

MAY WE OFFER TO GOD MANY ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICE

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 26, 2025

In many ways how human relationships function in civic society is very different than how God's society is meant to function.

Human justice is often different than God's justice. The human version of right and wrong, proper and improper is often different than God's version. How we act with one another is different than how God expects us to act. God calls us to act in ways that are pleasing to God, which may be radically different than how the human community functions.

Throughout the day and week, you and I are involved in various relationships and communities. Of these various communal connections, we fit into some more naturally than others. Many of our communities have certain written or unwritten rules about conduct. They govern how we act and interact with each other and in society. There is right behavior and there is improper behavior. You could say that it is important to know how to play the game.

His name was Ross Poldark, and he was a man who rarely played society's game well. There were some things he was very willing to do and others that he was just not willing to stoop to. He often found himself with his foot in his mouth and not acting the way a nobleman was supposed to act. Because of this he often found himself on the fringes of high society and regularly flirting with bankruptcy. Poldark is a Netflix series that takes place in 18th century Cornwall England. Ross's grandfather purchased and ran two copper mines that he passed down to his son, and then to his grandson Ross. But life was difficult for noblemen like Ross Poldark, and for the common laborers. Copper prices were low, and many of the mines seemed to have played out.

Yes, life was hard for everyone, but especially for the common laborer who had to try and survive living in an unjust legal system and with the daily struggle of trying to find a morsel to eat. Most of the noble class were unaware of the depths of deprivation and despair that common people lived with. But not Ross Poldark. He often flaunted the laws to protect the common people. He lived on the edge of bankruptcy as he hired one more worker that he couldn't afford so this man's family could survive, or he gave a worker a higher position so that he could provide for his growing family. And shockingly as a nobleman, Ross was often found deep in the mines alongside the miners with his shirt off, sweating, pounding away at the hard stone. No, Ross acted little like the nobleman that he was. He rarely played by society's rules. And yet many of the nobility secretly admired and envied Ross, because of the commoners' love for him.

You and I as well live by certain rules. As people of faith, we gather throughout the week and on the weekend to meet with each other and with God. To learn, pray, sing, read, and listen to each other and to God. Our scriptures guide us in how we should behave in these settings. But there are also many unwritten conventions that often unconsciously dictate how we are to act and speak with each other, and with God. We know what God expects of us – or at least we think we do – and so we try to toe the proper religious lines.

We are often called to act in certain ways to obtain favor and status in our relationships and in society – and especially in our relationship with God. After all, isn't having God pleased with us ultimately what we desire? I would guess that most of us want to be God-pleasers more than anything, to have God pleased with us. The Bible has a lot to say about how to curry favor with God. Today's scriptures speak directly to this matter. In the Book of Sirach, we read: "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. For the Lord is the one who repays, and he

will repay you sevenfold.” Now, that’s the best investment we could ever make, a 700% return! Give as much as you can, for God will repay you sevenfold!

Christianity often encourages us in this direction, especially during our Annual Fund Campaign! We say, “You can’t outgive God!” The more you give the more it will be returned to you. Give 10% of your financial resources. But we willingly offer other sacrifices. Within The Episcopal Church, to be a communicant in good standing requires that we receive Holy Communion at least three times in the past year, are faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God. These commitments and others are important for us to make as Christians and Episcopalians to follow the rules of our community.

All our decisions and commitments are important within secular and religious society. They are part of the norms and rules and conventions necessary for maintaining status and favor with others and with God. But is this how God expects us to act? Is this how we are to obtain favor with God and others?

There can be a problem in looking at our Christian faith and religious obligations this way. It may make our relationship with each other and with God little more than a matter of engaging in various transactions – if I do this then I will get that – with these people, and with God. Now, these kinds of transactional relationships may work on some level from a secular point of view or in some churches. But these are only surface level obligations that have little to do with the commitments of our hearts.

How are you and I called to live in relationship with each other and with God? How do we obtain favor? Let me return to the passage from Sirach I read earlier: “Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as

generously as you can afford. For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold.” But the next two verses say this: “Do not offer [the Most High] a bribe, for he will not accept it; and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice; for the Lord is the judge, and with him there is no partiality.” The author of Sirach is telling us on the one hand, give generously because of what God will give back to us. But then he says that God does not accept a bribe, a dishonest sacrifice. God will not show partiality. In other words, God is not concerned with playing the proper social status games of tit-for-tat, of what I will get out of this transaction.

When you and I go about fulfilling all the right Christian and religious conventions and obligations, we need to be mindful of the internal motivations of our heart. When we search within ourselves, we might find, if we are brutally honest, that on some subconscious level we have been trying to bribe God, to offer God a dishonest sacrifice. I have found myself there in my life. For many years I had established a detailed rule of life; a set of spiritual disciplines that I faithfully observed daily. Then in 2011 I became aware of an uncomfortable truth, the reality that on a subconscious level, one of my internal motivations for this Rule of Life was to please God. I realized that deep down I held the belief that somehow God was more pleased with me when I was faithfully practicing my spiritual disciplines than when I wasn't; that God loved me more. This made God's love for me conditional. And I knew that wasn't true. I had been offering a dishonest sacrifice.

Today's gospel story speaks to God's expectations, and how we find favor with God. Jesus told the story of a Pharisee and a tax collector. The author of Luke begins this passage with a commentary about this story. He writes: “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Luke is presenting a radical inditement of this Jewish Pharisee who trusted in himself that he

was righteous. He, and the Jewish religion at the time, had established a standard of what righteousness should look like. And this devout Jewish scholar of the law was obeying that standard to the letter of the law.

Pharisees were highly admired and respected among the 1st century Jewish community. One commentary says this: “In first century Palestine, people who were faithful, devout, practicing Jews were looked up to and admired. Yet, none were more admired than the Pharisee; the devout, passionate, rigorous scholar of the Jewish law.” In many ways the Pharisees back then would have borne many similarities to the class of nobility in 18th century Cornwall England.

In the Netflix series, Cornwall’s nobility looked down on the way Ross Poldark cavorted with the commoners and flouted the law. Similarly, the Pharisees looked down on the way that Jesus cavorted with commoners and ignored the Jewish Law. One day the Pharisees presented an inditement of Jesus that he was sitting down for dinner with tax collectors and sinners. But secretly, both the nobility and the Pharisees were envious of the way Poldark and Jesus were admired and loved by the commoners. But both classes of nobility also saw this as a threat to their position and power.

Here is Jesus’ story: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’” Now, most who were listening to the story would have been impressed and in awe of the way Jesus presented this devout, faithful, and holy Pharisee.

Jesus continued the story: “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God,

be merciful to me, a sinner!” I believe that many who were listening to this story may have had shuddered at this point in the story, being repulsed by this wicked man who had sold himself out as a tax collector to the Roman oppressors. Upon hearing the man cry out “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Many probably thought: “Yeah, you’re a sinner alright! Good luck finding mercy from God, you wicked vile creature!” But then Jesus lowered the boom in his story, shocking everyone present into silence: “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” God’s ways are truly not like our ways!

As you and I grow up, society educates us in how to behave and act and speak and dress and hold our fork and shake hands. But Jesus throws many of our conventions topsy-turvy. He was telling the Jewish society that many of the highly admired and respected religious scholars were merely abiding by a transactional relationship with others and with God; they were trying to bribe God and offering dishonest sacrifices of their time and money and resources.

The scriptures tell us that man looks at the outward appearance while God looks at the heart. The Psalmist writes: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” And so, God viewed, not the Pharisee, but this supposedly vile tax collector as justified in God’s sight; as a pure, clean, and holy beloved child.

May you and I offer to God the right sacrifices. May you and I not play by society’s rules, but by God’s rules.