

---

## On Giving and Getting

*by Elder F. Burton Howard  
of the First Quorum of the Seventy*

*Taken from an address delivered to the student body of Brigham Young University on May 22, 1984.*

F. Burton Howard, "On Giving and Getting," *New Era*, Oct. 1985, 44  
Throughout our years at the university and for a considerable time thereafter, my wife and I lived in a congested area near downtown Salt Lake City. After graduating from law school, I was fortunate in obtaining a job at the state capitol. Church callings and the proximity of our home to my office caused us to be in no hurry to leave our small apartment, even had our financial situation allowed us to. One of the economies which my wife allowed me to practice was walking to work. The distance was not too great, and the capitol hill climb kept me fit.

One brilliant, warm day I had come home for lunch; and as I was returning to work I noticed a small boy sitting on the curb at the foot of the hill. I knew him by sight as a neighbor who lived in a large apartment house next door to us. His parents were divorced. His mother worked and often left him alone in the afternoons to look after himself. As I was in no hurry to begin my ascent, I stopped to talk with him for a moment.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Waiting for my brother."

"Where is he?" I asked as I contemplated the hot climb up the hill. His answer brought me immediately to attention.

"He's in school."

"Don't you know that school isn't out until 3:30?" I gently replied.

He shuffled his toe in the dirt of the street and looked at me with what I am now positive was condescension.

"Sure," he said, "but I don't want to miss him."

"Maybe the kid had a point," I thought as I climbed the hill. And I have pondered his statement many times since that day. Of course he did. Whatever his reason for wanting his brother; whether for love or loneliness or just to deliver a family message, it was of sufficient importance for him to wait on the curb at the side of a hot street all afternoon.

He was not going to miss his brother, whatever the discomfort or whatever the cost. He had nothing more important to do.

It is difficult to sit in the sun on a street corner when all the world is bent on seeking shade. But as with many other things, it is where you sit that counts—or where you stand—or what you stand for. And with some things there is nothing more important to do than to pay the price; even though it entails inconvenience or sacrifice.

Before getting much older my young friend would find no shortage of those who would tell him he paid too much to see his brother that hot afternoon.

“Don’t be dumb,” they would say. “You could have watched television until just before school let out.”

Or they would say, “You should have stayed in the shade at home instead of sitting on that dusty old curb.”

“Be smart,” they would say. “Don’t give more than you have to, just to see your brother.”

But did he give too much? Was he just a naive little boy? Can we learn something from him? To simplify the subject, let me suggest that the real question on that street corner was how much to give in exchange for his brother’s company that hot afternoon.

This question perhaps can be best understood by subdividing it into two:

How much was he *required* to give, and how much could he give? It is a paradox that when we speak of how much *must* be given, we usually speak of getting. Only when we talk in terms of how much *can* be given, are we really speaking of giving.

Most of us were born with an egotistical streak. It is common in children. Hopefully, as we grow up we become less self-seeking and more interested in the welfare of others. But many labor mightily to obtain or retain as much as they can while giving up as little as possible in every giving and getting transaction. I suppose everyone has played Monopoly with such a person. It is sobering to realize that life is a never-ending series of such transactions, dozens each day, and that the sum total of all of the seemingly insignificant things constitutes our mortal probation.

I remember what it is like to attend the university. I don’t think I would voluntarily trade places with university students, even if I could be young again. I remember the pain. I remember staying up all night to prepare for an examination. I vividly recall homework and homesickness, grades, and graduation. I remember part-time jobs that never paid enough, and roommates who borrowed things. I remember worrying about what to do and what to be (which, by the way, I believe are the same thing). I remember the relief when the books closed for the last time, and the diplomas were finally awarded. I remember thinking that at last I could get on with the real business of living.

The university was for me as it is for most students, a time of waiting—and therein lies a danger. Everything a student does seems pointed to the future. Students are transients. Their hearts are often elsewhere. Summer jobs, lectures, credits—all of these promise a time when prosperity and peace will finally reign—when they can come home after work to a real home and do what they want; when one well-paying job will allow enjoyment of the important things like marriage or family or church service.

C. S. Lewis once said, “Nearly all vices are rooted in the Future. Gratitude looks to the Past and love to the Present; fear, avarice, lust and ambition look ahead” (*The Screwtape Letters*, New York: Macmillan, 1951, p. 69).

The Prophet Jacob put it another way. He spoke of the necessity of understanding “things as they really are, and . . . things as they really will be.” He described the Jews as searching for things that they could not understand and being blinded because of “looking beyond the mark” (**Jacob 4:13–14**).

So it is that college students, and others as well, often look beyond the mark. Because much of what they live for lies in the future, young people sometimes forget that the real test is never tomorrow but always today. Students are usually in a hurry to get on with life. Some remind me of a missionary I had in the mission field. He once wrote an unforgettable line:

“President,” he said, “do you know any quick way to memorize the discussions? If you do, send it to me right away.”

Because students are anxious to begin living, they tend to look for shortcuts. They sometimes merely endure difficult courses; they have been known to avoid hard teachers and to read long books in outline form. Students have often been known to cram for examinations and burn the midnight oil. All of this is done in expectation of better things to come. Sadly, those who burn the candle at both ends are usually more concerned with getting than with giving.

Because there is never enough time, students sometimes develop an attitude which will severely interfere with their spiritual progress, not only as students but throughout their lives as well. They try to *get* by. The question becomes “How much must I give to get the grade?” not “How can I master the subject?” Or, “How can I get out of school?” not “What can I learn here?”

In another related area, students are besieged with offers for free things—free karate lessons, free records and tapes, incredible returns on investments. The bookstore is filled with books having titles such as, *How to Make a Killing in Real Estate*, *How to Avoid Probate*, *How to Make a Million Dollars*, *How to Sell Anything to Anyone*, *Shortcuts to Effective Public Speaking*, *Ten Days to a Better Personality*, and *Calculus Made Easy*.

It is easy to forget Euclid’s warning that there is no royal road to geometry or the well-known comment that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Little by little, often

imperceptibly, our minds become conditioned to getting the things we want with as little effort as possible. We guard our giving, that we may have more time for getting. Many seek grades without effort, athletic attainment without training, musical excellence without practice. They try to lose weight without diet and to be free without being responsible. Others become more concerned with finding the right person than they are with *being* the right person.

It is not that these things are illegal or immoral, but they do have one thing in common. They all represent, at least in part, an attempt to acquire something of real worth without paying adequate consideration for it. And it is a short leap from these attitudes to others which are more serious. As minds become conditioned to getting things without effort or with as little effort as possible, it is easy to rationalize that it is a clever thing to secure advantage without paying the price.

For example, how many automobiles are not insured as required by law? How many own tapes or video cassettes which have been copied in violation of copyright laws? How many don't tell the full truth when they buy or sell bicycles, stereos, used cars, or other things? How many think that radar detectors should be standard equipment on every automobile? How many court unmerited popularity by telling off-color stories? How many seek artificial sensual stimulation as a substitute for righteous joy? How many of us are anxious to have a success without sacrifice? It can't be done, you know.

In this regard there is an interesting story in the scripture. On one occasion, late in life, King David offended the Lord. He sinned greatly and asked the Lord to remove his iniquity, acknowledging that he had done a foolish thing. To punish David the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, and 70,000 men died. David complained to the Lord and said,

“I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep [meaning the people], what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.”

That same day the prophet Gad came to David and said that the Lord would remove the plague if David would build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite and offer an acceptable sacrifice there. David was anxious to lift the Lord's curse. He quickly went to Araunah's place of business, and then the scripture details this most interesting account:

“Araunah looked, and saw the king and his servants coming on toward him: and Araunah went out, and bowed himself before the king on his face upon the ground.

“And ... said, Wherefore is my lord the king come to his servant? And David said, To buy the threshing floor of thee, to build an altar unto the Lord, that the plague may be stayed from the people.

“And Araunah said unto David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seemeth good unto him: behold, here be oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing instruments and other instruments of the oxen for wood.

“All these things did Araunah, ... [offer] unto the king. And Araunah said unto the king, The Lord thy God accept thee.”

Here David could have made a fatal mistake. He could have been more concerned with gain than with giving. But he wisely said unto Araunah,

“Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: *neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing.* So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver [which was no small sum in those days].

“And David built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord was entreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel” (**2 Sam. 24:17, 20–25**; emphasis added).

Why was David concerned about personally paying for the offering the prophet commanded him to make? Was it because he knew there is always a cost when real sacrifice is made? Should it be of concern to us if we fail to pay honest measure for that which we receive? Can we hope to learn a language if we are unwilling to make an effort? Should we expect to be virtuous if we are unwilling to control our thoughts? Is it possible to be forgiven without honestly repenting? Should we seek a witness before the trial of our faith? I believe all of these attitudes which many of us have shared at one time or another may jeopardize our salvation. Let me tell you why.

The scriptures tell us that, in the premortal existence, Satan rejected the Father’s plan of salvation and proposed to redeem all mankind and not lose one soul. You all remember the story. In exchange for what he offered, the son of the morning wanted honor (**Moses 4:1**) and the power of God (**D&C 29:36; Moses 4:3**). Because we had free agency there as we do now, Satan induced one-third of all of the spirit children of God to follow him (**D&C 29:36; Abr. 3:28**). When his scheme was rejected, Satan rebelled and sought to destroy the very agency he had to use to gain his following (**Moses 4:3**). But how did he manage to draw one-third away from God? I believe that it was simply by saying that there were unnecessary hazards in God’s plan, and that the power of God was sufficient to save all men without effort and without the keeping of the commandments. It was an attractive package. Many were deceived. In effect, they were offered salvation without risk. It wasn’t that our spirit brothers and sisters didn’t value free agency. They were undoubtedly taught about it and its importance. Probably they were committed to the concept; but because they were aware of the risks and were aware of their own weaknesses, they were unwilling to go to earth without a guaranteed round-trip ticket. They valued the presence of God more than agency and lost both because they looked beyond the mark and could not see that it was impossible to have one without the other.

The price was unacceptable to many who did not want to leave home. They began to cast about for an easier way, and when it was offered, they accepted it. I have learned that the easy way to anything is almost always suspect.

After Adam's transgression, the Lord told him that the ground would be cursed for his sake (**Moses 4:23**). It is interesting to me that one definition of the word *sake* is benefit. Thus, cursed was to be the ground for Adam's benefit. And by the sweat of his brow was he to earn his bread (**Moses 4:25**). Work, then, was not to be a curse, and earning things was to be a benefit.

This is still true today notwithstanding the fact that much time and effort go into trying to beat the system. Work is still the ruling principle in the lives of the Latter-day Saints. We should not seek to acquire things without effort. Only that which is truly earned is ever really ours. It is a blessing to earn what we receive, and this applies to spiritual things as well.

On one occasion, I was with President Marion G. Romney. He spoke to a large gathering of young people. Afterwards, a returned missionary came up to shake his hand. As he did he said,

“Brother Romney, when I was a missionary I had a question that no one knew the answer to. Let me take advantage of your time for a moment and ask you.”

He then asked a rather complicated question, the answer to which could have been found in the scriptures.

President Romney listened attentively for a few moments and then replied, “That is a very good question. When you find the answer, let me know, will you please?”

As we left the hall he commented to me, obviously referring to the young man and his question,

“As a boy my father always taught me that when I wanted a drink I should go to where the spring flowed out of the ground and not downstream where the cattle had been muddying the water. He'll be better off if he finds the answer for himself.”

But how easy it is to find someone else with the answer to our questions. How many want to know the mysteries of God without studying the scriptures? How many ask the Lord to do things which they should do for themselves? There is no spiritual attainment without effort.

As I have thought about the subject, it seems that the reasons the Lord wants us to earn what we get in this life are several:

1. First, if we get things without effort, we often fail to make the hard choices we were sent here to make. We may fail to exercise our agency and thereby be deprived of

important blessings. We are then out of harmony with the Lord and lose the blessings and trials (for many trials are blessings) which he intended would be a part of our own particular probation.

Second, if we acquire things with little or no effort we often develop an exaggerated view of our own ability and our own importance. If we think we are better than we really are, then we are in danger of not being sufficiently humble to be able to enter the kingdom of God.

Third, when we get something for nothing, we often feel that others do the same. Then we become critical, feeling that patronage, nepotism, luck, influence, or favoritism have allowed them to acquire what they have. Jealousy and envy then easily enter our lives.

Fourth, when we get something for nothing, we often develop a delusion of being especially blessed by the Lord. This can discourage hard work on other projects and may bring great disappointment when similar slack efforts do not result in corresponding large rewards.

Fifth, when we get something for nothing, it is often at the expense of someone else's loss. If the whole truth were known, offense might be taken. I do not want to be included among those about whom the Savior said, "It is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" (**Mark 9:42**).

Last of all, things cheaply purchased are seldom appreciated. Attitudes which cause us to look for bargains in some areas of life will carry over into more important things, because as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he (**Prov. 23:7**). We may then come to seek testimony without study and spiritual power without cost, and the greatest blessings of life may be cheapened or lost altogether as a result.

There is an important lesson here for Latter-day Saints. Somehow, some way, sooner or later, whether we want it that way or not, there are some experiences that all men must have. There are some truths that all must learn. There is a relationship between what we give and what we get. Shortcuts are often hazardous to the important things both in this life and the life to come as well.

I spoke about a young boy sitting on a street corner. I said often it depends upon where you sit or where you stand with reference to the important issues, whether you get a reward or not. You may be interested to know where I stand as a humble servant of the Lord with reference to getting and giving. I am deeply conscious of my own weaknesses in this area. Yet as I have seen the dangers and struggled with personal self-interest, I have found that the satisfaction of giving lasts much longer than the sweetness of getting. Like Abraham, I have found "greater happiness and peace and rest for me" (**Abr. 1:2**), when I render honest sacrifice and pay fair and adequate consideration for what I get. Therefore:

1. I have resolved never to ask the Church or anyone else to do for me what I should do for myself. Where possible, I prefer to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.
2. When I pray, I always try to pray “Thy will be done, not mine.” President Tanner once said that too many of us merely take a shopping list to the Lord when we pray. I try not to do that unless it is absolutely necessary.
3. As a lawyer before being called as a General Authority, I never accepted a case which would cause me to bend the law or ignore the facts; or which would give my client a benefit he didn’t deserve. I still recoil from those who suggest such things and do not traffic with men and women who shade the truth for personal gain.
4. I am thankful that my eternal companion also believes in giving honest measure for what she gets. In fact, she gives more and I appreciate that. It seems to me that a “something for nothing” attitude is inconsistent with eternal marriage.
5. I have never consciously misrepresented my income to the government and have always paid taxes on that which I have earned. I have little sympathy with some vocal groups who look for ways to avoid this obligation. It seems to me that they want all of the benefits of democracy without paying for them.
6. Likewise, I have never misrepresented my income to my bishop. I have always tried to pay just a little bit more tithing than I owed. I avoid thinking in terms of net or gross income and believe that gifts or profits from the sale of my property are all included in my increase. I recognize that all that I have comes from the Lord. I would willingly give up a new sports car or a boat or a vacation just for the privilege of paying tithing. I have done this all of my life and I have no regrets.
7. I believe in the “second mile.” I have come to know that the first mile doesn’t count for much and the one freely given counts for everything.
8. I have learned to distrust praise and to seek honest humility, which I define to be a true and correct estimate of what I really am in the sight of God. No more and no less.
9. I ask myself often, “What would Christ do?” and then try to do it. As the answer to that question comes it almost always involves giving, not getting.

As children we all learned the stories of the “Goose That Laid the Golden Egg,” of “Jack and the Magic Beans,” of “The Three Wishes,” and of “King Midas,” whose touch turned everything to gold. But it was Paul who said,

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (**1 Cor. 13:11**).

I suppose that most of us have dreamed of inheriting a million dollars, or making a killing in a business venture, or even just being free of the work-a-day world in order to do what

we want. But it is unworthy of a Latter-day Saint to spend his time trying to achieve these or other things without effort. The real reason for our mortal probation is to confront challenges, not escape them. It is to learn to give, not to learn to get. In earth life as in the university, we cannot complain about not getting passing grades if we are unwilling to take the test. There are no shortcuts to the plan of salvation. There is no exaltation without effort. We have nothing more important to do than to fully, honestly, and completely obey the laws upon which blessings are predicated. Make no mistake about it, we will reap what we sow (**Gal. 6:7**).

It has always interested me that the broad way seems pleasant enough at first, while the narrow, or strait, way initially does not. It has nothing to commend it to the advertisers of the world. It is difficult to sell. It is a toll road. The tariff is work, discipline, service, and love for others. It is paying the price for everything we get, then giving it away. Once entered into, however, those who travel the strait road are never the same. What at first seemed unpleasant will turn out to be the sweetest and most desirable road of all. It is what we give ourselves to that brings meaning and purpose into our lives—not what we get or gain.

*Gospel topic: generosity*