

Deuteronomy 9:1-6 We Are Not Worthy of All the Mercies You Show Us

Hear, Israel: You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you, with large cities that have walls up to the sky. 2 The people are strong and tall—Anakites! You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” 3 But be assured today that the Lord your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the Lord has promised you.

4 After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. 5 It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 6 Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.

In 2012 when President Obama was running for president, he wrinkled some feathers when he said to the business owners of America, “You didn’t build that.” To put the point in context, he also said, “Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. . . the point is, that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together.” President Obama was trying to emphasize the part that government plays in order to make businesses succeed. He may have overstated his point, however, when he said “You didn’t build” your business. The business didn’t come about because the government hired the workers or sold the product or put in hours and hours to put the business together.

When God brought the Israelites to the Promised Land, He made sure that they knew who built that. It was obvious that He deserved the credit for their victories. The very first victory they were given was when they fought the Battle of Jericho. The Israelites marched around the city seven times, blew their trumpets and shouted, and the walls fell down. It was obvious that this victory and all of their victories belonged to the Lord. They didn’t earn that. God miraculously gave it to them.

That isn’t to say that the Israelites didn’t play a part in the victory. They had to keep quiet for seven days. They had to march around the city. They had to blow the trumpets. They had to go in and kill the inhabitants of the city. They still had work to do, but their “work” was so obviously blessed by God that they would have had to have been blind not to give God the glory. Who ever heard of knocking down a wall with a trumpet? When you looked at the sheer size of the giant Anakites, for the tinier Israelites to defeat them and drive them out, anyone would see how the glory had to go to God.

When we are successful in life, sometimes it is hard for us to see God in the process. We succeed because of good business decisions. We get ahead because we put in long hours at work and don't spend more than we make. Marriages are happy and strong when couples set aside time to talk together and cooperate with one another. It takes work to forgive and to give and to prioritize in life. Many of the Proverbs also talk about how God blesses those who work hard in life. They condemn laziness. The Fourth Commandment promises those who honor their parents that "it will go well with you and you will enjoy long life on the earth." In the explanation to the Fourth Commandment we say, "God promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments." Success in life goes hand in hand with living according to God's Word. So we might think that we have earned these blessings.

We forget how God works in the whole process. He gives us the ability to work. He gives us the wisdom to make good decisions. He blesses our spouses to respond to us with forgiveness and love. If God didn't give us the ability to do these things we would have no success whatsoever. I couldn't even raise my hand if God didn't allow me to or give me the strength to. It is good for us to be reminded of this - of how helpless we would be were it not for God's powerful and gracious gifts to us.

That is not the temptation that God is warning the Israelites, however. The temptation was for the Israelites to think that He had blessed them with the Promised Land because they DESERVED it. So God said,

After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. 5 It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 6 Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.

First of all, sometimes people feel sorry for the people who lived in Canaan because of what the Israelites were sent to do. They were to annihilate anyone who remained in the main portion of the Promised Land. The Canaanites are sometimes painted as poor and innocent people whom the Israelites just seemed to randomly destroy. It wasn't that at all. These were absolutely wicked nations. They performed child sacrifices and their worship revolved around lewd sexual acts. One reason the LORD sent the Israelites there was to be God's arm of justice on these immoral people. When it comes down to it, there are no truly innocent people in this world. We're all sinners who deserve NOTHING from God.

And that leads us to the second thing that the LORD wanted the Israelites to know - was that they weren't much better. They were a stiffnecked people. This past week I took my dog to get her a bath and a hair cut. She loves going with me all sorts of places, but she doesn't like going there. So this pretty and obedient dog doesn't act so pretty and obedient when I get to the Sudzy Puppy. I put her leash on, but she dug her heels in and leaned her neck against me, trying her hardest to keep from leaving the car. She stiffened her neck. That's the way that God described the Israelites. They acted nice when God gave them what they wanted, but when they were told to go somewhere they didn't want to or to take a risk, they were stiff necked. When God called

Moses to rescue them from slavery, many of them stiffened their necks in the desert. When He told them to worship Him only, they decided to build a golden calf. When He told them to go and attack the people of Canaan forty years before they got to the Jordan, the Israelites didn't want to go. Instead of being thankful for their rescue the accused God of bringing them out into the desert in order to kill them. They were stiff necked. They weren't compliant to what God said. In spite of that, God still led them into the Promised Land, but they certainly didn't deserve it even though they were officially designated as God's chosen people.

The same thing rings true with us. We are more than willing to comply with God when He tells us things we want to do. Children are more than eager to get up early in the morning to go to the fun park. But ask them to get up early to mow lawn, they suddenly become too tired. Confess that you will be faithful to the point of death! But when it involves getting up on a Sunday morning and coming to worship on a weekly basis? Maybe not. The neck gets stiff real quick. We're not so righteous after all. We have no business thinking we are somehow worthy of what God gives us.

The third thing God reminded them of was WHY He gave them the Promised Land, in spite of who they were. He did it because He promised their forefathers that He would give them the Promised Land. Not only would He give the descendants of Israel this beautiful land, but He would also bring a beautiful Savior into the world through their offspring. The ONLY reason they were getting these things was because of God's faithfulness. That's it. The last thing God wanted them to think was that they were getting these blessings because they were such great and moral people.

One thing you'll notice in the attitude of the saints throughout the Bible is this great feeling of unworthiness. They didn't mind confessing this. They were glad to confess it. Jacob had to run away from home after he deceived his father with nothing but the clothes on his back and a staff in his hands. Throughout the years at Laban's place he had gained two wives, plenty of cattle, and blessings beyond compare. So on his return home he said in Genesis 32,

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

When Job was confronted by God for questioning God's justice, God answered him from a storm. He brought Job to his knees and Job said,

**"I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.
5 I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more."**

Jesus gave us this sober reminder in Luke 17 when he said,

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Even when Jesus was in His humility - while pointing people to Himself as the Christ - yet also pointed the people to His Father. Jesus was worthy of all praise. The Father told us to listen to Him. Yet Jesus didn't want the people to think only of Jesus. He wanted them to connect all that He said and did to the Father - giving glory to God for what He was doing as God. Everything that Jesus did was under the direction of the Father, especially going to the cross and being lifted up to die. Everything that Jesus said was under the Father's direction as well. Jesus pointed to the Father through His worthiness. As sinners, we are then told to look to

the Father through the Son because of our unworthiness. We don't think we are worthy of anything. But we know that Jesus died to make us look worthy in His sight. He is our worthiness.

Martin Luther was once asked if he contributed anything to what Jesus' did for our salvation. He said something to the effect of, "Yes. I contributed my sin, my filthiness, and my death. That's why I contributed - my complete unworthiness." Amen, Luther.

Some might say we have an unhealthy focus on our unworthiness. We like to go back to original sin again and again, especially in our confession of sin at the beginning of the worship service. As a tried and true Lutheran, if you haven't heard it once you've heard it a thousand times, "We are born dead in our trespasses and sins. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Some get sick of it. Even in a positive confession of what God gives us day after day, we still end by confessing that even with our successes in life and with all of the gifts that we have of body and soul, eyes, ears and all our members, that God gives us all of this NOT BECAUSE I have earned or deserved it. Why do we do this?

If God would be willing to give such gifts to people who by nature are repulsive to Him, then God's kind of love is one of a kind. If I can't look to even my best of works and say to God, "Look at what I did," then all that I am and all that I have must be due to God's grace and love alone, to love the unloveable. Then I can only look to one place and one person for the reason of my salvation. If I really am that unworthy and Jesus still chooses to die for me and God still chooses to stick with me and give me so many gifts, then my faith will be focused completely on Christ, and God willing my thankfulness will be magnified all the MORE because of who I am and what He did. This is meant to bring about a wonderfully humble faith within us.

We need to especially remember this when we are being blessed. Just because you are living in a nice house or have had a happy marriage does not always mean that you were a better worker or a better spouse. Plenty of good spouses have gotten the raw deal from their spouses through no fault of their own. Plenty of good workers have lost their jobs because of a merger that was beyond their control. Many women who would have made great mothers never were able to have children. Talented athletes have lost a shot at professional ball because of a blown knee or a sickness. Who is to say one is more worthy than another of success? When I saw such poverty in India years ago, it was a stark reminder about how bad life can get. Who am I to say that I deserved so much more than those people? They are much more patient and kind and giving than I am. Yet I have more and they have less. These humbling circumstances keep us ever mindful that we live in a broken and a sinful world. Things do not always seem to work by what is "right" or "fair."

When David gathered all of the materials for the new temple to be built, he took time to reflect on the majesty of the moment, how God would send a Messiah and how this temple would be built. He said,

**"Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? 19
And as if this were not enough in your sight, O Sovereign LORD, you have also spoken about the
future of the house of your servant. Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign
LORD? (2 Sa 7:18-19)**

He also said,

“But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. 15 We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. 16 O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.
(1 Ch 29:14–16)

Even though the people had brought the offerings and the people would build the temple, instead of praising himself or his people, he praised God. He knew they didn't deserve even the privilege of worshiping Him. He gave God the glory. So when we confess at the end of the First Article that God gives us all of these blessings, we say, “All of this God does because He is my merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it.” Isn't this what Luther is trying to get us to see as well? In the midst of our great unworthiness, we find a God who is worthy of our praise. His name is Jesus Christ. Instead of cringing at such a confession, shouldn't we be eager to make that confession and happy to do so?

In a few weeks we will move back into our worship area with some beautiful renovations having been done. What a great blessing this will be. These are the result of your generosity and desire for God to be praised with a beautiful building. They come about also through the volunteer hours of our people who have helped organize and perform the duties that were needed, such as pulling staples and taking out carpeting. But who gave you the money to give? Who gave you the ability and time to volunteer? It was God. When we return back to our church building we will have the opportunity to praise God in a newly renovated area. We will receive the same body and blood, study the same Word, and praise God with the same voice as we do here. Who are we to receive such love? We are nothing. Christ is everything. Amen.