

How to Legislate Relief

by Pastor Kurt Hoover

Presence Litany adapted from 1 Chronicles 29

Pastor: “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel

All: our father, forever and ever.

Pastor: Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty,

All: for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.

Pastor: Yours is the kingdom, O Lord,

All: and you are exalted as head above all.

Pastor: We worship You Lord in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen

Genesis 19:1-10 And the Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³ and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵ while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” ¹⁰ The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

Galatians 5:1-6 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Luke 10:38-42 ³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

But Martha was distracted with much serving... (Luke 10:40)

Genesis and Luke give us two different accounts from history. In one we see the joy of Abraham and Sarah as they prepare to relieve 3 strangers in the midst of a journey. Their joy in seeing the product of their work, we can imagine them seeing the men's appreciation...

It is a very different picture than that of Martha organizing her household to provide a meal for Jesus and his disciples. Martha distracted with much serving, complaining to the one being served about the burden of serving...

Why the disparity? Has Martha put too much pressure on herself and her household. Afterall, knowing that you are serving the popular teacher and prophet Jesus must have far more pressure than serving 3 strangers, even if you do suspect them to be angels in disguise which would have been Abraham and Sarah's motivation.

Why the disparity? One thing that stands out to me is that Abraham and Sarah are not expecting a reward for their action. They are given a wonderful promise, so wonderful that Sarah laughs and then lies about it. They are given a specific promise, but it is not a reward for their action. This promise was set in motion far before this encounter. They are not seeking a reward or forcing a promise. This is just what you do. It is their joy to serve.

As Pr. John Nelson pointed out so clearly last week. It is just what we do as Christians set free by God... we see these moments not as a burden but as moments to serve. It is in fact when we are freed from the notion of earning and deserving recognition... It is when we are freed from everyone doing their fair share that we find joy in serving. Especially serving tasks and relationships of which we may never see the benefit. Joy is in the serving, not necessarily the outcome.

And this Christian Act of service. ...Truly God inspired, a gift from God, not something we come by naturally. This is not the way our western world works. It is an interruption to the expectation that we have of one another. An expectation that I do not think serves us well.

We expect that there will be some type of peace, or freedom or what David Zahl calls in his new book... we expect that the way we find relief from the demands and distractions of life is in completing them. And if that does not work we try again assuming we didn't do it well enough.

We have this expectation that once we get the task done, ...get help with our goal, ...get everyone on the same page then we will be free from the burden of it...

This is Martha's motivation. She literally believes that the pressure of serving Jesus will be relieved if she does it well. And she is frustrated that her household is getting in the way of this task's completion. She actually believes she can legislate her own freedom, her own peace, her own relief! She actually believes that Jesus came into her home, into her life to affirm her plan for pleasing him.

And we do the same thing!!

There is no denying that the household chores must get done.

There is no denying that the church must have servants to set up worship, make the coffee, teach Sunday school and provide programs for the kids. Leadership, life groups, and mile markers.

There is no denying that God has placed people in our lives that are more needy than ourselves or our own families and it is our duty to serve them. God has put us in places of authority to make sure that people are kept safe and cared for.

There is no denying that these pressures exist. BUT, we do not have the power to relieve this pressure on our own, no matter how well we suppose we might get the task done, heal the relationship or legislate safety and concern.

There is only one relief and it does not come at the end of the task, no matter how well you get it done. Throughout history the term for this relief has been called Grace. *We are saved by Grace through Faith* (Ephesians 2:8)! God speaks words of Grace to our expectation of perfected tasks, relationships and various other legislations of life.

God speaks grace to you this day. In your reading is His speaking. My Grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor 12:9). It is finished (John 19:30).

What grand project, what task are you working on with the expectation that once this is over you will find relief? ...What religious work - when it is done, when it is right, you will be free from the anxiety of it.

Are you guilty of this? (I am) Keeping yourself busy, distracted as the Bible says, with a certain project or task thinking that the burden of this work once finished will give you a sense of relief?

Has that ever worked?

To this Jesus says, the same thing to you and I - that he said to Martha. This project, this work will not get you what you are looking for. You are not distracted with work, you have chosen to be anxious and troubled about many things outside of your control... you cannot earn God's (or anyone's) graceful disposition to you. That peace, that freedom is and always will

be a gift you do not deserve. And there in lies the power of Grace.

Grace is a gift that sets you free from your expectation and the expectation of others. If your service is about your performance in the task it will always be a burden and your effort never quite enough. When Grace (the grace of others and grace towards yourself) sets you free from a prescribed outcome - you truly are free, you are at peace, you have found relief. Not at the end of the task, but in the actual joy of being of use to another.

What other projects in your life have become the distraction, the solution, that if only we can all agree on the right outcome we will bring our own sense of relief and completion. If we can all just agree on the right alert systems for flooding on the Guadalupe River in Kerr County Texas, and implement them, and fund them, and get it right!... Then we can be at peace.

In the end much of our arguing over proper legislation is just a distraction that will not deal with the anxiety and trouble we all feel about those things outside of our control.

We can't legislate freedom, or relief any more than we can legislate morality.

What other projects have robbed you of the peace and freedom that come from hearing God's teaching of Grace. What is it that God has control of that you never will.

It is a misnomer that Martha and Mary are teaching us a distinction between tasks and relationships... as if the trick to finding relief is being relationship oriented instead of task oriented. This is not the case, relationship-oriented people are

just as capable of making our relationships into an idol to be perfected.

Who is it that you are trying to perfect... What relationship are you trying to get right!? How far must that person come along your perception of 'right living' or 'equitable distribution of responsibility' - justice... At what point will you get to the end of your expectations for that person or your relationship? Could it be that God is doing things you can't imagine, through people you least expect, getting results you will never see.

God's Grace is sufficient for you! And God's Grace is sufficient for them!

Here is the reality. We are... You are caught up, distracted ... with the expectation that you are doing the right thing and someday will achieve it. Hear me clearly - You are not capable of saving yourself, you cannot earn a relationship with God, ... But God in His mercy, at great cost to Himself, has entered history in general and your life specifically with a word of Grace.

Right now you ARE sitting at the foot of the Father. Just as Mary and eventually Martha did. You DO hear His voice. And it has nothing to do with how any task, relationship or legislation reflects on you and what you deserve.

God, for Christ's sake, knows your distractions, your struggle for control, and he removes them from you. That is not where your relief is found.