

Exposed and Expunged

To aspire to perfection is to curse oneself to eternal frustration. Have you ever felt that feeling that no matter how much you do, it's never enough? Did you ever try to please an unpleasable person? No matter what you do or how you do it, you can never reach their standards. Or how about those people, who are so insecure that no matter how much you show you love them, they will never believe you. Or are you simply that person who sets for yourself unattainable standards, sets the bar higher than humanly possible, only to fail again and again in the process of trying to reach it?

When you work toward an unattainable goal, you will always be left with a frustrating feeling of despair and insufficiency.

This is what it means also to cultivate a "works-based" faith. A faith based on works, that is, what you must do, the standards you must reach, in order to be saved, not only is frustrating, but you don't need God to do it!

If attaining salvation is something you can accomplish, then who needs grace? Or Jesus' sacrifice? All you need is a little more determination, discipline, or drive.

But that's not what our faith is about. This is in fact the good news. We don't "accomplish" salvation. We receive it.

We receive it by admitting we can't do it.

Sounds simple, right? Why do we make it so hard?

A few decades back, a young man named Kevin and a few friends made a dreadful mistake. In a lapse of judgment, due to a few beers on a back road and adolescent bravado, they robbed a liquor store. To them at the time, it seemed like a huge prank. The police didn't see it that way. Making an example of him, the judge sent him to juvenile detention for two years. When he got out, he discovered that the world had moved on without him. His friends had since graduated and gone on to college, seeking careers and stability, his parents had lost their expectations for him. He had trouble getting a job. After that one night, that one bad mistake, his world had changed. No matter how hard he tried to make amends, his record followed him everywhere.

Then he met George. George had been looking for someone to care for him. He was aging, and he needed help. He hired Kevin to care for him. The pay was meager but for Kevin, it was a job, meaning, purpose, and a chance to do something that perhaps could make a difference. During the course of two years before George died, the two bonded. Kevin found George funny, smart, honest, and caring. He became not only George's helper, but his companion. George could see the hurt in Kevin's eyes and offered him his wisdom, friendship, and acceptance. Soon for Kevin going to George's house was no longer about earning pay or doing a service at all, but he looked forward to spending time with George. Kevin hadn't told George about his past, and he hoped he wouldn't find out. He didn't want to lose the respect of the only friend he had.

When George died of cancer after those two years, Kevin received three letters in the mail. The first was a letter from a local non-profit, inviting Kevin to come and work for them. They said,

George had arranged for the job, and Kevin had come with George's high recommendations. He could start on Monday. The second was a letter from the Courthouse, saying that his record had been expunged. The third was a note from George. In the note, George thanked Kevin for his friendship and companionship and then told him to be proud of who he is, to be free of his past, and to look to the future and not the past. In the envelope was a check for \$20,000 to be used for Kevin's future, his education, and his life. Kevin was astounded.

Although Kevin had known George in his aging years, had gotten to know him as a person and as a kind, caring mentor, he hadn't realized that George had been a retired judge in his former years, still well respected in the community and with considerable influence. He also hadn't realized that George had known about Kevin's record the entire time. He had cared for him despite his past. He had seen through his mistakes and recognized in him a beautiful heart. He had invested in him and in his future.

Because of George's friendship, his trust, and his forgiveness, today Kevin is a lawyer who works with troubled youth to try to change their lives in a positive way.

In expunging not only Kevin's record but also seeing past his mistakes to the truth of who he was, George gave him the best gift anyone could give—he gave him back his hope. He freed him from his past. He saw him for who he was and not what he did.

In return, Kevin had done something that made this all possible. He had trusted George enough to let him see his heart.

This is what Jesus does for us. It's what he was trying to get across to the man in our scriptures for today. We don't have to try to "do" everything imaginable in order to attain God's forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. But all we need to do is open up our hearts to God, expose ourselves and our failings and mistakes, and God will expunge them from our lives, and give us the gift of his love, acceptance, forgiveness, and redemption.

It's not primarily about the deeds. It's all about the relationship.

Jesus is what I call a master of the teachable moment. He teaches by challenging people with their own assumptions.

When a young man approaches him and says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus immediately realizes the framework from which he is coming from. It's all in that one word: obtain.

Jesus replies, "No one is good, except for God."

Right there, we see Jesus trying to make a point that the gift of eternal life is not about our goodness, but about God's goodness. It's not about what we "do," but about the gift we receive.

The man doesn't get it, and still starts maintaining that he has kept all of the "laws" his whole life. Now, I want you to hear this next part: "Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him."

Then he said, "You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me."

The man went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Is this story merely about money? No. It is a parable about the difference between obtaining and receiving.

When Jesus sits down with his disciples, after seeing the list impossibly long and high of things they would need to do to be “perfect,” they are shocked, saying, “Then who can be saved?”

Listen to Jesus’ answer: “It’s impossible with human beings. But not with God. All things are possible for God.”

What do we need to do in order to be redeemed? We expose ourselves to God in all of our failings and mistakes. We expose to God our humanness, both good and bad. We expose to God our hearts and enter into relationship with Jesus.

As God sees our repentance, as we lay out our guilt and shame, our deeds and past, God expunges our “record.” And we are given a new chance at life, eternal life.

To expunge something from one’s record means it entirely disappears without a trace. It is not left to resurface later but is entirely wiped from one’s life, as though the act never happened.

This is the gift that God gives to all of us. All we need to do is open ourselves to Jesus. We are who we are. And that is good enough for God.

And when God redeems our hearts, when God expunges our sins, we will go on in a new way to make a difference in the lives of others.

This my brothers and sisters is the way of wisdom, celebrated in the first reading. To discover that life is first and foremost about receiving grace from Jesus and not obtaining our own salvation will inspire us to pray with today’s psalm: “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart”. And with our Collect discover what Kevin did, that good works flow from receiving and experiencing grace:

May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works.