

Givers and Takers

In the name of him whose shed blood speaks for us a better word than that of Abel's, dear friends in Christ: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." So said our Lord Jesus in what is one of his better known proverbs. Oddly enough, it's one of the very few of his direct quotes that we have which comes from a source other than the four Gospels and the Apocalypse of St. John. But wherever it comes from, the meaning couldn't be clearer: according to Jesus, it's better for us – we who are Christians, anyway – to be givers than to be takers. That may strike us as counterintuitive. Most of the time we'd rather be on the receiving end: getting good things from someone else rather than giving our things (or our money) away. So how's it that it's better to be a giver than a taker? It's because the one who gives to others is himself receiving something worth far more than whatever he gives away. Specifically, he receives the blessing of being God's instrument to do exactly what God does all the time: he gives. He blesses. He fills our lives with good things. And when we're out helping and serving our neighbors and being generous with the gifts that God has given to us – giving especially to those in need – then we are fulfilling our calling to be Christ-like. We are showing ourselves to be the sons and daughters of our heavenly Father who has so freely and generously given all things to us—including, of course, his greatest gift: his own Son. What could be more blessed than that?

But the saying, like a lot of proverbs, is not universally true. I mean, it is better to be a giver than a taker with good things; but not so much with things like germs or insults or curses. These kinds of things the Lord would rather see us *not* give away. And I don't know about the germs, but Jesus also said that we are blessed when we are on the receiving end of whatever insults and abuse that may be directed against us because of our faith in him. Then we blessed by taking it with patience and restraint, not returning evil for evil. So, it's not always better to be a giver than a taker.

And it's especially not better to be a giver than a taker when it comes to our relationship with the Lord himself. That too may strike us as counterintuitive. Our initial thought is that's exactly what the Lord wants from me: he wants me to give him my highest and utmost devotion. He wants my time, my talents, my money – my very best efforts to please him in all that I say and do. That's what we think. And I daresay that there are plenty of churches out there where you will hear exactly that. But as surprising as it is, it's wrong; which is the lesson of today's Old Testament and Gospel readings.

We begin with the first reading, which is, unfortunately, one of the most misunderstood and consistently misapplied accounts in the entire Scripture. It's usually used to teach the exact opposite of what it means. We've got the brothers Cain and Abel. Both of them bring an offering to the Lord. Abel's is regarded by the Lord with favor, and Cain's is rejected. The question is: why? It is most often assumed that the Lord favors Abel's offering because his heart was in the right place. He wanted to offer his very best lamb to the Lord, so he selected the finest one he had, and he gave it up eagerly, happily, and with great solemnity. But Cain? He was stingy. He was hard hearted and resentful, making his sacrifice to the Lord only grudgingly, and maybe not choosing the best he had: only the nasty blighted and bug eaten leftovers. No wonder the Lord rejected it – which in turn made Cain very angry. This is the way the story is usually explained.

But wait a minute: it doesn't make sense. When a student does a sloppy, half-hearted, last second job on a homework assignment, and then gets a D or an F on it, he's not disappointed. He thinks, "It's what I deserve." But if, on the other hand, he pours his heart into it, works hard and long and does his very best, and believes that he's done a bang-up job on the assignment, and *then* gets a D or an F, he's going to be very upset. So understand that *this* is why Cain is angry. He went all out. He put forth his best effort and brought to the Lord the choice, handpicked fruit of all his sweat and toil in the fields – *and it wasn't good enough*. No, it was worse than that: The Lord had *no* regard for it. None. "Cain, it stinks. How dare you bring it before me? Take it away. Get it out of my sight."

Well, what about Abel's offering? Why did the Lord look upon it with favor? I said before that it's usually assumed that Abel's heart was in the right place – which is true; but not in the way that most people think. It's not that Abel was trying to please the Lord by bringing his best; it's that Abel knew that even his very best would be offense to the Lord. Abel understood that he was a sinner and that everything a sinner has to offer is corrupt and unholy in the sight of God. He also understood that for his sin, he deserved to die. But Abel was sorry for his sin. He was repentant. And he knew that the Lord in his mercy offered a way for sorry sinners to live. He would accept the death of a substitute: the life of a designated alternate in the place of the sinner. So that's what Abel sacrificed: a lamb without spot or blemish to die in his place. Properly understood then, his offering was made to the Lord; but it was given for himself. The Lord didn't get anything out of the deal. What's he going to do with a dead lamb anyway? He doesn't need it. He doesn't need anything. No, the Lord was the giver: through the sacrifice of the lamb he gave Abel forgiveness and mercy. Through its death he gave Abel life, and the right to stand before him as one who is holy and blameless.

This is precisely the same story that plays out in the Gospel lesson. The Pharisee stands before the Lord telling him all the wonderful things he has accomplished. "Sin in my life? Oh, no! Far be it from me. I'm a good boy. See how devoted I am to you, Lord? Just look at all I have to offer you." It's Cain all over again. Meanwhile the tax collector stands at the rear of the temple court – like a Lutheran seeking the rearmost pew of the sanctuary, except that he does it for shame, not for the quick getaway. Like Abel, he contemplates his sin and unworthiness; he despises himself, his actions, and his wicked thoughts. And he appeals to the Lord's forgiving mercy, which he receives. He's here as a taker, not a giver. And he gets what he came for. He goes home blessed, counted righteous in the sight of God.

And the thing to see is that it doesn't change over time. Let's follow the story through. Having been forgiven by the Lord, let's imagine that responding to the mercy he'd received and filled with the Holy Spirit, the tax collector went forth inspired to be merciful to others. On his way out of the temple, he showed hospitality to a stranger. While passing the gate, he gave to a poor blind beggar. At home he strived to be more patient, kind, and loving to his wife and kids. At work the next week, he collected only what was his due; and when he came across a poor widow who could not pay her taxes, he cancelled her debt and paid it out of his own pocket.

Now he stands again in the temple praying. What does he pray? Does he now stand at the front? "God, I thank you that I am not like the other tax collectors – the cheats and traitors. I thank you too that I'm not like those self-justifying Pharisees – bunch of pompous blowhards, they. No, ever since I repented last week, I've tried real hard to please you with my life; and I don't mind saying that I've done a pretty good job of it. I'm one of your success stories, Lord; and I thank you for it. You're doing a great job with me." Is that how he prays? Does he now become a Pharisee? Or does he come as before: in shame and sorrow for his sin, and appealing to the mercy of the Lord? Is he now a giver or a taker?

More to the point, what are you? As you stand before the Lord assembled here in worship today – or any other day for that matter – how do you see yourself? Are you a giver or a taker? Are you a good, pious, upright, godly, and industrious Christian laboring hard in the service of the Lord? Are you fine, upstanding pillar of the Church here to thank the Lord for making you who and what you are? Or are you a poor, miserable sinner, come here to beg for God's mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ? Let me ask it another way: Will you leave here righteous in the sight of God, or will you depart righteous in your own sight, unknowingly full of the sin of pride, having presented yourself and your inherent goodness as an offering for which the Lord has no regard?

There are two things I want you to see here. First, how easy and seductive it is to slip into the pharisaical way of thinking and to bring before the Lord the unholy offering of Cain. Even while we confess "I, a poor miserable sinner ..." we're still thinking, "yes, but not as poor and miserable a sinner as some others I know, who haven't done what I have to offer the Lord." This is a dangerous and deadly sin that keeps us from receiving the forgiveness of God and the righteousness of Christ. We need to acknowledge it, confess it, and repent of it daily.

Second, I want you to see how it is that everything about our worship here in the church is about the Lord serving you. We call it the "Divine Service" for a reason; not that we are serving the Divine and giving to him; but the other way around: here the Divine serves and gives to you. And unlike Abel, you don't even have to bring a lamb. Here you receive the spotless Lamb of God that the Lord offered up for you – the one that Abel's offering only foreshadowed. Here we receive Jesus Christ, we receive his Word, we receive the righteousness of the perfect life he lived for us, and we receive the benefits of his bloody death on the cross: the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. To assure us poor miserable sinners of all this and to guarantee the Lord's generous intent toward us, here we receive also the body of blood of Christ that he gave for sinners. And through it all we receive his Holy Spirit who enables us to receive these gifts in faith and to leave here walking with the risen Lord Jesus and in his way. Everything we do here is about taking from God, not giving anything to him; and we have to constantly guard ourselves against the sin of seeing it the other way around.

Okay, no doubt the protest is forming in some minds, "But Pastor, what about the things I do give? What about my thanks and praise. What about the money I contribute to the offering? Am I not to be a giver in these ways?"

Good questions. It is true that here we give our thanks and praise to the Lord; but it's crucial to see that we do this only in response to what we have received from him. Praise and thanksgiving are merely ways of acknowledging that we are takers rather than givers. And the truth is that the Lord doesn't need your praise or words of gratitude; it's rather that you need to give him your thanks and praise to remind you that you are a taker and not a giver. This, incidentally, is precisely what is wrong with so many modern praise services. They tend to get things backwards, making the praise of the worshipping congregation the most important thing that goes on. It's "Lord, look at me! See how devoted I am? See how much I love and praise you?" It's Cain and the Pharisee all over again.

And regarding the collection of the offering, I challenge you to think about who it's really for. The fact is that the Lord doesn't need your money. He is not the beggar here – despite what some televangelists and synod bureaucrats tell you. And the truth is that with the offering we aren't giving to God so much as are to the church – precisely so that we can continue to receive. We're making sure that we have a safe and comfortable place to receive. We're

making sure that we have someone to give us God's gifts in Christ, and to ensure that other givers are trained to give them to us. We're giving also so that other people may receive the gifts of God's grace here at the church, at the Lutheran School, and in missions throughout the world. So strictly speaking, we aren't giving to God; we're giving to ourselves and to others.

And that's appropriate: we're supposed to give to others. *Then* it is more blessed to give than to receive – but here, as we gather for worship and prayer, we always come before the Lord as beggars with nothing to offer him. Here we are blessed only by holding out our hands and being takers of God's gifts: the grace, mercy, and forgiveness that he gives to us through his Son, Jesus Christ our Savior. Here our prayer must always be: God be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!