

Giving and Receiving, Part 1: How to Give Help

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

21 April, 2024

Part 2: How to Be Helped | 28 April, 2024

Children's Talk: What Makes a Gift Good?

If someone needs something, should we give it to them? Yes, of course we should! That is what the Lord is always doing for us. He listens to what we need, and then makes sure that we get it. This is why we should always ask the Lord for help when we need it. Jesus said,

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

So the Lord tells us that He will always give us the things that we need.

If the Lord does that for us, then we should certainly do that for other people. But we are not always as good at it as the Lord is. The Lord had an interesting way of reminding people that giving the right gift is as important as giving a gift at all. It involves people who need food. So can three volunteers come up? Each one of you needs something to eat: bread, fish, or an egg. But listen to what Jesus says:

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:11-13)

If someone needs bread, is a stone a good gift? No! If someone needs some fish, is a snake a good gift? No! If someone needs an egg, is a scorpion a good gift? No! In order to give good gifts, I need to think about the other person. I need to think about what they want or need, and then do my best to give it to them. I should give bread, fish, or an egg. You guys can be seated.

So why do we sometimes give people things they don't need? Sometimes it's because we are thinking more about ourselves than the other person. Let's say you see someone crying, and so you go to give them a hug; but instead of being grateful they tell you to go away. That hurts, because you were just trying to be nice! But

instead of thinking about how hurt you are, think about the other person. Maybe they don't need a hug right now. Maybe what they need is to be left alone. The gift you can give them is to actually respect that and give them some space.

So let's finish by thinking about how to do that better. What are some things that you can do to figure out what would be the best thing to give someone who is sad or upset or in need?

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We are going to carry on with the theme of giving help. This is part one of a two part series, next week we'll talk about getting help, which is fraught with its own challenges. But today is all about how we give help to other people, and the kind of attitude we can bring to giving help.

To start with, when you see someone in need, and you reach out to help them, you are doing exactly what you should be doing. The Lord inspires us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take in the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and come to those in prison; and to not only to do these things but to attend to the mental, emotional, and especially spiritual needs that are represented in all these maladies (Matthew 25:34-36). We should never feel bad about our instinct to help; it is from the Lord.

Part 1: Helping isn't about the one giving help

But, how we help does matter. And there is a kind of attitude that we can bring to helping other people that actually undermines everything that we are trying to do. It has to do with a desire for reward or recompense. Here is what the Lord says about this attitude:

But if you love those who love you, what credit 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 credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend *to those* from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:32-36)

The thrust of this passage is clear: don't give with an expectation of getting something in return. Give freely. Give generously. Give because giving is good in itself, not because you get anything out of it.

On one level I bet we all get this: imagine if you gave a gift to your best friend, and then she looked up online how much it cost and paid you back for it. Wouldn't that ruin the gift? Or if you gave someone solid advice, and they asked how much they owed you? Turning a gift into a transaction ruins the gift. So on that level we get what Jesus is talking about.

And yet on another level we totally miss it. Do we really do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return? When you offer to help someone, and they reject the offer, it can leave you feeling hurt or offended. Why is that? Going back to the children's talk, isn't helping about what the one being helped needs, not what the helper needs; yet it hurts when we're not needed after all. Or when you offer advice, and the other person does not take it, again it can leave you feeling hurt or like they wasted your time. And again, why is that? Shouldn't the advice be about the one being helped, not the helper's ego? Or last one, when you are generous to someone and they aren't generous back, you can really regret that you were so giving to them. Why? Did you only give to them on the assumption that they would return the favour?

Whenever you go into helping someone with an expectation, and when you are offended when that expectation isn't met, you have fallen into expecting a reward for your help. It's become a transaction: you get helped, *and in return*, I get to feel important, or useful, or wise, or superior, or worthwhile, or admired. We feel entitled to these things. We feel entitled to our help being worthwhile to the other person. Yet

we are not entitled to having other people receive our help the way that we want them to.

Part 2: Follow the Lord's example

One way we can get a better perspective on giving is to look at the Lord's example. When He sent out His disciples to preach His kingdom and to do powerful miracles, He reminded them that they had received everything freely, and so ought, in turn, to give back freely. Jesus said,

And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food. (Matthew 10:7-10)

All their power came from the Lord, freely given to them; and so when they were sent out they likewise had to give it away freely, with no concern or worry about how they would survive if they were not paid for their labour.

Each one of us has been and continues to be helped by the Lord freely. You didn't have to do anything to deserve the Lord's help. It's not like the Lord helps the people who He likes and withholds it from those He knows wouldn't accept it. Whether you like it or not, whether you respond or not, whether you accept His help or not, the Lord is constantly doing literally everything possible to help you and to give you what you need. And yet He has never once forced you to accept His help, He has never forced you to take His advice, He has never forced you to use it in a certain way. You know that feeling of telling someone exactly what they should do, and you know in your heart that you are right and that their problems will be solved if only you could find some way to force them to take your advice? Imagine how the Lord feels. When we think we know what is best for someone else we're usually wrong. The Lord actually does know what is best for someone; and He has the

power to make people do what He wants; and yet still He does not force people to take His advice.

Now if the Lord, the most powerful being in existence, does not force anyone to accept His help, and yet continues to give freely regardless of how that help is received, then surely we are not in a position to make anyone accept our help in any particular way either. As the saying goes, you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink. We can neither force a person to accept our help, nor dictate what they will do with that help. On the other hand, we are still obligated to offer the help; we cannot make it contingent on how the other person responds.

Part 3: Love that someone gets helped, not that you are the helper

At this point I've said a lot about the attitude that we should strive not to have. But I want to end by focusing on the positive side of things. With the right attitude we can find greater joy in giving than we currently do. The Teachings of the New Church have a useful definition of what it means to love another person. It's a bit complicated at first, but it's very useful:

Love consists in this, that its own should be another's; to feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving. But to feel one's own joy in another and not the other's joy in oneself is not loving; for this is loving self, while the former is loving the neighbour. (*Divine Providence* §47)

To love someone means that you feel their joy as your own; in other words, when they are happy, that makes you happy. Think of a wife watching her husband play a fun game with their kids. Because they are happy, she is happy.

But notice this passage mentions something very similar that isn't loving: to feel one's own joy in another, and not their joy in oneself. What that means is loving someone else only to the extent that they make you happy. If they don't contribute to your happiness, then they aren't loved. It's the opposite of the former.

Here's how they relate to giving help. When you give help to someone, and are attached to being the one who helps them, then you actually love yourself. The purpose of your actions is what you get out of them and how you feel. But when you give help to someone for the sake of them getting help, it doesn't matter if they accept it or not; if they need help from someone else; or figure it out on their own; or own much later wake up to what you were trying to say to them; whatever the source of the help, it will not matter to you, because you truly love them, and so all you care about is that they get the help they need; there is no ego or pride in being the one who helps them.

Now that's still hard when you think that you are the only one who can help. But that's never actually the case. The Lord is only one who can actually truly help anyone. As a friend of mine likes to say, "there is only one Saviour, and it ain't me." Those we cannot help, those who seem to be a lost caused; those who refuse our aid; they still have the Lord; and while it would be nice to be the one to help them, we can rest assured that they will get the help they need.

Fear not, for I am with you;
Be not dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you,
Yes, I will help you,
I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 40:10)