
What We Owe to God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 5 October 2025

2 Timothy 1:3-14 • Luke 17:5-10



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

What do we owe to God?

We could give a simple answer: we owe God our lives. God created us and granted us life, the very breath in our bodies. We are here on this earth because God put us here. We continue to live from day to day because God sustains us, and when he is ready, he will take us home. We cannot decide the hour of our deaths, any more than we can decide the hour of our births. It is entirely, completely, up to God.

That's worth thinking about from time to time. I've been thinking about it recently as I mourn the death of my wife Melissa. God put her here on this earth, and caused us to meet. That has been such a tremendous gift for almost forty years. And last month, God decided that her life should end.

Some people would react in anger to that. We have a good friend who tells me he is angry. I can understand, but not relate to that. I could blame God for

cruelty, in taking her away, rather than keeping her here to continue being my wife, and sister to her brothers, and friend to her friends; but I don't seem to feel any anger about it, just sorrow. Mostly, at least right now, it just seems so strange not to have Melissa to talk to, to tell about all my daily adventures.

I had such a wonderful demonstration of how many people she touched in our relatively short time here in New Zealand. Her memorial service was well-attended by people from all the parishes we've served in, as well as community groups she belonged to, and other friends we've made here. She was taken away from all that — but I don't really care for that expression. "God took her away." That makes God sound cruel, and God is not cruel. Isaiah wrote:

O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

We are the work of his hands, and God will do with us as he wills. Our God is a loving God, and would not just "take Melissa away." God took her toward something, something more wonderful than we can now imagine. If I were to question God's decision, I would be putting myself above him. That is not weakness or meek capitulation. That is a recognition that God is my Father, and all good things come from him.

Still, it is human to question, and even to be angry with God; for we do not understand. We see through the glass darkly; we know only a part of all that is going on in God's creation (1 Cor 13:12), and a very small part indeed. I mourn my loss, but I go on.

We each have our place in this world. Paul speaks of gifts and multiple members of one body. We all have our talents and our failings, and all together we make up the Body of Christ. And from what Jesus tells us in our Gospel this morning, we are truly more alike than different. We are all servants of God. In the parable about the master at table and the slave serving him, Jesus asks:

Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" (Luke 17:9-10)

It seems a harsh teaching. In reading this parable, we naturally put ourselves in the place of the slave, and God in the place of the master. Is God ungrateful for our service? Should God be grateful to us? We are used to expecting gratitude when we do someone a good service. If no thanks are given us, we tend to think less of the one we served. But we cannot apply that to God. The small service we each give to God is important, and we know that God works through us to effect change in this world. Our service is expected of us. God is not grateful; but he does see what we do, and loves us unconditionally. God is pleased when we serve him, as he asks us to do.

All that we can do for God will never measure up to what God has done for us. As I said before, God gave us our lives. God gave me Melissa for almost 40 years. I can never be grateful enough for that gift, and I can never repay God for it.

People used to ask Melissa and me: How long have you been married? And Melissa would look at me and say, “Not long enough.” But it was long enough. I would have liked another ten years with her; but it was long enough, because God decided to call her home. I am the slave who, due to the kindness of my master, was allowed to share my life with Melissa, and I am grateful for that. Getting used to it will take some time, but God and Christ and the Holy Spirit are with me, and I am blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.