

From First to Last

A Spiritual Life-Lesson from the Back of the Line

“Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” Micah 7:18-19, NASB

Perhaps most of us, at one time or another, when leaving a store, have experienced being first in waiting at an unattended checkout lane and counter only to see another lane open up and the attendant then serve people who should have been served after after you. Well, it happened to me the other evening. Allow me to share with you a lesson I learned from it.

After meeting my wife to eat at our favorite place the other evening (*Steak 'n Shake* for any who might be curious), I told her that I needed to shop for a few groceries and run a couple of errands after our meal. So I drove to the grocery store, procured a few items, and then decided as I drove by it, to stop in at one of the local “city garage-sale stores”—you know what I’m talking about, could be *Goodwill*, *Salvation Army*, *DAV* or a local mission store. These stores take in people’s discards and sell them. One person’s trash becomes another’s treasure. Frankly, I like going into those stores to look around, even to buy something now and then. I’ve found coffee cups and sturdy drinking glasses that our family both likes and uses. But usually when I go to a store like that, my first stop is at the book shelves labeled “religious and inspirational.” And so it was that evening. I looked and found a book titled *The Presence Driven Church* (Not the real title, but close. As you may or not be aware of, I just wrote an article on “God’s Present of His Presence” that appears on this website and others.). [1] So having written about the subject of His presence, my curiosity was piqued; I grabbed the book and proceeded to the front of the store to check out. But there was nobody at the check out counter. So I waited . . . and waited . . . the only one standing in front of four unattended checkout counters. “Isn’t there anyone working here tonight?” I thought. Impatience began to arise within. I just wanted to purchase the book and get on with my evening.

Then I noticed a lady move to the farthest checkout counter from where I was waiting to open it up. “Oh, she’ll call me over” I thought. After all, I had waited. I was first in line. She saw me standing. But guess what? She didn’t signal me to come over and get in line first. No, she motioned for two other women to take their place at her counter. “Very inconsiderate,” I thought. So I moved to get in line after the two ladies who were receiving “preferential treatment.” They had many items in their carts . . . mostly clothing. The first lady had article after article. Her checking out was tediously slow. I was getting irritated. “Is this book worth my waiting?” I asked myself. Maybe I should just put it down and walk out of the store. No. Don’t be impatient, I told myself. So I waited . . . my annoyance growing despite my pep talk to myself. “You know what?” I thought, I’m just going to wait and when I check out, I’m going to tell the checker how rude she had been to me and how she ought to put first customers

first. That's what I'm going to do. But while you're waiting, I told myself, why don't you start to read the book on God's presence? Hypocritical, I know. Reading about God's presence amidst growing impatience. Somehow, the two do not seem to "line-up" together. But I started to read the book anyway . . . make the time go faster. Finally, the first lady finished checking out. I thought, now the checker will invite me to the counter because I only have one thing to check out, and the next young customer had, you guessed it, a whole cart load of stuff! But the checker seemed indifferent to my waiting there . . . and inside my annoyance increased. She started checking the girl out. Then she noticed me standing there and somehow the error of ignoring me dawned upon her. She realized she'd made a mistake. She said to me—now are you ready for this—"I am sorry sir. I should have checked you out first." She didn't say it once. With a humble voice, she said it once and mumbled it a couple of more times. She was distraught and contrite.

My heart melted. The checkout lady's apology rebuked me. I thought to myself about myself . . . Here you were impatiently thinking of railing and going off on her for her tactless inconsiderateness, and now spontaneously she apologizes to you. Within the confines of my heart, I felt embarrassed. "Oh," I said trying to make light of the uncomfortable situation, "it's just given me time to start reading the book." Further, I told the checker and the ladies in front of me, who had heard the checker's apology, "Well, we'll just call it, 'Ladies first!' You do still believe in that, don't you?" The young African-American high school girl in front of me said she believed in *chivalry*. Imagine . . . a young girl still believing in chivalry! My having been snubbed from getting my place in line suddenly became a non-issue. My heart was relieved. Though it took me much longer than I had anticipated, with a healed attitude I finally checked out, and by the way, having perused most and read some of the book!

In the aftermath of reflecting upon this incident, I thought to myself, "How I felt after the checker's apology to me must somewhat mirror how God feels about us when we apologize to Him for not giving Him first place in the line of our lives. Now I know, my experience that evening was not exactly analogous to the Lord's feelings about us. For example, He doesn't offend or get impatient with us. He's longsuffering. But how often do we serve ourselves and others before before Him in the business of life? Then there comes that clarifying moment when suddenly we realize the error that we've ignored serving Him first. So we tell Him we're sorry. Does His heart melt toward us as mine did toward the checkout person that evening? I believe so, for that is God's character. All He's looking for from us is an acknowledgement on our part that we have offended Him, and when the repentance comes, that's it! It's over. His heart delights in our response of admitting we erred by ignoring Him, but now desire to serve Him *first* and others *second* (Matthew 22:37-40). Toward such repentant hearts, Micah tells us that the Lord does not retain "**his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy**" (Micah 7:18b, KJV).

ENDNOTE

[1] Larry DeBruyn, "God's Present of His Presence," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, January 1, 2014 (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2014/01/01/the-present-of-his-presence/>).