

Lent 3, March 2022 Seeking Gods Ways: Earning to Receiving God's Love

Come, Come to the water. Scripture is full of images of water. This morning we are looking at three such passages.

In Psalm 63, David describes his deep thirst for God by saying:

“O God, you are my God and I seek you.
My soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Thirst-quenching water is offered by God in our Isaiah 55 passage - the first 3 verses which we read today, for our call to worship.

And thirdly, in relation to the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13, we all know that water is needed for trees to grow.

So, what do these scripture passages with images of water have to do with the invitation to repent or change our way of thinking from “earning” God's love to “receiving” God's love?

As I was thinking about this question, I remembered the saying (Philip Yancey about grace) “There is nothing you can do to make God love you anymore, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less.” Do you and I believe this?

As I thought about this saying, I realized that “receiving” rather than “earning” God's love has been a challenge for me. I grew up singing the song ‘Jesus loves me’. I invite you to sing this song along with me and to hug yourself each time we sing the words “Jesus loves me.” Ready?

Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me, (3x) The bible tells me so.

But, along with this song, I heard messages of things I needed to do to be right with God or to get to heaven. It felt like I had to prove that I was worthy of God's love or that I somehow had to earn it, by believing right or saying the right words or doing the right things. There were a lot of “shoulds” in my life. E.g. I should be more loving, patient, kind, generous, etc. I should keep the 10 commandments and especially the most important commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind
Love your neighbour as you love yourself. (Matthew 22.36)

Then I thought of the many times I find myself thinking or saying to God or others “but that's not fair!” as if I have ... what - earned a better response than what I am receiving? Hmm

And each time I reflect on Jesus's baptism (Matt. 3.17), I remember once again that God says: "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased" - before Jesus begins his ministry!

I wonder if when I am thinking this way, I have bought into our culture's messages that we should be able to make our own way or earn our keep. To receive something for free is usually suspect. Not to mention if we can earn love or a good life, we have the illusion of being in control.

Let's take a closer look at these three scriptures and see how they might speak to "earning" vs. "receiving" God's love.

Psalm 63 was written by King David when he was - guess where - in the wilderness of Judah, likely hiding out from his son Absalom who was trying to kill him.

Listen to this Contemporary English Version of this psalm, imagining yourself in the situation of King David.

¹You are my God. I worship you.

In my heart, I long for you, as I would long for a stream in a scorching desert.

²I have seen your power and your glory in the place of worship.

³Your love means more than life to me, and I praise you.

⁴As long as I live, I will pray to you.

⁵I will sing joyful praises and be filled with excitement like a guest at a banquet.

⁶I think about you before I go to sleep, and my thoughts turn to you during the night.

⁷You have helped me, and I sing happy songs in the shadow of your wings.

⁸I stay close to you, and your powerful arm supports me.

What interests me is that after acknowledging his desperate need for God, David goes on at length with all the things he has received from God. I'm going to read it again and invite you to pay close attention to what David says he has received from God and his responses to all he has received.

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What did you notice that David received from God? I noticed things like: Seeing God's power and glory in the place of worship, God's love, God's help. God's protection and God's support.

What responses did you notice David making to what he received from God? Responses I noticed, include David: worshipping God; praising God; singing joyful praises to God; being excited or full of anticipation, thinking about God before bed and when waking up during the night; singing happy

songs while feeling protected; and choosing to stay close to God. Did you notice any indication of David thinking he could earn God's love? I didn't. I wonder if we were to make a list of things we have received from God, what would it look like. I wonder how our list of responses would compare to David's.

Let's move on to Isaiah 55. Here we have God speaking to the discouraged children of Israel who are again going through a wilderness experience. They have been taken into captivity. Their future is uncertain, and life is hard. Imagine yourself in their situation and hearing these invitations and promises from God.

If you are thirsty, come and drink water.
If you don't have any money, come, and eat what you want for free.
Drink wine and milk without paying a cent.
Why waste your money on what really isn't food?
Why work hard for something that doesn't satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and you will enjoy the very best foods
Pay close attention! Come to me and live.
I will promise you the eternal love and loyalty that I promised David.
⁶Turn to the Lord while the Lord may be found.
Call out to God while God is near
⁷Give up crooked ways & evil thoughts
Return to the Lord our God – he will be merciful and forgive your sins.

There are 4 things that caught my attention as I imagined hearing this as one of the children of Israel living in captivity.

1. First, that water is offered to everyone who is thirsty and that it is free.
2. When God asks: "Why waste your money on what really isn't food?" or "Why work hard for something that doesn't satisfy?" I was invited to take a good look at my life. What are my priorities? Am I satisfied? If not, what I am I going to do about it?
3. When God promised eternal love and loyalty like he promised David, I was impressed, as I knew how God had spared David's life when he was guilty of murder and adultery, and how God had kept God's promise to bless David and guide him every day of his life.
4. I was so glad to hear that God will be merciful and forgive my sins when I repent or turn to God and am open to receiving God's love.

Our third scripture is from Luke 13. Again, I invite you to imagine hearing this parable as the people who were listening to Jesus would have. You need to remember that your understanding of sickness or calamities is that they came about as a result of sin.

Prior to telling this parable, Jesus surprises you by challenging this way of thinking. He says people who suffer calamities were not worse sinners than those who didn't! He then invites you to repent or turn back to God or die. He then tells this story:

⁶A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. One day he went out to pick some figs, but he didn't find any. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, "For three years I have come looking for figs on this tree, and I haven't found any yet. Chop it down! Why should it take up space?"

⁸ The gardener answered, "Master, leave it for another year. I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow. ⁹ Maybe it will have figs on it next year. If it doesn't, you can have it cut down."

I wonder where the people first hearing this story saw themselves in this story. As the man with the vineyard? The compassionate gardener? The fig tree? I wonder where we see ourselves in this story.

I wonder whether Jesus intended this story to be interpreted as a threat – bear fruit or else, or a promise – a compassionate God is offering second chances along with the reality that life is uncertain. It will eventually end - sometimes sooner than we expect.

When I think of us as fig trees, I wonder what soul nourishment we are already receiving. I wonder what additional nourishment God is offering to us. I wonder what digging around our roots looks or feels like.

And now back to my question as to what these three passages with images of water have to do with the invitation to repent or change our way of thinking from "earning" God's love to "receiving" God's love? I see examples of God's free gift of love in each of them. David has received God's gift of love which quenches his thirst like water in a desert. God, through Isaiah, is inviting the people repeatedly to repent and receive God's free water and live. And Jesus, the compassionate gardener, is inviting us to repent and offers to dig around our roots in order that water and manure can help us grow and produce fruit.

Some of the questions that remain are: Are we thirsty? Are we willing to repent, or move from believing that we can earn God's love to realizing we can only receive it as a gift? Are we willing to let Jesus, the gardener dig around our roots so that we can better receive the nourishment he is offering to us because of his love for us?

As I think of all the invitations from God in these three passages, the image of God in this song from Rev. 3 comes to mind.

[Listen, listen, I am standing at the door knocking 2x](#)
[If you hear my voice, and open the door I will come in. 2x](#)
[I will come into you and eat with you and you with me. 2x](#)
[So, I listen, listen, I am standing at the door knocking 2x](#)

What a wonderful image of God's response to us when we choose to receive God's love.