

“Surprise Gift of Love”  
Jeremiah 31:1-7; Romans 14:9-12;  
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 1:14-18

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Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

A man sat there doing the repairs necessary, and as he sat, it became pretty rote, so his mind wandered. It wandered back across his life and he began to think about all that had happened. In the process, he was wondering, “Am I good enough?”

It’s hard not to think back and let some of those memories be ones about things that have gone wrong. A friendship that he had not been able to maintain and he felt it was his fault, a jilted lover, an argument with his wife, his anger toward his father, his wonder at whether he really should have come home to be part of the family business. He had so wanted to be a teacher, but had come home when his father asked—trying to honor him but wondering all the same if it was the right thing to do.

As he wondered whether or not what he had done was right, he began to have these thoughts about bigger things. What about the Roman occupation? How much of that was his responsibility to do something about? There were so many beggars these days, so many people begging alongside the road. What was his role in that? What was his responsibility? He wondered.

He thought, “Maybe on balance, overall, I think I’m doing all right.” He kind of had this balance going on in his mind. He thought, “Well, I have done some things that aren’t so good, but maybe if I just do enough good things, I can overbalance.” Some things take more than others. He struggled with whether he was good enough, whether he could balance out the wrongs in his life. He thought overall he was pretty good, but he realized, for example, his religion suggested that he was supposed to wash in ways that he couldn’t do as a fisherman. It just didn’t work, but maybe if he did enough good things, he’d be good enough. But he sat there wondering.

As he thought about the balance of his life, he thought, “I think I’m good enough. The good I do balances. It’s better than all the bad stuff that I’ve done, I think.” But then he realized, “There might be things I should be doing, a good I could be doing that I’m just not seeing. Or perhaps there’s a bad thing I’m complicit with and I don’t even know it.” And he also realized that this was *his* balance. Was his life his own? Was his own opinion the balance he was really most concerned about? Besides, when he did the balancing, he could sometimes add a little weight to the side he wanted, be a little subjective at times about how good he was.

Is his life anything like yours and mine? Do we ever try to balance out the good for the bad? Try to figure out if we’re good enough?

You might realize that who I’m talking about is Peter. Of course, I can’t know he thought all those things, but as he sat along the shore mending the nets, perhaps he had some kind of thought like that. “Am I good enough? Can I balance out my life?”

and then finally realizing that perhaps the one who does the real accounting is not him. We hear from Romans that it is to God that we're all accountable. We can't really put our finger on the scale to make it work right for us. Sometimes it feels like there's just too much weight. We can't ever do enough good to overcome it.

We realize, I think, that there is a sense of accountability to life. If somebody has a gun, there is a responsibility and accountability with that to other people. Driving a car. In a way, it's a gift to be able to have that mobility and to drive, but it comes with accountability and responsibility. We have children. They are a gift, but they are also something we are accountable for and there's responsibility that comes with them. Our education. In much of our lives, things that are gifts are also things that have accountability and responsibility with them. In fact, our very life is a gift but there's a certain accountability and responsibility that comes with it. Maybe Peter was along the shores of Galilee thinking about the kind of accountability and responsibility he had and when Jesus came along he saw something new, a way to address the struggle he was having figuring out whether he was good enough, whether it all balanced out.

It says in John that Peter had been following Jesus for a while and Jesus had said some hard things. He turns to his disciples and says, "What about you? Do you want to leave, too?" What Peter says is, "Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words that give eternal life." He recognized in Jesus one that gets him past the scale and into something new. It is as Peter encounters Christ he's recognizing God's grace in his presence. That surprise gift of love—that's one way of describing grace—is different than the Law of Moses. You might say the Law of Moses gave us the scale. It helps us see what's right and wrong. It begins to give us outlines, and I think we turned it into the scale, or a way to try to balance the good and the bad.

Sometimes this shows up in our lives. I think it's a pretty practical thing. We see studies that show we do these kinds of things. I did something really green today, something that was good for the earth, so I can do something that's not so good tomorrow. Or, we have a co-worker we are trying to get along with. I did really well getting along with them today so I don't have to work at it so hard tomorrow. We try to balance out life. In a way it gives us an excuse to do things we don't think are right.

What I'm suggesting is that when Jesus comes along, he comes to Peter and simply takes the scale away. What's in its place? He simply asks Peter to follow him. Is that really any different than he asks of any of us, to simply follow him? Peter realizes that in Jesus he has found the one who gives grace upon grace. Jesus helps him recognize the love of God in his life, that God cares, that incredible gift that God has given us that our scale can be taken away. What is it replaced with? It's following Jesus.

Let me describe what I think that means in the case of a co-worker who is irritating us. It's not about whether I'm good to them today and tomorrow. It's whether I'm doing what Jesus asked me to do. It's not that I've been good to them today so I don't have to be good to them tomorrow because it's not just about our relationship. It's about

whether I can accept the grace God has given me and express it each day in whatever situation.

Christ isn't asking us to balance things out; he's asking us to do the good. We have the immeasurable riches of the grace given us in Jesus Christ so that we are saved through faith, so we can do the good works that we are made to do (Eph 2). It's not about balancing things out. It's about following Christ. It's simply trying to understand how I give grace that I've been given. How do I share the love that I've been given? How do I love my enemy? If I'm balancing things out, there's no sense in loving my enemy, but if I'm simply trying to give the grace of God, then I try to love even my enemy. It doesn't mean I think they do everything right, or that I appreciate them fully, but I know that I need to give God's grace because I've been given it.

Just one final thing about that as we hear those words in Ephesians: we are saved by grace through faith. There's always that out for us (or in for us). We don't *have* to do what God wants us to do. We don't *have* to follow Christ. We don't *have* to live into the lives we've been made to live. We can go crossways. I don't think it's that helpful. We won't find the joy that we would find. We won't live out and be the good works that God has made us to be. But if we do trust and follow Christ, we will be led to do those good works.

Sometimes I think we try to balance things out and say, "I think my life for the most part is good enough." But as much as I try to do that in balance form, it will never be as good as when I just follow Christ. I'm not even thinking about doing the wrong things. I'll still do some of those, but that's why we have forgiveness and we are invited again, and again, and again to come along, to go on Christ's path, to follow him, to be his disciples and to know the good works that God has given us. It's what Peter found. It's what we are offered as well.

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Gracious God, we are so thankful for that adjective, gracious, that you would be willing to see who we are, to see us trying to balance out our lives. Sometimes we struggle with the times we feel like too much has been wrong or the times we are so proud that we are doing things right that we miss the good we could be doing. Lord, we are so glad you see all of who we are, and that you come to us and invite us to put away the scales and to follow you. You can take on the sin of our lives and lead us anew into the good works you made us to do. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.