

A Man's Gift

Proverbs 18:16

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“A man’s gift maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men.” - Proverbs 18:16 (Cf. 17:8; 19:6).

This verse is another in an approximately two-chapter series of maxims concerning generalized “good conduct” (Ch. 17-18). The proverbs in the immediately surrounding verses (15-19) could be applied to many settings in life, though here they seem to be particularly focused on a courtroom-style setting. In hearing a case in life, one should seek with one’s **heart** (Hb. *leb*, not meaning emotional response to a matter but speaking of “reason, emotions, and will”) to acquire **knowledge**, and likewise with one’s **ear** to listen carefully to what is being said, for this is the way that **the wise** (person) **seeks knowledge**.

One reason for this is the danger of bribery (condemned in 15:27) - that is, because of the **gift** that **makes room for him**, providing access to the **great**. Thus the warning of 18:17 not to be easily swayed by the person who **states his case first**; rather, the wise person **examines** the evidence in a careful, probing manner (cf. v. 13). Still, in some cases it is impossible to reach a verdict, because the matter is hidden and there is not enough evidence to make a well-informed judgment. In such cases (v. 18), it is better to settle **quarrels** by means of casting a **lot** (“before the Lord”), thus leaving the outcome in the Lord’s hands, rather than allowing **powerful contenders** to do violence to each other. Even so, whether by means of a lot or judicial determination, the reconciliation of one brother to another (i.e., reconciliation of close friends) is difficult to achieve. **A brother offended** can be **more unyielding than a strong city**—for the resolution of **quarreling** meets with resistance **like the bars of a castle**.

Just to take a more careful look at the verse and what exactly it is saying we should note, the verse starts with the phrase “a man’s gift...”. Once again, as we have noticed before, this is not speaking of only “males”, but is referring to mankind in general. We should also begin with the observation that the reference to “a man’s gift” is not the word for a bribe (cf. 17:23), but rather the word for a present given to someone (cf. Jacob’s gift, Gen. 32:20, 21; Joseph’s gift, Gen. 43:11; David’s gift, 1 Sam. 17:17, 18; and Abigail’s gift, 1 Sam. 25:27). We ought to understand it as referring to generosity and not to the giving of a gift in order to secure favor with the one to whom it is given. It seems clear that Solomon is speaking of an innocent courtesy. It is clear that he refers to and points out to us that legitimate favor can smooth the way for a person (cf. 1 Sam. 17:18). Again, we are not speaking of any effort to use the gift or act of giving to sway the opinion of the receiver. Rather this is a simple observation that developing the habit of generosity has no negative result, but, rather a positive one.

The Hebrew word, “*mattān*” should be understood to refer to something handed over to another, be the receiver consisting of any sort of relationship to the giver, from familiar to stranger. “Makes room” is an interesting word that, basically speaks of enlarging the space in which a thing occupies. So we might understand that the idea here is that of giving a gift that will enlarge the “room” in the recipient’s life or heart for the giver. It implies both generosity and the absolute lack of any selfish motive for the giving.

This is NOT to say that there is no overtly positive effect for the giving of gift or that this positive effect is unknown to the giver. However, it seems that there is the conscious setting aside of this benefit for the gift giving because of the words used and of their separation from the idea of bribery or the seeking to sway the recipient to look favorably on the giver. Now, again, we need to remember that there is nothing wrong here with the giving of the gift with the knowledge that there will be a positive response, from the “liking” of the gift to the enlarged place that the gift brings forth in heart and mind of the receiver. We would argue, however, that great care ought to be taken that this is NOT the primary reason for the giving.

I am always reminded of the TV show that I occasionally watch where one of the characters always complains about wither Christmas time or birthdays because it is his view that the giving of gifts inflicts an obligation on the receiver to give gift to the giver of like value. It is for this reason that he does not give gifts to others on special occasions. The seeing or regarding of the giving of a gift with the view of obligation or real benefit from the one it is given to is EXACTLY what Solomon is warning against here.

Just be way of finishing up our interpretation we should know that the word “gift” is capable of a good or a bad sense. In this Proverb, it refers to the Eastern custom of presenting a gift or introduction to a person of higher rank. Thus, generally, it comes to mean that liberality - an open hand - will secure a man admission into society above what he would otherwise gain access to. This is just the idea that Solomon is warning against. We are not to “give” anything with the aim of receiving back from the one we give it to.

There some illustrations we can look to in the Bible to underscore this matter:

- Jacob, both in the case of his brother and of the governor of Egypt, showed a knowledge of human nature which was characteristic by the judicious presents with which he conciliated their favor.
- Eliezer had in the same way obtained admission into Rebekah’s house.
- Abraham refused as a gift what it was expedient should be secured by purchase, but not the less courteous was the offer on Ephron’s part (Gen 23:10, etc.).
- Ehud (but with sinister intent) gained admission to the private audience chamber of a king by means of a present (Judg. 3:15, etc.).

- There were liberal men (like Barnabas) in the early days of Christianity, who devised liberal things, and they gained the more influence in the Church.

By way of application - we should see that little men are those “great men” into whose presence “a gift” procures admission, which would be refused to mere sterling worth of character. And of an ignoble nature must he be who would purchase access to the drawing-rooms of the class above his own by making presents to individuals or offerings to some pet institution of theirs in order to win favor. This is only a species of bribery without the name, and both they who tender and they who accept it deserve the disappointment which usually ensues. But to cultivate an open-hearted, free-handed spirit, as becoming to a Christian and likely to recommend Christianity, - this is quite another thing, and I shall be wise to do it. For, as love begets love, and a gift bespeaks love, generosity will never fail to promote friendship. “*Every man is a friend to him who giveth gifts*” (Prov. 19:6). Often it is not the value of the gifts that conciliates so much as the thoughtful kindness they reflect, and the grace with which they are bestowed. Society opens its arms to the generous-hearted, - at least the society which is most desirable, and they are welcomed to the houses of the “great” as well as of the poor. The latter class are not, as a rule, to be won over to the Gospel unless timely aid be given in their temporal necessities, according to the principle laid down by the Master (Matt. 10:7, 8), and His own example in giving us Himself, the “unspeakable Gift,” that He might win us to God.