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Approximately
1300 words

GIVING AND GETTING

by M. David Johnson

The letter looked very official with its nine stamps and its red "Certified Mail" sticker. Albert wondered what it could be as he opened it with a mixture of worry and eagerness. It could be almost anything. The return address was from a lawyer. Maybe someone was suing him. Or maybe he had won a sweepstakes prize. Did they send certified letters for overdue library books?

When Albert finally got the envelope open, it was several minutes before he could figure out what it meant. Finally he realized that the legal words said that a distant uncle had died and left him a small wheat farm.

Two weeks later, Albert stood looking across the desolate fields of middle January, wondering how long it would be until the wheat started climbing out of the snow so that he could start reaping his profits.

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Most of us would recognize that Albert was very foolish: one doesn't reap unless he first sows. If you want to reap a crop of wheat, you must first sow seeds of wheat. Wheat doesn't grow unless it is planted.

But how many of us stop to consider the promise of God that is present in this little piece of practical truth? When we plant the seed in the ground and water it and nurture it, God blesses it and that little seed turns into a bountiful harvest. We invest the seed and we gain the wheat.

This idea works in other ways too. We put money into a certificate of deposit at the bank and it grows into more money. We invest money in a business and the business grows. And this is also how the Lord works with the money we drop in the offering plate every Sunday morning.

Proverbs 3:9&10 says, "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine." (RSV).

In the original Hebrew, the word for "filled" is *mālē'*. It means a complete filling. The word is used in II Kings 4:6 where Elisha tells the Shunammite woman to borrow all the vessels she can and her little pot of oil doesn't run dry until she has completely filled every one of them. This word is also used by the Lord in Jeremiah 23:24 when he asks, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" In Proverbs 3:9&10, God is promising us that if we invest with him, he will completely fill our

lives with plenty.

He goes on to say that he will fill our lives until we burst. The Hebrew for "bursting" is pāraṣ in this verse. It doesn't just mean to punch a hole in the side of the vat; it means to level it with a tremendous explosion. It overflows so fast that it's like a dam breaking; the flood is devastating. God is promising to enrich us beyond our wildest expectations.

Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." (RSV).

In this verse, our Father is challenging us to a giving contest. He's saying, "You can't win this contest. The more you give to me, the more I'll give back to you. I'll give you so much that you won't have enough room to put it."

The word for test is bāhan. It means to scrutinize or to examine to determine essential qualities. It is used in connection with testing metals for purity and integrity.

The word that the RSV translates as "overflowing" is "day" in the Hebrew. (The Hebrew word is pronounced "day"; it does not mean a day of the week). It is preceded by the word for "not" and the meaning of the complete phrase is "not sufficient". There will not be enough room to contain the gifts that God will shower on those who try to outgive him.

How many times have our pastors stood in the pulpits and exhorted

us to give (and to give sacrificially) because of the needs of the church or of those to whom the church ministers? How often have they appealed to our sense of duty; to our sense of responsibility? These are all valid and important reasons for giving but God matches the duty with a promise.

II Corinthians 9:6-11 says, "The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever.' He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God;" (RSV).

The Greek for "sparingly" is *phēidōmai* and it means to abstain, to be stingy, to be miserly. "Bountifully" is *ēulogēō* which literally means to bless, to confer a benefit upon.

The Greek word used for "abundance" is *pērissēūō* which means to be superfluous, over and above, more than enough; to overflow. This word is used in Luke 9:17 and John 6:13 where twelve baskets were filled with the fragments after Jesus fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. God is saying that he will make us extremely rich if we are

cheerful givers.

"Enriched" is plōutizō in verse 11. It literally means to make wealthy (in earthly terms) but it is also used metaphorically to mean spiritual enrichment. God is promising both temporal blessings and spiritual blessings to those who give cheerfully.

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But if we look at this promise we might conclude that it doesn't seem to be uniformly fulfilled. Some people who never give anything to anybody nevertheless become super-wealthy. And others who give regularly until it really hurts end up losing everything and going on welfare or worse.

We need to take note of two things. First, this promise is directed to God's people. There is no reason to conclude that it also applies to those who still belong to Satan. Satan orders their lives according to his desires, not according to God's.

Secondly, the promise includes both temporal blessings and eternal spiritual blessings. Some will obtain more of one than the other and vice-versa. And those who enjoy temporal blessings for a short seventy years or so are certainly not better off than those who will enjoy their spiritual blessings for all eternity.

And, even more telling, those who have many temporal blessings are often obsessed with obtaining more and more of this world's goods. They are never satisfied, no matter how much they have. Those whom our Father has truly enriched are full of joy and thankfulness. They are more than satisfied with what the Lord has given them in this world no

matter how little it may seem to others looking on.

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Remember the promise Jesus made in Luke 6:38, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (RSV).

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