

BEFORE AND AFTER THE SEMICOLON

You may have heard it said that in order to understand the scripture you have to understand it in its context. I have always believed that and have devoted considerable time to reading and researching to try to understand. Some of that involves understanding how literature and stories work. Some of it involves understanding how people think, so I've studied psychology and sociology. Finally, some of it involves understanding the culture in which it was written, so I study history and anthropology.

I'm reading a new history book. It's called The Organization of Ancient Economies. When I saw this book, I just had to have it. The reason I'm so drawn to it is that the most difficult aspect of history for me to understand is economics. Money is so prevalent in modern society that it's difficult for me to understand how a complex society could function without it. Yet, humans lived in cities for millennia before money was invented. In fact, while the entire Old Testament is full of indications of economic activity, none of it surrounds money as we understand it. How did they do it?

This book tells a number of stories from around the world- including from the bible itself- to explain this, and I found one story that fascinated me. One way that economic activity occurred was through ritual gift giving. One of the stories was about a practice among the !Kung people of southwest Africa.

This tribe lives on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Where they live there is a brief wet season and a long dry season. They are hunter gatherers so during the dry season their survival depends upon foraging close to permanent water holes. They marry outside their group, so each person has a right to access two water holes: one through their father's family and one through their mother's family. But that isn't really enough.

They supplement this with a ritual gift-giving practice known as hxaro. Hxaro begins in adolescence and continues throughout a person's life. A family group will visit another group. While visiting a young boy or young girl will initiate a friendship with another young boy or girl by giving a gift. Later the roles will be reversed. Sometime after the visiting tribe returns home, they will themselves be visited by the tribe that they previously visited. The person who received a gift will give a gift themselves. Then, before they leave, they will give a gift themselves. Later the cycle is repeated. The interesting thing about this practice is that the scales are never balanced. One person is always in another person's debt.

The thing about this is that the exchange is not really the point. The real point is to create relationships, so that you have some sort of safety net. If you get into hard times, you don't just have somewhere to go. You have people upon whom you can depend literally everywhere you can reach.

We have in front of us today two passages. These are two of the most well-known passages in the scripture. The first has come down to us as the greatest commandment. The

second is John 3:16, easily the most widely known Scripture in America today. Each of these verses can stand on its own. Yet, when placed side by side they present us with an apparent theological dilemma. John 3:16 tells us, albeit in a roundabout way, that Salvation is a gift given to those who believe. It supports the formula given to us in Ephesians 2 that we are saved by grace through faith. Yet, in Matthew 22 when the Pharisees ask Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?" he replies with Love God and Love your neighbor?

Do you see the tension? If all that's necessary for salvation is belief, why bother to love your neighbor? This is not a new problem. In the **Institutes of the Christian Religion** John Calvin talks extensively about the nature of these two, seemingly contradictory, theological doctrines: justification and sanctification. Justification discusses the nature of salvation. It talks about Jesus' atoning death and resurrection. Sanctification is about the righteous works done by those of us who have been saved.

Through the years, having been to literally hundreds-perhaps thousands-- of worship services, I've heard many, many sermons on justification. I've heard about the love and grace and mercy of the risen Lord, who gave his life, so that those of us who believe might be saved. For the record, I fervently believe those things, and I appreciate every one of those sermons.

However, I've heard very few sermons on sanctification. I've also noticed that if I broach the subject, people often become defensive. Often, I can expect to be met with the terse response, "The Bible says we are not saved by our works." When someone says that to me, they say it with a period- or, sometimes, an exclamation point. But what I often hear is an implied semicolon. For those of you who don't remember your remedial English grammar, a semicolon is used to separate two independent clauses. These two clauses could be complete sentences in their own right, but a semicolon gives us a way to link them together into one sentence. So, while the person is saying to me, "The Bible says we are not saved by our works, *period.*", what I actually hear is "The Bible says we are not saved by our works; *therefore, there is no need or reason for us to do them.*"

Now, I want to respond to that notion; the notion expressed in the second sentence that contains the semicolon. I fervently believe the portion of that sentence that comes in front of the semicolon. I am saved by the grace of Jesus Christ through his atoning act of crucifixion, death and resurrection. Nothing else nor any other person can accomplish my salvation save that divine grace. I want that clearly understood. Anyone who says I said differently either misunderstood me or is lying.

But while I firmly accept the first part of that sentence, the part that comes before the semicolon, I just as firmly reject the portion that comes after it. Being saved doesn't relieve me of the responsibility of looking after my neighbor. I think the mistake that we make is when we assume that salvation is the only thing that really matters. I think that's false. These two exist side-by side not to contradict each other, but rather to complement each other.

I want to make some points here. There are some hidden dangers in focusing only on that first clause. I'm going to tell you a personal secret about myself. I spend almost no time thinking about my personal salvation. Do you know why? Because my trust in Jesus Christ is so absolute, that when he says "whosoever believeth" I don't question it. As far as I'm concerned, Jesus said, I believe it, and that settles it. That thinking frees me up to ask the question, "What am I supposed to do now?" "How can I serve Christ today?" I don't need to worry about my salvation, because Jesus already took care of that for me.

But there's a second danger in focusing too much on the first clause. One of the differences between the ancient world and the modern world that needs to be noted here is the difference in the way emotions are perceived. In the modern world emotions can be a purely internal exercise. For example, it's possible, in our understanding, for a person to love someone without showing it- or even saying it. Love is a feeling for us. In the Ancient World, people didn't make that sort of distinction. To say that you love someone without doing something to *show* that you loved them was hypocritical. Love *required* action.

I want to point out to you that Jesus didn't just tell us that he loved us. He showed us he loved us in the most tangible way I can imagine. He died for us. He also showed us through his resurrection that death isn't permanent. He demonstrated the reality that awaits all of us who believe: eternal life. He showed us through those acts the truth of the clause that comes before the semicolon.

As for the clause that comes after the semicolon, there are at least three issues that make it wrong in my opinion. The first issue is one that Calvin wrote about extensively. He said, in essence, that the purpose of good works was not to save us, but rather to demonstrate our gratitude towards the God who had saved us. Going back to the example *hxaro*, what we see is an exchange of gifts of equal value, followed by a new gift that once again creates debt. Imagine instead that the initial gift was priceless. Imagine that finding a gift of comparable value was impossible, because no such gift existed. That's the situation we have with the Grace of Christ. Now imagine that instead of trying to repay the gift, we bring a succession of smaller gifts-tokens really- that don't so much repay a gift that can't be repaid as demonstrate our gratitude for receiving such a gift. That's what sanctification does.

There's a second issue here. Christ charged us with spreading the good news. So, I pose for you a question of morals. Why would anyone believe us? Why would anyone who has yet to recognize the grace of Christ working in their lives believe us when we talk about Christ. Does your life demonstrate that love? That's a major reason why that commandment is so important. It lends credibility to us when we spread the good news. It's a powerful thing to say to someone, "I love you." It's infinitely more powerful to show them that you love them. If you want someone to believe that Christ loves them, don't just tell them: show them.

Finally, I want to suggest one other reason we should do them. Jesus said to do them. If we truly believe in Jesus, that should be sufficient reason all on its own. We shouldn't need any more convincing than that.

We are not saved by our works. Only the grace of Jesus Christ can accomplish that. That doesn't mean that works are irrelevant, or even unimportant. They serve important purposes in the Kingdom. They demonstrate our love for and our gratitude to God and our credibility to our neighbors when we talk about Jesus Christ and his love, grace and mercy. My prayer for you is that God will make clear to you the works that the Spirit is calling you to do, so that future generations will know God, at least in part, through your example.