



Matthew 5.²³⁻²⁶

²³Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; ²⁴leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

²⁵Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. ²⁶Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Lent is a season of increased sorrow for sin, deeper, more heart-felt repentance, and a more faithful looking to God for forgiveness. When Jesus refers to our bringing a “gift to the altar,” it seems likely that he has our desire to be reconciled to God foremost in mind. During Lent we can place upon the altar what, astonishingly, is to God the most prized of gifts: our broken, wounded heart, sickened heart. And we can do so with full confidence that God will handle it with care and the utmost tenderness.

But, as Jesus makes clear in today’s reading, our relationship with God is bound up with our relationship with others. God cares very much about these relationships. So, as we seek reconciliation with God, Lent is also a time to take stock of our relationships with others and to attempt reconciliation with those with whom we are out of sorts. We cannot achieve reconciliation with God without doing all that we can to be reconciled to our “brother.” There are times when the latter takes priority over the former.

We place a high value on ordinances. Many would not dream of regularly missing out on partaking of the sacrament and thus receiving the weekly renewal promised in the ordinance. Temple attendance is often viewed as the height of spiritual attainment. Jesus might beg to differ. There can be no thought of worshipping God, engaging in ritual activities, and seeking spiritual renewal while our relationship with others is in shambles. This would become pure, or impure theater. A sham.

Isaiah makes this point passionately at the beginning of his Book. He begins with the Lord’s complaint about sham, legalistic religious practices that Israel so meticulously observed.

“Hear the word of YHWH, leaders of S^cdōm.

Incline your ear to the instruction of our God, people of ‘A^mōrâ.

‘Why do you offer your many sacrifices to me?’ asks YHWH.

‘I have had my fill of ram offerings,

and the fat of specially prepared sacrificial animals.

As for the blood of bulls and lambs and goats—

I find no value in any of it.

When you come to present yourselves to me, who has asked this of you?

It is merely the sound of trampling feet in my courts.

Do not continue to bring such meaningless tributes?

The odor of your sacrifices is abhorrent to me.
New moon, šabbāt and calling of assemblies—
I cannot stand the iniquitous assembly.
Your new moon festivals and your other sacred times—
my soul hates.
They rest upon me like a burden.
I am weary of bearing them.
When you lift your hands to me,
I shall turn my eyes away from you.
Though you may multiply prayers,
I won't be there listening.
Your hands are covered with blood!.”¹

This is the equivalent of Jesus' “bringing thy gift to the altar.” Israel brought their sacrifices to keep peace between itself and God and to find reconciliation with God when it was out of sorts with Him. However, to be in right standing with God and to be reconciled to Him when necessary, something far different and more difficult was required.

“Wash yourselves!
Clear yourselves!
Remove your evil deeds from my sight.
Stop doing evil.
Learn to do good.
Seek after justice.
Set things right for those treated unjustly.
Take the side of the orphan.
Plead for the widow.
¹⁸Come! Let us reason together,’ says Yahweh.
‘Though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.
Though they are as red as scarlet died fabric,
they shall be as wool.’”²

The real key to cleanliness or right standing with God is not the gifts we bring to the altar but the way we treat others; the justice and compassion we exercise in the lives of others. Interesting, Isaiah suggests that it is how we treat those who might in some way be vulnerable to us that God is particularly sensitive to and observant of.

We should give more thought to those who are in some way vulnerable and the relationship that exists between them and those whom Jesus speaks of having “ought against” us. There can be little doubt that those toward whom we are unjust and merciless will have and feel “ought against” us.

That we are responsible for our own feelings and are to snuff out feeling “ought against” our “brother” is a given. When we feel “ought against” another, we put ourselves in spiritual turmoil and danger. But Jesus ups the ante. He does not counsel us concerning our own feelings toward others, but the feelings of others toward us—“if... thy brother hath ought against thee.” This is not encouragement toward narcissism, but toward community and at-one-ment. Jesus reminds us of the impact we have on others and places responsibility upon us to be a healer.

¹ Isaiah 1.¹⁰⁻¹⁵

² Isaiah 1.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Whether our “brother” admits it or not, his possessing “ought against” us, whether it is justified or not, puts him in turmoil. It disturbs his emotional equilibrium and diminishes his spiritual capacities. It places him in a spiritually vulnerable place. It doesn’t matter “who’s at fault” in the ruptured relationship, we have a responsibility to at least reach out and attempt to be a healer in our “brother’s” life. We do not do so in such a way as to convince him of our rightness and of his wrongness. We do what we can to put him back in equilibrium and out of turmoil. We try to leave him with the renewed spiritual capacities that he will need to meet life’s inevitable challenges.

We act, in other words, as we would have God act in our life as we approach the altar. We bestow reconciliation upon others as we seek reconciliation with God. Only then can we return to God’s altar with our gift in hand and plead in good conscious for the healing reconciliation with God that renews us, empowers us to meet life’s challenges, and makes it possible for us to be what God intends us to be: a blessing to others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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