

SERMON TITLE: "The Lord Surrounds His People"

TEXT: Psalm 125

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: June 27, 2010/5th Sunday After Pentecost

Last week, Colin sent me a YouTube video that he said was very interesting and that I had to check out. Now, I have a confession to make: I am a bit cynical when it comes to the innumerable video clips or songs or funny emails or other bits of cyber-entertainment that I "have to check out," so initially I had no intention of watching it.

But Colin's been around for a year now, and he's *almost* at the point where we think he's trustworthy (that's a joke, for those who are wondering!). So, on Tuesday morning I decided to see what it was about.

Turns out, it *was* interesting and it *was* worth checking out! It was by an American writer named Daniel Pink who writes about a whole host of topics related to business, and **it was called "The Truth About What Motivates Us."**

Again, I am a bit suspicious when it comes to anyone claiming to tell me "the truth about" anything, but the more I watched the video the more I was intrigued.

Pink talks about a whole host of experiments and tests that were done on workers from a wide variety of cultural and economic contexts. Basically, he was interested in discovering what motivated people to perform better.

Now on one level, many of you are probably thinking the answer to the question of what motivates people to perform better on the job is pretty simple.

Pay them. *Money* is the main motivator we are familiar with.

If you're an employer and you want your people to perform—to do their jobs well, to be creative and resourceful, to contribute to your organization consistently and productively—you have to reward them appropriately. The more you expect or the more you want, the more you pay.

It's a pretty straightforward approach: incentives for good performance, punishment (or the withholding of rewards) for bad performances.

This is the basic assumption of what motivates us as human beings. It is what our entire economic system is based on. Those who do the best work (or at least the most highly valued work—think of professional athletes and entertainers!) get paid the most.

There are bonuses offered for going above and beyond the call of duty—Christmas

bonuses, extra vacation time, boosts to expense accounts, and any other number of perks. But at the end of the day, it all boils down to some kind of monetary value. This is how we keep workers sufficiently happy and motivated to keep producing.

In short, most of our society is run on the premise that carrots and sticks—rewards and punishments—are the most effective way to encourage the kind of performance and behaviour that we want.

But is this true? Well, according to Pink, the results are surprising. The answer is both yes and no.

His studies showed that it is true that rewards and incentives work for encouraging the effective completion of rudimentary mechanical tasks where the steps are straightforward, linear, and orderly (the world of mathematics is the example Pink used—being mathematically challenged, myself, I didn't see how this fit into the "simple task" category, but I digress...).

But the studies found that once you get to tasks involving even a minimally higher degree of creativity and cognitive flexibility, *rewards don't work*. In fact, when it came to these tasks, performances got *poorer* when higher rewards were offered.

Those who were given a significant cash incentive to do well in a task that required a pretty basic level of cognitive skill (Pink didn't specify what the task was), actually did *poorer!*

Pink's conclusion is simple: rewards are not what motivate people. The conclusion is counterintuitive, but the results of this study have been replicated across cultures and across economic classes by sociologists, psychologists, and economists.

++++

So, the obvious next question is.... What *does* motivate people?

Well, what the researchers discovered is that people are motivated by three main things:

1. **Autonomy** (e.g., Australian company who was given one day of autonomy a month to do whatever they wanted, with whomever they wanted, and however they wanted to do it; the result? All kinds of innovations, software solutions, etc)
2. **Mastery** (people like to be challenged, to know that they are making a contribution)
3. **Purpose**

More and more organizations are finding that their employees work best when they have some kind of transcendent purpose that they can participate in, whether it's contributing to world relief, designing products that make the world a better place, or whatever.

The researchers are discovering that profit unhitched from purpose leads to poorly done work and grouchy and unproductive employees!

While we crave things like autonomy and self-determination, and we need challenges, and the prospect of becoming proficient at something, **what we need most of all is purpose.**

This is what their research discovered. People are *purpose* maximizers, not just *profit* maximizers. We are not just economic units that can be manipulated by carrots and sticks.

††††

Well, that's all very interesting, you might be thinking, but what does it have to do with faith? What does it have to do with our sermon series on the Psalms?

Quite a lot, I think.

I think how we approach faith and discipleship often looks a like the carrot and stick model Dan Pink was talking about in his YouTube video.

I think quite often we believe or are urged to believe in God or to follow the hard teachings of Jesus because of the rewards and incentives we think will come.

Or because of the sticks we think await us if we don't.

The big carrot is the promise of heaven, of course. Eternal life with God in the new creation where there will be no more death or pain or tears. It's the ultimate carrot!

And the big stick is equally obvious. Hell. Punishment, separation from God, isolation, etc.

But aside from the big carrot and the big stick that sometimes motivates our religiosity, there are smaller, more earthbound ones as well. Many people think that becoming a Christian is the surest way to obtain material blessings, whether it's money or promotions, or spouses, or whatever.

Or, conversely, many think that if they *don't* follow God, he will surely see to it that their lives are as miserable as possible.

Let me give you some examples of both kinds to illustrate.

The first comes from the “big stick” category. When I was a younger person, there was a church near my hometown in southern Alberta that would host an interesting event each Halloween. It was called “Hell House,” and it was basically designed to scare the hell out of you. Literally.

I didn’t ever actually walked through it myself, but from what I’ve heard from those who did, imagine something like the Bethlehem Walk in Parksville, except rather than pleasant scenes from the time around Jesus’ birth, imagine fiery scenes of demons and torture and fire and whatever other products of someone’s fertile imagination you can.

It was horrific! And what was the point? To use the threat of the “big stick” to produce some kind of religious response. It was using fear to promote faith.

At the other end of the spectrum, just a few miles further down the road, another church would often have very different kinds of nights. Far from trying to scare you into faith, here the goal was to entice and lure you into the church with the promise of all manner of supernatural manifestations, healings, and material blessings. Jesus was the star of the show and he was dispensing blessings and miracles and healings from 7 – 9 pm—a donation usually helped—a few weeks out of every year.

In a different way than the Hell House, this, too, was horrific. It was dangling a carrot in front of people’s noses to bring them in and get their money.

Now, it’s easy to be critical. Too easy. There are obviously some elements of truth in both of these approaches, however small they might be. The bible *does* contain promises of blessings—even material ones, in response to obedience. The bible *does* contain threats of judgment and punishment.

But I think there are healthier ways to understand both of these realities.

And just like carrots and sticks aren’t good motivators for performance on the job, they aren’t good motivators when it comes to Christian belief and obedience either.

††††

You’re probably wondering when we’re ever going to get to the Psalms!

Psalm 125 is an antidote to the anxiety produced by a carrot and stick approach to a life of faith.

Again, I want to make it clear that the bible *does* promise actual blessings, and it *does* warn of actual punishment, both here and now and in the eternal sense.

But I do not believe that God expects or wants his people to be in a constant state of anxiety about whether they are in or out, whether they are on the edge of blessing or punishment, etc.

Psalm 125 gives us a different picture of God than the one implied by some of our more questionable evangelism techniques.

¹ *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.*

² *As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.*

³ *The scepter of the wicked will not remain
over the land allotted to the righteous,
for then the righteous might use
their hands to do evil.*

⁴ *Do good, O LORD, to those who are good,
to those who are upright in heart.*

⁵ *But those who turn to crooked ways
the LORD will banish with the evildoers.
Peace be upon Israel.*

The first thing that needs to be said about Psalm 125 is that it is part of a larger context. Psalm 125 is part of the Psalms of Ascent, 15 psalms songs that the Israelites would sing on their yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the holy festivals.

Why are they called psalms of *Ascent*? Well, Jerusalem was the highest city geographically in the land of Palestine, so wherever people would come from, whether from the north, south, east, or west, they were always going “up” to Jerusalem.

They were going “up” to Jerusalem on a more symbolic and theological level as well. Jerusalem was where the temple was, the place where God dwelt. First it was the Ark of the Covenant, while they made their long and tortuous journey into the Promised Land, then it was the temple that Solomon built.

For the average Hebrew, the festivals—whether the Festival of Passover in spring, or the Feast of Pentecost in summer, or the Feast of Tabernacles in fall—were a time when they would re-encounter God, where they would hear the stories of their people’s past, where they would recapture a vision of who they were and who they were called to be.

The feasts were a time of teaching and reminding the people who they were and who God was. Going up to Jerusalem would have been part of renewing the covenant between themselves and their God. These festivals were yearly markers in Israel's journey of faith and obedience.

And the Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120-134) were the songs they would sing on the road (think of it like singing songs in the car—remember, the Hebrews were part of an oral tradition, not a written one). They cover a whole host of realities that the Hebrew pilgrims needed to be reminded of on their pilgrimages. Eugene Peterson has written a book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which looks at the Psalms of Ascent, and he identifies one major theme or characteristic of each of these psalms. Each of these themes or characteristics was an important part of what a life of faith in God looked like, and so they sang these songs to teach and remind themselves.

Psalm 125, in particular, is a psalm that celebrates the God who “surrounds” his people, the God in whom security and goodness are found.

Just as the mountains wrap around the city of Jerusalem, giving it security and strength, so the Lord is all around his people. It is a Psalm of confidence, security, and hope.

It's a good song to sing on the road.

✚✚✚✚

So far so good. But let's take a closer look at Psalm 125, specifically the first couple of verses to see what it might be saying to us.

The Psalm begins with these words:

*Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.*

Now, if you're like me, you're scratching your head a bit here. Most of us don't feel quite this unshakeable. Eugene Peterson captures how most of us likely feel:

*The person of faith is described in this psalm as one who “cannot be moved, but abides forever.” But I **am** moved. I am full of faith one day and empty with doubt the next. I wake up one morning full of vitality, rejoicing in the sun; the next day I am gray and dismal, faltering and moody. “Cannot be moved”—nothing could be less true of me. I can be moved by nearly anything: sadness, joy, success, failure. I'm a thermometer and go up and down with the weather....*

So right away, we might be tempted to feel like we are in a bit of a different world than the first singer. Yeah, they had been through all of those awe-inspiring miraculous events throughout their history. *Of course* they would not be shaken!

But Peterson goes on to remind us of exactly who these Israelites were that would have been singing this song. He uses the phrase “saw-toothed history” to describe how Israel actually lived:

Israel was up one day and down the next. One day they were marching in triumph through the Red Sea, singing songs of victory, the next they were grumbling in the desert because they missed having Egyptian steak and potatoes for supper. One day they were marching around Jericho blowing trumpets and raising hearty hymns, and the next they were plunged into an orgy at some Canaanite fertility shrine. One day they are with Jesus in the upper room listening in rapt attention to his commands and receiving his love, the next they are stamping around and cursing in the courtyard, denying they ever knew him.

*But all the time, as we read that saw-toothed history, we realize something solid and steady: **they are always God’s people.** God is steadfastly with them, in mercy and judgment, insistently gracious. We get the feeling that everything is done in the sure, certain environment of the God who redeems his people.*

They were always God’s people. When they were faithful and when they were not.

*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.*

The Hebrews were aware of their saw-toothed history. They knew about their times of unfaithfulness and faithfulness. And so they sang these words as they made their pilgrimages, year after year, to remind themselves of who God was.

To remind themselves that their identity was rooted in the character of God not their own performance.

Maybe we’re not so different from Israel after all... Maybe we need to hear these words as well.

I like how Eugene Peterson puts it:

*All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. **We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us.** The opening phrase of the psalm is “those who trust in the LORD”—not those who trust in their performance, in their morals, in their righteousness, in their health, in their pastor, in their*

doctor, in their president [prime minister], in their economy, in their nation—“those who trust in the LORD.” **Those who decide that God is for us and will make us whole eternally.**

††††

We are not ancient Hebrews and we do not, obviously, make pilgrimages to Jerusalem year after year. So in one sense, this Psalm describes a world very foreign to our own.

But in another sense, we are all pilgrims and we are all on a journey of discipleship. Each of our lives—your life, my life, our kids’ lives, our parents lives— are journeys toward God and his purpose in our lives. They are roads toward the day when we will be with God, where we will be his people and he will be among us.

Just like the ancient Hebrews, this is the purpose that gives shape to each of our stories.

And like the ancient Hebrews, we all need reminders that our identity is rooted in who God is not on how well we perform.

To return to the picture we began with, I think that Psalm 125’ picture of the Lord who surrounds his people, just like the mountains surround Jerusalem—this picture of God protects us from the carrot and stick approach to faith and discipleship that we talked about earlier.

It is a picture of:

- a God who walks with his pilgrim people
- a God who blesses and punishes along the way, but who loves us, who has sent his Spirit to indwell and guide us
- a God who will not let wickedness rule forever
- a God whose ultimate purposes are for goodness and peace and wholeness.

This is much better than a carrot and stick approach!

Why? Two very closely-related reasons:

1. **You cannot entice or threaten someone into love.**

In Matthew 22, when the teacher in the law asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, what did Jesus say? Love God and love your neighbour! God wants his people to love him, heart, soul, and mind.

But you cannot threaten someone into loving you, nor can you bribe them. Think about it—would we ever try that with our children? Of course not! We would say that love doesn’t work like that. So why would we ever assume this would be the way God works?

2. **A carrot and stick approach to faith can lead to an almost constant state of anxiety.**

Are we in? Are we out? Are we blessed? On the road to punishment? How do we know? **And just like fear and bribery, anxiety does not and cannot lead to love!**

Carrots and sticks might be effective ways to produce certain kinds of “right” answers to certain kinds of questions about faith.

But just like in the YouTube video, if what we’re looking for goes beyond the basics—if what we are looking for is mature, committed, courageous, creative, and joyful lovers of God and neighbour, they simply are not the tool for the job.

Carrots and sticks are not a big enough purpose to motivate us to do and be all that God wants has created us to do and to be.

A vision of a God who loves and surrounds his pilgrim people on their journeys back to him, and who has created us for love, is a purpose that can motivate and guide us, and free us from chasing after rewards or trying to avoid punishments. Our identity as God’s people is secure.

We are free to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Thanks be to the God who surrounds his pilgrim people.

Amen

