

## “Are You Really As Good As You Say You Are?”

I read an article this week that said on a scale of 1-10, you probably think you are a seven, and you are not alone.<sup>1</sup> This wasn't talking about physical attractiveness but moral character. That's a problem because if the 1-10 scale represents the spectrum of humanity, you can't have most people that far above average, or else average doesn't mean anything. That got me looking into similar studies, and I found another one that surveyed 2,000 residents of the U.S. and concluded that almost half of the people in our country believe they are the best person they know.<sup>2</sup> So this Fourth of July weekend, we can celebrate our freedom but maybe not our modesty. One thing Jesus taught us is that pride can be a serious problem for our spiritual lives. In this part of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus was using this story to ask the outwardly respectable but prideful religious leaders to ask themselves if they were really as good as they thought they were. That's a good question for us to consider. Is there a way to answer that question honestly but, in doing so, discover that you are not crushed by honestly facing your imperfections but set free to not only more deeply rest in God's compassion but grow more like him as you do?

Most of the time, when we think about this story of the prodigal son in **Luke 15**, we focus on the younger brother. The young brother radically rejects his father and runs off to a far country where he lives a wild and wasteful life. When the fun is over and his friends have left him, he comes to his senses. He comes back to the father that he hurt deeply and sinned against repeatedly. The father runs to him, welcomes him warmly, kisses him lovingly, and forgives him completely. But Jesus doesn't end the story with the father's kiss or with the party that was thrown. He ends with the father confronting a furious older brother who refuses to come into the house and enter the celebration. So, in the end, Jesus uses this story not *only* to tell people who have messed up their lives that God will receive them if they return to Him -- but also as a tender-hearted but much-needed warning to seemingly good people. Jesus wants you to understand ***it is possible to think of yourself as a good person when in fact, you are very far from the heart of God.***

### **I. SOME PEOPLE WHO THINK OF THEMSELVES AS PRETTY GOOD ARE ACTUALLY VERY LOST.**

In **verses 28-29**, there is a tense moment between the father and the elder brother. The older brother says, *'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.* It's clear he's resentful because he feels he has been mistreated and is more righteous than has been acknowledged. He thinks he deserves more.

*Jesus is showing us that in spite of what he says, he is far from the father's heart. In the end, he's the one doesn't come into the party that pictures the enjoyment of God's grace. He misses out. The point is...*

**A. It is possible to be oblivious to how deeply  
you need God's grace.**

In each of the three stories in **Luke 15** something is lost -- it's not where it should have been. The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each story, you have someone who goes out to seek and find what is lost. But in this last parable, the father does not go out to seek for the prodigal -- the younger brother. The father goes out to meet and greet Him but the prodigal returns on his own. Where in the story is the seeking for that which is lost? It is in **verse 28**, which says: *"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.* So Jesus, as a master storyteller, is actually confronting the people who would have identified more with the older brother, Scribes, Pharisees, and generally outwardly decent religious types, with the fact that they can be lost too.

We miss the point if we think the older brother represents a pretty good person who is just a little bit grumpy. In the book I have referenced before by Kenneth Baily, in which he considers the prodigal son story in light of middle-eastern village culture, he points out twelve different insults and offenses against the father that reveal how lost he is. For instance, as the elder brother, he would have been expected to join the father in greeting the guests and helping host the celebration. His refusal to come in was not only disobedience but hurtful and shameful. Everyone would have noticed. When the returning prodigal speaks to the father in repentance, he begins each time by saying, *"Father,"* which shows respect. When the elder brother speaks to him, he says, *"Look!"* The listeners would have shuddered at that. Baily concludes that he is consumed with envy, pride, bitterness, sarcasm, anger, resentment, self-centeredness, hate, stinginess, self-satisfaction, and self-deception. Yet he appears to see his actions as a righteous search for honor.<sup>3</sup>

John MacArthur's study of the parable concludes, "The *elder brother has never been devoted to his father. He is by no means symbolic of the true believer. The elder brother turns out to be just as lost and hopelessly enslaved to sin as his brother ever was. He just won't admit that – not to himself or anyone else.*"<sup>4</sup>

## **B. We need a deeper understanding of sin because there is more than one way to be lost.**

The most common Biblical words for sin describe missing the mark or overstepping a boundary. God reveals a goal for our actions and attitudes, and we fall short of it. God draws a boundary, and we step across it. So many people think of sin as breaking God's rules or commandments, and there is truth in that. Sin is all of that, but it ultimately isn't just about rules but a relationship. When People asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the law of God? He quoted the first of the ten commandments. **Matthew 22:37-38** *And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*<sup>38</sup> *This is the great and first commandment. Then he added this in verse 39, And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

What's happening with this older brother who so vehemently claims to have always served and never disobeyed the father? To make that claim, he must have avoided any obvious acts of rebellion and done some good things, but if the father represents God, did he love the father with his heart and soul? If the other son represents other people, did he love his neighbor as himself? Those are the greatest commands!

Sometimes we compare ourselves with others and think we're pretty good. Others are worse than us. We can list *all* of our good qualities. But the Bible judges us by a different standard. It's not just about rule-keeping but a relationship with God. Or maybe, to be more accurate, the first and greatest of all the rules God has given are actually about relationships. We are to love God and love each other. In light of that standard, we all deeply need his grace. We are all guilty. **Romans 2:1** *Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself because you, the judge, practice the very same things. Romans 3:10* says as it is written: *None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no*

*one seeks for God.” We all need to let go of our proud delusions to receive the compassion God offers us in Jesus.*

## **II. IF YOU THINK OF YOURSELF AS PRETTY GOOD YOU ARE IN DANGER OF MISSING OUT ON THE GRACE OF GOD.**

Look at **verses 28-29**. The obvious problem child has come home. The father has embraced him, blessed him, and is now celebrating with him. The older brother hates it. Jesus says, *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.* In Henri Nouwen’s beautiful little book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he says, *“Unlike a fairy tale, the parable provides no happy ending. Instead, it leaves us face to face with one of life’s hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not trust in God’s all-forgiving love.”* (75)

### **A. We don’t really rest in and appreciate the compassion of the Father unless we clearly see how we desperately we need it.**

This was what the Pharisees, and the older brother in the story did not understand. They didn’t think they were lost and needed grace.

I think it was Tim Keller who I first heard use this imagery. In one sense, if you are lost, you are lost! It’s like death. If you get hit by a truck and dragged down the street and your body is in tatters, you are dead. And if you go to sleep and have heart failure and never wake up, you are dead. One person is hideously dead, and one person is peacefully dead, but they are both just as dead. In the same way, if you are lost, you are lost. And yet -- it might be valid to speak of someone as more lost if they are less likely to find their way home. And that is one of the points Jesus makes here. Sometimes good people can be more hopelessly lost than bad people in that they are less likely to discover their lostness and find their way home.

When you run away from God and try to find happiness in wild living, and it leaves you empty, and your life falls apart, you may just say: “wow, maybe I need God after all.” But if you are like the older brother, it’s harder to see. Your outward respectability hides how far you are from your father --how little you understand Him or cherish your relationship with Him and how much you also only want what he can give -- all of that is masked by your outward goodness. Only when something happens that causes the selfishness, the anger, frustration, pride, and resentment to come to the surface is it obvious how lost you are on the inside. But even then, it is easier to blame others than to face the truth about yourself. A certain kind of relative human

goodness can become a thin facade that hides how lost you really are.

If you tell outwardly good people that they are, in God's eyes, so lost and sinful that the only way they could ever be saved was through the sufferings of Christ for them on the cross, and they are often highly offended! Their inflated view of themselves blinds them to their desperate need for God's gracious compassion. It keeps them from being overwhelmed with the stunning beauty of God's grace.

*You have to take an honest look at your inner lives and the reality of your relationship with God.*

**B. We have to let go of any sense of entitlement or deserving.**

The older brother thinks he deserves better. Anyone can fall into that thinking. **Isaiah 64:6** is humbling if we will hear it. It says, "Your righteousness... Not your sins, the things you know you have done wrong, but the things you have tried to do right, those things are like filthy rags when offered to God as the means by which you want him to approve your life or bless you with good things.

It would be like this: Imagine a little boy. You're his father, and he comes to you and says, "Daddy can I have a dollar to go buy you a present." You say, "OK, go ahead." So he goes and comes back and says, "Look, Dad, I bought you a present." That's fun. You smile and are happy. But if the son says, "And therefore Dad, I don't want you to tell me what to do anymore - I don't want you thinking that what's your giving me is some kind of compassion anymore. I want you to see that because of what I've done, you should be giving me room and board and a young goat every now and then. You look at that child, and you say: "listen, this gift was fine, I loved it, my heart was warmed. But what are you doing now with this gift? What are you saying? How arrogant? My love for you doesn't need to be bought or earned; it's free. But if you keep this attitude up, it's just going to come between us" You see, it is good to do good works unless you start to think that because of your good works, God ought to give you his favor. Your good works and mine always fall short of God's requirements for righteousness. *Your good works aren't all that good.* Your good works are what you should be doing anyway.

**C. We have to turn from good works to trust in God's grace alone.**

In his book, *The Body*, Chuck Colson wrote about an experience he had when he was in a major city to speak at a governor's prayer breakfast.

Mr. Abercrombie is the imaginary name Colson uses to refer to a man who was not only a pillar of the community and an active church member but he also hosted a weekly Bible study luncheon at his office. He invited Colson to attend the study luncheon. Mr. Abercrombie had asked Colson to speak at the luncheon and then allow time for questions. Somewhere in Colson's talk, he referred to our sinful nature. Actually, "total depravity" was the phrase he used. After he finished, the first question was on sin.

One older gentleman said, "You don't really believe we are sinners, do you? I mean, you're too sophisticated to be one of those hellfire-and-brimstone types."

Colson said, "I believe we are desperately sinful. What's inside of each of us is really pretty ugly. In fact, we deserve hell and would get it, but for the sacrifice of Christ for your sins."

Mr. Abercrombie said, "Well, I don't know about that. I'm a good person and have been all my life. I go to church, and I get exhausted spending all my time doing good works."

The room seemed particularly quiet, and every eye was focused on Colson. Colson said, "If you believe that, Mr. Abercrombie - and I hate to say this, for you certainly won't invite me back - you are, for all of your good works, further away from the kingdom than the people I work with in prison who are 'aware of their own sins.' After that comment, there was just stony silence...until someone eased the painfulness of the moment and changed the subject. Colson said when lunch ended. Mr. Abercrombie led Colson down the corridor to an empty office. As soon as they were inside, he said, "I don't have what you have." Colson said, "I know, but you can. God is touching your heart right now." A few moments later, they were both praying. And Mr. Abercrombie stepped into a new relationship with God.

## **CONCLUSION**

When you set aside your striving to prove yourself and accept God's grace in Jesus, you are embraced and welcomed. When you set aside all your claims to have earned or even helped to earn God's love and acceptance and trust in Christ alone as your Savior, God does

something for you that is awesome and amazing. God chooses to accept us as righteous in his eyes because of Christ. God doesn't want you to trust in yourself. He does not want you to trust in Christ plus yourself. He wants you to trust in Christ alone as the means by which you measure up with God.

Our sins separate us from God. In Christ, God came into this world. Jesus went to the cross as a perfect sacrifice for you and me. He died in our place to take the punishment for our sins and he rose to be our Lord and Savior. You don't add anything to what he has done for you. You simply turn to him and trust in him. You come home.

**Romans 11:6** *And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.* Grace is undeserved favor and mercy. You cannot mix grace and works as if your salvation and righteousness before God is partly on the basis of God's grace and partly on the basis of your works. As long as you think that your works have anything to do with God's acceptance, you are not trusting in God's grace.

In his commentary on the book of Galatians, Martin Luther writes about this gift of compassion that is so freely given in which the father clothes us in the robe that is representative of Christ's righteousness given to us. He says,

This Christian righteousness is a mystery to all those who do not know Jesus, and as a matter of fact, Christians don't completely understand it and don't take full advantage of it. So we have to constantly teach it over and over again to others and repeat it to ourselves because if we don't understand it and have it in our hearts, we will be defeated and depressed. Nothing brings peace like Christian righteousness. It's like this the earth does not produce rain nor is able by its own power or work to get it. The earth simply receives it as a gift of God from above. It's the same with Christian righteousness. It is given without our deserving it or working for it.

Is there a way to honestly face our sinfulness but come away, not crushed but, awestruck by the compassion of God, set free from our brittle and deceptive pride and inspired not only to celebrate with God but to joyfully serve him? Yes, the one who tells the story shows us the way. He is the way. Trust in him. Believe what he promises and teaches. He welcomes sinners like me and you.

**Amen**

## **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ.**

Lord, we are all too much like the foolish prodigal and the self-righteous elder brother. Awaken clarity and humility in my heart so that I see sin in both its openly seductive and its far more subtle forms. I thank you for Jesus, my Savior. My trust is not in myself but in him who gave himself on the cross for my sins and rose as from the dead as my Lord. I find my peace in your grace through faith in Jesus. Amen

## **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Almighty and gracious God, my creator, and redeemer, you are also the perfect and compassionate Father. Enable me by your Holy Spirit to live as your trusting and joyful child. So work by the power of your grace to reproduce in me a Christ like reflection of your own welcoming grace. Let my life mirror your mercy and my words clearly reveal the truth of the gospel. Grant me opportunities to share the message of your grace and compassion with winsome boldness. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/everyone-thinks-they-are-above-average/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://swnsdigital.com/us/2021/05/almost-half-of-americans-say-they-are-the-best-person-they-know/>

<sup>3</sup> The Cross and the Prodigal, Bailey p. 86

<sup>4</sup> The Prodigal Son, MacArthur p. 150