

INTRODUCTION

An 85-year-old man named Sam bought a lottery ticket with a \$1 million prize. His grown children learned he had won, but because Sam had a bad heart, they were afraid to just tell him outright in fear that he would have a heart attack on the spot. So after some discussion, they decided to ask his pastor to try to break the good news gently to Sam so it wouldn't put a strain on his heart.

The pastor called on his old friend and they chatted for awhile, until the pastor said, "Sam, let me ask you a question. If you learned suddenly you had won a million dollars, what would you do with it?" Without hesitation Sam said, "Well, I'd give half of it to our church." And the pastor had a heart attack on the spot!

You may not have half a million to give to your church, but we are in a section in 2 Corinthians in which Paul is writing about the offering received from the churches to help the saints in Jerusalem who were suffering from a severe famine. Chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to this offering, but never once does the word "money" appear. Instead we find the word "grace" predominating. God has been generous in pouring out the riches of His grace to us, so that in turn, we might learn about the grace of being generous to others.

2 Corinthians 8:10-21. "And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.' (That's a direct quote from Exodus 16:18 that refers to collecting the manna that God gave to the Israelites.) I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men."

Paul had critics in the church at Corinth who made claims that he was unfit to be an apostle. Part of their criticism might have been directed at how this offering was being handled, so that's why Paul bent over backward to explain that the offering was being handled with integrity and accountability. He said Titus and another brother were given the job of handling and administering the offering. We can learn from that today. Because there have been financial abuses in churches and religious organizations, it's important for us to handle God's money in a way that is right in His eyes and in the eyes of man. That's why, for instance, when our offerings

are received here at Green Acres, our worship hosts deliver the offering to a designated place where there are several people waiting and then a designated group collects it and carries it directly to our safe—we never allow a single individual to carry the offering. That’s why we have an outside accounting firm come in every year and conduct a full financial review of how our offerings are received and spent. And thankfully, we have always gotten a clean audit.

But, again this message isn’t about money; it’s about learning to be gracious and generous. The economy in Corinth was vibrant and the believers had been blessed financially, so Paul reminds them that they have been blessed so they can share their blessings with the less fortunate. So without talking about money, I want to share with you how we have been blessed to be a blessing. We are blessed to live in America. We are blessed to living in East Texas, and because we are blessed, we have the joy of *being* a blessing to others.

There is a discernable pattern in the Bible that I call God’s blessing cycle. If you want to get in on this cycle, you must understand the four components in it. When you comprehend these four truths, you can be on your way to participating in God’s blessing cycle. The first truth is:

(1) EVERY BLESSING COMES FROM GOD

God’s blessing cycle begins when we acknowledge that every good thing in our life has come from God. As Americans we tend to think the reason we’re blessed is because we have worked hard and we deserve it. But the Bible teaches that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father.” (James 1:17)

One of my favorite movies is “Shenandoah starring” Jimmy Stewart. It’s the story of a crusty Virginia farmer during the Civil War. He’s a recent widower. And on her deathbed, his wife made him promise to raise their seven children as “good Christians.” He tries his best to honor her request. The movie begins with an unforgettable scene, with the family seated at the dinner table. Jimmy Stewart feels compelled to honor his wife’s wishes, so he begrudgingly prays this prayer: “Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn’t be here and we wouldn’t be eatin’ it if we hadn’t done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel. But we thank you just the same for this food we’re about to eat. Amen.”

Some of us fall into the same trap of thinking we deserve what we have because we worked so hard to earn it. But the Bible makes it clear that all that we have comes from God. One of the most powerful reminders of this is found where God says, “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

Paul used the illustration of manna from heaven to demonstrate this truth. He quoted Exodus 16:18, which says, “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.” God sustained about two million people wandering in the desert for 40 years by providing manna for them. The word “manna” literally means “what is it?” On the first morning the Hebrews saw it they said, “What is this?” It would be like you sitting down to food that you didn’t recognize and asking, “What is this?” The Bible says the manna was a bread-like

substance that appeared on the ground six days a week after the dew evaporated. It was round, sweet, and like a flake. I've always pictured something like Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. Six days a week the Hebrew people went out and simply picked up the manna—one *omer* (about two quarts) for each person in their family. If they tried to save it for the next day, it would become rotten with maggots. But on Friday they would pick up twice as much so they wouldn't have to work on the Sabbath, and for that day, the manna would still be fresh. The message of the manna is that GOD supernaturally provided the manna; therefore no one could claim they had produced it themselves.

Now after a few years of eating manna, I would think the cooks had to get rather creative in preparing it. Can you imagine sitting down to a manna meal in one of the tents? There before you is manna casserole, manna soufflé, and for desert, bamanna bread, of course. After the meal, you say to your host, "Thanks for the delicious food." Your host wouldn't say, "You're welcome. I created this manna myself." No, instead the host would say, "Oh, don't thank me. Thank God. I didn't do anything except go out and pick it up. God is the one who provided this meal." Don't you think we should say exactly the same thing about every good thing in our lives? We didn't create it, we didn't produce it. God did, and He enables us to collect it and share it. The blessing cycle begins when you acknowledge that EVERY blessing is from God.

(2) GOD DESIGNED YOU TO BE A CHANNEL OF BLESSING, NOT A CONTAINER

God gives us blessings for a reason: So we can BE a blessing by sharing with others. But the moment you start hoarding or storing up your blessing, it becomes like day-old manna—it stinks to high heaven. We see evidence of this truth in the promise God gave to Abram, who would later be named Abraham. The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1-2). I can imagine Abram thought, "Well, Lord, if I've going to have a family that becomes a great nation, you'd better get to work, because right now it's just my wife and me!" God later promised that Abraham's descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky and the grains of sands on the shore. God waited until Abraham and Sarah were well beyond child-producing age to give them a son, Isaac. He did this to show again that Abraham couldn't take credit for the blessing—it came from God.

But over the centuries, the nation of Israel became self-centered and forgot that God blessed them to BE a blessing to all nations. God chose the Israelites so they could tell all nations that there is a kind, loving Creator who wants to have a relationship with all people, not only the Jews. But the Jews thought they were the *only* blessed people, so they developed an Us Against Them mentality. They came to the point where they thought there were only two kinds of people on earth: "US: The blessed ones" and "THEM: The *goyim*, the Gentiles, who were all unclean heathens." They became so xenophobic of other nations (like Myanmar is acting now) that God had to send them into captivity to remind them that they weren't supposed to store God's blessings, they were blessed to share God's blessing with all nations.

Sometimes we make the same mistake. When we receive God's blessings, we start hoarding or storing instead of sharing our blessings with others. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Whenever I'm in Israel I always point out the difference between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea and use it as an illustration of two different attitudes people have. The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful fresh water lake teeming with fish. It receives fresh water from the north and then the fresh water flows out from the south side as the Jordan River. We always enjoy a baptismal service in the Jordan River near where the southern edge of the Sea of Galilee.

About 45 miles south of the Sea of Galilee the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. It's called the Dead Sea because nothing lives in it. Why? Because being the lowest point on earth, the Dead Sea only receives water, it never passes it on. It's a container instead of a channel. Blessed people are like the Sea of Galilee. We receive God's fresh blessings and pass them on to others. But some people are like the Dead Sea, always receiving, but never sharing. If your life is dead, dull, and boring right now, it might be because you've become content to be a container instead of a channel of blessing to others.

Billy Graham wrote: "God has given us two hands—one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for sharing."

Let's review: First, every blessing comes from God. Second, God designed you to be a channel of blessing not a container, and third,

(3) WHEN YOU BLESS OTHERS, YOU RECEIVE A BLESSING

We are often so selfish in our prayers. Our prayer becomes a shopping list that we present to God, where we are basically praying, "God bless me, bless me, bless me." Instead, we should be praying, "God MAKE me a blessing." Because when you bless others, you receive a blessing. This truth is repeated throughout the Bible. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." Would you like to be refreshed? Then focus on refreshing others.

Did you notice the statement that Paul made in verse 14? As he addressed the wealthy Corinthians about giving a gift to benefit the poor believers in Jerusalem, he wrote, "Your plenty will supply their need and, in turn, their plenty will supply your need." What did he mean by that? I don't think he meant that in time the poor Jerusalem Christians would take up an offering and send it to the Corinthians. No, I think he was talking about how when we give unselfishly to others, they give us something we need—the blessing that comes from giving away something without expecting anything in return. I've often said that much of what we call "giving" is actually just swapping. We give Christmas gifts and birthday presents to our family and friends because they give up Christmas gifts and birthday presents. And we even calculate the value of the gift we give them based upon the value of the gift that they gave us. "Let's see, she gave me a book last year, so I'll give her a book." Or, "He gave me a dozen Titleist golf balls, so I can't give him Top Flites." That's not giving, that's swapping.

True giving occurs when we give and we don't expect anything in return except the blessing of giving the gift. I was able to witness this graceful generosity in a remarkable way this past week

when I was on the Africa Mercy hospital ship docked outside Monrovia, Liberia. Mercy Ships, offers hope and healing in Jesus' name to the poorest people of the world—and they offer it all free. I was on the ship to lead a two-day Conference for Liberian pastors, but while I was there I got to observe two life-changing surgeries. The doctors go by their first names, so I watched Dr. Gary perform a cleft palate, lip, and nose repair on a 3-month-old Liberian girl. During the surgery, I asked Dr. Gary how many cleft palate repairs he had performed while working on Mercy Ships and he said somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000. After the surgery, I sat down with him and asked him why he operates on the poorest people who have no way to pay him or repay him. He told me his satisfaction comes from knowing he gets to make a real difference in the lives of people whom God loves. And then he said these golden words, "I've been BLESSED by God with the skills to perform this surgery, and by making a difference in a person's life, I receive a tremendous blessing." He has discovered we are blessed to be a blessing!

Dr. Gary and the other volunteers are giving what they have plenty of to those who have need, and in turn these patients are giving these medical professionals something they need—a deep sense of the satisfaction of practicing medicine for the pure purpose of relieving suffering.

Have you discovered yet that God has blessed you so you can make a difference and BE a blessing to others? You really aren't living until you discover this. In his book, *Halftime*, Bob Buford writes that most professionals spend the first half of their lives working for security, only to discover that money doesn't satisfy them. Smart people make a change at halftime and spend the rest of their lives working for something more valuable than security: Significance.

Someone sent me the anonymous observation, "First I was dying to finish high school and start college. And then I was dying to finish college and start working. And then I was dying to marry and have children. And then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for school so I could return to work. And then I was dying to retire. And now, I am dying...and suddenly I realize I forgot to live." Real living is found in God's blessing cycle. This blessing cycle is really a life-cycle!

You may not be able to perform a life-changing surgery, but you have been blessed in a way that in turn you can be a blessing to others. Are you following the cycle? First, every blessing comes from God. Second, God designed you to be a channel of blessing NOT a container. Third, when you bless others you receive a blessing. And fourth,

(4) THE MORE YOU GIVE AWAY, THE MORE GOD CAN GIVE YOU TO GIVE AWAY

This is the final, and I believe, the most important step in the cycle. Just as there are certain natural laws in effect in our universe, there are also spiritual laws in effect. The father of modern physics, Isaac Newton, didn't discover the physical laws that govern our universe, he only observed and catalogued them. These unbreakable physical laws were already in effect. For instance, we are all aware of the law of gravity. If you jump off a 50-story building, you don't break the law of gravity, you only demonstrate it.

When I speak of spiritual laws, I'm not talking about the Old Testament commandments, or the Old Testament Law. I'm talking about unbreakable spiritual laws of cause and effect God established. For instance, there is the law of sowing and reaping. God's word says in Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." There is another universal spiritual law Jesus gave in Luke 6:38. He said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Luke 6:38)

In Jesus' time, people wore robes. When they needed to carry something they often picked up the front hem of the robe to make a basket. That's the image Jesus is employing here. When we give, we receive. And the measure we use to give is the same measure God uses to give to us. If we give with a thimble, we'll receive a thimble full of blessing. If we give with a shovel, we'll receive a shovel full of blessing. If we give with a boxcar, we'll receive a boxcar of blessing in return. Get it? But God's shovel is always bigger than mine, and His boxcar is always bigger than mine.

God has already given you so much, and the cycle is activated when you give. When you do, God gives you more, and so you can give more away. And the cycle continues. But if you ever start hoarding it to yourself, the cycle is broken. God also can examine the motives of your heart. If you give so you can receive more to hold onto, the cycle doesn't work. But if you give so you can give more away, God keeps His part of the law.

God loves to give to His children. A man once said to me, "Every time I go to church, all I ever hear about is 'give, give, give.'" I said, "Thank you for giving me the best one-word definition of the Christian life. "For God so loved the world that He GAVE..."

CONCLUSION

Have you ever heard the expression "prime the pump?" Back in the days when people used hand water pumps, you had to pour water into the pump to often get water flowing out of it. In his book *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity* Chuck Swindoll relates the story about a man lost in the desert, thirsty for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old weather-beaten, windowless shack, and took refuge inside its walls to find a little shade. As he glanced around, he saw an old water pump about fifteen feet away, and he stumbled over to it. He grabbed the handle and began to pump up and down, but nothing came out. Disappointed, he staggered back to a corner, but then noticed an old jug off to the side. He looked at it, wiped away the dirt and the dust, and read a message that said, "You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug. P.S. Be sure to fill the jug again before you leave."

He popped the cork, and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live, but if he poured all the water into the old rusty pump, it might yield fresh, cool water from the well—all the water he wanted. He studied the possibility of both options and wondered what he should do. Reluctantly, he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump—up and down, up and down. Nothing came out. Up and down, up and down. A little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his great relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump.

Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it, and he filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents. Then he filled the jug to the top for the next traveler, popped the cork back on, and added this note: "Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back."

That's faith! It took faith for the thirsty man to take all the available water to prime the pump. Think of your resources as the jug of water—and then think of God's blessings as the cool, stream of gushing water. Where are you in God's blessing cycle? Will you keep your resources all to yourself, or will you, by faith, prime the pump of God's flood of blessings? The choice is yours.

Will you choose to get involved in God's blessing cycle?

OUTLINE

(1) EVERY BLESSING COMES FROM GOD

"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth." *Deuteronomy 8:17-18*

(2) GOD DESIGNED YOU TO BE A CHANNEL OF BLESSING, NOT A CONTAINER

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." *Genesis 12:1-2*

(3) WHEN YOU BLESS OTHERS, YOU RECEIVE A BLESSING

"A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." *Proverbs 11:25*

(4) THE MORE YOU GIVE AWAY, THE MORE GOD CAN GIVE YOU TO GIVE AWAY

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." *Luke 6:38*



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes