

If, Because, Regardless

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

I read an interesting quote that was the inspiration for the sermon title and outline. In her book *God Knows My Heart*, journalist Christine Wicker interviewed a man named Vincent Hall. Apparently, Mr. Hall is known throughout Dallas, Texas for two things: he is chairman of the board of a major credit union, and he is a committed Christian. A particular sermon changed his life. His pastor preached on three different kinds of believers: "if," "because" and "regardless."

An "if" believer follows God if they receive blessings and rewards in return. They wait to see what God will do first, then decides whether or not to respond in obedience. Jacob is a good example of an "if" believer.

A "because" believer follows God because God blesses and rewards them. They have seen the connection between their obedience and God's blessing and want to keep it going. King David is a good example of a "because" believer.

But there's a third kind of believer, said this pastor. This is the "regardless" believer. A "regardless" believer loves God no matter whether they ever receive any blessings or rewards in return. Job, the man whose very name is synonymous with suffering, was a "regardless" believer. A "regardless" believer loves God in spite of the circumstances, in spite of their hardships. On the day he heard that sermon, Mr. Hall devoted himself to being a "regardless" believer for the rest of his life.

I got to thinking about that and realized that this analogy could be stretched to include stewardship as well. There are three kinds of givers: "If, Because, Regardless."

An "if" giver only gives if he or she is going to receive a blessing and reward in return. This person waits to see what God's going to do first, then decides whether or not to respond by giving. There's a perfect example of this in the movie *Groundhog Day*.

Phil Connors is a self-centered weather reporter who falls under an enchantment. He has to relive *Groundhog Day* in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania over and over again. Each day is exactly the same in the way it unfolds for others, but each day Phil is given another opportunity to change himself. Finally, he has come to know and love the people he once disdained. What he learns is that his divine-like intervention can be a thankless job. Phil is recording what must be his thousandth *Groundhog Day* report, but instead of a mindless repetition, it becomes apparent that he has been honing this speech every time his day repeats, and that he truly has come to love the people of the town.

As Phil walks across the sidewalk, he looks at his watch and sees that he may be a few seconds late. He begins to run as he looks up to see a young boy fall from a tree. He catches the boy, but as he is putting him down, he asks, "What do you say? What do you say?" The boy squirms and runs away. Phil calls after him, "You little brat. You have NEVER thanked me. I'll see you tomorrow, maybe."

But the viewer knows he will be back again and again, as long as he is needed. Have you ever thought about how much we take God for granted. Think about all the complex details that have to come together every day, just to sustain our lives. Yet how often do we stop to thank God for all God has done for us?

When we don't give thanks when we just take advantage of God's Providence and run off, we are "eating someone else's bread we didn't pay for", and we are being "if" Christians.

The "Because" Christian, gives because God has blessed them and wants to keep receiving that blessing. While not the best theology or the best reason, it's a good reason. There's a scene in *To Kill A Mockingbird* that illustrates this idea.

In the opening of the movie, we meet one of the central characters, Scout. A grown-up Scout is recalling her youth in the South.

A man, Mr. Cunningham, is seen taking a burlap bag, filled with nuts, off his wagon and then approaching the Finch house. Young Scout calls out to him, "Good morning, Mr. Cunningham!" He greets her. Scout offers to fetch her father,

Atticus Finch, but Mr. Cunningham says, "No miss, I don't care to bother him." Scout cheerfully replies, "It's no bother, Mr. Cunningham. He'll be happy to see you!"

Scout runs up the stairs and calls out for her father. He appears on the steps, "Good morning, Walter." Mr. Cunningham returns the greeting and says, "I brung you these here hickory nuts as part of my entailment."

Taking the nuts, Atticus tells Cunningham, "Well, I thank you. The collards we had last week were delicious." Cunningham tips his hat and takes his leave.

Scout slides up next to her father and asks, "Why does he bring you all this stuff?" Atticus replies, "He's paying me for some legal work I did for him." Scout wants to know why he pays in hickory nuts, and Atticus tells her, "That's the only way he can. He has no money."

Mr. Cunningham probably wouldn't be bringing those meager gifts if it weren't for the work Atticus did for him. Similarly, we all know that we can never repay God for our salvation, but we bring God what we have. Our offerings are often poor, and sometimes we're embarrassed to bring them at all. But we bring them "Because" we know God wants them and "Because" we want to say thank you. And "Because" God has blessed us. But I wonder if we would quit giving, quit attending, quit supporting if God quit blessing. That's the danger of being only a "Because" Christian.

And then there is the "Regardless" Christian. Those who are like Job. They have faith, they give, they attend, they support, they reach out, "Regardless." "Regardless" of whether they like the preacher. "Regardless" of whether they agree with all the ministries of the church or not. The "Regardless" Christians stay involved regardless of whether or not they are blessed because they know that God is faithful, no matter what. So, they try to be like God and remain faithful, no matter what.

The "Regardless" Christians give and participate and support and pray simply because they love God. They have experienced the unconditional love and faithfulness of God and want to share it with others. It doesn't make any difference whether life is good, or life is tough, they love God and know that God is faithful in the midst of every situation life throws at us. And we are called to do and be the same. The "Regardless" Christian is able to say with the Psalmist: You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

The Good News is that God is God regardless of what we do or how we respond. "If, Because, Regardless" it doesn't make any difference to God. God is God. And I hope you noticed, too, that all of these types of Christians are still Christians. As our spiritual life and relationship with God grows, usually the "If" Christians grow to become "Because" Christians. And most "Because" Christians grow to become "Regardless" Christians."

God accepts you as you are. God may not leave you there, but God meets you there and loves you as you are. No strings attached. And hopefully, the church lives and models that, too. Because, you see, it takes all of us. Individually, we are weak. But together, we can be unbreakable.

It doesn't matter what kind of Christian or what kind of giver we are: "If, Because, Regardless" as long as we are faithful; as long as we are tied together through the bonds of our baptism and salvation in Christ, there is nothing we can't face.

Whether it's shortfalls in the budget and giving, whether it's cancer, whether it's disagreements about how things should be done. Whatever it is, if we stick together, if we rely on God to fuel the fire we can accomplish whatever God puts before us.