

Is God Manipulative?

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as "Good Shepherd" Sunday. Sermons will typically revolve around this theme of Jesus being the Good Shepherd who will lead the people and give us everything that we need. There will be a uniting of all people, regardless of national origin as people come together in their belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of the world. In today's Gospel reading; which is one of the "I am" statements of Jesus revealing His identity; Jesus asserts that unlike the then current religious leaders, Jesus willingly protects God's flock - even to death. In this reading, Jesus is taking the title of Good Shepherd which is attributed to God in the Old Testament, as we hear in the 23rd Psalm.

When Jesus talks about other sheep that do not belong to this fold and that He must bring them into the fold so that there is one flock, we usually hear that Jesus is talking about Gentiles, all those who are not Jewish. However, there is another way to hear this verse which is actually more consistent with the Bible. From Biblical history, we know that after King Solomon's death, the kingdom split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, or Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians around 740 BC. As part of the practice of the Assyrians, people from Israel were deported to other conquered lands and people from those areas were brought to Israel. Usually, these people were known enemies of those in the land to which they were brought. Over time, the Israelites and these others intermingled and formed the Samaritan culture. These Samaritan Israelites remained Jewish religiously and worshipped God at Mt. Gerizim.

The southern kingdom, Judah, had been conquered by the Babylonians around 587 BC. After the return from the Babylonian exile, these Israelites reorganized their Jewish traditions and can be referred to as the Judean Israelites. The center of their worship was the Temple in Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, these Judean

Israelites included the lands of the former southern kingdom as well as *Galilee*. Because of the differences in emphasis on worship and other doctrinal differences, the Judean Israelites and Samaritan Israelites did not like each other, thinking that they were the true Jews while the other group was not.

Throughout the Old Testament, one of the Messianic goals of the Judean Israelites was to unite all Israelites, regardless of where they lived. So, the Judean Israelites, the Samaritan Israelites and the Jews who lived outside of the lands of the kingdom of Israel under King David would be all brought together and there would be one religion; there would be no denominations, so to speak. By way of analogy, it would be like there were no Lutherans, no Catholics, no Baptists, no Methodists - just Christians.

If we accept that uniting all the Jewish people was one of Jesus' main missions, we can better understand why Jesus seemed so harsh to the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus for a healing for her daughter. We also can better understand Jesus saying that His mission was to the Israelites and not the *Gentiles*. In today's Gospel reading, we can hear Jesus as referring to this reunification of all Jewish people under Him.

While all this makes for a 'feel-good' sermon, especially when we think of Jesus as the *Good Shepherd* of the *Gentiles* as well, we do have some troubling verses in the second part of this text. These verses are the ones where Jesus talks about having the power to lay down His own life and take it back up again. These verses and others throughout the Gospels, and especially in John's Gospel account have led to the understanding that Jesus actually was in control of the whole situation and that He was not an 'innocent puppet' to the actions of the religious authorities and Pilate. If Jesus was not this innocent victim, then He must have orchestrated, manipulated the situation to achieve what He wanted to achieve.

This then leads to the question of whether or not God manipulates us, forcing us to do what God wants us to do. My wife and I have recently started watching the TV series "Lucifer" which ran from 2016 to 2021 where Lucifer takes a 'vacation' from being the guardian of Hell, goes to Los Angeles and decides that he wants to stay there. Without getting too much into storylines, one of the main themes that runs throughout the episodes is that Lucifer and the other celestial beings assert that God is manipulative of everyone for God's own personal satisfaction and for God's own plan. So, is God manipulative?

This question has been on the minds of people for thousands of years and leads to questions about free will, determinism and the like. Since these questions have not been totally resolved by some the greatest minds over the centuries, I am not presuming to be able to give the ultimate answer this question but hope to shed some light on this important question.

The idea of free will versus determinism is one of the theological sticking points between some Christian denominations. Suffice it to say that some believe that we do have free will and choice over things that we can control, but for those things that are beyond our control, we have no free will. In other words, from our perspective we do have free will and can exercise the ability to choose. However, from God's perspective, because God is all-knowing, God will know what we will do, thus giving the appearance that we have no choice.

Perhaps when others say that Jesus was in control of His fate and orchestrated the events which led to His death and resurrection, what is meant is that Jesus knew human nature so well that when faced with the possibility of losing one's power and influence, people will do whatever they can to stay in control and keep that power. When faced with either ceding power and control or ensuring keeping that power and control, those with the most to lose will opt to keep what they have at all costs. In other words, change is difficult for people to accept and embrace.

People think in the short-term, their lifetimes; whereas God and Jesus see the long-term.

Being manipulative implies that someone will control what others do for their own benefit, usually at the expense of those who are manipulated. Using this general understanding of manipulation, we see that God and Jesus do not act for their benefit, but for the benefit of others. We may or may not see the benefits that we are given, but they are there, especially when we consider the long-term, that is when we consider beyond our earthly lives. When we consider last week's Gospel reading of Luke 24:47 where our repentance leads to forgiveness, we see that we do have a choice - to repent or not. We may need some help and guidance along the way in order to see our need for repentance and that is where the Holy Spirit comes in to provide that.

Because of our stubbornness and unwillingness to always do what God wishes us to do (which incidentally is the best thing for us), God continually provides us chances to turn our hearts to God and make the choice to follow God's ways and forego our own selfish wants.

So, did Jesus manipulate the religious authorities and Pilate into doing what Jesus wanted done? Not really, since there was no benefit for Jesus in His dying and rising again since He was already divine. Jesus relied on the sinful human nature of those who opposed Him making those choices which protected their power in the short-term and led to Jesus' death. Once we see that God is not manipulative but rather tries to persuade us to do what is best for us in the long-term, we can see the love, grace and mercy that God wishes to bestow upon us.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/p8i2T5RqJDw>

Service: <https://youtu.be/PuXhwsU31Ng>