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IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE

By D.B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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We all know the famous beatitudes of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, such as "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven". But there is one beatitude of Jesus which is unique in that it is not recorded in the gospels. It is found at the end of St. Paul's address to the ministers of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20, when he concludes by saying "remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said "It is more blessed to give than to receive" or as the modern translation puts it "Happiness consists more in giving than in receiving". This sentence is a reversal of what we normally think. We have only to remember our childhood, how exciting is the prospect of a birthday because of what we are going to receive, or how exciting is Christmas because of Christmas presents. Even when we are grown up the same attitude dominates our life and our activities. We believe that happiness lies in getting things. The whole business world and the whole trade union movement is geared these days to this objective; receiving rather than giving - that is where we believe happiness to lie.

But Jesus says the exact opposite. Happiness is to be found in giving rather than receiving. We Christians may give a sort of notional consent to this, but to what extent are we experiencing this happiness, this blessedness? Abraham was a man who practised the concept of giving rather than receiving. You will remember how he allowed his nephew Lot to have the choice of what part of the country he should graze his flocks. Lot chose the luscious pastures of the valley and left Abraham with the aridness of the hilltops ; and Melchizedek, the priest of God, he gave a tenth of all his possessions and he gave back to the King of Sodom everything he had captured. God's character is distinguished by giving. Creation is a gracious gift; that we are alive at all is God's generosity; He gives to us life and breath and all things readily to enjoy. He gives us what we need day by day. He gave his people in Old Testament times the Land of Promise. He gives us, under the New Testament, every spiritual blessing.

If we look up in a Bible concordance the number of times the word "give" occurs in Scripture we will be surprised how frequently the term is used and how frequently God is the

subject of the verb, because God's character is that of a giving God. Most noteworthy, of course, is His gift of His Son as our Saviour. As John says "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes on Him should not perish but should have eternal life". And He crowns this gift of salvation through His Son with the gift of His own presence, His Holy Spirit which is freely given to all who ask Him, to all who open up their lives to Him and invite Him to enter as their Lord and God. He gives His Holy Spirit to all who ask.

And so this last beatitude "It is more blessed to give than to receive" springs directly from the basic nature of reality, from God's own character, and we all should take Jesus' words as reported by St. Paul at their face value and seek these blessings by practising this way of life; giving rather than receiving.

Three things are necessary if we are going to succeed and obtain this blessedness and happiness. First strong, real faith in God, for how can we give of our time or of our money if we feel that our own future security depends on our retaining control of these things ourselves. We must put our faith in God, knowing that He is able to supply all our needs, that He has promised that all we need will be added to us if we seek first His kingdom. We must take His promise as our support for the future as it is expressed by the words of the psalmist "I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his children begging bread (Ps.37:25). God will supply our needs and the needs of our families if we seek to do His Will in the circumstances of life.

This leads me to the second thing we need if we are going to live by this beatitude and that is we need faith not only in God as the supplier of all things, but in God as the one who controls the details of our life so that the things which come into our life and which have to be done are the things that He wants us to do. It may be that we will have to abandon some cherished project, some aspiration, or plan or achievement because of circumstances. God will make His way

plain to us, by what our duty is in the circumstances into which He allows our life to come. He who guides the sparrow certainly guides the events which make up our life so that if we do what is right in those events we can be sure that the outcome will be according to the perfect will of God. We are to have faith that our work will not be in vain in the Lord, even though it seems to have ragged ends, from our point of view, as a result of the way events have fallen out.

Thirdly, and above all, if we are to base our life on giving rather than receiving, serving and ministering rather than being ministered to, we will ourselves need to have the character of Christ, the character of God, because we cannot achieve this beatitude simply by the exercise of our will; our whole character must be transformed in this direction and this is what God has promised to do for those who seek Him. He has promised to give Himself to us, to give us His Holy Spirit, and to change us by that Spirit into the image of God by transforming us into the image of Christ. The Lord Jesus said "God freely and willingly gives His Holy Spirit to those who ask" (Luke 11:13).

Let us seek God's Spirit for this purpose, that our character might be like His and our lives based on His life of giving rather than receiving, so that we might share the blessedness of God Himself. God gives His Holy Spirit to all who seek His presence. Do not let us seek the incidentals of that presence - such as, perhaps, speaking with tongues, healings or other minor manifestations - but let us seek God Himself and His character as our character that we might experience the blessedness of which Jesus speaks, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

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