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WHY GIVERS ARE BLESSED

Acts 20:33-38

By

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December 23, 2001

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Acts Lesson 55

Why Givers are Blessed Acts 20:33-38

Early one morning years ago an American serviceman was making his way back to the barracks in London. He saw a little boy with his nose pressed to the window of a bakery, staring in silence. The serviceman's heart went out to the little boy, probably an orphan. "Son, would you like some of those?"

"Oh, yeah, I would!"

The serviceman stepped inside and bought a dozen. He took the bag outside to the boy and said, "Here you are."

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He heard the child ask quietly, "Mister, are you God?"

When we give, we act as God does. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son ..." (John 3:16). As God's people, we should be givers, not only at the Christmas season, but as a way of life.

In his final address to the Ephesian elders, Paul reminds them one more time of his own example when he had been with them. His example of being free from greed and of working to provide for his own needs and even for the needs of his co-workers, demonstrated before them how they, too, should shepherd God's flock. More than his own example, though, Paul told them to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Then Luke records the emotional farewell between Paul and these men who thought that they would never see his face again.

Jesus' words here are not contained anywhere else in Scripture. Apparently they were part of the oral tradition handed down from those who had been with Jesus during His earthly ministry. As John (21:25) mentions, if everything that Jesus did was written down in detail, even the whole world couldn't contain the books. We may wish sometimes that we had more of Jesus' sayings, but what we are given are probably convicting enough for us to work on for a lifetime! That is certainly true of His words here. By our

fallen nature, we all are takers, not givers. But by God's sanctifying grace, He wants us all to grow to be givers. As we do, not only will others be blessed, but so will we!

But, why are givers more blessed than those who receive? I remember as a boy when my mother would quote this verse to me at Christmas time, thinking, "Well, then I'll let someone else get blessed by giving to me!" I wanted to be on the receiving end! Our text explicitly reveals three reasons that givers are more blessed; a fourth reason is implicit in Jesus' statement and taught explicitly in other Scriptures:

Givers are blessed because they are freed from greed, they are being conformed to Jesus, they have enduring relationships with others, and they will reap eternal rewards.

1. Givers are blessed because they are freed from the destructive sin of greed (20:33-35a).

Perhaps Paul is contrasting himself with the false teachers that he has just warned them about, wolves who come in to feed on the flock, rather than to feed the flock. Throughout the Bible, false teachers are denounced for being greedy and covetous (Isa. 56:11; Jer. 6:13; 8:10; Luke 16:14; 1 Tim. 6:5; Titus 1:11; 2 Pet. 2:3, 14, 15; Jude 16). But Paul's example shows us that ...

A. Elders are to set the example of being free from greed.

As Paul himself argued (1 Cor. 9:1-18; 1 Tim. 5:17-18), those who labor in the gospel are worthy of being supported by the gospel. But there is a huge difference between a man being supported by the gospel and a man who is in the ministry to get rich by taking advantage of others. One requirement for elders is that they be "free from the love of money" (1 Tim. 3:3). Both elders and deacons must not be "fond of sordid gain" (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Tim. 3:8). If a man is trying to fleece the flock, it erodes trust and undercuts the basis for any lasting spiritual ministry.

The prophet Micah (3:11) denounced Jerusalem's leaders that pronounced judgment for a bribe, her priests that instructed for a price, and her prophets that divined for money. In the world, giving counsel for a hefty fee is standard practice. Unfortunately, the Christian world has imitated the secular world in this. But the Lord's servants should offer counsel or other ministry freely,

trusting God that if people are ministered unto, they will reciprocate by helping to meet the needs of the one who has ministered to them. There is nothing wrong with charging for a product, such as a book or CD, where there are obvious costs in production and marketing. But even there, the focus of many Christians seems to be on making huge profits, not on ministry to the Lord's people.

Many years ago, I was shocked when I tried to line up a speaker for a men's retreat at our church in California. I tried a nearby seminary and the secretary told me up front, "Dr. So-and-So's fee is so much for a weekend retreat." I could not find even one speaker who would come without agreeing on a fee, and most of them were high amounts! I finally settled on one of the cheaper speakers, but I was grieved by the monetary focus. Why not come and minister and trust God to provide? The biblical principle is that we should offer ministry freely, and those who are ministered to should meet the needs of the one who is ministering (Gal. 6:6). Elders must set the example by being free from greed.

B. Greed is a sin that destroys the greedy person.

The Bible ranks greed or covetousness alongside immorality and idolatry, warning that "because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:5-6; Col. 3:5-6; see also Mark 7:21-23; 1 Cor. 5:10). Paul said that those who desire to get rich get snared by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:9).

A Nigerian folk tale illustrates the destructive nature of greed. Three friends were on a journey when they found a bag full of money. They were very happy with their good fortune. They were hungry, so they sent the youngest man into a nearby town to buy food. After he left, one of the men persuaded the other that they should kill the younger man when he returned so that they would only have to divide the treasure two ways.

Meanwhile, the youngest man had bought the food and started back when he got the idea, "If I could kill these two men, the money would all be mine." So he returned to town, bought some poison, and put it in the food. "I will tell them that I have already eaten and am not hungry now. They will eat and die, and the money will all be mine," he schemed.

He no sooner arrived back with the other men than they beat him to death. Then they sat down to eat their lunch, but before they could finish, they became ill and died from the poison. And so because of greed, all three men died without enjoying any of their newfound treasure.

Greed is always easy to recognize in others: They won't share what they have with me! But it's not so easy to spot it in ourselves. Charles Simeon, in a sermon on Luke 12:15 (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 12:468-471), developed three criteria to judge whether we are under the influence of greed. He said that we should examine the manner in which we seek material things; the degree to which we enjoy them; and, the manner in which we mourn or are anxious when we lose them. Givers are blessed because they are freed from this sin that brings both temporal and eternal destruction.

- C. The solution to overcoming greed is to work to provide for your own needs and to give to provide for the legitimate needs of others.

In Ephesians 4:28, Paul wrote, "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need." When he was in Ephesus, Paul had been an example both of hard work and generosity. He had made tents to meet his own needs, and from any surplus, he had helped support the men who worked with him in the gospel. Apparently he also had enough funds to help some in the church who were needy (20:35a).

Paul's example affirms the dignity of work, including physical labor. Some are like Maynard G. Krebs in the old Dobie Gillis TV show. Every time the word "work" was spoken, Maynard would jump backwards and shriek as if he had been contaminated by the plague, "Work!" Some think that work is a part of the curse. But Adam had work to do before the curse, and we will have work to do throughout eternity. The curse is the thorns and thistles that interfere with productive labor, not the labor itself.

All Christian men, except those who are physically or mentally incapable, are responsible to work in order to provide for their families' and their own needs. Women are primarily to be workers

at home (Titus 2:5). Not to provide for one's family is to deny the faith and be worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8, a fairly strong warning!). Paul says that if a man will not work, the church should not feed him (2 Thess. 3:10). There is no mandate to meet the needs of moochers or of irresponsible people who squander their money and don't have anything left to pay their basic bills. But we are to help those who are weak, that is, who are unable to work because of legitimate health needs or who need help because of unusual trials.

Giving to those in need is the drain plug for greed. If you think that greed is getting a foothold in your life, sit down and figure out what frivolous spending you can eliminate and give it to the Lord's work. Think about what material possessions are clogging your spiritual arteries, and give them to our church missions yard sale. Giving is more a matter of mindset than of amount. Paul was never wealthy, but he demonstrated a lifestyle of giving. It's a matter of disciplining yourself to resist impulse spending and to give off the top because it is your priority. Givers are blessed because they are freed from the destructive sin of greed.

2. Givers are blessed because they are being conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus (20:35b).

As I said, we have no record of Jesus saying these exact words, although there is no reason to doubt that He did so. But we do have record to show that these words are in complete harmony both with His teaching and His example.

For example, Jesus warned, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). The context for that comment was that a young man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13). I would have thought that Jesus would have condemned this young man's greedy brother. But rather, He confronts the greed of the complainer and goes on to tell the parable of the rich man who decided to build bigger barns to hold all of his wealth. But God said, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?" (12:20).

Jesus also said, "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 neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21). You store up treasures in heaven by investing in God's kingdom here below.

Jesus Himself is the embodiment of giving, in that He left the splendor and glory of heaven to come to this earth, not as a mighty king, but as the lowly baby of the stable in Bethlehem. He came to give Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Thus Paul could write, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

I want to make it clear that no amount of giving or self-sacrifice will get you into heaven. Before you can give anything that pleases God, you must first receive God's free gift of eternal life. You must come to God as a poor sinner, unable to pay the debt that you owe, and receive the forgiveness that He has provided freely for you, but at great cost to Himself. Jesus' death is the only satisfaction for our sins before the holy God. He offers this unspeakable gift to everyone who will receive it. Receiving God's salvation in Christ is the starting point for becoming a giver, because it is the starting point of being conformed in your character to the Lord Jesus. Thus if we are becoming givers, although we can never match what Jesus did or even think of paying Him back, we are being more conformed to His image, and we will be blessed.

3. Givers are blessed because they have deep and enduring relationships with others (20:36-38).

Paul had given himself and his material goods to see these men come to Christ and be built up in Christ. They knew that he loved them like no one else had ever loved them. And so when it came time for Paul to depart from them for what they thought would be the last time, they broke out in loud, uncontrollable sobs. They fell on his neck and repeatedly kissed him, as Middle Eastern men do to this day when greeting one another. The scene that Luke portrays here shows the deep mutual love between Paul and these

men. If Paul had been stingy or greedy or had tried to rip them off, this scene would never have taken place.

Ask any person on his deathbed what means the most to him and he will not say, "All of the things that I have accumulated for myself! And my huge bank accounts really mean everything!" Invariably, he will say, "My family and friends that love me mean more than anything else to me right now." And Christians will say, "My hope in the Lord Jesus and His promise of eternal life means everything."

I once read that the late billionaire J. Paul Getty had pay phones installed in his mansion for his house guests to use, because he didn't want to pay for their long distance calls! Needless to say, those guests were not there because of the warm feelings that they had for J. Paul Getty! Stingy, greedy people cut themselves off from close relationships with others. Think of how greed has often divided family members from one another because they think that they are not getting their fair share of the inheritance of a departed "loved one," who was not very loved! Greed destroys close relationships, but givers know the joy of deep and enduring relationships with others.

Givers are invariably people of faith, because you have to trust in God to give away money that you easily could spend on yourself. People of faith are people of prayer, because it is through prayer that we receive from God's bountiful supply. So it was fitting that Paul knelt down with these men and prayed with them before he got on board the ship. He probably prayed that God would keep them from false teachers, that each man would be a godly example to the flock, and that through them the church would be built up and expand all over Asia. And he probably prayed that God would meet their needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). These men grieved at the thought of never seeing Paul again, because they knew that this generous man loved them, and they loved him.

So givers are blessed because they are freed from the destructive sin of greed; they are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ; and, they have deep and enduring relationships with others. But there is a fourth reason that givers are blessed. It is not explicit in our text, although it is implicit here and explicit elsewhere:

4. Givers are blessed because they will reap eternal rewards.

As I said, heaven is *not* the reward for being a giver. Heaven is God's free gift, based on Christ's giving Himself on the cross. But those who have received God's gift of eternal life will reap rewards in heaven in proportion to their stewardship of money in this life. Unlike our investments in this uncertain world, that can be lost in a market crash, our investments in heaven are secure from every source of loss. That's why Paul told Timothy:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

How can you put a price on an investment that yields eternal dividends? If you give to further the Lord's work, you will someday be welcomed into eternal dwellings by many friends who are there because you gave (Luke 16:1-9).

Years ago, a lady was filling a box for missionaries in India. A child came to her door to give her a penny, all that the child had, to be used for the Lord. With this coin, the missionary bought a tract and put it into the box. Eventually, this gospel leaflet came into the hands of a Burmese chief, and God used it to bring him to salvation. The chief told the story of his conversion to his friends, and many of them believed in Christ and threw away their idols. They built a church there, sent out a missionary, and at least 1,500 natives were converted. All this, and probably more, resulted from a little girl's gift of one penny for Jesus ("Our Daily Bread," 12/70).

Conclusion

Almost everyone has heard of and loves O. Henry's short story, "The Gift of the Magi." He tells of a young couple who are very much in love, but very poor. One Christmas Eve, Della wanted to buy a present for her husband, Jim, but she did not have enough money. She wanted to buy him a platinum fob chain for his precious family heirloom pocket watch, the proudest possession he owned. In desperation, she decided to sell her own most proud

possession, her long and beautiful hair. It brought in just enough, and she bought the watch fob. When she got home and looked in the mirror, she was shocked at her appearance. But she thought that it was worth it to get Jim this special present.

When Jim came home, he looked at Della and there was deep, silent shock in his eyes. "Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without buying you a present." Then Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket. He handed it to Della to unwrap. Now it was her turn to be in shock, because inside she found a set of combs for her beautiful hair that she had long admired in a Broadway window. To buy them, Jim had sold his precious watch. Both of them had sacrificed the most precious possession out of love for the other.

Were they foolish? O. Henry concludes, "No, of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. They are the Magi."

His story illustrates the joy and blessing of giving. God has given His own Son so that you might be saved from His judgment. If you have received His gift, He will bless you even more as you become a giver out of love for Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Greed seems to be a sin that few American Christians recognize or confess. How can we be on guard against greed?
2. How can we distinguish one who is truly weak, and thus deserving of our gifts, and one who is not living responsibly?
3. Sometimes giving creates unhealthy dependence in the recipient. How can we avoid this problem?
4. In a world of needs, how can we determine where God wants us to give and how much to give?

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