

In God's Image: The Joy of Generosity

Acts 20:32-35

Sunday, February 8, 2026

Paul was on his way to Jerusalem from the last of his three missionary journeys. The Holy Spirit had informed him that trouble was waiting for him in Jerusalem, so he took time to visit with some of the churches he has started and nurtured. And among those visits was one with the elders of the church in Ephesus. Paul lived, worked, and ministered in Ephesus for two years, the longest time he spent in one place during his entire ministry. So, the Ephesian church had a special place in his heart.

Knowing he wasn't going to see his Ephesian friends again, a big part of his visit with them was giving them advice on how to carry on their ministry for Christ. And, in today's scripture, we see maybe the most important piece of advice he gave them: He reminded them of what Jesus said and lived: it is more blessed to give than to receive.

And the reason this piece of advice was so important should have been obvious to the Ephesian elders. They lived in a fundamentally transactional culture; a culture in which giving was predicated on getting something of equal or greater value back. It was all about the principle of reciprocity. The motto of their culture might well have been, "It is more blessed to receive than to give."

Which could also be the motto of our culture, couldn't it. Like Roman culture, ours is transactional, reciprocal. It's about giving value for value. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

It's the message we are bombarded with 24/7, 365 in our consumer culture (except maybe a couple of hours every few weeks here at church). If we're watching TV, we're hit with it. If we're on social media, we're hit with it. Sometimes it's presented as just a straight-up trade. You need to pay a lot of money for our expensive suits so you can impress people, become more successful, and have people pay you a lot of money.

Often times, however, it presents itself in terms of trading our money for happiness or social status. Here's an example. For some reason, I tend to get a lot of social media ads for *tactical* wallets. Now, until recently, I didn't know such a thing existed. But under the onslaught of these ads, I'm beginning to suspect that the fact I've just got a regular leather wallet makes me a loser. I mean, if I'll just get wallet that can stand a direct hit from a 38 caliber bullet while also doubling as a machete and Firestarter for those times I find myself stranded in the wilderness, not only will I be prepared for anything, but my life will be more fulfilled. And it goes without saying that I'll also be the coolest guy I know and everyone will be envious of me. I will no longer be a leather wallet loser.

And we even see this transactional approach to life in our philanthropy. Have you ever been on a college campus and looked at the buildings? Have you noticed they all have names? I'm pretty sure those aren't just names the university staff thought up. I suspect they might be related to the people who paid for the buildings. Of course, I could be wrong.

What do I get out of it? What's in it for me? That's the question our culture asks. That's the question our culture is doing its best to get us to ask, even when we give.

Of course, as we talked about last week, that isn't the kind of life Jesus lived and taught. Jesus lived differently. He lived generously. He gave of himself. He gave away his time, his attention, his gifts, his very self, expecting nothing in return. And, in doing so, he was a walking, talking, living expression of God's divine love and generosity in action; the love and generosity that every living human being was created to live in as well. He made it clear that following him means living the same way; living into the love and generosity we were created for. Which is why he said, "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

Now, it probably goes without saying that the nature of the blessing we receive is not necessarily going to be kind of blessing our culture puts a ton of value on. Of course, sometimes it might be. It isn't out of the question that if you give a lot of money, you'll receive a lot of financial or reputational or material blessings in return. But if you're giving without thought of reward, that outcome certainly isn't guaranteed. So, what kind of blessings are Jesus and Paul talking about?

Let's look at something Jesus said to his disciples about being blessed. This is from Luke's Gospel, 6:20-23, and it's called the "beatitudes," which means "blessings." Jesus says: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.²² Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.²³ *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.* For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

Jesus starts out by saying that those who are *really* blessed are basically the people whom the culture of his day, as well as ours, would consider cursed: the poor, the hungry, the distraught, the rejected and the marginalized.

Jesus then goes on to declare woes for those whom his culture, and ours, consider blessed: the rich, the well-fed, the happy, the well-connected.

Which, of course, makes no sense to us. But Jesus explains it. He says those who are blessed should rejoice because “great is their reward in heaven,” while those whom he declares to be cursed should enjoy what they’ve got now, because if that’s where they find their value and meaning, that’s all they’re ever going to get.

Now, one way of looking at this is a test of who’s getting into heaven when they die. But I don’t think that’s what he’s talking about. I think he’s talking about what we’re talking about in this sermon series. I think he’s talking about real life, new and abundant life, eternal life. He’s talking about heaven that starts in this life, the moment we say yes to Christ, and continues for eternity.

Those who have next to nothing can find joy in giving themselves to Christ. While those who rely on their wealth, possessions, and power for their happiness will never find that same kind of eternal joy.

And we know this. I shared last week how my first mission trip was a transformative experience because I literally experienced what had before then just been an abstract piece of knowledge: It really IS more blessed to give than to receive. I have rarely in my life felt that kind

of joy and peace. And the times I have, it's been pretty much the same deal: giving myself in some way, whether it's hands-on missions or sharing the financial gifts God has given me.

And my guess is that most of you in this room know what I'm talking about. You've experienced the joy and peace of selflessness, of generosity.

Which raises an interesting question. Once we've experienced that kind of peace and joy, why don't we choose to stay there? Or maybe I should just speak for myself. I experience the new, abundant, eternal life Jesus promises in those times of selfless generosity. And then I find myself once again asking, "what's in it for me.?"

Why do I do that. Why do I so often pull back? And, of course, we all know the answer. It's the reason Paul was visiting those Ephesian elders. It's one of the main reasons I get up here every Sunday. We're all subject to our culture's relentless onslaught of "what's in it for me?" And, unless we're reminded of the alternative Jesus offers, it's so, so easy to slip back into that way of thinking.

So, just as Paul reminded the Ephesian elders, Here's my reminder to you. You might write this down, maybe make a note on your phone with an alarm that goes off once a day ... something to remind you over and over again. It IS more blessed to give than to receive. It's how we were created to live. It's who we were created to be.