewhere. A couple who attended the church I pastored in California professed to be Christians. The wife suffered chronic back pain. When I

heard that they were going to a Science of Mind “healer,” I talked to the husband about the spiritual danger. He replied, “My wife is in pain; we’ll go where she can get relief.” They stopped coming to the church. Truth didn’t matter to them. The living God didn’t matter. They just wanted relief wherever they could find it. I’ve known other professing Christians who walk out on their marriages or get involved in immorality because they’re seeking happiness above seeking God’s kingdom and righteousness.

Commenting on “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “I do not know of a better test that anyone can apply to himself or herself in this whole matter of the Christian profession than a verse like this. If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of Scripture you can be quite certain you are a Christian; if it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again” (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Eerdmans], 1:74).

Of course every true child of God is aware of many shortcomings in this regard. We’re all easily led astray by the selfishness that dwells within our sinful hearts. We have to fight it constantly. But if the pattern of our lives is that we violate God’s holy standards to pursue self-fulfillment, then we are fooling ourselves to call ourselves Christians.

Mary says that God fills the *hungry* with good things. To be hungry is to be aware of a desperate need. Relieving hunger is not a luxury; it’s a matter of survival. Probably none of us has ever experienced this level of need on a physical plane. Starving people aren’t interested in new stereos or computers, unless they can somehow sell them to buy food. Hungry people have one focus—where to find food. It consumes their whole existence from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed. They need food.

That’s how we should hunger for God! Do you feel desperate to have your sins forgiven and to come to know God? If you have had your sins forgiven at the cross, do you now sense that whatever else in life you have, you must know God? The ones God satisfies are marked by that kind of spiritual hunger.

B. *God alone* can satisfy our hunger.

The "He" of verse 53 is God. He alone is able to meet our deepest needs. If we want to be satisfied, then we must seek God for the fulfillment of our spiritual hunger. He made us; He understands us thoroughly. He alone can meet the deepest needs of every human heart. So if we recognize our hunger, we must seek God to fill it.

To seek elsewhere is to seek that which can never satisfy completely. As the Lord speaks through Isaiah, "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me" (Isa. 55:2-3). God alone can satisfy the hungry heart.

David knew this. He was in the Judean wilderness, running for his life from the mad King Saul. Samuel had anointed David as Saul's successor, but for the time being, David was a hunted fugitive. If I were David, I probably wouldn't be writing songs at a time like that or if I were, the theme would be, "God, get me out of here! Give me relief!" But at just such a time, David wrote, "O God, You are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). As he seeks God there in that barren wilderness, David exults, "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips" (63:5). He knew what it meant to be satisfied with God alone, even when God had not yet provided him with physical comfort or with the position as king that God had promised.

Beware of seeking fulfillment apart from Jesus Christ. Satan offers all sorts of subtle temptations that seem to fulfill your needs, but they aren't centered in Jesus Christ. They satisfy temporarily, but ultimately they do not nourish. The one who fills up on them will starve. It's as if you were physically hungry and you came to me for food. Suppose that I had perfected a process for infusing the taste of steak and potatoes into old newspapers. It tasted great, but it was nutritionally useless. If you ate it, you would enjoy the taste and your hunger would go away. But you would starve to death. That's what happens to anyone who seeks to be satisfied with anything other than God.

We've seen that the ones God satisfies are marked by spiritual hunger. Also, God alone can satisfy our hunger. Third,

C. God *satisfies* the hungry.

I'm focusing here on the word "filled." It's in the past tense (Greek, aorist) because Mary is quoting from Psalm 107:9 (106:9 in the LXX) which looks at how God has met the need of those who have called out to Him. But it points to His characteristic way of dealing with all who seek Him. He satisfies them or fills them full (the meaning of this Greek verb). It means that God doesn't just give partially; He meets our needs fully. It's the same word used in the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:12), where it says that after everyone was filled, they picked up 12 baskets full of leftovers. Everyone ate until they were satisfied, a feeling that many of us can identify with at this season of the year!

Of course there's a sense in which we are both satisfied and yet still hungry in Jesus Christ. We who have tasted of God's banquet in Christ are satisfied in the sense that the longing of our soul has been met. Our sins are forgiven; we enjoy peace with God; we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; we are ready to meet the Lord. In all of that and in much more, we are satisfied. And yet in another sense, as long as we're in this body, we will be hungering and thirsting to know more of God, to experience more of what He has provided for us in Christ. Since God is infinite, we can never exhaust the delight of knowing Him.

Also, note that God satisfies the hungry with *good things*, not with junk food. God fills you with Himself, the source of all that is good and beautiful. "The good things" of our text does not refer to what our society calls "the good life." Mary wasn't referring to material prosperity, to a life of freedom from suffering, or to a feeling of self-fulfillment. She was referring to the satisfaction of the soul in God Himself, which transcends circumstances.

Many years ago a great monarch, Shah Abbas, reigned in Persia. The Shah loved his people. To understand them more clearly, he would mingle with them in various disguises. One day he went to the public baths dressed as a poor man. There in a tiny cellar he sat down beside the man who tended the furnace. He talked with the lonely man as a friend and at meal time, he ate some of his

coarse food. In the weeks that followed, he visited the poor man often until the man came to love him dearly.

Then one day the Shah revealed his true identity to the poor man. The Shah waited, expecting the man to ask some favor or gift from him, but the commoner simply gazed in astonishment. Finally, he said, "You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to partake of my coarse food, to care whether my heart was glad or heavy. On others you may bestow great riches; but to me you have given a much greater gift—yourself. I only ask that you may never withdraw the gift of your friendship."

Friendship with God in Jesus Christ is what truly satisfies the soul! Mary affirms that God fills or satisfies the hungry soul with good things, namely, with the ultimate good thing of knowing Him. All that I've said thus far is to try to explain and apply the first half of this verse. But we must look briefly at the second half:

## 2. God sends the self-satisfied away empty.

This is a shocking reversal of the natural order! In this world, the rich are the full; the hungry are the empty. But in God's order, the rich are the empty; the hungry are the full. Note three things:

### A. God sends away the *self-satisfied*.

By rich, Mary means those who have no felt needs before God. Perhaps she is specifically referring to those who were the self-proclaimed spiritual leaders in Israel in her day. When God picked a family for His Messiah to be born in, He didn't pick the family of the chief priest or of one of the leading rabbis. He went to a poor, unknown carpenter and his wife in Nazareth. The "rich" in Jerusalem were overlooked.

The surest way to receive nothing from God is to be satisfied with where you are at. The Pharisees didn't see themselves as needy sinners before God. They saw themselves as righteous because of their good works. They saw themselves as better than "the sinners." But they didn't see themselves as God saw them! They were "proud in the thoughts of their heart" (Luke 1:51), and their pride blinded them to their true spiritual condition.

The church of Laodicea was like that. They had become lukewarm about spiritual things because they were complacent.

Their view of themselves was, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." God's description of them is a bit different: "You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). How would you describe yourself spiritually? God sends away the self-satisfied, who do not see their true need before Him.

B. God actively *sends them away*.

What a startling thing! The text doesn't say that God ignores the rich or that He gives nothing to them. It says that He actively sends them away empty-handed. What a frightening thought, that God would send a person away! You may wonder, "Why would God do this? Doesn't He want everyone to come to Him?" Yes, but they must come on God's terms, not on their terms.

A *Newsweek* cover story several years ago [12/17/90, pp. 50-56] reported on the baby-boomers who were coming back into church now that they realized the need for religious values for their kids. But the article made it clear that these self-confident people are coming to God on *their* terms, not on His. "They don't convert—they choose." They want to know, "What's in it for me?" They're picky consumers, shopping for churches they like that offer services they want. The message to the churches is, "If you want to grow, you'd better cater to the customers' needs."

A similar article in *Time* [4/5/93, pp. 44-49] observed, "Increasing numbers of baby boomers who left the fold years ago are turning religious again, but many are traveling from church to church or faith to faith, sampling creeds, shopping for a custom-made God."

You can custom-make an idol. But you can only come to the living God on *His* terms or not at all. His terms are that you recognize your sin and that you cannot save yourself. You must see yourself as hungry and starving unless God intervenes. He isn't in the business of working out deals with self-confident young urban professionals. He actively sends the proud away.

C. God sends them away *empty-handed*.

What despair, to be sent away by God empty-handed! If God sends you away empty-handed, you have absolutely nothing. Paul expressed the same truth by saying that such people have no hope

and are without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). What good are material riches in this life, if you spend eternity in that place Jesus described as “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48)? What good is passing pleasure or romance in this life, if you spend eternity in the place Jesus described as “outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30)? The worst thing that could happen to anyone is to be full of the passing pleasures of this world, but to be empty-handed when you stand before God at the judgment.

### Conclusion

What is the solution? How can we avoid having God send us away empty-handed? D. L. Moody said, “Christ sends none away empty but those who are full of themselves.” To the church at Laodicea, God said that they needed to see their true condition as He saw them and to repent, to turn from their sin to Him. It was to that church that Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). He will truly satisfy the hunger of anyone who acknowledges his true spiritual need and who seeks Him.

Don't seek happiness. Don't seek fulfillment. Don't seek pleasure. Hunger after God and His righteousness and He promises that He will fill you with good things.

### Discussion Questions

1. How can a Christian develop a deeper hunger for God?
2. What is the proper balance between seeking God Himself versus asking Him to meet our needs?
3. To what extent should our evangelistic approach try to meet the felt needs of lost people?
4. Is it wrong to try to “market” the church? Why/why not?

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