

Hebrews 12-18-29 The Carrot and the Stick
Isaiah 58:9b-14
August 25, 2019

We have been looking the past few weeks at the latter part of the Letter to the Hebrews. Last week I mentioned that the recipients of the letter were struggling in their commitment to Christ and their church and the letter was written to urge them on. It involved what I called the carrot and the stick, that is, the threat of punishment and the assurance of reward. As a matter of fact, one of my seminary professors, Gerald Borchert wrote a book about Hebrews and called it, "Assurance and Warning."

I became interested in the metaphor of the carrot and the stick and did a little research to discover two different ideas that both concerned the topic of getting people to behave in a certain way, achieve a particular outcome. Both ideas involve manipulation.

The first idea pictures a donkey, of all things, whose rider has a stick which is being held out in front of the donkey's face. On the end of the stick is tied a string. On the other end is the string is a carrot. The donkey, being attracted to the carrot moves forward to get it, but each time the donkey moves forward, the carrot also moves. Thus the the donkey goes, never able to attain the carrot, ending either in reaching its destination or exhaustion, either way, the rider gets the desired outcome.

The second idea is referred to as, "the carrot or the stick," and refers to using both negative and positive motivations to get the desired behavior, both punishment and reward. In the case of the donkey, either hit it with the stick or entice it with the carrot.

The Prophets

The lectionary readings this year, especially those from the prophets, are particularly hard. They are focused on justice, at the expense of religion. Over and over we read that God is not interested in religious rituals and doctrines when one can see that the world is a mess, largely because the people have made it a mess.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe him? . . ."

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and the malicious talk, and if you spend yourself on behalf of the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the oppressed. . . . then your light will rise in the darkness."

The recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews saw themselves as heirs to the same traditions, one that created a burdensome demand that was hard to bear

and caused some of them to quit, or at least think about quitting.

The Stick

Like the prophets who railed against Israel and its religion, sometimes Christianity can have an edge to it; a hard edge that makes one falter, maybe wish to be out from under its demands, lose some enthusiasm.

The biblical prophets were trying to explain the decline and fall of the Israelite civilization. They thought it was related to the corruption of power, and to greed, and the neglect of justice, and of the poor. They thought it was related to defective religion, a surface level religion and not a religion of the heart. Biblical faith always criticizes the culture.

We are also heirs to the tradition of the prophets. Called to a life of sacrifice, told that service in obedience to Christ is the source of joy and meaning in life, and that selfish indulgence is essentially a train wreck, we are nonetheless selfish.

We have anxiety, and insecurity; we fall into anger and tend to want an excuse, to blame someone else, the system or something. We hear the word of sacrifice, we see the example of Christ, but fail to follow it. It is as if it is believed that God wills our harm, our demise.

We are called, and we seek a better world and better selves. Honesty compels us to confront the reality that we have neither. Though there are all kinds of

wonderful examples to the contrary, the general rule is that we have created a society based of greed and self-interest. We are warned against such a life. That is the stick.

The Carrot

Too much stick can be counter productive. So there is also a carrot. Isaiah told his people that if they changed their hearts and actions, there would be a rising of a light in the darkness, “our night will become like the noonday.”

The author of this letter says it another way. He speaks of two mountains; the mountain of Moses, the one on which he received the commandments, the mountain that couldn't be touched, burning with fire, darkness, gloom, and storm; and Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of the Living God.

“You have come to thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly . . . you have come to God, the judge of all people, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, *the mediator of a new covenant* . . . “

The mountain to which we are headed is not Sinai, but Zion, the glorious mountain of God's presence. So whether we see it as the difference between darkness and light or in terms of the metaphor of the mountain of gloom like in the Lord of the Rings or the mountain of God on which God's Son would be sacrificed for the forgiveness of Sin, The difference between hell

and heaven, warning and assurance, there is a voice calling us *toward* something good as well as *away* from something bad. That is the carrot.

The Gospel

Human beings tend to think in carrot/stick terms. I wonder if there is any way to wrench us from that frame of mind.

When I read the prophets, I am aware that they were also operating under the notion of the carrot and the stick, that good behavior would be rewarded with both present advantages, and also the hope of heaven, or else punished in like manner.

The carrot and the stick is a mindset. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, made a new covenant, God threw out the carrot and the stick. It just seems the human race, including most Christians have a difficult time considering the situation outside the context of the carrot and the stick, reward and punishment. It requires a new mindset, which seems as close as one can get to the idea of a renewed mind.

To place it in the context of the metaphor, God climbed down off the donkey and ceased demanding any involuntary progress, and asked for a relationship instead. Instead of seeking to dominate and control behavior, a strong feature of much religion, God has treated human beings not as assets to control but as beloved family.

All previous offenses are forgiven and in the future mistakes will be instructional, building character and preparing for life in heaven. Even the knowledge of sinfulness becomes a positive, rather than a source of guilt. When we learn to accept ourselves as we are, we are able to use the knowledge of our sinfulness in a constructive way, to work towards becoming better.

This new mindset is the meaning of the Incarnation, of all those miraculous healings and stories of transformation found in the Gospels. It is the meaning of the teaching of Jesus, “love your enemies . . . come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden . . . blessed are the poor in spirit, take up thy cross, . . . all of it. It is the meaning of the cross of Christ, and all the talk in Hebrews about a once-and-for-all-time sacrifice and a priesthood after the order of Melchizedeck.

This is the meaning of the doctrine of Justification by Faith. It is what Paul was talking about in Romans when he wrote,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The Letter to the Hebrews offers an affirmation of a promise, that we have been made God’s family, that we are continue our journey of faith.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)