



WHEN YOU GIVE, YOU WILL TAKE AWAY

The statement, “When you give, you will take away” is an intriguing maxim, isn’t it? At first blush, it almost sounds contradictory. Let me give you some simple examples to illustrate its truth. If you give food to someone, you will take away their hunger. If you give love to a child, you will take away their loneliness. If you give the gospel to a woman, you will take away her feeling of being lost. If you give work to a man, you will take away his feeling of uselessness.

When we talk about giving someone the essentials of life, this truth does not seem particularly profound, does it? In the giving, there will always be something gained and something lost. In the above cases, what was gained was good and what was lost was bad.

What makes this statement anything but simple, however, is that once you go beyond “life essentials,” it is often a considerable challenge to be sure that what you give is good and what you take away is bad. Without careful attention to this maxim, we could easily find ourselves giving a “bad gift” that will take away more good from the recipient than it bestows. This is where God has a decided advantage on us. James 1:17 (NASB) says, *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. God knows how to give the perfect gift.* If we were all-knowing and all-loving like He is, we would be a lot better at this gift-giving than we are. But, as mere mortals, this can prove to be a very tricky business.

Let me tell you a story. I live in a blue-collar, interracial, tract home part of town. Last summer, I was standing in my driveway sweeping up some yard debris when, driving very slowly up my street, comes a man and his young teenage son in a brand-new, black BMW convertible sports car. I am not a car enthusiast at all, but even I cannot help but notice this beautiful car coming toward me, especially since this is not the kind of car you ever see in our neighborhood. I have no idea who they are, but I still smile in their direction as they drive slowly toward our house.

Then, to my shock, they turn into my driveway and pull right up to me. I am now feeling real pressure because I am sure I should know them. Yet seeing their faces clearly only confirms I have absolutely no clue who they are. The dad is sitting there, smiling at me like we are old friends. (I just hate it when this kind of thing happens to me!) I walk slowly around the car over to the driver’s side, thoroughly examining this automotive masterpiece, trying to buy myself a few extra seconds for my aging mental hard drive to find the file on who this smiling guy sitting in my driveway is. I smile and say in a friendly tone, “Nice car.” He replies, “Yep, just drove it off the lot. I bought it for my son who is turning sixteen next week. I am showing him what all it does.”

It was obvious. He didn’t know me from Adam. He simply pulled in my driveway to impress me, a total stranger, with the car he had just bought for his son. His son, who didn’t look older than thirteen, was sitting

in the only other seat in the car looking more overwhelmed than delighted by all this attention. I was so taken aback with this spontaneous encounter that the most profound thing I could think to say in response was, “Well, this is a really nice first car.”

The dad beamed proudly, “Yep. Well, gotta run.” Putting the car in reverse, he backed out and drove off in the same direction he had come—making it seem like he had driven over from wherever he lived for the express purpose of showing me the car. Now, with his mission accomplished, he was going back home. As he drove off, I just stood there. What was that all about? Then, as is almost always the case with me, I came up with the definitive response that I should have given to this father. Unfortunately, it was about three minutes too late. (If this ever happens again, however, I am ready!)

My response to this proud father should have been, “You realize that by giving this car to your son as his first car, you could ruin him for the rest of his life.” I doubt my wise and insightful response would have made any difference to this dad, assuming he even understood what I meant by it. I have thought often that I might have been the only person in this part of town who could have seen his gift for what it really was. Of all the driveways he could have pulled into to show off the car, he picked my driveway, and I was just too slow on the draw to warn him. But maybe this happened for your enlightenment, not his.

Back to my maxim. If you give your son a brand-new BMW convertible for his first car, you will take away...what? This dad has likely taken away his son’s ability to ever be content with any less of a car. He probably has taken away his ability to set realistic controls on his spending, not buying what he cannot afford. He certainly has taken from his son the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of working hard and methodically saving up to buy his first car, appreciating what it really costs in time and money to own a car like this. He may have also taken away his son’s ability to appropriately connect a healthy work ethic to its corresponding material rewards. He might have taken away any sense of humility in him, now that he owns the nicest car in both the student and faculty parking lots at his high school. (I don’t know about you, but it would have been very hard for me as a sixteen-year-old to be driving a brand-new BMW convertible sports car and remain humble.)

You see, the first car this boy will ever own may be the finest car he will ever own. His “car life” going forward will always fall below the standard now set for him by his father. Admittedly, this father was giving his son a very generous gift. In so doing, however, he was likely taking away several experiences that would be far more valuable to his son in the years ahead. This gift, by my calculation, will produce for this young man a net-loss life-effect (i.e., more loss than gain). I have seen these kinds of gifts made many times by well-intentioned but oblivious parents and grandparents who have given gifts to their heirs that only ended up producing a negative effect.

Before we decide to give something beyond “life essentials,” it would be in our and the recipient’s best interest to thoughtfully reflect on this truth and whether the gift we are considering might produce a net gain or a net loss in the life-effect of the recipient.

“When you give, you will take away.” Make every effort in your giving to ensure that your gifts do not unintentionally take away more than they provide.

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