

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Chasing Welcome Rewards

Matthew 10:40-42

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Peter Keyel

[Jesus speaks] ⁴⁰ *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”*



DIAGNOSIS: The rich get richer

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Welcoming because we're told to

We like instructions, even if some instructions are harder than others. But welcoming is easy. We're already taught to be civil and polite, and we socially enforce it. We've even got Jesus's authority here reinforcing the command to welcome others. Doing as we're told can be difficult, but in this case, it isn't. Welcome strangers. Greeters at the entrance. Check. Welcoming a righteous person? Simple. Win the reward by giving a cup (or in this day a bottle) of water to the newest disciples, or your newest customers? An easy good deed.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Feeling righteous

Welcoming and all of these other good deeds make us feel good about ourselves. Some may be a little harder than others, but overall, we can keep a net positive cash flow in good deeds, right? As long as we do, we can keep feeling righteous. Slowly, those good deeds become more about feeding and maintaining our sense of self-worth than what they actually do for other people.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Reward

When we feel good about our own righteousness, we feel justified. We feel we have earned the reward. That "reward" is the moral recognition by God that we are good, earned as our due for our good works and our good hearts. As long as we stay rich enough in moral currency (always doing what is right, see Matthew 5:48), we'll have no problem earning the reward. Of course, if we're earning our reward on our own, we're relying on ourselves, and not God. All the good works in the world will not stop death.

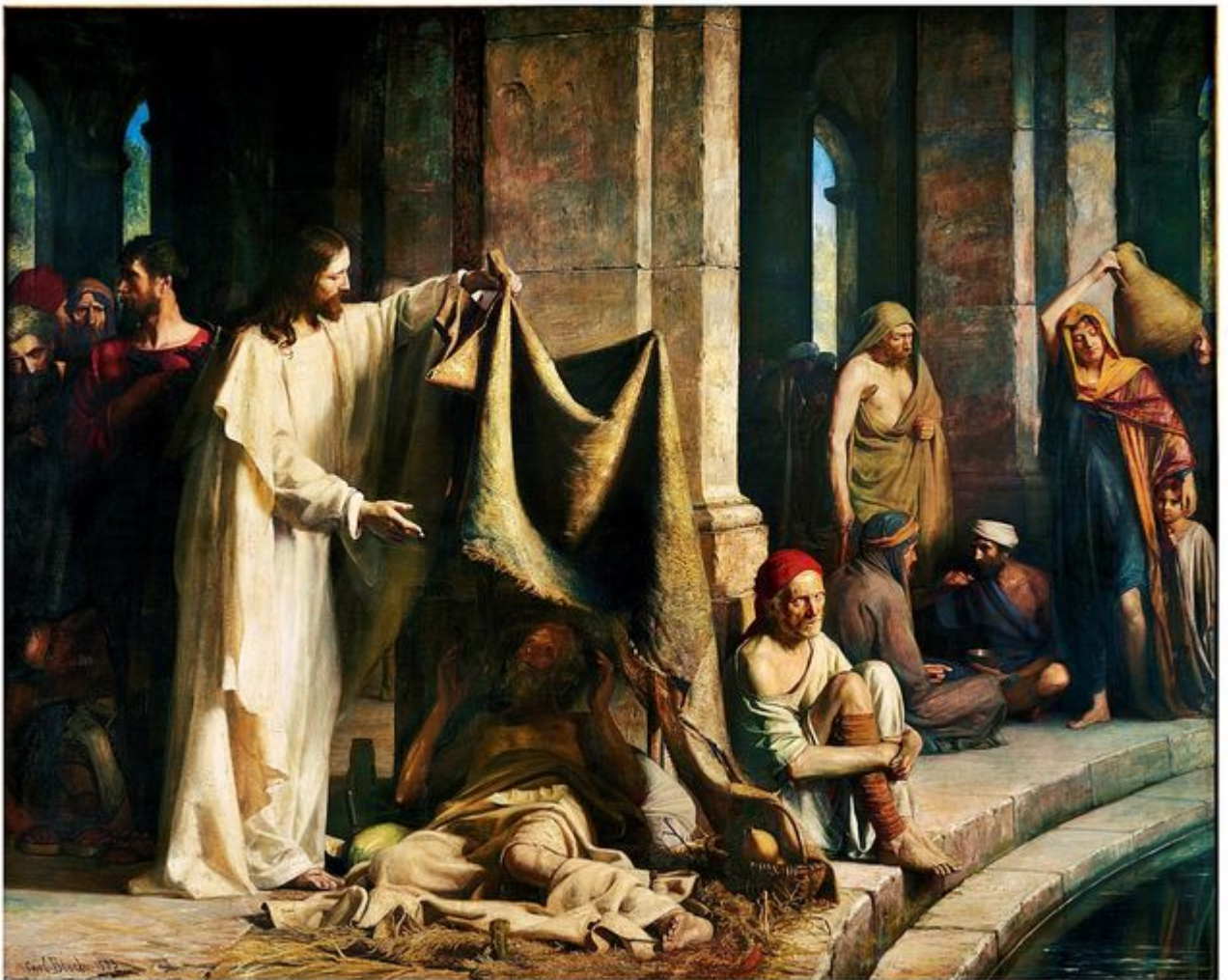
And if we're doing good works just to earn the reward and keep

ahead on the treadmill of self-righteousness? The deeds become less about the person for whom we are doing them and more about ourselves. Pretty soon they cease being good deeds for others and become deeds to feed our own sense of self-worth. Worse, if the only way we are justified is by having a good heart or good works to rely on, we're in a lot of trouble when those run out, or when we hit "a rough patch." The unspoken problem is if we fall short, tough luck. How will God reward us with moral recognition for our failures?

PROGNOSIS: The poor get Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Damn the Torpedoes!

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Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda, by Carl Heinrich Bloch, courtesy BYU Museum of Art

e we earned it, but because of what God has done in Jesus. Our reward is guaranteed by Jesus on the cross. The sign that God will see Jesus' righteousness for our own is in Jesus's triumph over death, which God promises for us, too.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Made righteous

Receiving God's reward as a gift is not just feeling good for what we've earned. It's being made righteous in the face of our own failings and attempts to earn our own righteousness. It is a freeing righteousness—our need for doing good deeds is gone, and with it the need to make those deeds about ourselves and our own gratification. We are free to help others because we want to, not because we need to.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Welcoming because we want to

Welcoming because we want to is even easier than doing it because we're told. It doesn't require adhering to commands or directions. Since welcome is no longer about our self-worth, we're also free to welcome others in Jesus' name who may be riskier to welcome than a righteous person, prophet, or a stranger.