

Series: The Joy of Giving
Part I: Blessed to be a Blessing
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Today, we are starting a new series we are calling “The Joy of Giving.” Not too long ago, I heard the true story one pastor told about a woman who was looking for joy in her life:

Sue Wyatt was a Methodist lay teacher in Florida...Every fall, Sue had a circuit of churches for whom she did retreats for women. She was a popular teacher and a lifetime student of the Bible. Every fall, she would work her way through North Florida and South Georgia. One year, she felt God leading her to teach on the subject of joy. She started in the spring, reading, studying, researching everything she could find on joy. But the more she prepared, the less joy she felt. She said, “I felt as if someone had pulled the plug on my joy.” But she went on and did the retreats. She spoke every weekend. People who knew her would ask, “Sue, are you alright? You don’t seem yourself this year!” And she would always say the same thing, “I’m fine! Everything is fine!” But she knew it wasn’t. She finished her teaching early in December and was absolutely depleted. It was like the wine had run out. Every year in December, Sue’s gift to her daughter was to meet her in Tallahassee and help her with her Christmas shopping. Her daughter noticed it too. “Mother,” she said, “is everything alright? You’re not yourself. What’s wrong?” “Nothing’s wrong,” Sue would say. “I’m fine. Why does everyone keep asking that?” They were in a grocery store getting groceries, and her daughter said, “Mother, you finish here, and I’ll run next door to the drugstore, and we’ll meet up there.” Sue finished the grocery shopping and took them to the car. And as she was walking to the drugstore, she encountered a Salvation Army fellow ringing a bell. As she walked beside him, he put the bell in her hand, and said, “You are to have this bell. It will bring you joy.” She thought he was asking her to do his job. She said, “Excuse me. I’m in a hurry” -- fished out a dollar bill out of her billfold and gave it to him. He said, “No, Ma’am, you are to have this bell; it will bring you joy.” She said, “I’m meeting my daughter. I’m busy.” He said, “Lady, take the bell.” She took the bell. She began to ring it. When she turned to see the man, he was gone. She went into the drugstore ringing that bell. She went up and down the aisles ringing the bell. And suddenly, her feet became lighter. People gave her odd looks, some smiled. Suddenly, as she turned the corner, she came face-to-face with her daughter. “Mother, what on earth are you doing?” she said. “Have you lost your mind?” “No,” said Sue. “I haven’t lost my mind, but I think I’ve found my joy!” The next morning Sue called the Salvation Army to return the bell. They said, “Ma’am, we don’t give away bells.” Further conversation revealed that there was no kettle at the location she specified. Sue concluded that day that an angel of the Lord had appeared to her and restored her joy. (As told by David Chappell on Day I sermon, December 8, 2013)

So, here’s my question: *Are you looking to restore some joy in your life?* If that is the case, then I think about the words of Paul found in our Bible passage from Acts 20:32-35. This is Paul speaking to some of the church leaders from Ephesus where he had started a new church. This will be the last time Paul will see them. These words are at the end of what he tells them before

he encounters the challenges he will face in Jerusalem, and later in Rome. As we read this, listen for the Word of the Lord.

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 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.' – Acts 20:32-35, NIV

When it comes to joy, I believe that one of the primary ways we can experience joy in our lives is through giving. Today, and in the coming weeks, we are going to peel back the layers of “the joy of giving” to find out why that is true.

Paul starts us off today with these final words he tells these church leaders. He then ends these words of wisdom by quoting Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35b, NIV) Not only does Paul mention these words of Jesus that focus on blessing and giving, but this whole passage is really a blessing. It is almost like the benediction we give at the end of the worship service each week. When one of the pastors raises his hands, what we are doing is speaking good words while we are blessing everyone here. That is why our hands are raised facing those in the congregation. We are blessing you in the name of Christ. Paul's words sound like a blessing and a benediction: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up . . .” (Acts 20:1a, NIV) Not only that, but Paul ends by actually mentioning the word “blessing” when he quotes Jesus saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35b, NIV) In a sense, blessing bookends these words -- both at the beginning and the end. In between, Paul points the way to what it means both to *be* blessed and *why* we are blessed.

I don't know about you, but I usually read the bumper stickers on the cars in front of me – especially when I am stopped behind them in traffic. Every now and then I see one that says either the single word “Blessed” or “I Am Blessed.” I have to admit I have mixed thoughts and feelings when I see that. On the one hand, as a Christian and a pastor, I assume the person in the car in front of me is a Christian – since “blessed” is language we use in the church to describe what it means to be a follower of Christ. We believe we are all recipients of God's grace and we find salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and a purpose in life -- all as gifts from God. These are blessings from God we can only receive with open arms and say thank you to God. In addition, we also believe that God showers blessings on us every day – from the beauty of creation to the resources we have to use in life. These are all blessings that we receive from God. And as the great, old hymn of the church reminds, we should “Count our blessings, name them one by one.” I know all of that.

However, there is something about seeing a bumper sticker that says “Blessed” or “I am Blessed” that feels a little boastful to me – as in “*I am blessed . . . and you are not.*” Now maybe that is reading too much into it. (Some of you may be thinking that I need to get a good counselor to help me work on my own issues – which may be true.) But still, it feels like the person with the “I Am Blessed” bumper sticker may be missing the point of what it means to be blessed -- not only that blessings come from God, which the bumper sticker seems to recognize,

but also that there is *reason* we are blessed. And that reason may be more than just telling everyone how blessed we are on a bumper sticker, which sounds a little like spiritual bragging. Paul's words point the way to not only what it means to *be* blessed by God, but *why* we are blessed in the first place. And I believe *that* can lead us to joy.

After Paul begins with his words of blessing, he talks about grace, inheritance, coveting silver or gold, clothing, supplying needs, and hard work. So, why does Paul use all these words that have to do with money, material possessions, and how we attain them through our effort? And what does this have to do with blessing? I think the words of Jesus are the key: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Paul is reminding us that Jesus is focusing on the *reason* we are blessed – *we are blessed in order to give*. Or, as some have put it, *we are blessed to be a blessing to others*.

Notice why Paul talks about these things. Look at what he said right before he quotes the words of Jesus. Paul says, "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, . . ." (Acts 20:35a, NIV) Paul worked hard and was blessed by God in order to "help the weak." Paul understood that *he was blessed to be a blessing to those in need*. That is why *we* are blessed in life – in order to be a blessing to others through our giving. And that is one of the main ways we find joy in life – through our giving to help those in need, those who are weak, and those who need our giving to relieve their suffering and pain.

Last fall we invited everyone to read along in Eugene Peterson's classic book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, as we looked at the Psalms in worship. Near the end of the book, Peterson has a great chapter on "Blessing" -- which I encourage you to go back and re-read this week, if you still have the book. And if you don't, then you really need to order the book and read the whole thing. It is one of those books that I have read again and again and it will change your life – if you take to heart what it says. Peterson says this about blessing: "And because God blesses us, we bless God. We respond with that which we have received. . . persons who travel the way of faith experiencing the ways of grace in all kinds of weather and over every kind of terrain, become good at blessing. . . Every act of worship concludes with a benediction." (192)

Peterson says we respond to being blessed by first blessing God in worship. He notes that blessing God is a command and not an option. For example, in Psalm 134 it begins, "Come, bless GOD, all you servants of GOD!" Now, in response to a command like this to bless and worship God, someone may say, "But I don't feel like it. And I won't be a hypocrite. I can't bless God if I don't feel like blessing God. It wouldn't be honest."

In response to that line of reasoning, Peterson says this: "Act your gratitude; pantomime your thanks; you will become like what you do. Many think that the only way to change your behavior is to first change your feelings . . . But there is older wisdom that puts it differently: by changing our behavior we can change our feelings." (194-195)

So, when it comes to worship and blessing God, saying, "I don't feel like it" or "When I feel like it, then I will do it" – that doesn't get us to where we want to end up, *if* blessing and joy are our ultimate goals. When it comes to blessing God, or to being a blessing to others, don't wait until you feel like it – do it anyway! *Do it anyway!* The more you do it, the better you become at doing

it. The more we bless God and others with our actions, the more we experience joy. That's because we were each created in the image of God to experience joy through our giving. And that's why we are blessed – in order to be a blessing to others.

When it comes to giving, I have heard some different perspectives over the years on how our giving relates to how we feel about giving. C.S. Lewis said this:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc, is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

Lewis seems to be saying that as Christians, we should *give until it hurts* and involves some sacrifice that we feel. From his perspective, feeling uncomfortable about what our giving costs us is actually a good indicator that we are doing the right thing. Maybe it is like stretching our muscles when getting ready to exercise. During your stretch, if you don't feel some discomfort in what you are doing, you are probably not stretching enough. In the same way our giving should stretch us.

Ted Bailey was an elder at a church I once served. Ted was also the primary fundraiser for one of the larger hospitals in Atlanta. He had even taught fundraising for not-for-profits at the college level and wrote a textbook on how to do it. So, Ted knew something about giving. Once in our church, he stood up and challenged the congregation by saying this: "Give until it feels good." In contrast to C.S. Lewis, Ted believed that you needed to push beyond the discomfort of giving until it finally feels good again! If giving doesn't yet feel good, then it is because we are not yet giving enough away to make a difference in the lives of others.

Here at Johns Creek Presbyterian Church, your giving goes to make a difference in the lives of others. Some of it goes directly to help those who are "weak" – as Paul describes it. For example, as we talked about last week, Hands of Christ is our mission partner. It is a front-line ministry that helps the hungry and those on the edge of poverty. When you give to JCPC, part of that goes to help those who are weak. Our mission trips such as the one our youth went on helped hurricane victims put their lives back together. Our on-going partnership with those in the Dominican Republic enables us to do long-term mission, such as building a school to educate children who did not have that opportunity.

As a church, we have helped buy an ambulance for the Good Samaritan Health Center in Cameroon which was started by our own Christina Siewe. Mission Hope, Compassion International, Beacon of Hope, the Central Night Shelter, the Atlanta Community Food Bank, the Good Samaritan Center, Dreamweavers of Georgia, Life South Community Blood Centers, 13 weekly 12-Step meetings that occur in our buildings, scouting troops for boys and girls – all of these help others – especially "the weak." When you give to JCPC with your annual pledge, you are using your blessings to be a blessing to others.

Now I hope just hearing about the large scope of human need addressed that happens here inspires you to give generously – even beyond what you ever thought you could do. I hope you already feel like giving. I really do! But, even if you don't *feel* like giving, like pledging, or like being a blessing to others – *do it anyway*. Do it anyway – because that is one of the main ways God has created each one of us to experience joy in this life – by giving generously to others, to be blessing to others.

This week you will receive a letter from me if you are a member, reminding you of all of this. It will also contain our “Joy of Giving” brochure. In addition, there will be a pledge card asking for you to give generously in 2019 and make a difference in the lives of others through the ministry and mission of this church. Sunday October 28, which is also “Kirkin’ of the Tartans” Sunday with bagpipes, brass, and drums, is the day we will invite you to give that pledge card in worship. However, if you know you will not be there, we need you to go ahead and make your pledge beforehand or as soon as possible so we can make a difference in the lives of others in 2019. You can also do that online – just go to the JCPC app or the website. Simply put, we need your generous support to continue the great ministry God is blessing here at JCPC. We need you to use your blessings to be a blessing to others.

I want to close with a short video about giving. It is a Christmas video – a TV commercial from a few years back that you may remember. It is about a young boy who can't wait for Christmas.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5RhP3H3G7w>)

Remember what Jesus said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” If you want to find joy, you can find it through giving and making a difference in the lives of others. I hope you will choose to do it through the amazing ministry here at Johns Creek Presbyterian Church.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.