

What Did Jesus Say?

“It is better to give than to receive.”

These words have become an age-old adage, perhaps even “conventional wisdom,” but few recognize that they are the words of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you did know that these words were the words of Jesus, so what? If you’re like me, you thought sparingly about the meaning of the verse—everyone who has ever given a gift to a loved one has at least felt a glimmer of the joy derived from giving. Stories about the psychological and even bodily health benefits of giving appear in every major newspaper during the months leading up to Christmas. While this quote is old, wise, and its basic idea is well-known, there is a far deeper meaning to these words when understood in context of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Mark 10:45 says “the Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus’ purpose in becoming man and living in the world was to literally *give his life* so that we may be redeemed in the eyes of God. Jesus’ life truly is the ultimate story of sacrifice and giving. So if followers of Christ are meant to emulate the way that Jesus lived, then Christians are meant to live *radically* generous lives. Jesus did not only set the example of giving, he commanded it of his followers. Jesus talked about giving and greed numerous times throughout the Gospels, and even what Jesus calls the two greatest commandments can be understood as giving. According to him the two greatest commandments are “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To love is essentially to give. You devote your time, energy, and your money to that which you love. Loving God entails surrendering your life to him—it is giving *all* that you have. Similarly, loving others involves giving and self-sacrifice. Even the smallest acts of loving others, such as having a conversation with someone who is feeling down, involve giving that person your time and emotional energy.

To more fully understand the magnitude of the statement, “It is better to give than to receive,” it may be necessary to understand the context of the verse. Acts 20:35 is the final part of the apostle Paul’s parting words to the some of his dear friends in Ephesus when he thinks that he may be close to his death. He departs from them with two final bits of encouragement. First he asks them to remember the word of God’s grace. Second, Paul asks them to remember how he had shown them to minister to one another’s needs and help the weak, remembering the words of Jesus, “It is better to give than to receive.” Paul’s choice to leave his friends with those words shows the importance Paul places on them. I would go so far as to say that giving, not following rules, epitomizes the way that Jesus called his followers to live.

The way that we manage our money, time, and energy shows others—and often ourselves—where our hearts are. I love baseball. I love all sports for that matter, but I have probably spent more time working on my baseball skills than anything else in my life outside of school. I would never think twice about giving up two hours of my time and literally *all* of my energy to do a grueling workout, but I might very begrudgingly give up that same amount of time and far less energy to do some sort of service project. What does that say about my heart? The simplest answer is that I am selfish or just crazy for so easily deciding to torture my body so that I can be better at a game. As a Christian I think that the answer lies deeper. I can so easily put so much time and energy into working out or practicing partly because I love the game, but also because I derive my identity from being an athlete. Since we are Princeton students, I would venture to guess that many of you, like me, derive part of your identity from being a scholar. Deriving our identities from knowledge or athleticism can be a desperate experience. We will so willingly give countless hours of our lives to work out or study, because we have to fortify that identity. We are motivated by the fear that if we slip up, if we don’t know or understand something that we are expected to, or if we don’t play well in a sport, others will no longer see us as that identity which we desire. However, Christians are freed from that desperate experience.

As a Christian I am meant to derive my identity from the way that God loves me. Because of Christ’s sacrifice for me, I am redeemed and God views me as his unblemished Child. Accepting my identity as a beloved child of God is still an ongoing process for me, but with that identity comes freedom and security. In my identity through Christ I am set free of the constraints of fortifying my other identities. This doesn’t necessarily mean that I do not want to play baseball or study, but it means that I do not have to worry about doing those things for my self image or security. My identity in Christ allows me to focus less on myself and frees me to serve others.

-Will Davis ‘14