

## **Sock It To Me (Just A Little Bit)**

### **Psalm 24**

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for God has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.

They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Such is the company of those who seek God,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

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Psalm 24

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## **I.**

I received an email last week from The Old Man of The Pulpit, the Rev. Gary Larson. Gary is fellow Presbyterian minister and colleague from *way* back in the day when I was fresh out of seminary and just starting out in parish ministry. At that point he was the a long-tenured pastor of the “big” church in Olean, NY, while I served two smaller congregations, located nearby and which were “yoked” together; one in Cuba, NY and one in Allegany, NY.

By the time I meet Gary he was a seasoned, grizzled, and cantankerous veteran of ministry with an ENORMOUS sized pastor’s heart equalled only by his deep, raspy, and booming voice. Though long retired, the years away from the pulpit have not mellowed him in the least. He is still ornery as ever; which I appreciate. Gary has been a mentor and friend to me, and at a couple of key moments, kept me in the game. So, when he contacts me I pleased to respond.

## **II.**

Gary’s most recent communication clearly suggests that he has managed to get a big fat bee in his very broad bonnet. I noted he sent it to 25 other folks as well, almost all of whom are unknown to me. However, given the content of the message I assume them to be ministers or church folk/professionals as well. He begins by saying: *“If you’re looking for something to preach/speak about, how about COURTESY AND RESPECT? Does the Bible, Koran, Jesus, whomever have anything to say about the subjects?”* Which is an important topic and a fair question.

He then goes on a bit of a rant about the state of our nation’s politics and some examples (which I will skip) then he ends with: *“Are there no lines anymore, no rules, no good behavior/bad behavior? I’m sick and tired of those boasting that America is number 1. Dear God. We have lost most moral foundation.”* While I always welcome any idea or notion to serve as inspiration for a sermon, I was not immediately moved by the topic so relegated it to my mental back burner along with 20 or 30 other things.

### III.

Over the course of the next few days, however, a few folks began to respond to Gary's query. Let us call them Dean, Matt and Drew because those are their real names. To me, this is where things got interesting. Out of necessity, I have redacted their reasoned and well-articulated responses while still hoping to convey the gist of their perspective on the matter.

Dean began with the familiar phrase, *"Respect must be earned."* He then added, *"Admittedly, that's difficult these days, with all the forces arrayed against deference to any person, position, or institution. What I would hope for is not automatic respect or disrespect but something like a healthy skepticism about institutions and officials at every level grounded in a presupposition that individuals and institutions deserve a certain respect until they prove otherwise. In other words, we shouldn't generalize from one or even some failures that all such people or institutions are equally guilty."* Fair enough. A level-headed and even-handed approach.

### IV.

Matt built on Dean's response and weighed in from his perspective as a professor of Philosophy at the collegiate level. Focusing more on causation than remedy he said: *"Why and how has this occurred? My thoughts link this situation with the atrophy of liberal arts education, particularly in the fields of the humanities. Financial security and advancement is the number one reason students go to college. Not to learn, not for truths or wisdom. When ethics and morals are relegated to the provinces of mere opinion, respect and conscience are lampooned as modes of weak or powerless individuals."*

He concluded by saying, *"How does this blindness get remedied? I'm unsure. Being unashamed to call out crass and selfish motivation? Endorsing community over individualism? Lauding the pursuit of the more noble truths, but also insisting that there are, in fact, truths beyond 'scientific facts' or the 'bottom line?'"* Again, a fair response that is well-stated.

### V.

Finally, Drew said, *"I wholly agree that a large aspect of the breakdown in basic respect and critical thinking overall is the quick skid away from the humanities. When we skip over the humanities, we skip over the root--- humans. We see people as nothing more than objects of value (or lack thereof)*

*to our selfish purpose and motive. We see them as just a collection of chain reactions, DNA splitting, and cells. We forget that the undefined soul (or spark, or whatever you want to call it) is in there and has meaning, purpose, desire, jealousy, love, etc. By failing to educate (both in public schools and post secondary schools) our young minds on the value of the human experience and the value of the human creature and all its confusing intricacies, we are basically saying that people don't matter; only what we can use them for or what will cause us to become billionaires.*

*In reflecting on the lived experience of the other, I am able to reflect on my own, integrate their life and mine, learn to think and look beyond my limited view of the world. I can start to perceive the viewpoints and experience of others. Will I always agree with them? No. But I can understand they come from a very real set of circumstances and life. And that helps me to temper down my own selfish wants and desires.”* Once again, a fine response and an insightful perspective.

## **VI.**

Normally, I don't engage in these types of virtual interactions or discussions. In fact, I have a hard and fast rule that if I receive something as a forward, or as part of a larger group, I refuse to even open it up and read it *regardless* of who is sending it. Life is short. I barely have enough time to do the things which are required of me without wandering around cyberspace engaging in idle curiosity or speculation. For Gary Larson, though, I make an exception. The reason I do so is fairly ironic: I respect the guy.

## **VII.**

Which is not to say that I had *any* intention of writing a sermon about the biblical and theological underpinnings of respect. That said, it just so happened that I read these responses at 2 a.m. this past Tuesday morning while downstate on a quick visit to Linda's family in Allegany; which is where I first met Gary. I was awakened from slumber and could not fall back to sleep so I decided to get up and use the quiet to take a try at the sermon. I began by reading today's text from Psalm 24 hoping for some inspiration and came up with nothing, nada, zilch. I didn't have a clue about where to begin with this text. Frustrated, I decided to procrastinate by checking my email. In for a dime in for a dollar, I read the responses from Dean, Matt and Drew. It was then that I had a bit of a triune epiphany.

## VIII.

First, don't be surprised if you post a response to a group email being sent out to a bunch of preachers and one of the lazier of the lot lifts your words to help write their sermon that week. Second, that whatever issues we have as a nation and society when it comes to respect (or a lack thereof) run quite a bit deeper (at least in my mind) than the current drift away from teaching humanities, rampant political polarization or, for that matter, the decline in relevance and influence of the church in American life. While certainly related to all three of these, the real problem begins when we forget, or ignore, that the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

Moreover, such problems (and, really, all of the problems we face as a people and a planet) will persist and continue to worsen unless and until we find within ourselves enough of the good sense God gave geese to remember *who* and *what* we are, and *to whom* we belong. Which, I would assert, is the purpose of the 24th Psalm: it serves to remind us of just how BIG God really is, and how small we actually are.

## IX.

Which is exactly the *opposite* of the message proclaimed by the much more familiar Psalm which proceeds it. There, the psalmist envisions and conveys the welcome image of a much "smaller" God. One who is intimate and personal. A God of comfort and companionship who leads us, provides for our needs and overflows our cup, and *makes* us to lie down in green pastures by the still water so as to restore our soul. A God who accompanies and protects us in the valley of the shadow of death through which each one of us must walk so that we may fear no evil; offering the assurance that we *shall* dwell in the house of such a Lord forever.

It is a wonderful imaging of our deity, isn't it? Kind of makes you feel warm and fuzzy all over. So much so, that we are lulled into believing that we can go off and do whatever we wish and that God will be there for us whenever the going gets tough and, certainly, that we will be there with God at the end of our days.

## **X.**

This is the same kind of thinking, or faith, which results in “small” salvation. That the cross is all about *you*, if only you will accept Christ as your *personal* Lord and Savior such that all our “stealing cookies from the cookie jar” kinds of sin are forgiven. This is not at *all* how the Apostle Paul imagines the salvific work of the cross. For Paul, the cross isn’t personal. It a *cosmic* event which mends the tear caused by sin in the very fabric of reality. Or, to continue the analogy, cracked the whole cookie jar.

When we lose a sense of respect for God as Lord and Creator of the world, it is inevitable that we lose respect for all that is *in* that world: the creation, our fellow creatures and, eventually, ourselves. While many may believe we can make ourselves feel “big” by treating those around us as “small,” Psalm 24 seeks to remind us of just how small *each* of us actually is with respect God.

## **XI.**

The third part and final aspect of my epiphany is that Aretha Franklin really was the “Queen of Soul.” Not just soul music, but the music of the Soul.

*R-E-S-P-E-C-T*

*Find out what it means to me*

*R-E-S-P-E-C-T*

*Take care, TCB*

*Oh (sock it to me, sock it to me*

*Sock it to me, sock it to me)*

*A little respect (sock it to me, sock it to me*

*Sock it to me, sock it to me)*

*Whoa, babe (just a little bit)*

*A little respect (just a little bit)*

Like many of you, I’ve sung along to this song a great many times in my life. However, it wasn’t until I was writing this sermon that I took note of the lyric, “Take care, TCB.” Which, I discovered, is short for “Take Care of Business.” The 24th Psalm is all about TCB; God’s business, not our own.

## **XII.**

The Psalmist proclaims that the earth is the Lord's, and *all* that is in it. That the earth is founded on the seas and established on the rivers, which represent the chaos which God keeps at bay so that we might live (in "Presby-Speak") a life of decency and order. That the distinction between that which is holy and that which is not is *absolute*, and not culturally or socially determined. That clean hands and pure hearts are not relativistic. That we must not swear deceitfully or lift up our souls to what is false without expecting grave consequences. That those who seek God will absolutely receive blessing and vindication, while those who do not will, given enough time, be cursed. That the King of Glory stands at the Ancient Doors and knocks, and to any who hear and lift up their heads the Gates will open so that the King of Glory may come into our lives, and into our world.

And that, Gary, is my sermon on respect. Sock it to me (just a little bit). Amen.