

*"Dead Enough"*

*Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13*

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In his book, Parables of Grace, Robert Capon declares: *"Grace only works on those it finds dead enough."*

Are we dead enough to truly rely on God's grace, defined as "God's love freely given." Or, to use an acronym, God's riches at Christ's expense? Are we honest enough about our own failings and imperfections—our spiritual "deadness"—to experience and give grace?

The scriptures are certainly clear about our need to rely on God's grace. You might find it amusing, as I do, that I grew up on Chapel Road. There is a house near ours on Chapel Road that, for at least the half-century that I can remember, has a plaque outside. On it is written Ephesians 2:8-9 in the King James Version: *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."* It is a bit clearer to modern ears in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase The Message:

*Saving is all God's idea, and all his work. All we do is trust God enough to let God do it. It's God's gift from start to finish. We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing.*

If we can be open to this grace, it makes it a little easier to understand Jesus' parable today of the dishonest manager. A little easier...but not much! For this grace-story fouls up our moral machinery. In vain we look for a good person in the story. The best we might say is that grace flows from the place and people you'd least expect to those who least deserve it. That can be an unsettling truth, for sure.

So what to make of this parable? Let's first understand what a parable is. It is not a morality play. It is not an American movie where the good guy wins. A parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Certainly the early story of a dishonest manager is clear enough. It's the heavenly meaning that's elusive. Here's my take on Jesus' story:

Word is out that a rich landowner has a bad apple in his company's barrel. His manager, Joe, is skimming profits and has sudden money that's hard to hide. So the owner summons Joe and pink slips him: "Audit the books, turn them in, you're done." Joe's silence speaks volumes.

But once outside the office door, Joe knows what he has to do. You have to understand Joe. He's a manager, a middle-level bureaucrat, a broker. He lives in the never, never land between the customer and management, that stressful world between two masters. Oh, he works for the landowner all right; and the owner expects the proportion of the harvest each tenant has agreed to pay as rent. Of course, happy tenants make for good business. Stressful, too, which is why Joe has found some "fringe benefits" along the way. Now he's caught.

Caught. But not conquered. Quick on his feet, he has a plan: *"I'm too weak to work and too proud to beg, but I can cook the books. I'll outsmart the boss and endear myself to the tenants. After all, I may soon be working for them."*

He's gotta work fast. You know how fast bad news travels. So he confers with each tenant in private. *"We're marking your bill down,"* he tells each one privately. *"We know the drought was tough this summer and we're taking it into account."* Each tenant falls for the "we," and why not? Few of us question refunds. *"Hurry,"* says Joe. After all, the boss is waiting for the books.

And when Joes turn them in, they only show one more of his tricks. Joe stands exposed as a cheat, needing punishment but dead enough to be open to grace. And what's the boss, the owner, to do? He can go to each tenant, by now in the middle of celebrating the boss' goodwill, and announce that it was all a mistake, Joe's a cheat and your bill is really higher. That'll go over really well. Year, suurre!

Besides, to understand what the boss does, you have to look at what he DOESN'T do. He could have thrown Joe in jail or taken the account books from Joe to begin with. He did neither. The landowner's mercy left open one small window, and Joe scrambled through it.

We who are appalled by Joe's fraud—who prefer to be reputable—are challenged by Jesus. *"The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light."* You could afford to learn from this disreputable man, says Jesus. Not because he's unrighteous—which he is—but because he's such a good manager, even if what he manages so well is unrighteousness. With his luck running out and his past catching up with him, this character Joe shoots the rapids of his dwindling options and ends up at the feet and mercy of his master.

"You could learn from him," Jesus says. Joe manages evil and punishment better than you manage grace, the "true riches." Joe is "dead enough" to know three important things: time is of the essence; money is just a means, not an end; and the mercy of his master is his only hope. Dependent on each, he takes risks with each. We who bask in the warmth of grace each week could learn from him.

Phillip Yancy develops this theme in his book What's So Amazing about Grace? He tells stories from his own experience to support his thesis that we in the church are often least acquainted with our greatest treasure: grace. One of the stories is about the Rev. Mel White, a prominent behind-the-scenes leader in evangelical Christianity in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. He ghost-wrote books for the Reverends Billy Graham, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. In 1994 he came out as gay, and in 1995 wrote his own book Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America.

Mel White said that when he told the world he was gay, he ceased to exist for nearly everyone, especially in the church. In an interview with his parents, a reporter asked: *"They say he's an abomination. What do you think about that?"* His mother replied, *"Well, he may be an abomination, but he's still our pride and joy."*

We could learn about grace from this manager, Joe, says Jesus. Is Jesus condoning unrighteousness, lying and deceit? No. Jesus is shaking us up, getting our attention so that we may give and receive grace.

Please sit down for what comes next. Oh, right, you are sitting down. Here it is: I am a planner. Spoiler alert: most of the scriptures and sermon themes through the end of the year have been given to our worship

leaders. On the whole, it serves me, and the churches I've served, well. But the old saying is also true: "Humans plan, and God laughs."

There have been many times God's laugh was on me, but I remember this one time when the day was schedule-packed with off-site pastoral appointments, and I told the church administrative assistant that I would be retuning from one of those appointments at 10:30 a.m. to commence our church's weekly publications. As I walked in she said, *"There's a young man here waiting to see you. He arrived at 10 a.m. and I told him you'd be in in about 30 minutes."*

"Grrr...." thinks Brian. "Doesn't he know I'm too busy for drop-in appointments?" But, of course, I chatted with him. The details are unimportant for this message. What is important is that my own plans, my own schedule, my own agenda almost got in God's way! I was almost guilty of opposing God! Because at the end of the conversation the young man said, *"Thank you for talking with me. I stopped in two other churches and they wouldn't talk to me."* Gulp! Even Jesus wasn't too busy to talk to people.

When we shut the door to grace, we shut it on ourselves as well. But Jesus keeps knocking for us to open up. Are you and I open to someone who messes up our moral categories like the unjust manager, a scoundrel who may just stumble on grace in the end? Are we open to someone who messes up our best-laid plans, a searcher who needs a word of hope and peace? I hope so. For Jesus gives us such a story to prepare us for the cross, where he saves us by becoming disreputable himself, and a manager of unrighteous us.

May we find ourselves dead enough, to receive grace enough, to be resurrected enough. Amen.