

The Inhibition of Good-Will

November 2005

The woman looked to be in her mid-sixties. She was working in her front yard as I was passing by on my morning walk. No man was in sight as she picked up a blower, proceeded to a step ladder positioned under the gutter and began to climb it. I thought to myself, “She’s not really going to try blowing those leaves out of the gutter by herself ...”.

I paused and watched, expecting at any moment that someone was going to have to call 911. As she neared the top of the ladder, I called out, “Can I help you with that?” “No,” she replied, “I’m ok.” With some trepidation for the woman’s safety I carried on with my walk.

As this woman was needlessly putting herself at great risk, it bothered me that my offer to help had been rebuffed. And I was in no position to force the issue. But on the other hand, how could I blame her for refusing the help of a total stranger given the threat of random violence in our society?

I began to wonder what might have gone through her mind. (I admit that I don’t know the real reason that she didn’t accept my offer, but I don’t think it was because she needed the exercise.) “Who is this stranger? What does he really want? Is he trying to find out if I am alone? Will he attack me? Does he want to see if I have anything of value in my house? Will he come back later to rob me?” The proliferation of house alarms, defensive fire arms, window bars and other protective devices signal our concern about becoming the victims of crime. So I understood her reluctance to accept help from a stranger, but I was frustrated that a simple act of service could not be performed because of the moral climate in which we live.

From there I began to think about the residual effects of sin, the “fallout” of evil. Sin does great damage in its initial commission: psychological/physical damage inflicted on the victim; the economic costs of stolen merchandise, law enforcement resources, courts, prisons, rehabilitation programs, insurance premiums, etc. But a secondary effect is the suppression of goodness, either by making those who offer reluctant or recipients resistant. The result: the world is more callous and indifferent, and more suffering goes unrelieved because of sin’s tendency to inhibit good will.

There are many ways in which sin neutralizes goodness. One way is through sheer fear: Since evil recognizes no decency, righteousness must assess the risk in expressing itself. Sometimes the risk is unacceptable (a woman stopping on an interstate to render roadside aid, perhaps). But we err when fear in a matter of judgment is transferred to a matter of principle:

⇒ Rahab accepted the risk of hiding the spies (Jsh 2).

⇒ Obadiah accepted the risk of Jezebel’s wrath when he hid the prophets of God (1 Kgs 18).

⇒ Paul accepted the risk of arrest or worse when taking the offering to Jerusalem (Ac 21:13).

While there is risk in offering help to others, let’s not surrender to let the threat of adversity or the reluctance of the scared. Our faith in God’s protection must outweigh our fear as we try to counterbalance the evil of this world.

Perhaps the bigger danger in this present climate of suspicion and anxiety is that we will not offer assistance on the assumption that it will not be welcomed anyway. Though I was frustrated that I could not help the woman with her gutters, I was glad that I had offered. Let’s do our part in returning civility and compassion to the public arena. *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”* (Gal 6:10).