

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 13, 2025

Transactional or Reciprocal?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I sincerely hope that I need not do much by means of explanation when it comes to our Gospel text today. It should be rather obvious that Jesus is calling out the leaders of his day for not taking care of those who are suffering, the way they were expected to.¹ He describes the callousness of the priest and the Levite, all too willing to pass “by on the other side.”² But the Samaritan, this hated enemy of the Jews, recognized the unnamed victim’s holy need and was “moved with compassion.”³ This hated enemy then offered his presence, his time, his energy, and even his material resources on behalf of this victim.⁴

The only sermon that needs be preached on this Gospel text are the final words of it: “Go and do likewise.” Give of yourself for the sake of those whom the world is passing by. Give of your time and treasures to care for those whom the world is actively harming. Stand with our transgender neighbors, our nonbinary neighbors, our gay and lesbian neighbors, our immigrant and refugee neighbors, our black and brown neighbors, our veteran neighbors, our unhoused neighbors, our hungry neighbors, our Muslim neighbors, our disabled neighbors, and all the other targets of the power systems of our day. Those are your neighbors...serve their needs. That’s it. Done. Amen.

¹ c.f. [Jeremiah 6:13, 8:10; Ezekiel 34:2-4; Micah 3:11](#)

² [Luke 10:31-32](#)

³ [Luke 10:33](#)

⁴ [Luke 10:34-35](#)

So let's look at Deuteronomy today instead! There is a tendency, especially in Western churches, to read passages like this as very transactional. This is not surprising really, as most of Western culture is steeped in the transactional systems of capitalism. No wonder this way of thinking seeps into everything, even the church. But it is largely my experience and the witness of Scripture, that God does not operate in a transactional manner, so what do we make of a passage like this?

Of course we must consider the context of the passage. Chapter 30 is the final portion of Moses' farewell address to the Israelites before he becomes an ancestor. At this point the people of Israel are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. They have been wandering in the wilderness for some time, the memories of slavery in Egypt are likely beginning to fade. And so Moses offers these final words, these final teachings: God intends prosperity for God's people. God brought them out of slavery in order to establish them in a land of their own. And this prosperity would occur out of God's deep and abiding love for the Israelites.

The problem lies in hearing this as an if/then clause when it is not necessarily so. It is easy to hear this as: "observe God's commandments and God will make you prosperous." But a far more theologically consistent interpretation of clauses like this are more like: "live in the ways God has created you to live, as stewards and co-creators with God concerned with the well-being of all, and prosperity will naturally result."

In particular, the closing words of Moses' last words emphasize that God's commands are not onerous or hard to keep. No, as a matter of fact the commands of God are not hard, nor far away or lofty. No, God's commands are near to us and natural to us. From a young age we understand what we need to learn: to share, to care for others, to be kind and compassionate, to

meet our neighbor's needs. This fact seems so obvious that we make memes of it today!

Perhaps you've seen this one, it reads: All I really need to know...I learned in Kindergarten: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your mess. Don't take things that don't belong to you. Apologize when you harm someone. Wash your hands before you eat...and on and on and on. These lessons are so simple we teach them to our youngest learners. And when you watch a classroom that really lives out these values...for that is what they are values more than rules...it is a wonderful environment for growth and learning! Full of the sort of prosperity God is really interested in...the prosperity of healthy community and connection.

This is not transactional...and it cannot be transactional when it is done authentically, because at the end of the day all of these commands...these values of God...are based on love. And transactional love is not really love. Love is meant to be reciprocal. Actions done in love invite reciprocal loving actions.

When our actions are aligned with the values and culture of God, we find healthy connection and community. When our actions are grounded in God's love, peace and justice flourish. And much like how we explored the difference between God's peace and the world's peace last week, there is a great deal of difference between the commands of God and the commands of the world expressed in this difference between reciprocal and transactional.

God's commands, grounded on the reciprocal nature of love, resemble soft rain and warm sun on a growing flower, leading to growth and prosperity of life. The commands of the world, grounded on transactional quid pro quo, force fertilizer on the flowers and harvest the bloom as soon as possible.

When God's commands are violated, we will be held accountable to the natural outcomes of that violation: break down in relationship. When we fail to heed God's command to love and care for the land, for instance, the land will lose its ability to love and care for us. See the damage done, not just to those violating God's commands, but to entire ecosystems and communities!

When the world's commands are violated, what occurs? Violence. If you fail in the transactions/commands the world expects of you then goods and services will be withheld, and compliance will be enforced.

Moses, and Jesus sometime later, are both teaching us the main difference between the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom, kin-dom, of God. One is focused on community and creation; one is focused on the individual and the resource. One invites reciprocity and one enforces transaction. One is concerned with loving the whole while the other is concerned only with loving the self. One is concerned with justice for all, the other with justice only for the powerful. One leads to prosperity of life for the entire world, and the other leads to a prosperity of false life that ultimately leads to death.

God's loving, reciprocal commands...commands to pursue love, justice, and connection, are near to you...near to us all. If only we can let go of the world's teachings. If only we can change our perspectives away from that of power and empire, towards justice and community. From transaction to reciprocity. From scarcity to abundance. From prosperity of false life, full of empty things and shallow relationships, to prosperity of true life, life found in connection and community. Amen.