

“Measuring up”
Building a strong self-image – Part II

March 25, 2007

Text: Psalm 32, Luke 15:11-32

I.

As children growing up ... (remember back to your childhood, now, if you can ... I know for some of us that will require greater energy and effort than for others ... nonetheless, think back when you were growing up) ... trying to find your way.

If you had siblings, you were trying to get your share of mom and dad ... trying to get your share of anything. Sibling rivalry is a powerful force ... in part because of how much, as children, we want mom and dad’s approval.

- Assuming that our parents have done a reasonably good job of parenting ...
CHECK IT OUT: we don’t want to disappoint mom or dad.
- Applied to us as parents (this is important to understand for younger parents), with the same assumptions in place, our children don’t want to disappoint us.
- This is particularly the case the more we put ourselves lovingly and passionately into their lives.

They don’t want to disappoint us. Put another way, they want to *measure up*. They want to feel like they’ve been a good child, a good son or daughter. On a personal level, I still want to feel that way.

And as our parents’ children, no matter our age, don’t we always want to feel that way? That we’ve been good? That, to whatever extent and in whatever ways, we’ve made mom and dad proud of us?

II.

How many of us here today have spent countless years of our lives working through, sorting out, trying to come to terms with the bad parenting of our parents? How many of us, even as older adults, still feel like—in the sight of our mom or dad—we never quite measured up?

We were never the son or daughter that they wanted ... or expected us to be. That’s a tough reality to have to live with, no matter how delusional or off base our parents might have been. To *almost* be a good son or daughter doesn’t cut it, does it?

In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Charlie Brown, Lucy and Linus are reviewing the performance of their baseball team. It has been a *losing* season beyond imagination. Charlie Brown, the team manager agonizes,

You know our team lost every game. There's simply nothing good about our team.

Lucy tries to cheer him up. *Well, Charlie*, she says, *Schroeder ALMOST hit a homerun. And we did ALMOST win a couple of games. Once we ALMOST made a double play. We were this close. We ALMOST made it.*

Then Linus pipes up: *Charlie Brown*, he says, *If it's any consolation to you, we led the league in ALMOSTS.*

As children, however, we don't want to *almost* be good enough. We don't want to *almost* make mom and dad proud or *almost* be the son or daughter that our parents wanted. We want to be the real deal. We don't want them to *almost* love us or *almost* approve of us.

III.

In the timeless Parable of the Prodigal Son, from Luke's gospel, there are so many themes and sermons. What I invite us to look at this morning is the response of the prodigal to the *sinful* path his life had taken.

As we all remember from the story, he's asked for his rightful inheritance, gone off to Las Vegas and wasted it all. He's lost it all. What a waste! However, living on the edges of life, at last he *comes to his senses* ... and he begins to see how—sadly—his life has not **measured up** in any way.

Sometimes, as we all know, our *measuring up* or not *measuring up* is not on our parents; it's on us. Sometimes, the truth of our lives is that we've fallen short ... we've gotten off track. But the key is what are we going to do about it?

However, there's an even more critical KEY in our story. For the prodigal, it's the key of not only confessing his sin but of realizing that ...

- By the way of grace, there's a way back, a way out of his darkness. For all of us, no matter what dark hole we have fallen in to in our lives, there's a way out.
- All is not lost ... i.e., always, always, there's hope in the grace.

Overflowing with repentance and a confessional heart, the prodigal son returns home; but not without some glimmer of hope.

Put another way, while his hope for personal reinstatement (and winning back his father's approval) is low, his hope for grace taking him to a better place is high. And that's so important all the time in our lives ... that we give ourselves, however haltingly, to a process of moving to a better place, which is where *grace* takes us.

Friends, sometimes, the truth of our lives is there's stuff we gotta deal with. There's stuff we gotta confess ... or stuff we gotta call to the attention of a parent, a spouse or a child.

Holding in these deep-seeded passions ... these deeply planted feelings of disappointment, resentment, regret and anger ... holding them in leaves us stuck in the mud of an estrangement that lingers.

IV.

Listen to the **psalmist** in Psalm 32. If you've been on the short end of *measuring up* in life and ... if there's an estrangement in your spirit and a piercing sorrow in your heart—towards a parent, a spouse, or a child—listen up ...

With many of us, there's stuff we gotta talk through ... or at least *put out there* to see where *grace* might take us.

Psalm 32. *While I kept my silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me ... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

*Then I acknowledged by sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, **I will confess my transgressions to the Lord** ... and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Wasn't this a key for the prodigal son? When he *came to his senses* ... and brought his *confession* before God. When he began to see what his life had become and is moved to repentance ... and to a desire to find his way back ... back to God and back to his father and family.

He knows he hasn't *measured up*. But it's on him; it's his fault. He's been restless and young, careless and irresponsible.

But what about those of us who (for the most part) have been good ... and it's on our parents. For whatever reasons, our parents have been too difficult, too rigid and controlling, too sick or self-absorbed. And no matter what we did or how we did it, we never *measured up*.

1. Perhaps, parental expectations were too high or too unrealistic.
2. Or maybe our parents were simply too dysfunctional themselves to ever be able to truly value and appreciate us.

However, for us, if we can ever get to the other side of all this ... where grace washes over us with a fresh forgiveness and a new love, new beginnings are possible. As Christians—always—we are people of new beginnings.

V.

An elderly woman suffered a stroke and, during her long convalescence, she lived with her daughter and her family. While the daughter loved her mother, she was always a little afraid of her: ***She never felt like she quite measured up to her mother's expectations.***

Consequently, she was determined to make this a positive experience for both of them. However, no matter how hard she tried, they were soon back to their familiar pattern:

1. *the daughter obsessed (trying too hard) with making everything perfect,*
2. *the mother forever offering her critical comments along the way.*
3. *The daughter, of course, was devastated by the criticism ...*

Finally, it all came to a head over the preparation a hard-broiled egg. The tension, the frustration, the anger all came pouring out.

Why are you doing all this for me anyway? The mother blurted out.

By now, of course, the daughter had totally had it ...

1. *Because I want you to get well ...*
2. *And I wanted to show you that I'm a strong, capable woman ...*
3. *I wanted to make sure you were ready to return home alone ...*

And not only that, but ...

1. *and I'm sick and tired of being afraid of you ...*
2. *all I ever wanted, my whole life, was for you to praise me ... just once ... for something, anything.*

By now, the daughter, who was normally non-confrontational, was amazed at how she had stood up to her mom. Even the mother was impressed.

When her daughter finished her tirade, her mother responded, ***It's all junk. It's junk.***

Junk, her daughter yelled back. ***Junk??***

Yes, ***junk***, her mother said again, a little more quietly. ***You don't have to have all those reasons. We love each other. That's enough.***

Junk is fine. It's what you don't need anymore. I love you.

And suddenly it was over ... like the calming after a storm ... the stillness after a downpour.

VI.

Some of us spend lifetimes, don't we, trying to measure up ... to a dysfunctional or perhaps too severe parent or spouse.

We'd give anything, like the daughter in the story, for just one unconditional word of praise and affirmation. We'd give anything to hear our parents say the words that fill any emptiness and that light up any darkness ...

I love you!

And the prodigal son set off to find his way back home—with confession on his lips and hope in his heart ... And what do you know ...

While he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion ... and he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son.*

But the father said to his slaves, *Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it ... and let us eat and celebrate ... for this my son was dead but is alive again; he was lost but now he is found.*

What a moment! What a day! What a faith!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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