



Theme: Are You Restless?
"More Blessed to Give Than to Receive"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber
October 31-November 1, 2020

Scripture: John 17:20-21

Weekly Memory Verse:

You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." --Acts 20:35b

Scripture Readings:

Acts 20:35; Proverbs 11:25 and 22:9; Luke 6:38

VIDEO Sermon Intro

SLIDE "More Blessed to Give Than Receive"

My name is Jeff Huber and I serve as lead Pastor here at Summit Church in Durango. We are so glad you are worshipping with us today. If you are worshipping with us online today, we ask at some point you will let us know that you are here by putting your name in the chat box or sending us an email from our website.

In this time of pandemic, I have seen people of faith asking two questions over and over again. A few in our church have asked these, but I

have heard many ask them from outside of even faith communities.

SLIDE Is this the end times?

SLIDE Is God judging our nation or world?

Is God trying to get our **attention**? Should we **call the nation to repentance** from sin and pray for the soul of our nation? Let's be clear that it is **never a bad thing to be prepared for the return of Jesus** because we are asked to be in that kind of place all the time. It is also **good to pray for repentance**. Often times we come to these questions because of the way we are **raised** or because of our **worldview** or the kind of church we grew up in. I would suggest that these are not actually pertinent questions or even helpful, especially when Jesus himself said he did not know the day or the time of his return. I think we sometimes use questions like this to keep us from what is really important and because we wrestle with these questions, we become anxious and restless.

Today, we begin a new series of sermons about how we call our restless hearts and what Jesus tells us to do in order for us to experience a sense of God's peace and grace and mercy. What concerns me most about questions like these is that they point to a **limited view of history** and what other **Christians in the past** have dealt with which make our **current reality pale** in comparison. They also concern me because it means that we probably are not aware of what is happening to people **in other parts of the world**, not just during this pandemic, but **all the time**. If we live in the US, we are in the top 5% of wealthy people in the world, even those of us who feel poor. Many parts of the world have had to **navigate illness and pandemic and poverty for generations**, and many were experiencing horrible circumstances **before COVID** even arrived.

I want to be clear that I'm **not downplaying the more than 200,000 deaths experienced** in this pandemic or how challenging it has been for

those on the **front lines**, and in **communities at risk**. But there is this **question gnawing** at me when I get these questions about the end times or the judgment of God.

SLIDE Why do we in America move to complaint so quickly?

I want to be clear that I am asking this question of myself! **I can complain and whine** with the best. Part of the reason this is true is because we are **so blessed** as a nation. We have **great resources** and we have been **very protected** in many ways. When we travel to different parts of the world, we see that we **Americans have high expectations** of how we deserve to be **treated**. We **don't want to be told, "No."** We feel like we have **the right to do whatever we want**. The fact that fights have broken out and guns have been drawn over **whether to wear a face mask in a restaurant**, at Walmart or on an airplane should tell us something about our **low tolerance for discomfort**.

If we are willing to be honest about our culture, we are all pretty **"me" focused**. We are often **more concerned about our rights and our responsibilities**. **When individual rights take precedence over personal responsibility, and when our individual rights become more important than being personally responsible, perhaps the end is near!** Perhaps an apocalypse is just over the horizon! We cannot **create, pass, and enforce all the laws necessary to ensure peaceful coexistence** in a culture where **personal responsibility takes a backseat to personal freedoms**. I heard it put this way recently.

SLIDE "It can't be all about me, and all about you, all the same time."

Somebody and something **must give**. Some must be **willing to sacrifice some personal freedom** or chaos will ensue. This is difficult for us to grasp because the **notion of surrendering any personal freedom seems very un-American**. But we do it **all the time** if we are honest. Every time we stop at a

four-way stop sign and let the person to the right go before us, we are surrendering some personal freedom to just go at our own pace. Every time we **wait in line at the grocery store**, we are letting someone else go first. We **raise our children to say “no”** to themselves so they can **get along and play well with others in the sandbox**. I think of my grandfather and all his brothers and many in his generation who **sacrificed their own personal freedoms by fighting in World War II** against Nazi oppression. Many of them made the **ultimate sacrifice** and yet we squabble **about wearing a mask**. It seems **rather pathetic** when we look at it that way.

When we refuse to take responsibility for our own actions, we **force others to take responsibility** when they shouldn't have to. That can only go on for so long and have any sort of cohesive culture. That inability or **unwillingness to take responsibility**, combined with our background and curiosity, lead to those **strange questions** about the end times or how God works in the world when we experience illness and suffering, or in most of our cases, the **inconvenience or hassle** of the coronavirus.

The New Testament makes it crystal clear **what kinds of questions the early church asked when their hearts were restless** because they were facing problems they couldn't solve and when faced with a natural disaster that for whatever reason, **God chose not to withhold or intervene and miraculously fix**. After Pontius Pilate gave into the religious leadership and crucified Jesus, it became **open season on those who were followers of Jesus**. The **religious leaders** didn't drag anyone else to Pilate for execution, but just **took it upon themselves to go after Jesus followers**.

The **Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts** are in many ways part one and two in written by the same person. We read in the book of Acts that the first to be executed was a man named **Stephen**, who was sent by leaders in the early church to collect **food for widows and orphans and the poor** on

behalf of the followers of Jesus. Stephen was officially the first Christian martyr and he also was a **skilled and persuasive communicator**. The religious leaders and Jerusalem had Stephen arrested and tried for blasphemy. During the trial, they made a critical error by allowing him to testify and **defend himself, out loud, in front of a crowd**. His argument for the faith that we read in **Acts chapter 7** simply angered the crowd of religious leaders. They didn't drag him to any Pilate to be executed but instead were led by a man named Saul who **took him outside the city gates to be stoned to death**. It was a horrible way to die because in most cases the **victim wouldn't die immediately** but were left to bleed out alone, while animals gathered around to be the first to feast on the **carcass**. But, even in his stoning, **Stephen continued to give his testimony** while they put their hands over their ears, and we read this about his death.

BIBLE ⁵⁹ As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

We then read this at the beginning of chapter 8.

BIBLE **Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. ² (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) ³ But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.**

The followers of this Nazarene sect could no longer meet together **safely or legally**. So, what happens next? **The Jesus movement dies because all the leaders are rounded up and executed...correct?** No, that of course is

not what happens. Instead, those who were **scattered preach** the good news of hope wherever they ended up. The fact they could no longer meet together in Jerusalem did not dampen their enthusiasm or kill the movement. It turns out, the **persecution served as a catalyst to begin to spread what was called “The Way”** to regions that have yet to hear the message of Jesus.

We read that Saul, who eventually becomes the apostle Paul, was leading this persecution of Jesus followers in Jerusalem. When those followers began to scatter, he had himself **deputized and then went to Damascus** and other areas north and west to bring them back to Jerusalem to torture and imprison them. This seems **crazy when you think** about the distance between Jerusalem and just Damascus.

GRAPHIC Map of Jerusalem to Damascus

This journey was more than 300 miles and would take him **two weeks**, which shows you how **intent Saul was** on putting away this movement of Jesus followers. You may remember that on his way to Damascus and putting this movement called “the Way” out of business, he was **interrupted by the living Jesus**. He immediately abandoned his violent ways and joined the losing team that eventually lost their way to victory and shaped Western civilization. Paul eventually goes on to write this **series of letters** which shaped Christian theology for the next 2000+ years.

Christians are scattered and killed, despised and dispersed during the first century. What they talk about when they gathered while they were running away from the authorities? **What did they focus on when they came together to be the church** in the first century during this time of persecution? We read in the next few chapters of the book of Acts how those followers of Jesus continued north and west, bringing the gospel farther and farther away from Jerusalem to anyone who would listen. They share the

good news with those who are not Jewish, called Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit was with them and a great number of people believed and turned their hearts to Jesus. Here is what we hear from Luke in Acts 11.

BIBLE ¹⁹ **Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. ²⁰ However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.**

SLIDE **Could this be the church's story today during COVID?**

Wouldn't it be great if those of us who could no longer meet because we are scattered by the virus **found new opportunities to share faith** and the good news and hope of Jesus? That is our opportunity during this time of pandemic, and this story in the book of acts drives this home even more clearly and gives us a very simple solution to calling our restless hearts.

Eventually, **so many people came to believe in Jesus** in the north and the west that the leaders of the church sent a message back to Jerusalem telling them they needed help as the church begins to grow. The church in **Jerusalem then sends Barnabas** to Antioch in the north to disciple and teach all the new believers. After Barnabas arrives, even more people respond, and Barnabas needs **backup**. We read this in Acts 11.

BIBLE ²⁵ **Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. ²⁶ When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)**

The reason the **gospel is shared with so many and it begins to move throughout the Roman Empire is because of the disruption and the persecution happening 300 miles south in Jerusalem.** There is no indication that first century followers of Jesus in Antioch or Jerusalem tried to figure out how all the disruption and displacement and persecution **played into some larger framework about the end times or even the will of God.** They didn't interpret the persecution as **a sign of God's displeasure.** They simply **adjusted to the new normal and kept going.** ***God used them in the midst of that upheaval to change the culture.*** It's interesting that in Antioch is where the Jesus movement finally got their **permanent name as Christians.**

The next part of the story is what ties into our **time of pandemic** most powerfully, and how we might discover an **antidote for our restless hearts.** During these years of disruption, uncertainty, and persecution, a **severe famine** begins to descend upon the entire Roman world. A famine in ancient times would mean that **entire villages, and in some cases an entire generation, would starve to death.** This was the worst news imaginable and it was not a localized disaster. It's not like people could **leave town and go buy bread** in another town. **Luke refers** to this famine on several occasions because many of his readers would have **lived through this horrific** experience.

It's once again interesting that those first century followers of Jesus **did not respond to this impending famine with questions about the end times or that this might be God's will or punishment** might be because of this famine. They didn't ask if they were being **called to repentance** or if it was an omen or warning because **God was judging the Roman Empire for her cruelty and immorality.** They didn't ask if it was **some sign** pointing to a deeper truth. There's **no indication or record that they worried** about these sorts of things.

Instead, they asked **practical questions that were helpful**. They began to ask questions that **aligned with the teachings of Jesus** because they saw themselves as Jesus followers first. Their questions had to do with what was here and now and not worrying about some theological or revelatory issue. Theologian, professor and author N.T. Wright summarized beautifully what they were thinking in his commentary, Acts for Everyone.

When they got together and realized something dreadful was about to befall them, here are the questions they asked.

- 1. Who will be at risk?**
- 2. How can we help?**
- 3. Who can we send?**

Those are great and practical and helpful questions. The group of believers in Antioch realize that the famine posed a threat to them as well. These **brand-new believers and followers of Jesus paused to consider the implications for Jesus followers in other areas that would be hit harder**, specifically the plight of believers in Jerusalem some 300 miles south and people that were predominantly Jewish and not Roman. When famine would sweep through the Empire, **people in Jerusalem and Judea, which was farther south, would be harder hit**. Most of them in Jerusalem who were believers were considered outlaws and they couldn't work. They had been **expelled from the Jewish temples and they were poor, vulnerable**, and had no resources.

The believers in Antioch saw this as **an opportunity to serve and care for those who had less** all the way back down in Jerusalem. Instead of sitting around and talking about what it means, they looked around and got to work. Here's what we read later in chapter 11.

BIBLE ²⁹ So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they

could. ³⁰ This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

Barnabas and Saul begin taking up a collection those living in Judea and Jerusalem. They were helping people they had never met and were doing so in the midst of a famine, which was much more severe than the pandemic we are experiencing today. Not only that, **these two communities were a world apart and culturally very different.** These were Gentiles, Romans, and Antioch who thought the Jews were a strange people. They could **easily have excused themselves from any responsibility** as these were people they would never meet and that were in a region of the world they would **never even visit.** This is going to be an empire wide famine and they would be affected just like those living in Jerusalem.

That brings us to the point of today's message and in many ways what is meant to **set the stage for this entire series of sermons**, which are the only **words in the Bible attributed to Jesus but** not said directly by him in one of the Gospels. In the book of Acts, **Paul** is speaking to the leaders of the church in Ephesus when he bids them farewell in chapter 20. **These are his parting words** before they kneel together and pray and embrace and weep at Paul's departure. Paul is talking to them about problems that are going on in the Roman world and the first century that are making it difficult for them to follow Jesus. **The New Testament makes it crystal clear what one of the keys to dealing with a restless heart.** My guess is that most of you know these words by heart because you have heard them, so this sermon is really not rocket science but simply reminding you of something that you already know. Let's say these words together.

BIBLE ***You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."** --Acts 20:35b*

While these words seem commonplace and virtuous to us today, **this idea was unheard of in ancient times**. Generosity towards someone who would not or could not be generous and return was not considered a virtue or even smart in the first century Roman world. **It was considered weak and pathetic**. Why would anyone help someone who could not help them in return? In ancient times, that was ridiculous because there would be no return. **That kind of generosity was not considered commendable but rather foolish**. You would give in hopes of getting something in return. **You did favors in hopes of receiving something back**.

The people in Antioch and Syria did not know the people in Jerusalem and they were **not “their” people**. The people who receive wooden even though the names of the people who gave. In ancient times there was no category or word for this sort of generosity. It wasn’t until **Jesus** and people beginning to understand the implications of this **new, upside down Kingdom, that this cultural idea of giving being better than receiving became a part of any cultural norm**.

When presented with the message of Jesus, these Gentiles in Antioch came to understand they had been given a gift that was free, and they could never repay. It was the gift of forgiveness and the gift of grace. Paul preached about it in Ephesus with these words from Ephesians 2.

BIBLE ⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰ For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Those believers in Antioch had **discovered peace for their restless**

hearts not through the gods of their childhood, but they received peace from the living God in Christ Jesus. Now, they were to **do for others what God in Christ had done for them so generously**. As Jesus followers, they were now accountable to the Law of Christ, which called them to love others as Jesus loved them.

So, **when the opportunity came for them to give without receiving anything in return, they gave willingly and generously**. Never before in recorded history had a **local, multicultural group like the early church in Antioch, felt a familial responsibility to a group of people far away** with whom they had virtually nothing in common, and it never met. **Where did this politically and culturally incorrect behavior come from?** It came from the recognition that God so loved the world that God GAVE. This attitude came from an understanding that this kind of generosity would help **everyone to see that they were followers of Jesus**. They gave because love requires of them and they did so freely, **without complaining, or asking questions** about whether this meant the end of the world was coming or that God was **punishing them**.

Here's what we need to remember today. Those are our people who got the ball rolling in this direction so we could be here today. **They introduced a new kind of generosity that is meant to change us today in the year 2020**. These are the saints that went before that we should remember on this day, just like those people who are saints in your life are most likely people who gave you something with nothing expected in return.

SLIDE Saints understand it is better to give than receive.

I asked you to **bring a picture** of someone today that is a saint in your life. If you didn't bring a picture, you might simply picture them in your mind. I am guessing they are someone who gave to you at some point in your life in a way that was sacrificial. This idea was given a name in the first century

church and in the Greek New Testament.

SLIDE *Caritas* = charity = love for everyone

This Greek word was *caritas* which is translated as charity or love for everyone. **CS Lewis referred to it as “gift love,” the highest form of Christian love.** *Caritas* was giving to **relieve the financial or physical stress** of others without expecting anything in return. That brand of generosity would eventually be the brand of Christianity. It would become the **hallmark of the church**. The name may also sound familiar to you because it is the name of one of the largest relief organizations in the world sponsored by the Catholic Church. Pope Francis put it this way.

SLIDE “A Church without charity does not exist.” –Pope Francis

If we are to live as those first century followers of Jesus, that our **first responsibility is not sitting around trying to figure out why the pandemic happened or who’s to blame.** We are not to engage in worrying about the various theories of its origin or figure out how it fits into the overall, sovereign plan of God. **It doesn’t really help anybody.** At best, it leaves us debating among ourselves and **ignoring the calling of Jesus.** If the apostle Paul is correct, then the **pandemic is simply another global expression of a broken world awaiting redemption and its Redeemer.**

The truth is that this **pandemic is nothing new.** The question that will really help us deal with our restlessness during this time is a simple one.

SLIDE What should we do?

Right now, one of our answer to that question is **Operation Christmas Child.** Especially during this time of pandemic, these boxes are critical for children all over the world. So please, if you haven’t got one already, grab one today or make one at home and bring it by the church when you come for worship or to the church garage in the next two weeks.

GRAPHIC Operation Christmas Child Children with Boxes

This next Saturday, **November 7, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.**, you can be part of our food and supply drive for the Navajo Nation. Help make a difference for those living on the Navajo Reservation. Many families there have **no electricity, running water, or reliable transportation**. Covid-19 continues to take a toll. As **winter approaches, everything becomes more difficult, and many will face hunger and cold**. Now and throughout the winter our Native Hope Ministries will be visiting homes and providing food, supplies, water, and firewood as needed. Your donations will help make that possible.

Consider “Healthy.” Where possible, please provide items with low or no sugar or salt. When dropping off supplies, please stay in your vehicle. Follow the signs, and volunteers will take the items from you. **Melton is our contact on the Navajo Nation and here you see the loaded trailer to begin the Native Hope ministry down on the Navajo Reservation. The trailer is loaded with 6 - 55 gallon water drums, 450 gallon water tank, firewood, siphon pumps, and hand sanitizer.**

GRAPHIC Native Hope Water Drums and Trailer

GRAPHIC Native Hope Water Drums and Firewood

GRAPHIC Native Hope Water Drums with Melton

GRAPHIC Native Hope Children

We also have received a grant and we will put that together with some of our funds to secure a **truck for Melton** to use on the Navajo Nation to deliver food and supplies to those off grid, and help maintain the solar lights we have installed on numerous homes.

For Christmas this year, we have two projects your **dedicated Christmas Offering** will go to. Each year we ask you to give as much money

to **Jesus as you're going to spend on yourself** and this is a good time to think about it because Christmas now starts the day after Halloween! The first step to dealing with a restless heart is remembering that it's **not all about me**, and **Christmas is NOT your birthday!** The two projects we are working with are ones that we serve all year long.

GRAPHIC Habitat for Humanity house blessing.

This is a photo of a house blessing from last year where our church presented the family with Bibles and a candle to use in their home, reminding them of the life of Christ which is meant to fill their lives now that they have a simple, decent place to live. **Our giving will directly go to purchase of supplies such as framing packages, flooring, drywall, etc.**

GRAPHIC Acacia Ranch in Kenya

Our international project is the Acacia House project in Kenya which supports **self-sustainability and family empowerment**. Plans towards self-sustainability on The Acacia Ranch include food production and animal husbandry with the purpose of **feeding our rescued residents at The Treasure House** as well as making an income to help cover the cost of our scholarship program. The purpose of ITHM is to rescue orphans and destitute children by breaking the cycle of poverty. We desire to **show these children that they are treasures, and their lives are valuable**. This is done through sharing the Gospel of Jesus, providing a quality education, meeting practical needs, building safe housing, and placing children in family structures.

GRAPHIC Widows and Orphans at International Treasure House

We have expanded our work to also **rescue young mothers and their babies** to show them love and **equip them for success**. By equipping moms, we enable them to keep their babies and therefore reduce the number of children being abandoned.

It was the **first century church which first embraced this novel idea that devotion to God is best demonstrated and authenticated through our love for others because it is more blessed to give than to receive.** The extravagant generosity towards others is the **appropriate response to God's extravagant generosity towards us.** That approach had a ripple effect throughout the entire Roman world and I hope and pray that our generosity as a local church, **being Jesus Christ in the world,** will have the same effect on communities near and far away with people that we don't know and will never meet. You can go directly to the **giving page** on our website or on our app and be generous by giving to our missions fund which will support all these ministries you just heard about. You also can come by the church for the Navajo nation food and supply drive the **Saturday.**

Let's show our community that are church is more than sermons and songs and that we are not closed. Let's say this Scripture memory verse for this week and this powerful truth from the mouth of Jesus together one more time out loud.

BIBLE ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive."***

SLIDE **Prayer**

Gracious God, thank you for the witness of the early church, showing us what it means to be generous and how it is we can calm our hearts during the season of pandemic and the upcoming season of Christmas which can feel overwhelming. Help us to calm our restless hearts by remembering it is more blessed to give than to receive. It literally feels better, so help us to live that out in the days ahead. We can easily get caught up in questions that are not that important so we repent from doing that to focus on what will bring us life and joy this season. May we do those things not just to change ourselves in our own hearts, but the world around us into your kingdom. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen