

God Loves a Cheerful Receiver

October 27, 2002

Background Study

Last week, we considered our role and responsibilities as trustees of God's house, a house that extends from our home here at St. Andrew, through the community of God's people, to all of creation. This week, we move on to a deeper look at what it means to be God's trustees and why it can be so very difficult for us all.

A Key Scripture Passage – Luke 18:15-17 (NRSV)

¹⁵People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Receiving

In the financial world, trustees are sometimes referred to as "receivers." This makes sense, because trustees receive assets which they hold in trust and manage well for the beneficiaries of the trust. In exactly the same way, God has given us the glories of all creation, which we hold in trust and are supposed to manage well for the benefit of all God's creatures. Unfortunately, this business of "receiving" is extraordinarily difficult for most adults.

Are you better at receiving a compliment or giving one? How would you respond to a stranger who came up to you and tried to give you a gift? Would you think the person a little nutty? Would you immediately try to figure out the angles? Would you try to reject it for fear of obligations that you might incur by accepting the gift? However, a small child accepts a gift with open arms, giving no thought to any future obligations! Indeed, we consciously teach our children to be suspicious of such gifts because we understand that we live in a flawed world where predators can take advantage of small children's openness and cheerful receiving. We teach our children that it is better to give than to receive as we try to move our children from selfishness to selflessness. But we lose something along the way. We lose our ability to rightly see and appreciate God's gifts to us.

When reading the above passage from Luke, Christians will sometimes, and wrongly, assume that Jesus is saying that we need to be as simple or naïve or unlearned as children when we approach the Good News. Instead, as Walter Liefeld notes, Jesus is talking about the attitude "essential for receiving God's grace. It is not age per se that is in view, but childlike qualities such as trust, openness, and the absence of holier-than-thou attitudes."¹ And this is why it so hard for us adults. We've worked hard for what we've got. We've earned it – the old-fashioned way. The idea that what we have is a gift from God, that we've *received it in trust*, is counter to the worldview most of us actually live. Frankly, this very problem underlies the difficulty so many of us have in grasping the essentials of the Christian proclamation. This problem explains why a majority of Christians mistakenly believe that we earn our way into heaven, into eternal communion with God.

¹ From Walter Liefeld's commentary on Luke in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, F.E. Gaebelin, Editor, 1984, Zondervan

Receiving the Gift of God's Grace

We are receivers of God's wealth and God's grace. Most of us know what we mean by God's wealth, but we probably could use a refresher on grace. In the New Testament, the word "grace" appears well more than 100 times and translates the Greek word, *charis*. Paul uses *charis* more than any other NT writer, especially in his greetings and benedictions. For Paul, grace is all about God's free giving to us. For example, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul speaks of "the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6). In his letter to the home churches in Rome, Paul writes, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified² by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). God's free gift of grace brings us the joy and fulfillment of a restored relationship with God.

The hard part for us is acknowledging that God's gift of grace is exactly that – a gift freely given, that we neither earn nor deserve. A traditional definition of God's grace is "unmerited favor." If we deserve (merit) what God gives us, it is not a gift, but a payment or reward. Children can receive God's gifts without feeling like they earned it or deserve – they just accept it. But this is pretty hard for hard-driving, high-achieving Americans who believe that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that we get what we pay for.

Being a Cheerful Receiver

The above verses from Luke are part of a larger block of teaching about understanding our total dependence on God in all we have and all we do. In 18:9-14³, Luke tells us Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee fasts and tithes and is quite proud about it, sure that all his giving to God has earned him God's favor. Of course, he is wrong. Then, after telling us about Jesus and the small children, Luke moves on the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30), who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus forces the young man to confront his bondage to his possessions. Jesus asks that this man not only give up his rights to his possessions, as Jesus asked of his disciples (Luke 14:33), but actually sell them all and give the money to the poor. This, he is unprepared to do and, frankly, I'd hate to imagine what my own response would be to Jesus' demand.

Len Sweet and Harry Wendt put all this business about being cheerful receivers rather bluntly:

When we place our so-called "gift" on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything . . . [W]e are not *giving God but [what is] God's own!* We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian giving, but Christian management and distribution [of God's creation], and this applies not merely to what we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all."⁴

Tough stuff, but fully consistent with the biblical witness. All we have – our lives, our stuff, our family, our very salvation – is a gift from God.

² You can think of "justified" as being declared innocent by God, removing all guilt and sin, and restoring us to a right relationship with God.

³ The following paragraphs will be clearer if you open your Bible to Luke, chapter 18, and read the passages. I don't have the space here to re-tell each story.

⁴ From "Freely You Have Received, Freely Give," by Leonard Sweet. A copy of the article is available at <http://www.leonardsweet.com/sweetened/articles.asp>

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 2:4b-25 God creates everything and gives humanity a paradise</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 100 & 1 Chronicles 29:10-19 It is God who made us and we are completely dependent on him.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 18:9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 18:18-30 Jesus and the rich young ruler</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 Paul knows that all he is and has is a gift from God (the grace of God)</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Are you better at receiving a compliment or giving one? How would you respond to a stranger who came up to you and tried to give you a gift? Would you think the person a little nutty? Would you immediately try to figure out the angles? Would you try to reject it for fear of obligations that you might incur by accepting the gift? Honestly . . . aren't we usually a lot more comfortable giving than receiving? Why is this so?
2. In the key scripture passage for this week, Jesus tells his disciples that they must receive the kingdom of God like a small child. What do you think he means? What are the biggest barriers to our acceptance of God's kingdom? What can we learn from our children?
3. How can we go about learning to be better receivers? This is absolutely critical to grasping the depth of God's grace and our dependence on him. Most of us don't like being dependent on anyone. I, for one, used to make an idol out of my independence and self-reliance. How do we teach our children about our dependence on God? How do we wean them from their selfishness but still help them to become cheerful receivers?