

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 8, 2018

Grace, Not Greed

Acts 20:13-38
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." According to Paul, those words come straight from the mouth of our Lord Jesus. Now don't go flipping through the four Gospels trying to find this verse. It's not there. We're not sure exactly what tradition or source Paul is drawing from when he quotes these words from Jesus. Wherever Paul got this statement, he uses it in this morning's Scripture passage from Acts as a reminder that helping the poor and the powerless isn't a take it or leave it matter for Christians. On the contrary, giving to provide for those in need is a divine necessity.

Remember that the community of Christ's people is a fellowship of believers that makes the kingdom of God visible. And one of the ways God's reign becomes evident in the church is through our giving, our sharing of money and possessions, both within the fellowship and beyond it to the wider world. This means that in our life together as God's people, it's more blessed to give than to get. It's more blessed to hand it over than to hoard it.

This time of the year, many churches might have their own variation on Jesus' statement. Their word to weekly worshipers is, "It is more blessed to give than to receive—and to do so year-round." That's because many congregations experience a "summer slump" in financial contributions. Due to church members being on vacation, traveling more, doing extra things with their families, or for other reasons being less present and involved in the fellowship of believers, giving often declines between May and August. Churches sometimes try to counteract this trend by focusing on generosity during the weeks leading up to the beginning of summer, or by planning special activities or services that will sustain attendance and involvement, or by promoting online and mobile giving.

There are lots of voices making an appeal to church members, seeking a portion of their possessions. This past week, you were probably bombarded by ads and commercials about red, white, and blue sales of various sorts. Everything from cars to cookout supplies was pitched to you with flags waving and patriotic music playing in the background. This time of the year, the prevailing wisdom seems to be, "It's more blessed to arrive early at your local auto dealer than to miss out on prices that are hotter than the summer temperatures."

By now, though, a lot of the Fourth of July spirit has receded, and here we are again this morning, gathered to reaffirm and declare our allegiance to the crucified and risen Lord, whose words run against the grain of our culture's stress on purchasing power. Instead, Jesus says to us, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Jesus reminds us that in the kingdom of God, and in the community of his disciples that makes the kingdom visible, spiritual vitality and growth aren't measured by what we possess but by how we part with our possessions. Remember that in our Scripture passage from Acts, Paul is saying a sad farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, a city where plenty of people valued acquisition and accumulation over acts of generosity. But Paul reminds these church leaders that they belong not just to their municipality but most of all

to the people of God, a community where relationships are more precious than financial assets. This includes how they give in order to provide for the needy among them.

As he says goodbye to the Ephesian elders, Paul knows just when to pull out a quotation from Jesus in order to seal the deal on his stewardship message. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." If we didn't know that these words came from our Lord, you would think that they were composed by a church finance committee just in time for the summer slump.

Too often, we think of stewardship primarily as a matter of giving to the church so that the church can pay its bills. In order to keep going, the church needs many things. It needs prayer. It needs the power of the Holy Spirit. It needs the time and effort of folks who serve in its programs and ministries. But it also needs dollars and cents. And that's where stewardship comes in. We often think that stewardship is primarily about the church's need for financial support.

Now, it's true, the church does need money in order to pay the bills, to fund its ministries, to pay its staff, and to give to the larger work of missions, locally and globally. And as I've noted, this time of the year there's generally a pattern of more money going out than there is coming in. But stewardship is so much more than just giving money to the church so it can pay its bills. According to the word of our Lord, stewardship is about the blessedness of giving. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." I like the way one minister puts it when he says, "Although Jesus talks about money a lot, he never talks about the need of the church *to receive*. Jesus always talks about the need of the giver *to give*. This is the Bible's stewardship message. We who gather in Jesus' name would do well to follow our Lord's lead."¹

Listen to that again. Jesus doesn't talk about the need of the church to receive. He talks about the need of the giver to give. Don't we in the church talk a lot about people needs, your needs, and how to minister to them, how to meet them? The need for salvation, the need for encouragement, the need for healing, the need for comfort, the need for correction, the need for guidance, and on and on the list of needs could go. But what if we added to this list the need to give? In order to cultivate and take care of this need to give, you need the community of Christ's people. You need to be actively participating in a fellowship where giving is expected, encouraged, taught, and blessed.

Giving is blessed, says Jesus. In fact, it's more blessed than receiving. Why? First and foremost, because our relationship with God is grounded in God's giving. Salvation is available to us not because God has received something from us that triggers his love and causes him to reach out to us, but rather because God has first given to us. He gave his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gave himself for us. Without God's giving, there is no redemption, no transformation, no hope. So when you give, financially and otherwise, you imitate God. You reflect God's will toward us. The way of Christ, the pattern of Christ himself, takes shape, gets formed in your own life.

What's more, when you give, you influence others to give. When I was growing up, I never knew specifically how much money my parents were giving to the church, but I do clearly remember my mother sitting down either Saturday night or Sunday morning, week after week after week, to write that check and put it in the offering envelope. Now this doesn't mean we should open the books so that everyone in the church can see how much you're giving to God's work through the church. But it does mean that others witness how much your life is a life of giving, and that helps determine how much their lives will be devoted to giving.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow once worked on a project trying to discover why certain people give of themselves and why other people don't. Why are some people selfish and others aren't? Wuthnow said at first, he thought he was going to find that unselfish people came from good families. But in reality, some of the most selfish people in the world come from good families, and some of the most generous people in the world come from terrible family situations. What Wuthnow ultimately found was that people who give of themselves have themselves experienced someone giving to them, and that experience becomes a story that continually shapes how they give their lives to others.²

As Paul says farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he relies partly on the power of words. He knows that words have the power to shape, to mold, and to determine the pattern of other people's lives. Not just his own words but especially the words of our Lord: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." But Paul also knows that words have limited power and influence unless they're embodied in the day-to-day lives of those who speak them, including himself. In our text, Paul doesn't hesitate to say, "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you . . . (v.18)." Paul isn't being arrogant. He's simple pointing to himself because he believes his own example points to Jesus. And as one preacher has pointed out, Jesus' primary purpose wasn't to convey holy ideas but to create holy people.³ People who think and act differently from the rest of the world. People whose lives are oriented toward assets whose value far exceeds temporary forms of wealth.

Paul even speaks about how the word of God's grace gives us an inheritance worth much more than what's included in anyone's estate plan. One preacher tells about how, in a sermon on hoarding, he pointed out what he considered the foolishness of waiting until we die to give our children their inheritance. He told the congregation:

When we die, our children will be in their 50s or 60s. They likely won't need our money then! And so, until their deaths, they hoard it from our grandchildren.

The time to help our children is when they're young and need the money. Our children will actually benefit from it, and we can hear them thank us instead of wondering if they quietly hope we croak early! And since we can transfer as much as \$10,000 per child annually without the recipients paying taxes on the gift, it's wiser to transfer resources when we're living.

Several weeks after the sermon the pastor received a thank you letter from a young couple whose parents happened to be visiting that weekend. The wife explained that after hearing the sermon her parents had sent her and her brother checks for \$6,000. She wrote, "My brother and I call that the \$6,000 sermon! Please preach more sermons on stewardship—especially when my parents are in town!"⁴

In Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, he says that the preaching of the gospel gives us an inheritance. I believe this isn't just an inheritance to be claimed in the future, though that's part of it, but also a type of asset that's already being distributed to followers of Jesus here in the present. It comes in the form of life with and among God's people, where we can grow in grace and resist the power of greed. To do that, we need to be examples to one another. We need to embody what Jesus says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." We not only need to hear that from one another. We need to see that in one another.

Today's text is sometimes used in ordination services for pastors or other leaders in a congregation. In one denomination's service book, there's a question that's typical for the occasion of ordination: "Will you do your best to pattern your life in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people?"

That's an appropriate question for various aspects of Christian living, including our giving practices. It's a good question for myself as pastor, for our deacons, for our committee chairpeople, and our other organizational leaders. But it's also a good question for all of us. Are you doing your best to pattern your life in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to others? Are you embodying grace, not greed? Since we know that our lives have a shaping influence on those around us, does the way that you handle possessions mold others in the direction of generosity? Do your patterns of spending and consumption, and the management of your income, show that caring for the weak and providing for their needs, are priorities for you? When it comes to your own patterns of financial and material stewardship, does your life show that it's more blessed to give than to receive?

¹ Charles R. Lane, "A Daring Rescue—Reclaiming Stewardship from 'Paying the Bills.'" *The Living Pulpit* (July-September 2006) 10.

² Thomas G. Long, "Preaching from the Present toward the Future." A lecture at Duke Divinity School, October 12, 2004.

³ William Willimon, *Acts. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) n.p.

⁴ Bob Russell, *Leadership* (Fall 2002).