

June 2, 2019

“Mythbusters: You Get What You Deserve”

Ephesians 2:4-10, Luke 15:11-32

“God will never give you more than you can handle.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “God helps those who help themselves.” Not true; at least not biblically-speaking. These are some of the most popular myths to have crept into the church with a bible verse here, a favorite poem or sermon there, and enough usage by people we know and love to seem true. But as we’ve been saying, these myths aren’t true and they’re not helpful – especially for those going through painful and difficult situations, which is usually when these little slogans come out of our mouths. People in the world and the Church need MYTHBUSTERS who are willing to name what isn’t true, and to think deeply about what comes out of our mouths, appears on our bumper stickers, and gets written in our bulletins or put on our websites.

This week we are exposing the myth “You Get What You Deserve.” This fits what many call our Protestant Work Ethic, and has gained popularity through the growing influence of Buddhism/Hinduism’s concept of karma! The word Karma communicates about the same thing as “You Get What You Deserve” – or its close cousin, “You/He/She had it coming.” Karma fits nicely on a bumper sticker. It is also easy to add to the end of someone’s anonymous rant in Sunday’s ‘You Said It’ section of our local newspaper.

And those rants are perfect examples of the usual tone when we say this out loud – or think it privately. We almost always say “You get what you deserve” when something bad happens to someone; and it’s almost always someone we don’t really like, don’t know, or don’t like very much. We typically say this in a judgmental and smug way. If we’re honest, we’re glad they are facing negative consequences for their choices and behavior. It’s seldom said to someone we care deeply about, and almost never self-directed. We might occasionally say, “I deserved that” or “I had that coming” but it’s usually tongue-in-cheek.

“You get what you deserve” isn’t biblical. Like a lot of these myths we are trying to bust, there’s a kernel of scriptural truth behind them. They are partially true or true in some circumstances. But they aren’t ‘Truth’ with a capital T.

Are there kernels of truth in this myth? Does it come from the laboratory of life as well as our scriptures? To some extent, yes.

We do believe, and the Bible teaches, there are consequences to our behavior and choices. Paul writes to the Galatians that “we reap what we sow.” (Galatians 6:7) God tells Adam that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will lead to death. (See Genesis 2 and 3) God disciplines the Israelites for idolatry and injustice. (See a lot of Old Testament history) Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. (See Matthew 25:31-46)

Common sense tells us there are natural and legal consequences to most of our behaviors – especially the negative ones. But we also know people get away with terrible things or get off the hook when there are clear violations of laws; when agreed upon Moral Codes of Conduct are ignored. It’s simply not true that everybody “gets what they deserve” in a timely fashion.

Are we ready to let go of this myth?

We’d like it to be true – that people “get what they deserve” – when we don’t like the people involved and disapprove of their behavior. But we’re not always so intent about making sure “**WE** get what we deserve.”

The most important question is, what does God say about this oft-quoted slogan and partially-sanctioned saying in the Church?

A big-picture, large-scale place to start is with the word of God to Isaiah in chapter 55: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways.” (Isaiah 55:8) Almost everything God does and says is different than our instincts, impulses and ideas about how the world works and should be run. The Good News of the Gospel is that God doesn’t run the world using a simple system of rewards and punishments. God isn’t into Karma. God is into GRACE.

“For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) This passage from Ephesians, and many others, fueled Martin Luther to begin a Reformation just over 500 years ago. Paul writes a lot about grace because that is what captured his heart.

Jesus tells a story in Luke 15 with the intent of capturing our hearts, and exposing how we really feel and what we really think about grace. The context for this story – and the two others that precede it in Luke 15 – is important. Luke writes, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So Jesus told them [these] parables.” (Luke 15:1-3) The religious leaders who had gathered around Jesus that afternoon loved and lived by the motto: “**You get what you deserve.**” And this story just wrecks all that.

Disrespectful and disobedient sons shouldn't get an inheritance in the first place, let alone be welcomed home by the Father after blowing it all. Dad doesn't even make the punk do the walk of shame and give a full apology. Jesus says, "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) And then dad just goes overboard with generosity and grace. So you think a ring, a robe and a nice pair of sneakers – followed by a great barbeque – is going to teach him a lesson? His older brother doesn't think so.

It's not hard for many of us to empathize with the older brother, is it? It must have been hard seeing his father go to all that expense. He's mad about the inheritance being wasted, and mad about even more money being blown on a welcome home party, and mad about grace. He doesn't like it one bit. His younger brother is NOT getting what he deserves.

Where are you in the story?

I have been both sons. My wandering and wallowing in the pig slop may look different than this younger brother's or your wandering and wallowing, but I did my fair share of it in high school and college. I'm also a pretty good older brother. "Responsibility" is my top strength in Strengthsfinder and I just learned that I am a 1 on the Enneagram Test, also known as The Perfectionist (or Reformer). When I'm at my worst, I fixate on what's not going well, who's slacking off, and why anyone would want to have fun when there's so much important stuff left to do. Smoldering resentment is the besetting sin that creeps in if I'm stressed or not careful. Who does that sound like in the story? I don't know if we have more younger or older brothers here today, although I have a guess where most of us fall oftentimes.

But whether you're like the older or younger son, neither son actually deserves their father's love. Their father loves them because of who they are not what they do or don't do. Actually, you could say the father loves them because of who he is.

And because of who God is . . . "We don't get what we deserve."

In the book of Romans, Paul reminds us what has been clear from the beginning, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Later he writes, "the wages [price] of sin is death." (Romans 6:23a) Paul makes it clear that God's not soft on sin; but he doesn't end there. He goes on to remind us that, even though we deserve to pay the penalty of our sin, "the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

In his letter to the Ephesians at the beginning of chapter 2 he paints the same bleak picture of being dead in our sin, but goes on with the Good News. "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4-5) In other words, the Father throws parties all the time when the lost get found and the dead come to life!

Tom Hansen at First Presbyterian Church of Grand Junction, CO

**Jesus was willing to get what He did not deserve, so that we wouldn't get what we do deserve!** You can say that and be right every time, in every situation.

“God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)