

Good Grief: Giving out of Obedience

[Deuteronomy 12:8-14](#)

[Luke 16:13](#)

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Comic strips are like parables. We can identify with them, and they are often funny because they point out our own human foibles. We can laugh at ourselves. Charles Schultz is my favorite cartoonist with his "Li'l Folks," the Peanuts gang, who have captured the hearts of Americans since 1950. Robert Short wrote several books about the theological insights in Peanuts. I've taken my theme for a sermon series from his first book, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. For three Sundays, as we focus on the stewardship of our resources, we'll take a look at qualities depicted in Peanuts comic strips: obedience, gratitude, and love. These are reasons for giving to the church. We give out of obedience, gratitude, and love.

"Good ole" Charlie Brown is "obedience personified." Let's let Charlie Brown and Lucy, and then Linus, lead us into our conversation about obedience today. Here come Charlie Brown and Lucy.

Skit:

Charlie Brown: I've come to the conclusion that there's nothing worse than being unloved...

Lucy: How about being lost in the woods? That's a lot worse! Wow!

Charlie Brown: Well, that's a strange comparison, and I'm not sure that I...

Lucy: Oh, yeah? Well, let me show you. (Lucy takes CB by the hand and leads him into the woods.) There! You stand in those trees for a while, and you'll see what I mean. (Lucy departs.)

Linus: (comes along into the trees) What in the world are you doing?

Charlie Brown: No matter what anyone says, it's much worse to be unloved than it is to be lost in the woods.

Linus: (turns to go) Sometimes I think you've been lost in the woods all your life, Charlie Brown.

Charlie Brown: Actually, it's kind of peaceful.

Good grief, Charlie Brown, do you always have to do what you're told to do? We might say, Charlie Brown is a fool; he just stands there in the woods because Lucy told him to. He is such a loser. Yet, there's something endearing about him: he is faithful and he keeps trying. No matter how many times he has failed at flying his kite, he keeps attempting to get that thing up in the air. No matter how many times Lucy pulls the football away just before he's going to kick it, he keeps trusting her word that this time she'll let him kick it. He never wins in baseball, what do you expect, with a beagle at shortstop, a little kid with a blanket at second base, and a left fielder still on a bottle. But he's determined to manage his team

and do his best. One time, at the end of a game, you see him walking away, bent over dejected, and he says, "Good grief! 184 to nothing! I don't understand it. How can we lose when we're so sincere?"

Of course, sometimes, even a higher duty calls than baseball, like when his mother tells him to take his baby sister Sally for a walk in her stroller, and he has to miss his baseball game all together. His loyalties conflict, and he feels terrible, but he does what he is told to do. We can count on Charlie Brown. He will always do what for him is right, no matter the consequence.

Poor Charlie Brown. Most of us would admit to feeling like him at times in life. He's Schultz's Everyman character. Think back to the times when you were picked last for a team, or when you didn't get the part in the school play, or when you didn't have the nerve to ask a certain person out. Charlie Brown gives us a picture of ourselves in times of failure—but also he gives us a picture of how to be the best we can be, in spite of it all.

Sally asks her brother, Charlie Brown:

"Do you think it's a brother's duty to help his sister with her homework if she's having trouble?"

He answers, "Yes, I should think so."

"Good....Duty calls!"

Then the next day, sitting together waiting to talk to the teacher, Sally says, "I told my teacher how you helped me with my homework last night...She said you got all the answers wrong. She asked me what we should do about you...I suggested life imprisonment without possibility of parole..."

Charlie goes up to the teacher's desk: "Yes ma'am, I helped my sister with her homework. We got all the answers wrong? How could that be? Anyway, I did my best...I tried to help her...Isn't there more to life than getting the answers right?" Later sitting outside the principal's office, he says to himself, "There isn't more to life than getting the answers right."

But we, the readers, know differently. We know that Charlie Brown has his heart in the right place, and we can't help but admire him.

There's something to be said for loyalty and obedience and doing what's right. In our culture, we tend not to talk much about obedience, unless we are talking about our dogs. (Everyone wants an obedient dog.) We have taken the words out of the marriage ceremony that say "love, honor, and obey," in respect for equal rights of men and women in the partnership of marriage. I don't suggest putting the words back in, "to love, honor, and to **obey**, till death us do part," ...but I certainly affirm the idea that there are many times in a relationship when we want to and should do the right thing for our partner. We choose, for example, to attend an important function even though we might not want to attend, we choose to be home at a certain time, or to be supportive through a difficult period—because it's our duty as spouse or as friend. We often do things simply because we are asked. It's the right thing to be faithful and responsive to another's need. It is the right

thing to put another person's need first, not at the expense of our own important needs, but to honor the commitment to be in relationship. It is also the right thing in the work world to respond willingly when asked to do a particular job, or to sacrifice family and pleasure in order to serve our country or a cause worth working toward.

I remember a time, before I went into ministry when I was teaching, when I realized that I was the same age as my pastor, my principal, and my president. I realized that I was a leader in my community and church, and that if things were going to get done, perhaps I would need to be one of the ones who would make them happen. I became aware that fulfilling obligations is a part of maturity.

Jesus teaches us how to be obedient to God in our scripture lesson from Luke. This is all about Christian maturity. Jesus shows us a distinct path. Today we have one verse to focus on: No servant can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and wealth."

No one can serve two masters. The relationship of servant to master is one of obedience. The question is not, *should* we obey? The question is *whom* should we obey? In Deuteronomy, God says, very clearly, through the prophet Moses, that we should "not act according to our own desires," but that we should come to God's dwelling place with offerings, tithes, and donations, and all our choice gifts. And God says: "And there you shall do everything I command you" (12:8, 11, 14). God speaks in the context of the religious community, those about to be brought by God safely across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. The offerings are to be brought to the place of worship where the community gathers.

In the New Testament, Jesus elaborates on God's commandments. He is very clear that our obedience involves a choice. We either follow one master or another. We cannot follow both. Really the whole bible talks about making a choice, whether to follow God or another master: materialism, greed, or selfish desires.

The Gospel of Luke speaks often of the kingdom of God. Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and ethicist, suggests instead of saying "kingdom of God," we might try using the words "empire of God," to understand the radical connotation meant by this phrase at the end of the first century when the Gospel was written. The terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" have lost the cutting edge they would have conveyed during the Roman Empire, a time when the Empire had vast control over the lives of the people of Palestine—it waged wars against the Jews, it taxed the Jews, it took the land away from the Jews. Rome was a malevolent master. To call something, other than Rome, a kingdom was heretical. When Jesus came, he offered an alternative "empire," a different master. It was an empire that required obedience, just like Rome required obedience. But in the "Empire of God," the obedience was to God; God was to be master. So, the term "kingdom of God" is a political term referring to a new spiritual allegiance.

The Gospel according to Luke insists that there can be only one master, and that master is God. The Gospel according to Peanuts suggests that grief can become "good grief" when we are obedient to a loving God. Let me explain...

The children in Peanuts experience all kinds of grief: fear, disappointment, and embarrassment. Snoopy regularly comes to the rescue as the faithful savior. In one comic strip, when Charlie Brown is so encumbered with his winter coat and hat and boots, he slips on the ice and can't even get up. He's lying there flat on his back, terribly embarrassed. But Snoopy comes along and pushes him head to head off the ice.

And another time, when Linus finds out that Lucy (also known as Lucifer) has buried his security blanket, it is finally Snoopy who digs it up and brings it back to Linus. Even in grief, good things eventually happen. Some have called Snoopy a Christ figure. The problems of the world surround him, yet he can still dance!

Charles Schultz tackles the human predicament of life with all its problems, and he says, "I am a believer in what the church calls 'holy living.' I think life should be lived on as pure a scale as possible...I am not suggesting that we take ourselves out of the world...we still have our obligations, and we must live in the area where God has placed us, exerting our influence and working with schools and institutions. We have to do the best we can, living each day at the point where it begins, but this does not mean that life cannot be lived in a holy way" (Short, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, 121). I think Schultz is talking about righteousness. When we remain faithful to God, God rewards.

Gospel means good news. According to Luke, this good news teaches us to choose the path that serves only God, not ourselves. It teaches us to choose the path that serves God, not money. And so, in terms of our giving, God commands us to bring our gifts to God, our tithes and our offerings. We are commanded by Jesus to put God first.

One way to do this is to make an automatic payment by giving monthly online. This is my family's practice. You can do this on our website. That way, there is no question whether there will be enough money at the end of the month. God comes first. Our financial giving to the church should not be out of guilt, but it should be a choice out of obedience to God.

I'm reading the book, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, a New York Times bestseller that came out in 2014. It is a true story. When the author, Bryan, was a young boy he met a boy who was visiting his church, who stuttered and couldn't get his words out. Bryan had never heard someone stutter, and it made him laugh. His mother pulled him aside and told him she never wanted to see him ever laugh at someone like that again. She made him apologize and even hug the boy. Bryan was terribly embarrassed, but he did what his mother told him to do. He said, "I'm sorry I laughed at you," and he gave the boy a half hug. But, to Bryan's surprise, the boy clung to Bryan and thanked him for the apology. Later Bryan grew up and went to college and then to Harvard Law School. One summer he met a trial lawyer who was the director of the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee in Georgia, assisting condemned people on death row. He said to Bryan, "Capital punishment means 'them without the capital get the punishment.' We can't help people on death row without help from people like you." This lawyer seemed completely committed to the cause. Bryan had been ambivalent about what to do with his life, but at that moment he seemed to hear a call. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Bryan Stevenson could have joined a prestigious

law firm and earned a lot of money. But instead he has worked in Alabama and Georgia, and eventually around the country, since 1983, often representing African Americans on death row who had never had a fair trial, and children convicted as adults to serve life sentences, when their background had never been researched enough to learn of their mental incapacity or their disabilities, or the abuse they had suffered from. *Just Mercy* is a book to read before the election this year. We have the opportunity to repeal the death penalty in California (Proposition 62), and we have the opportunity to disallow children from being tried as adults without first having a hearing in juvenile court (Proposition 57). Bryan Stevenson made a choice that determined his path for life. From early on, he had learned to care about another person, perhaps less advantaged than he. As an adult, he made the choice to defend the rights and needs of those without a voice. I think that is serving God, not money.

“No one can serve two masters.” The gospel is clear: obedience to God is the choice that brings abundant life.

[Hear a Ted Talk by Bryan Stevensn.](#)