

Letters to the Church



APRIL '24

DEARLY BELOVED IN THE LORD,

Ugh, why does that difficult person have to be in my church? What about all I've done?

As we resume our Sunday Luke Series, we're reminded of the profound truth that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Last month, we considered the parable of the prodigal son from chapter 15 in our pastoral letter, where we witnessed the father's gracious forgiveness extended to both sons. Truly, both were lost, and both sons needed to accept that the Father's grace was greater than what they felt was deserved. How easily we can fall into the same errors! Our flesh pridefully yearns for works-based earning. We need these humbling lessons to trust the Father's grace, especially when dealing with difficult people in our church.

The elder brother came to despise not only his younger brother but also his father. He felt that he had been a model son, but that he was living in his father's house like a slave. Listen to his own words: "these many years I have served you" and "I've never disobeyed your command," but "you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends." (Luke 15:19). Do you hear his deservedness? He's saying, in essence, "I keep giving, but I'm not getting!" He felt that he worked hard like a slave and that his father treated him like a slave, but now, "when this son of yours came" (Luke 15:30) - "he gets what I deserve!"

Similarly, the Pharisees were committed to slavish outward obedience, yet inwardly, they were estranged from the Father and detested others. The summary of the first two great commandments is to love God and love others (Luke 10:27), but a heart that feels deserving leads to despising both the Father and others. These religious leaders in Jesus' crowd that day abhorred him; they were repulsed by the sinners he received and eventually would call for him to be crucified. This is the inevitable consequence of the deserving heart. It rages against grace.

Often, within the local congregation, we find ourselves struggling with difficult people when we feel they are getting better than they deserve and we are getting less. We might be tempted to bring up and exaggerate their failures, (like the elder brother when he said, "did everyone forget the prostitutes?" (Luke 15:30)) and secretly hope for recognition and reward for our own merits. But a heart that underrates the Father's grace is always preoccupied with



rewards. It leads to a dangerous self-importance, a deep dissatisfaction about what we perceive as our meager returns, and always a disdain for others - like the older brother, we wish that sinner would receive far less.

But the gospel declares what everyone deserves: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (**Romans 3:23**). There is, indeed, a great incongruence between what we deserve and what God gives! We are sinners saved by an amazing grace. We deserve wrath; we earned death as the wages of our sin, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (**Romans 6:23**). We are all wandering children; none stayed and worked faithfully in the Father's house. "All we like sheep have gone astray" (**Isaiah 53:6**).

God has been merciful to us sinners (**Luke 18:13**). The gospel proclaims that we are doing so much better than we deserve. Instead of despising others, take up the Father's invitation to rejoice that wandering sinners have come home. "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost" (**Luke 15:6**). You are one of them, and so is that difficult person.

Your life and your brother's life have been rescued from death—a death that was deserved. Don't be a hypocrite. Don't covet grace for yourself but strict justice for another. Instead, desire unmerited demonstrations of gospel grace for the glory of the Father. Allow the Father's graciousness toward the undeserving (like that difficult person and you) to no longer cause your heart to despise but instead to rejoice. Listen to your Father's words:

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

YOUR PASTOR & SERVANT,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stam'.