

“God Provides”

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Lev. 19:1-2,9-18

Matt. 6:1-34

[Jesus said,]

“DO YOU SEE HOW THE BIRDS OF THE SKY
NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER THEIR FOOD INTO BARNES.
YET YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN FEEDS THEM;
AREN'T YOU MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN LITTLE BIRDS?”

Matt. 6:34

Let us pray... O God,
For those times when we feel abandoned,
may we find patience to trust that you will send the help we need.

Amen

When I was in high school, I had a copy of the New Testament called
Good News for Modern Man.

Up to that time, it was the most modern version of the Bible
and had marvelous stick-figure line-drawings by Annie Valloton,
to illustrate various Biblical scenes.

And at that time, I made up my mind to read the Bible
and got as far as the first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

I particularly remember that the verses about how God provides
for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field,
made an impression on me.

This life lesson seems quaint like a folk saying or fortune cookie wisdom,
but I have come to know that it speaks of something deeper,
more substantial.

I suppose this principle of ‘God provides’ had to get tested in my life
to see how it really works.

And my practical education in that regard was when I was in the service
and this usually had something to do with technology –
breaking down.

Some of the most spiritual experiences I’ve had
were about breaking down on the road – and the confidence
that somehow I would find a way through that situation.

I won’t go on about the particulars of my experiences,
but ask you to put it into the context of your own life.

Ask yourself about those times when something fell apart,
and you had to pick up the pieces
when you weren’t quite sure what the next step was.

Willard, p.2

Say for example, you have a problem with your plumbing –
a flood at your new church right after a prayer service at night and
there is a pool of water slowly expanding across the floor!

It is afterhours and you haven't a clue where to find a plumber.

It so happens one of the visitors that evening
tells you that fire departments generally know where
the water mains are and can turn them off.

So, you call 9-1-1 and a fire engine comes out to help,
but these firemen don't know where the water main is.

But they do find where the water is coming from –
out of an icemaker in the kitchen
which they plug up with a towel, stopping the leak.

It so happens one of the firemen knows someone who
specializes in this kind of clean-up.

Thus disaster was averted before the next Sunday.

And it is a nice touch that it was firemen who came to the rescue that day
which so happened to be September 11th about a year ago...

There are a number of different principles involved
in this simple teaching right in the middle
of Jesus' Sermon on The Mount.

'Grace' in the form of undeserved 'salvation' –
you are helped because you needed it and not because you earned it.

'Miracles' in the form of 'the right thing at the right time' -
which could be in the form of a person, part, or tool.

Such miracles are not necessarily spectacular, but just enough so.

'Cause and effect' which is how reality on Planet Earth is set up
so that problems can be solved
and we are not at the mercy of an arbitrary universe.

Miracles can ultimately be explained in this way –
which also allows a convenient way to cover up God's tracks.

But these are just explanations and descriptions about how
God provides.

It is that God does provide – God does help us
which is the key to understanding this part of Jesus' teaching
that begins by talking about 'rewards'.

If you toot your own horn about your big donations;
If you make a big show of your eloquent prayers;
If you make a big deal about how much you're suffering
for the glory of God and the church,
that will be all the reward you're going to get.

Willard, p.3

On the other hand,

If you give your offering as a matter of habit

without the left side of your brain counting the cost all the time;

If you trust that God is present with you

when nobody else is around to see you or hear you pray;

If you fast – or apply yourself cheerfully to serve God, the church, and others,
you will get the reward, the help, the food, the clothing you need.

‘...THESE THINGS WILL TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES.’

Jesus then gives us some supplemental teachings:

We should build up treasures of the heart and

not trust in earthly things subject to decay and theft;

We should maintain a healthy outlook by what we look for in life –

to see by the light and not be overcome by the gloom;

and we are not to have competing loyalties –

just like nobody wants two bosses telling them what to do.

And all of this points to a relationship and a dialogue going on with God
as you work to avoid hypocrisy and strive to live an authentic life.

But this part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is as much about God –
the nature of God as it is about how we are to interact with God.

In our religious tradition, we say that Jesus was – and is, God

or the ‘Second Person of the Trinity’ who walked among us
on Planet Earth.

He prepared his disciples then – and ever since,

how to relate to God as Spirit –

the Holy Spirit or the ‘Third Person of the Trinity’.

When we speak of the ‘spirit’ of something – like ‘class spirit’, for example,
it is in terms of its true nature as well as its mood and character.

So, Jesus is teaching us about the true nature of God

that calls out to our true nature –

which cannot be satisfied with phony display

nor go on tolerating oppression in any form.

From this part of the Sermon on the Mount,

we learn about the nature of God:

God can tell the difference between hypocrisy and generosity of our actions;

God can hear and see us wherever we are;

God is aware of our emotional being – even our inmost thoughts.

God knows what we need even before we ask.

Willard, p.4

Little birds and pretty wildflowers are important to God,
so you better believe that you are, too.

God loves you and will help you to live an authentic life free from
hypocrisy and oppression.

What happened in Tunisia and Egypt, and is now happening
in Iran, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya regardless of
how these protests turn out in the short run,
bear witness to that calling forth of True Nature to true nature –
of God calling us out of our darkness into the Light.

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the Beatitudes,
Jesus said that the reward of prophets persecuted for the faith,
awaits those who try to live honestly without hypocrisy
and who encourage others to be the same with them.

On the Mount of Olives, the week before his Crucifixion,
Jesus tells his disciples that this reward is the 'kingdom' –
a 'beloved community' which has been prepared for us
as our inheritance since the beginning of Creation.

The teachings and deeds of Jesus Christ are all of a piece,
unified into a common theme that:

“The Son of Man, the true Heir of Humanity, will suffer and die,
but on the third day rise.”

Not even death can separate the relationship we have with our God
who loves us no less than the little birds of the sky
and the pretty flowers of the field –
our 'Heavenly Guardian' who already knows
what is needed to help us even before we ask.

Amen

*The Jewish Testament lesson today is from Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
and this text also speaks about God's commitment to justice
for the sake of humankind.*

*The last verse should sound familiar to us all –
it is part of the Great Commandment to love...*

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them:
You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy...

9 When you reap the harvest of your land,
you shall not reap to the very edges of your field,
or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

10 You shall not strip your vineyard bare,
or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard;
you shall leave them for the poor and the alien:
I am the Lord your God.

11 You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely;
and you shall not lie to one another.

12 And you shall not swear falsely by my name,
profaning the name of your God:
I am the Lord.

13 You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal;
and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer
until morning.

14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind;
you shall fear your God:
I am the Lord.

15 You shall not render an unjust judgement;
you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great:
with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people,
and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour:
I am the Lord.

17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin;
you shall reprove your neighbour,
or you will incur guilt yourself.

18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people,
but you shall love your neighbour as yourself:
I am the Lord.

Matthew 6:1-34

[Jesus said,]

1 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

3 But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
4 so that your alms may be done in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;
for they love to stand and pray
in the synagogues and at the street corners,
so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

7 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do;
for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

8 Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day
our daily bread.*

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also
have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

15 but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

16 ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites,
for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.
Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,
18so that your fasting may be seen not by others
but by your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust* consume
and where thieves break in and steal;
20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust consumes
and where thieves do not break in and steal.

21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 ‘The eye is the lamp of the body.
So, if your eye is healthy,
your whole body will be full of light;
23but if your eye is unhealthy,
your whole body will be full of darkness.
If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

24 ‘No one can serve two masters;
for a slave will either hate the one and love the other,
or be devoted to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and wealth.

25 ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,
what you will eat or what you will drink,
or about your body, what you will wear.
Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

26Look at the birds of the air;
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.
Are you not of more value than they?

27And can any of you by worrying
add a single hour to your span of life?

28And why do you worry about clothing?
Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
they neither toil nor spin,
29yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory
was not clothed like one of these.

30But if God so clothes the grass of the field,
which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,
will he not much more clothe you—
you of little faith?

31 Therefore do not worry, saying,

“What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?”

or “What will we wear?”

32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things;

and indeed your heavenly Father knows

that you need all these things.

33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,

and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 ‘So do not worry about tomorrow,

for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Inspired by Matthew 6:1-34

NOW, BE CAREFUL THAT YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS
IS NOT FOR SHOW TO WIN FAVOR FROM OTHERS.
OTHERWISE, YOU WILL HAVE NO REWARD
FROM YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN.
THEREFORE, WHENEVER YOU GIVE YOUR OFFERING
DON'T TOOT YOUR OWN HORN
AS THE HYPOCRITES DO TO GET ATTENTION
IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND PUBLIC PLACES.
INSTEAD, YOU SHOULD MAKE YOUR DONATIONS
SO THAT YOUR LEFT SIDE DOESN'T INTERFERE
WITH WHAT YOUR RIGHT SIDE IS DOING.
THOUGH YOU MAKE YOUR DONATION ANONYMOUSLY,
YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN WILL KNOW
AND REWARD YOU.

AND WHENEVER YOU PRAY,
DON'T BE LIKE THOSE HYPOCRITES WHO LOVE
TO MAKE A BIG SHOW OF THEIR PRAYERS
IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND PUBLIC PLACES
FOR THE ATTENTION.
I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,
THEY HAVE ALL THE REWARD THEY WILL GET.
BUT YOU CAN PRAY EVEN WHEN YOU ENTER AN EMPTY ROOM
AND SHUT THE DOOR.
SO, PRAY IN SOLITUDE
FOR YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN WILL SEE
AND REWARD YOU.

NOW IN YOUR PRAYERS,
DON'T BABBLE ON AND ON LIKE EXTREMISTS DO.
FOR THEY THINK THAT THEIR ELABORATE REQUESTS
WILL BE HEARD.
DON'T BE LIKE THEM,
BECAUSE YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
ALREADY KNOWS WHAT YOU NEED
EVEN BEFORE YOU ASK.
SO, PRAY LIKE THIS...

GUARDIAN OF US ALL,
WHO IS IN HEAVEN,
LET YOUR NAME
BE RESPECTED.
LET YOUR BELOVED COMMUNITY
COME TO BE.
LET YOUR DESIGN UNFOLD
ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN.
GIVE US TODAY
THE BREAD WE NEED AND
FORGIVE US OUR FAILURES
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO FAIL US.
AND DO NOT ABANDON US TO DISASTER,
BUT RESCUE US FROM THE EVIL-DOER.

SO NOW, IF YOU FORGIVE OTHERS' TRANSGRESSIONS,
SHOULDN'T YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
ALSO FORGIVE YOU?
IT FOLLOWS THAT IF YOU DO NOT FORGIVE OTHERS,
NEITHER SHOULD YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
FORGIVE YOUR TRANSGRESSIONS.

AND WHENEVER YOU FAST,
DON'T BE LIKE GLOOMY HYPOCRITES WHO GRIMACE
TO MAKE A BIG SHOW OF THEIR PIETY.
I AM TELLING YOU THE TRUTH,
THEY HAVE ALL THE REWARD THEY ARE GOING TO GET.
BUT WHEN YOU ARE FASTING,
ANOINT YOUR HAIR AND WASH YOUR FACE
SO NO ONE CAN TELL YOU ARE FASTING
EXCEPT YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
WHO KNOWS IN SECRET.
AND YOUR BELOVED GUARDIAN
WHO CAN SEE YOU EVEN IN YOUR HIDING PLACE
WILL REWARD YOU.

DO NOT PRESUME YOU CAN HIDE YOUR TREASURES
ON EARTH WHERE MOTHS AND RUST DESTROY AND
THIEVES CAN BREAK IN AND STEAL.
BUT STORE YOUR TREASURES IN HEAVEN
WHERE MOTH AND RUST AND THIEF
CANNOT TOUCH THEM.
FOR WHERE YOUR HEART IS,
THAT IS WHERE YOUR TREASURE WILL BE.

THE EYE ILLUMINATES ONE'S PHYSICAL SELF;
SO, IF YOUR EYE IS HEALTHY
YOUR APPEARANCE WILL SHINE.
BUT IF YOUR EYE IS FOCUSED ON EVIL,
YOUR OUTLOOK WILL BE GRIM.
FOR WHEN GLOOM INFORMS YOU INSTEAD OF LIGHT,
HOW SINISTER WILL THAT GLOOM BE.

NO ONE IS ABLE TO SERVE TWO BOSSES;
FOR YOU WILL HATE ONE AND LOVE THE OTHER,
OR STAND BEHIND ONE YET DESPISE THE OTHER.
YOU ARE NOT ABLE TO SERVE BOTH
GOD AND YOUR BELLY.

THEREFORE I SAY TO YOU,
DON'T BE ANXIOUS ABOUT LIFE –
WHETHER OR NOT YOU EAT AND DRINK
OR HAVE CLOTHES TO WEAR.
ISN'T LIFE MORE THAN
CONCERNS ABOUT FOOD AND CLOTHING?

DO YOU SEE HOW THE BIRDS OF THE SKY
NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER
THEIR FOOD INTO BARNES.
YET YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN FEEDS THEM;
AREN'T YOU MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN LITTLE BIRDS?
AND CAN ANY OF YOU EXTEND YOUR LIFE A DAY LONGER
BY WORRYING ABOUT IT?

NOW, WHY WOULD YOU FRET ABOUT CLOTHES?
THINK HOW FLOWERS GROWING IN A FIELD
DON'T HAVE TO SPIN AND WEAVE.
YET NOT EVEN SOLOMON WAS ARRAYED
AS MAGNIFICENTLY AS THEY ARE.
THOUGH GOD HAS ADORNED SUCH WILDFLOWERS,
WHICH ARE GROWING IN A FIELD TODAY
YET TOMORROW ARE THROWN INTO AN OVEN,
WON'T GOD MORE GRANDLY ADORN YOU,
O YE OF LITTLE FAITH?

THEREFORE, DON'T BE ANXIOUS, SAYING,
'WHAT SHALL WE EAT? OR
'WHAT SHALL WE DRINK?' OR
'WHAT SHALL WE WEAR?'

AREN'T THESE THE THINGS
THAT MATERIALISTS STRIVE FOR?
DON'T YOU THINK YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN
KNOWS THAT YOU NEED THESE THINGS?

BUT FIRST,
SEARCH FOR THE KINGDOM OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY
AND THE RIGHTEOUS WAYS OF GOD,
AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES.
SO, DON'T WORRY ABOUT TOMORROW –
FOR TOMORROW WILL HAVE ITS OWN CONCERNS.
TODAY HAS CHALLENGES ENOUGH.