

The Forgotten Beatitude

ACTS 20:32-35 • PART 1

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It is good to be together this morning! After we look at the word of God, John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Lord's Supper, so let's be sure we are ready for that. The elements for the Supper are on the table in the entryway. You might have noticed that we had to go with a smaller table last week. We had the windows open all through the winter last year, so we actually wore our coats during worship. Now, though, Gary has us set up with these HEPA filters, allowing us to close the windows, but that means we need to have a place to hang our coats – which is right on top of where we had been keeping the Lord's Supper. That change represents a bit of progress, I suppose. I am thankful we no longer need to bundle up in here, I no longer see my breath as I preach, and I can feel my fingers again! Following the Lord's Supper, Michael/Caleb will be leading us in three songs before we dismiss [for class]. And if you are visiting with us today, we hope you will fill out a visitor card, online if you can, by following the QR code on the wall up here, on the bulletin board, and also on the front of the bulletin. We would love to hear from you in that way.

As we get started, I'd like to give the reminder that we are once again collecting commodities for Shults-Lewis Child & Family Services down in Valparaiso, Indiana. Shults-Lewis is a residential treatment facility for struggling teens and their families. We have done this many years, and this year they are asking us to collect canned soup. We also continue to collect old cell phones, used toner and inkjet cartridges, and we are also collecting funds for their "perishables" (milk, and meat, and so on). If you get cash or a check to me (written out to Shults-Lewis), I will be glad to pass that along when someone from Shults-Lewis stops by during the week of December 5. If you can bring soup, that can be placed on the table up here.

Before we get to our text for today, we do want to make sure we invite you to obey the gospel if you have not done so already. We have sinned, but in his great love and mercy, God made a way for us to come back. He sent his only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. In response, we believe the message, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism.

And once again, we do have several examples. Last week, one of our guests said that she really appreciated seeing the pictures of the baptisms, that it helped her feel connected to her new brothers and sisters around the world. So, we start today with an update from Jake Sutton, a friend who preaches at the Piedmont Road congregation down in Marietta, Georgia. He says, "I love a wet sleeve at night!" Talking about "wet sleeves" is

something of a code for preachers. If I go home with “wet sleeves,” somebody has obeyed the gospel! Jake says, “Welcome your new brother, Bill Snellgrove. He was just baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of his sins and added to the body of Christ. His sweet wife Donna is now his sweet sister.” If you are here today or joining us online, and if your spouse has obeyed the gospel, but you haven’t, we would invite you to investigate and to study and to take that step yourself. Let me know if I can help in some way.

The next update comes to us from Tyler Gilreath, from the Gulf Shores congregation down in Alabama. Tyler simply says, “Praise God for Anique’s decision to be baptized into Jesus Christ!” That’s all we know, but we are thrilled for Anique and for her new Christian family down in Alabama.

And then we have an interesting update from Cody Bradford down in Perryville, Arkansas, as he says,

Late Wednesday Night I got a phone call from Alex Crowder. He said he got a call from his son, that Will wants to meet at the Church building, and before Alex could get anything else out, I jumped out of my chair and yelled, “YES!” right in his ear. The dogs jumped up and started howling, Ali jumped up worried and my question was, “Can I come join y’all?”

That night I had the privilege of watching my friend William Crowder die. You read that right. I watched my friend die. He was buried with Christ. You see that is what happens at baptism. You’re watching a death. You’re watching someone give up their life, goals, dreams, will, and ambitions to pick up God’s. You’re watching them, as they’re being dunked in water, be washed by the blood of the lamb, Jesus Christ. Then, when you see them come out of the water you’re seeing a resurrection, of a new sanctified person. So, while I watched my friend die I also watched him become resurrected as a new creation, saved. When he came out of the water, he was not just my friend anymore, he is my brother, and we have a fellowship that is deeper than we ever had before. Our fellowship is with Jesus.

Why so late at night? My brother Will Crowder knows why: because baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is when we enter the Church (Acts 2:46-47). Baptism is when we have our sins washed away (Acts 22:16). Baptism is when we receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). Baptism is when we are buried with Christ and brought up in in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1-7). Will knew he couldn’t wait because these things are too important to miss out on any longer. Why do you delay?

Amen to all of this! We are thrilled at Will’s decision, and we would invite you to take the same step today. Do not leave this building without doing everything you know God requires. Pull me aside after worship or get in touch with any of our shepherds. Our contact information is always on the front of the bulletin each week (on the wall right inside the front door).

This morning (and next Sunday), I would invite you to meet me in Acts 20 as we study what has sometimes been referred to as “the Forgotten Beatitude” (in Acts 20). We just briefly looked at this on a Wednesday evening a few weeks ago, as we’ve been making our way through the book of Acts. And when we came to this verse, I said I’d like to look at it in greater detail in sermon form at some point in the future. The future is now!

As most of us know, a “beatitude” is a statement of blessing, and it often goes back to a Latin word that refers to being “happy.” We have a number of beatitudes in the Bible. We think of the opening words of the book of

Psalms, in Psalm 1:1-2, ***“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”*** So, if we’d like to be happy in this life, we don’t listen to advice from those who are wicked, we don’t hang out with those who are bitter, and so on, but we delight in the Law of the Lord.

In the New Testament, Jesus gives a series of eight beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew 5), ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth,”*** and so on. He gives us seven more, scattered throughout the book of Revelation, starting in Revelation 1:3, where he says, ***“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”***

Most of these are familiar to us, but we do have one that is often overlooked, and it is found in Acts 20. Just to give a bit of background on this one, Paul is on his Third Missionary Journey. He spends three years in Ephesus, but then he keeps going, traveling through Greece to pick up famine relief to take back to Jerusalem, and on his way back, he stops at the port city of Miletus, and as he is there, he calls for the elders from the church in Ephesus, to come meet him on the beach. This is the ancient version of a layover. If you’ve ever been stuck in an airport for a few hours, but you are in a hurry to get somewhere, that’s what’s going on with Paul right here. There’s not enough time to go anywhere without missing the boat, but there’s just enough time to send a messenger up to Ephesus to send for the elders to have a quick meeting on the beach. He encourages these men to stay strong as they shepherd the church of God, and then toward the end of this passage, he reminisces for a bit as he gives some encouragement based on the time he spent in Ephesus.

This brings us to Acts 20:32-35. We have Paul and his traveling companions, standing together on the beach, waves rolling in behind them, a ship anchored briefly nearby, and he closes his comments with these words in Acts 20:32-35,

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. 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. 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.’”

As we look at that last statement, we find that it is a “beatitude,” isn’t it? Jesus uses the word ***“blessed,”*** referring to something that is “happy.” If you’d like to be happy in life, this right here is fairly important. This is one key to happiness. But what is especially unusual about this beatitude is that it is only found here, in the book of Acts. We don’t find this in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. And that’s a bit unusual. We normally think of the words of Jesus as being in the four gospel accounts. If you have a “red-letter edition” of the Bible, you might notice that the words of Jesus are in red in this passage. We normally find those red words in the gospel accounts, but here we have a bit of red right in the middle of the book of Acts. And what is also unusual is that Paul seems to assume that these men have already heard this statement as having been attributed to the Lord. Notice: He says that they are to ***“remember the words of the Lord Jesus.”*** So, this isn’t new information, but this is a reminder. Based on our study of Acts, this takes place at some point around 57 AD. Jesus died back in 30 AD. I’m not really good at math, but I think that’s a gap of about 27 years. For us, that would be like remembering something somebody said back in 1994. I mention this to suggest that this seems to be something of an oral

tradition. I would also point out that most of the gospel accounts hadn't even been written yet, with the possible exception of Mark. Mark was perhaps written at some point in the 50's, Matthew and Luke were most likely written in the 60's, with John not being written until perhaps the 90's. This statement, then, is one of the first written records of anything actually spoken by the Lord. Paul knew it, and these elders knew it.

When did Jesus say this? Why did he say this? What were the circumstances of Jesus saying this? We don't know, do we? Some have suggested that Jesus said this at the feeding of the 5,000, when the little boy offered up the five loaves of bread and two fish. We can almost hear Jesus saying on that occasion, ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive."*** Ultimately, though, we don't know. We do know, though, that Jesus said it.

Before we really dive in, I also hope we notice the context here. As I was studying, I noticed that many lessons focused in only on verse 35, and really, only on the last few words of verse 35, only on the beatitude itself, as if the rest of this didn't really exist. For our study, though, I started back in verse 32 to give us some context. Many have yanked this out of its context, and many use this exclusively to try to beef up the contribution at church, "We need a new church building, so please turn with me to Acts 20:35." No! And yet, their application is: Put more in the collection basket, and God will make you happy. Well, that might be true, and that might be ONE application of this passage, but as we look at the whole paragraph, this (in no way) is all of it! This is not primarily about the weekly collection. But in context, this is Paul using his own example of hard work and earning a living to help the weak, and he is using this example to encourage the elders to do the same. At the beginning of verse 35, by the way, when Paul says that ***"In everything I showed you,"*** he uses a word that means "to show secretly, to show by tracing out, to teach, to make known." It goes back to a compound word meaning "to show under." Today, we might think about tracing something. Or we might think of being in kindergarten or first grade where we have the letters with the dotted lines. Remember that? The teacher "shows" us what to write. This is what Paul says here, ***"In everything I SHOWED you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak."*** I have given you the dotted lines. I have given you an example to trace. And in this sense, it is certainly ***"more blessed to give than to receive."*** Paul has demonstrated this.

And to me, we seem to have a parallel passage over in Ephesians 4:28, written to this same congregation, where Paul says, ***"He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need."*** That is the main point of this passage: When we help those in need, God has a way of blessing us and taking care of us, and there is a sense of happiness that goes along with helping others. So, I just want us to keep the context in mind as we focus in on the blessing itself. I know we've had quite a bit of background material here, but today and then next week, I'd like for us to notice two big ideas in this passage, followed by several very practical applications.

I. **But let's start today by looking at the blessing again and noticing that there is some BLESSING IN RECEIVING – IT IS BLESSED TO RECEIVE.**

Now, I certainly don't want to undermine or dismiss the Lord's point that it is MORE blessed to give than to receive, but by using the word ***"more,"*** he is making a comparison, isn't he? He's not saying that it good to give and bad to receive, but there is a blessing to both. Both can make you happy! And this is where we do need to admit that there is a blessing in receiving. I like receiving gifts. Don't you? I love being on the receiving end of a thoughtful gift. A week or two ago, one of our members gave me a sticker to put on the wall. The sticker says, "Wash your hands and say your prayers, because Jesus and germs are everywhere." Isn't that awesome! This has "me" written all over it! I'm still not sure exactly where to put it. But what a thoughtful gift! I'm guessing she was out and around somewhere, saw this, and thought of me. I love Jesus and hate germs. This is perfect.

But it feels good to be remembered. Several years ago, one of the young women of the church gave me a sticker that said, “Yay! Snow!” That also, is perfect. When I switched cars last month, I carefully peeled it off the old car, and it is now proudly displayed out in our garage. I think of the artwork from kids here at church through the years. I have some artwork from Carson hanging up in my office, probably going back fifteen years or more. It feels good to be remembered. It feels good to be on the receiving end of a thoughtful gift, doesn’t it?

And what is true of stickers and artwork is also true of financial help. Many times, we (as a congregation and as individuals) have been able to help some of our own members who’ve been in some tough situations – illnesses, surgeries, accidents, house fires, unemployment, and on and on. We’ve helped with cash, we’ve helped with food, we’ve helped with clothing, we’ve helped with furniture, we’ve helped with the gift of time (even volunteering to help build a house on one occasion). And yes, we are blessed for doing that, but there is also a blessing for being on the receiving end. And I say this to emphasize: It is not necessarily a sin to need help! It is not necessarily a sin to lose your job or to lose your car in an accident. It’s not a sin to have surgery. It is not a sin to have your house destroyed by a fire or a flood. But instead: There is at least some blessing (some happiness) in being on the receiving end of a gift.

But here’s a danger: We sometimes pride ourselves on being completely self-sufficient. I don’t need help (even when I really do)! And so, we turn it down, or we don’t ask when we need it. But maybe we can think about it this way: If all of us are too proud to ask for or to receive help when it’s needed, how will the rest of us ever be blessed by giving? By receiving, aren’t we allowing others to be blessed? If it is truly **“more blessed to give than to receive,”** doesn’t that require that somebody be on the receiving end? I would suggest, then, that if somebody notices that you are going through a rough patch in life, and if somebody offers to drop off a lasagna, take the lasagna! It’s easy for us to say, “Oh, no, I can’t take that,” or, “You really shouldn’t have,” and then turn down the gift or the help, but by turning it down, aren’t we perhaps robbing somebody of the opportunity of being blessed themselves? There are times, then, when we might need to give somebody the blessing of giving by us learning to be gracious receivers.

I think of how hard it is to receive a compliment sometimes. Somebody says, “Oh, that was a great whatever,” and we might say, “Oh, I’m terrible at that, whatever I did was just awful,” and on and on. But what are we saying? Have we thought about that? Aren’t we saying that the person giving the compliment has terrible judgment? So, instead of receiving the compliment as it was intended, we’ve practically returned it as an insult. I certainly haven’t mastered the art of receiving a compliment, but it seems like there are times when we might just need to say, “Thank you! I appreciate that!” Let us allow the other person to experience the blessing of giving – whether it’s a compliment, or a meal, or paying my utilities for the month.

And we can receive, knowing that we are allowing the other person to have the greater blessing by giving. And this reminds us: Jesus is not making a contrast between a good thing and a bad thing (giving and receiving), it’s he’s not saying that one will make you happy and the other will make you sad, but he is suggesting that there is a blessing in both. Both will make you happy, but there is even more of a blessing in one than the other. One author pictured this on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being sad and 10 being happy. Giving is a 10 and receiving is maybe a 7 or an 8. And I appreciate the picture. It’s not that receiving a gift is terrible, but there is a blessing to it. Both are good, but giving is even better. He uses the word **“more.”** As Jesus says, **“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”**

Conclusion:

This brings us to a good place to pause. Lord willing, I hope we can come back together next week to look at the rest of this beatitude, the giving part of it! And then we will also look at some practical applications of this passage. For now, though, we have looked at the fact that there is a blessing to receiving. And the practical application today is that if somebody wants to help us in some way, if somebody wants to do something nice for us, let's do everything possible to let them do it, and let us accept the gift graciously and with appreciation, knowing that what the Lord says here is true: There is a blessing in receiving.

And this reminds us: Most of us here today are here because somebody took the time to give us the gift of knowledge. Somebody taught us the gospel. We were on the receiving end of that. We think of what Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica, in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, when he said, ***"For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."*** When some teach, others receive what is taught. Most of us have been on the receiving end of the gospel, and we are eternally thankful for that blessing.

With this in mind, before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are a God who gives, and we are eternally thankful for the gift of your Son, for the gift of salvation. We are thankful to be recipients of that gift. We pray that we would receive this gift and treasure it, with the utmost of humility and with the deepest appreciation.

Thank you, Father! We come to you this morning in the name of Jesus, who gave his life for us.
AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com