

“‘BECAUSE GOD ...’ NOT ‘SO THAT GOD ...’”
Romans 6:5-8

Well, in case you hadn't noticed, today is our Gift Day, our opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to the vision of this church by giving towards the Development Fund. Last week, those of you who were here will remember (I hope), we looked together at a vision for this church to become a “*church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church*”. Our giving today will go towards realising that vision as we develop our premises here and look to the future of God's work here in the centre of Lichfield. I hope it has involved careful thought and prayer, looking forward in faith to what God will do and looking back with gratitude to what he has already done. God has been blessing his people who have met in this place for nearly two centuries and he has been blessing us as individuals in all kinds of ways as well.

Of course, some of you may be thinking that we need to give to God in order to gain his blessing. Both in our offerings today and in our work for God in other places and at other times, there is often the thought that we need to keep working hard and giving hard to earn the blessing of God. Indeed, we often present our gospel that way – “You do this, that or the other, and God will save you!”. It's the kind of thought that is at the root of the Prosperity Gospel – “You give so much money and that will stimulate God into doing something for you in return.” That's really a heresy: as we look through the Bible, we see no such teaching. Rather, we see the opposite. Our offerings – of money here today, of time, of energy, of resources – are offerings *in response* to what God has already done, offerings given in gratitude to a God who has acted first, who has taken the initiative in his dealings with this world.

This morning, before we actually make our offering and having already celebrated the offerings of God's Son Jesus for us in the taking of bread and wine, we're going to explore this thought a little more. We're going to see what it might mean for us in practical terms and how it affects our conception of God and his grace. We need to begin, as so often, in the Old Testament.

1. GOD TAKES THE INITIATIVE

From the very dawn of the history of the world, we see that it is always God who takes the first step in his dealings with humanity – and then he waits to see how humanity will respond. The first step is always an action of his divine love – he created the world and placed his creatures in the paradise of Eden. Human beings promptly responded by fouling it up! We are probably all agreed on that – even if we don't necessarily take the biblical story of creation as a literal account. There's no doubt that God gave Adam

and Eve a gift that was entirely independent of their actions. They couldn't have done anything about it – they weren't there!

As we read on, however, it's easy for us to take the view that from then on men and women had to work their way towards God's grace and favour by keeping the law and doing as they were told. But let's just look at some examples from the early part of the Bible and see how God acted in love and took the first step.

In *Genesis 17*, we have the story of God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham is ninety-nine years old and God appears to make him a promise in vv3-8, then calls for a response – “I will do this: you respond.” It wasn't, “You do all this and then I might consider my angle on it.” (St. Paul elaborates on this in *Romans 4* if you want to read more about it.) The same thing happens to Jacob in *Genesis 28:13-15* – Jacob is no great and godly man – he's a cheat and a swindler – but God, in his love, makes a promise to him. The look at the famous section of *Exodus 20* in which God gives his people the Law, the Ten Commandments. God doesn't give them these commandments and then say, “Right, if you can keep that lot, I'll see that you're alright.” No, in vv1,2 he says, “I've already rescued you and brought you from slavery and oppression into freedom and nationhood, now here's your chance to make a response: live as I want you to.” God took the initiative – the response of his people was variable, but his love remained: he always protected them and, although they rejected his love from time to time, it was still there for them to turn to.

That theme continues throughout the Old Testament. In the book of *Hosea*, for example, there is the acted parable of God's love. The prophet's wife is unfaithful to him but he takes her back – a reflection of God's love in action. And there is an achingly beautiful picture of this love of God in *Ezekiel 16*, where God, now angry with his people's continual turning away from him, tells of how he first took them under his wing. We have a picture of a God who acts first, whose first instinct is for love. But what relevance has this to do with us as Christians? It's all Old Testament stuff and linked very closely to the people of Israel. Well, our God is the same God, only now we see that ...

2. GOD HAS TAKEN THE INITIATIVE IN JESUS

If we turn to the New Testament, we see once again that it is God's work that counts, not ours. We read from *Romans 5* earlier on. Look at vv6-8 in that chapter. This is surely the very heart of our Christian gospel, which sums up all God's love for us. The great preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones, writes of v6, “*I do not hesitate to assert that there is no greater statement of the love of God than in this verse.*” Why is it so

great? Because it refers to God's love for us "*when we were still powerless*", and to the fact that Christ was crucified for the "*ungodly*" – not for those who had worked their way to God by doing all the right things.

We've just remembered that as we have taken bread and wine together. The body of Jesus Christ was given for us. The blood of Jesus Christ was shed for us. That happened before any of us could do anything about it. God took the initiative. He took the risk. There was no guarantee that anyone would respond to that ultimate gesture of love. As Jesus hung there, as his life flowed from him, as he gave his all in sacrifice in fulfilment of his Fathers' plan to rescue humanity from the eternal consequences of their own wrong decisions and wrong choices, it was God's love that was being demonstrated. It is, once again, quite definitely Gods' initiative and it's an initiative that continues to have an effect today – v8 says "*God demonstrates*" : it's a present tense, an ongoing love.

3. **THE INITIATIVE IS NOT DEPENDENT ON US**

The truly amazing thing about all this is that it does not depend on us, on our own works, on our offerings, on our perfect lives. If it did, we could never, ever attain God's love. Paul tells us very clearly, as he continues his argument in the following chapters, that God's love "*does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy*" (Romans 9:16). The most immediate result is that, when we accept God's gracious invitation to commit our lives to him, to throw ourselves on his mercy, we can have complete assurance. God has chosen us; he has worked in us by his Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin and of our need of his help; he has released us by the death of his Son Jesus from the oppression and tyranny of sin; he has given us new life – and **God is unchanging**. He won't go back on that.

You see, if we had chosen God, if we had struggled to get to him, if we had worked hard to make our lives good enough for him to accept us, then it would all be dependent on our own works and subject to the vicissitudes of our own human nature. We would have no assurance and everything would be dependent on our own moods and emotions – one day we'd be doing OK, the next we wouldn't. Every time we doubt, though, we can look back to that verse (v6) and remind ourselves that God did his work "*when we were still powerless.*" Paul develops his argument here (which is fairly complex and we haven't the time to unravel in its entirety this morning) all the way to the end of chapter 11, where he rounds it off with those tremendously exhilarating verses 11:33-36. But ...

4. THE INITIATIVE PROVOKES A RESPONSE

You see, Paul doesn't, in fact, finish the argument completely there. Yes, he closes what he has to say about God's love, but he goes on in chapter 12 to spell out some of the implications of it all. God has sent Jesus and demonstrated his love for us in a way that is beyond our ability to comprehend, but we which we can gratefully accept. So he begins *12:1* with "*Therefore ...*". "*Therefore*" we are to make a response to him by offering ourselves wholly and completely to him. God's love doesn't depend on that. He loves us even if we don't offer ourselves – just as a human parent might well love a wayward child who has left home and is nowhere to be found and who seems not to want to experience that love. But that love doesn't become effective for us, we do not experience it fully if we are not "*transformed by the renewing of our minds*" (*12:2*). We must allow ourselves the opportunity of God's love or we will miss out on it all together, for God is a God of justice as well as a God of love.

What we are doing here this morning as we make our offerings and our pledges to God for the continuing of his work in this place is not trying to bribe him into doing something for us. What we are doing is responding to that absolutely amazing love that he has already shown us. We are demonstrating here that we are aware of the huge debt we owe God, and giving some of our money is only a small part of that response. You see, if God wants this development to go ahead, it will happen, but he is graciously inviting us to be a part of his plans here, allowing us to play a part in it all.

Paul uses a powerful image here in *12:1* as he calls on us to "*offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God*". As Alan Dempster said, "*God doesn't want my money – he wants me*": he wants us to be wholly surrendered to him in grateful response to his love. And when we do that – when we really do that – we "*will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"

God has loved us: he continues to love us and he demonstrated that by the sending of his Son. Our offering will only ever be a response to that – this offering today is only a response – but it helps us become more and more aware of that love of God which is sure and unchanging. This offering today is our response to God's love, not a bribe to get him to do what we want. No doubt that's why Paul writes elsewhere that God loves a cheerful giver, the one who gives out of gratitude and not out of duty. We give **because** God is good, not **so that** God will be good.