

Chapter 22

Everyone settled down in the yard where only minutes before dead trolls and witches had polluted the ground. Some sat in chairs, some on the grass, but all looked at Greg with anticipation.

“Before I begin,” Greg said. “I want to remind you that you’re guinea pigs. I say that not to excuse my performance but to explain. Some of this may be a little awkward here, but I want to do it exactly like I plan to do it on Wednesday in chapel. So pretend you’re there rather than here.”

No one complained, so Greg walked over by the play set, bowed his head and whispered, “Guide my words, please Lord.”

He walked purposefully to the center of his ‘stage,’ the deck around the swimming pool.

“In the beginning,” Greg said loudly and dramatically, raising his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “I did *not* want to do this.”

The laughter was good. Greg grinned back at his congregation.

“But some of you ... encouraged me and I caved in. But I was worried because I have a problem.”

As Greg spoke, he used his body language as a natural extension of his words. He paced, waved his hands, made faces. He drew his audience into his message.

“Some of you may not know it yet, but I have a learning disability. There’s a whole ‘nother message in that statement, but it’s not the one for today. The only reason I bring it up is because this is also the first message I’ve ever given. With my learning disability, I know I can’t stand up here and read, not even notes, not even the bible. A certain beautiful fellow student suggested that I should preach something I know so well that I won’t need notes. So, today I’m giving you a message right out of my life. I knew early on that I was going to give this message, but I resisted making it too personal. Then a friend of mine told me a story.”

Greg wagged a finger at them. “She doesn’t go to this school, so don’t start looking around at the ladies. An’ I no lie!

“Anyway, the story my friend told me was about something that happened in her past. She wasn’t particularly proud of it, but she saw that maybe God wanted

her to use that part of her life to help others. In helping her see that God did indeed want her to help others, I was myself convicted. By using my own life, I can help you see not only what I'm teaching, but also how you might apply it to your lives. I venture to bet you guys aren't much different from me!"

Greg paused to look at faces, daring anyone to disagree. He saw in Jenni's face that she knew who his friend was and she was awed that God had indeed chosen to use her. Already this was worth the pain and effort.

"One of the underlying themes of my message is also a theme of my life and of this school – keep verses in their context, in their passage, in their book, in their Testament, in the whole bible. Know all of what the bible says on a subject before you run off at the mouth! So I'm going to be all over the bible, but I do have a sermon text. It's one we all know well, but I'm going to show you that most of us don't know it as well as we think we do.

"My text is from Acts 20:35, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

"I like this verse because I'm a giver. Or maybe I'm a giver because I like this verse! Either way, when I say I give, I mean I *really* give. At times I've given 'til there was no money left in my bank account, no strength in my body, no food in my kitchen. I've given time that I didn't have to give. I've given love when I should've given scoldings. And that's the problem with living 'this verse.' You focus on the giving and you don't think about the stewardship. So, instead of focusing on this verse, let's properly understand it by putting it in context.

"First off, you have to think about the whole passage. Paul is giving his farewell address to the Ephesians. He reminds them how he's instructed them and exhorted them in spite of the problems he faced. Always he's been concerned more about the gospel and God's glory than he has been about his welfare, his own life. Now he's going to be leaving them and he isn't coming back. What was going to come to them was troubles from without and within, direct attacks on their faith. In verse 34, Paul said, 'I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.' Paul then reminded the Ephesians that he had always worked to provide the things he and his companions needed. Then he said, 'In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."'"

"When we look at the whole context of the passage, we see that here in Acts 20, in his farewell address to the Ephesians, Paul is talking about the Ephesians' hearts, their coming trials and their requirement to take care of those who are weaker, even in those trials.

"Right here we givers run up against a problem because our temptation is to say – okay, that means we as leaders are not supposed to receive. We're supposed to provide for ourselves just like Paul did. But remember, we have to consider everything the bible says on a subject. Proper context requires us to

look at the book of Acts in its entirety, and since this is Paul speaking, we have to look beyond Acts to the letters of Paul, then we have to consider the rest of the New Testament too, then the Old Testament as well.

“When we consider the context of Paul’s letters on the giving-receiving principle, what do we do with his thanks to the Philippians for sending Epaphroditus to take care of his *needs*? Was Paul lying when he wrote to Timothy and told him to give twice as much to those who labor as elders for the Lord? When you read all the epistles of Paul, you discover he was a man with many faces, depending on whom he was with and what their needs were. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul tells them that he became all things to all people, a slave for the slaves, a Jew for the Jews, weak for the weak. Whatever it took to share the gospel. What Acts 20 is telling us is that it took becoming strong and independent to share the gospel with the Ephesians.

“Beyond Acts and Paul, in the greater context of the New Testament, if we’re going to take ‘more blessed to give than receive’ as an always statement – always give and do not receive – then what do we do with John’s statement in 1 John 3:17, ‘If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?’ John’s talking about *brothers*, other Christians. If we’re all supposed to work for everything we get, as we like to understand Acts 20, then what brother is receiving? And what about Jesus? Matthew, Mark and Luke all specified that Jesus received support from the women who followed him.

“When you consider everything the bible says about receiving and needs, you have to see that in Acts 20, Paul wasn’t making a blanket statement to all Christians for all times when he talked about working for his needs. Instead, he was speaking specifically to the Ephesians about how he interacted with them based upon the character of their church. This is the same church that Jesus addressed in Revelation 2. This is the church that Jesus commended for their hard work and perseverance, their testing ‘those who claim to be apostles but are not.’ This is the church which had ‘endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.’ But this is also the church which Jesus chastised for forsaking their first love. This is the church he warned to ‘Repent and do the things you did at first.’ Do you see how this fits with what Paul said to the Ephesians in Acts 20? Don’t you see that what Paul conveyed to them that day was the other side of what Jesus conveyed in Revelation? They went through the trials that Paul prophesied, but they forgot the love and the charity for their weaker members that Paul reminded them of in Acts 20. That passage in Acts wasn’t about giving and receiving, it was about the heart of a church.

“Of course we learn something about giving and receiving from Acts 20, but it’s only part of the picture. We can’t use ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ by itself. When we want to apply the giver/receiver principle Paul refers to in Acts 20:35, we have to use wisdom. Ephesians 5:15-17 tells us, ‘Be

very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, ... do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.' What is the 'most of every opportunity'? Is it always having to be the one who gives? No, sometimes you have to step back and let others give.

"Let me illustrate what I mean. Some of you know that my new brother-in-law is rather wealthy. I on the other hand Well let's just say, I'm not. Recently I had the opportunity to give some financial aid to someone. Without even thinking about it, I stepped up and gave that aid. At this same time ole lolo here," Greg pointed at himself with both hands, "*is receiving* financial aid to go to school. Now, is that really 'the most' of that opportunity? What if my brother-in-law was more than willing to give from his abundance? What if he had as much if not more reason to give to this person? Is it still 'making the most of every opportunity' for me to give instead of letting him give?

"If you think it was, listen up people: Jesus didn't normally give that way! Neither did Peter or Paul. Sure they shared everything they had, but they stewarded wisely and they exhorted those who had plenty to give generously. When Jesus pointed out the widow with the mites, he did it to exhort those who had great wealth to give more, not for the poor to give all they had.

"When 1 John 3 told us to give to our brother, it specified, 'If anyone *has material possessions*.' When we 'belong to the truth,' we indeed give generously, but it is out of our *ability* that we give. It is utter foolishness to try to give everything God has given you to steward. That's not being faithful. It's a false humility that's actually a wicked pride. You set yourself up to be equal with God, always able to fix things, always in control.

"While you're handing out blessings like my brother-in-law likes to do, you have to remember that you can't give indiscriminately. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul warns about making sure that those who receive benevolence are indeed worthy of receiving aid. In verse eight, he specifically says, 'If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.'

"Recently this verse gave me some real trouble. I was reading it to say that I couldn't have a family unless I could provide everything for them, but that isn't what this verse was intended to communicate. If you put the verse in its passage, you see that Paul was telling Timothy how he would know the people who did or did not deserve benevolence. He was using it to show one of the right ways to judge people in the church.

"One of my other problems with properly understanding the biblical giving-receiving principle is that I don't like to receive. I've discovered that this is to my shame, not my honor. Think about this – Acts 20:35 says it is *more* blessed to give, not it is *only* blessed to give. There is a blessing in receiving, even beyond the obvious blessing of having actually gotten something that will meet a need in your life. When you receive, you are blessed because in receiving you have

allowed the giver to get a greater blessing than what he's given you.

"Those of us who are in ministry need to remember that we have to receive sometimes rather than always give. First off, we allow others to be blessed as they become part of the work of God. Second off, it's our right to receive material blessings because of our ministry.

"In 1 Corinthians 9:11, Paul said, 'If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?' Receiving as a minister is not benevolence, it's the wages you've earned. It may not look like you've done much to earn them, but that's because you're looking at it from the material perspective instead of the eternal!"

Greg reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of car keys. He looked at them thoughtfully for a moment.

"It looks like you're earning a new car when you're annihilating the quarterback in the Championship Game, and indeed you are. It might *not* look like you're earning a new car when you're sitting at the city gates, helping people learn how to draw closer to God, live a more godly life, but you really are. And when you receive that car, both the giver and the receiver are blessed. And the giver at sometime will become the receiver. The receiver is also the giver. Which gift is greater? Neither. The greatness of the gift is not determined by the gift itself, but by the need of the receiver and the ability of the giver.

"The reality is that you darn sure better be both a giver and a receiver! But be wise in your giving and receiving. If you see a brother in need, ask God if it's a legitimate need. Is there a legitimate reason he cannot provide this need for himself and his family? Or is he 'worse than an unbeliever,' refusing to do what is needed? Will God be glorified by your giving or will you block the work God is trying to do in that person's life? Always give for the glory of God.

"The other side of the coin is this: if someone is standing in front of you with a set of keys to a new car, the most important thing to ask yourself is, 'Will God be glorified if I receive this gift?' If your answer is yes, then take that car and be grateful.

"Whether you give or receive, do it for the glory of God. It's really not about you and your blessing. It's about God and his glory.

"Lord, it's way too easy to get all wrapped up in ourselves, thinking about us and our wants, but what's most important is that you be glorified. Change us, please Lord, from creatures of pride and dignity to creatures on our knees before you, giving you glory. And for what we receive *and* give, let us always be truly thankful, for without you, none of us can give anything."

Greg put his keys back in his pocket and with his head still bowed, ambled off to the far side of the play set.