

What Benefit?

1 Samuel 26:6-12, Luke 6:27-36 (ESV)

January 16, 2005

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you?” These three questions constitute an attack upon our ordinary goodness, and they challenge us to extraordinary goodness. These three questions—“What benefit is that to you?” “What benefit is that to you?” and “What credit is that to you?”—undercut the working presuppositions of polite society. Indeed, these three questions peel away the veneer of respectability and self-righteousness and open the door to the gospel of God and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you?” Consider the assumptions behind these three questions: “If you love those who love you,” “If you do good to those who do good to you,” and “If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive.” That is what we do. We love the people who love us. We do good to those who do good to us. We lend to those from whom we expect to receive. That is what good people do. In fact, surely it would be bad not to love those who love us, not to do good to those who do good to us, and not to lend to those from whom we expect to receive. What kind of world would that be? So surely the point is not to quit doing good, to quit loving, or to quit lending.

What, then, is the point? Consider the comment after each question. “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.” The presumed ordinary goodness that we share with the rest of humanity is nothing more than, and nothing other than, the self-interested and self-serving strategy of sinners trying to make it on their own. “Even sinners love those who love them.” “Even sinners” do good to those who do good to them. “Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.” Even sinners meet these minimum standards of human interaction. So these can hardly be considered virtues.

Having established that, let us return to the questions. “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?” “And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you?” Given that even sinners do all of those things, the answer is that none of these things is of any benefit to us and none of these things brings any credit to us. That is not to say that we are to stop loving, stop doing good, or stop lending. In fact, we are to do them even more. We will get to that in a moment. The point here is that, given that even sinners do all of these things, none of these things is of any benefit to us and none of these things brings any credit to us. They may form a minimum standard of human interaction, but they count for nothing before God. They get us nowhere with God. They are of no benefit to us with God. They gain us no credit with God. We are still penniless, beggarly sinners.

These negative answers seem to imply that we should do something more, something above and beyond the minimum, in order to be of benefit to us with God and in order to build up some credit with God. If even sinners love those who love them, should we not love those who do not love us? Would not that be of benefit to us? If even sinners do good to those who do good to them, should we not do good to those who do not do good to us? Would not that be of benefit to us? If even sinners lend to sinners from whom they expect to receive, should we not lend to sinners from whom we do not expect to receive? Would not that be of credit to us? Well, yes and no. Yes, we should do all this and more. We will get to that in a moment. But no, even these increased activities will not earn us any benefit or credit with God. That is not the way it works. The truth that our minimal standards are not of benefit to us seems to imply that if we do more we will earn more. But that is not the way it works.

Here is where the gospel of Jesus Christ provides a correction to our natural way of thinking. Listen not only to the implied behavior but also to the gospel reason behind it: “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” “He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” “He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Thanks be to God! There is the gospel. “He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” We do not have to earn our way into heaven. Heaven is not a benefit we receive for our good works. Heaven is not purchased by building up credit. The God and Father of Jesus Christ “is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” And that, my friends, reaches far enough to include even us. We do not earn God’s kindness. God is kind even to those of us—all of us—who do not deserve it.

Here is the key to it all. It still has implications for our behavior. We will get to those in a moment. But stop and consider the great gospel behind all the questions, behind the all assumptions and the implications, and behind all the critiques and the challenges. The God and Father of Jesus Christ “is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” That is not a reason for us to strive to be ungrateful and evil. But we do not have to strive to be ungrateful and evil. We already are. That is where we are. That is who we are. That is reality. So God has come to us where we are. He loves us where we are. He also loves us into another place where we are not yet. But he starts with us as we are. We do not have to earn his attention and care. Forgiveness is not a benefit of behavior so good as not to need forgiveness. Neither is eternal life purchased on credit.

In case we missed this gospel, Jesus gives it to us again in a slightly different form: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” Again, we will get to “Be merciful” in just a moment. For now, consider the foundation: “Your Father is merciful.” That is it. “Your Father is merciful.” That is the good news. Jesus does not say, “If you are good enough, God will look kindly upon you.” How terrifying that would be! Jesus says, “Your Father is merciful.” Jesus does not say, “If you try hard enough, God will credit your effort toward your account.” How terrifying that would be! Jesus says, “Your Father is merciful.” The foundation, the good news, the underlying reality of all that is said here is the grace and mercy of God Almighty.

Now it is time to look at the implications. Now that we have the truth, now that we have the gospel, we are ready to ask what it means for our lives. This is very different from what we first thought the implications were. Instead of seeking to earn God’s favor, now we are in a position of seeking to respond to God’s prior favor. Jesus does not say, “Be merciful, so that your Father will be merciful to you.” That is not the gospel. That would be terrifying. Jesus does say, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” That is the gospel. That is grace. That is full of life and hope. Either way, the implication could be worded, “Be merciful.” Either way, some of the outer actions would look the same. But the foundation is different, so the motivation is different, so the resulting Christian life is different.

Jesus says, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” We could put that in chronological order to say, “Because your Father is merciful, therefore be merciful.” That is the gospel. Because God has already shown mercy to you, show mercy to each other. Because God has already forgiven you, you do not have to live in the anxiety of wondering whether or not you have been forgiven. Instead, you are set free from that worry and set free to be forgiving of those around you. Because God has already promised you eternal life, you do not have to live this life in fear and worry about the next life. Instead, you are set free from that worry and set free to be of help to those around you in this life. Do you see the difference? Instead of

seeking to earn God's good favor, we are told that he has already poured it out upon us. Instead of seeking to establish our own benefit and credit, we are set free to live in joy and gratitude, responding to the benefit and credit already given us.

What, then, if anything is the additional benefit to us of good behavior? What beyond salvation is the credit we receive? Not that we earn some future favor but that even now we will be drawn closer and closer to God. "Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High." What a wonderful benefit that will be! The reward is not extrinsic or arbitrary. The reward of godliness is being children of God. The reward of gratitude is being grateful. The reward of graciousness is being gracious. The reward of mercy is being merciful. The reward of goodness is being good. The reward of generosity is being generous. The reward of kindness is being kind. There can be no higher reward. That is the benefit. That is the credit, if you will. "Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High." Is this of interest to you? Is this something you would like to do? Does this appeal to you?

Now we are ready to hear how we are to go about living out this wonderful grace of God in our day to day lives. "I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Do you see how expanded this is? Not only are we to love those who love us—Jesus never says to stop loving them—but also we are to love even our enemies, even those who do not love us, even those who hate us and seek our harm. We are to love them and seek their well being. That love would reflect the love of God. Not only are we to do good to those who do good to us—Jesus never says to stop doing good to them—but also we are to do good to those who hate us, even to those who do not do good to us, even to those who wish us harm, even to those who work for our demise. That goodness would reflect the goodness of God.

Not only are we to bless those who bless us—Jesus never says to stop blessing them—but also we are to bless those who curse us, even those who do not bless us, even those who are not neutral toward us, even those who despise us and spit upon us. We are to bless them despite what they do to us. That blessing would reflect the blessing of God. Not only are we to pray for those who pray with and for us—Jesus never says to stop praying with and for them—but also we are to pray for those who abuse us, even for those who do not pray for us, even for those who actively work against us, even for those who injure and humiliate us. We are to pray for them. It is easy to pray for family and friends. It is easy to pray for fellow Christians. It is easy to pray for the weak and needy. But to pray for the strong and mighty? To pray for those who lord it over us and wrong us? Such prayer would reflect the very heart of God.

“I say to you who hear... To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.” Now Jesus has gone from prayer and blessing to actually suffering injury, wrong, and loss. To strike back when injured would be to fall to the level of the offender, to take matters into our own hands, and to deny the love and mercy of God. To stand and take the injury is to bear witness to the suffering love of God, particularly as made manifest in the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. This does not say that we are not to protect others. But it does say that we are to suffer personal injury without striking back or seeking retaliation. And this extends even to property loss. If someone takes your overcoat, do not withhold your jacket either. This is not the way to get ahead in the world. And it is not meant to encourage thievery. But it would reflect the extravagant mercy of God.

“I say to you who hear... Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.” Is this for real? Does Jesus mean this literally? I see no indication that he does not. I see no way out of this. He says what he means and means what he says. People come to this church every day seeking help. People throughout this city need help. People in Africa need help today. People around the Indian Ocean are crying out for help. Do we hear them? Can we help them? “I say to you who hear... As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” We recognize this as the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It may or may not work as a strategy. The others may still do something else unto us. But we cannot control them. We are, however, responsible for our own actions.

Again, “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great.” “Expecting nothing in return.” Ostensibly, that refers to the persons to whom the good is done. We are not to seek anything back from them. And yet, it may have a larger reference, too. We are not to do good deeds to others in expectation of a return from God. That is not the way it works. We are not to do this to seek benefit. We are not to do this to seek credit. We are not to do this to curry favor. We have already received good from God. We have already been forgiven. We have already been promised eternal life. Any little good we do is in response to that prior grace. Any little good we do is an act of thanksgiving, an act of praise, and act of joy and of gratitude. Let us so live our lives as to celebrate the goodness of God.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend,

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expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

To the God of mercy be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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