

THE MORE BLESSED WAY"

October 13, 1990

TEXT: Romans 20:35 "In all things I have shown you that one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Not long ago I saw a cartoon in one of my clergy magazines. It showed a minister standing in the pulpit, saying to his congregation, "My job this morning is to preach this sermon. Yours is to listen. Let's hope you don't finish before I do."

I suppose most ministers know that feeling, especially when they are preaching sermons on stewardship. And, after the scripture I just read, most of you have probably guessed that that is what this is. But do not be misled. It is not just a sermon on giving. It is a sermon on living.

In reality, those two are very closely linked, as a lady named Alice Pratt once observed. She wrote, "An ungiving person does not live: he breathes, he eats, he sleeps, he gratifies his needs, but only exists until he has discovered the cleverly interwoven secret of life, giving of oneself." In the words of this morning's scripture: "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (II Corinthians 9:6)

That is the experience of some of the best-known figures in American history. Albert Einstein wrote, "The value of a man should be seen in what he gives and not in what he is able to receive." The famous psychiatrist, Karl Meninger, adds, "Money-giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill."

And J. L. Kraft, who founded the Kraft Cheese Corporation, and gave twenty-five percent of his enormous income to Christian causes, once said, "The only investments I ever made which have paid constantly increasing dividends, is the money I have given to the Lord. Pastors will do their greatest service in leading their men to understand the truth of God concerning the stewardship of time and money."

I would like to believe that Mr. Kraft did not mean the return on giving to God will always be financial. In his case, the financial blessings were there, but I am told that the man who gave money for the founding of Baylor University soon suffered business reverses and lost all of his property.

Some of his friends asked him, "Don't you wish you had the money back that you put into that school?" But he answered, "Not at all. It is all that I have saved. If I had kept that money, I would have lost it too. I am thankful that I gave that building when I did." "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (II Corinthians 9:6)

The best explanation I have ever seen for that was written by a man I know only as "Desert Pete. It is on a scrap of paper mounted behind glass in a store near the California desert. As I heard the story, that paper had once been folded and stuffed into a baking-powder can. Then the can was wired to an old pump on a long and seldom-used trail across the desert. And this is what it said:

"This pump is all right as of June, 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime this pump but not if you drink some first. Pour in about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like anything. You'll git water. The well never has run dry. Have faith. When you get waterd up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete.

"P. S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold. And next time you pray, remember that God is like this pump. He has to be primed. I've given my last dime away a dozen times to prime the pump of my prayer, and I've fed my last beans to a stranger while saying AMEN. It never failed yet to git me an answer. You got to git your heart fixt to give before you can be give to. Pete."

The grammar's not the best in the world, but the theology is pretty good. Old Pete only made one little mistake. It is not God Who has to be primed. We do. As he said, "You got to git your heart fixt to give before you can be give to." God and His grace are like the vast underground supply of water which fed that pump. They never have run dry. But, like the pump, you and I often need to be primed. We have to give of ourselves to make room so we can receive."

And, of course, that assumes that we give willingly. In the 20th chapter of Acts, verse 35, St. Paul writes, "In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Where Paul got that 10th Beatitude we do not know, but his command to remember shows it must have been familiar to those who heard him. And, like Matthew's Beatitudes, it is not really a blessing but a statement of fact. We can try to forget it, we

can rebel against it, but, like the other laws of nature, we can not really defy it; we only illustrate it. The failure of selfish pleasure to satisfy the soul, the weariness which follows self-indulgence, the frustration which comes from powers unused and duties unfulfilled give proof to the wisdom of those words. However the short-run seems, in the long run life is happier when we give than when we receive.

Do you remember O. Henry's famous story, "The Gift of the Magi"? It is about a young couple who are very much in love. They are poor, but they have each other. And each has something very special. For the man, it is his father's watch. For the woman her long and beautiful hair. It is Christmas, and, because they love, they want to give each other something special. So he pawns his cherished watch to buy a set of tortoise shell combs for her hair. And she sells her glorious hair to buy a chain for his precious watch.

I do not know whether "The Gift of the Magi" is read much anymore, but, if it is not, it should be. In this "me-first" age it might sound corny to some. But when I was young it was often read, especially at Christmas-time. And everyone would nod and say, "Yes, that's what love is like."

To some, O. Henry's story might seem ironic; to others even tragic. But it does not seem that way to me. I can easily imagine that young couple laughing and hugging at the knowledge that each had given his or her most precious possessions for the other. And they had done so gladly.

According to Robert Rodenmayer, in his book, Thanks Be to God, "There are three kinds of giving: grudge giving, duty giving, and thanks-giving. Grudge giving says, "I hate to;" duty giving says, "I ought to;" thanksgiving says, "I want to." The first comes from constraint, the second from . . . obligation, the third from a full heart. Nothing much is conveyed in grudge giving since "the gift without the giver is bare." Something more happens in duty giving, but there is no song in it. Thanksgiving is an open gate into the love of God."

That is the kind of giving that brings true happiness. Stewardship is not a Sunday or a program; it is an attitude toward life. Appeals for money can embody some very imaginative methods, but methods of and by themselves get reduced to gimmickry if they are not accompanied and nourished by love and thanks toward God.

As someone once said:

"It's not what you do with a million,
If riches should e'er be your lot,
But what you are doing at present
With the buck-and-a-quarter you've got." (Anonymous)