

OBLIGATION OR OPPORTUNITY?

OUR GOD IS A GIVING GOD. WE ARE CONSTANTLY SURROUNDED BY GIFTS HE HAS SHOWERED DOWN UPON US. OUR FOOD, OUR CLOTHING, OUR HOMES, OUR CHILDREN—ALL OF THESE ARE GIFTS FROM GOD. AND OF COURSE, THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL IS THE SAVIOR HE SENT TO DIE FOR OUR SINS AND GIVE US ETERNAL LIFE. EVERYTHING WE HAVE, EVERYTHING WE ARE AND EVERYTHING WE WILL BE IS A GIFT FROM GOD.

SO WHY DO WE TEND TO TREAT SOME OF GOD'S MOST PRECIOUS GIFTS AS IF THEY WERE REQUIREMENTS OR OBLIGATIONS OR DUTIES? FOR EXAMPLE, GOD OFFERS TO WASH AWAY OUR SINS IN BAPTISM, AND WE SAY, "DOES A PERSON HAVE TO BE BAPTIZED IN ORDER TO BE SAVED?" THEY'VE TURNED A GIFT INTO A REQUIREMENT.

HE INVITES US TO GATHER TOGETHER ON THE SABBATH TO RECEIVE HIS BLESSINGS AND WE SAY, "I WENT TO CHURCH LAST WEEK—DO I HAVE TO GO AGAIN THIS WEEK?" HE INVITES US TO BRING OUR PROBLEMS TO HIM AND SEEK HIS HELP IN PRAYER AND WE SAY, "I KNOW I OUGHT TO PRAY MORE OFTEN THAN I DO." GOD OFFERS TO SPEAK TO US IN HIS WORD AND WE SAY, "I JUST DON'T HAVE TIME TO READ THE BIBLE." HE FORGIVES ALL OUR SINS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST AND WE SAY, "YEAH—BUT THERE MUST BE SOMETHING I HAVE TO DO ALSO." HE KEEPS TRYING TO GIVE SALVATION TO US AND WE KEEP TRYING TO EARN IT. IT'S CALLED PRIDE AND IT'S THE MOTHER OF ALL SINS. WE THINK THAT IF IT'S GOING TO GET DONE, WE HAVE TO DO IT.

A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THIS IS HOW THE JEWS IN GALATIA RESPONDED TO PAUL WHEN HE BROUGHT THEM THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST. THEY HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO BELIEVE THAT THEY HAD TO DO CERTAIN THINGS IN ORDER TO EARN GOD'S APPROVAL. FIRST AND FOREMOST, THEY HAD TO OBEY ALL THE LAWS GOD HAD GIVEN THEM AT MOUNT SINAI—NOT ONLY THE TEN COMMANDMENTS BUT THE CIVIL LAWS AND FOOD LAWS. THEY ALSO HAD TO OBSERVE ALL THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS: THE PASSOVER, THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD, ROSH HASHANNA, THE FEAST OF BOOTHES, YOM KIPPUR AND MANY OTHERS. AND OF COURSE THERE WAS CIRCUMCISION: ANY MAN WHO WAS UNCIRCUMCISED WAS EXCLUDED FROM THE COVENANT COMMUNITY OF ISRAEL. FOR MOSES HAD WRITTEN: "EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING THAT IS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW IS UNDER A CURSE." AND THEY HAD TO DO IT ALL PERFECTLY BECAUSE MOSES HAD WRITTEN, "HE WHO BREAKS THE LAW AT ANY POINT BREAKS ALL OF IT."

SO IF YOU DIDN'T WANT TO BE UNDER A CURSE, YOU HAD TO DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO DO EVERYTHING WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW. THERE WERE A LOT OF OBLIGATIONS, A LOT OF REQUIREMENTS AND TO GIVE THE JEWS CREDIT, THEY TRIED—THEY REALLY TRIED. BUT OF COURSE THEY FAILED BECAUSE SINFUL MAN CANNOT POSSIBLY LIVE A SINLESS LIFE. THEY WERE SO USED TO FOCUSING ON OBEDIENCE THAT WHEN PAUL

BROUGHT THEM THE NEWS THAT JESUS HAD DONE ALL THE OBEYING THAT NEEDED TO BE DONE—THEY JUST COULDN'T BELIEVE IT.

THEY WERE CONVINCED THAT THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH. EVEN THOSE JEWS WHO ACCEPTED THE GIFT OF SALVATION THROUGH JESUS CHRIST BELIEVED THAT THEY HAD TO CONTINUE IN THEIR OBSERVANCES AND TRADITIONS IN ORDER TO BE SAVED. THEY ACCEPTED THE GIFT BUT ADDED AN OBLIGATION—THE OBLIGATION TO OBSERVE THE RULES AND REGULATIONS OF JUDAISM.

AND YOU KNOW SOMETHING? WE'RE A LOT LIKE THEM. A LOT OF CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THAT THEY HAVE TO ADD SOMETHING TO WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR THEM IN ORDER TO BE SAVED. I ONCE SAW A ROADSIDE SIGN THAT READ: "WANT TO BE SAVED? 1. ADMIT YOU'RE A SINNER; 2. REPENT OF YOUR SINS; 3. BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST; 4. FOLLOW HIS COMMANDS." THEY HAD IT RIGHT WITH THE FIRST THREE; THEN THEY TOOK IT ALL AWAY WITH THE FOURTH. THEY ALSO HAD A PROBLEM BELIEVING IN A FREE LUNCH.

I'D LIKE TO CONSIDER THREE OF THE GREATEST GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN US AND HOW WE TURN THEM INTO OBLIGATIONS OR DUTIES IN OUR MINDS. THE THREE ARE WORSHIP, PRAYER AND GOD'S WORD. WE'LL START WITH WORSHIP. WHEN YOU GO TO CHURCH, DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO RECEIVE A GIFT OR TO FULFILL AN OBLIGATION? DO YOU THINK THAT YOU **OUGHT** TO GO TO CHURCH OR THAT YOU **GET** TO GO TO CHURCH?

WELL, LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS DURING ONE OF OUR CHURCH SERVICES. WE CONFESS OUR SINS AND RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS. WE SING OF GOD'S LOVE FOR US AND HIS FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST. WE SHARE GOD'S PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER. WE HEAR GOD'S WORD READ AND EXPLAINED TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HOW HIS LOVE CAN SHAPE OUR DAILY LIVES AND HELP US WITH OUR BURDENS. WE RECEIVE THE BODY AND BLOOD OF OUR SAVIOR IN THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR WHICH STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH AND OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. FINALLY WE RECEIVE HIS THREEFOLD BLESSING IN HIS PROMISE TO WALK WITH US IN OUR DAILY LIVES.

WHERE IN ALL THAT IS THE REQUIREMENT? WHERE IS THE OBLIGATION? WHERE ARE WE ASKED TO DO ANYTHING? THE ANSWER IS *NOWHERE*. WE GO TO CHURCH TO RECEIVE—NOT TO GIVE. THAT'S WHY OUR LUTHERAN FORM OF WORSHIP IS CALLED "DIVINE SERVICE," BECAUSE IT CONSISTS OF JESUS CHRIST'S SERVICE TO US, NOT OURS TO HIM. JESUS SAID, "THE SON OF MAN CAME NOT TO BE SERVED, BUT TO SERVE." JUST PAUSE FOR A MOMENT AND THINK ABOUT THAT! GOD TOOK THE FORM OF A SERVANT WHO COMES TO SERVE US WHENEVER TWO OR MORE OF US GATHER IN HIS NAME. IF THAT DOESN'T QUALIFY AS A GIFT, I DON'T KNOW WHAT DOES.

THE SECOND GIFT I WANT TO LOOK AT IS PRAYER. PRAYER IS NOTHING LESS THAN AN OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK DIRECTLY TO GOD. THE GOD, WHO MADE THE EARTH, THE MOON, THE SUN, THE STARS, THE GALAXIES AND THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE. THE GOD WHO DIRECTS THE COURSE OF ELECTRONS AROUND THE ATOMS IN THE RINGS OF SATURN. THIS SAME ALMIGHTY, ALL-KNOWING, OMNIPRESENT GOD INVITES US TO SHARE THE CONCERNS OF OUR HEARTS AND OFFERS TO HELP US WITH OUR PROBLEMS.

EVEN MORE THAN THAT—THIS IS THE SAME GOD WHO PROMISES TO WORK THROUGH OUR PRAYERS TO CHANGE US FROM THE FALLEN CREATURES WE ARE—CREATURES CONSUMED WITH PRIDE, AMBITION, LUST, ANXIETY, FEAR AND ANGER—INTO NEW CREATIONS WHO ARE FULL OF LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS AND SELF-CONTROL. TO INCREASE OUR FAITH, OUR HOPE AND OUR LOVE IN SHORT, TO MAKE US MORE LIKE CHRIST. AND WE SAY THAT WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR PRAYER? THAT WE HAVE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO?

MORE IMPORTANT?

IF YOU WENT TO YOUR 6-YEAR-OLD SON AND HELD OUT A BEAUTIFULLY WRAPPED GIFT AND SAID, "HERE'S SOMETHING THAT'S GOING TO MAKE YOU HAPPIER THAN YOU'VE EVER BEEN!" DO YOU THINK HE WOULD SAY, "SORRY, MOM, I DON'T HAVE TIME TO OPEN IT RIGHT NOW. MAYBE LATER." PROBABLY NOT. THAT MAY BE WHAT JESUS HAD IN MIND WHEN HE SAID, "*ANY ONE WHO WILL NOT RECEIVE THE KINGDOM OF GOD LIKE A LITTLE CHILD WILL NEVER ENTER IT.*" SO IS PRAYER AN OPPORTUNITY OR AN OBLIGATION? I HOPE THE ANSWER IS OBVIOUS.

FINALLY, THERE'S GOD'S GIFT OF HIS WORD IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES. AS FOOD IS TO OUR BODY, GOD'S WORD IS TO OUR SOUL. AS FOOD NOURISHES A CHILD AND HELPS HIM GROW INTO AN ADULT, THE WORD OF GOD NOURISHES A BELIEVER AND HELPS HIM GROW IN FAITH AND HOPE AND LOVE. IN *PSALM ONE*, THE PSALMIST DESCRIBES HOW A BELIEVER FEASTS ON GOD'S WORD: "*HIS DELIGHT IS IN THE INSTRUCTION OF THE LORD AND HE RUMINATES ON IT DAY AND NIGHT.*" THE HEBREW WORD WHICH IS TRANSLATED "RUMINATE" REALLY MEANS TO EAT AND DIGEST. WHEN A CHILD EATS AND DIGESTS HIS FOOD, HE GROWS PHYSICALLY. IN THE SAME WAY WHEN WE "EAT AND DIGEST" GOD'S WORD WE GROW SPIRITUALLY.

AS JESUS PRAYED FOR HIS DISCIPLES IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE: "*FATHER, SANCTIFY THEM BY THE TRUTH: THY WORD IS TRUTH.*" C. S. LEWIS PUT IT THIS WAY: GOD IS NOT SO MUCH INTERESTED IN MAKING US HAPPY AS HE IS IN HELPING US GROW UP. DOES A CHILD HAVE A DUTY TO GROW UP? OR IS IT A GIFT? JESUS SAID, "*IF YOU CONTINUE IN MY WORD YOU ARE TRULY MY DISCIPLES. THEN YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE.*" GIFT OR DUTY? OPPORTUNITY OR OBLIGATION?

OUR GOSPEL LESSON FOR TODAY IS ABOUT A POOR WIDOW WHO SAT DOWN BY THE TEMPLE TREASURY. AFTER WATCHING SEVERAL WEALTHY PEOPLE PUT LARGE SUMS OF MONEY INTO THE TREASURY BOX, SHE GOT UP AND DROPPED A FEW SMALL COINS IN. YET JESUS SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES THAT SHE HAD PUT IN "MORE THAN ALL THE REST." WHY? BECAUSE THEY CONTRIBUTED OUT OF THEIR SURPLUS—OUT OF WHAT WAS LEFT OVER AFTER ALL THE BILLS HAD BEEN PAID. BUT THE POOR WIDOW GAVE ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON. LITERALLY—SHE GAVE OUT OF HER LIFE. THEY GAVE OUT OF DISCRETIONARY INCOME; SHE GAVE OUT OF THE RENT MONEY, THE FOOD MONEY.

NOW I HAD ALWAYS PICTURED AN OLD LADY GETTING UP OUT OF HER CHAIR, HOBBLING OVER TO THE TREASURY BOX, DROPPING IN HER TWO COINS, AND HOBBLING ON HOME. IT WAS THE IMAGE OF A MARTYR PRACTICING SELF-

DEPRIVATION—SOMEONE WHO WAS PAYING THEIR DEBT TO THE CHURCH EVEN THOUGH THEY WONDERED WHERE THEIR NEXT MEAL WAS COMING FROM. THEN IT STRUCK ME ONE DAY THAT THE WIDOW COULD JUST AS EASILY HAVE BEEN A HEALTHY YOUNG, WOMAN WHO SPRUNG UP OUT OF HER CHAIR, WALKED BRISKLY OVER TO THE TREASURY BOX, JOYFULLY TOSSED HER COINS IN THE BOX AND SKIPPED ON HOME WHISTLING A TUNE.

THE FIRST PICTURE IS ONE OF SELF-SACRIFICE FOR THE SAKE OF FULFILLING AN OBLIGATION. THE SECOND PICTURE IS ONE OF JOYOUS FAITH—FAITH IN THE CERTAINTY THAT, WHEN HER WORLDLY RESOURCES RAN OUT, GOD WOULD PROVIDE. CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT JOY IT WOULD BE TO HAVE A FAITH LIKE THAT? TO KNOW WITH ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY THAT GOD WOULD ALWAYS TAKE CARE OF YOU—NO MATTER WHAT?

THAT'S THE KIND OF FAITH DAVID HAD. THAT'S THE KIND OF FAITH PAUL HAD. AND THAT'S THE KIND OF FAITH GOD IS WILLING TO GIVE TO YOU AND ME—IF WE ARE WILLING TO RECEIVE IT. IN HIS SERMON ON THE MOUNT JESUS SAYS, *“DO NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR LIFE—WHAT YOU WILL EAT AND DRINK—OR ABOUT YOUR BODY, WHAT YOU WILL WEAR. FOR THE PAGANS RUN AFTER ALL THESE THINGS AND YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER KNOWS THAT YOU NEED THEM. BUT SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU AS WELL. THEREFORE, DO NOT WORRY ABOUT TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW WILL WORRY ABOUT ITSELF.”*

THAT SAYS IT ALL. GOD GIVES; WE RECEIVE. HE GIVES US THE GIFTS OF WORSHIP, PRAYER AND HIS WORD TO HELP US GROW INTO THE LIKENESS OF HIS SON. DOES ANYTHING YOU CAN DO COMPARE WITH THAT?

AMEN.

Psalm 32 Of David. A *maskil*.

¹ Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

² Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count
against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, “I will confess

my transgressions to the LORD.”
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

⁷ You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of
deliverance.

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the
way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye
on you.

⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the LORD's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

¹¹ Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you
righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Galatians 3:1-11 Faith or Works of the Law

³ You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ²I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? ³Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? ⁴Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? ⁵So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? ⁶So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

⁷ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. ⁸Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” ⁹So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

¹⁰ For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”

¹¹ Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.”

Mark 12:41-44 The Widow's Offering

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”