

Law and Virtue: Adult Catechesis, February 18, 2024

Gratitude, Generosity, and Hospitality: The Antithesis of the 8th and 10th Commandments

“Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:12, 16-17).

Introduction

Teaser #1: How does covetousness spring from self-love? And vice-versa?

*“... in the last days distressing times will come. **For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!**” (2 Timothy 3:1-5)¹*

“From self-love spring covetousness.” - St. John Chrysostom²

Discussion: If you had to diagram this connection, how would you connect the dots between self-love and covetousness?

Teaser #2: Why does Paul summarize evil desire and covetousness as “idolatry” in Colossians 3:3?

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness³ (which is idolatry)” (Col. 3:3).

Discussion: Why does Paul summarize evil desire and covetousness as idolatry? Or what does worshipping an idol have to do with covetousness and evil desire?

How can we avoid idolatry by practicing gratitude, generosity, and hospitality?

What is the Root Sin?

Discussion: What have you heard people describe as the root sin or the sin underneath all other sins?

¹ All verses from the NSRVUE unless otherwise indicated.

² Homily VII on 2 Tim. 3:1-7.

³ covetousness = *pleonexia* (πλενεξία) | The state of desiring to have more than one’s due, greediness, insatiableness, avarice, covetousness.

In his book exploring how the concept of gift-exchange in the Greco-Roman world heavily influenced Second Temple Judaism, and how that cultural background influenced and can help us understand Paul's theology in Romans and Galatians, John M.G. Barclay writes,

“Seneca takes for granted that gift giving is a matter not of individual ethics but of sociality, ... tying people together in bonds or obligation. The strength of this bond arises from the strong expectation that a gift must be returned in one form or another: **“the whole world” regards ingratitude as among the worst social vices**” (*Paul and the Gift*, 46).⁴

Elsewhere, Seneca calls ingratitude “the most odious vice.”⁵

St. Gregory Thaumaturgus (the Miracle Worker) writes,

“Ingratitude appears to me to be a dire evil; a dire evil indeed, yea, the direst of evils. For when one has received some benefit, his failing to attempt to make any return by at least the oral expression of thanks, where aught else is beyond his power, marks him out either as an utterly irrational person, or as one devoid of the sense of obligations conferred, or a man without any memory”⁶

Clement of Alexandria describes ingratitude as the only “dishonor” that “can touch God.”⁷

Why was ingratitude considered the direst of evils by these contemporaries of Christ?

Introducing “The Gift”

In his landmark study of gift giving among pre-modernized, pre-Western people, French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss detailed a system of gifts and returns gifts that subsequent scholars would label “gift-exchange” or simply “the gift.”

In a culture marked by gift-exchange, there exists an obligation to:

1. Give gifts
2. Receive gifts
3. Return gifts

“To refuse to give, to neglect to invite, as to refuse to take, is equivalent to declaring war; it is to refuse alliance and communion” (Mauss, *The Gift*, 74).

This economy of gift and return gift wasn't just for show. It was primarily to create and maintain social bonds—to establish and stabilize communion with someone else.

Scriptural example: 1 Samuel 25:2-44, David, Nabal, and Abigail

⁴ “Not to return gratitude for benefits ... is both base in itself, and is thought base by all men wherefore even ungrateful men complain of ingratitude, and yet what all condemns is at the same time rooted in all; ... The man is ungrateful who denies that he has received a benefit; who pretends that he has not received it; who does not return it. The most ungrateful man of all is he who forgets it” (Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, 3.1.1).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.6.

⁶ St. Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Oration and Panegyric Address to Origen*, Argument III.

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, VII.

The Great Symbiosis & Grace

In his Old Testament scholarship, John Walton uses the term “The Great Symbiosis” to describe how people in the Ancient Near East believed that their god(s) would give them gifts or blessings only if they were worthy and only if they gave the right gifts to their god. The symbiosis itself was an arrangement where worshippers provided the god with a house (temple), food (via sacrifices), and even clothing and the god cared for and protected them in return (and vice versa, the god gave gifts in order to get gifts).

The non-problematic, redeemed version of this in terms of Israel’s worship centered around gifts as an expression of thanksgiving that facilitated communion with Yahweh.

*“The sacrifices and rituals of the Old Testament played the role of relationship-building exercises” (Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, p. 32).*

Part and parcel of a gift-exchange economy was the concept of **a worthy recipient**. For if giving a gift carries with it the connotation of entering into a relationship and a sequence of back and forth gifts, **then perhaps we should be careful with whom we give gifts and from whom we receive gifts?** Giving a gift or extending hospitality to one who cannot reciprocate is akin to placing them in perpetual debt. In this system is it almost predatory.

The questions then become: ***Who is worthy to receive gifts from God? What makes someone worthy? Who is my neighbor? And how can we offer return gifts to God?***

The Testimony of Scripture: Old Testament and New Testament

What can we give to God that we have not already received?

Read: James 1:17; Psalm 50:12-14; 1 Cor. 4:7b; Psalm 47:7-9; Romans 11:35

What then should we give, as a return gift, to the God who owns everything and deserves all praise and honor?

Read: Isaiah 1:11; 16-17; Michael 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Psalm 40:6-8; Matthew 25:34-40.

What kills gratitude? What causes covetousness? Why are we not worthy to receive good gifts from God?

Deut. 8:11-14, 17-19; Deut. 9:4-5; Romans 3:11-12, 23-26

Discussion

Question 1:

How does covetousness spring from self-love? And vice-versa?

If you had to diagram this connection, how would you connect the dots between self-love and covetousness?

Question 2:

Why does Paul summarize evil desire and covetousness as idolatry? Or what does worshipping an idol have to do with covetousness and evil desire?

How can we avoid idolatry by practicing gratitude, generosity, and hospitality.

Conclusion

*“I know what he is thinking,” said the King, looking upon the Queen. “He is thinking that you suffered and strove and I have a world for my reward.” Then he turned to Ransom and continued. “You are right,” he said, “I know now what they say in your world about justice. And perhaps they say well, for in that world things always fall below justice. But [God] always goes above it. All is gift. I am [Ruler] not by His gift alone but by ... yours, not by ours alone but by my wife’s—nay, in some sort, by gift of the very beast and birds. Through many hands, enriched with many different kinds of love and labor, the gift comes to me. It is the Law. The best fruits are plucked for each by some hand that is not his own” (C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, ch. 17)*

The confession that “All is gift” is at the heart of gratitude, generosity, and hospitality. It is the vaccine that inoculates us against the 8th and 10th commandments.

The root vice that short circuits love for our neighbors is ingratitude. The feeling that we are worthy or are entitled to good things, especially the good things that others have. The belief that “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” This grasping will lead us to steal, kill, destroy, covet, commit violence, hoard, abuse, and justify any sin.

Passages on Gratitude, Generosity, and Hospitality (and Covetousness)

“God showed himself, by the fall of man, as patient, benign, merciful, mighty to save. Man is therefore most ungrateful, if, unmindful of his own lot, and of the benefits held out to him, he do not acknowledge divine grace” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.X.I).

“It is Yahweh who gives the resources that provide life in the deadly dangers of wilderness, but Israel must trust in the reliability of God's provision and avoid the temptation to hoard or control the blessings God provides. The people of God must learn to receive God's gifts; to attempt to grasp these gifts is to lose them” (Walter Brueggemann et, al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 124).

“What happened to Solomon's wisdom? Didn't he ask for and receive the gift of wisdom for the governance of the people? One answer to this question is to note that the giving of a gift does not mean that the gift cannot be squandered” (*Ibid.*, 254).

“I meditate on the superlative grace of God and see that I have nothing good that wasn't given to me” (Cornelius Plantinga, *Taking Care of a Grateful Faith*).

“Thou ought to be thankful, not to be puffed up. Haughtiness is the first act of ingratitude, for it denies the gift of grace. He that is puffed up, is puffed up as if he had excelled by his own strength, and he who thinks he has thus excelled is ungrateful toward Him who bestowed that honor. Hast thou any good? Be thankful to Him who gave it” (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philippians 2:1-4*).