

God Does Not Allow His Gifts To Be Abused.

Text: Daniel 5:17-30

1) The dispensation of gifts

Suggested Hymns:

2) The evaluation of the recipients

182, 372, 357, 284, 367

3) Security in God

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Daniel 5:17–30, *¹⁷ Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation.*

¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. ¹⁹ And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down.

²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. ²¹ Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

²² “But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. ²³ And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.

²⁴ Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written. ²⁵ “And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.

²⁶ This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; ²⁷ TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; ²⁸ PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our God is so remarkable that our attempts to describe and understand Him always seem a little feeble. To know Him better, we centre our attention quite properly on Jesus Christ, in whom God showed us everything He is, and told us everything that He had to say.

In our public worship, Christmas began this year's cycle of specific attention to the life and death, and the sayings and doings of Jesus, God's Son and Mary's Child.

We understood Him to be God's matchless gift to fallen humanity, who was born in order to live and die and rise again so that God's gracious rule might be extended to us, and to all who are to be His.

The Epiphany season followed, and we were quickly purged of any mistaken opinion we may have had that Jesus was only mildly capable and concerned, and therefore only mildly helpful in our many needs. Jesus showed Himself to be Very God of Very God, God in man made manifest.

From the routine contacts of daily life to the brilliance of the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus demonstrated that He was aware of the needs of His friends and perfectly able to fill them.

In Lent, soon to follow, we shall remember that His concern for our sin was so great that He gave His life for us. All in all, we know Jesus Christ, and thus know God the Father, as One who has much to give and gives it generously.

But today's text reminds us that God's giving is not like that of a super Santa Claus nor like that of a rich relative. God is concerned about the use to which His gifts are put. Our text today teaches us that *God Does Not Allow His Gifts to Be Abused*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Dispensation Of Gifts - God Is The Only Source

God alone can supply man's needs. Appearances sometimes deceive. The supermarket supplies our need for food — or is it the farmer? — or the soil? - or the father's wages? Contractors and carpenters provide our houses — or is it the trees of the forest and the minerals of the earth? - or twenty years of payments with 7 percent interest?

Medical advice and drugs are not the source of health. Natural ability and education and experience are not the source of income. Even modest insight brings one to see quickly that human hands and human ingenuity are dependent on something or someone else.

Mother Nature is not the final source of good and blessing either, because she really is not a mother at all. God alone is the source of every good gift, every positive value, and every constructive achievement.

Our text pictures this truth on a grand scale. Even an absolute monarch does not have his position because his father was king before him, nor because of the superior might of his armies, nor because of popular support.

Our text says, *¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. ¹⁹ And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him.* Even the man at the very top of all men is dependent on God. He is what he is only at God's discretion. When God withholds His blessing from any person, that person has nothing. God alone can supply man's needs, and He dispenses His gifts as He wishes.

God's greatest gift, the one in which all His other gifts find their ultimate basis, was His only Son, our Saviour. Man could never produce nor demand the remedy for his sin. He could not recover status with God; he could not deal with the problem of alienation. He could not earn or expect heaven or any real good this side of heaven.

By nature man does not even have a sense of values with which to work toward such goals. If man was to have God's favour at all, he was clearly cast in the role of a beggar.

But in this greatest need of man, God again became the generous Giver and through Christ achieved the way in which men may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom. The forgiveness of sins, the restoration of life, the hope of heaven — these are the evidence that man's ultimate need is also supplied only by God's gracious gift.

We can have nothing, we can achieve nothing, we can accumulate nothing, we can retain nothing - unless God be mercifully present with His good gifts. They are His and His alone to give.

Gifts Distributed as God Wills

Who shall have God's gifts? Shall they be distributed indiscriminately? Can any of you plead special merit or special need so as to be given preferred consideration? Certainly not!

We do not determine how God's gifts are to be dispensed; He does. I do not know why I should be able to think or speak or walk while others are without these gifts. I do not know why I eat well while others starve. I do not know why my wife and I have children while other couples are childless.

I do know, as do all of you when you begin to list your special blessings, that both you and I, have not deserved God's kindness. In His grace and mercy God blesses all people, and for special blessings He makes His own choices. He determines to whom His gifts will be given.

God also determines how much any person is to receive and for what purpose the gifts are given. Nebuchadnezzar did not achieve his unrivalled power and importance because God somehow lost control or forgot to count how much had already been given to this king.

God was firmly in control of how much Nebuchadnezzar was to have, as was most dramatically illustrated when God turned off the supply, took everything away, and left this great king with nothing more than animal existence. Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar learned by similar experience that God always determines how much a man is to have and for what purpose he is to have it.

Or consider today's Gospel,¹ the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Some bore the burden and heat of the day and received a proper day's wage. Some worked only the last hour of the day and also received a day's wage.

Two questions at the end of the parable establish the principle involved as we read in Matthew 20:15, ***15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?*** In other words, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"* If the last are to be first and the first last, that is a matter for God to determine. No one holds a claim on God. He chooses how His gifts are to be dispensed.

2. The Evaluation Of The Recipients

God Is Present

God is not withdrawn from the people who need Him. He is present with them to help them. We His children count it a special privilege to have the Lord always close. This is why we can be confident in prayer: the Lord is present to hear us. This is why we are glad to gather around the Word and sacraments: God is present to build us up through these means.

The knowledge of God's presence also helps us control fear; no impending difficulty, not even death, need terrorise us, for He is with us. And in the area of His giving gifts, we are happy that He is near us because He knows what we need before we ever ask, and He provides us with blessings for which we would never have thought to ask.

God's constant presence also has a more challenging side. He always sees how His gifts are used. That ghostly hand wrote on the wall an evaluation of Belshazzar and his kingdom that was based on observation.

Belshazzar had assumed that he could use his power as he pleased. But it was not so. Daniel told him that God knew all about his repeated affronts and insults. God is not withdrawn from those who have and use His gifts.

God Makes Evaluations

God can and does distinguish the worthy recipients of His gifts from the unworthy. God is not mocked. Those who abuse His gifts will lose them.

Nebuchadnezzar had had no equal in prestige, power, and majesty. Our text testifies explicitly that this supreme position had been given to him by God.

But Nebuchadnezzar did not exercise his power as a proper steward of the gifts God had given to him. He began to use them to achieve his own ambitions, and God's intent was ignored. At that point God intervened by taking away everything so that only his physical life, and that a miserable life, was left to Nebuchadnezzar. He had nothing until, in the words of the text, "***he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.***"

Belshazzar was a young adult when all of this happened to his father. He knew every detail of this history. Yet, when he became king (again by God's choice and with God's gifts at his disposal), he quickly accumulated a record of sacrilege, idolatry, and self-esteem by which he was playing God.

God knew this, and God acted. MENE: your days are numbered. TEKEL: you have been weighed and found wanting. PERES: your kingdom is divided among other rulers. God is not mocked. Those who abuse His gifts lose them.

In this situation Daniel bore testimony to God's position in human affairs by saying that God holds even man's life breath in His hands and that He furthermore holds in His possession all of man's ways.

Whether a person is to live or die is God's choice; what he does is subject to God's will. For the person who is determined to go his own way without regard for God, this situation is terrifying and intolerable. But it cannot be wished away. God continues to be in control, and His purposes will be achieved. He will give and withdraw gifts so that His will is done.

The ancient Egyptian Pharaohs who dealt with the Children of Israel are good illustrations of how God achieves His purpose with or without man's consent. As long as God's purpose of raising up a numerous and prosperous people as descendants of Jacob was being achieved, the Pharaoh ruled over them and prospered.

But when God's purpose of removing His chosen people to their own land was resisted, the Pharaoh was disposed of. God's will will be done. The title "***Most High God***" is not idly assigned.

Paul in his address to the people of Athens, as reported in Acts 17, reduced the entire matter to a single line: *“In Him we live and move and have our being.”* We furthermore acknowledge and accept God’s preeminence in all of His dealing with us when we pray, as our Lord taught us, *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

It is readily apparent that submission to God’s discretion in giving and withholding gifts can be a cause for stability and confidence instead of terror. Some people can take heart rather than lose heart that God cares enough about their affairs to apply His standards to them.

We are such people. Surely we are not always the kind of people that God finds worthy of receiving His gifts. Surely we have no special claim on His mercy. Surely we too on occasion abuse His gifts. But thanks be to God that we have learned to address Him as Father.

Thanks be to God that we have learned to know that the relationship between God and us is workable only to the extent that we humble ourselves before Him. And thanks be to God that He has revealed Himself as One who accepts our repentance for past sinful abuses of His kindness and forgives us.

Yet we are not merely to sit back and count our blessings. God does give His gifts for a purpose. His purpose, in general terms, is that we be enabled to remain faithful to Him, that we succeed in living with devotion and perseverance, that we share the good news of God’s grace with those who do not yet know it, that we work and play within the limits of His will, and that we finally attain to the prize of heaven.

Accordingly, He supplies whatever is required for these goals to be reached. But He also warns and encourages us to use these gifts for His announced purpose rather than waste or divert them. God has such a legitimate claim on us as our Father and King; He has such a legitimate control over our gifts as the One who gave them. With us too, God will deal in whatever way is necessary for achieving His purpose. God has re-created us so that we are free to follow His direction, but with that goes the responsibility of being dependable. God evaluates the recipients of His gifts, and His evaluation determines whether or not His gifts shall continue to flow.

3. Security in God

The warning implied in all of this is apparent. The experience of the Children of Israel in this matter was a sheer disaster. They were God's own chosen people; yet God finally had to reject them. They abused God's gifts and undermined God's purpose and thus extended God's tolerance further than it could reach.

Even Paul, in today's Epistle,² acknowledges the possibility of becoming a castaway. Carnal security is not a proper response to God's gracious gifts. Grace is not cheap.

Is there no security then? Are we apt to be shut off from God's favour? Many people do not reach the goal for which they were called. Not even one of us achieves any merit before God, not even with the finest service. We are not really dependable, but we are always dependent.

God is not able to depend absolutely on man, but the man of faith is able to depend absolutely on God. And there is our security. Grace is not cheap, but it is free, freely given.

How do you know that you will be favoured with God's continued blessing? If you make a self-evaluation, you will be uncertain. But if you evaluate God, the answer is unmistakable and assuring. In Baptism God has made you His own dear child. In His Word He has brought you His sacred promises, sealed with an oath.

In Holy Communion *Christ gives us His own true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.*³ All of which is to say, God Himself is your security for continued blessing. He, the Most High God, is the finest security there is.

Cling to this merciful God. Accept His gifts gratefully — together with the challenge to use them as He wishes. Pray God that we never abuse His generosity. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matt 20:1-16

² 1 Cor 9:24-27

³ *Luther's Small Catechism*, Q 287, "What does Christ give us in the Sacrament?"