

A Bias Toward Generosity

Acts 20:31-35

This past summer I went back to Mississippi to spend some time with my three brothers and their families and our mother. One of the highlights of that trip was a gift from my brother Jeff. He gave each of the brothers a “shaving set” from a company called Harry’s located in New York City. The set contained a handle, two razor blades, and a tube of shaving cream. My little brother only needs to shave about once a week, but for the other three of us shaving is a pretty big deal. It turns out that Harry’s razor blades are amazing. I assumed that they would be outrageously expensive, but it turns out that they are less expensive than the razor blades I normally buy off of eBay. So I ordered some razor blades from Harry’s. A couple weeks later (after my blades had arrived), I received this email:

Hi there,

My name is Katie and I’m a member of the Harry’s team. I just wanted to reach out and say thanks so much for supporting Harry’s.

You are important to us and I am here to personally help you however I can. Please don’t hesitate to reach out with any thoughts or questions about our products (or shaving or life in general.)

Also, if you ever want more blades or shaving cream, I’d be more than happy to take care of that for you. You can just email me back or call me at (888) 212-6855 and I’ll place your order for you. And, of course, you can also always order more on harrys.com.

Thanks again for your support and I hope to speak soon!

All the best,
Katie

I emailed her back and said, “You probably get this a lot, but you’re the first razor blade rep who’s ever ‘reached out’ to me.” She replied, “Yes, I get that a lot.”

One thing that’s obvious about Harry’s is that they value the personal touch. They don’t have to tell you that this is something they value; they exude “personal touch.” That’s a good description of an organization’s values: it’s what they exude.

Like Harry’s and many other organizations and churches, Faith has a number of stated values. Our values describe the type of church we want to be, the types of things we want to exude. One of our values is intentional generosity:

Since God is generous we seek to live out intentional generosity as a way of life. We experience deep joy when we choose to be generous with our material and spiritual resources.

Since God has been so generous to us, we should be generous toward others in a very comprehensive way. We should be generous with our material and spiritual resources. We actually believe that a generous life is a joyful life. Being generous shouldn't deplete you; it should satisfy you.

This morning we're going to consider a passage of Scripture that pushes us toward this type of intentional generosity (Acts 20:31-35). Next week we'll talk specifically about being generous with our financial/material resources.

Why we should be biased toward generosity: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:31-35)

Paul is talking to the elders at Ephesus. He had just challenged them to be good shepherds, guarding the flock of God against dangers. Specifically Paul wanted them to be on guard against people he described as "savage wolves" who would enter in as predators. The very nature of the church as a community that welcomes everybody makes it vulnerable to people who have ulterior motives. Elders (and others) should be alert to this possibility. As well Paul warns against people who surface internally (even fellow elders) who mislead people doctrinally. In light of these dangers, Paul writes:

31 "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

I'm intrigued at Paul's boldness in pointing to himself as an example to follow. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul actually wrote, "Be imitators of me, just as I am of Christ." Here in Acts 20 Paul wants the Ephesian elders to follow his example of serving others. Paul wanted them to remember that "night and day" (i.e., all the time) for three years he "did not cease to admonish each one with tears." Paul expended great spiritual energy in urging them to know and follow Jesus.

In verse 32 Paul expresses his confidence in God's ability to transform their lives through "the word of His grace":

32 "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Back in verses 20 and 27 Paul had reminded them how faithfully he had taught them about God. Here he tells them to continue placing themselves in a position to receive grace from God through His word. In verse 33 he returns to his own example of servanthood.

33 "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. 34 "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me.

Paul hadn't come to Ephesus to **take**; he had come to **give**. Later Paul would write to Timothy (who was a pastor in this same city of Ephesus) that elders who work hard at teaching and preaching should be compensated financially for their service. He quoted from Deuteronomy 25, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (1 Timothy

5:17-28). But Paul's practice as a church-planting missionary was to not take any money from those he was trying to reach. Sometimes Paul would be supported financially by believers in other places (e.g., Phil. 4:15-20; see also 1 Cor. 9:14). In Ephesus he worked as a "tentmaker"; he literally made tents to support himself (see Acts 18:3). Paul never wanted to give the impression that he was using the good news about Jesus for personal profit. In verse 35 Paul spells out exactly what he wanted the Ephesian elders to learn from his example:

35 "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

They may or may not have realized it at the time, but Paul was showing them by his hard work that they "must help the weak." Paul had worked hard relationally as a missionary; Paul also worked hard physically by earning money to support himself and his traveling companions. His mindset was, "I am going to work hard in relationships and I'm going to work hard supporting myself financially so that the Ephesians will be established in the gospel."

The Ephesian elders were supposed to see Paul's example of working hard and conclude, "**We** must help the weak." "Weak" is the opposite of strong. The person who is weak has some type of frailty or deficiency. In the gospels this term is most commonly used to describe someone who is sick; that person is weak physically in some way. In the epistles/letters this term is also used to describe people whose faith is weak (see Romans 14:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 8:11-12).

The Ephesian elders were to imitate Paul's example of hard work by "help[ing] the weak" - whether they were weak physically or economically or spiritually. The church must never give the impression, "Unless you're strong you don't belong here. . . Unless you have everything together and can pull your own weight you need to go somewhere else." No, the church is supposed to treat others the way God has treated us. When we were weak and helpless to do a single thing about our sinful condition, God sent His one and only Son to die for us. Because God has been so generous to us, we are to be generous to others who are weak and helpless.

Paul's example confirms that helping the weak can be strenuous and demanding. He reinforces his example by reminding the Ephesian elders of something Jesus had said: "***It is more blessed to give than to receive.***" This statement isn't found in the gospels, but it is certainly consistent with the way Jesus lived and the things Jesus taught. For example, in Matthew 10:8 Jesus told His disciples (as He sent them out):

8 "Heal *the* sick, raise *the* dead, cleanse *the* lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give."

The disciples were supposed to manifest the power of God to bring about physical and spiritual healing. The guiding principle was, "Since you have freely received from God,

you should freely give to others.” They were to be generous toward others because God had been generous to them.

Jesus said that there is **more blessing** associated with **giving** than receiving. Of course if there are givers, there have to be receivers; and so there’s nothing wrong with receiving. There will be times when you’re the one who is weak; you have a deficiency in your faith or in your finances or in your life personally. In those times you need to receive. There is even blessing in receiving - your needs are met, you experience the care and concern of others, etc. But, Paul says here, there is **more blessing associated with giving**.

The term “blessed” is the same term used in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:4-12); there Jesus describes those upon whom the favor of God rests. Those who are “really well-off in the Kingdom of God” are those who mourn, who are gentle, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. In the same way the favor of God rests upon those who give.

We aren’t told exactly **how** it is more blessed to give than to receive, but the sky is the limit really. The blessing could be in the satisfaction inherent in helping another person. The blessing could be the satisfaction of knowing what Jesus taught in Matthew 6, namely that “your Father in heaven sees” your acts of righteousness (giving to the poor, praying, fasting) and “will reward you.” The blessing could be wrapped up in the security of knowing that God meets the needs of those who are generous to others (Philippians 4:17-19).

Ultimately I think it is more blessed to give than to receive because givers are progressively becoming god-ly (or Christ-like or Spirit-led). There is inherently blessing associated with becoming Godly and Christlike and Spiritual. As believers, we are supposed to declare with our lives, “Jesus was right: it really is more blessed to give than to receive.” Another way to say it is, “Our bias should always be toward generosity.”

In our time remaining I want to talk about different ways that we can embody generosity. This certainly isn’t an exhaustive list; it’s more of a sampling of ways that we can be generous toward others. I hope that these examples spark your imagination and help you envision specific, tangible ways that you can be generous toward others.

Ways we can embody intentional generosity:

Our Speech. Ephesians 4:29 is one of many verses that urges us to be generous in the way we talk with others.

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

Instead of saying things that are “unwholesome” (i.e., “rotten” - words that taste bad as you say them and as others hear them), we’re supposed to speak words of edification

(words that build others up). We're supposed to ponder, "What can I say that will meet the need of the moment?" Much of the time we don't really stop and consider what we say and how we say it. Paul is advocating a very intentional approach to our speech: speaking words that meet the need of the moment. The end result is that our words "give grace to those who hear." People should walk away from a conversation with us having received grace (they should feel like they've just been given a present).

We're supposed to be people who **give** with our words instead of **take**. We all have seasons in our lives when our emotional/spiritual tank is empty and we just don't have much to give others. But generally speaking, we should seek to give grace through our words. Of course it's not merely a matter of mouthing different words; it's a matter of actually being more compassionate. Jesus said that "the mouth speaks from that which fills our hearts." If our hearts are full of compassion for others, it will show up in our words. People will experience us as generous in the things we say.

Our Relationships within the body of Christ. Think about the type of generosity that is needed in our relationships within the body of Christ. Think, for example, about the "one-anothers" of Scripture: love one another, forgive each other, pray for one another, admonish one another, etc. Unless you have a bias toward generosity you won't do those things. Consider Galatians 6:2:

2 Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

In the previous verse (6:1) Paul spoke about helping restore the person who is entrapped in some sin; he says that those who are spiritual (led by the Spirit) are to do this with gentleness. This ministry of helping others with their sin is a core way that we as believers "bear one another's burdens." In this metaphor, sin is a burden that the person doesn't have the strength to carry alone. If you've ever been involved in helping someone else deal with his/her sin, you know that it can be burdensome; your load would be lighter if you didn't get involved. But you care too much to keep your distance and just hope things work out okay. It's an act of generosity to bear others' burdens.

We certainly need discernment in relationships; we have a finite amount of time and energy to invest in the "one others." But our bias should be toward generosity instead of stinginess.

Our Relationships outside the body of Christ. (Titus 3:14) When we introduced our Love Manhattan effort last month we considered Titus 3:14.

14 Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

Instead of being concerned only about ourselves, we need to learn how to engage in good deeds. The goal isn't to "get busy doing something"; the goal is to meet pressing needs around us. This would include needs both inside and outside of the body of Christ. In this way we learn how to be fruitful.

We hope that the Love Manhattan effort stimulates this type of generosity toward our city. We agree with the perspective that says, “We don’t merely want to be the best church *in* our city; we want to be the best church we can be *for* our city.” We want to demonstrate with our words and with our actions that it really is more blessed to give than to receive. Stop by the Love Manhattan table in the foyer if you want some ideas for joining others at Faith are already seeking to show generosity to others in our city.

Our Money and Possessions. (1 Timothy 6:18) Not surprisingly, the Scriptures urge us to be generous in financial giving. We’ll talk more about this next week, but today let’s simply consider 1 Timothy 6:18. Paul is telling Timothy what he needs to impress upon those who are “rich in this present world.”

18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.

When it comes to our good deeds and our money and possessions, we are to have a bias toward generosity. Instead holding onto as much as possible, we’ll seek God about how to give as much as possible - to those in need and to the cause of Christ.

Concluding thought: Everybody agrees - in theory - that we should be generous people. I don’t know anybody who would say, “God is pleased when we’re stingy and tight-fisted and selfish.” We’d all say, “Since God has been so generous to us, we should be generous to others.” In theory generosity makes great sense. But in practice, I find that actually being generous is very complicated.

I find when I’m not walking closely with Jesus, generosity is incredibly difficult. Being generous with my words and actions seems unreasonable. I can think of a dozen reasons why I shouldn’t be generous towards others with my words or my actions or my money. When I’m not walking closely with Jesus, I am apt to compare myself to others (“I’m certainly more generous than him/her!”) instead of seeking to hear from God about ways to be generous. When I’m not walking closely with Jesus if I were honest I’d have to say, “It is more burdensome to give than to receive.”

But I also find that when I’m walking closely with Jesus, keeping in step with the Spirit, being generous to others seems like an obvious way to live my life. Many times generosity just flows. If we want to exude generosity, the best thing we can do is walk closely with Jesus. As we walk closely with Jesus, we’ll be humbled by the generosity God has shown us, and we’ll turn around and show the same to others.