

“RECEIVING UNTIL IT HURTS”

There once were two men who lived in a small town down South. They were as different as night and day. In fact, they were so different from each another, even their names reflected it.

Now, in this town it was the custom to call people by an abbreviated version of their first and middle names. For example, a person named William Robert Smith would be called Billy-Bob Smith. Well, this custom applied for the two men in this story.

The name of one of the men was Cecil Lester Giver. But to the townsfolk, he was known as Ces Les Giver. The other man's name was Haverford Benjamin Given; but everyone called him Hav Ben Given. These two men, Ces Les Giver and Hav Ben Given, lived on adjoining lots in a comfortable middle class neighborhood. But that was where the similarity between them ended.

Ces Les Giver was known by everyone in his church and town as a very giving person—generous to a fault. Each spring during the church stewardship campaign he was the one who stood in front of the church and urged the congregation to “Give until it hurts.” In fact, that was his personal motto: “Give until it hurts.”

And he did just that. The trouble was, his giving tended to hurt, not so much himself, but everyone around him. Because you see, the more Ces Les Giver gave, the more unpleasant he became. Ces Les Giver had a way of making people feel guilty and undignified when he gave to them. The truth was, Ces Les Giver was far from a cheerful giver. Indeed, although it seems contradictory, the more he gave to others, the smaller the love in his heart became.

One other observation must be shared about Mr. Ces Les Giver. While he could and did give to any cause that caught his attention, he was unwilling or unable to receive anything from anyone else. It wasn't that Ces Les Giver didn't have any needs. Rather, he found it impossible to allow someone else to give to him because he had no capacity at all to feel or express gratitude and thanksgiving.

On the other end of the spectrum was Hav Ben Given. Hav Ben Given didn't have any trouble at all receiving gifts and enjoying them. He was a

recent widower, so people from the church and neighborhood often delivered casseroles and cakes to his door. Whenever people arrived with such goodies, he greeted them with sincere and heartfelt gratitude. That meant a lot to the givers. Hav Ben Given had this uncanny way of making everyone who helped him feel glad about it. Those who knew him commonly described him with two words: “joyful” and “thankful.”

Now, Ces Les Giver gave to a lot of different causes, but Hav Ben Given wasn't one of them. When his wife suggested one day that they invite their neighbor over for a meal, Ces Les Giver sharply rejected the idea. “Anyone who so repeatedly and gladly receives gifts from others must be a lazy freeloader,” said Ces Les Giver. “Hasn't that Hav Ben Given ever read in the Bible that “It's more blessed to give than to receive”?

At this point in the story, I'll tell you something that you probably already realize. And that is, the last names “Given” and “Giver” are quite similar. The spelling differs by just one tiny letter. Because of that, Ces Les Giver and Hav Ben Given appeared next to each other in the church directory.

Now, Thanksgiving was approaching, and a new deacon in the church had been asked to deliver a basket of food to Mr. Hav Ben Given. But when he looked up the address in the church directory, the deacon mistakenly copied down Ces Les Giver's address. And he took the basket to Mr. Giver instead of Mr. Given.

Well, the way Ces Les Giver reacted, you would have thought the deacon had committed the unpardonable sin. Ces Les Giver chased that poor man off his front porch and threw the food basket right in the garbage. The next day, Ces Les Giver stormed into the office of Reverend Doolittle, bellowing that he had never been so insulted in all his life. “How could anyone possibly mistake me for that freeloading Hav Ben Given?” Ces Les Giver demanded to know. “Why, I'll bet Given doesn't even pledge to this church—or if he does, it isn't much. When he puts his hand out to others, he always expects to get something. But when I extend my hand, I always have something in it to give.”

Reverend Doolittle didn't say anything, but she knew that Mr. Hav Ben Given was one of the church's largest, most generous and joyful contributors. On the other hand, Mr. Ces Les Giver wasn't generous at all in his giving to the church.

Ces Les Giver continued his outburst. “This church needs to hear more sermons on Acts 20:35, which says, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ I read that verse just this morning. In fact, I read it every morning!” Ces Les Giver then gave his interpretation of the verse: “It means the people of this church must give until it hurts. Yes sir, this congregation would be a lot more Christian

if the members spent less time giving thanks for what they received from God and instead concentrated on giving, giving, and giving some more until it hurts!”

Ces Les Giver had a lot more to say on the subject, but Reverend Doolittle interrupted and told him she was coming down with a severe headache and she needed to run down to the drugstore right away to buy some aspirin.

After Ces Les Giver left her office, Pastor Doolittle sighed wearily. Deep down she felt sorry for him, because he didn't have a clue what true giving and thanksgiving were all about. And that was very sad. For some reason that only Ces Les Giver and God knew, he had never learned how to graciously and gratefully receive. And if Ces Les Giver didn't know how to receive even a small food basket with thanksgiving and joy, he surely didn't know how to be thankful for all the wonderful blessings and gifts God had given him.

Reverend Doolittle decided to use this particular incident as inspiration for her Thanksgiving sermon. She jotted down a thought that popped into her head: “One must first be able to receive with gladness and thanksgiving before one can give to others in a manner that pleases God.”

Once again it was that ancient theological fact that revealed itself time after time: God always takes the initiative by giving to us first, and we human beings can only respond to God's initiative with joy and receive God's gracious blessings with gratitude. When we come to realize that we're loved so much by God and have been so richly blessed by God, we can't help but be moved to respond gladly and thankfully with our own acts of giving and sharing.

And here was the kicker, thought Rev. Doolittle. If our giving doesn't flow out of such God-inspired gratitude and thanksgiving, then perhaps it's not necessarily better to give than to receive because ungrateful, thankless giving might rob the giving of the goodness and decency God intended. With those and other ideas in mind, she sat down at her desk and began to write her Thanksgiving sermon.

Thanksgiving Sunday arrived. Hav Ben Given was in church that day with a smile on his face, receiving and giving handshakes of welcome. Ces Les Giver was also there, although he didn't know why. Thanksgiving was his least favorite holiday. As the congregation sang the opening hymn, “Now Thank We All Our God,” Ces Les Giver stood silently, staring at the words as if those expressions of gratitude were written by extraterrestrials from another galaxy in a totally incomprehensible language.

When the time came for the sermon message, Ces Les Giver casually glanced at the title: “Receiving Until It Hurts.” His blood pressure started to climb and he wanted to jump up out of the pew and say something right then and there, but he decided to try to be calm remain seated. Rev. Doolittle had

a right to preach her foolish “Receiving Until It Hurts” sermon, but he had a right not to listen to it. So as soon as she stood at the pulpit and got ready to talk he started humming to himself. Of course, Ces les Giver’s curiosity ultimately got the best of him, so he opened his ears a tiny bit and heard the opening statement in her sermon.

“The Bible tells us that it’s more blessed to give than to receive,” she said, “but I believe there are times when it’s more essential for us to receive than to give. But, interestingly, for some people it’s much harder and a lot more painful to receive than to give.”

Ces Les Giver knew she was talking about him. Who else could it be? It was all he could do to keep himself from walking out of the service right then and there. “Harder and more painful to receive than to give?” he thought. “That’s one of the most ridiculous, bone-headed statements Reverend Doolittle has ever made in a sermon—and she’s made a lot of them during her time as pastor of this church.” Ces Les Giver knew this was true because he kept track of all her foolish comments in a little notebook he brought with him every Sunday morning.

But then, a funny thing happened. You might even call it a miracle. Ces Les Giver’s mind began to open. For the first time in years he allowed a new thought to enter his head and bounce around in his skull for a while. “It’s harder and more painful to receive?” he thought. “Could that actually be true?” Ces Les Giver thought of the many needy people he would be serving a turkey dinner to this Thursday, down in the church vestry. “For whom is it harder and more painful?” Ces Les Giver wondered. He had always assumed it was harder to give the meal than to receive it. But never having been on the receiving end of a soup ladle—thank the good Lord!—how could he really say for sure?

“It must be pretty humbling,” Ces Les Giver thought, “to have few or no resources at all, and depend almost totally on the charity and grace of others for survival.” Then Ces Les Giver looked around at the people in church. He saw his neighbor, Hav Ben Given. He thought about all the meals, cards and well-wishes people had given to him in the last few months, which Hav Ben Given so gladly and thankfully received.

“For whom is it harder?” Ces Les Giver wondered, “the giver or the receiver of such benevolence? For Hav Ben Given, receiving so many meals and cards and kind words must have constantly reminded him of his loneliness as a widower, and that had to be very hard.”

At last, Ces Les Giver’s eyes turned to the altar in the front of the church. He looked at the cross: the ultimate symbol of giving; the object which best illustrated his “give until it hurts” motto. Jesus certainly gave until it hurt. He

gave his very life.

Then Reverend Doolittle's sermon title flashed into Ces Les Giver's mind again: Receiving Until It Hurts. "For whom was the cross harder?" he questioned. Ces Les Giver had always thought for sure that it was much harder for God to give such sacrificial love than for humankind to receive it. But now he wasn't so sure. After all, to receive the love of God expressed on the cross was to admit that you needed and were dependent on God's grace, and that was a very scary thing to do. Human beings have this tendency to be prideful and stubbornly independent creatures who didn't really want to ask God for help, even when they were on the verge of self-destruction. And that made the divine grace God offered through the cross very hard to receive.

Suddenly Reverend Doolittle said something that grabbed Ces Les Giver's attention: "It's only when we have learned to receive the gifts God and others offer us with joy and thanksgiving that we can truly and cheerfully give. True Christian giving flows out of a joyous, grateful heart, in response to the many blessings that have been showered on us by our loving God."

The sermon was winding to a close now, but for some strange reason, Ces Les Giver kind of wished it could go on a bit longer. The words were really hitting home with him. "My friends," said Pastor Doolittle, "I'm certainly not telling you not to give, because when giving is done with a loving and thankful heart, in joyful response to the many good things God has bestowed on us, then it is more blessed to give than to receive.

"But even as you give to others, I encourage you to also learn to receive. That might be hard for you, but even if you begin to resist and fight it; and even if it humbles you so much that it's painful, allow yourself to receive the gifts God and other people offer you and be grateful for them. Receive until it hurts," Rev. Doolittle concluded. "And then respond in a way that genuinely expresses your joy and gratitude for what you have received. In thanksgiving, pass along a portion of the good things you have received. Then you will be a truly cheerful giver—the kind of giver that pleases the Lord."

The music for the final hymn began. Ces Les Giver's head was swimming. His whole life had just been turned upside-down. He sensed a tiny change in him, as if his heart had cracked open a tiny bit. The work of the Holy Spirit, maybe?

When the hymn ended, Ces Les Giver's eyes met those of Hav Ben Given, who was standing across the aisle from him. They smiled at each other. Hav Ben Given walked over and placed a warm hand on Ces Les Giver's shoulder. "Happy Thanksgiving, Cecil," he said.

"Same to you, Haverford."

There was an awkward silence. Hav Ben Given started to leave, then stopped. "Say, Cecil. I was wondering, would you and your wife like to come over to my place for dinner some day? There are times when the house just gets too quiet and lonely for me. I'd really love the company."

Ces Les Giver opened his mouth to say "no;" but then, fighting against every instinct in him, he stopped himself. And instead of "no" he said, "I can't imagine how hard it must be to live by yourself after having been married for so many years, Hav Ben. I never did tell you how sorry I am that your wife died."

Hav Ben Given's eyes misted up. Ces Les Giver put a compassionate arm around his shoulder and said, "Haverford, I'd be pleased to accept your invitation to have dinner with you, and I'm sure my wife would be, too. We'll do it soon. I'll give you a call the day after Thanksgiving and we can pick a date that's good for all of us. Thanks so much for the invitation."

The wonderful thing was, Ces Les Giver meant it from the bottom of his heart. He truly was grateful for the coming opportunity to get to know a neighbor a little better and break bread with him. That's not to say that accepting the invitation from Hav Ben Given had been easy for him. In truth, it was a very difficult thing for Ces Les Giver to do. For him, receiving hurt, it really did; but that was okay; he would survive just fine. And he was sure that, over time, he would learn how to more easily receive gifts from God and others with gladness and gratitude.

But until that happened, Ces Les Giver would give thanks to God that at least his learning had begun. And he could even imagine a day when, by God's grace, his favorite saying wouldn't be "Give until it hurts," but "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, who continues to bless us every day." Amen.