

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; St. Michael and All Angels; September 29, 2024

+ Luke 10:17-20 +

“Extra Heavenward Help”

**The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!”**

**He told them, “I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Look, I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. And nothing will ever harm you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names have been written in heaven.”**

**“Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.”** Jesus speaks those words during his Sermon on the Mount: go the extra mile. And, without a doubt, these words are unsettling and confusing to his audience.

At the time, there was a law that said a Roman soldier could compel any resident of the empire to carry his gear for one Roman mile (about four fifths of what we call a mile). So, you could be picking grapes or building a wall by the road, minding your own business. And a soldier marching by could point at you and say, “Hey, Pally: you carry my stuff for the next mile.” And you had to do it. You had to drop what you were doing and march a mile with him.

But once you hit the first mile marker on the side of the road, he could force you to go no farther. One mile only, then you were free to go; that was the law. How Jesus’ words must make the Jewish people listening to him gasp! But the Romans are our enemies! They’re our cruel occupiers! Why would we ever give them more than the bare minimum required by the law?

But this is the command of God, part of his moral law: whenever possible, do more than the minimum for others. Give them – even your enemies! – extra. Why does God give such a difficult command? Because it is his own nature.

Consider: when human beings make rules and laws, they are not usually a reflection of our nature – who we are at our core. A city council passes a law that the speed limit on Main Street will be 35 miles per hour. Why? Is it in their soul to drive only 35? No. They make this law because some traffic expert gave them a presentation explaining why it’s the optimum speed limit for safety and traffic flow on Main Street. Or, a father makes a rule for his daughter: your curfew is ten o’clock. Why? Is it in his nature, is it in his own heart, to be home by ten? Probably not. We usually make rules and laws not because they reflect our nature, but simply as a means to an end of maintaining order and safety.

Because our rules and laws are not a reflection of our very selves, they are negotiable and changeable. The council may revisit and change that speed limit if there are too many accidents on Main Street. The wise father may listen to his daughter’s reasonable plea to move that curfew back to eleven, at least on Friday nights.

But God’s laws are not like that. God doesn’t make laws just to maintain order and safety. He gives laws that are his very own nature. That is why God’s moral law is never negotiable and never alterable. God does not change. And his moral law is his own heart, so it can never change, either.

Consider: why does God command us not to steal? Because it is his own nature not to steal; he already owns everything, so he couldn't steal if he wanted to. Why does he command us not to commit adultery? Because God's own heart is pure faithfulness, never breaking promises. Why command children to honor their parents? Because it is the nature of the eternally begotten Son of God to honor and obey his Father. God's moral laws are unchanging and unchangeable because reflect his very own self, the unchanging and unchangeable God.

So, why does God command us to go the extra mile, to give more than what's required, even to our enemies? By now you should know the answer: it is God's own heart to do more than necessary, even for his enemies. We are born enemies of God. And what does he do for his natural born enemies? He washes them clean and calls them his adopted children. He makes them heirs of eternal life through faith in the saving work of his Son, Jesus Christ. That sounds like going the extra mile to me! It sounds like going infinite miles with his enemies: making them his dear children in Jesus forever.

And there are so many ways God goes the extra mile with us and for us. He could have simply told us in his Word that Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. That was enough. But he goes the extra by giving us the Lord's Supper; another way for us to receive the grace of his forgiveness in Christ. There's that extra mile! The Holy Spirit could have inspired only two Gospels for us to read as witnesses of Jesus' saving work, as Scripture says, **"Every matter must be determined by two witnesses."** But instead of just two, the Spirit gives us four Gospels. There's that extra mile again! When you opened your pantry to find breakfast this morning, God would have been keeping his promise to provide for you if you found there only enough for your next meal. But you probably found a lot more than that – the extra mile, again.

Now let's think about St. Michael and all the other angels God created. What are they like? What do they do? Why did God create them? Did he need them and their services? If not, why did he make them? And why does it matter for you and me?

During my last year at the Seminary, I had a roommate named Joe. Joe decided to write his senior thesis on angels. His advisor warned him: "Bad idea. Your thesis needs to be at least fifteen pages, and you write on angels, you won't get more than eight." Joe ignored his advisor. Later he emerged from his room and said, "I need a new topic. I'm only on page six and I've got nothing else to say."

Indeed, for all the fanciful speculation and entertainment fiction about angels, the Bible tells us little about them and what they do. We know God made them sometime during the six days of Creation. We know some of them, led by Satan, rebelled and were cast out of heaven; those who remained faithful were confirmed in their righteousness, meaning they no longer have the option of rebelling. They are everlasting spirits, sexless, and do not reproduce. Those who have been confirmed are holy and pure, always listening to God and doing the work he gives them. That work includes rejoicing whenever a lost soul repents, praising God together with his saints in heaven, delivering messages to God's people, and watching over God's people and protecting them. They also deliver the souls of the saints to heaven, and appear as strangers to test us.

Does God need angels to accomplish any of that work? Does he need angels at all? Is the omnipotent God not capable of watching over all his people and protecting them himself? Is God at risk of throwing out his back if he lifts up those saintly souls to heaven himself? Is he incapable of delivering messages of hope and peace on his own? Is the praise of the heavenly saints insufficient? Of course not.

He does not need angels at all. So why did he create them? And why does he use them? Because it is God's heart – his very nature – to go the extra mile, even for his enemies. But especially for those he now calls his children forever.

In the Gospel, Jesus has appointed seventy-two of his followers to go out with his call to repentance, the call to turn from sin and put faith in the Son of God, because the kingdom of heaven is near. Among many other things, Jesus tells these seventy-two: **"Whoever listen to you listens to me. And whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."** Who is this preaching all about? It is all about Jesus, to believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But to go the extra mile and prove the authority of the message that he is the saving Son of God, Jesus also gives these seventy-two power in his name to drive out demons: **The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."** Jesus already has all power and authority over those angels who broke bad and followed Satan in rebellion. Jesus is love enough. Jesus is full salvation. Jesus is the promise of heaven. Not only that, Jesus is all-sufficient power to crush the head of Satan and all his demons. But is God's heart to give even more than everything in his Son. So he also gives those seventy-two to drive out demons in his name. **He told them, "I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven."**

About seventy years later, St. John received the vision you heard earlier from Revelation chapter 12. **There was also a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought with the dragon. The dragon fought back along with his angels, but he was not strong enough. There was no longer a place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down – the ancient serpent, the once called the Devil and Satan, the one who leads the whole inhabited earth astray – he was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.** Was God not strong enough to do this himself? Of course he was; here is more than enough divine power to vanquish Satan and his evil angels: **Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ...they conquered him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony.** That was more than enough to do the job: the salvation and the power of God and the authority of his Christ. The blood of the Lamb that defeats the Devil for eternity; God's eternal word of salvation; that was enough!

So why create angels to send into battle and beat the Devil too? Because, for one thing, it's awesome to think about! Just close your eyes and picture that scene! Good angels smashing into demons and Satan screeching and falling in a flash from of heaven! That's the view St. John sees in his Revelation and what Jesus sees in the Gospel! Satan being thrown down from heaven. This is God going the extra mile with his angels to comfort and calm our hearts, to fill us with even greater confidence that Satan is defeated for all eternity.

Would it be enough for God to say, "I have crushed Satan's head in my Son's death and resurrection"? Is it enough to hear Jesus say that he saw Satan falling from the sky? Of course. But he goes the extra mile and shows us his angels routing Satan's army, too. It is a little extra for our faith, a little more help heavenward. Would it be enough for God to promise that he himself will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom? Of course. But he does even more, and shows angels bringing Lazarus into Abraham's embrace. And isn't that awesome? Isn't that a little extra heavenward pull? Is it enough to hear Jesus say, **"Rejoice that your names are written in heaven."** Is that enough? Yes; but isn't it amazing, too, to hear his angel say such a similar thing to Daniel five centuries earlier: **"At that time your people will be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book."** Is it enough for God to speak his own saving promises? But

isn't it amazing that he does even more, that he sends his messengers from heaven to repeat them: **"You will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from his sins."** **"He is not here; he is risen, just as he said!"** **"This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."** Is it fully satisfying to know that God himself will hold his shield over us until the time comes for us to join him in heaven? Of course. But he is so good, so thoroughly good, that he goes the extra mile with his protection: **He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways.**

Grace upon grace, love on top of love. This is the heart of our God, and his angels are one more way to see it. Does he need them? No. But his heart is all about us, everything for us, every mile, every step, to strengthen us and thrill our hearts. And from this heart of abundant grace and help come his holy angels, to offer us even more heavenward help. Amen.