

ACHIEVEMENT, REWARD, AND GRACE

Scriptures: Luke 6:27-36, Luke 18:9-14

There is a book in our church library by William Diehl called *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World*. It is almost a textbook for this sermon series, or at least a book of case studies. Here is one of them. William Diehl writes,

Claire has been in and out of our lives for many years. My wife, Judy, first met her during one of her visits to the local county prison, where Claire was serving a term for being an accomplice to armed robbery. ...

Claire was a sweet, harmless, young woman whose major fault was that she seemed to be incapable of planning her life or considering the consequence of her actions. She got involved in the armed robbery because a boyfriend talked her into driving the car. During her parole period, she frequently missed appointments with the parole officer because she had agreed to go on a trip with friends a few days earlier. Judy spent hours trying to teach Claire the consequences of her actions, but with little success. ...

Claire invited us to her wedding—the only nonfamily members to be there. We were a bit concerned because her new husband, Michael, also had a police record. A few months after the wedding, Claire and Michael came to visit us. They needed help. They wanted to rent an apartment but did not have enough money for the deposit, and they could not get credit anywhere. Would we lend them \$300 for a few months? Judy agreed and we gave them a check.

For about six months we heard nothing from Claire and Michael. Judy called Claire's mother and discovered they had left town shortly after we gave them the money. Their whereabouts was unknown. We had been taken for \$300.

Almost two years later we got a call from Claire. They were back in town, this time with a baby. Could they visit us? Judy said yes. Claire and Michael were obviously glad to see us. They were back in town for good, they said, and Michael was about to start work next week. But they needed money. Could they borrow from us? I reminded them that the first "loan" had never been repaid. They seemed surprised. Apparently, they had forgotten all about it. I looked at Judy and suggested that we needed to talk it over a bit. They left with our assurance that we'd let them know promptly (pp. 73-74).

So what would you do with Claire? What would Jesus do? Keep this situation in mind as we look again at our second scripture lesson from Luke 6 (NT, p. 64). Let's start with verse 31. Jesus says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This is perhaps one of Jesus' most famous sayings—the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

What does that mean for how we deal with Claire? I think if we applied the golden rule to Claire, we would tell her to get lost. Seriously, who of us would expect to get a loan from someone after totally ignoring—not just failing to repay but totally disregarding!—the previous

loan they had given us? None of us would expect others to give us a loan under such circumstances. So why should we give one to anyone else? The Golden Rule is about fairness: treating people the way you would expect or want to be treated.

But now look at the verses which precede the Golden Rule—verses 27-28: “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” That is not fair; that is crazy. Now look at verse 30: “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” Isn’t that an invitation to irresponsibility? How will Claire or anyone else learn responsibility if we are always bailing them out? We are starting to wonder that about auto makers and banks.

The Golden Rule is about fairness: treating others the way you would want to be treated. But the rest of this scripture passage is about something else. Look at verse 32: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

According to Jesus the golden rule is not good enough. Even sinners love those who love them. Even sinners recognize that if others do good to you, you should do good to them. There is nothing uniquely Christian about that. Jesus says to his followers, “What credit is that to you?”

In Greek this statement of Jesus is even more dramatic. In Greek he says literally, “What kind of grace is that for you?” The same Greek phrase appears in the next two verses. Let me read verses 33-34, putting in my own literal translation:

If you do good to those who do good to you, what kind of grace is that for you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what kind of grace is that for you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

These verses are not about fairness, they are about grace. Grace means giving someone an unearned or undeserved favor. Loving your enemies is not about fairness; it is about grace. Giving to those who cannot or will not repay you is not about fairness; it is about grace.

Why must we go beyond fairness to talk about grace? The answer is in verses 35-36:

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

The key to this scripture passage is God. God is not just fair; God is grace. God does not give us only what we deserve. God gives us what we need out of God’s love.

Now I think we have a clue as to why Jesus puts the Golden Rule into the middle of this scripture passage. As I have pointed out, the Golden Rule does not really fit the rest of this scripture. The Golden Rule is about fairness. This scripture passage is about grace. The Golden Rule does not fit in this scripture unless ... unless you think about it in relation to God. In this context the Golden Rule is saying, Do unto others as you want *God* to do unto you.

How do you want God to treat you? Do you want God to give you only what you deserve? Do you want God to repay you only according to your deeds? Do you want fairness from God or do you want mercy? Do you want justice from God, or do you want grace?

The truth is we all have a debt to God we cannot repay. We like to think that at least we are better than others, like the Pharisee in our first scripture lesson. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or that tax collector over there. The Pharisee went to church and even pledged. What could be better than that? But Jesus says that he did not go home justified; he did not go home reconciled to God. He was so caught up in his achievements he was incapable of receiving grace.

If you think only about giving people what they deserve at work or school or anywhere else, you will be able to receive only what you deserve. And that would be a sad situation when it comes to God.

So what does this mean for Claire? William Diehl says that he and his wife Judy really agonized over this. He says that Judy wanted to give them another loan, but he wondered if they were really helping them by giving them more money. Are they demonstrating grace or enabling irresponsibility?

Here is what they decided. William Diehl writes,

We decided to make a charitable gift to a local human services agency, whose director knew Claire and Michael. We asked the director to extend a loan to them, and to follow up for repayment. If Claire and Michael repaid the loan, the agency was ahead by \$300; if there was a default, the agency was simply back to where it was before our gift (p. 74).

What I like about this is how it gets Claire and Michael out of the role of repaying the Diehls and into the role of helping someone else. The Diehls will not receive any repayment for their gift. In that sense they are “lending” and expecting nothing in return. But if Claire and Michael repay the loan to the social service agency, then the agency will have money to help others. Claire and Michael have an opportunity to pay it forward, to take the gift that has been given to them and share it with others.

That is how grace is supposed to work. It is not about reward and punishment; it is not about repayment. It is about an undeserved favor that we have received from God and have the chance to share with others.

- Ken Onstot
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