

THE LAST BEATITUDE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 19, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

All of us are familiar with the "Beatitudes" with which Christ began his great Sermon on the Mount. Eight times Jesus pronounced blessings upon those who possess certain special characteristics. Notice each of these: "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are they that mourn ... Blessed are the meek ... Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness ... Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are the pure in heart ... Blessed are the peacemakers ... Blessed are them that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake." (Matt. 5:3-10).

To these eight beatitudes we add a ninth, which we might call Christ's last beatitude. It is found in the closing remarks of the apostle Paul in his special message to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He said, "...remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35). This is an unusual passage in that it is one of only two occurrences outside of the gospel narratives where the inspired apostles quote a statement from Jesus verbatim. One of those instances is found in I Cor. 11:24-25, where Jesus, in speaking of the Lord's Supper, said, "This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." The other instance in which Jesus is quoted exactly is in the text mentioned a moment ago.

The setting of this passage is also quite interesting. The apostle Paul was finishing his third missionary journey and had stopped briefly at the seaport town of Miletus on the western coast of Asia Minor, where he had summoned the elders from the church at nearby Ephesus. Even though he was hurrying to Jerusalem, he wanted to deliver a farewell message to these elders whom he knew intimately and whom he loved greatly. That message began, "Ye yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, after what manner I was with you all the time, serving the Lord. with all lowliness of mind, and with tears, and the trials which befell me by the plots of the Jews; how I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ... Wherefore I testify unto you this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men."

Then, after warning the elders to be true to their responsibilities, Paul closed his message with these words, "I coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. Ye yourselves know that these hands ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. In all things I gave you an example, that so laboring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:18-21, 26, 33-35). Notice how he emphasized that he had supported himself, and even provided support for his companions, either through his teaching in the school of Tyrannus or through his trade of tent-making. He then crystallized his whole message in the few words which he quoted from the Lord, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

A Blessing In Giving

There is a great blessing in giving. In fact, giving is at the very heart of the gospel. God gave his Son, as we note in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Then, Christ gave himself for the salvation of mankind, for we read in John 10:17-18, his words, "...I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." There are these additional words from the Lord, "... even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:28). We who would be followers of Christ are also instructed to give. In Matt. 10:8 we have the account of Jesus admonishing his followers, "... freely ye received, freely give." Giving is the heart and center of the Christian religion.

An experience common to all of us is that of receiving more joy, happiness, and satisfaction from giving than from receiving. Although I remember with pleasure the early years of my own life and the joy of receiving, yet I must say that this satisfaction was not nearly so deep as the joy that I now know as a father in giving to my own children. I believe that you men who are in this audience would agree that one of the greatest satisfactions that you have in life is the joy that comes from providing for your wife and children. This makes all the toil and effort that we spend earning a living worth while. I believe that you women in this audience would also agree that you have no greater satisfaction than that of caring for your families. What is there that brings you a deeper happiness than providing the many little services that make your home possible? In our own lives, I am confident that most of us have considerable evidence to convince us that Jesus was exactly right when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The apostle Paul described Christ's life in these words, pointing up the sacrifices which led ultimately to his glorification, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore God also highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things

on earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:5-11).

No Special Blessing in Receiving

There is nothing sinful about receiving. It is simply not accompanied by the blessings which accompany giving. There is no special reward here or in the life to come for receiving. There are rich rewards for giving. Notice this statement from the apostle Paul concerning the blessings of giving, “But this I say, he that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Let each man do according as he has purposed in his heart: not grudgingly, nor of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in everything, may abound unto every good work: as it is written, He hath scattered abroad, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness abideth forever. And he that supplieth seed to the sower and bread for food, shall supply and multiply your seed for sowing, and increase the fruits of your righteousness...” (II Cor. 9:6-10).

Raymond Calkins, a noted preacher of recent years wrote, “Not long ago the Prime Minister of England made the astonishing statement that it seemed to him that the people of England as a whole were happier in the terrible days of war than they had been in times of peace. What can this mean? What can it mean but that the whole-souled devotion of the British people to the ideals of freedom, justice and brotherhood, no matter what sacrifices it entailed, made them happier than the selfish devotion to personal and material ends which so many of them had known (and now know) in days of peace.”

As I read this I cannot help but think of America, too. No people in the history of the world have been so blessed with material possessions as have we. No society has been so affluent. Yet, we are not happier because of our affluence. No generation in the history of the world has been so blessed with material possessions as have the younger generation of our own day, yet we find many of them frustrated, disillusioned, and destructive. Jesus was so right in saying that genuine happiness comes not so much in receiving as in giving.

A baby begins life with no power beyond that of making his wants known and of insisting that they be satisfied. Love, devotion, and tender care from parents are all taken for granted. Ultimately, however, the infant as he grows up learns that he must also serve the needs of others. Eventually, in a mature, wholesome personality the incoming tide turns and flows back into the lives of others. There may even come a willingness to sacrifice for others. I am convinced that this kind of self-giving, on its highest level, comes from a knowledge of Jesus Christ and of his sacrificial love for mankind.

God’s Steward

Somewhere in our consideration of man’s responsibilities it is imperative that we come to realize that man is God’s steward. The universe in its entirety actually belongs to God who created it. This was the message of David at the beginning of the 24th Psalm, “The earth is Jehovah’s and the fullness thereof; The world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, And established it upon the floods.” (Ps. 24:1-2). In the 50th Psalm God’s words are presented, “For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains; and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee; for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof.” (Ps. 50:10-12). Further, God’s message explains, “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine.” (Ezek. 18:4). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul’s speech in Athens contains the words, “The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men’s hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.” (Acts 17:24-25).

The fact is that we are God’s stewards. After mentioning the idea of stewardship, the apostle Paul added “... moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” (I Cor. 4:2). It is important that we realize we only use the things of this world for a while, and that we do not absolutely possess them. For example, most of us carry a set of keys either in our pockets or our purses. I have a key, for example, to my home. I think of it as my key to my house, yet, if time goes on for very many years this key will be mine no longer, and the house itself will be used by another. I carry a key to my office, yet it is not really mine. It is inevitable that someone else will call it his office. Nothing we own do we own in the absolute sense. Even though we may have worked hard to buy something, it is really only ours to use. “The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof.” We are his stewards. We only use that which belongs to him for a brief time and then turn it over to someone else.

In this connection it is important that we also realize that our eternal destiny depends, in significant measure, upon how we use God’s bounty. There are other factors, of course, which will determine our eternal destiny, yet there are few factors more significant than the manner in which we use the talents and possessions with which God has endowed each one of us. It is indeed important that we realize that stewards must be faithful in the manner in which they use that which belongs to their Lord.

Man’s Responsibility

In the Old Testament book of Malachi there are these words, "Will a man rob God? yet ye rob me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? in tithes and offerings? Ye are cursed with the curse; for ye rob me, even this whole nation. Bring ye the whole tithe into the store-house, that there may be food in my house, and prove me now herewith, saith Jehovah of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." (Mal. 3:8-10).

The apostle Paul posed two tests--one for the non-Christian and one for the Christian. For the non-Christian he suggested, "For ye are all sons of God, through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ." (Gal. 3:26-27). This is a simple means by which we may know whether a man is a Christian or not.

Then there is the apostle Paul's test for those who are Christians. It is found in II Cor. 8:8 and it deals with giving. Paul spoke of giving and then said, as presented in the King James Version, that it is "to prove the sincerity of your love." The American Standard Version translates this, "as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity also of your love." The Revised Standard Version translates it, "to prove ... that your love also is genuine." According to Phillips it is translated, "Here is a way to prove the reality of your love." Moffet says it, "to prove how sterling your own love is." And finally the New English Bible puts it in these words, "I am putting your love to the test." Giving is the means of knowing whether a person loves God and loves his fellowman.

In the same II Corinthian letter Paul wrote, "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia: how that in much proof of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For according to their power, I bear witness, yea and beyond their power, they gave of their own accord, beseeching us with much entreaty in regard of this grace and the fellowship in the ministering of the saints: and this not as we had hoped (or expected) but first they gave their selves to the Lord, and to us through the will of God." (II Cor. 8:1-5). There is no question about their love in view of these comments concerning their giving.

Conclusion

There is no clearer emphasis found in the scriptures upon the importance of giving generously to the needs of others than that found in the Judgment scene as presented by Christ near the end of his life. At one point he described the final Judgment and then said, "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me." (Matt. 25:34-35). How important it will be to each of us at the Judgment to have lived a life in which we were not so concerned about our own needs as about giving to those around us who were in need.

Obviously, the most significant gift that man can give to the Lord is the gift of himself. Nothing less will do. It is only when man gives his own allegiance and love to his Lord that he can be a Christian. If you have never committed your life to the Lord, pause for a moment and think of all the blessings that he has showered upon you. It was he who made possible both your physical and your spiritual life. He has loved you with a love beyond our power to comprehend. Does this not make you want to express your faith in him before men and to turn away from the world with its sins, that you may be added to his family? I hope that it does and that you will make that response now.