

We're Not Worthy (and that's ok)

In his novel, *The Blood of the Lamb*, author Peter DeVries skewers his Calvinist Christian upbringing. In one particular scene, he recounts a group of devout men talking with the pastor. The men seem to be having a grim contest to see who can outdo each other in belittling their own spiritual works. No matter what act of service got mentioned, it was immediately disparaged as no more than “a filthy rag” that could not but stink to highest heaven, compared to the shining glories that God alone possesses. The narrator of the novel observes this scene and then wryly comments, “This being what we thought of virtue, you can imagine what we made of vice.”

For some people today, such self-deprecations and disparagement are not a caricature of Christianity, as it is in DeVries' novel, but a fair representation of the real thing. Being a Christian, it is alleged, entails having an exceedingly low view of humanity, thinking that people are innately depraved and debased. The Christian, in their mind, walks around in a proverbial hairshirt, ceremoniously chanting “we're not worthy,” and scourging themselves, metaphorically or perhaps literally, for their sins.

And passages like this morning's lesson from Luke only serve to confirm this view. Jesus asks his disciples, if a slave should be rewarded for just doing what they are told to do. No, of course not. Just so, Jesus says, when believers have done what is expected of us, what God commanded, no matter how difficult or how impactful, we should say, “We are worthless slaves. We have only done what we ought to have done.” You can't find a more explicitly demeaning and denigrating statement of humanity's state than that.

Except that that was not what Jesus was getting at with the “worthless slave” comment. As humiliating as it sounds, Jesus is not talking about human depravity but about misunderstandings about faith. You see, the disciples had apparently gotten to thinking of faith as a kind of commodity, something you can have more or less of, that you need to spiritually “top off” before you can be expected to follow Jesus. This is why the disciples are asking Jesus to give them “more faith,” because they don't think they have enough of it. Jesus attacks that idea head-on, telling them that it doesn't matter how much faith you have. It's what you do with it that matters.

But Jesus then anticipates another misunderstanding, from the opposite side—the idea that, if they used their faith to do great things for God, they could perhaps earn a spiritual “bonus.” That's why he tells this little story about the dutiful slave. It's not that he's “worthless.” It's that he's meritless, he hasn't earned any extra credit. He's just done his job, what he's supposed to.

Now, before we condemn the disciples for their dullness, we should acknowledge that their question is one that arises out of a real pastoral concern. Behind their plea for “more faith” is a deep anxiety about their not measuring up, about not being good enough, not being ‘enough’ for God.

Many Christians have struggled with this feeling, the feeling of guilt. But to many today, such concerns seem strange, a peculiar preoccupation of religious people. Normal people, secular people, appear oblivious to feelings of guilt, in the theological sense. They've left those feelings behind at the same time they left behind belief in God. The modern person stands defiant in front of the mirror, like Stuart Smalley from Saturday Night Live, and declares, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me."

That's the story we are led to believe, anyway—that without God, we can be free of guilt, free of worries about not being good enough. But Andrew Root, a professor at Luther Seminary, puts the lie to that belief. Root looks at the dysfunction we see in our society, the unhealthy behaviors and social dynamics that are common today, and attributes a lot of it to a deep anxiety about status, about measuring up. You see this especially among the professional class and the upwardly mobile, but it's trickled down to the rest of society, creating a widespread obsession with status and recognition.

Its origin, Root argues, can be traced to the shift from a traditional, religious worldview to a modern, secular worldview. In traditional, religious societies, he points out, there's an external standard people are measured against. A person can look to the model of Jesus or the saints, they can read the teachings of the New Testament or the admonitions of the Church, and know where they stand, how they've fallen short, in the eyes of God. And not just them, but everyone. Because we are all in the same boat, we're all sinners. And this engenders an appreciation of human frailty and finitude, and a general distrust of ambition.

Not so with the modern, secular person. The modern, secular person is not burdened by superstitious "baggage" like the notion of human depravity or innate deficiency. We are born good, we are taught. And since God is out of the picture, no longer judging us, telling us we're "bad," we are free to be fully who we are, to express ourselves, to show off our specialness, to realize our "inner magnificence," to use Root's term.

The idea is that each of us has some unique goodness that we are to bring out and show off to the world. And we do that through the performance of our "inner creative genius," showing off what a special, talented, creative person we are, or through the performance of "heroic action," laying hold of our own power to master the world, shaping the environment to our will. Either by becoming a TikTok influencer or becoming the next Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk.

However it is expressed, though, "performance" is the key word. Because one's "inner magnificence" doesn't just exist. It has to be proven, shown, and affirmed by others, repeatedly. Only by "performance," showing off our "magnificence," can we stay ahead in the game, can we prove our worth, can we distinguish ourselves from everyone else, who are also vying for status and recognition.

This probably doesn't resonate with many of you, being of an older generation. But maybe it's helpful, for interpreting what you are seeing in the culture today, to understand how younger generations have grown up being told that they can "do anything, be anything." They've seen on TV and online example after example of people who have been publicly celebrated for their magnificence, their genius, their achievements. Sure, older generations also had their heroes, but

people today are inundated by images of celebrity sports figures, whiz kid entrepreneurs, and social media personalities. And the message we've been given is that we can do that too. We can be the next big influencer, the next celebrated creator, the next great innovator, the next big star.

That might seem like a positive, inspiring message, *at first*. But soon enough, that "can" becomes a "must." If we are *free* to do great things, it's only a matter of time before we start to feel we are *expected* to do great things. And the pressure isn't so much from others, but from ourselves. We feel like we have to perform, we *must* be recognized for our genius.

The thing is, though, not everyone is "magnificent." Not everyone is a creative genius, not everyone is able to build an empire or found the next hot tech startup. And when that doesn't happen, when we haven't achieved what we believe—what we've been *told*—we are capable of, we are left with this anxiety, this fear, that we are failing, falling behind our peers, that we're worthless.

Say you've graduated from a prestigious college, earned a PhD, but at 50-years-old you're just a professor at a mid-tier college, making less than your highschool classmate who does HVAC repair. Or you've scrambled for years to get ahead, to make partner at your company, but you just can't seem to rise above middle management. Or you've long dreamed of writing the next great American novel, but are stuck doing freelance work for a regional literary magazine. You always believed you could do great things, that you were meant for more. But it turns out, you're not.

In many ways, this is *worse* than committing a sin. At least with sin, we can confess it and God forgives us. But who can forgive us for not being all that we can be? We have no one to blame but ourselves. *We* failed. And so we are left with a crushing sense of inadequacy, disappointment, frustration, and self-recrimination.

Feelings like this can be too much to bear. Which is why people are so keen to shift them off—by proclaiming their innate goodness through "virtue signaling," or by blaming others for their failures, making scapegoats of Jews or immigrants, the "racist system" or their political opponents. Or else they blow up in outrage and call for others to be punished when their genius, their magnificence is not given its due.

We see these behaviors and we wonder, What is going on? How did this get to be normal? Well, in the "performance culture" we live in, where everyone is trying to prove their worth, clamoring to be recognized by others, competing for the limited resource of attention, it's inevitable that a lot of people are going to lose out. And when they do, they're going to have some pretty powerful, negative feelings, and those feelings are going to be expressed in some pretty destructive ways—hence these behaviors we see.

Jesus' answer to today's performance-driven men and women is the same as his answer to the disciples when they didn't feel like they measured up: "Stop trying to earn it, stop trying to deserve God's love. You already have it." That may seem like odd advice to the frustrated status-seeker, but their anxiety is at root a desire for security, for recognition, for being known and loved and appreciated for who they are. That's what they are looking for in their career achievements, sports trophies or massive following on their Instagram account, but they are

inevitably disappointed. Because what they are looking for can only be found in God. And they can't get it from Him by *performing*, but only by *receiving*.

You see, our relationship with God is not based on keeping score and handing out rewards, but on grace. And grace, by definition, is a free gift, completely unmerited, given to those who don't deserve it. God loves us not because of what we've done, but because of who God is. Not because of who we are, but because of what he's done. God has shown his love in sending his Son Jesus Christ to us and, through him, inviting us into relationship with God. Through Christ, we are given God's favor and blessing, so we don't have to earn it, because we can't.

Accepting that requires that we learn what one little boy learned on his trip to Washington, DC. The boy came to the Washington Monument and noticed a guard standing by it. The little boy looked up at the guard and said, "I want to buy it." The guard stooped down and said, "How much do you have?" The boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. The guard said, "That's not enough." The boy replied, "I thought you might say that." So he pulled out nine cents more. The guard looked down at the boy and said, "That won't do it either." "Well, how much do I need then?" the boy asked. "Look," the guard said, "you need to understand three things. First, thirty-four cents is not enough. In fact, \$34 million is not enough to buy the Washington Monument. Second, the Washington Monument is not for sale. And third, if you are an American citizen, the Washington Monument already belongs to you." It's the same with God's grace: we cannot earn it, it's not for sale, and, if we accept Christ, we already have it.

By insisting on "earning" God's favor, after we already have it, we are in fact rejecting the gift, rejecting God's grace. Because we can't have it both ways. We can't trust in ourselves and in God's grace. That'd be like the guy who insisted on having played at his funeral his two favorite songs: "Amazing Grace" and Sinatra's "I Did It My Way." We have to choose one or the other. We're better off choosing grace.

Because, contrary to those who think it demoralizing, Christianity's "low" view of humanity doesn't condemn us but rather opens us up to God's grace. It doesn't push us down but makes it possible for us to be lifted up by God. It's not about all our deeds being just "filthy rags," but rather that, through God's grace, our "filthy rags" become splendid raiment, the most stunning attire we could ever put on. So, yes, with God, we *can* do great things. But even if we don't, God still loves us, and our place with Him is secure. Thanks be to God!