

Buzz King  
[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)  
<https://BuzzKing.com>

**Acts 20:28,35, ESV**

*<sup>28</sup>“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>35</sup>In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

**A Gift Not of this World: *An ancient doll stuffed with rice.***

My father’s mother raised my dad on her own. Her husband, my father’s father, served in the trenches in World War I. He was a bugler. It was his job to blow his bugle to send out command signals during combat. That meant that he had to stand up straight, and he repeatedly put himself in the line of fire. He saw hundreds, perhaps thousands, of his buddies get slaughtered, but over and over and over, he did not get shot or hit by a shell. After two years in the trenches, he was finally hit with mustard gas, and so he was sent home. When he got home, though, he was in terrible mental shape. My father was two years old. His dad ran off, abandoning his family. He left the United States, lived on the street in Quebec, and finally died on the street when I was a boy. So, my grandmother was a single mom. When she was older and had a pacemaker implanted in her chest, she came to live with my parents. That was when I got to know her, and she was

the only one of my four grandparents I knew in any significant way. She was a soft-spoken woman, very small, and she spoke English, but preferred Portuguese. She loved talking to me. When I was in grad school, getting a Ph.D. in Computer Science, she didn't understand that I wasn't studying to be a physician. She kept asking me medical questions. What I didn't realize was that she was dying. My father didn't initially share this with me. One day I went to my dad, and I told him he was going to have to help his mom find a real doctor, that she couldn't turn to me for advice about her heart. My dad initially got angry with me and told me I should just go ahead and answer her questions and reassure her – and then he told me that she wasn't going to live very long no matter what.

One day, I was in my parent's living room, working on some coursework. My grandmother came into the room, holding something. She sat down next to me and said that she didn't mean to interrupt my work, but could she talk to me for a bit. I said fine, there was no emergency on the assignment. It was something tedious and not very interesting. Then I noticed what she was holding. It was a very old doll, ancient, with hair that was partly missing, and a hole in one of the knees. It was made of tan leather, with a ceramic head and neck. Its arms and legs were floppy, with no joints, and it was stuffed with rice that was leaking out at one place. It was stained and dirty. She told me that it was named Marcia.

She said that she had had it since she was a very little girl and that it was the only thing she still had from her childhood. My grandmother told me about how when she was a girl, she would carry Marcia everywhere, that she ate with Marcia, slept with Marcia, took Marcia to school, talked to Marcia, danced with Marcia, and drank milk with Marcia. Then she handed the doll to me and asked me if I would please take it, that she wanted me to have it. I said that I didn't want to take the only thing she still had from her childhood. Then she said that I was like her husband before he went crazy, that I reminded her of him, and that I had always been very, very nice to her. She said it would mean everything if I would take Marcia. She apologized for not having anything nicer to give me and that she knew you don't give a man a doll, but could I please take it? Please? It was the only thing she could give me, she said. She lowered her voice and said that she knew very well that her life was almost over.

Let's look at an extremely famous passage. It's from the Book of Acts, the narrative written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. It tells the story first of Peter and the Apostles spreading the faith to Jews after Jesus has been crucified, and then tells the story of Paul and others spreading the faith much farther, to Gentile people all the way from Jerusalem to what is now Italy. Our passage is from Chapter 20. This is near the end of the story of Paul's journeys. In Chapter

20, Paul travels from the wealthy port city of Ephesus, in modern Turkey, to Macedonia. Then he travels through Macedonia and Greece, and Asia Minor (again, modern Turkey), and ends up back near Ephesus, in a city called Miletus. He sends a messenger to get the church leaders of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. These elders were among the very first people that Paul converted in his missionary work, and he has returned to give a sort of farewell speech. He offers his life as an example that these elders should follow. Paul declares his absolute dedication to the task of spreading the faith. Then he relinquishes his role as their leader and as their teacher. He tells them to protect the church from wolves.

Here is a heavily edited version of Acts, Chapter 20, verses 28 to 35:

*<sup>28</sup> “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert. <sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

Paul tells these people who will inherit the job of spreading the Gospel that they will have to work hard and be alert. They must help the weak. They must be generous. They are to give and not receive. They are not to see themselves as important or powerful or better than other people. That phrase has become one

of the most frequently quoted passages of the Bible: *It is more blessed to give than to receive*. Paul is commanding people to step forward and take care of each other – and he ends by saying that when we do this, we are giving to others, and this is the most valuable thing we can do in the eyes of God. Paul was making a very important point: building the faith of others is an incredible gift.

My grandmother was near the end of her life. She was very unsophisticated about medical things, and not well educated, but she was smart. She knew that she couldn't take her doll with her, that it was time to hand it off. It was time for her to teach her grandson about generosity. She had found a brilliant way to leave a deep impression on me. It worked.

I was very reluctant to take the doll. I told her that it was amazing how it was made, and I reminded her that I was an engineering student. I told her that modern dolls were mass produced, molded out of plastic in Asia. But this doll's leather body had thousands of hand-stitches, and after all these decades, the leather was still in very good shape. The face was delicately hand-painted, with dozens of eye lashes. It was stuff with rice. It was a durable work of art that was beautiful. She smiled and said that the day she got it she was the happiest little girl on the planet. I asked her who gave it to her. She laughed and said that she didn't even remember, maybe it was her mother, maybe her grandmother,

maybe some other relative. She didn't know if it was a birthday gift, a Christmas gift, or if it was just something that some person decided to give her. She told me she wasn't even sure that it was new when it was given to her. But giving it to me, she said, would make her very happy. Then she told me that she didn't want to die and not know who was going to take care of Marcia. It was then that I relented and took it. My grandmother beamed. I told her that I would keep it always, that I would protect Marcia, and that one day, I would give it to one of my kids, if I had any. She thanked me.

But the Bible might make us think that the sorts of gifts we must offer are extremely hard to come by. I'd like to look at three other quotes, two by Paul, and one by Luke. The first is from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 12:6-8:

*<sup>6</sup>Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; <sup>7</sup>if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup>the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.*

The second passage is related, and it is from what we call his first letter to the Corinthians 12:7–10:

*<sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup>For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to*

*another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.*

Paul is saying that we all have different gifts, and whatever they are, this is how we give, this is how we serve. He does make the point that we are not to be giving gifts that are valuable in this world. Still, the language is poetic, and so it's intimidating and easy to misinterpret. Which of us has a gift for exhorting? How about acts of mercy? Or better yet, uttering wisdom? Or my favorite is to work miracles. How about doing prophesy? Who happens to be a many-language linguist?

But now, consider this, from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 6:37–38. These are the words of Jesus himself:

*<sup>37j</sup>“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”*

Whatever we give, we get the same thing back. God echoes our gifts back to us. When we lift others up, we are instantly lifted up. This passage also doesn't say that we must perform miracles or give valuable things of this world. The focus is on simply being a giving person.

Yes, we should use our skills to serve others. But God judges us by what's in our hearts, not by our gifts. My grandmother, who was less than five feet tall and could not possibly have weighed more than ninety pounds, was very much

like Paul and like Luke. Remember that Luke was much more than Jesus' biographer. He was Paul's young cohort. Luke was an evangelist, a wanderer himself. My grandmother's life was a long, very tough journey. She spent much of her life in poverty. She took almost nothing from this world. She gave and she did not take. She passed things forward: a love for God, a love for God's people, and of course, Marcia. Marcia now sits in a display case in my office at home. It's all I have of my grandmother. But it will always remind me of the power of giving.

Not long after she gave me Marcia, my grandmother went on to be with God. I visited her, though, once again, weeks before she died. I asked her something that I had been nervous about asking her, but I felt that it was my last chance to do so. I asked her if she understood that her husband had been mentally ill - that he had meant no harm to her or to my father. She said that it was tough for my father, growing up without his father around, and hearing stories of his father wandering from city to city, committing crimes, living on the street. But, she said, she knew that her husband was just trying to do what he could for his family, the only thing he could imagine doing. My grandmother said that he knew that he was sick, and in his mind, he was doing the best thing. She said that he believed that it was better for his son to grow up without him, and this was all he thought he had to offer. So, he disappeared. The problem, of



course, she said, was that my father had relatives in Quebec, and so stories about my grandfather made their way back to his son, my father, and that his father didn't succeed in getting away, getting out of the lives of his wife and son.

Remember that the most important things we can give anyone have nothing to do with anything material. But it does call for emotional stamina, and that is what my grandfather didn't have. Jesus told us to love God and to love others, that these two commandments superseded the ten commandments and all the teachings of the prophets. We can give others love, emotional protection, spiritual support, a listening ear, and true empathy when they are suffering. But we do go through things in life that make it extremely difficult to reach down inside and find something genuine to give. If we can do it, if we can give, then, as it turns out, we discover that giving lifts us up, too. God made us to want to give, to not want to take. When we ignore the calls of this corrupt world to take rather than to give, and instead give to others, we find ourselves soaring above the clouds. That's what my grandmother did just before she died. She gave me what she had to give, and she was happy. She handed me a gift not of this world, and in doing so, did just what Paul commanded – she built my faith. And she soared.