

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 10, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ACTS 20:35

“Remember the words that the Lord Jesus Himself said, ‘There is more happiness in giving than in receiving.’” (Good News Bible)

LIVING GENEROUSLY

Do you really believe that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving? The Bible certainly teaches that happiness is based on living generously. Let me give you some key words from Holy Scripture:

- The word “believe” or “believer” is used 272 times.
- The word “pray” or “prayer” is used 371 times.
- The word “love” or “loving” is used 714 times. And
- The word “give” or “giving” is used 2162 times.

So my question is: Where does the Bible put the most emphasis? It’s pretty obvious that it’s on “giving.” The Bible is a book about giving. This principle of “giving” is not something that’s tacked on to the Christian life. It is the essence of Christian living. Jesus was the ultimate Giver.

Now the Bible says, “Give, and it will be given to you... For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38, Revised Standard Version). “Give, and it will be given to you.” We’ve all heard that. My question is: “If I give, what do I get back?” And that brings me to the first of the two main divisions of the sermon this morning, namely,

I. HOW GIVING BENEFITS MY OWN LIFE

There are, I believe, seven benefits in being a generous person.

1. Giving makes me more like God, because God is a Giver. The Bible says that “God so loved the world that He gave His Only Son...” (John 3:16). Everything you have is a gift from God. Now, you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

Think of those beautiful lines of John Oxenham:

Love ever gives, forgives, outlives,
And ever stands with open hands,
And while it lives, it gives,
For this is love’s prerogative,

To give, and give, and give.

“God is love” (1 John 4:8), and so to be like God, you have to learn to become a giver.

Love is always extravagant in its giving. You remember that day in the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus at Bethany — “Mary took... an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped His feet with her hair” (John 12:3). Do you realize that this phial of perfume represented nearly a whole year’s wages? You see, love never calculates; love never thinks how little it can decently give; love’s one desire is to give to the uttermost limits; and when it has given all it has to give, it still thinks the gift too small.

2. Giving draws me closer to God. The Bible says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Now, where is your heart this morning? It is wherever your treasure is. What is your Treasure? Is it your home, your spouse, your children, your career, your hobby? Where your Treasure is, that’s where your heart is. And every time I give to God, it moves me a little bit closer to Him, because that’s where my Treasure is — in Him. And God is much more interested in developing disciples than He is in raising dollars.

3. Giving is a victory over materialism. There’s a lie that you see constantly on TV. It says that happiness can be purchased. If I just get a certain thing, then I will be happy. Folks, if that were true, then the people with the most would be the happiest. But that’s just not true, is it? You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give. And every time I give, it breaks the grip of that pernicious idea which says, “I’ve got to have more!” Giving is the only antidote I know that successfully combats materialism.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 says, “Command those who are rich in this present world (and that is all of us. If you live in America, you are rich compared to the rest of the world) not to... put their hope in wealth...but to put their hope in God, Who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” (Folks, it’s not wrong to enjoy nice things. But God doesn’t make us prosper so that we spend it all on ourselves.) Paul continues - “Command them... to be generous and willing to share. In this way... they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” You make a life by giving.

I like what John Taylor says in his book, Enough is Enough. He says, “Every Christian family should adopt as its slogan when ‘commercials’ come on TV – ‘Who are you kidding?’” And he says that as a family we should stand up and shout in unison every time a commercial comes on, “All right, kids, get ready, let’s go - ‘Who are you kidding?’” “If you just use this toothpaste, you’ll be successful... If you’ll just get this deodorant, you’ll be sexy... If you just get this product, life will be a breeze...!” “Who are you kidding?” Giving is an antidote to materialism.

Look at Deuteronomy 14:23 (Living Bible): “The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to (what?) put God first in your lives.” That’s why Satan hates Christians who tithe, and that’s why he fights the practice so vigorously.

4. Giving strengthens my faith. God uses dollars to test our faith and to strengthen our faith. God says in Malachi 3:10, “Test Me; try Me; prove Me!” He says, “I dare you! You give

and see if I won't bless you more in return!"

Do you want to prove that there is a God? The Bible says there's only one way to prove God, and that is through giving -- not through the classic philosophical arguments for the existence of God. There's only one argument for God in the Bible, and it's this: "You give, and see if He won't bless you back!" God says, "Test Me in this... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

Giving strengthens my faith. You see, there are lots of promises in the Bible, and there are more promises concerning giving than there are about anything else. And with every promise there is a premise. God says, "You give, and I'll give to you." We often say, "God, You bless me, and then I'll give!" But God says, "No -- you prime the pump. You first!" Why? Because that requires faith. Giving tests my faith and strengthens it. Look at Proverbs 3:9 (Living Bible): "Honor the Lord by giving Him the first part of all your income, and (what?) He will fill your barns..." That is the promise of God.

5. Giving is an investment for eternity. Now, you've heard me say many times that "you can't take it with you." I asked you recently if any of you had ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul! No! You can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead! And you send it on ahead by investing it in people whom you hope to meet there. Jesus said, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:20). How do you do that? 1 Timothy 6:18,19 (Living Bible) tells us, "...Give happily to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given you. By doing this you will be storing up real treasure for yourselves in heaven -- it is the only safe investment for eternity!" Believe me, friends, this is a protected investment, and the dividends are fantastic!

6. Giving blesses me in return. I always get more out of it than I give! Proverbs 22:9 says, "A generous man will himself be blessed." Psalm 112:5-6 says, "Good will come to him who is generous... A righteous man will be remembered forever."

Let me ask you -- When you die, what do you want to be remembered for? Calvin Coolidge said, "No man is ever honored for what he received in life; he is only honored for what he gave." We're not honored for what we get out of life. Lots of people amass enormous fortunes. We're honored for what we give.

Fathers, when you die, are your children going to say, "My Dad was a generous Dad. He was generous with his time, his money, his energy"? Mothers, when you die, will your children say, "My Mom was a generous Mom. If she had it, she gave it"?

The Bible says that we are blessed in return when we're generous toward others. Look at Proverbs 11:25: "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." Have you learned this secret — that whatever you give out is what you're going to get back in life? Have you learned that when you give out criticism, what you're going to get back is criticism? If you give out gossip, you're going to get back gossip about you. But if you give out encouragement, you're going to get encouragement back. It is a law of life that we reap what we sow; and the more we give away, the more we get back in blessings.

7. And finally, giving makes me happy. It is the source of true joy. Remember today's text -- Jesus said, "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving." I'm thankful to say that God has taught me over the years to be a giver. Actually, it's my nature to be selfish. I was an only child, and as I look back, I almost blush with shame as I remember how I hated to share my toys with any other kid! But God is still teaching me to be a giver. Do you know why? Because it feels so good to give! And people who don't know that are people who've never done it. What pure joy you experience when you give to the point of personal sacrifice. And God wants you to enjoy being a generous person.

You see, there are only two types of people in the world -- there are takers and there are givers. And the happy people are those who are generous with their lives. Jesus said, "Lose your life -- give it away - in order to find it!" (See Matthew 10:39). Do you realize that the word "miserable" comes from the same root as the word "miser"? The more I grab on to what I have, the more miserable I become. You remember Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' A Christmas Carol, don't you? When did Scrooge experience real happiness for the first time in his life? -- when he began to give to others -- to little lame "Tiny Tim" and the other members of the Cratchett family, and to his relatives and to the wider community. The generous person is the happy person.

Karl Menninger once said, "Giving is a good criterion of mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill." Isn't that interesting? Look at 1 Chronicles 29:9: "The people rejoiced... for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord..." Do you know why we have a happy church here at Faith? I'll tell you why, if you happen to be a visitor today. This is a giving church! The people in this church are incredibly generous. And as a result, we are a happy church.

Now let me speak to you for a few minutes about

II. HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF GIVING, or

"How to enjoy an offering"! 1 Chronicles 29 is an appropriate passage, because it's the passage that tells how the children of Israel all gave a sacrificial offering to build the Temple in Jerusalem. So it gives us a model of how we should give.

There are, I believe, five ways to enjoy an offering -- five ways to get the most out of giving.

1. Give willingly. Look at 1 Chronicles 29:5. David says, "Now, who is willing to consecrate himself today to the Lord?" And in verse 17 he says, "I know, my God, that You test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly Your people who are here have given to You." He's saying, "Giving is a matter of willingness, not wealth; it's attitude, not amount!"

Now look at 2 Corinthians 8:12: "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." Paul is saying, "It's the

willingness that makes the difference, no matter how small the amount that can be afforded.” Or consider 2 Corinthians 9:7: “Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give (that means, you’ve thought it out and prayed about it) not reluctantly or under compulsion...” God does not believe in pressure giving. You remember that pathetic face and voice on TV — “Folks, if you don’t provide the eight million dollars we need, I just know the Lord is going to take me home!” Come on, Oral, whom are you trying to kid?!

2. Give generously, if you want to be the kind of giver with whom God is pleased. Look at 1 Chronicles 29:2. David says, “With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God.” He says, “I haven’t held anything back.” In verse 3 he says, “In my devotion to the temple of my God I now give my personal treasures... over and above everything I have (already) provided...” Think of that. When we build our church, would you be prepared to donate stocks and bonds, or some property, or a car, or a prized necklace or other jewelry, as a love offering? I believe many of you will; and we’ll be better people as we sacrifice for the Lord. That kind of giving, you see, teaches us the meaning of one very important word -- “Commitment.” You remember the widow’s mite -- she gave all that she had, and Jesus was pleased. It was the attitude, not the amount, that mattered to Him. True Christians regard giving as an opportunity, not an obligation.

Look at 2 Corinthians 8:3,4: “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” Paul is telling the Christians at Corinth how the Macedonian believers had simply emptied their pockets for the work of the Lord.

3. Give joyfully. Look at 2 Corinthians 9:7: “For God loves (what?) a cheerful giver,” and the adjective in Greek is “hilaros,” from which, of course, we get our word “hilarious.” Do you remember dear old Ed Wynn in Mary Poppins? He got to laughing so hilariously that up he went into the air -- and Mary Poppins and the children caught his spirit, and they laughed outrageously, and up they went too! Tell me, are you “hilarious” when you give, or are you glad the choir sings the anthem during the offering to ease the pain?!

Give joyfully! In New Testament times, they got excited when the offering was announced. They were joyful givers because they wanted to be like Jesus. Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Tithe if you love Jesus; anybody can honk!” I love it!

4. Give thankfully. Look at 1 Chronicles 29:13,14: “Now, our God, we give You thanks, and praise Your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand.” That is giving thankfully!

You know, it’s a great privilege to live in America. It is a great privilege to be a part of this church. And with privilege comes responsibility. And God says, “Be thankful in your giving.”

Look at Psalm 116:12: “How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness to me?” You see, giving is an opportunity to give back to God. We say, “God, I realize I wouldn’t even be alive if

it weren't for You. I wouldn't have my health, or my family, or my career. I wouldn't have anything. And God, I just want to give something back." AND every time you give an offering you're saying, "Thank You, Lord. Thank You! I just want You to know that I'm not ungrateful for what You've done for me."

5. Give expectantly. You can't out-give God. Look at 2 Corinthians 9:6: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." Now that's just the principle of farming. A farmer who wants a crop doesn't just sit down and pray about it. He goes out and he scatters some seed. And the amount of seed he scatters determines his harvest. If he scatters a small amount of seed, he gets a small harvest; if he puts down lots of seed, he gets a bumper harvest. And the Bible says that's true in every area of life. You reap in proportion to what you sow. So the question becomes — how big a harvest do I want?

You see, giving is not a debt that we owe, it is a seed that we sow. It is not an obligation primarily, it is an opportunity to build our faith. When I sit down and write a check for my tithe, realizing that that money could go to pay bills, that's a test of my faith! And so I give expectantly.

Some people say, "When I earn more, then maybe I'll consider tithing." And God says, "Whom are you kidding?" God says, "You prime the pump." I believe there are myriads of people in churches across this country who are in financial straits. They can't pay their bills. Their finances are in shambles. And I know that if those people would trust the Lord, and sit down with a godly counselor, and start tithing, within a year to 18 months they would be sailing in smooth financial waters. After all, how can anyone hope to prosper if that person is cheating on God? The Lord says in 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honor Me, I will honor."

God doesn't want equal gifts, but he does want equal sacrifice. What's the starting point? Look at the last verse on your outline - 2 Corinthians 8:5: "They first gave themselves to the Lord." God wants what your money represents -- He wants you. But He doesn't have you unless He's got your money too - unless you say, "Lord, everything belongs to You -- my time, my money, my energy. I'm Yours."

That's what it's all about.

AMEN.