

Sermon for Zion, September 08, 2019 (storm revision)

Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:10-11; Luke 6:36-38; Acts 20:32-35

Sermon Title: Giving Happiness

*(Deuteronomy 15:10-11 NRSV) Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land."*

*(Luke 6:36-38 NIV) Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

*(Acts 20:32-35 NKJV) "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

Earlier this year we had our variety concert at Zion, and I sang “If I Were A Rich Man.” It’s a great old chestnut which I like to roll out every decade or so, as Tevye the Dairyman speculates how his life would improve with, as he says, “just a small fortune.”

*But Does money buy happiness?* Scientists study all kinds of different things, many of which – or even most of which – seem to have very little to do with you and me. But I recalled an article I read in the journal “Science” about a very interesting study done out of the University of British Columbia. It was entitled, “*Does money buy happiness?*” Here’s a summary:

*Does money buy happiness? The verdict is far from clear. Studies show that money does make people happier, but only up to a point. Beyond a certain level, additional income yields hardly any additional happiness. The United States, for instance, is four times wealthier than it was in 1950 yet Americans report being no happier than they were half a century ago – if anything, less happy.*

*A new study suggests that what matters most is not how much money we have but, rather, what we do with it. Spending money on others, it shows, can boost our own happiness.*

*The researchers first asked a group of college students how happy they were. They then gave the participants money — either \$5 or \$20. Half were told to spend the money on themselves. The others were told to spend it on others, such as giving a gift to a friend or making a charitable donation. That evening, the researchers again asked the students to gauge their happiness.*

*It turns out that the participants who spent money on others reported a much greater happiness boost than the ones who spent money on themselves. And, surprisingly, the amount of*

*money the students were given didn't seem to matter at all. It was how they chose to spend it that determined their happiness levels.*

*"This suggests that even making really small changes in how one spends money can make a difference for happiness," says one of the authors of the study.*

*In another study, the same researchers tracked the happiness levels of 16 employees who received a profit-sharing bonus. Again, the findings were the same: those who spent their bonus on others reported the greatest happiness boost.*

*"The size of the bonus turned out to not matter at all. What mattered is how they spent the money."*

*There is a growing body of research that lends scientific credence to the old adage: it's better to give than to receive. But another study suggests we're not very good at assessing human nature. The study asked a group of college students what they thought would make them happier: spending money on themselves or on others. The vast majority of respondents said: spending money on themselves.*

*Apparently, there is large chasm between what we think will make us happy and what actually does.*

That old adage, "it's better to give than to receive," is more than just an old adage: it is the teaching of Jesus. We heard it in our scripture reading earlier, from the Book of Acts, in a sermon from the Apostle Paul: "*Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus,*" wrote Paul, "*for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" Jesus knew this 2000 years ago. Paul knew it from Jesus, and passed the lesson on. We knew it, but largely forgot about it, wooed and swayed as we are by our society's claim that "the one who dies with the most toys, wins." We have fallen into that "*large chasm between what we think will make us happy and what actually*

*does.*” And it is now science, of all things, that is reminding us of the real truth all over again. It is more blessed – it is better – to give than to receive.

What I want to do this morning is not only say “Amen” to that, but I want to take it a step deeper. Not only is it better to give than to receive, but further, we can only receive from God and from others, in proportion to what we give. Or to say it another way: God is only able to give to the degree we are open to receive, and we are open to receive from God only to the degree we have given, both to God and to others. And if that’s too convoluted, Jesus (of course) put it better. Listen (*Luke 6:36-38 NIV*):

*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

Did you get that? *For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* Or another way: How forgiving I am will determine how much forgiveness I can receive. How loving I am will determine how much love I can receive. How generous I am will limit how generous God can be with me. “*For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*” All of which is to say, it is not only better to give than to receive, it is necessary to give in order to receive.

All right, everyone’s confused. So let’s start with Forgiveness. That’s a good place to start, because we’ve already prayed that we might receive forgiveness; we did so this morning, right in the

Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts, **as we forgive** our debtors," we prayed. It is the way Jesus taught us to pray about forgiveness. "Forgive us, **as we forgive.**" Do you hear what's happening? We are actually praying that God would treat us in the way that we have treated and continue to treat others, that God would impart to us his forgiveness in the same manner we have forgiven those who have wronged us. "Extend to us, dear God," we pray, "the same forgiveness that we have extended to others." And that is a pretty sobering thought. Forgiveness, for Jesus, is a two-way street. To be forgiven is to forgive. To forgive is to be forgiven. It is all wrapped up; it is indivisible.

Forgiveness is, after all, all about the healing of relationships: our relationship with God, and our relationship with one another. And more relationships have been irreparably damaged by a refusal to offer or extend forgiveness, than by any other thing. The family who is torn apart by an argument for which nobody remembers the cause. The neighbours who refuse to so much as wave at one another because of a misunderstanding over the fence. The aged one sitting alone remembering over and again the obscure wrong done by a friend once dear. The family who never goes back to church because of the visit the minister failed to make. Only forgiveness can heal those wounds. Only forgiveness can restore those relationships. And we can't be forgiven, unless we start the process, and forgive.

Imagine we had an argument with someone. Harsh words were used. We called one another names. Now, some time has passed. It is time to seek forgiveness. But we go about it all wrong. We say to the person, "You know, we said some pretty harsh things there, in the heat of the moment. I want you to know, I will never forgive you for what you said. But I insist you forgive me for what I said to you." How do you think that will work out?

No, we need to say, “You know, we said some pretty harsh things there, in the heat of the moment. I want you to know, I am sorry for what I said to you, for what I called you. I hope you can forgive me for the things that I said, so we can put it behind us, and be friends again.” Which scenario is likely to result in forgiveness? *“For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

As with forgiveness, so with love. How loving I am will determine how much love I can receive. In a previous sermon, I used this illustration. Let’s see if you remember it:

The phone rings. It’s the bank. They've given you a gold card, no credit limit, and no matter how much you spend, at the end of the month, they'll write it off. And you say, "What if I spend a thousand?" They'll write it off. "Ten thousand? A million?" They'll write it off. No limit. What if I don't use it? Well, then, you get nothing. You don't use it, you lose it.

God called. He's given you a gold card of love, he’s filled your life with love, no limit, and no matter how much love you give to other people, no matter how much love you share, no matter how much love you spend, he'll just fill you with more. And you say, "What if I share my love with one person?" He'll fill you with more. Ten people? A hundred? He'll fill you with more. No limit. What if I don't use it? Well, then, you get nothing. You don't use it, you lose it.

God is begging us to use this gold card of love. Again and again, front to back, the Bible is nothing more than the story of how God has done this for us, and a manual of how to spend our love, of who to spend it on, of what happens when we spend it.

How do we spend it? Freely! Who do we spend it on? Each other! Everyone! Particularly those who need it most! What happens when we spend it? We get more! The more love we spend, the more love we get; the more love we give, the more we receive.

All of us know people who don't share their love, who don't reach out with love. They are hard to love themselves. All of us know people who share their love freely. We enjoy being with them. They're easy to love. How loving I am will determine how much love I can receive. *"For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*

Finally, how generous I am will determine how generous God can be with me. God can only give to us in proportion to our ability to receive, and our ability to receive is directly related to how generous we are with God and with others. That's what Jesus is getting at when he says, (Mark 4:24-25 NRSV):

*"Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."*

What does this mean? Well, simply and again, God can only give to us in proportion to our ability to receive, and our ability to receive is directly related to how generous we are with God and with others.

A final illustration. I come upon a need. I take out my wallet. It is closed tightly. No one can get anything out! Now God wants to give me something. I take out my wallet. It is still closed tightly. God can't get anything in! (Try this with the person in the pew

beside you as well.) But, the person who opens their purse, their heart, their wallet; well, God finds a wide open purse, heart and wallet in which he is able to pour blessings untold. And that person walks away happy. It's not complicated. Even the scientists have figured this out. Remember this? *“There is a growing body of research that lends scientific credence to the old adage: it's better to give than to receive.”* And Jesus says, “I told you so. I've been saying that for thousands of years.”

Forgiveness, love, generosity, happiness – it is all there, waiting for us to receive. Forgiveness, love, generosity, happiness – it is all here, right in our hearts, waiting for us to share. How can we get the ball rolling? How, for instance, can we forgive someone who has wronged us, someone we ourselves have never wronged? How? Because God has forgiven us first. How can we love someone who has never been kind to us, who makes it hard for us to love? Because God has loved us first. How can we give when all our instincts tell us to hang on to everything we've got? Because God has given all for us. Including his very Son. Who Forgave. Who Loved. And who gave his life, that we might know forgiveness, generosity, and love.

*Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

Amen.