

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 3, Patronage and Reciprocity 6-min. Video Overview

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All right, today we're going to crack a code. Seriously. We're about to uncover the fundamental social operating system of the entire first-century Mediterranean world.

And trust me, once you get this system, this idea of patronage and reciprocity, it changes how you read everything from back then. We're talking historical accounts, sacred texts, the whole shebang. So let's dive right in.

So let's start with a thought experiment. Imagine you need a loan, right? Or maybe you're looking for a job. Or heck, your house just got flooded, and you need help.

Today, what do you do? You go to a bank, you hit up an insurance company, you browse LinkedIn, you order supplies on Amazon Prime. Now, imagine none of that exists. No banks, no insurance, no HR departments, no Amazon.

How on earth would you survive? I mean, how would you get anything done? Well, that was the everyday reality of the ancient world. And this right here, this is the absolute core difference. Our world, it's all built on these big impersonal systems.

Their world, it was built on people. That's it. To get what you needed, your go-to resource wasn't some institution; it was a relationship.

The old saying: it's not what you know, it's who you know. For them, that wasn't just a saying; it was literally everything. So just let that sink in for a second.

If you can't rely on a system, who can you rely on? Well, the answer was always, always a person. It had to be. You had to find someone who had what you needed, or just as importantly, who knew the person who did.

Your entire survival, day in and day out, depended on this web of personal connections. And look, this wasn't some kind of informal backup plan, you know? This wasn't what you did when the real system failed. As the philosopher Seneca, who was writing right in the middle of all this, tells us, this system of giving and receiving favors was the system.

It was the absolute glue holding their entire society together, the main thread in the social fabric. Okay, so if this was the game, you got to know the players, right? And there were two main roles that defined pretty much every interaction where someone needed something. Let's break them down.

You had the patron, and you had the client. So first up, you've got the patron. This is the person with the juice, right? They've got the power, the resources.

We're talking money, land, jobs, and maybe most importantly, the right connections. They are the ones in a position to give. And then, on the other side, you have the client.

This is the person who's in need. They get the favor, they get the help, but, and this is a huge but, it is not a free lunch. When you accept that gift, you are also accepting a very real obligation to pay it back.

Not with money, but with stuff like public gratitude, unwavering loyalty, and your own services whenever the patron calls on you. This really breaks down that unwritten contract perfectly. You can see on one side, the patron gives out real, tangible stuff: money, food, maybe a piece of land.

But look what the client gives back. It's not stuff you can hold, but it's incredibly valuable. Things like public praise, which is huge for the patron's reputation, political support, and just being on call for whatever's needed down the road.

This wasn't a one-time deal. It was a lifelong relationship. Now, if all of this is starting to sound a little familiar, it should.

I mean, just think about the opening scene of *The Godfather*. It's a perfect, even if it's a bit dramatic, modern example of this whole ancient system. The Undertaker comes asking for a favor, Don Corleone grants it, and what does he say? Someday, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do a service for me.

It's the exact same principle. A favor is given, and a long-term bond of obligation is forged right then and there. But hold on.

It wasn't just a simple, two-tier system with the super-rich on top and everybody else on the bottom. No way. This was a complex web that pretty much everyone was tangled up in.

And that brings us to another really, really important player in this game. The broker, or the mediator. So think about it.

What happens if you're a client who needs help, but you don't actually know a patron who can give it? Well, you've got to find a broker. This is the person who can make the introduction. Their gift, their favor, isn't the actual money or the job.

It's the connection. They are the ultimate networkers of the ancient world. And you see this system playing out at every single level of society.

I mean, way up at the top, you have Roman governors, like plenty, acting as brokers for people who wanted a favor from the emperor himself. Then you have social equals, guys like Pilate and Herod Antipas, trading favors back and forth as friends to build political alliances. And it goes all the way down to the village level.

You've got peasants and farmers exchanging tools and grain because they knew, if you got a reputation for not returning a favor, you could be socially ruined. It was everywhere. Okay, now here's where it gets really interesting.

There is a word for this entire social engine, this whole system of favors and gratitude. And it's a word you know, but we've almost totally locked it into a religious box. In their world, the word grace was the everyday practical term for how society actually worked.

Yeah, grace. The Greek word is *karis*, and it had this amazing three-part meaning all rolled into one. First, *karis* was the giver's willingness to give the favor in the first place.

Second, it was the actual gift itself. And third, this is so important: it was the gratitude that the receiver showed in return. So it's not three different things; it's one beautiful circular idea.

And this wasn't just some abstract philosophical concept. They had a powerful image for it. They pictured this whole cycle as the three graces, three goddesses you see in art all the time, dancing in an eternal circle.

One gives, one receives, and one returns. It's a constant flow. Seneca, that philosopher we mentioned earlier, really breaks this stance down for us.

Step one, giving the benefit. Step two, receiving the benefit. And step three, returning the benefit.

It's like each of the graces represents one part of this beautiful motion, passing the gift along, making sure it always comes back to the start, so the dance can continue. But Seneca also gives a really stark warning. He says that if you break this cycle anywhere, if you fail to show gratitude and return the favor, it's not just impolite.

He says the beauty of the whole thing is destroyed. It was a disgrace, a major violation of how the world was supposed to work. Here's a modern way to think about it.

In a world with no credit scores, your reputation for gratitude was your credit score. That's it. If you were known as a grateful person, someone who always returned a favor, people would line up to help you.

Your credit was good. But if you got a reputation for being ungrateful, you'd be cut off from the network. And that was pretty much a social death sentence.

All right, so we've got the theory down, right? The patrons, the clients, the brokers, this whole dance of grace. Now let's see how this ancient social network actually plays out in a famous story from the ancient world. The story of the Roman centurion in the Gospel of Luke.

Okay, let's just map out the players here using what we've learned. The centurion, he's the client. He needs a huge favor.

His servant is dying. But notice, he's also a patron to the local Jewish community because he built their synagogue. So who does he send to Jesus? The Jewish elders.

They are the brokers. They're indebted to him, so they go and plead his case. And in this story, Jesus is positioned as the ultimate patron, the one with the unique power to grant this incredible gift of healing.

And this is where another key word, *pistis*, which we usually translate as faith, fits in so perfectly. See, in this context, faith wasn't just some abstract internal belief. It was the word you use to describe your profound trust in a patron's power and their reliability.

It meant you had total confidence that this patron could and would deliver on their promise. So when the centurion says that famous line, just say the word because I myself am a man under authority; he is speaking fluent patronage. He's essentially saying, look, I get how this works.

I recognize your authority as a massive patron, and my trust in you is absolute. And Jesus's reaction, his amazement, shows that he totally got it. He understood that this was an incredible expression of trust, all within this cultural system they both understood.

And that really brings us to our final thought for today. Once we understand that in the ancient world, every single gift of grace automatically created this beautiful, sacred obligation of gratitude, well, it kind of forces us to ask a question about our own lives, doesn't it? How does that change the way we think about receiving a gift? Is any gift ever truly free? Or does every act of grace, in some small way, call for a response?