

Sermon 12, The Lord of the Human Condition, Exodus 4:10-17

Proposition: God shows Himself to Moses as the Lord of human ability (and disability) and therefore as the Lord of human help too.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus, we examine together this evening the final passage in Moses’ conversation with Yahweh at the burning bush. What we’ll see is that God is Lord of human ability and Lord of human help, and that He revealed both of those things to Moses, by word and by sending Moses a brother to help him with the task of delivering Israel out of Egypt.

I. The Lord of Human Ability, vv. 10-12

We look this morning at Moses’ final objection to the Lord’s commission. Rather than being hypothetical, like his previous objection, this one deals with an actual fact.

A. “Lord, I’m Disabled!”, v. 10

The objection is “Lord, I’m disabled!” Moses insists that he is unable to speak clearly. He has never been eloquent, not a long time ago when he was a little kid, teenager, young man, and not now, when he’s 80 years old and has talked only to sheep for the past several decades. In fact, his conversation with God has not made him any more eloquent, either.

Now, we read this conversation and we think, “Moses, you’re really disabled in the mouth? Seems to me like you’re holding your own against the Almighty pretty well.” And isn’t that interesting? You can’t lie to God, and we know that we can say absolutely whatever we think to Him because He already knows it anyway. Nonetheless, Moses insists that his speech and tongue are “heavy,” usually translated “slow.” Of course, the transition from spoken to written dialogue conceals how slowly Moses responded. We all know people who take so long to answer a question that we wonder if they’ve gone to sleep in between the time the question was asked and the time they start to answer it. Well, that was apparently Moses. He physically couldn’t spit

the words out quickly. Unlike his countryman Ben Shapiro, Moses spoke slowly, so slowly that he thought God would agree that he was not right for the job of talking Pharaoh into letting Israel go. Famous fast-talkers are thought to be better at persuasion than their slow-speaking counterparts. And so Moses says, “Don’t call me. I talk slow.”

B. Do You Think I Don’t Know and Control That Too?, v. 11

God’s response is swift and biting. Moses, do you think I don’t know and control that too? Who made man’s mouth?

Brothers and sisters, what abilities and disabilities do you have? In one sense, it doesn’t matter what they are; they are from God. He made your mouth. He made your eyes. He gave you the ability to speak and hear. If you wear glasses, that is from God. If you wear hearing aids, that’s from God too. If you can say 150 words per minute, and think that fast too, that’s a gift from God.

So that brings up the difficult question: Is God responsible for disability? Does God disable people? The answer has to be “Yes.” If you have Down Syndrome, God gave it to you. If you have cancer, God gave it to you. If you have Covid-19, God gave it to you. Of course, He used and uses secondary causes, both in striking and in healing. But these things can ultimately be traced back to Him. He gave you your mouth, and if your tongue doesn’t work right, He gave you that. He gave me a digestion that doesn’t handle gluten; He gave me a little sister who died at 3 months old. He also gave me the ability to read the Bible and compose and deliver sermons. And so it is with every one of you. Your unique gifts and needs are from God. That’s what we mean by Creation and Providence. And that’s also why you and I should not rage against our disabilities, why we should not be offended and angry at God because we can’t eat certain foods, enjoy certain activities, or perform certain tasks. Maybe you can’t walk. Maybe you can’t talk. Maybe you can’t eat, but instead use a feeding tube. Maybe you can’t stay up late without suffering fatigue, or move fast without chest pain. That disability is a gift from God with your name on it to train you toward greater faith, hope, and love. Within the order of nature, it is a gift of grace.

That is God’s point to Moses. Submitting to your disability and pain is ultimately a matter of submitting to God’s providence. Yes, it is perfectly appropriate to use medical science and techniques to get the best level of functioning you can. But is it also necessary to submit to God’s providence, even when it’s painful. This is a key part of the Christian life. Moses, in other words, had touched on the wrong theme if he wanted God to say, “Oh, Moses, I’m so sorry. That must be incredibly painful for you.” You will never hear God say those words. Jesus does weep with us. But He certainly did not apologize to Mary and Martha for letting Lazarus die, even though He had done it quite deliberately. In the same way, He deliberately took my ability to digest gluten, deliberately took your child or your bank account or your freedom or your country. If He did not do it, who did? This is the God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. This is the God who makes men deaf, dumb, and blind. He is Lord of disability. He is Lord of ability. Whatever you have is from Him. This life is about learning to be content, to find your peace in His will. Moses had to learn that lesson at the burning bush.

C. Anyway, I Will Be With Your Disability, v. 12

“Anyway,” God says, “I will be with your disability.” God promises to be with Moses’ mouth and teach him what to say. The ability to speak and the content of what Moses will say will both come from God. In the same way, He is with our feet when we walk, with our minds when we think, with our hands as we shape handicrafts. But He was with Moses in a special, particular way, a way of promise. It was through Divine help that Moses was able to persuade Pharaoh to even give him a hearing.

In the same way, you may have no money, no political power, no digestion, no health, no happiness, no home — but God will help you in that. He helped Moses, and He is as kind and faithful now as He was in the days of Moses.

II. The Lord of Human Help, vv. 13-17

Indeed, He is the Lord of human help. The rest of the passage is clearly about that, in that it shows God kindly giving Moses a helper, someone who will assist him precisely in his area of greatest disability. Even more amazing: God sends this gift after getting angry at Moses! Look with me at Moses’ submission to God’s providence in his life. This is so typical.

A. “All Right, Lord, Have It Your Way”, v. 13

Some have taken Moses’ “Send by the hand of whoever you will send” as a way of saying “Anyone but me!” But when compared with the later use of the same form, “Bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil,” clearly the form means “Choose whatever you want. Have it your way.” This is Moses’ enthusiastic “Here am I. Send me!”

And as I said, isn’t this typical? For years you fight God over your poor health. I’m so upset at how my eating, drinking, fun, even working is curtailed by this poor health! But eventually I’m so beaten down that I just say “Fine, Lord. Have it your way.”

Is that what you call submission to God’s providence? It’s a sort of submission. But it is a very huffy, “I-wish-you-weren’t-doing-this-to-me” kind of submission. It is hardly an enthusiastic “Thy will be done,” or even a humble “Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.” It is an “I can’t believe you would act like this, God. You really think that someone as unqualified, disabled, unready as myself is the one for your vast eternal plan? Whatever.”

And that is the attitude with which we so often receive the calling of God, whether it is a calling to office in the church, a calling to service in the community, a calling to step up in our own family and lead worship or sacrifice our own desires for the sake of the other, a calling to eat some humble pie at work, or what have you. We don’t dare openly rebel, but when God has met all our (unfair, tendentious) objections, we break down enough to say “Fine. Do what you want.”

Brothers and sisters, you know what I’m talking about. I know you do it because I know I do it. And do you know what God thinks about it?

B. The Anger of God Burns, v. 14

Oh, that’s right: As soon as He heard this response, His anger burned against Moses. How did Moses know God was angry? Did the burning bush flare up? Somehow, God communicated His anger against the man who dared to speak like this. And brothers and sisters, when you and I

respond with this kind of passive-aggressive “Fine” to God, it still makes Him angry. God is not interested in dealing with our little attempts to make it clear that we submit under protest but that we really think that this time, God is majorly screwing up. In fact, He hates that and it makes Him angry.

1. You Will Submit to My Calling

Why? The unstated demand here is “You will submit to my calling.” You will submit to God’s providence. Every knee will bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. If He is Lord, He has the right to take your health and abilities. He has the right to send you on whatever mission or task He wants. Notice how Moses addressed God as “Lord” but essentially said “I’m not interested in obeying your Lordship.” Is God Lord, or not? Does He have the right to decide what your life will be like, or not? Will you submit to His calling, or not? Brothers and sisters, when we pray “Thy will be done” we pray that we could know, obey, *and submit to* God’s will in everything.

2. Your Adequacy or Not Is Not the Issue

In other words, your adequacy or inadequacy is not the issue. The issue is whether you will submit to God’s providential working and direction in your life. If you are sure that God would never have called you to be a mom if He only knew how much you need to work outside the home, or if you’re sure that God would never have called you to work in retail if He only knew how much artistic creativity is burbling through your brain all the time, then you are in the position of Moses here. You are the one who insists that you know better than God, and that if He’s going to be that way that’s fine but it’s not something you’re going to approve of or celebrate because you are not the best you could be and God knows it.

But at the same time, though God is angry at Moses’ refusal to submit, He provides help. He is the Lord of human disability *and* the Lord of human help. And even in His anger, He treats Moses with perfect justice and perfect grace and mercy, giving him three different helps for his mission.

a) A Brother Levite to Help, vv. 14-16

The first of these helps is a brother Levite. Aaron is a glib speaker, so glib that he cooks up the entire golden calf incident. Moses can’t talk? Well, God will send someone who can. But it is clear from the entire rest of the story that Moses is firmly in the driver’s seat. Aaron may come into play for a few crucial speeches, but Moses actually ends up doing an awful lot of the talking. Of course, Moses at the burning bush didn’t know that. What he did know was the mercy and patience of God, who provided him with a helper.

Where have you seen God act like this in your life? Where have you provoked Him to anger, only to see Him turn around and treat you with kindness far beyond what you would be able to ask or expect?

b) Divine Aid in Speaking, vv. 15-16

In addition to a helper, God also promises Moses His own divine help. He had already given Moses the main points of his speeches in the second half of the previous chapter. Now He gives Moses promises of further assistance. Notice, too, how God defines the relationship between

God and the prophet by explaining that Moses is like God and Aaron is like the prophet. As we will see over and over throughout Exodus, the crucial role of the prophet is to present God's words to the people. In the same way, Aaron was called to present Moses' words to Pharaoh or to the people. Aaron was not a speechwriter. He was a spokesman, giving the official words of Moses to a live audience.

As you listen to the Bible and to preaching, you are hearing the words of God. I may be speaking them, but they are His words.

c) A Staff to Prove Your Calling, v. 17

And finally, God gives Moses "the rod of God." Yes, this was "just" Moses' pre-existing staff. But God gives it to him as a vehicle of miraculous powers. How? Because that's who God is. He can work without means, but He can also use means. In this case, He uses the means of the staff in order to reassure Moses about his calling. Moses may not have wanted to go, but he could hardly say that he was being sent unequipped. He had help. He had a helper. And he had a wonder-working rod.

God may have called you to sickness, pain, misery, or sorrow today. He may have called you to ill health, a difficult job, a bad marriage, to parent a rebellious child, or things even more difficult and trying. And yet He has not left you without His assistance in that either. He is the Lord of human ability and disability. Wherever you are on that scale, what do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you brag about it? God gave you everything that you have. Trust Him to continue to provide, so that you will be able to submit to His good providence no matter what.

And know, too, that He has provided the ultimate help for the human condition. Just as He called and equipped Moses to deliver His people from Egypt, so He has called and equipped His Son to deliver His people from this present evil age. If the present evil age in which you get sick, suffer, and die has got you down, fear not: the God who helped Moses is still helping Jesus Christ. Moses triumphed; how much more will the one who is greater than Moses? Brothers and sisters, God knows whatever you're going through today. It's precisely because of who you are that He has called you. Your ability and inability are not the issue; it's His calling that will triumph. Believe it. Trust Him. And obey. Go. Fulfill your calling. With you will go the Lord of human help. Amen.