LIVING THE OBEDIENT & SURRENDERED LIFE

Life Transformation: The Deeper Meaning of Life

A biblical approach to life cannot focus simply on maximizing what you will keep for yourself and your family. You must also strive to address the deeper issues of your life's purpose—what can you do to maximize your blessing to others?

It is more blessed to give than to receive. Do you know who originally said this, or where it can be found? You might already know that this statement was made by Jesus. However, it is found in a surprising place. Whenever we think of the statements of Jesus, we immediately think of the Gospels and possibly His few comments in the book of Revelation. However, this statement is actually found in Acts 20:35 (NIV). Paul quotes it in his farewell address to the elders at the church of Ephesus after his three-year ministry with them.

What is particularly interesting about this is that Paul tells the elders to *remember the words of the Lord Jesus…Himself*, suggesting that these words must have been widely known among believers even though they are not recorded in any of the Gospels. The Apostle John does tell us in the last verse of his Gospel, *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written* (John 21:25). Needless to say, there is much more that Jesus said and did than is recorded in the Bible.

With that as a background, let us consider the verse itself. This verse is just one of many examples of the idea of human contradictions. Jesus was a master of these. He would tell people that if they wanted to be first, they would have to be last. If they wanted to live, they would have to die. If they wanted to be rich, they would have to become poor. We could go on, as the list of human contradictions is extensive.

Nowhere is the contradiction of giving and receiving more obvious than at Christmastime, when gift-giving reaches its annual apex. Just ask a small child whether it is more fun—"blessed"—to receive or to give presents at Christmas, and the answer will always be the same. In fact, they may even look at you with some degree of disbelief. How could you even ask such a ridiculous question? What keeps young children up at night with excitement is what they are going to *get* the next morning, not what they are going to *give*. There is nothing wrong with a child who is almost delirious with excitement about what he will receive—it is very natural. And that is exactly my point; it is very natural. Jesus is the master of calling us to the unnatural—like loving your enemies and forgiving those who hurt you.

Almost everything about being a follower of Jesus is unnatural or counterintuitive. In fact, it is a safe rule to follow that however you are naturally inclined to respond to a situation, respond just the opposite, and you will probably be responding the right way. You see, the spiritual dichotomy is between what is natural and what is *super*natural—which is how we have been reborn to live. The natural man will say, "It is more blessed to receive than to give." The *super*natural man will say, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

If we were completely honest with ourselves, we would all admit that it is a blessing to both receive and give. Notice that Jesus said, "It is *more* blessed to give than to receive." When the blessing of receiving overrides the blessing of giving, life becomes warped, myopic, and egocentric.

The tale of Ebenezer Scrooge is a classic example of the natural man turned into the supernatural man. Ebenezer's life was consumed with getting and accumulating, while giving was an entirely foreign notion to him. In fact, it could be said that he found the idea so abhorrent that when he was once asked to support the poor so they would not starve to death, he said, "Let them die and decrease the surplus population."

He would squeeze every penny out of every business deal he could, continuing to pile up greater and greater wealth. Yet, accumulating more and more wealth failed to give him what he was looking for, which was true happiness and fulfillment in life. In fact, the more he acquired, the more miserable he became. Something was terribly wrong with this lonely old man. The deceitfulness of believing that receiving was the greatest joy had failed him completely. He was not happy, he had no friends, and he had no joy.

But when three spirits visited him that one fateful Christmas Eve, Scrooge was forced to face himself and the empty life he had built. His cold, callous heart was broken and changed. Totally transformed in just one night. That change immediately redefined his understanding of the purpose for all his accumulated wealth. He now saw it as a resource to be used for doing good. For the first time in his life, he gladly opened his hands to help others as quickly and generously as he could. In all his giving, he discovered the one truth that had completely eluded him all the years of his life—that it *is* more blessed to give than to receive.

Now this stingy, odious, crabby, hardhearted old man was changed into a generous, pleasant, kind, and caring gentleman who finally found tremendous satisfaction in life—no longer in receiving and accumulating wealth for himself, but in giving that wealth in ways that would change people's lives and circumstances.

Sadly, King Solomon's life outcome was not as positive as Scrooge's. As one of the richest men who has ever lived on this planet, Solomon reflects back on all his material accomplishments in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 (NASB). Read it carefully.

I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.' And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, 'It is madness,' and of pleasure, 'What does it accomplish?' I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. I enlarged my works: I built houses <u>for myself</u>, I planted vineyards <u>for myself</u>; I made gardens and parks <u>for myself</u> and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water <u>for myself</u> from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected <u>for myself</u> silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided <u>for myself</u> male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all

my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun (emphasis added).

If Solomon had done these things *for others*, instead of for *himself*, would he have come to the same pessimistic conclusion about his life and his work*? All [is] vanity and striving after the wind and there [is] no profit under the sun*. Probably not.

With all of Solomon's wisdom, there is one truth that he sadly missed entirely*: It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). Giving is a natural outgrowth of mature love. We see this so plainly in John 3:16, *For God so loved… He gave*. And we can all be thankful that His desire to receive our gifts of praise was exceeded by His desire to give us a gift that we could never buy for ourselves. Romans 6:23 reminds us that *the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*.

A biblical approach to life cannot focus simply on maximizing what you will keep for yourself and your family. You must also strive to address the deeper issues of your life's purpose—what can you do to maximize your blessing to others?

If you want to experience the deepest meaning in life, let me encourage you to follow the converted Scrooge's example—and not Solomon's—in regards to your accumulated wealth.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Do you receive more joy when you get things or when you give things? What does this say about your level of spiritual maturity in understanding the deeper meaning of life?

2. It is actually a blessing to receive and to give. What happens when our focus is shifted too far toward receiving?

3. How important of a role does giving to others play in your life?

4. If you asked ten people in your life if they viewed you as more of a giver or a taker, what would they say? How would their assessment of you make you feel?

5. What have you emphasized in the lives of your children to instill a healthy balance of giving and receiving?

6. Share some family giving stories (working at the food bank, serving as a family in the church nursery, providing Christmas gifts to a needy family in the community, etc.) that have been particularly meaningful to you?

7. Do you have any family policies to put reasonable limits on Christmas/birthday gifts? Examine your gift-giving strategies – do you over-extend yourself to provide gifts to your family? If so, why?

8. What can you change in your life to "maximize your blessing to others (outside your family)?"

9. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?