

“Blessings and Curses”

Jeremiah 17:5-8, Luke 6:17-26

You drive into a crowded shopping store parking lot and find what seems to be an open spot. But you find it blocked by a stray shopping cart left there by someone. To better service customers, some stores like Walmart have cart receptacles throughout the parking lot; some, like Fareway, have attendants who take the cart for you, and in cities you “rent” the cart and are reimbursed when you return it. But why do people strand their carts in parking lots? Here are some reasons that people have given in studies of this behavior:

- The receptacle is too far from where they've parked their car.
- They have a child whom they do not want to leave unattended.
- The weather is bad.
- They have a disability that is prohibitive to easy movement.
- The perception that it's someone else's job to collect the carts.
- They're leaving the carts for someone else to easily pick up and use.

What we can see in this is the choice between our needs and social norms. Those norms fall into two categories—injunctive and descriptive. Injunctive norms are based on how we feel others might see our actions. Descriptive norms are those we get from seeing what other people do. So, I could return the cart because I am worried what others may think or because I notice everyone is doing that.

In 2008 a study published in *Science* showed that a violation of a norm could lead to a violation of another norm. This came from noticing shopping carts. Researchers went to a parking garage that served a supermarket and a gym. In one scenario, four carts were strewn about the garage, and in another all carts were in the receptacles. The researchers left flyers on the windows of the cars in the garage and—you guessed it—58 percent of participants littered (i.e., threw their flyers on the ground) when there was unmanaged shopping carts compared with 30 percent when all carts were in the receptacle.

The next test targeted participants who parked their bicycles in two alleys. On the walls of the alleys were signs that indicated graffiti was not permitted. One alley had no graffiti, while the other did, despite the signs. Researchers attached a flyer to the handles of bicycles in both alleys so that the owners needed to physically remove the flyers. In the alley with graffiti on the wall, 69 percent threw the flyer on the ground or hung the flyer on another bicycle compared with 33 percent in the alley with no graffiti. The researchers reported that the anti-graffiti signs were readily visible and all entrants to the alleys glanced at the signs. The appearance of graffiti on the walls in defiance of the signs suggested that it was appropriate to break another norm: littering.

Finally, they set up temporary fences along two parking lots and posted No Trespassing signs and No Bicycle signs. While the temporary fences did have a gap that a person could use to get to their vehicle, the No Trespassing signs were intended to make people walk to another entrance. The No Bicycles signs were intended to signify that people could not lock their

bicycles to the fences. At one parking lot, bicycles were left nearby; they were not chained or locked to the fence. At the other parking lot, bicycles were chained to the fence. The results were significant: 82 percent of participants used the gap if the bicycles were chained to the fence compared with 27 percent when there were no bicycles chained to the fence.

We see in this the conflict between what benefits all of society versus what satisfies “me.” The study shows that once the norm meant for all is breached, more people trend toward disorder and are given permission to do what they want. Not returning our shopping carts opens the door to throwing our circulars on the ground to parking haphazardly or in reserved spaces to other items that impact the quality of our experience at that establishment.

That may not seem like much, but we can see through a bigger lens, the one we see in our Old Testament lesson where Jeremiah tells us:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

We can go with what God says or with what we want. That can start with little things like shopping carts, but moves toward other things like tiny sparks that can turn into a raging fire. On July 10, 1941 the people living in the town of Jedwabne, Poland had been occupied by Nazi Germany since September, 1939. They began to persecute the Jewish population there. The Germans did not begin it or join in it. They just let it happen. The government and society restrictions against such behavior were removed. The result is that over 1,300 Jews were brutally murdered.

The famous philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, “If there is no God, everything is permissible.” People may think that is good because it gives them freedom from restrictions. But what really happens is that we become captive to our selfish desires. It is no wonder that Nietzsche was driven to insanity before he died.

It may seem a far stretch, but there is a direct line from not returning shopping carts to murder. It was the German writer Goethe who wrote that he realized that there was just a fine line that separated him from a murderer. But as Romans 6 tells us, “The wages of sin is death.” That doesn’t just mean punishment for sin, but the result of doing “what I want to do” is all that is wrong in this world.

But Jesus who spoke about blessings and curses returned all the shopping carts. He did all that His Father commanded Him. His reward for that we too receive all the bad consequences we deserve for going away from God. On the cross He took on the wages of all our sin.

When Jesus said:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.

Jesus was talking about what we are now because He took our place. We have been forgiven from all that we have done wrong and all the good we have failed to do.

We can return the shopping carts to their right place, not because we have to, but because deep down we want to. Our lives are like one of us as we see our mom feeling ill and we ask her, “What can I do to help you?” We are not doing it to get on her good side or to avoid her complaints, but because we truly love her. What she tells us to do is not something we have to do, but what we want to do. Even better, we are like the little child who asks mom how he or she can help, not because he or she needs it, but because he or she loves mom. And mom gives him or her something to do, not because she needs it, but because she loves her son or daughter.

In Jesus there is something besides the injunctive -- how we feel others might see our actions, or the descriptive--what other people do. So we can do it based on the love God gives us.

In language we have the “active” and the “passive.” An active sentence would be, “He hit the ball.” The subject of the sentence does the action. But the passive would be, “The ball was hit by him.” Now the subject receives the action.

Our efforts to “return the cart”—active-- will always fall short because they are selfish. But because of Jesus we respond to what God has already done—passive. That does not fall short. We return the shopping cart, not to avoid punishment, not to avoid guilt, not to just do what everyone else is doing, but because we do it for others as Jesus has done it for us.