

I. Introduction

- A. Thank you for joining us at Neighborhood. Today is part four in our series, I'm Too [Blank] For Faith... a series where we poke and prod and consider all the reasons and excuses people use to shove God out of their lives. Some are sincere. Some are less than sincere. Some are rationalizations... people rationalize. People tell themselves rational-lies.
- B. We all do it.
- C. And when we tell ourselves, rational-lies about God and faith, that's when when our topic comes in.
- D. So far, we've talked about:
 - 1. I'm too successful for faith.
 - 2. I'm too open minded for faith.
 - 3. I'm too guilty for faith...
 - a) Last time we looked at the parable Jesus crafted about the prodigal son. Anyone remember that? Anyone? Anyone?

II. Well, let me remind you, because we're going to pick it up where we left off last time.

- A. Here is a young adult, a young man, who asks his dad for his share of the inheritance. He runs out, and spends himself into a debt he can never repay... partying like it's 1999, and wasting everything on sex, drugs, and country music. Bad country music.
- B. The prodigal son hits rock bottom. He's miserable. He's as hungry as a tick on a cadaver. His whole life has fallen apart.
- C. That's when Jesus says he comes to his senses. He heads back to the one place he might possibly find some food — he heads back to his father's house... yes, the same father he ran away from.
- D. He hopes to come back, however, not as a son, but as a slave.
- E. His father, who represents God, wants nothing to do with that idea.
- F. When he sees his idiot son heading up the road, the father makes himself an even bigger idiot, and does something no self respecting man would do in that culture:
 - 1. *And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)*
- G. If the Bible had a highlight reel, I think this golden moment would be on it.
- H. But there's more:
 - 1. *But the father said to his servants, “Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” And they began to be merry.” (Luke 15:22-24)*
- I. There is no guilt so deep that grace can't erase it.
- J. There is no hole so deep that grace can't lift you out of it.
- K. It's an awesome moment when all the neighbors and relatives show up to the big dance with prime beef to welcome the lost son home.
- L. It is at this point that a dark cloud blots out the son, and the music track turns ominous. Who should show up wondering what's going on, but Mr. Perfection himself, the prodigal son's older brother.
 - 1. *Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.” But he was angry and would not go in... (Luke 15:25-28)*
- M. So this brings us right back to full circle... because today, I would like you to fill in the blank this way...

III. I'm Too [Put-Together] For Faith

- A. Here is a hard working man. A decent man. A good man, if you ask anybody around.
- B. But he cannot even be happy for one minute that his wayward brother has come home.
- C. Can you blame him?
- D. He has a lifetime stockpile of bratty encounters with this rotten little kid. He remembers every single moment.
 - 1. The time the kid broke the new wheel off his wagon.
 - 2. The time he wore his new suit without asking and spilled wine on it.
 - 3. Years and years and years of of this high chair tyrant ruling the roost.
- E. Great, he thinks. Bratty brother makes it back, and they're treating the special snowflake like a king. Loser.
- F. There's music playing.
- G. There's dancing shaking the ground.
- H. Laughter and clinking champagne flutes.
- I. The sun is setting against an orange and azure sky.
- J. A gentle breeze rattles the olive leaves.
- K. And wafting across it all there's that delicious aroma of succulent, grain fed beef turning on the gigantic spit.
- L. Everything is absolutely perfect except for one thing: the elder brother is outside the party throwing a hissy fit, and refusing to come in.
- M. We are going to give this guy a name. Let's call him Mr. Uptight.
- N. That's the set up.
- O. Now... what does Jesus say? That's what I want us to think about. What would Jesus say to a person who says, “I'm too put-together for faith?”
- P. This one is easy, because he tells us. When Jesus crafts the parable of the prodigal son, he puts words into the Father's mouth, which makes it very convenient to preach this sermon. Let's look at them one by one.
 - 1. *Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.” But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. (Luke 15:25-28)*

IV. What would Jesus say?

A. Please come in.

1. The father pleaded with him. "Please come in, son. You belong in the party. You belong with your brother. You belong with me."
2. "I wouldn't go in there if you paid me."
3. It's remarkable when you think about it. It's mind-blowing that the father would come out to plead with Mr. Uptight. If you thought the father made himself look like an idiot when he ran to his prodigal son, he now makes himself look like an even bigger idiot when he pleads with his put-together son.
4. This is his grace.
5. God cares for his own glory above all else. But there are times when God accepts disgrace — think Jesus, stripped, beaten, bloodied, and shamed on the Cross — there are times when God accepts disgrace to accentuate the glory of his grace.
6. And that is what he's doing here.
7. That's how much he loves him, even when the put-together son is being a grade-A, pure-bred, uptight snout.
8. If that doesn't show you the father's heart, nothing will.
9. As Jesus crafted this parable, he began with the words, "*A certain man had two sons*" (Luke 15:11). So let's assume that's it.
10. One hundred percent of his kids did not turn out so well.
11. In the same way, one hundred percent of the human race did not turn out so well either.
12. Listen to God's assessment of the whole human race:
 - a) *As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:10-19)*
13. The prodigal son and the put-together elder brother seem to be polar opposites. But they are not. They actually represent opposite manifestations of the exact same thing: a heart that has positioned itself outside the Father's grace.
 - a) Both sons forgot their need of the father.
 - b) Both sons forgot where their real life came from.
 - c) Both sons forgot who they were, and whose they were, and why it mattered.
14. You may be a very put-together person. You may be hard working, decent, successful, impressive. You may have an awesome reputation in the community. People admire you, respect you, look up to you. And it's all for the right reasons.
15. But there is this thing at the core that you can never put together without the presence of God.
16. For Christmas, Margi got me an iWatch. It's awesome, and I love having it. I didn't know it, but the iWatch works off of an iPhone. It's paired by Bluetooth to your iPhone. The apps on your iWatch actually work from the iPhone. When your phone is near, your iWatch can access its apps and make them work. When your phone is not near, all it does is tell time.
17. And what the put-together son forgot was that absolutely everything in his life only worked when his father was near. It makes no difference how prodigal you are, or how put-together you are. If your heart is far from God, your life won't work, and your eternity will be hot lunch forever with no cold beer to wash it down.
18. So, his father, who loved him, came outside and pleaded with him. "My child, there is a party in my presence. In my presence is fulness of joy. At my right hand, are pleasures evermore. In spite of all your successes, and all your decency, you're missing what matters most. Please come in."
19. The Bible is full of invitations. He wants you. He calls you. He summons you. He enjoys you. He searches for you. He invites you.
20. That's the first thing Jesus would say to the person who says, "I'm too put-together for faith."
21. The second thing comes from how the son answered his father:
 - a) *So he answered and said to his father, "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him." (Luke 15:29, 30)*

B. Listen, Mr. Uptight, you've got it backwards.

1. The son said, "*These many years, I have been serving you.*"
 - a) Jesus said, "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45)
 - b) You've got it backwards.
2. The son said, "*I have never transgressed your commandment at any time.*"
 - a) God says, "*All the world is guilty before God.*"
 - b) You've got it backwards.
3. The son said, "*You have never given me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.*"
 - a) God says, "*Everything belongs to you! ...the world, life, death, the present or the future, everything is yours! For you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*" 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, Phil.
 - b) You've got it backwards, God says.
 - (1) God says, *everything, absolutely everything, you think you know about your life with me... every single word that comes out of your mouth is not just slightly wrong, it's the opposite. It's 180 degrees out of phase.*
4. The son said, "*But as soon as this son of yours came....*"
 - a) God says, "*To me, he is 'this son of mine,' but to you, he's your brother. And until you can call him that, until you can take your place along side him, you'll never know the celestial party of life with a Father who loves you better than you can imagine.*"
 - b) You've got it backwards.
5. The son said, "*This son of yours, who has wasted your livelihood with harlots...*"
 - a) God says... *Hey, Mr. Uptight, you're wasting your life too. Somebody wound your man-bun too tight, and if you loosen up, you can come to the party.*
 - b) You've got it backwards.

6. The son says, *"You killed the fattened calf for him."*
 - a) God says, *"Finally, you get it right, but you hate it. You resent it. And that is the heart of your uptight problem, isn't it?"*
7. Put-Together people dig in their heels and take their stand against the one force in the universe that can fill their lives with joy, both now, and forever. That force is grace.
8. It came to me that it has been a while since we swam around in the pool of grace, and we have a lot of people in our church now who may not understand what we mean by it, so I'd like to jump in right now.
9. The simplest way I can explain grace is to use arrows.
10. Here is God at the top.
11. Here is us at the bottom.
12. When we think about stuff we do for God, we draw an arrow pointing up. When we think about stuff God does for us, we point an arrow pointing down.
13. The universal instinct — I mean everybody thinks this way, everybody — makes life and religion all about the arrows pointing up. I do this. I do that. Sacrifice. Serve. Morality. Improve. Stop sinning. Start behaving. Religion. Confirmation, communion, confession. Rituals. Giving back. Paying forward. Helping people. Serving the community. Be a fanatic, not a fan. Show crazy love. Do, do, do, do, do.
14. The religion of the world is arrows up. Stuff I do for myself. Stuff I do for the community. Stuff I do for God. That was the elder brother's speech. And it's the same speech you give to God every time you think:
 - a) Well, I prayed hard this week, so God's gonna bless me.
 - b) I went three whole days without doing that sin, so God will answer my prayers better.
 - c) I did a deed, paid a price, pressed a button, and now the heavenly candy dispenser owes me my due.
 - d) Arrows up. This is all the religions, all the philosophies, all the mental and religious systems of the world. Arrows up. Stuff we do for God, or karma, or the force, or whatever you're believing in.
 - e) This is the elder-brother's position. I'm serving you, I'm obedient to you, I'm a good person.
 - f) Here is the basic problem with the arrows-up position:
 - g) The finite can never reach the infinite. There is no ladder high enough to climb your way to God. If God is infinite, if God is holy, if God is perfect, if God is anything like the Bible says he is, then not only is he exalted beyond our reach, but also... and this is the big deal... the only way to reach him is to try to pull him down.
 - h) And that is exactly what religion and philosophy, and even atheism does.
 - i) But it's even worse. Why?
 - j) Because the person who says, "I'm too put-together for God" is pulling God down, and doesn't even realize they're doing it!
 - k) They don't even know.
 - (1) *Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:17)*
15. That is a perfect description of the elder brother.
 - a) You're against grace!
 - (1) No I'm not!
 - b) You're against the Bible!
 - (1) No I'm not!
 - c) You're against the truth!
 - (1) No I'm not!
 - d) You're messed up with God!
 - (1) No I'm not.
 - e) You're not right in the head.
 - (1) Yes I am.
 - (a) You do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.
16. And the main reason why is that all your arrows are pointing up. You are put-together. You don't really NEED God, or grace, or a Savior, or his salvation.
17. So you stand outside God's celestial party, with your arms folded and your grouchy face, just like Mr. Uptight, and resent all the good stuff he gives to all those dirty bums inside... and, if you persist in this condition, you'll be kicked out of the party forever.
18. The solution, of course, is to flip those arrows over. No, it's not easy, and returning to the default position of arrows up is so easy.
19. This is what the Bible calls repentance. Repentance is the glorious day when you drop your arrogance before God, and whether you are prodigal or put-together, you say, Father, I need you. I can't reach you by myself.
20. The Bible says,
 - a) *God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)*
21. Arrows up represents Works. Stuff you do for God.
22. Arrows down represents Grace. Stuff God does for you. Past, present, and future.
23. God made you, God loved you, God searched for you when you went astray, God carried you back home. He forgave you and he blessed you. He Gave you the most precious gift the world has ever known. It's called salvation, and it is absolutely free.
24. Everything God does for you, he does by grace.
25. God doesn't give paychecks.
26. God gives blessings.
27. And that means you don't pay for them, not one little penny.
 - a) *"Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness," Romans 4:4, 5)*

28. And the one and only reason for all of this grace, and goodness, and kindness and love is the shed blood of Jesus Christ on a cross that stood 2000 years ago on a hill called Calvary.
 29. Every single arrow points down. Grace, not works. Grace, not human effort. God does the work. God breaks the sweat. God pays the price. And he pays it once for all, in full, forever.
 30. What is grace?
 - a) Grace is God's unmerited favor.
 - b) Grace is God's Riches at Christ's Expense.
 - c) Grace is God doing for you what you could never do for yourself, strictly and completely, on the basis of the shed blood of Christ.
 31. The grace of God, and the blood of Christ, is so powerful, that no demon can ever take you from God, no sin could ever take you from God, and no choice you make on your darkest day could ever take you from God.
 32. It is not the power of your commitment, it's the power of his commitment.
 33. And the only qualification is you admitting your need, which is exactly what the elder brother, and all the put-together people of all the ages are so stubbornly reluctant to do.
 34. The hardest people to come to Christ are put-together people. I got into a conversation once with a Buddhist. He told me he wasn't just a Buddhist, but a Brahman, which is the highest caste.
 35. I asked, "Have you ever heard of salvation?"
 36. He said, "I don't need salvation. As a Brahman, I am already perfect."
 - a) Well, that was a first.
 37. "So, you have never sinned?"
 38. "No."
 39. "You have never failed, or messed up?"
 40. "No."
 41. "You don't really need God in your life?"
 42. "All is god, and god is all, and I am god," he said.
 - a) That was first, too.
 43. I said, "How about them Cubbies?"
 44. Because there is not much you can say to a put-together, perfect person that's going to change their mind.
 45. And that's what the Father knew. So he said his piece and walked away.
 - a) *And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 'It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' Luke 15:31, 32)*
 46. So here is the third and final thing Jesus would say to the person who says, "I'm too put-together for faith."
- C. Grace is the only deal in town, so please shut up.
1. When somebody was messed up and knew it, Jesus was always tender and kind.
 2. But when somebody was put-together, and just wouldn't admit their need, Jesus pulled out the hammer.
 3. The so-called "hard sayings of Jesus" in the Bible, are not for repentant prodigals, but for unrepentant, grace-denying, works-insisting put-together boasters. So it's time to bring down the hammer.
 4. The Father says, Son you are always with me... Well, let me rephrase it...
 - a) Listen you little punk. I'm never more than a conversation away from you. Quit acting so neglected. And what's this about your brother wasting my stuff? It's his stuff; I gave it to him. Remember? And I gave you your stuff, too, so don't bellyache to me. Any day you wanted, you could have killed that fattened calf, and we would have had a party ourselves, but you're such an uptight cheapskate. And as far as you brother's assumed sexual proclivities are concerned, listen, Mr. Immaculate Conception, at least he had the humility to die to his own efforts at a life, and come home to live mine with you. And if you weren't so stinkin' full of your self, you could do the same. Don't you see you're living like a pauper when I've made you a king?
 - b) Now, there's party going on inside, and I'm going back to it. Don't worry, I'll leave the door open. When you're done with your hissy fit, come on in, pour yourself some wine and have some gluten-free garlic bread to go with it.
 5. The story ends without a conclusion. It's a question. What will Mr. Uptight, the put-together person in the world's most beloved parable, actually do?
 6. And I guess I'll leave my sermon without that conclusion too.