

Sermon
7/10/22

Gratitude vs. Gratification
Pastor Dan Peterson

Last Sunday we heard three mini-sermons or sermonettes.

Your task was to choose **one** that spoke to you personally and then meditate on it over the week.

The first sermonette focused on the language we use for God. The Bible, you may recall, speaks of God not only as Father (which we see in our second reading for today) but also as Mother (which we saw in Isaiah 66 last week).

How do you react to this maternal metaphor for God?

Would you agree with the statement that while God is beyond the categories of male and female, God is simultaneously both male **and** female?

The second sermonette raised the question of whether Jesus and Paul can free Christian men to resist toxic masculinity in our culture by exhibiting supposedly “feminine” traits like patience, kindness, and gentleness rather than force, authority, and control.

The third sermonette looked at life **before** death.

What resources might our faith offer to help us live and thrive on **this side** of the grave? What would it look like to be what Paul calls “a new creation” in **this world** instead of simply in the world to come?

My hope in offering these mini-sermons was that one might stay with you by speaking to you. So, what do you think? What are your conclusions? I welcome your feedback.

Why Should You Care for Others?

Now, speaking of last week, you may recall our reading from Galatians. There the Apostle Paul tells us that in Christ we should *look out for one another*.

We should “*bear one another’s burdens*” (Gal. 6:2).

Beyond that, we should also “*work for the good of all*” (Gal. 6:10).

But why?

Why should we love our neighbor?

Why should we go out of our way to help people?

Why not simply live for ourselves instead of living for others?

As it turns out, all three of our readings for today offer a response.

Yet before I get to them, I want to share a **practical answer** that comes to us from John Cassian, a Christian who lived in the fourth century.

Cassian was a monk who introduced this way of life to people living in Western Europe.

Works of charity and good will, he writes, “are **necessary** in this present life for as long as inequality prevails. [Our good works] would not be required were it not for the *superabundant numbers* of the poor, the needy, and the sick. These are there because of the *iniquity of men* who have held for their own private use what the common Creator has made available to *all*. As long as this iniquity rages in the world, these good works will be necessary and valuable to anyone practicing them . . .” (*Conferences*, p. 45).

In other words, because some people hoard what God has given to everyone, *works of charity will always be necessary*.

Cassian provides a good place to start.

If we wish to live in a world with less injustice and more equality, *we should care for those in need*.

That said, there must be **other reasons** for why we should work *for the good of all*, right?

Reward and Punishment

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, our first reading, offers one such reason.

There we learn that God “*delighted*” in making the ancient Israelites prosper when they obeyed God’s commandments.

Biblical scholars refer to this as *Deuteronomistic Theology*, although it also appears in other books of the Bible like Joshua and Proverbs.

This view thinks of morality in terms of **rewards and punishments**.

If you obey God’s laws, it says, good things will happen to you.

If you violate God’s laws, bad things will happen to you.

So, why should you help your neighbor in need?

Because if you do, God will **reward you** and if you don't, God will **punish you**.

Fear the Lord and do what is right...*or else!*

Now, to be fair this mentality does not simply belong to the Old Testament.

We find precedent for it in the New as well.

In the Book of Revelation, for example, we learn that the dead will be "*judged according to their works*" (20:12).

Those who remained faithful to Christ in the midst of Roman persecution will ultimately be rewarded.

On the other hand, those who did not will be *cast into the lake of eternal fire!*

One has to wonder, though.

If the condition for salvation is faithfulness to Christ, then what happens to **St. Peter** who denied Christ three times before his execution?

Other questions crop up as well.

Why, for instance, do bad things happen to *good people*?

Consider Job.

He was a righteous man "who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Yet in the span of just a few chapters, *Job suffers more than just about any other person in the whole Bible!*

And what about the relationship a Christian should have to those in need?

At its worst, the law of reward and punishment transforms the widow, the orphan, and the poor into *our* means of salvation.

We *use* them, in other words, to make ourselves right with God.

They become a means to an end.

Now, let me be clear: helping someone in need, **no matter what the motivation**, is better than not helping them at all.

But is there a *higher motivation*, one that prevents us from reducing God to a *supernatural scorekeeper* while making the *neighbor's benefit* our focus instead of our own?

John Cassian, the fourth century Christian I mentioned earlier, has a *fantastic response*.

The Alternative

Cassian cites the First Letter of John in the New Testament to make his case.

Initially, he says, we avoid sin “out of fear of punishment or hope for reward” (*ibid.*, p. 145).

This is, I suspect, what most of us who attended Sunday School were taught.

As we mature in our faith, however, another motivation for helping others appears.

Cassian calls it the “stage of love, for there is no fearfulness in love. Indeed, perfect love casts out fear, because fear is to expect punishment and anyone who is afraid is still not perfect in love. So we are to love [others] *because God first loved us*” (1 John 4:18-19)” (*ibid.*).

Do you hear Cassian’s reasoning?

He turns everything around!

Instead of working for the good of others to please God and avoid punishment, we work for the good of others in response to the love of God **we already have**.

As Colossians 1, our second reading for today puts it, God has *already* “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in who we have redemption [and] the forgiveness of sins” (v. 13).

We live for others, in turn, not for the sake of being rewarded, or out of fear, but (as our second reading also says) **out of gratitude** for the acceptance we have already received from God through Jesus Christ!

Because the believer has been made alive by God in Christ and grasped by God’s grace, Martin Luther writes about a thousand years after Cassian, good works should naturally “*break forth as a response*. . . [for] if [true] faith is there, [the Christian] cannot hold back” (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2 ed., p. 111).

Notice, then, what’s missing in the story of the Good Samaritan in today’s Gospel reading.

We hear nothing about *incentives* or *fear of punishment*.

The Good Samaritan does what he does simply out of love. He does it because it’s right, simply because he sees another person suffering and feels he must do something about it.

He lives for his neighbor, bandages his wounds, and houses him without any expectation of a reward.

Each of us, Jesus says, should “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

Next Steps

Dear friends in Christ, it’s a **struggle** sometimes to work for the good of those in need.

I often scrutinize my motives.

Am I doing it for the reward, which to me is the feeling of *gratification*?

Or am I doing it out of **gratitude** in response to what God has *already done* for me?

Think about it.

God has given each of us life, and as the power and ground of everything that lives, God sustains us each moment from one flash of being to the next.

In Christ, moreover, God has begun to create in us clean hearts and renew a right spirit within us (see Psalm 51), freeing us for the kind of life where we truly forget and even transcend ourselves by living for others.

This week, therefore, I invite you to do one thing: help someone in need *deliberately out of gratitude for what has God has given you.*

This is the higher motivation, the stage of love and gratefulness that ultimately answers our question of why we should care for our neighbor. May God replace whatever desire for **gratification** we have, and fill us with a spirit of *gratitude*.

And all of God’s people said,

Amen.