



"The fruits of your labors may be reaped two generations from now. Trust, even when you don't see results."

—Henri Nouwen

10-Jun-16

Altruism

Last month, a town hall meeting was held at my place of employment, and a minister opened the meeting with a story, which went something like this:

A long time ago, a king traveling through his kingdom came upon a very old woman who was diligently tending to some trees that she had recently planted. Her hard work impressed the king, but it also concerned him because she was doing it in the heat of the day.

The regent dismounted from his horse and offered his assistance, but his subject politely declined his offer and continued working. As they talked, she explained that she had only recently planted some fig trees and that this early work was some of the most important to ensure their long-term health.

The king asked her when the fruit would be ready to eat. The old woman explained that for the best, most flavorful fruit, it would be several years. The king marveled, thinking to himself, "This woman is very old, and she is working very hard. Will she even be around to enjoy the fruit of her labor?"

The elderly woman perceived the king's worried thoughts. She told him, "The work I do today won't show any results for several years, but the fruit we enjoy eating today is only possible because of the people who planted, watered, and tended other fig trees many years ago." In like manner, the blessings we delight in today are the result of the actions of those who have preceded us, and our good works today help lay the foundation for others to have a better tomorrow.

Altruism is "the attitude of caring about others and doing acts that help them, although the doer receives nothing by doing them." To use a phrase Herbert Armstrong said frequently, it is outgoing

concern for the well-being of others. As the story illustrates, we must do the right thing now even if we will not be around to enjoy the benefits, because in due time we, or possibly others, will surely reap them.

The well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)) is another story of selflessness in preparation for the future. In it, [Jesus](#) shows how the last six of God's commandments—expressing love and fulfilling our obligation to our fellow man—are put into action. The Good Samaritan was traveling somewhere and doing something, yet he took time out of his busy life to assist someone whom he had probably never met before and may never see again.

The victim was most likely a Jew, and the Jews and the Samaritans were notorious for their hatred for each other. Despite the hurt man being an enemy, the Samaritan expressed the Golden Rule, doing unto others as he would have others do unto him ([Matthew 7:12](#); [Luke 6:31](#)). And he did it with compassion. The Greek used in [Luke 10:33](#) indicates "his heart went out to him." He immediately opened his first-century first-aid kit and shared his supplies with the injured man—in fact, the parable says that the man had been left half-dead ([Luke 10:30](#)).

But the very act of offering assistance put the Samaritan in danger. The seventeen-mile route from Jerusalem to Jericho was rugged and rife with robbers. Working in groups, these highwaymen inflicted excessive and even gratuitous bodily harm as they deprived their victims of their possessions. They could easily have returned to the scene of their crime. Even today, particularly in Chicago with its high crime rate, paramedics trying to save lives end up fighting to stay alive themselves. Whether it be by the injured parties, distraught family members, assaults by angry mobs, or just criminal behavior, things can quickly turn dangerous for caregivers.

Not done yet, the Samaritan put the injured man on his own animal and brought him to an inn. Doing this not only involved more of his time and labor, but also put them in more potential danger. But despite exposing them to more bandits prowling the road to Jericho, the noble Samaritan did not forsake the injured man.

Finally, after all of this sacrifice, he provided generously for the injured man's recovery. [Matthew 20:2](#) says that a denarius is a day's wage for a worker. The Samaritan gave the innkeeper two denarii, or two day's wages. For a full-time worker, it was a third of what he made in a week! And he pledged to give the innkeeper even more, if needed.

The selfless efforts of the elderly widow in the minister's story provided a benefit for a future generation that she likely would never meet. The Samaritan's compassionate intervention provided the wounded man with a future and a [hope](#), paving the way for him to "pay it forward" and treat someone else in a similar manner. These are examples of people "in lowliness of mind . . . esteem [ing] others better than himself" and looking out "for the interests of others" ([Philippians 2:3-4](#)).

God's way of giving is our only example of true altruism, and while we will never attain to such a perfect standard, He exhorts us to develop this characteristic by being gracious, generous, and lending to the needy without regret. When we practice being altruistic we learn, in a small way, to be like both the Father and the Son. Of the Father, [John 3:16](#) reads, "For [God](#) so loved [the world](#) that He gave His only begotten Son." The Son likewise "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" ([Matthew 20:28](#)). They are our finest examples, setting the standard for Christian conduct.

Our calling is not really about us. We have been given a job to do, which Jesus summarizes in [John 15:13](#): "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." The apostle later writes, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I [John 3:16](#)). We have been called to a life of godly love seen in sacrificial giving.

In business, they speak of a much different "golden rule," called WIIFY, or "What Is in It For You?" So what is in it for us? Recall that Jesus gave the Parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life. Eternal life is the life that God lives, both in quality and duration, and He is graciously and generously providing us with both the opportunity and the means to share in His glory.

To have eternal life, we must live as God does, the way of give, which is the epitome of altruism. That perfect, selfless way of life is our goal, which God exhorts us to practice now. As Paul writes in [II Corinthians 9:6-7](#): "But this I say, He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."

- John Reiss

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Love and Works](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Works certainly are not "done away"; God expects works from all those He has called. We show our faithfulness and loyalty to God by our works or conduct - what we produce by what we have been given. The works demanded of us consist of continual striving to be faithful to our covenant relationship with God by keeping His commandments (not the traditions of men). As we strive to live by the Spirit instead of by the flesh (Romans 8:5) we will produce the kind of fruit pleasing to God. God forces a converted person to choose between two opposing forces (Romans 8:13), providing us His Spirit as a tool to overcome.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Learning to Love One Another](#)

by Geoff Preston (1947-2013)

We may look around the church of God and wonder why so many are not being healed. Geoff Preston, suffering a chronic illness himself, uses his experiences to assure us that God is working out even these matters for our good.

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