

Sermon for Zion, August 27, 2017 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage
Hymns and Choruses: Praise Band – Blessed Be Your Name; 663 – God, Whose
Giving Knows No Ending; 626 – Lord of All Power
Scripture: Proverbs 31:10-12; 31:25-31; Luke 19:1-10; Colossians 3:15-17
Sermon Title: With Gratitude In Your Heart

Proverbs 31:10-12; 31:25-31 (CEV)

*A truly good wife is the most precious treasure a man can find!
Her husband depends on her, and she never lets him down.
She is good to him every day of her life.*

*She is strong and graceful, as well as cheerful about the future.
Her words are sensible, and her advice is thoughtful.
She takes good care of her family and is never lazy.
Her children praise her, and with great pride her husband says,
“There are many good women, but you are the best!”
Charm can be deceiving, and beauty fades away,
but a woman who honours the Lord deserves to be praised.
Show her respect - praise her in public for what she has done.*

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Colossians 3:15-17 (NIV)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Tomorrow, Dana and I will have been married 35 years. August 28, 1982, barely of legal age, we tied the knot, and thanks be to God, we haven't looked back since. God has blessed us with two outstanding children, and with a love for one another stronger now than even it was on that day 35 years ago.

Very early on in the whole relationship, as Dana and I were dating, a college friend gave me some advice which I have never to this day forgotten. He said, "Doug, you must thank God every day for the gift of this woman." And you know what? I have. Not only because he told me to, but because my thankfulness naturally arises out of my relationship with Dana. I love her, she loves me, she makes my life wonderful, has raised two wonderful children, and deserves much of the credit for anything worthwhile that I have become.

How could I not be thankful? How could I not be joyful? Why wouldn't I try to make her life as full as it can be, shower her with the occasional gift, speak well of her to others, try to make her proud? It all arises out of her love for me, and my response of loving her, and my wanting to do all I can to make her happy and proud. I can never pay her back – what value could you put on the children she has birthed, nurtured and raised? – but I can live a life in loving response. It isn't an effort – it is a joy. I thank God every day for the gift of this woman. I hope and pray the way I treat Dana reflects that sense of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Enough about Dana. Let's talk about God, which is in fact why we are here. But I wasn't just trying to bore you with the Dana stories, or put pressure on the other husbands to step up their game. You see, the writers of the New Testament do something very curious in describing the relationship between Jesus Christ, and the church which he founded. They do this curious thing because Jesus did it first. He, and they, illustrate the relationship Christ has with the church by comparing it to the relationship we have together as husbands and wives.

Jesus carried this theme forward in several parables and stories. When asked why he and his disciples were often joyful, and not fasting and mourning like proper disciples, he said, (Mark 2:19-20 NIV) "*How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.*" Paul makes the "Jesus as Groom, Church as Bride" connection all kinds of times. And the Book of the Revelation really goes to town on this bride idea (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-4)

Let us rejoice and be glad and give God glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear." Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Wow. Now that's a wedding! Suffice it to say, the relationship of devotion, intimacy, service and self-sacrifice – the relationship of love – between a husband and wife, is the best the Bible writers could do to give us an idea of our relationship with God. It is to be a relationship akin to a healthy marriage, with love, gratitude and joy at its very core.

As with marriage, then, so with our relationship to God. Paul talks about it in our passage today in this way: *"sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."* Our very praise is to be an outgrowth of our gratitude and love for God. And that is quite an interesting reversal to the way many of us approach worship.

Many of us approach worship – our singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs - with an emphasis on us, not on God. We think about whether or not to sing based upon whether or not we feel like singing, or if this is a song we happen to like to sing, or a style we enjoy, or an old favourite or God forbid something new, or whether we feel we have a voice that's good enough to sing with. But that's not worship. Worship is singing to God, worship is giving God praise, because God is worthy of - deserves - our worship, because of all that God has done on our behalf. Or, as Paul puts it, *"with gratitude in your hearts to God."* If we are grateful to God, if God has done anything to be worthy of our praise (and believe me, God has), then that is why we sing. Singing solely on the basis of our enjoyment or preference or mood is just self-entertainment.

Let me illustrate. One of the morning rituals in the Rollwage household has to do with the all-important first cup of coffee. No coffee, no morning. Whichever of us happens to be up first will make the coffee, and will bring the sacred first cup to the other. Why? Because we love the other person, and want to make them happy, by

wafting a coffee under their sleepy nose. We never ask why the other person would bring us a coffee. We know why. It is a sign of love. We will probably say to the other, “Good morning, hon. I love you,” or words to that effect.

But let’s say, tomorrow morning, I come into the bedroom with one coffee, and proceed to drink it. Nothing for Dana. “Why didn’t you bring me a coffee?” she would likely ask, disappointed and confused.

And now let’s say, God forbid, I replied like this: “I didn’t feel like it. I wasn’t in the mood. I was thinking only of myself. I couldn’t honestly think of what I would get out of it. I don’t particularly enjoy this particular coffee, so I didn’t bring you one. You don’t need me to bring you coffee, if you wanted some you can get your own. I’ve brought you coffee before, why should I bring you coffee again? Maybe if you do something really nice for me, I’ll think about it. Maybe someone else who’s better at it than I am will bring you one. Are you talking to me? I don’t hear anything.”

We wouldn’t treat a beloved spouse like that. If we would, they probably wouldn’t stay “beloved” very long. But we treat God like that all the time. We sing when we feel like it. We worship when we feel like it. We evaluate our praise on the basis of how it makes us, not God, feel. We evaluate a service of worship based on what we got out of it, not what we put into it. “Are you talking to me, God? I don’t hear anything.”

Here’s a tip: If you are fortunate enough to be married, start every day with deed or a word or an attitude of love and kindness towards your spouse. Communicate that love in a way that leaves no doubt. It will impact your marriage in a way that can only be a blessing.

Here’s another tip: If you are fortunate enough to be a Christian, start every day with a deed or a word or an attitude of love and kindness toward God. Communicate that love in a way that leaves no doubt. It will impact your soul in a way that can only be a blessing.

And when you come to worship, try to remember that you are, indeed, here to worship God. Worship is about ***what you can bring***, in terms of attitude and participation. What we get out of it is a side-effect, not the goal. Our worship is based not upon our own need, mood or inclination, but upon the gratitude that is in our heart for who God is, and for all that God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives, in the lives of those we love, and in our world. When we truly live with grateful hearts, our worship and our lives will be filled with joy.

And that leads into the next sign of a healthy relationship with God: activity and outreach. And for this, we are going to talk a little theology. After all, a little theology never hurt anybody, even on a summer Sunday.

There is a popular misconception, fuelled by countless movies and jokes and the like, that our entrance to heaven depends upon the number of good things we've done outweighing the number of bad. If we've been more good than bad, in we go. If not, St. Peter pushes the down button on the elevator. But as good and faithful Protestants, we don't believe that to be the case. As good and faithful Protestants, as Presbyterians, as devoted followers of Jesus and students of the Apostle Paul, we believe – officially – that your entrance to heaven is entirely dependent not upon what you do, but upon what God has done on your behalf through the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. It is Jesus who paves the way, Jesus who buys the ticket, Jesus who gets us into heaven. It is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that provides for the forgiveness of our sins, and our identification as the Children of God. It is not, thank God, the feeble collection of half-hearted good deeds or even the fine collection of brave and selfless acts of compassion which we have done. It is a gift. Bought by Jesus. Given to us. Paul, who is better than I am at this, put it this way (Titus 3:5-6):

He saved us. It wasn't because of the good things we had done. It was because of his mercy. He saved us by washing away our sins. We were born again. The Holy Spirit gave us new life. God poured out the Spirit on us freely because of what Jesus Christ our Saviour has done. Paul also wrote (Ephesians 2:8-9), God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Alright, why bring this up now? Back to the marriage analogy: I do nice things for Dana not to be in her good books, not so that she will reciprocate by doing nice things for me, not so that she won't be mad at me and send me to hell (or make it seem like I'm living there, anyway); no, I do things for Dana because she loves me, and I want to celebrate that love, and do something tangible to express my gratitude and appreciation for what she means to me. It's just a natural outgrowth of our relationship together and the love we share.

In the same way, I want to do things for God, on behalf of God, on behalf of the people of God, not to be in God's good books, not so that God will reciprocate by doing things for me, not so that God won't be mad at me and send me to hell; no, I want to do things for God because God loves me, and I want to celebrate that love, and do something tangible to express my gratitude and appreciation for what God

means to me. It's just a natural outgrowth of the relationship God has made possible through Jesus, and the love God has shared.

That's why we should never try to motivate one another or our congregation into service or generosity through guilt. Or threats. Or begging. Or desperation. We would, I hope, never use guilt, begging, threats or desperation in our marriages! Why do we do this with God? What we really need to do is to wake people up to the blessing it is to respond to God and engage in service, out of the appreciation we have in our hearts for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

We serve God because we love God - not to be in God's good books, not so that God will reciprocate by doing things for us, not so that God won't be mad at us and send us to hell; no, the Spirit of God is alive and active within us when we do things for God – kind, loving, generous, self-sacrificial things - because God loves us, and we want to celebrate that love, and do something tangible to express our gratitude and appreciation for what God means to us.

That's what the Zacchaeus story from Luke illustrates. Zacchaeus, in love and gratitude to God, and in response to the grace and love shown to him by Jesus, commits to giving half of his wealth to the poor, and to making restitution to anyone he has wronged. Not to earn the love of God; but in response to the love of God, freely offered in Jesus Christ. Look at the story: God's love comes first; Zacchaeus' generosity comes in response. He didn't buy God's love, he responded to it.

It is in doing things for those we love that we can tangibly express our love to them. Not for what we can get out of it; but in celebration of that love. It is in doing things for God and for others, in the name of Jesus, that we can tangibly express our love for God. Not for what we can get out of God; but in celebration of that love. Because God loves you. And you want to say, "I Love You," back.

I'll end by letting the text speak for itself (Colossians 3:16-17 NIV):

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.