

'It is more blessed to give than to receive', Acts 20. 35. Bethesda Meditation. 16th September 2009.

Those of you who were here last Lord's Day evening may recall that Paul Young read the nine so-called 'Beatitudes' recorded in the opening section of Matthew 5. Not counting parallel accounts, the gospels record at least seven other occasions on which the Saviour pronounced beatitudes, either on groups or on individuals.¹

But there is one 'blessedness' of which our Lord spoke while here on earth which is recorded, not in the gospels, but in the Book of Acts. And for the knowledge of this particular 'blessedness' we are indebted to the apostle Paul, whose message to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 Linda and I happened to be reading together on Thursday evening. There Luke records that Paul closed with the appeal, 'remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.

And I note that, in calling on these elders to 'remember' our Lord's words, Paul evidently took it for granted that, although it found no place in the gospel narratives, this specific saying was widely known in the early church.²

'Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. But I would suggest that the saying, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive', represented not only our Lord's words, but that it expressed also the very principle on which the whole of His public ministry was based – if not the whole of His life here on earth.

For example, one conspicuous feature of our Lord's ministry was that, as far as I am aware, He never laid claim to the service of anyone for whom He performed a miracle.

Think for a moment of the children to whom He gave back their health, and, in some cases, their very life. He sought no recompense from either the Syrophenician and her one-time demon possessed daughter,³ or the man at the foot of the so-called Mount of Transfiguration and his one-time demon possessed son.⁴ Nor did He look to 'receive' anything from either Jairus and his one-time deceased daughter,⁵ or the widow of Nain and her one-time deceased son⁶ – of whom (after our Lord had raised him back to life) it is explicitly said that, 'He gave him to his mother'.⁷

But then, I guess, you might have expected this in the case of parents and their children.

Yet neither did our Lord look to 'receive' anything from adults to whom He gave health and well-being. Take just three examples – one each from Matthew chapter 8, Mark chapter 8 and Luke chapter 8.

In order, we think of the leper to whom Jesus 'gave' cleansing, and to whom He said, 'See that you tell no one; but go your way'⁸ ... we think of the blind man of Bethsaida to whom Jesus 'gave' sight, and who, Mark reports, Jesus 'sent ...away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town"⁹ ... and we think of 'Legion' – the demon-possessed man from the country adjacent to Galilee – to whom Jesus 'gave' deliverance and sanity, and who, when the man 'begged Him that he might be with Him', Jesus 'sent ... away, saying, "Return to your own house"¹⁰.

In each and every case, as you might expect, our Lord's actions were perfectly consistent with that which He taught His disciples in Luke 6 verse 35: 'do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return' – 'with no expectation', that is, 'of receiving again'.¹¹

'Remember', Paul said, 'the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. And this morning we remember not only His words, but we remember the One who spoke them – the One who, in practice, knew far more about the blessedness of giving than any other – the One who is Himself the supreme example of selfless giving. And it was, of course, in His passion that His selfless and sacrificial giving reached its climax.

We read that, when instituting what we know as 'the Lord's Supper', 'Jesus took bread, and, blessing it, brake it, and gave it to the disciples'¹² ... 'saying, "This is my body which is given for you"¹³ ... 'and he took a cup, and, blessing it, gave it to them, saying ... "this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins"¹⁴.

And we note that He not only gave both the bread and the cup 'to' them. But He spoke of His body being given 'for' them. And, thank God, not for them only!

We read at the close of Mark 15 of how, in response to the courageous request of Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate 'gave the body (of Jesus) to Joseph'.¹⁵ But we know that our Lord Himself had 'given' that body long before Pilate ever did!

Prophetically, the Saviour had said through Isaiah well over 700 years before, 'I gave my back to the smiters (rendered in the Greek Old Testament 'to the scourges'), and my cheeks to those who pulled out the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting'.¹⁶ Yes, He gave His back to the murderous scourge ... He gave His cheeks to those who tore out His beard ... and He gave His face to the filthy spittle of both the Jewish Council and the soldiers of Pilate.¹⁷ And not only so. For He also gave His head to the 'crown of thorns' – which sharp thorns the same soldiers repeatedly pounded down with the reed-staff they had now taken from His right hand¹⁸ ... He gave His hands and feet to the nails¹⁹ ... and He gave His side to the Roman javelin.²⁰

Well did the poet write :

His holy fingers made the bough
That grew the thorns that pierced His brow;
The nails that pierced His hands were mined
In secret places He designed.
He made the forest whence there sprung
The tree on which His body hung;
He died upon a cross of wood,
Yet made the hill on which it stood.²¹

Yet He 'gave' so much more. For did He not say Himself that 'even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'.²² Yes, the One who said of His 'sheep', 'I give to them eternal life'²³ could do this because He 'gave' His own life for them – and that as 'a ransom'

Indeed, Paul later wrote of 'the man Christ Jesus, who gave *Himself* a ransom'.²⁴ And it goes without saying that in giving Himself He gave everything.

At the outset, we sang a verse of a hymn attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux. In one of his books, when contemplating our Lord's claim to our love, Bernard wrote, 'Could any title be greater than this, that He gave Himself for us unworthy wretches?' No, indeed not.

Earlier I cited two instances where our Lord commanded those He had healed not to publicise the fact. And these were but two cases among many. For our Lord had not come to be a mere Wonder-Worker, and He sought no acclaim or applause from men. He was content, if providence pointed that way, freely to 'give' – and then to pass on, unknown and even unthanked.

Think, for instance, of the lame man at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, who had been an invalid for 38 years, but whom Jesus healed. The gospel tells us that, when the Jews later interrogated him, asking who it was that had told him to take up his mattress and walk, 'the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn' Himself.²⁵

Certainly this man could have sung from his heart the lines of Bryn and Sally Haworth's hymn, 'What kind of love is this? A love I've never known. *I didn't even know His name*. What kind of love is this'.²⁶

The One who had once said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' had given the man strength to walk. How much more has He 'given' us!

Let us respond this morning by joining the multitude of angels around the throne who exclaim, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!'

Footnotes

- ¹ Matt. 11. 6; 13. 16; 16. 17; 25. 34; Luke 11. 28; 12. 37-43; John 20. 29. Compare Luke 6. 20-22. From heaven, He pronounced two further beatitudes; see Rev. 16. 15 and 22. 7.
- ² Our Lord both said and did much more than is recorded in the gospels. Compare the closing words of the last gospel: 'there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written', John 21. 25.
- ³ Matt. 15. 21-28; Mark 7. 25-30.
- ⁴ Matt. 17. 14-18; Mark 9. 17-27.
- ⁵ Matt. 9. 18-26; Mark 5. 22-43; Luke 8. 41-56.
- ⁶ Luke 7. 11-15.
- ⁷ Luke 7. 15.
- ⁸ Matt. 8. 4.
- ⁹ Mark 8. 26.
- ¹⁰ Luke 8. 38-39.
- ¹¹ Luke 6. 35. For this translation of 'apelpizō', see TDNT, volume II, pages 533-534.
- ¹² Matt. 26. 26.
- ¹³ Luke 22. 19.
- ¹⁴ Matt. 26. 27.
- ¹⁵ Mark 15. 45. Note verse 43: 'Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus'.
- ¹⁶ Isa. 50. 6.
- ¹⁷ Matt. 26. 67; 27. 30.
- ¹⁸ Matt. 27. 29-30. The word translated 'struck' is in the imperfect tense.
- ¹⁹ John 19. 18; 20. 25; Psa. 22. 16.
- ²⁰ John 19. 34.
- ²¹ F. W. Pitt, '*Maker of the Universe*'; quoted by Tony Garland in his commentary on the Book of the Revelation (comments on Rev. 1. 18).
- ²² Mark 10. 45.
- ²³ John 10. 28.
- ²⁴ 1 Tim. 2. 5-6.
- ²⁵ John 5. 13.
- ²⁶ Praise! Number 449, verse 1.