

“Do You Live to Bless or Possess?”

Acts 4:32-37

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Datta Phuge loved gold. As the founder of “a slightly slippery” money-lending firm in India, Datta acquired a lot of gold. Yet it wasn’t enough for him to stash it in the bank or wear it on his fingers. He longed to be coated in gold. To fulfill his dreams it took 15 gold smiths two weeks to fashion for him a 22-carat gold shirt. The cost? \$250,000. Admirers began calling him the “Gold Man of Pune.” The Economist reports

As a man of political ambitions himself, he hoped the shirt might get him noticed nationally. That was why he wore it not just to functions or events, but also when going casually around the town, causing a small sensation.

Unfortunately, Mr. Phuge attracted the wrong kind of attention. On July 14, the 48-year-old golden boy was on his way to a party when twelve “friends” to whom he owed money killed him. The golden shirt has disappeared.

The Economist went on to compare the man with a shirt of gold to a man with a heart of gold on the other side of the world. Thirty years ago Johnny Barnes, a retired railroad employee decided to take a stand for happiness...literally. Every morning at 4 a.m., rain or shine, he dons his wide-brim straw hat, walks the two miles to the Crow Lane Roundabout – one of the busiest intersections in Hamilton, Bermuda - and blesses all the rush hour motorists. For six hours he waves, blows kisses and shouts, “I love you!” He is known as the Happy Man of Bermuda. Why does he do it? Genuine joy and gratitude for the life God has given him. A devoted follower of Jesus, Johnny claims he is an instrument of God to bring happiness to others. Commuters admit they can’t help but feel happy when they receive his love. At times he will even pray for passersby who stop by. Eventually his grateful nation raised a statue of Johnny Barnes near where he takes his stand. On July 9th, five days before the death of Datta Phuge, Johnny Barnes passed away at the age of 93. The Economist observed,

The moral of the tale seems almost too easy to draw: the selfish flaunter of happiness, weighed down by gold, came to an awful end, while the selfless one, wearing his prodigious love so lightly, was praised.¹

Do you live to bless or possess? Do you live more to give or to get? Where do you fall on the scale between holding onto and handing over? Today in Believe our key theme is Stewardship. Now that seems strange since most of us filled out pledge cards over a month ago. Yet Stewardship is far more than an offering. Stewardship is about owning. Who is the owner? The key idea is: “I believe everything I am and everything I own belongs to God.” The key verse is: “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. Psalm 24:1” According to the Bible, everything – my possessions, my money, my time, my abilities, my life - is owned by God and loaned to

¹ “Clothed with happiness,” *The Economist*, July 23, 2016, p. 74.

me. Now I may say I believe this. Yet I act like I own it and I'm doing God a favor by giving or loaning some of it to Him. I want to be a blessing like Johnny but I hunger for more possessing like Datta.

Why do we prefer possessing over blessing? Possessions give us status: "You are what you drive." Possessions give us security: "Don't leave home without it." Possessions give us pleasure: "Double your pleasure, double your fun." Possessions give us power: "Just Do It!" Yet it's all an illusion. Possessions are only things. They can't do any of this. Yet we believe they can. And we're miserable when we lose them.

The first new car I bought was a sleek, black Ford Tempo. When I finished the forty-eighth payment it was finally mine. I had the title to prove it. Right after that, my family and I drove it to Chicago to stay with Lisa's sister. We pulled up to their curb, turned off the engine and discovered this model has a special feature. Its internal combustion engine also combusts externally. Smoke rose from under the hood. By the time the fire department arrived it was too late - a total loss. I had to rent a car to drive the 800 miles back home. Now let me put this in perspective so you can feel my pain: when I drove to Chicago I had a fully-paid-for car that was all mine. When I returned, all I had was the license plate. This event so affected my family that in September, when my son's teacher asked what he did on his summer vacation, he drew a picture of a black car with flames leaping out of the hood. I must confess: this made me depressed. Why? I lost something I thought I possessed. I have the title - I should have complete control over it. Right? Yet it's all an illusion. It can be taken from me at any time. I felt grief over its loss. How did a thing made of steel, glass, rubber and plastic work its way into my heart?

Neurologists who study brain scans made an illuminating discovery. When subjects are shown material possessions, the part of the brain which lights up is the same spot which glows when people feel close to God. The conclusion? Gazing at possessions is similar to having a deep religious experience.² No wonder the Bible says that idolatry, substituting stuff for God, is the most basic sin. Scripture says that idolatry is adultery: it's loving stuff more than God. Stuff does not give status. Stuff does not give security. Stuff cannot save us. When you live to possess all you get is stress, distress and a mess.

God gives us stuff not to possess but to bless. The Greek word for "steward" is *oikonomos*. It refers to a servant who manages the household for the master. A steward is a supervisor, a caretaker but not an owner. Jesus says,

Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. (Luke 12:42-44)

A steward does not own anything. He or she manages the master's possessions and hands them out according to the master's directions. A steward lives to bless not possess.

² James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 163-164

Contrast how I felt about my car with the way Paul and Martha Stringer handle their Suburban. Over the years they have frequently and freely offered this great, big, blue behemoth for Creation Festivals, Mission trips and Youth Retreats. The PennDOT title tells them they own it. God tells them to bless others with it.

The first Christians lived to bless not possess. From the very start they did something rarely seen in the history of humanity.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:44-45).

Nobody was in need since those who had provided for those who had not. How do you bless instead of possess? First, **Open Your Life to God's Grace.**

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33).

The reason we bless others is because we are blessed with abundant and eternal life by our Lord Jesus Christ. We don't give out of guilt. We don't give because we are paying God back. We don't give because it's our duty. We don't give because God or the church needs our money. We give for only one reason: gratitude. We were given the greatest gift of all – the life of God's only Son for our salvation. It's a gift of pure grace, utterly free. We can never pay for it and we don't have to. The greatest factor that makes someone a generous giver is not how long they've been a member, how much they have in the bank, or what position they hold in the church. Extravagant cheerful givers are people whose hearts have been grasped by the extravagant gift of God's Son. If the immense and amazing cost of that sacrifice has not grabbed your soul, then nothing I say can convince you to give your time, your talent, your treasure. But if that grace *has* filled your soul, then nothing can stop you from giving. Open your life to the incredible grace of Jesus Christ. Open your life to the One who gives your whole life to you, who gave His whole life for you and asks you to bless others with a tenth of what He gives.

My Grandparents were married for fifteen years when my Grandfather Leon passed away. He left behind my Grandmother Lucy, my Uncle Ed and my Mom. They were devastated. With two children to support my Grandmother desperately searched for a job but in the 1940s companies did not want to hire a 40 year-old woman. Finally, she managed to coerce an insurance company to hire her. Now my Grandmother had a bachelor's degree in accounting from NYU. She obviously hoped for a responsible position. Instead, the company made her the mailroom supervisor's assistant. With two children to support and no income, she had no choice but to accept. When her supervisor left for alcoholic rehabilitation, she was given his position with no pay raise or additional vacation days. Yet she worked to clothe, feed, shelter and put her kids through college.

Now after so great a sacrifice, imagine if my uncle and mom, when they are grown, rarely ever speak to her again. They may send a Christmas or Easter card but they don't visit, call or answer her calls. Would you call that gratitude? The truth is, my Grandmother never asked anything from them. What she wanted was for them to pass on

the love and bless the next generation – me, my brother, sister and cousins. And in gratitude for her great sacrifice, that is exactly what my uncle and mom did. In fact, my Grandmother’s sacrifice has made it possible for me to be your pastor.

God does not want you to pay Him back for His great sacrifice, the life of His Son. What He most wants is for you to pass the blessing to others. That’s the second way we live to bless: **Open Your Heart to God’s Mission.** “All the believers were one in heart and mind.” (Acts 4:32). The first Christians were united in purpose. They believed in the same mission: to do Good Deeds and to share the Good News about Jesus. They lived to bless people. Today, there are many people who do not give because they do not believe in the mission of God’s people. They are skeptical, even critical. One survey shows 28% of Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians give nothing.³ If you don’t believe in the mission of Woodside then I do not want you to give or serve. If you are not united with what we are doing for Jesus, then please do not give and serve.

But if you believe in teaching children to praise God and learn the Scriptures, if you believe in helping teens to discover that Jesus can lead them through the tempting and treacherous waters of junior high and high school, if you believe in helping adults grow closer to Jesus through Growth Groups, if you believe that worshiping God is a great way to tell your Heavenly Father, “I love you,” if you believe in offering shelter and meals to the hungry and homeless, recovery to the addicted, hope for the prisoner, building houses in Bucks, East Trenton and Appalachia, churches and medical clinics in the Dominican Republic, gardens and homes in the Bahamas, water wells in parched, dry Mozambique, and restoring villages in hurricane ravaged Haiti, then you’ve come to the right place. Why not join us and start blessing people?

Third, we live to bless when we **Open Your Hand and Give God’s Way.**

No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4:32, 34-37)

It’s not wrong to have possessions. These first believers were not possessed by them. They did not cling or hold on to them. Instead they opened their hands. If anyone had a need, they sold what they had and gave it away. A believer named Joseph sold his land and gave it all away with no strings attached. Joseph lived to bless. He blessed so many they actually gave him a nickname: Barnabas – Son of Encouragement – we could call him Encouragement-Boy or simply Atta-Boy. He was always going around giving everyone an Atta-Boy. In fact, Barnabas was so encouraging he found the Apostle Paul hiding at home and brought him back to the ministry. Paul wrote 13 letters – most of our New Testament and started an incredible number of churches. But we might not have any

³ Ron Sider, "A Lot of Lattés," Books & Culture (November/December 2008).

of that if it weren't for Atta-Boy. Barnabas gave the way God does: he made a promise to give and then he kept that promise. He lived to bless not possess.

Today, I ask you to be a Barnabas. Live to bless not possess. If you have not completed a Pledge card would you take that step today, respond to the emails I sent and commit a percentage of your income to God's work at Woodside in 2017?

And to all of you, this Advent Season, I ask you to make and keep a Promise. On Christmas Day God kept His Promise to us: He sent us a Savior wrapped in the flesh of a new born baby. On Christmas Day I invite you to make and keep a Promise. I ask you to put your best gift in this envelope and bring it on Christmas Day. 100% of it will:

Dig a well in the dry land of Mozambique
Provide a way out of homelessness for local families through Family Promise
Give education and God's Word to kids and teens in Trenton through Urban Promise

On that day we also invite you to bring all the items you've collected for Family Promise, Urban Promise and Code Blue in your Reverse Advent Calendar.

Now giving money and things is only the first step. In fact it's the easiest step. If you want to give the way God gives, I ask you to go farther and give yourself. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day you can be a greeter and welcome hundreds of people with the love of Jesus. During Christmas week you can participate in Family Promise, in the New Year you can help with Code Blue, provide a meal for the teen leaders or to help with homework at Urban Promise. You can get involved with the Prison Ministry, serve meals through the Dinner Ministry, lead worship at Manor Care, help build homes with Habitat for Humanity in Morrisville and Trenton, restore homes in Haiti in February.

This Christmas, discover the power of a promise.

Many people say we have just come through the most divisive election in American history. It has been painful and divisive and it still is. But it was not the worst. Our most divisive election was in November 1860 when Abraham Lincoln became our 16th President. One month later on December 17, 1860 delegates in the city of Columbia, South Carolina voted to secede from the Union. The remaining states of the Confederacy followed suit in rapid succession. The next four years of war claimed the lives of 620,000 soldiers. That fiery war neared the end on February 17, 1865 when the city of Columbia was set ablaze. Some blame General Sherman's devastating march to the sea. Others say the retreating Confederates ignited supplies to keep them from falling into Union hands.

Regardless of who was responsible, the flames left annihilation in their wake. One third of the city became mute smoldering ruins. The impact of that holocaust was magnified because Columbia had no firefighting equipment. It was lost during the war. Bucket brigades were the most they could muster to fight the inferno. It took decades for that city to truly rise from the ashes.

Buried within this horrific tragedy of division is a message of hope that opposite sides, even enemies, can unite to build a better future. Two years after the fire, while much of Columbia still lay in ruins, a promise came from an unlikely place. New York City firemen, many of whom once marched in the Union army, put out some of the fires of bitterness with a single gift. They raised \$5,000 – mostly from pennies - and purchased a fire wagon for their brother firefighters in Columbia. In March of 1867 a new fire truck was loaded onto a steamship bound for South Carolina. Unfortunately, on its journey south the ship went down in the Atlantic taking the fire truck to the bottom. Yet a promise made must be kept. The New York firefighters mounted another fund drive and sent a second wagon in June. The people of Columbia were so overwhelmed by this gift from their once bitter enemies that Confederate Colonel Samuel Melton made a promise on behalf of South Carolina's capital city. They would return the kindness "should misfortune ever befall the Empire city."

Their opportunity to bless New York came on a clear September morning. When Nancy Turner, the principal of White Knoll elementary school heard the devastating news of September 11, 2001 she wanted to find a tangible way her students could respond to the attacks. The children were too young to give blood, and no one liked the idea of simply sending money to an impersonal national fund. While searching for an idea she stumbled on the story of the fire truck given by New Yorkers so long ago. It was easy to get city leaders and the state governor, Jim Hodges, to join in. Columbia's fire chief was a New York native. The effort was renamed "South Carolina Remembers." Children, teens and adults raised the \$350,000 needed to replace one of the dozens of New York City firetrucks destroyed on that dreadful day. After 134 years, the day to remember came and the children of Columbia kept that promise.⁴

Let's stop the hatred and start the healing

Let's stop the grabbing and start the giving

Let's stop the possessing and start the blessing.

⁴ "A Kindness Returned-134 Years Later," from an Associated Press story by Page Ivey.