

Acts 20:35 – Excel in the Grace of Giving: More Blessed to Give

**In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”**

A custom which has become a part of today’s society started with a small China cup sitting on the counter of a butcher shop in England in the mid-1500’s. On the cup were printed in capital letters the initials T.I.P.S., the abbreviation for the words “To insure prompt service”. The obvious message was that, if you wanted to be waited on before others who were also waiting in line, you made a contribution in the cup to assure prompt attention and service.

For those who lived during the Depression of the 30’s when people could scarcely afford food, let alone tips, and for those who have witnessed the gradual increase in the amount of tips expected from five to ten percent, from ten to 15 percent, and now 20 percent in most places, the original meaning of tips to reward prompt, efficient, and courteous service has been obscured by the modern custom of having the gratuity already attached to the check, regardless of the kind of service you received!

We regularly compute, down to the penny, the expected tip to leave on the table for a waiter or waitress who spends less time than two minutes writing down our orders, serving our food, filling our water glasses or coffee cups, and bringing our checks—someone we have probably never met, do not know, have never even seen before and will seldom, if ever, see again—but we would be ashamed of ourselves and feel cheap if we did not tip the customary 15 to 20 percent for a total stranger! Yet, we would wince at the painful thought of contributing the same percentage of our income to our God Who gives it all to us in the first place!

Fortunately, our God doesn’t give in percentages! Only 20 percent of His sunshine, 30 percent of the air we breathe, 40 percent of our daily bread, and only 50 percent of His love! God continues to give outrageously, extravagantly, generously. Giving is God’s way of loving. He gives us everything we have—and everything He gave us He gives: the sun, the stars, the sky the birds and beasts and blossoms and butterflies. All were created to give light, heat, food, or decorative beauty.

Giving is Christ’s way of living. By His lowly birth in poverty and His lonely death in agony, He opens the treasure stores of Heaven! Eternal love swathed in infant flesh! Eternal life purchased with innocent blood! By His devoted life of labor among the diseased and the distressed and the despairing, He gave the warmth of His compassion, the comfort of His companionship, the assurance of His forgiveness, the ceaseless care of His concern. By His teaching of eternal truths, He gives inspiration to the soul, wings to faith, joy in sadness, hope in despair, comfort in grief, peace amid pain, strength in weakness, rest in weariness. By His death and resurrection He gives meaning and purpose to life, pardon for sins, life for death, everlasting rest for earthly tears and turmoil. And through His Church He gives the fellowship of saints, the sympathy and support of shared burdens, the unity of spirit, the privilege of service, the harmony of love, the oneness of faith.

Motivated by Christ’s love, our motive for serving our Lord in our stewardship of life through commitment, service, and obedience shows love and gratitude to God for all His gifts, especially the gift of His only begotten Son!

When winter gives way to warmer weather and spring buds and blooms burst forth all around us, the annual urge to dig in the soil and sow seeds and set out plants brings us outdoors to marvel again at nature’s unfolding mysteries of new life encapsulated in tiny, tiny seeds. We can readily picture the farmers following their ribboned furrows, preparing the seed beds, making it possible for new life to begin.

But suppose one plump kernel of grain in the grain bin should say to itself at seeding time, “No way! None of this self-sacrifice for me! I refuse to lie in the cold ground and die!” So it silently slips through a crack in the granary floor and settles itself on a dry sill, safely hidden away. Soon there are noises in the grain bin above as seeds are scooped into sacks and hauled to the fields and sown in the soil. In three days time, those tiny seeds swell, and, from their bursting shells, green sprouts appear and thrust their way upward through the soil toward the sun. Back in the granary, how safe that solitary kernel must feel, resting snugly on its dry sill, saved from the grave. But out in the field, on any summer’s day, there is a waving sea of green heads rippling in the wind, chasing the shadow of clouds to the horizon, where once there had been a graveyard of decaying seeds. At harvest time, in a dark corner

beneath the bin, the one kernel that had slipped out of sight is no longer plump and safe. Now it is only a dry husk caught in a cobweb, a hollow shell mildewed and lifeless in its musty grave of selfishness and idleness!

This is God's law of the soil—seeds must die to live, to give new life, to produce the fruits of harvest. This is God's law of the soul: souls must die to sin and self and become alive again in Jesus Christ through faith and love! This is what Jesus meant when He said, **"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."**

To give is to live. To receive only, to hoard and to hold, to be a taker, is to die. Why would anyone choose this path? Many have, even in Christ's day. There were those who took the loaves and the fish and filled their stomachs. There were ten lepers who took Jesus' healing, but only one who came back to give his thanks. Sadly Jesus asked, **"Where are the other nine?"** There were the soldiers at the cross who took Jesus' robe and gambled to see who would own it. All they gave the dying Savior were jeers and sour wine.

We look around us today and see that our selfish natures are still with us. Our giving often hinges upon what we can get in return, whether it's power, praise, or just the good will of the recipient. Our excuses haven't changed much either. We have unexpected expenses. We just have to have a bigger house. The church shouldn't be asking us for money, anyway. What I do with my money is my business! And Jesus, who gave His life for us, is lost among our excuses. His words, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive,"** fall on deaf ears, and, in our hoarding of our money, we miss out on the blessings that God would love to give us.

The crosses in our churches portray the poignant truth that it is precisely at that point in our lives where the Cross of Jesus Christ intersects our self-centeredness and where His unmerited grace overcomes our reluctance to live and to give for others that the miracle of new life occurs! By His grace, we begin giving not just what we are and have—that's all His anyway—but we begin giving God everything in life along with our lives—everything! Yesterday's troubles, today's tensions and trials, tomorrow's uncertainties—all are God's.

It is a paradox that we can begin to give only after we've received. We must take all that Christ offers us, just like the tax collector and the thief on the cross. We must come in humility with repentant hearts. We must take the forgiveness of sins He won for us and, with it, the peace, joy, strength, and courage to give back in response for all we have received.

That's what Paul really wanted out of life—to be able to give and go on giving right down to his last breath. He didn't ask for currency or clothing, he declined a regular salary, he spent many a midnight stitching tents for his own support, simply because he lived down to the last letter his Lord's lesson on love: **"It is more blessed to give than to receive!"**

In prison, awaiting the trial that would close his long career, Paul had a chance to change his mind about sacrificial giving, to rewrite the script, to go sour on God. Now that the stark shadow of prison bars was falling across his manuscripts, he had time to think back across the years of pain and persecution as an apostle, and, for a moment, it sounds as if he might crack under the strain.

Here's his account of what life had dealt him: **"Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."** So what now, Paul? A confession of defeat? Bitter regrets over a wasted life as a penniless ambassador of Christ when he might have been a wealthy and highly respected Pharisee?

Never! From his lonely cell, with life's remaining days measured in fleeting hours, with death leering over his shoulder, Paul flings his challenge of faith full into the face of death with these fearless words of life: **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."**

Once we have received from the Lord Jesus Christ, nothing else satisfies. The riches, power, and status we can accumulate in life pale in comparison to the riches that Christ offers. We no longer will need to be asked to give or reminded to share. Once we have received from Jesus, our thinking changes. We reason, "My Savior loves me! I love Him! Everything I am and have and hope to be is His. He gave purely out of love for me. Now I want to give back to Him. He has saved me. He has redeemed me. He has loved me unto death. I must do something for Him!"

With a Lord like that to live for and to give for—we never really die!