

God Is For Giving

Texts: 2 Chronicles 31: 2-8; 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15; Luke 21: 1-4; Acts 20:35

Date: 11/10/19

Jesus never said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” It’s not in the Bible!

I read that in a trivia book once, so you know it has to be true!

It was right up there with other things Jesus never said, like “God helps those who help themselves,” (That was Benjamin Franklin) “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones”, (Benjamin Franklin, again!) and “Walking on water is easy if you know where all the fish are.” ... (Okay, I just made that one up!)

It’s true that you won’t find Jesus saying “It is more blessed to give than to receive” in any of the Gospels. You could read through every verse of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to see for yourself, or, if you’re feeling lazy, just check a concordance. It’s not there.

But—and you probably knew a but was coming—that doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t say it. In fact, the Apostle Paul quoted Jesus saying just that according to chapter 20 of the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts 20: 13: “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.’ ”

And it turns out the Acts of the Apostles is in the Bible! Weird, huh? Acts was written by Luke, who also wrote one of the gospels, and you can probably guess which one, but he didn’t include Jesus’ saying there.

What this shows is, first, that the early church, including at least one of the gospel writers, knew some sayings of Jesus that weren’t included in the gospels, and, second, that they need better fact checkers for trivia books!

Okay, so Jesus did say it: It is more blessed to give than to receive. But the next question is, is it true?

Now I want to say it’s true because Jesus said it, but I think we have to admit that it’s not *obviously* true. If it were, there would be no reason for stewardship sermons, and that’s what this is, I’m sorry to tell you!

I mean, for *some* things it’s definitely true. Some things really are better to give than to receive: like, for example, a punch in the face! I’d much rather be on the giving end of that!

Some other things that it's obviously better to give than to receive would include: a speeding ticket, a cold, a failing grade, and a talking to. Better to give than to receive. But for most things? Meh, probably not.

What about money, for example? Not a lot of people out on street corners begging you to take their money, or holding a sign that says, "Great home, good income, please help yourself to five dollars!" But the reverse is certainly true!

How about time? Nope, seems like that's definitely something we never have enough of.

[Make phone sign] "I'd love to volunteer, but it would have to be on Thursday between 1:45 and 2:00 ... No, a.m.!"

Time is hard to come by!

And what about talent? I mean, aren't professional athletes always saying, "Hey, I'm playing a game! I should just give it away. Pay me what a good plumber makes and we'll call it even!"

No, no they're not! If you want their talent, you're going to have to pay for it. Same thing with writers and musicians, designers and perfumers: their talent is protected by copyright laws.

No one gives away anything for free, including free services like Facebook and Twitter. If you're not paying, you're not the customer, you're the product!

But I want to say that in spite of all that, Jesus is still right, it *is* more blessed to give than to receive. I know, you're shocked. Okay, maybe not.

I want to look at three scenes from Scripture to see what they say about giving. Maybe that will help.

Second Chronicles looks promising. Most people are unaware that there's a First Chronicles in the Bible, much less a Second, but here we are. So, anyway, King Hezekiah of Judah suddenly got religion and decided to fix up the Temple of God, and we have a lovely story about how he contributed some of his own goods to restart the morning and evening burnt offerings.

He even ordered the people to give a portion of *their* goods to the priests and the Temple, which they happily did.

How lovely! How noble! How not quite what it seemed! There's more to the story! We have to go back a bit in time to find it.

You might remember, but probably don't, that after King Solomon died around 931BC, his foolish son, Rehoboam, fired all of Solomon's experienced counselors—I guess in one of

history's first attempts to drain the swamp—and hired all of his super self-confident young friends in their place to give him advice from a ‘fresh point of view’.

This worked out so well that the kingdom soon split in two, with the *ten* northern tribes rebelling against Rehoboam and his junior cabinet, choosing their own king and calling themselves Israel, and the remaining *two* southern tribes sticking with Rehoboam and calling themselves Judah.

And the split was still going on more than 200 years later until just before our story about Hezekiah takes place. So we've got Israel in the north, and Hezekiah in the south ruling little rump kingdom of Judah.

Here's the picture: It's just after 721BC, and Sargon II the king of the powerful Assyrian Empire from over Iraq way has just crushed the northern kingdom. That's right, that's it for the north, the end of the split, because the North is, pfft, gone.

Some of the people fled south to Judah, some hid out, but many were taken back to Assyria.

It was about this time that King Hezekiah of the southern kingdom of Judah got religion and started restoring worship in the Temple, as we heard.

He was doing it because the fall of the northern kingdom had scared the bejeebers out of him! He gave to suck up to God so that he wouldn't suffer the same fate! He gave because he was scared and he was trying to buy some insurance with God.

The people gave because they were scared of the Assyrians, and also scared of the king! And just in case the whole God thing didn't work out, they also built a thicker and stronger wall around Jerusalem.

If we were to turn this into a Stewardship slogan, it might be “Give Until The Fear Is Gone!” or maybe “It's better to give than to receive a whupping at the hands of the Assyrians!”

Okay, maybe this isn't what Jesus means: it's better to give than to receive who knows what at the hands of your enemies! I won't try to frighten you into upping your pledges next week, but, hey, did you just read about North Korea? Wow! That's some scary stuff!

Maybe Paul and the Corinthians can help us in scene two. I just love the Corinthians, but what a mess of a church! A man was sleeping with his own step-mother and they did nothing about it! A combination of Harvey Weinstein's Hollywood and Bill O'Reilly's Fox! I mean, Yikes!

At least, that's what Paul said! And it made the Corinthians mad for a while, and that put in jeopardy the collection that Paul was taking up for the poor Christians of the mother church in Jerusalem.

Paul was worried the Corinthians weren't going to give, even after they had eventually come around to Paul's point of view on the whole sleeping with your step-mother thing. So Paul is writing a stewardship letter to them in 2nd Corinthians.

Quick bit of background information: Corinth was home to the Corinthian Games, second only to the Olympic Games for prestige. The Corinthians were very competitive and hated being in second place in anything. Paul uses that to his advantage.

"Hey, look at the Macedonians," Paul says, referring to the Roman Province just north of Greece. "They're like super poor, but they gave a ton, more than they could afford, much more than we ever thought they could give. They exceeded our expectations.

"I'm sending Titus to you to pick up the pledge that you made. Hey, you guys in Corinth are really terrific in everything – no one does it better than you in faith, in speech, in love, and it would be a little embarrassing for everyone if the Macedonians Titus is bringing with him outdid you in giving.

"Think of the headline: rich Corinthians beaten in giving by poor Macedonians! No one wants to see that.

"Oh, and, did I mention to you while I was there that Jesus had the riches of heaven, but became poor for your sake, so that in his earthly poverty, he could make you rich in heavenly blessing?

"I'm not saying you have to give more than you think you can afford—that was something the Macedonians decided to do, but you know, that was them—I'm just saying that you should at least try to be equal with them, it's equality that I'm after.

"Oh, and by the way, I've been telling everyone in Greece how totally awesome and generous you are, and I'd hate for them to think I was, like, lying!"

Paul lays it on pretty thick, and if you think I'm exaggerating, take a look at 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 again after the service. It's all in there!

Paul's stewardship slogan might be: Give More Than The Generous Poor.

It is better to give than to receive humiliation for your chintziness.

I'm pretty sure that Jesus wasn't talking about guilting people into giving, and I won't try to guilt you all, but, hey, did you see what those downtown churches are doing in their ministries? Pretty impressive, to do so much with so little!

Okay, so fear, guilt, not the best motivations for giving, though God accepts the gift no matter what the motivation.

In our third scene, which we didn't read today because we heard it just a few weeks ago, we get a better picture. It's just a poor old widow giving her last penny to the offering plate. It's a picture of complete faith and trust in God. She doesn't have much, but what she does have, she wants to contribute.

What I think the widow gets is that giving to God is a great privilege.

God is omnipotent, all-powerful. If God had wanted to build the kingdom of God all alone, without our help, God could have done it.

It would have been no sweat for God. But then we would have missed out. We wouldn't have the pride of the builder when it was all done.

In the middle ages, it took a hundred years to build a cathedral, but towns still did it and took great pride in the building. They started a project they knew they would never see completed, because it was too big for just one or two generations, but they started anyway, and the next generation took it on to keep it going, until, a century later, it was done.

And when it was done, a family could point to the cathedral and say, "My great-grandfather put that foundation stone in place, my grandmother helped make that tapestry, my father sculpted that saint, and I put in this piece of stained glass."

Each person had only contributed a little to the great and magnificent building, but there was pride there, that they had had a part, that they had played a role in producing this incredible structure.

It's like that with our giving. God doesn't need us to build the kingdom, but God shares the work with us so that when it's all done, when the kingdom of God is complete, we can take pride in what we've done, and say, "I helped build that small corner of God's kingdom over there."

"I shared with that widow, I helped that homeless person find shelter, I was involved with that hurricane rescue, I welcomed that refugee, I funded that third-world business start-up that helped a whole village get a sustainable income, that little girl over there, she had clean water because of the well I built, and that person on the left, I stood by them in the fight for their civil rights, I advocated for sustainable green energy in that county."

In fact, those are all things that we did in this past year through our offerings, and many more! We really made a difference in sharing God's love with the world, in helping God's kingdom to come, in being good stewards over the earth.

The widow's stewardship slogan might be: I give to play my small part in the work of God.

God has given us the great privilege of having a part to play in God's great plan for the world, and giving helps us to play that part.

It's better to give than to receive because giving gives us the pride of the builder when God's kingdom comes in all its completed glory.

There's one final reason why it's more blessed to give than to receive, and that is because in giving, we do what God does, and we become a little more like God whom we love.

God has given us a universe to live in, a planet to dwell on, food to eat and the breath in our lungs to survive. God has given us the Law to guide us, a Savior to redeem us, and the hope of heaven as our eternal home.

God is for giving. And when we give, we are doing what God does, and we make ourselves a little more ready to live with God forever.

So as you are filling out your pledge cards for next week, don't do it out of fear, or envy, or guilt, but do it because you want to put a brick in God's kingdom, and become a little bit more like God.

Jesus is right: It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. Amen