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Pentecost 13, August 27, 2023

““God Won’t Take Back His Gifts””

Read: Romans 11: 13 – 15, 29 – 32 and/or memorize Romans 11: 32 NLT

Have you ever threatened to take a Christmas or birthday gift back from someone you gave it to? I think we’re all courteous enough to understand that when you give a gift, it’s no longer yours. They might give it back or return it, but you can’t take it back.

Paul has been really pondering what’s going to happen to the people of Israel because of their disobedience. In these closing words of chapter 11, he’s come to a number of conclusions.

Paul reached the conclusion that disobedience does not lead God to take His gifts back. Just as the people of Israel, because of their disobedience did not lose their gifts, of salvation especially. Neither will we lose our gifts because of our disobedience.

So, unlike us human beings, when God is unhappy, He does not threaten us with taking gifts back. Paul knows the history of the disobedience of His people. He knows how they have fallen short, failed in their efforts, and not made any discernable effort to keep their promises to God. It’s almost like someone trying lose weight to fit into an outfit. They find themselves promising to follow their diet faithfully – tomorrow or as soon as the cheesecakes is gone, or whenever. It’s doubtful the weight will ever be lost.

So, when Paul asks, “I ask, then, has God rejected His people?” he’s really asking a rhetorical question. We might want to put a whole bunch of exclamation points after his answer: “No, of course not!”. When God says they are irrevocable, meaning they cannot be taken back, He means it. It may be hard for us to understand this but they are given forever.

Now, we want to understand that God’s gifts are never taken away. But that does not mean that the gifts are always available for use. The gifts are irrevocable, but that does not mean that we always use them properly or even use them at all.

God is clear that He wants us to use His gifts. Perhaps you've heard the terminology, "use it or lose it." I've experienced that. I used to change my own oil. That was back in the day when I was young, had no money and thought I could save a couple bucks. Because I have not used that gift for many years, I would not attempt to do it anymore.

Perhaps, you've had a similar experience. You have the potential to do many things but you need to try them out. I know the simple answer today is just Google it. There will be a video that will show you how to do it. I've done that on occasion. Sometimes it works, sometimes not. Our gifts are the basic talents and skills, with which God equips us with for service; refining them, as we use them.

So, in a sense, we begin with potential, but that means we must work on the potential to bring it to its full flower. This was exactly the case with a young lady named Mary Alice. Everyone said she had potential, and she did.

But she was deeply concerned that she might misuse her potential, or that it might somehow be taken from her, or that if she used it, it might somehow be diminished. So, instead, she hoarded the potential.

Mary Alice never actually used any of her potential, but she knew that no matter what else might be said of her, people would always say, "she has potential." The story of Mary Alice is an extreme example of the ways we avoid our own potentials; avoid using the gifts God has given us. Everyone can think of people who are like Mary Alice, people who have gifts; who have potential, but who allow their gifts to languish.

It seems obvious that any gifts we have are gifts from God. Without God, we have no claim to be or to do anything. Even so, it can be uncomfortable to make the effort to utilize our gifts. Most often, the gifts do not merely happen, but require us to exert ourselves. It is often not a matter of simply applying our gifts with no further effort.

We often find ourselves confronted with situations which require intense personal involvement and no promise of complete success. Or, we face situations that require us to be personally involved; risk opening ourselves to getting hurt by others, with only a hope of success, not even a promise.

In light of this, it's not surprising that some people choose to not utilize their gifts. It would seem, that our problems with gifts don't end with our failure to not use them. The more serious problem for many of us is that we misuse our gifts. God gives us our gifts to use for the benefit of others. One misunderstanding is that we think of them

our ours. We attach that possessive. It seems so obvious that they are not, yet, it is a difficult thing to understand.

The second misunderstanding is that they are for our benefit. It should enrich us, make us more attractive, wealthier or enable us to show that we are better than others. I don't think I need to dwell on that very much. I'm sure we have all struggled with that issue.

We suspect that the only way to use our gifts is to work for or in the church. Certainly, there are a number of things that need to be done around the church and ways gifts can be utilized. There are often opportunities for using our gifts that are not fulfilled because people are reluctant to use them or are acting like Mary Alice and hoarding their potential.

The story of how we use our gifts does not end with the church. It does not end with the ways we use them to further the mission of the church. There is a big wide world outside the walls of the church. That's the place that God gives us to exercise those gifts that can especially bring Glory to Him and bless us.

Using our gifts to make a living for ourselves and our families, to find fulfillment in our work, are also ways we should be using our gifts. We have been provided with a variety of gifts that can be used for a variety of reasons.

We are often reminded that our work in the world provides for us with more than sustenance. It provides the opportunity to display those gifts, especially the gifts of behaving ethically and responsibly. By setting an example for those around us, we are also acting as a witness to the God, who gave us these gifts.

In many ways this is true of all our gifts. We have been given these gifts and are expected to use them responsibly and ethically as part of our witness to God. This is the responsibility that comes with the gifts: that we use them as we witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

That responsibility can be troubling. It can lead people to look at the gifts from God in the same way we sometimes look at the gifts we receive from people. You know that relative who thinks you are still 10 years old. People who give you gifts that are two sizes off, either too large or too small. Who of us has not stood in line after Christmas to return something? Some have even taken to including a gift receipt to make it easier to return them.

With God's irrevocable gifts it's different. He won't take them back. Sometimes the gifts are difficult for us to cope with. They present us with duties and responsibilities that appear beyond our capacity. It is in those times, that giving the gift back begins to look like an option or promise, if only for relief from the demands of the gift.

I hope at that point, we remember that God is giving us the gift for a reason. It gives the opportunity to grow and stretch ourselves beyond what we think we are capable of, because the gifts come with another gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is there to help empower us to fulfill the gifts that God gives us.

Perhaps our biggest problem is that in trying to return a gift, we can quickly, even without meaning to, turn our backs on the gift of God's mercy. That's the danger we risk, when we think about returning the gifts of God. We are forgetting that they are His gifts to us to help build us up.

We try to cope with the gifts, we try to use them responsibly and ethically and we fall short, we fail in our efforts, we sin. When we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are not what we should be. We don't live up to the gifts that we have been given. As humans, there is a way we can arrange our possessions known as an irrevocable trust.

It is used to arrange for the final disposition of a person's belongings and resources, both for the remaining years of life and after death. While the idea may be attractive, there is one important aspect that must be taken into account. In an irrevocable trust, if your directions should change, the instrument is extremely difficult to change.

God has given us an irrevocable trust in His Son. We have been given a gift, something that can never be taken. We have been given God's mercy, which came to us in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. We have been given God's love. His unalterable care for us, even when we don't care about Him. Both of these have been given to us as an irrevocable gift. What we do with the gift is our witness to God and our reflection of God to the world.

Count me in: How will you share the gifts of God's mercy and love with others?