

STEWARDSHIP SERIES
THE GENEROUS LIFE
(1) THE GRACE OF GENEROSITY

Acts 20:35

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PROLOGUE

During the reign of Oliver Cromwell, the British government began to run low on silver for coins. Cromwell sent his people to the local cathedral to see if they could find any precious metal there. After investigating they reported: "The only silver we can find is in the statues of the saints standing in the corners." To which Cromwell replied: "Good! We'll melt down the saints and put them in circulation!" Chuck Swindoll says that this is still good advice today. In commenting on this incident, he writes:

That brief but direct order states the essence of the practical goal of authentic Christianity. Not rows of silver saints crammed into the corners of cathedrals, but melted saints circulating through the mainstream of humanity (Dallas Theological Seminary "Daily Devotional" for May 30, 2006).

We need circulating saints whose hearts have been melted by the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURE

"In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

God is a gracious, giving God. What do you do more than 25,000 times a day, and yet rarely notice that you are doing it? The answer: You breathe. If you are 40 years old, you have already taken more than 375 million breaths. And each of those breaths was a measured gift from the hand of God. God holds in the divine hand "the life of every living thing, and the breath of all humankind" (Job 12:10).

We are such a dependent people. Our very existence depends upon the grace of God's giving to us the next breath we breathe. The layer of oxygen hugging the surface of the earth is so very thin. Most humans could not survive breathing at 30,000 feet above the earth's surface. Do we think we invented that five miles of oxygen that sustains the entire planet? The very air that we breathe is the gracious gift of God.

God is a giving God. It is against the backdrop of this statement that we remember a saying from Jesus, that could have been lost. That Jesus did and said things not recorded in the four Gospels was the conclusion of the last verse of the Gospel according to John (John 21:25). We owe it to Luke for preserving a quotation from the Lord Jesus in turn spoken by Paul in his farewell message to the elders of the Ephesian church. Paul tells us to remember the words of the Lord Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). That God is the Great Giver highlights and reinforces this statement. Giving is caused by and reflects the grace of God in our lives.

1. IT IS BLESSED TO RECEIVE

The obvious is not always obvious. When Jesus said that it is "better" to be a giver than a receiver, the implication can be overlooked. It is not bad to receive. Indeed, in Jesus' own words, it is "*more* blessed to give." This implies that it is blessed to receive.

God is the Great Giver. James writes, "Every generous act of giving, with every good and perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Everything in life that deserves the name "good" comes from God either directly or indirectly. James insists that God is the Source, the only Source and always the Source of good gifts.

God is a giving God and what God gives is good. Whatever in life deserves the name "good" comes as a gift from God. Whether health and family, work and play, or resting and eating, all of the good things of life come from God.

The late tennis legend Arthur Ashe was a gentleman that inspired millions with his conduct on and off the court. He died with AIDS which he had contracted from a blood transfusion. Obviously Ashe could have become embittered in the face of his terminal illness. He made an incredible statement: "If I asked 'Why me?' about my troubles, I would have to ask 'Why me?' about my blessings." This observation of life reflects rare wisdom.

Insurance companies have traditionally declared a hurricane, flood, earthquake and other calamities "acts of God." Yet why isn't the birth of a baby, the love of a parent, the rainbow after the rain, the crimson sunset over a lake, or the composition of a symphony an act of God? Suppose a neighbor came to your door every day for 30 days and gave you \$100. He insisted that you take it and would not take no for an answer. Then on the 31st day you watched as the neighbor passed by your house and for the first time gave \$100 to the next neighbor. Would you dare open your door and scream, "That's not fair! You cheated me out of my \$100"? Grace is not something we earn or deserve. It is a gift from God.

God is a giving God. A report from the Harvard Center for Population Studies attests to the earth's enormous potential to sustain life. The report estimates that about one-fourth of the ice-free areas of the world can produce food sufficient for 40 billion people. Hunger is the direct result of social and political conflicts as well as a mindset that ignores God's principles for care of the earth and sharing its abundance. Do not lay shortage of food at the feet of God. God made a world of goodness and life.

This is even more the case in the spiritual realm. God gives grace. Grace means “unmerited favor.” The Greek word that is translated "grace" (*charis*, pronounced khar'-ece) indicates everything about an object or person that is winsome and appealing. God's grace indicates God's willingness to give these qualities even to those who because of sin do not deserve his goodness. God has given us the greatest gift of all — his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul tells Timothy that God, “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 1:9 NRSV). John says of Jesus, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16 NRSV). And what better statement of the grace-giving nature of God can be found than this, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16 NRSV). God is a giving God.

If God is a giver, then we must be receivers. Life should be received by us as a gift from God. We are not the beneficiaries of random circumstance. Should we say to ourselves on Thanksgiving Day as a prayer to nihilism, "Thank nothing that out of nothing by a fortuitous combination of atoms I am here today"? That is the equivalent of believing that the unabridged dictionary came as the result of an explosion at a printing plant.

Nor are we the result of our own efforts. You did not begin your own life. I did not create myself. We should receive life as a gift from the hand of God. Every day, in every occasion, and at all times, we should see the goodness of life as a gift from God.

2. IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE

The greater blessedness belongs, however, to those who not only receive but also give. It is more blessed to give. The biblical word "blessed" refers to a kind of joy that is different from what we commonly call happiness. Happiness, you see, is based on circumstance. Therefore, happiness is easily lost.

If you know anything about clown history then you have heard of Grimaldi. Grimaldi was one of the most famous clowns in history. An apocryphal story from the 19th century tells of an extremely sad man who visited the office of a London physician. The man was so despondent that he taxed the training of the doctor. Finally the doctor told the man, "Go see Grimaldi the clown and let him cheer you up!" The patient responded, "But I am

Grimaldi the clown." Grimaldi may have been one of the most famous clowns in history but he often struggled with depression. This is the ironic predicament as it relates to the human search for happiness.

On the other hand, blessedness is a joy not based on circumstance. It flows out of a growing relationship with God. The Hebrew term for this joy is found in the Psalms where it says, "Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers but who delight in ...the Lord" (Psalm 1:1,2 NIV). It has the sense of, "Congratulations, you are on the right track!" The person in Psalm 1 has the right priorities; their destination is assured.

The Greek word for "blessed" (*makarios*) also reflects this joyful dependence upon God. The Greeks called Cyprus the "Blessed Isle" because that island contained everything within its own shores to sustain life. Nothing had to be imported. In fact, the island could export to others out of its own abundance.

The blessed life is the life of abundant generosity. The Latin word from which abundance comes means "wave upon wave." There is a fullness about the life that gives.

Here is the paradox of truth so characteristic of the Bible. The more giving you become the more blessings you receive. But this is not a *quid pro quo* as though if you give money you will receive (more) money back. Rather, you will become a person of more and more abundance in every area of life that really matters. Import the full meaning of the biblical word "blessed" into this text. The life that has endlessly renewed spiritual resources is the life that gives. The life that only takes, grabs, receives and refuses to give is the life that dries up at its very source.

A man and his ten-year-old son were on a fishing trip miles from home. At the boy's insistence, they decided to attend the Sunday worship service at a small rural church. As they walked back to their car after the service, the father complained. "The service was too long," he lamented. "The sermon was boring, and the singing was off key." Finally, the boy said, "Chill out, Dad. I thought it was pretty good deal for only a buck!"

God has carved into the world around us the clear teaching that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The sun is the sun because it gives heat and light. That great atomic reaction in the sun means that it is a living star. If it did not give, it would be a white dwarf — a dead and dark star without light. A tree lives because it gives. In the process of photosynthesis the tree breathes in carbon dioxide and gives off oxygen which supports animal and human life. The ocean lives because it gives. The water of the ocean evaporates and forms clouds. These clouds in turn carry rain to the earth that forms the rivers which replenish the life of the ocean. All of nature lives because it gives.

Jesus espoused the philosophy of life, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." No one in history was more giving than Jesus Christ. He gave up a place in heaven to come to the stable of Bethlehem. He gave up the comforts that even a poor person has in order to be a traveling preacher and healer. At the end, all Jesus had left was a seamless robe. Jesus even gave that up as the cross fell upon him. Finally, Jesus gave life itself on that cross for an undeserving humanity.

The great validation of Jesus' philosophy of life as giving came on the third day of his entombment. God intervened and raised up Jesus Christ from death as a mighty vindication of everything that Jesus did and said. Included in that is the philosophy of Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

No philosophy of life has ever been vindicated like that of Jesus. The same is true of those who followed Jesus. Have you tried the philosophy of life, "It is more blessed to give than receive"? Try it. It is the only instance in which God asks us to put him to the test. "I am the LORD All-Powerful, and I challenge you to put me to the test. Bring the entire ten percent into the storehouse, so there will be food in my house. Then I will open the windows of heaven and flood you with blessing after blessing" (Malachi 3:10 CEV).

CONCLUSION

Researchers have placed goldfish in tight little bowls. For months they swim in small circles. When such fish have been released into a large pond of water, they continue to swim in tight little circles. They do not know that the barrier is gone. How much we are like that. We move in our own tight little circles of getting, keeping, and clutching. In so doing, we miss what the grace of God does in our lives.

When you make the commitment to give to God, to the work of God, and to the kingdom of God, you have the promise of Jesus that your life will become more blessed as you give. You have been given the grace of God in all of life. Let that grace make you a giver.