

From Earning to Receiving

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; (2 Peter 1:3-8)

As we seek God's way, we move from believing we must earn our nourishment, our privileges, and even our identity as God's children to an understanding that abundant life is a gift from God to everyone. Making earning, being self-sufficient into an idol, disables us from receiving many things, including God's love.

Notice the tension in the theme between earning & receiving. But these Lent themes are not opposites. We do need to learn to value the second one more – but then the first idea expands. For example, as we are generous with people, and as our systems are generous others, everyone finds security. And the more compassion we have in this world, the less reasons people have for fear.

And it's the same with our theme today. The more we are willing to receive, to get help, the more we earn. The more we earn – work hard, improve ourselves and so on, are all based on receiving. Someone must create a job for us. Someone educates us. The government provides and allow good systems like roads and laws and rules – so we have opportunities to earn.

But let's not think in just economic terms. Let's think in all areas of a complete life, a shalom life. For example, the more we receive friendship, the more we earn security & help. When we receive compassion, it helps us become less fearful. As we receive more generosity, we earn more of life's intangibles that are what life is really made up of. The more we receive love, the more able we are to earn love. And vice versa. The more we receive learning, the more we can earn. These Lent themes that initially seem opposite, really tie together in many ways. Plus, they move us in God's direction taking in, living, God's values.

These Lent themes are not contrary to each other. We must develop each side of these couplets but especially the second ones, because they lead us into our Creator's value system. "Lent is a time to repent – to turn from our wants and recommit ourselves to the ways of God as revealed in

Jesus. As we 'seek God's ways' we find space and encouragement to explore the ways God is calling us to greater faithfulness." This is what Lent, religious exercises and study are about – growing in faithfulness, plus trust & godliness.

As 2 Peter 1:3-8 says, "God's divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great & precious promises so that through them we may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; & to goodness, knowledge; & to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; & to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is what Lent is about – earning and receiving.

Because our Creator's ways are beyond our ways, let's trust in our Savior's goodness. And let's accept God's ways contrast with our culture, which urges us to be self-sufficient and earn our way, basing our identity on gaining wealth, enjoying many experiences, and how many toys we have. Repentance, turning around, is freely receiving from Christ what we can never earn.

I believe we all agree that most people must earn their keep. Being people with European background, we have deep in us the purpose and value of hard work. Furthermore, as Mennonites and Protestants, we have the opinion, tradition, and mindset, of the value of hard work. When people do not match up, we tend to be less patient and more suspicious of them.

An MCC volunteer I know, planned to return to Canada and live off his wife. She was a nurse so made enough for them to live on. He intended to be available to help anyone – for free. Just call him – if you needed help with something. His

wife said she was fine with this. I do not know how this worked out for this couple. I hope it did. But we all thought it was an interesting and weird plan. It went against the idea of being a self-supporting, independent, a cultural manly man, much less a Mennonite follower of Jesus. It models simple lifestyle & love of neighbor.

We all have our stories and frustrations and opinions about people who don't work. I've heard several your stories and you have heard some of mine. I remember an uncle who was livid, to put it mildly, about a next-door neighbor. When her youngest child turned 17, my uncle believed she deliberately got herself pregnant, so she could stay on welfare.

I know a church who sponsored a family, and the father turned out to be a beggar and a bum. This went on during the time of refugee sponsorship and afterwards. He did his best to fulfill the Bible's promise that the poor will always be with us. He did not follow the expectation of making the best of a wonderful opportunity by earning his keep, being a good citizen, & a model father. This soured the church on sponsoring families & turned some members against immigrants. It was good to hear that over 10 years later – the church sponsored a family again, but definitely no one from the first man's country.

And we all have our good stories of people who worked hard, sacrificed, as they earned, not just their living, but overcame obstacles and found their way in the world. People we personally know, we love, and famous figures we admire.

We know Terry Fox's & Rick Hansen's stories. Terry died young but inspired people around the world and brought light about the ravages of cancer with his run. Rick Hansen highlighted spinal cord injuries and was a torchbearer in the 1988 and 2010 Winter Olympics. Closer to home is Alvin Law from Saskatchewan. He was born without arms but plays drums and is a motivational speaker. People like this earn honor, respect, and success. Their determination earns them the right to be famous.

We honor people who work hard to overcome challenges that life brought them. But some more than others had to be willing to receive. They had to move from believing they were helpless, stuck, to accepting nourishment, a helping hand, encouragement, & so forth. They especially had to see their identity as God's children, plus an understanding that abundant life is a gift from God to all. They had to give up the idol of being self-made independent people to being receptive to others help, advice, love, and to God's grace.

Sure, they worked hard and suffered. They had days full of tears & frustration. They gritted their teeth at the unfairness of life but moved forward. But they needed to receive from people the help & encouragement & sometimes prodding, each of them needed for their situation. And they had to be open to God's grace, mercy, and love.

Have you ever met someone who can't receive a gift? When you offer them something, they resist receiving it, try their best to give it back. When they accept it, they feel they must give you back a bigger, better, and more elaborate gift? I've known a few people like that & it can be frustrating. You want to thank them for something, or see a way you can help them, or express love toward them in some way, but they resist. How do you think God feels when we are like this toward him, or someone he sends our way?

What about someone who really needs help? Whatever it is – a relationship, job issues, a barrier of some kind, or their own destructive habits? We have all had to work with people who want to solve their problems or situation on their own – but it doesn't work. Being self-reliant and independent is good – up to a point. But all of us need to be open and willing to receive Jesus' correction and grace. We need to move from a focus on earning to receiving. We need to be willing to receive and value receiving.

John Amodeo & Lybi Ma offer these perspectives from an article titled, [5 Reasons Why Receiving is Harder than Giving](#). We grew up believing it's nobler to give than to receive. This safeguards us from becoming self-centered monsters, scanning our environment to see what

we can extract for ourselves. Recognizing others' needs, honoring their feelings, and being responsive to the less fortunate, safeguards us from the unbridled narcissism that runs wild today.

But there are hidden downsides to prioritizing giving, earning over receiving. Is it difficult for you to receive love, caring, & compliments? Do you silently squirm inside when someone offers a kind word or a present? Or do you allow yourself to receive the gifts of kindness, connection, caring, advice, & help? Here are some reasons why receiving is often more difficult than giving.

First, but not least, it's a **Defense Against Intimacy**. Receiving creates connection. Prioritizing earning, over receiving may be a way to keep people distant and our hearts defended. To the extent that we fear intimacy, we may not allow ourselves to receive a gift or advice, or compliment, which deprives ourselves of precious moments of connection.

Second, **receiving is a form of Letting Go of Control**. It might be easy to offer a kind word, buy someone flowers, or give help. But can we allow ourselves to surrender to the good feeling of receiving a gift or advice or help? How much does giving actually come from a generous heart over having control or promoting our self-image of being a caring person? But receiving invites us to welcome a vulnerable part of ourselves. Living in this tender place, we are more available to receive the gifts we are offered every day, such as a sincere "thank you," a warm smile, a compliment, advice, or help.

A third reason we dislike receiving is our **Fear of Strings Attached**. If I invite you over for a meal, do you think you have to reciprocate? We may have received compliments only when we accomplished something, like excelling at sports or achieving good grades. But if we sense that we are not being accepted for who we are but rather for our accomplishments, then receiving may be tinged by the distasteful continuing need to perform. If parents narcissistically used us to meet their own needs, such as to showcase us to their friends, we may equate compliments to

being used. We were recognized for what we do rather than for who we really are.

Fourth, we **Believe It Is Selfish to Receive**. Our religion or parents may have taught us that we are selfish if we receive, that life is more about suffering than being happy. It's better to be self-effacing and not take up too much space or smile too broadly, lest we bring too much attention to ourselves. As a result of this conditioning, we might feel shame to receive.

An inflated sense of self-importance; believing we deserve more than others is rampant today. A study suggests wealth can increase this sense of entitlement. But the perils of destructive narcissism can be contrasted with healthy narcissism, which reflects sound self-worth and a right to relish life's pleasures. Receiving with humility & appreciation; living with a rhythm of giving & receiving keeps us balanced & nourished.

A Fifth reason receiving is harder than giving is the **Self-Imposed or Cultural Expectation and Pressure to Reciprocate**. Blocks to receiving may be a way to protect us from being in someone's debt. We may suspect their motives, wondering "What do they want?" Presuming that compliments or gifts are attempts to control or manipulate us, we pre-emptively defend ourselves from any sense of indebtedness or obligation by not opening ourselves to the gift.

Another thought - If everyone were busy giving, then who'd be available to receive all that good stuff? By receiving with tender self-compassion, we are allowing ourselves to be touched by life's gifts. Especially God's gifts of grace. Without the capacity to be touched by appreciation, help, and caring, we render these gifts less meaningful. Sacred receiving, allowing all kinds of things in with heartfelt gratitude, is a gift to the giver! When we are visibly moved, it conveys that they have made a difference in our lives. We may then bask together in a moment in which there is no distinction between the giver and the receiver. Both people are giving and receiving in their own unique ways. This shared experience can be

profoundly sacred and intimate, a moment of enjoyable, tasty, delectable grace.

Can we put as much or more importance on receiving as we do earning? Can we open our trust and ourselves to fully receive from God? A suggestion: The next time someone offers a gift, or compliment, or looks lovingly into your eyes, notice how you feel inside. What is happening in your body? Is your breathing relaxed and your belly soft or are you tightening up? Can you let in the caring, connection, advice, and help?