

THROUGH CHRISTIAN EYES

There is much that is lovely, much that calls my heart to worship, as I read this psalm. It's hard to remind me too often of where true deliverance comes from, where unfailing love comes from, where the true source of hope resides. But there is that troubling phrase right at the very end: "*Lord, you reward everyone according to what he has done.*" So much comfort, and perspective. So much longing to draw close, to trust, to remember that whatever is going on at the moment, God has the power and will bring it right in the end. And then just as I'm starting to relax, breathe deeply, and think life may be pretty good after all, the psalmist ruins everything: "*Lord, you reward everyone according to what he has done.*"

Of course, this is Old Testament. In Christianity, we are always talking about the Gospel – the “Good News” of God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness. No matter what you have been or done, God loves you. Christ died for you. We have even coined a phrase in our time about “unconditional love.” And while that may point to some good meanings, many have interpreted it to mean there are no standards anymore: Since there is no way we can “earn” love – no way we can perform well enough to deserve acceptance, salvation, and eternal life – that is, since “*by works no one can be justified*” (Romans 3:20), therefore works don’t matter. Therefore, do anything you like, act any way you wish; God is *required* to forgive and save you. Isn’t that interesting: The Gospel frees us from the Law, but it turns into an unbreakable LAW for God. He *has* to love and save us – no choice. He is required to forgive us, no matter what we think or do or become – no matter how much damage we do to his Kingdom or his children, and even if we decide to go on doing it. What marvelous control we have decided the Gospel gives us over God and what God can do or decide. I think we had better guess again. There is no such thing as unconditional love. Love is not a gutless wonder. The psalmist gives the right phrasing: *Unfailing* love.

No matter how good or bad the economic situation, the world is always full of misery and mayhem because most of us have decided we don’t have to obey our Creator unless we happen to feel like it. We no longer know that the misery and the mayhem are caused by our disobedience and rebellion. How can we repent when everything is somebody else’s fault? Is it really better to go on living in a world beyond redemption, than to wake up each morning with the prospect of living our lives according to God’s will?

Anyway, God made the rules but now God is stuck with them? We can live our whole lives here and never lift a little finger to help a neighbor, show any gratitude to Jesus, or help build the Kingdom He came to reveal – yet at the end of life, God is *required* to forgive us, save us, and reward us in Heaven just as much as the noblest saint who sacrificed his or her life for all the values and truths we had no time for and couldn't be bothered with? Is that what we believe? That's what a lot of people are trying to believe today. That's what a lot of people think they are being told and taught when they hear about the Gospel of Jesus Christ: God *has* to love us no matter what; therefore eat, drink, and be merry, for in the end nothing bad can happen to us. We have free will, but God does not. God is our "Good Ol' Buddy," and there is nothing we can do to make him angry at us. And if anybody dares mention something about "the wrath of God," everybody sucks in their breath and says, "Heresy, heresy." Actually, they don't even know *that* word anymore. They just get angry – like God is never supposed to do – and walk away, saying, "If you're going to talk like that, I want nothing more to do with religion. I believe in a God of love." Actually, they believe in a cosmic imbecile.

Love never gets angry? Love doesn't care how you behave? Every parent knows better! We *all* know better, but we frequently don't speak or act like it. "*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful.*" I love the Apostle Paul, but that is one of the dumbest things he ever wrote. Unless, of course, I know what kind of general, nonpersonal "good will toward life" he is talking about, and I don't confuse it with the personal devotion, caring, commitment, affection, and attachment I mean by "LOVE." A man who never married or had children tells me that "love is always patient and never jealous"? Hey, fella, I know more about some things than you do ...

But it's not that easy, is it? I cannot duck the Great Apostle just because he never married, and I cannot ignore this psalm just because it's in the Old Testament. It's in *my* Bible too – and the only Bible the early church had for at least two generations. "*Lord, you reward everyone according to what he has done.*"

Something has occurred to us in this last century that I believe would never have occurred to any previous generation. We have imagined – dreamed up the notion – that the love of God means we can escape consequences. Do we *really* think that there are no consequences for our actions, or that the consequences can be repealed? Oh, not everybody believes this, or the world would have self-destructed already.

But the aberration is present and growing. More and more people believe that quality of life has little to do with character, and that character has little relationship to behavior. You can blame the insurance companies, the welfare programs, or the churches. You can suspect that the structures of modern life are so monolithic that individuals can no longer trace cause and effect. Maybe it has something to do with grocery stores that are full of food whether we remember to plant and harvest or not. And all you have to do to get everything you want is vote for the right candidate.

Now, people in the ancient world also knew that in some circumstances, an individual could escape the consequences. But there was only one way: Someone else had to step in and take the consequences for you. The reality of that “act of mercy” – and the debt owed for it – was not vague or obscure.

So what do we think, as Christians, when we come across a phrase like “*Lord, you reward everyone according to what he has done*”? Does this mean the Gospel is incorrect or repealed? Is there some conflict between karma and grace? Does Gospel repeal Law? To you, does the love of God mean that there is no wrath of God?

I understand that there is a lot of possible promise in this phrase at the end of the psalm. We *have* done some things well. It’s a mixed bag. Part of the phrase surely means that God will not leave our good efforts unnoticed or unrewarded, even if this world does not notice them. And I do take some comfort in that. If we keep enough of our good deeds secret, as Jesus instructed us to, then this phrase reminds us that none of it disappears into the void, like it sometimes seems. God notices. God appreciates all our efforts. God has his own way of saying thank you. Some say this is wishful thinking, but if you believe in God, you know it’s true. You can never outgive God. If you serve him truly and sincerely, it will not be lost. That is a good word indeed, and we need to be reminded. There is no conflict between that and the Good News of the Gospel, though they are far from the same thing.

Yet that’s never the side of the ledger that troubles me. It’s the gap between what I should have been and was not; what I should have done and did not; what I should not have done and did. That’s what makes the phrase difficult to hear. So why don’t I just trust the mercies of Christ and forget it? Because one does not cancel out the other. If it weren’t for the mercies of Christ, then the expectation of consequences – and the awareness of the gap between what I am and

what I should be – would completely overwhelm me. There could be no hope, no comfort, no possibility of any appealing future. But grace keeps calling me “valuable” when I do not see it or believe it. Love picks me up, hugs me, pays a lot of debts and prices I couldn’t pay, dusts me off, and sends me right back into the same mayhem to try all over again.

However, I have never known the love of God to say it did not matter. I have never known the love of God to tell me that right and wrong have been repealed. I have never known the love of God to say I no longer had to try or that I didn’t have to learn anymore. What the love of God does say to me is: “You still have to get it right and do it right, but stop being so frightened! I am never leaving. Every time you fall off, I am picking you up again. So start enjoying the ride.” But never does the love of God tell me I don’t have to learn to ride. Furthermore, it insists that there are certain ways to ride which work and other ways which will never work. So more and more we grow grateful for The Presence, the kindness, the mercy. More and more we are astounded at the patience and the caring. After a while, we realize we don’t have to ride well to get the love or the attention, or to keep The Presence – it’s already there, and has been for years. But riding is still important. It is what we are here to learn to do. And more and more, we do it just because we want to please God. There is no conflict between grace and Law. That is, they are not enemies. Not unless I think I ride so well that I don’t need the mercy. Not unless I think that the mercy means I don’t have to ride anymore.

Actually, I didn’t mean for this sermon title to sound so grandiose, as if I had the wisdom or the gift to see anything “through Christian eyes,” certainly not in any true or final way. I was just reading through the psalms and was caught again and again, as many of you have been, with the self-centeredness and bloodthirstiness of so many of the psalms: Vindicate me. Protect me. Kill all my enemies. Slaughter everybody who is giving me a bad time. Make me prosperous, and make them suffer. And by the way, I will give you the praise and the glory, if you do this for me.

I, of course, resonate with these lovely themes. There are always people around who are negative, small-minded, stingy, and mean-spirited. They generate fear and they live to criticize, and every good vision and purpose must work ten times harder than ought to be necessary to get over and past all the barriers and details and reasons they throw up to keep life nasty and mean and joyless. It has always been so on this planet. It will always be so on this planet. They will not

go away and we will not quit, so the conflict is just part of life. Sometimes we win for a while and things go well and get built up. Sometimes they win for a while and things and people get torn down, weakened, or destroyed. All of us keep having to decide which side of the line to throw our own lives on. We decide this every day, whether we want to or mean to or not. “*Behold I set before you the way of life and the way of death, sayeth the Lord. Choose life that you may live.*” (Deuteronomy 30:19; Jeremiah 21:8)

It doesn't matter whether you are in a church, company, family, university, state, nation, or world – this struggle is going on. “*Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.*” We try to side with life, or we become the cynics and detractors. Or we try to stay neutral so we can have a little peace, but we get sucked in anyway.

So the psalms speak to us. Why doesn't God help a little more? Wouldn't it be a very good idea if God would fight on our side a little harder? And if that wouldn't be fair, couldn't God at least take out some of the opposition? Or at a bare minimum, at least make it as hard for them as he does for us?

One of the very appealing things about many of the psalms is their very childlike, uncensored emotions. They do not try to be mature or theologically correct. They have no interest in “unconditional love” for the other guy. “These guys are hurting me – sic 'em! Settle their hashes. Give 'em what they really deserve.” The little kid on the playground tells the bully, “You stop it or I'm going to tell my big brother (or my daddy) and he'll come beat you up.” Well, a lot of the psalms are us telling a bigger Daddy what they are doing to us and that he ought to come beat them up for us. But will Daddy stand up for us? And if so, when?

After a while, I realize that Daddy cannot slaughter them when they are wrong, any more than he can slaughter me when I am wrong – or there would be nobody left here to grow and learn and walk the Path. So Daddy doesn't stand up for me; he stands *with* me. And in his presence, it is always about how **I** am doing. I have to trust that it's the same for others, when they allow it. But I cannot escape the consequences. Mercy keeps me valuable, knowing I am cared for and cared about. But it does not repeal the workings of the principles of the universe. When my heart is filled with hatred, life is not the same as when my heart is filled with love. If I hurt somebody, no forgiveness takes away the consequences of that damage. We never get good enough to earn love or to deserve or merit eternal life. But being bad

still wrecks things. Grace and judgment operate at the same time. Gospel never repeals Law.

But Law only gets me to neutral – nonpersonal (to zero). Law does not get me to joy or to love or to meaning. It tries to set it up so this can happen, like medicine kills germs so that the body can come back and take over for life. Not drinking only gets me to not being drunk. But that does not tell me what to do with my life. It is wonderful to not steal or kill or commit adultery; it stops enormous pain and mayhem. But it does not tell me what to do with my life. God forgives (mercy), but no laws (principles of life) are repealed. We still get to live with who we are – with what we have become. If God chooses to give me another chance, that does not mean all my mistakes and wrong attitudes are acceptable. The Gospel is Good News: GOD LOVES US. But the Good News does not mean, as so many seem to imply, that there is no right or wrong anymore.

The fact is that God, life, reality – “the wrath” – all reward us according to what we have done. We do have to live with what we have done and with what we have become. There is no escape from it. If there were, there could be no learning and no meaning. Mercy calls us valuable despite our mistakes, but it does not call bad “good.” True forgiveness is never incentive to ease back into or settle for our misconduct or wrong-headedness. Forgiveness is encouragement to continue. Somebody cares. It’s possible to keep trying until we get it right, or at least better. And to feel the affection and caring and guidance through all the dark times of defeat, incompleteness, and wondering if we’ll ever get anything right – well, that’s what keeps our souls alive.

This is just an aside: Some of you may be thinking about folk out there who don’t seem to care about any of these things one way or the other. First of all, you cannot always tell from the outside what a person’s heart is like on the inside. God reaches us in lots of ways, and people don’t always talk about it in “god-talk” language. Some of you felt The Presence nudging you for years before you were willing to do anything about it. It is a dangerous thing to assume that others have no souls, just because they don’t wear them on their sleeves. Remember who made them. The light is in them somewhere, whether we see it or not.

Do you know the difference between available and operative? Grace, mercy, and the love of God in Christ Jesus is always available. (This is what thinking people actually mean by “unconditional love,” though I wish they wouldn’t use such a misleading phrase.) You heard

that, right? Grace, mercy, and the love of God in Christ Jesus is always *available*. It only becomes *operative* when we repent: when we turn toward God, receive it, and live by it.

As noted earlier, in former times people knew they could escape consequences only when somebody else stepped in and took the consequences for them – paid the debt; took the loss; put up surety; suffered or sacrificed in their place. It was always kind of a miracle when somebody cared enough to do that – to get you out of debtor’s prison, save your farm, or let you keep your job even though you had made mistakes that cost them lots of money. The normal result, in the ancient world, was gratitude. Such unusual behavior was rare, and most people felt what came to be called “a debt of gratitude.” Often they would try to pay back some of the cost, if possible, when they got back on their feet. If they could not, the gratitude was even greater. They knew that forgiveness and mercy had cost somebody a lot. And often this gratitude was itself a powerful force of transformation in the life of the forgiven person. It brought them new perspective and often turned their own life around. *Les Miserables* is Victor Hugo’s attempt to portray the power of gratitude.

Since we happen to be on the subject, gratitude is what makes the power of the Cross of Christ operative in a person’s life. Without gratitude, the love and mercy and forgiveness are still available, but they lie dormant, have no effect, make no difference. Gratitude is what activates the power of the Cross in a person’s life. And gratitude *means* you *did not* deserve it. It is impossible to feel gratitude unless you receive something you did not deserve. Gratitude *means* you did not deserve it! The Christian Life is filled with gratitude.

By the way, how are you doing with *your* children? I always suspect that’s maybe about how well God is doing with his.