

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Scandal of Jesus' Beautiful Gospel

The Gospel, for the Undeserving

(2 Samuel 11; Romans 4:6-8; 5:6-8)

Study #2

Introduction: Blessing the one who can't bless back...

Jesus' parables are stories about heaven, wrapped up in earth. They are worldly tales dressed in street clothes, designed to tell how the spiritual realm works.

Many of His parables immediately bring to mind a reality of God's ways. For instance...

- ...as the good soil into which the good seed drops produces a tremendous harvest, so does God's Word produce fruit in the life of someone who is receptive.
- ...as the prodigal son comes home to a welcoming father, so our Heavenly Father welcomes us lovingly when we return to Him.

Jesus' "Parable of the Guests" (Luke 14) has always seemed different to me.¹

Jesus gave this parable at a party in the home of a Pharisee who had invited friends, relatives and rich neighbors.

Speaking to the Pharisee who had thrown the party, [12]... "***When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment.***"

He went on to tell the man - and us - that we should invite to our parties those who are so poor that they can't invite us back to our lavish dinners.

In the past, I have seen this parable, both as a pretty bold thing to say at a party and as a pretty pedestrian way of telling us to be kind to those who are less fortunate.

It dawned on me this week that the genius of "The Parable of the Guests" is that it perfectly describes what God, in Christ, has done for us.

He has lavished blessing on us, who could never do the same for Him. God practices what He preaches. He gives to the needy, blesses the outcast, and showers value on the undeserving.

Scandalous.

Review...

Last Sunday, I made the case that it is a scandal that the offer of eternal life in Jesus' Gospel is free. Of course, it cost Jesus everything, but it's free to us.

We read dozens of times in John's Gospel that we don't get what we do deserve - *condemnation* - and we do get what we don't deserve - *eternal life* - as a gift when we believe in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul made the same thing crystal clear in Romans when he said that Abraham was made right with God by faith.²

¹ Scholars differ as to whether this (Luke 14:12-14) is actually a parable or a wisdom saying. I lean toward seeing it as a parable.

² For a summary of Abraham's two justifications (one by faith, before God; the other by works, before people), please see the Appendix at the end.

Abraham certainly had plenty of good works. But those didn't justify him. He was justified before God one night when he went out of his tent to count the stars and simply believed God's promise that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son.³

The scandal of the Gospel is that justification before God is by faith, never by works, no matter how good we might be, because we can never be good enough.

From this focus on Abraham, Paul shifts his focus in Romans 4 to one of the Jews' greatest heroes, the sweet psalmist of Israel and the man after God's own heart, King David.

What King David's Life Says About Getting Right with God (Romans 4:6-8; 2 Samuel 11)

King David Rejoices Over Forgiven Sin (Romans 4:6-8)

[6] just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

[7] BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,

AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

[8] BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.

For many of the one hundred and fifty psalms in the Bible, we don't know who the author was, nor do we know out of what historical setting they arose.

But we do know both the historical setting for this psalm (Psalm 32) and what prompted David to write it.

³ It seems that most Jewish rabbis of Paul's day assumed that Abraham was justified based on his works (despite what Genesis 15:6 says). In fact, it is written in some places that Abraham never sinned and so had no need for repentance. Clearly, these scholars did not focus on his terrible betrayals of Sarah.

We'll take time this morning to walk through the narrative that led to the psalm to help us see why Paul brings David into a discussion of getting right with God.

The Life and Times of King David

David was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, and when he was a teenager, Samuel the prophet anointed him to be king of Israel.

Separating that anointing and the coronation were ten long years of suffering, mostly at the hands of Israel's first king, Saul.

But, at the end of that miserable decade, King Saul died, and David sat on the throne as king.

David was a very good king and he built a base for an enduring dynasty. During his reign, Israel's enemies became less numerous and less dangerous.

His kingdom and his battle-tested army were strong. And, after twenty years on the throne, David decided it was time to take it easy.⁴

We catch up with the king one evening in the spring time, at his royal palace in Jerusalem.

As the king, David was also commander in chief. And normally, when his army marched to battle in the spring season of the year, David marched with them.

[1a] Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah...

The Bible tells us, ***[1b]...But David stayed in Jerusalem."***

⁴ Bible scholars estimate that David was in his forties to near fifty when we turn to 2 Samuel 11.

So, David's off-duty, thinking, *"I've done my time. I've paid my dues. I'll let Joab deal with the Ammonites this year by himself."*

With the army off at war, David was at home in his palace. At rest. And restless.

King David, Sinner

David sins against Bathsheba

The narrative begins at the time of day between late afternoon and sunset. We read that **[2 Samuel 11:2] David arose from his bed...** In other words, he had just gotten up from a late afternoon nap.

Restless, he wandered outside and walked around on the roof of his palace as the outside light dimmed.

I picture David's eyes moving from place to place, like someone's eyes might move across a computer screen looking for something appealing. Something appealing caught his eye.

[2] Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.

Centuries before David, another man was faced with sexual temptation. And when he faced his hour of temptation he ran away. Joseph *literally* ran away. (See Genesis 39)

David didn't run away. He didn't even look away. David kept looking at this woman.

He looked long enough to know more than he should have known about her. Long enough to know that she was **"very beautiful."**

David called to his servant on the balcony. He asked, casually, *"Say, who is the woman who lives down there on Main Street, fourth house down from the palace? See what you can find out for me, OK?"*⁵

The servant may have wondered, *"Why is my God-fearing king asking about the woman? Oh well, he's the king. He can ask about whatever he wants to ask about."*

And off the servant went to get the answers the king sought. He returned to tell David that the woman is Bathsheba. She's Jewish, married to a foreigner, a Hittite named Uriah.⁶

From elsewhere in the Bible we know that Uriah was one of David's most valiant soldiers, one of David's "mighty men." David would have known Uriah well.

But David has looked at Uriah's wife longer than was proper and has asked questions he should not have asked.

He's stepped over a line and he's not retreating.

The king sent servants to her house to bring her to the palace. (These messengers did nothing wrong in obeying their king's orders to bring a woman to the palace. The only one in this story who bears guilt is David.)

[4] David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her...

Scripture offers up no details. Nothing sensational. Just the fact.

But what about Bathsheba, you ask? It takes two, after all. What guilt does she bear here? Good question. So, yes, let's consider that.

⁵ What possible reason could David have had for this information? Why would he want to know anything about her? Only if he is already scheming.

⁶ The servant has provided more information than was requested. Did he include the bit about Uriah, suspecting what the king had in mind, as an attempt to bring the king to his senses? Maybe...

Some have suggested that Bathsheba was a lonely wife whose husband was away at war, that she was looking for attention.

I've read those who say that her public bathing advertised her availability, that it was an invitation to the men of the city. Maybe she was even particularly signaling to David, as his palace balcony gave a view into her courtyard.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Something else entirely was going on here. Let me explain.

The way the New American Standard Bible reads (usually a very reliable Bible translation) we get the impression that Bathsheba "***purified herself from her uncleanness***" AFTER David lay with her.

However, the Hebrew text makes it clear that the bath she was taking when David saw her from his balcony was the bath that was purifying her.⁷

See, the Old Testament set out requirements for women to bathe monthly for ceremonial cleansing.⁸ And it was THIS washing that Bathsheba was tending to when David sent for her.⁹

When David saw Bathsheba bathing, far from trying to be provocative, she was obeying the Old Testament Law's requirements in the privacy of her own courtyard.

The idea that Bathsheba was a lonely woman hungering for affection finds no support in the Bible. Again, the only guilty party in this episode is David.

⁷ This understanding is reflected in the English Standard Version, the New International Version, the King James and New King James, The Message, and the New Living Translation.

⁸ See Lev. 12:2-5; 15:18-28; 18:19. These verses describe the purification process for women after childbirth or after menstruation.

⁹ This is in the text to show that David knew this. The only way for him to have known this (that she was not just taking a normal bath) was by her telling him, no doubt to dissuade him from his intended action.

King David was the guardian of the Mosaic Law. He saw a woman, lusted for her, and violated her while she was in the very act of obeying the Law he was sworn to uphold.

Afterwards, David sent her back to her house. Some weeks after the event, Bathsheba sent David a note.

[5] The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant."

Bathsheba wasn't being chatty. She expected David, the king, to do something, to make things right. And whatever it was she might have hoped David would do, it was NOT what he, in fact, did.

David sins against Uriah

He immediately sent word to General Joab, who was leading the army against the Ammonites, to send Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, home from battle.

And, no. David wasn't bringing Uriah home to confess his sin.

His plan was to bring Uriah back to Jerusalem, get him to go home to Bathsheba so that he and everyone else would believe the child she was carrying was his and nobody would suspect David.

It was an indecent, but shrewd, plan. And it would have worked, too, except that Uriah was a man of unimpeachable integrity.

He refused to go home to sleep with his wife - even after David got him drunk! - while his fellow-soldiers were on the battlefield, fighting the Lord's battles.

So, failing in his efforts to win by deceit, David resorted to brute force. He sent Uriah back to the battle front, with a note telling Joab to place Uriah on the front lines, where the fighting was fiercest.

While Joab must have wondered what David was thinking ("*Why would I sacrifice one of my best soldiers?*"), he saluted smartly and carried out the command to the letter.

Uriah was placed in the most dangerous part of the assault on the Ammonite city and was killed in battle, just as David planned.

The upshot of all of this is that King David has now sinned by forcing himself on another man's wife (adultery) AND by then killing the woman's husband to cover his sin (murder).

David committed terrible sins. Sometime later, when he sat down to write Psalm 32, he spoke of the blessings of forgiveness and the blessing of being right with God.

Let's listen again -

[6] just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

[7] BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,

AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

[8] BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.

David's sins have been splattered on the pages of Scripture for everyone to see for three thousand years.¹⁰

But David will live with God in glory, will forever be God's son, and will not be condemned for his sins. He received grace from God the same way Abraham did, by faith.

The scandal, of course, is that there's no way David deserved all that grace. And that is the story of every one of us. Paul tells the story of us all in Romans 5.

He starts out by telling the story of all those who have been made right with God.

¹⁰ These verses teach that when God reckons righteousness to someone apart from works, it is equivalent to His forgiving sins. And, the word that is translated "sins" here (*ανομία*) refers to the most active kind of sin, rebellion against God's authority, and a deliberate and open violation of God's commandment.

What Paul Says About Getting Right with God (Romans 5)

Hope in Jesus Changes Everything (vv. 1-5)

[1] There having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ [2] through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

When you place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting that He died and rose again to bear the penalty for your sin, God declares you justified - SAVED - and gives you eternal life.

Of course, God could have justified you - declared you righteous - and then left you on your own. But, that is not what He did.

After He justified you, He made you His child and His friend. He tore down the wall of hostility between you and Him, adopted you into His family, and gave you the gift that changes everything: HOPE.

Now, despite whatever challenges and hardships, persecutions and sufferings you may endure, you can know the richness of hope because of God's amazing love that has been given to you in Jesus.

[5] and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

When you hear those words, think extravagance. God's outpouring of love on you is like the time when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with waaaay more perfume than was needed.

That's what God's love is like. Over the top. Extravagant. Excessive. Profligate.

It is exactly the kind of love that He showers on undeserving people like us.

The Love of Jesus Changes Everything (vv. 6-8)

Our Condition When Jesus Died for Us (v. 6)

[6] For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

The idea that “*God helps those who help themselves*” was an ancient idea when Benjamin Franklin included it in Poor Richard’s Almanac. It’s been around forever, and it’s been wrong forever.

God doesn’t help those who help themselves. God helps, God saves, those who admit they are helpless.

Like the guy whose parachute has failed to open and is hurtling to the ground, helpless, so we are helpless before God. There is no way we can get right with God on our own.

The reason? Our sin.

Our sin is that serious of a thing. And when we don’t see the devastating seriousness of our sin, Christ’s death is nothing but a thoughtful gesture.

We see the cross of Jesus as an act of kindness, like when your neighbor takes your mail to your house on a rainy day. It’s nice, but if he hadn’t done it, you could have gone to get the mail yourself.

The reality is that our sin puts us in an impossible predicament. We have offended a holy God. We can never get right with Him and what we deserve is eternal separation from Him.

When we see our sin as God sees it and then see that Christ died for our sin to bring us to God, the cross becomes unspeakably precious.

For many years after having become a Christian, I was “mildly appreciative” of what Jesus did for me on the cross. I wasn’t a notorious sinner like King David and I wasn’t gripped by God’s amazing grace.

Then, as I matured in life and in faith, I began to recognize deep-seated, sinful patterns in my life. I saw really ugly stuff like an independent streak a mile wide, unloving self-protection, and a demanding spirit toward God.

It was then that I began to see the beauty of Jesus’ Gospel.

There is no way I could have ever saved myself. I was helpless and hopeless. And, yes, He died for me at just the right time.¹¹

Timing is everything when it comes to politics, tactics on the battlefield, or when negotiating a sale. Timing is everything if you are navigating choppy marital waters, playing a piece of music, or competing in athletics.

Jim Gaffigan’s success as a comedian depends on timing and Jesus died at just the right time, meaning that He didn’t wait for us to get good before He gave Himself for us.

He didn’t wait until we deserved His many blessings. The time of our rebellion was the perfect time for Christ to die for our sins.

Now, this thought - Christ died for us - gets Paul to thinking.

You can almost see the wheels turning as he continues to write, stream of consciousness-like, toying with this idea of someone dying for someone else.

Imagine dying for someone else... (v. 7)

[7] For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.

¹¹ Some understand Paul to mean that, in an historical sense, Christ’s death came at the best of all possible times. Along this line, Galatians 4:4 refers to Jesus’ coming at the fullness of time. Also, in Mark 1:15 Jesus says “*the time is complete.*” And a case can certainly be made for that, historically. It is not, though, Paul’s point here.

It happens in families that one member will lay down their life for another. A mom will donate a kidney. A dad runs out into the street to save his kid.

On a dark street late at night a hero will emerge to rescue an innocent victim of violent crime at great personal risk. These things happen on the battlefield.

Anyone who is thinking about risking life and limb for someone else will use some sort of calculus to determine if the risk is worth it.

The hero will figure, *"It's worth the sacrifice because I love that person, because that is a good person, because that person deserves it."* - or he won't make the sacrifice.

God looked at a world filled with helpless rebels, made the calculations according to a very special kind of math, and figured that it was more than worth it to send His only Son to die for us.

The greatness of God's love (v. 8)

[8] But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
(What a great memory verse!)

So, beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. In our case, God, the Beholder, saw the beauty of our made-in-His-image souls.

When the Bible says that God loves sinners, it means that He loves the undeserving.

As incredible as it may seem, God loves people who want nothing to do with Him, who are opposed to Him, who don't acknowledge His existence, and who flagrantly disobey Him.

And He showed that love by sending His Son to die for us while we were still sinning.

Conclusion:

God is preparing to throw a party and it's going to be an out-of-this-world party, a tremendous party filled with laughter and joy.

It's going to be the kind of party, the kind of banquet, Jesus told a certain Pharisee to throw.

The people who will be attending this party are those who can't earn their way to the party, can't invite God to a party they will throw, can't afford to bring anything to the party, and, in fact, don't even deserve to be at the party.

They will be at this party because, knowing their need, they gave the Host the only RSVP He would accept: Trust in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is what will get me, a prideful, doubting, selfish man in to the party. Faith in Jesus is what will get you - a sinner - into the party. Faith in Jesus is what will get those you love into God's banquet.

It is a scandalous thing - and a beautiful thing! - that God would invite to His banquet feast someone who was as undeserving as King David. Or me. Or you.

Today, we praise God that He doesn't wait for us to get good to shower us with His grace. He lavishes His grace and His gifts on sinners like us who simply believe in Jesus.

Appendix: The two justification of Abraham

***Abraham's justification by faith (Romans 4) and Abraham's justification by works (James 2)

In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul explains how people are eternally saved. He picks up the Abraham story and writes -

[20] yet, with respect to the promise of God, [Abraham] did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, [21] and being fully assured that what [God] had promised, He was able also to perform. [22] Therefore, IT (his faith in the promise of God) WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Paul sees Genesis 15 as significant because it records the point at which Abraham was justified before God by faith alone. However, if we back up a few verses, we find this from Paul.

[Romans 4:2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

We are justified before God by faith. Works don't send anyone to Heaven. But Paul can picture a justification by works. So can James.

What I (and many others) suggest is that Abraham experienced two different justifications.

The *first* one was by faith, before God, and resulted in his eternal salvation (Genesis 15; Romans 4). The *second* was by works and was before men.

The result of that second "justification" was that Abraham was known as "**the friend of God.**" (See Is. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7; James 2:23). Jews, Muslims, and Christians call Abraham "**the friend of God.**"

So, what did James mean when he linked Genesis 22 (the sacrifice of Isaac) to Abraham's justification?

[James 2:21] Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

It was widely accepted in Jewish circles that Abraham was justified before God by faith. Here, James adds a twist when he says that Abraham was justified by works. Not "faith + works" or by a working faith. Justified by works.

So... unless we are prepared to pit James against Paul and Jesus (see John 3:16!), we'll have to admit that James must be talking about a different kind of justification than Paul was.

James says, **[24] You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.**¹²

In other words, a "*by faith*" justification is not the only kind of justification there is. There is also a "*by works*" justification.

Had Abraham not obeyed God on Mount Moriah, he would still have been justified by faith, and would have been Heaven-bound, because he believed the promise of God (Genesis 15).

But, because his faith was alive and active, he was also justified by works, (i.e. - seen to be a friend of God) before a watching world.

In the same way, when you are place your faith in Jesus, God justifies you and gives you eternal life (Romans 4:6). But that is a spiritual transaction only God can see.

When you, a person of faith, lead a life of obedience, faithfulness, and sacrificial love, you are showing an intimacy with God that others can see.

They will see that you are "*a friend of God*" in the same spirit in which Jesus said to His apostles on the night before He died, **[John 15:14] "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."**

¹² The late Zane Hodges was an excellent Greek grammarian, and he pointed out that the Greek adverb "*alone*" or "*only*" does not modify the noun "*faith*." It modifies the verb "*justified*."

And that is the benefit of “works.” You, someone who knows God, becomes someone who makes God known.