Sermon – Better Than I Deserve

Scripture: Ps 103:10-13 Sunday, June 25, 2017

Well, last week we laid Walter to his eternal rest. It was one of those moments when you can just imagine the commendation, “well done my good and faithful servant” easily rolling of our Lord Jesus’ tongue as he receives Walter. And as I reflect on Walter’s life and conversations with him one of the things that jumped out at me was that every time you would ask him how he is doing, he would always respond, “better than I deserve”. “Better than I deserve”. In that one phrase was rolled so much of sanctified humility and solid theology that I felt that phrase alone deserved a sermon and the first Sunday after his funeral was the best Sunday to do it so that is what I am going to do.

So the first question is, what does the Bible say about us having it better than we deserve. To examine this question well, we have to examine the three dimensions of life itself, the good, the bad and the eternal. Let’s start with the good.

Now when you look at the Bible there are plenty of versus about working hard and the fruits that come of it, right? Prov 12:11 says, those who work their land will have abundant food, Prov 13:4 says, “the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied, Prov 14:23 says “all hard work brings a profit”. Prov 12:14 sums these versus very simply. It says, “hard work brings rewards”. So when you look at these versus, when things in life are going well, that is, when there is food on the table, roof over the head and money in the account, it is very tempting for us to thing that these versus on hard work are endorsing the American view of the self-made man. The view that says, everything I have I have worked hard for, and everything that I have is the result solely of my hard work. The self-made man is this person who came from nothing and accomplished some great result. Even immigrants get sucked into this self-made philosophy very quickly. So many immigrants who have made it big will tell you that when they first came to this country they had just a few dollars in their pocket and a suitcase with some clothes in it. And from that beginning they made something of themselves with sheer hard work and determination. It is true that most immigrants come with little money and physical possessions. It is also true that immigrants come in with a tremendous work ethic and determination to make something of themselves. All that is true. But the big lie in this formula for success is the exclusion of God’s hand that aids all that hard work. In every person’s success there is an x-factor. Because you could have all the talent and hard work in the world but in this world there are many things that are not in our control, we do not control our circumstances, time and place and circumstances of our born, the circumstances of our life, things like accidents or illnesses that could befall us at any time, the laws that the government might pass, that might give you some opportunity or take away some opportunity. There are so many things outside our control. And the things outside our control are the things that God controls. So unless we add God’s favor to all the work that we do we really do not have the recipe for success. So the Psalmist in Ps 90 verse 17 prays, “let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and confirm for us the work of our hands”. In 1 Cor 3:7 Apostle Paul brings out God’s role in productive work like this, he says, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. So when we look at the best that life has to offer, what we find is that if we have anything to show for our labors, it is because God has answered the Psalmist’s prayer in Ps 90:17 and established the work of your hands. It is because God did the real work alongside you while you were planting and watering to bring about the fruitfulness. The labor is very important. I am not minimizing that at all and God hates lazy people. But I guess when people like Walter have lived long enough and see enough of life they acquire wisdom enough to see that the fruit that comes with the best of life is really something that God gives you and so you realize that in spite of all our hard work, what we are getting is way more than we deserve.

What about the bad then. What about when terrible things happen to some people and not to others. When bad things happen is a person still supposed to declare that my lot in life is better than I deserve? Well the best place to get a Biblical perspective on this is to go to the book of Job. Now in the book of Job you find that, Job had a lot to start off with because he was the richest man of his time. He had tremendous wealth, he had health, he had family, he had peace in his home, he even had a strong faith. So by every measure Job had everything a human being could every want. And then God allowed him to be tested and permitted the enemy to take things away from him one after another, till he was undergoing the most intense misery ever. Now you can ask the question, is Job still getting better than he deserves? Well, two things about that. Firstly, the question of Job’s suffering takes a very different tone I think when you zoom out and take the long view of Job’s life. Because if you take the long view then you will see that while he did suffer intensely for a time, ultimately his suffering not only came to an end but by every measure his post suffering phase was even better than before. Secondly, when we think of Job we always thing of the things he suffered. Yet tied closely to his suffering was his unique encounter with God. Job would never forget this encounter and conversation with God. Few people in the history of the world had an encounter like that. And even though God did not answer his questions directly, Job did learn a lot. You see by asking Job where he was when God was putting in place the foundations of the world, God was telling Job, just like you do not understand all the physics and cosmology and genetics that went into the universe that I made for you, you cannot know all the reasons behind all the specifics of our day to day life’s. But this much is enough for us to know, that God has not delegated the job of putting in place the foundations of the universe, he has done it himself. He is governing it all, he is in control, he has puts limits in place and he is continues to direct events to get to a good outcome in the end. So, through all the suffering, Job got to experience God in a way few people has experienced, and in the end he got all his fortunes restored and much more.

So, if you could magically be transported to Job’s deathbed and ask him how he was doing, I am quite sure, Job’s answer would not be too different from “better that I deserve”.

We have examined how when we look at the best of life and the worst of life we can still say, in the end that we got better than we deserve. That brings us to the eternal. To examine the eternal life, we have to talk about sin and its impact on our relationship with God. Now Ps 103 verse 10 could not be more clear, “He does not punish us for all our sins, he does not deal harshly with us as we deserve”. This idea that we do not get the punishment we deserve is all over the Old Testament. When the Israelites returned from their Babylonian exile in 538 BC prophet Ezra said these words in Ezr 9:13“What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this”. Rewind the clock a little to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and you have these words from the prophet Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail”. Amazing isn’t it that these prophets could see very clearly even when the people of Israel were being punished for their disobedience and the entire nation was destroyed, even its capital Jerusalem and when they were taken into exile, that Jeremiah was aware of how much God was actually holding back his punishment because of his incredible compassion. The earliest example of this is right in Gen chapter 4 when Cain kills his brother and he is cursed to be a restless wanderer. Even there he is given protection from being killed by other people, something he clearly deserved for murdering his brother. Now all the examples of Old Testament compassion on human sinfulness actually point forward to Jesus’ work on the cross. The only reason God does not fully exact the penalty of sin from humankind is because his son takes the full penalty of sin on the cross. In the New Testament Apostle Paul writes this. I am reading from Rom 3, 23-27

 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[[i](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV" \l "fen-NIV-28017i" \o "See footnote i)] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 27Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded.

OK the principle here is this. Because of God’s grace and because Jesus takes the full penalty of sin we are saved its penalty. And because we are saved of sin’s penalty we get to experience eternal life that is way beyond anything we can ever earn or deserve. Put another way there are no people who are good enough that they get to spend eternity in the presence of a holy God. Paul describes the human condition with these words in Romans 3:10-18

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“There is no one righteous, not even one;
11    there is no one who understands;
    there is no one who seeks God.
12All have turned away,
    they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
    not even one.”[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28004b)]
13“Their throats are open graves;
    their tongues practice deceit.”[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28005c)]
“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28005d)]
14    “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28006e)]
15“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
16    ruin and misery mark their ways,
17and the way of peace they do not know.”[[f](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28009f)]
18    “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”[[g](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28010g)]

This is a a really serious ego puncturing indictment of the whole human race. But because we worthless, cursing, bitter and sinful people get to go to heaven on Jesus’ ticket, the moment we accept Christ and have our ticket in hand, suddenly and only after that moment do we become fully aware that this reward is way beyond what we deserve.

So no matter what aspect of life you look at, the good, the bad or the eternal, what we get with Christ is so much more than we ever deserve.

I don’t know about you but as I was working on this sermon, it made me thing of this new movie out on Wonder Woman. It is a super hero movie and while I did not get to watch it I was listening to an NPR conversation about it and I was struck by one aspect of this movie. You see after all there super heroes do there thing and save however they are saving, if they are thoughtful superheroes they go through an existential crisis. They begin to look at the world after it is saved and look at the people going about their usual business and they begin to wonder if these people who were saved actually deserved saving. And while the superheroes don’t focus too much on this because if they did they would realize that these people did not deserve to be saved and that then defeats their whole purpose. I bring this up just to contrast it with the ultimate superhero, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because if Jesus Christ were sitting with these super heroes he would say something like this. No they do not deserve saving. But I saved them because I created them and I love them and I can sanctify them with my blood to spend an eternity with them.

And if you look at that and don’t come to the conclusion that that is way more than we deserve then I don’t know what is. So let us never forget that no matter what aspect of life you look at, what God gives is is way more than we deserve. Let that attitude shape our life like it did my dear brother Walter’s. Let us pray.