

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOD?

Luke 15:1-2, 25-32

There is an old tale that speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven's gate.

The angel said, "Here's how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in."

"Okay," the man said, "here goes. I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, never even thought about it."

Gabriel replied, "That's wonderful. That's worth two points."

"Two points? Is that all?" said the man rather incredulously. "OK, I attended church all my life. I served in the church on committees and even as an elder. And I supported its ministry with my money."

"Terrific!" said Gabriel. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the angel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"You got it! Come on in."

Today, we are going to talk about grace. We're going to do that by looking again at the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Remember last week? We learned that the parable is more about the father than the prodigal son. It is about the heart of God. What is His heart? To seek and save those who are lost!

That's another way of saying the parable is about grace. But to understand how grace is illustrated in this parable, we must understand what was going on with both sons. The younger son lives openly in wickedness and immorality. He breaks all the rules. He's the bad boy. The older son stays at home. He works hard at the family estate. He does everything he is supposed to do. He's the good boy.

THE YOUNGER SON

Last week, we saw the restoration of the younger son – the prodigal son. Today, we will see how the father's love was offered to the older son. When we grasp the father's heart from both perspectives, we'll have a better understanding of God's grace.

Jesus told this story to Pharisees and teachers of the Law. These were the religious leaders of the day. They were angry at Jesus because He hung out with tax-collectors and sinners, the outcasts, the down-and-out people, “low-lives,” criminals. Those Pharisees didn’t like that.

When He spoke of the restoration of the prodigal son, who was one of those sinners, it caught them off-guard. For them, salvation was about doing all you can to earn God’s favor: Good people go to heaven, bad people don’t!

The prodigal son was bad. He did not deserve unconditional forgiveness. He had to earn it. He acted in a shameful way. He asked for his share of his father’s estate. Wealth was normally distributed after the patriarch of the family had died, or at least when he was too old to work.

Even then, the estate was used to provide for the parents. To sell off the inheritance, go away to a distant country and then blow it all on wine and women amounted to saying, “I don’t want anything to do with you. I wish you were dead!”

But circumstances didn’t go the right way. Life happened. Disillusioned, the younger son returned home, hoping to be taken on as a hired servant. One day he would pay back his father and be restored as a son. But the father acts out of grace and forgives his son unconditionally, immediately upon his repentance. And then he throws a party. That’s where we’ll pick up the story of the older brother.

THE OLDER BROTHER

So, who is the older brother? If the Prodigal Son represents sinners who repent and receive God’s forgiveness, who does the older son signify? Some people say he is the dutiful Christian, a Christian with an attitude maybe, but generally a good guy. The prodigal was a problem, the one who needed to change. But that’s not true! The older brother represents people who think they have done enough to earn salvation or to keep God’s favor.

In this parable, Jesus redefines sin. In the younger brother, He shows the traditional view, that typically bad, very bad people need Christ. In the older brother, He broadens that view. Both wanted the father’s things – his estate – but not a relationship with the father. Both sons use the father to get what they really want. So Jesus uses the parable to surprise and shock anyone who thinks that they are good enough for God.

In our story, the older brother is out in the field and comes in, back to the house. He hears the sounds of a really big and important party. The word “music” in our text is *sumphonia*. It’s where we get the English word “symphony.” The word “dancing” is *choros*, a band of singers and dancers hired to perform. It’s where we get our word “chorus.”

They slaughtered the fattened calf. Cooking beef was rare (sorry about the pun!), in those days. They did so only for big occasions. And invited the whole village to celebrate. The point is that this party is no small affair. Something really important is going on.

The son asks one of the servants the reason for the party. His answer was that the younger son was back “safe and sound.” That word means more than being out of danger. It means wholeness, well-being. In the Old Testament, it was the idea of “shalom,” the peace of full reconciliation.

That’s the reason for the celebration; the prodigal trusted his father’s heart, has been restored and now has peace with his father. Romans 5:1 says the same thing: Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

But look at the older brother’s response. He became angry and refused to go into the house to celebrate with his father. Why do you think he was so mad? The text gives us several clues.

First, we see that he complains about the lack of his father’s generosity. The language he uses is that of a slave. He doesn’t seem to be talking like he is a son, much less the first-born. This man sees life in his father’s family as a duty, an obligation, something to be endured. He’s no different than his younger brother.

Pastor Tim Keller calls this “duty without beauty.” Obedience is a grind, a duty. The older brother found obedience useful, but he didn’t love his father. There was no relationship. He was just as far away from his father as the younger son was in the distant country. That’s a point Jesus makes.

Older brothers see God as useful. They are results oriented. Religion is a duty to get something out of God, to get what you want. But sons find God beautiful. They delight in God; their obedience is not to get things from God, but to be like Him, to enjoy Him, because they love Him.

The older son was angry because a party was thrown for his undeserving brother. Look at how he puts it. The father gives a fattened calf for the bad son, but not even a measly old goat for the good son. He believed that his father owed him that goat because he remained home and worked on the estate. He owes him for all that he did.

What a display of self-righteousness! “Dad, you owe me!” But he goes even further. He says he never disobeyed his father’s orders. That’s the language of a really self-righteous guy. Jesus uses this to demonstrate the problem of self-righteousness. We cannot be good enough to earn salvation. We cannot be good enough to keep God’s favor. That’s not grace. Listen to these words from Titus 3:5-6:

He saved us not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

John MacArthur calls this self-righteousness an illusion and offers a helpful way of understanding the problem: Even if what we do is good, it lacks purity and the motive to glorify God. Even when we do good things, we always want to get something.

Take, for example, good things you do – we do – around the church. You might serve as a Sunday school teacher, or on a committee, visiting someone in the hospital, singing in the choir . . . preaching a sermon. Probably, your primary intent is to give God glory. But do you hope that someone notices, that somebody – even God – gives you a pat on the back? Do you feel bad when you don’t get just a little of the credit you think you deserve? We all struggle with that, don’t we?.

Even if our primary motive is to glorify God, our good works are impure. And anything not done for the glory of God, but for the glory of man, is sin.

Christian service, when done for personal motives of any sort, tends to produce self-satisfaction, self-gratification, and pride. This gives us a false sense of well-being. If we are not careful, it can deceive us into thinking that through what we do, we are good enough for God.

Self-righteousness causes problems. A self-image based on performance is masked by arrogance and anger. We look down on people who fail to perform like we do. We think too highly of ourselves.

That was evident in the older son. He was self-righteous and angry at his brother. So he complained about his father's mercy toward a man who he believed did not deserve mercy. In his pride and self-righteousness, he found fault with his father's actions, both toward him and his brother. In effect, he was perfect and the father had sinned. It was as if he said, "Father, I don't need your forgiveness, but you need mine." What a way to dishonor his father! What a way to dishonor God!

But the father's response was one of tenderness and grace. He calls the older son to embrace the language of family. He says "my son" – actually the word is more intimate - "my child." It's an endearing term. He reminds him that the prodigal is his brother, as well as a son. And he says "All that I have is yours." That's a picture of God's endless grace and abundant resources to all who belong to Him.

You see, the party wasn't really about the younger son. It was about the father. It was about the father's grace and mercy, the unmerited favor that God extends to sinners like you and me. In heaven, we give praise to God, not to the sinners who are saved. The celebration is about God!

We don't know how the older son responded to his father's grace. But we do know that we can't be good enough to earn salvation. We can't be good enough to keep God's favor.

THE TRUE OLDER BROTHER

But there is a bit of controversy with this parable. It may appear that restoration and forgiveness were offered at no cost, at no sacrifice, with no atonement. The younger son tries to make payment, to earn his father's favor, but the old man refuses. Some take this to mean that God forgives without the Cross.

That's not what the Bible says and not what this parable teaches. Tim Keller and the late Edmund Clowney (who was a professor at Westminster Seminary) make this case. What follows comes from their sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

We see in Luke 15 three parables. The first, in verses 3-7, is about a lost sheep. The shepherd goes out searching for that one lost lamb. In verses 8-10, in the second parable, we have a lost coin. The owner is a woman who searches diligently until she finds it, and then she celebrates. But in the Prodigal Son, no one goes out to find him. No one! That makes us ask, "Who should have gone out?"

It was the older son's job. In ancient Israel, it was the elder son's responsibility to care for the family. Remember that he owned most of the estate. It had been divided – one-third to the younger son and two-thirds to him. Though he couldn't actually take possession of it until his father died, it was his. He controlled it. If the older brother loved his father, instead of using his father for what he could get, waiting for the old man to die, he would have acted differently. He would have said, "Dad, I know what breaks your heart. I know what you long for and what will bring you joy. You want your younger son to come home. I will search for my brother and bring him into the family. And I'll do it at my expense."

Why would he do this at his own expense? Because everything the father owns now belongs to the older brother. That's another reason he was so mad. He had to foot the bill for the celebration. The father cannot bring the younger son back except at the expense of the other brother.

Dr. Clowney tells the story of Army lieutenant Daniel Dawson. It was from an article in the 1965 edition of *Life* magazine.

Lieutenant Dawson went missing in action when the reconnaissance plane he flew went down in Vietnam. When his brother Donald heard about this, he sold everything he had, left his wife with \$20, and went to Vietnam.

He equipped himself with soldier's gear and wandered around the guerilla-controlled jungle looking for his brother. He carried leaflets in Vietnamese picturing the plane and offered a reward for news of the missing pilot. For nine long months, Dawson risked his life looking for his brother in the war-torn jungles of Vietnam, until he obtained proof from the Viet Cong that his brother died in captivity.

That's what the older brother would have done. Like Donald Dawson, he would have gone to the distant country and searched for his brother. You and I need a true elder brother, not one who goes to Vietnam or to the distant country, but one who comes from heaven to earth to search for us.

Jesus is the true older brother. He did what the older brother was supposed to do. I think that's the real point of this parable. The Father saves us only at the expense of the older brother. The true elder brother – Jesus Christ – took on the shame, the expense, the humiliation, the pain of the Cross to save us. When we receive that gift, we enter into the joy, the celebration of God.

CONCLUSION

So, what can we take home from this parable? What do we learn? It's about two sons – both must change, both need forgiveness, both need grace. That's another way of saying there are two ways of being lost, of going to Hell.

You are lost by being bad, by going your own way. Like the younger son living a life of self-indulgence, the traditional way we usually think of sin. But you are also lost by being good. That is looking to yourself, instead of Jesus, for salvation. The younger sons are usually "out there," in the world. But the older sons are usually here, in church, doing all the religious stuff. They're trying to earn favor with God instead of seeking His free offer of forgiveness. We cannot be good enough to restore our relationship with God. And, once forgiven, we cannot be good enough to keep it.

We need the true elder brother, Jesus Christ. Preach the gospel to yourself today. If you are a younger son, repent and know that He forgives unconditionally. You don't have to square away your life before coming to the Savior.

If you are an older brother, trapped in self-righteousness, learn the heart of your heavenly Father, return to Him, not expecting Him to reward you for the good things you've done. That's not grace. It's dishonoring to God. It's a slap in the face of Jesus Christ, who sought you and bought you at the expense of the Cross.

We can never be good enough to earn our salvation.

We cannot be good enough to keep God's favor.

We must trust the grace of the true older brother.