

“You owe me.”

How many times have we heard that? How many times have we said it ourselves? We want a favor done for us, and so we reach back and remind someone of how we’ve treated them in the past. We’ve been nice to them and now it’s time to pay it back. We may have never said anything at the time. It was just implied; I’ll do this for you and you’re going to owe me back in the future. It’s hardly surprising that we tend to default into operating this way. You do in order to get. Our whole culture of humanity has been built around this structure from long, long ago. In our reading today, Jesus shows that this attitude is nothing new.

<read text: Luke 14:12-14>

Here we have a situation where Jesus is again invited to a dinner. But now he challenges the societal conventions with the advice he gives to the host and all the guests. At the time, you were expected to invite the people you wanted to invite you back. And you would try to get the highest class people you could to come to your party so that then you could be seen at their house and increase your own societal standing. But Jesus offers a different take on the setup. If you do something in order to get something back, you have received your reward in full already. But if instead you do for those who you know *can’t* repay you, then you will receive an eternal reward.

It comes down to the difference between our natural, sinful selves and the new self in our God. The old self is selfish. Any outward act of good or charity is done for selfish intent. It’s done to expect a reward or repayment someday, or at the very least recognition of what a Good Person you are. But the life lived in our Lord operates on a different level. In humility we face God’s law and realize that in our selfishness we do not deserve any kind of reward or anything good at all. We see that we have put ourselves first when God tells us to look to him and others first. And yet despite that, our God died for us. In his death we have been given as much as we ever need and more than we could ever repay. And motivated by what’s been done for us already, empowered with a heart of love by our God, we do out of love for our God and others, not out of love for ourselves.

So the question we have to back up and ask ourselves then, is in any given situation, what are you doing that for? Is your motivation a selfish one? Are you doing so that now or later you can get something back out of the deal? It’s surprising when you think about it how often we operate this way. Now, as I said, that’s not really a surprise, as I said, it’s how we operate by nature. Our society teaches us this lesson from the beginning. Do and you will be rewarded. Work hard and you’ll get the benefits of it. Don’t work hard and you won’t get as much. Naturally, we understand that it doesn’t work that way all the time in practice, but the ideal sticks with us as a lesson we learn from our youth. We do in order to get.

And again, it’s no surprise that our culture acts this way because that is how we are simply wired by default as human beings. We are born sinful and the core essence of sin is selfishness. The sinful self only cares about the self and so will only ever do something for others if there’s something in it for the self. It’s not always a material reward, sometimes it’s just to be complimented and get the recognition we think we deserve. Sometimes it’s just for a personal feeling of satisfaction and self-righteousness. Whatever it is you’re looking for, ask yourself, how often do you do the things you do simply because of what you’ll get out of them?

Now, someone might think, “Is that really so bad? Why shouldn’t I expect compensation for my hard work?” But that does cause problems. Because what happens when the compensation you expect doesn’t line up with the compensation you receive? Either because your expectations are set too high, or because the person you’re helping isn’t thankful enough? I just did all that for you and all I get is a thank you? Okay, once, twice, maybe that we can brush off. But eventually we decide that we’re never being nice to that person again because we get worn out at doing so much for them and never seeing anything in return. Or the people who do respond what we would consider appropriately, eventually our standards go higher and higher. They didn’t give us as much back as *last* time. We get resentful at how much we give and give and never get enough back. And that’s to say nothing of the people who’ve hurt us in the past before we’ve even begun. They’re immediately disqualified because they don’t deserve our help in anything.

So you see how over time this attitude leads us to narrow our good will and charity to the point where it’s only done for a handful of people that we know will pay out when we put our nickel in. This is a far cry from God’s initial expectation that asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It gets to the point where we’re only “loving” our neighbor outwardly whenever it lines up with loving ourselves. We set out to do good, but it all ends up wrapped up in that ball of selfishness that our God condemns as sin.

But even as bad an outcome as that is, it doesn't really hold a candle to when we try to interact this way with our God. Think about what would happen if we applied the same scenarios to our relationship with God, how devastating that would be! If everything we did for our God was in order to get something out of him, we'd end up even worse off. Now, that may seem silly to you. Why would anyone think that? We know that God does not owe us anything. We know that God has already given us all that truly matters, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. We know that he watches over us and guides our lives in the best way possible to see that we reach our heavenly home. So how could we delude ourselves into thinking that our relationship with God is one of some kind of give and take?

And yet, it happens all the time.

We've felt it happen in ourselves, and we've seen it happen in others. We sometimes slip into this idea that there's an unspoken agreement between us and God. We do what we're supposed to do, and he keeps our life easy and free of major trouble. We show up to church the right number of times a year (whatever number we've decided is enough), we keep our lives on the relative straight and narrow, do some good deeds every now and then, and we expect God to be pretty grateful that he's getting that out of us and make our lives convenient and easy.

Now, I don't think anyone here would ever say anything so foolish out loud, or even think it in so many words. But the fact that the notion is there, floating around in our brains, can show itself when God does not hold up his assumed end of the bargain. When life isn't easy, when we're struck with cancer, when a family member is taken suddenly, when a job is lost or any other kind of tragedy strikes. Then the cries can start to go up...why me, God? What did I do to deserve this? And we start to think, after all I do for him, this is how he treats me? God, if you're not going to play fair, then I'm leaving! We've seen it happen. The trouble hits and instead of clinging to our God, our only source of hope and strength, God is instead blamed and hope is lost.

It doesn't even have to be anything big. It can just be minor things that pile up over time. We get assumed expectations of what God owes us for our lives of service, and when he doesn't meet them (and he never promised them), we get burned out and resentful. And eventually, it drives a person to walk away.

So again I ask you to ask yourselves, what are you doing that for? Everything we do for our neighbor is done for God as well, so it all comes back to him in the end. Your acts of service for God...what are you doing them for? Are you doing them for an implied reward that God never promised? Are you here today because you know you're "supposed" to be, because God told you to and you don't want to make the big guy angry? All of those are selfish motivations, they're exactly what Jesus warns us about today.

Instead, let us act with the proper understanding and the proper motivation. You want to talk about being owed for one's work, then let's start with Jesus. He lived a life as a mortal, he died a death worse than you will ever know. And he suffered hell itself on the cross. All your selfishness was credited to him and he suffered for it. He made a payment that would've taken you a literal eternity. God has *already* done for you, he does not owe us anything for our good works. It's the other way around. If there's any debt here, it's always from us to him.

So when we pour out to those around us and when we serve our God, we are the ones paying back. We are the ones who've already received our reward and need to return. You can't ever give out to God and others more than he has already given to you. Don't look for repayment for your actions to come, you've received them already in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that God has granted you. That is our motivation for what we do, that is why we care for others first and cling to our God at every opportunity.

And even as we do that, we understand it is not some sort of repayment plan. We're not doing to make the scales even with our God for what he's done for us. Rather, we do simply out of gratitude because he has done so much for us, and he demands nothing in return. He has given us the ability to be truly selfless when it comes to others and ourselves, and that is a blessing the rest of the world does not have.

So as you go out and live your lives of faith, as you return regularly to hear God's word, consider what you're doing it all for. Don't do it for what you might get out of it all, you already have more than you'll ever need. Don't do it for any reward. Just do it for the one who saved you. Amen.