

A Brand New Heart—Courtesy of Your Father

Israel, I wanted to accept you as my son and give you a delightful land, the most beautiful land in all the world. I wanted you to call me Father, and never again turn away from me. (Jeremiah. 3:19 TEV)

The sunglasses had been stepped on—the frame bent, lens pushed out, one stem hinge twisted. Righteously, if not clumsily, I pushed in, re-twisted, and resolved to live with it. And then recently, after two years of discomfort, in a blaze of spendthrift abandon I sent the glasses to the manufacturer to get fixed, without even asking the cost. Two weeks later, I opened the package and discovered a brand new pair. Holding my breath as I read the invoice, I was startled to read, “Though your warranty has expired, nevertheless we have replaced your broken sunglasses at no cost, as a courtesy.”

The stems had always curved too short for my extra-large head, and on the crest of this newfound abundance, I took the sunglasses to a local store to have them fitted to my ears. When the clerk had straightened and molded them to perfection, I dutifully pulled out my wallet, noting that I had not bought them at his store. “No problem,” he said; “with this manufacturer, there’s no charge.”

Striding down the street later in my new and for-the-first-time comfortable sunglasses, it struck me: For two years, I had determined to live in discomfort, yet all along I could’ve had a brand new, fitted pair simply for the asking! As a strange mixture of thanksgiving and dismay overtook me, I had to ask: *Father, is there anything else I’m needlessly living with, tolerating, or enduring in my life now that makes me not a righteous hero, but an unbelieving fool? Indeed, Is there something you want to give me that I haven’t asked for?* At home later, in my prayer closet, I fell on my knees--and wept as the Father revealed a host of blessings He’s been trying to give me, but I haven’t trusted Him enough to receive. In that moment, I recognized the demon of “deprivation” which had kept me from seeing the Father’s heart for me, and in the Name of Jesus, cast it out. In its place, I asked for the spirit of Sonship (Rom. 8:16), and the release of my full spiritual inheritance (Galat. 4:1-7)

Still later, I balked. Where is the line here between faith and name-it-claim-it presumption, between overcoming demonic deprivation and indulging selfish greed? Where is the balance between today’s shame-less, pleasure-centered culture and our shame-full Puritan ancestors--who outlawed the popular frontier sport of bear-baiting, not because it harmed the animals, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators? How do we escape the demonic trap between a pleasure-worshipping licentious spirit and a pleasure-renouncing ascetic spirit? What right do I have to ask for more blessings when others in the world are starving?

Searching the Scriptures, I was drawn to a surprising Word that upends not only the Puritan killjoys, but the modern hedonists as well:

Set aside a tithe—a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Then go to the one place where the Lord your God has chosen to be worshiped; and there in his presence eat the tithes of your grain, wine, and olive oil, and the first-born of your cattle and sheep. Do this *so that you may learn to have reverence* for the Lord your God always. (Deut. 14: 22-26 TEV)

If this sounds extravagant, even unrighteous, hold on. There’s more:

If the place of worship is too far from your home for you to carry there the tithe of the produce that the Lord has blessed you with, then do this: Sell your produce and take the money with you to the one place of worship. *Spend it on whatever you want—beef, lamb, wine, beer—and there, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families are to eat and enjoy yourselves.*

What God has given us, we are commanded to enjoy. Not in order to foster selfish indulgence, but rather, to *inspire humble reverence*. A little boy, that is, may obey a father who enforces severe discipline, but he will revere the one who not only teaches him safe boundaries, but who can also enjoy an ice cream with him. We think, “If we just don’t turn away from God, He will bless us”—and burn out striving to stay focused on Him. But what if, as Jeremiah suggests, the more we let God accept us as we are, the more we call Him Father and receive His blessings, the less likely we are to turn away from Him? Not because He threatens to punish us if we turn away, but because He’s so good we don’t want to.

God is not an exacting Scrooge who frowns on fun, but a grace-full Father who loves *and therefore enjoys* His children. Thus, He introduces Jesus to the world with the heartfelt blessing, “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.” (Matt. 3:17, *The Message*)

Scorning pleasure is no more promoted by God than worshipping it. That’s not because He’s morally lax. When God commands a “Thou shalt not,” it’s a loving Father’s plea, “Please, my child, don’t do that—it will harm you!” God’s laws are designed not to deny us pleasure, but to protect us from pain. It’s not the goodness of the world that we celebrate and enjoy, but the goodness of our Father. And we do it within His boundaries because that’s best for us. It’s true that Jesus did not come to bring us the good life. He came to bring us the best life. The question, therefore, is not, Why do the pagans have all the fun? but rather, Why is it so hard for me to receive my Father’s blessings?

Sadly, tragically, when we deny ourselves God’s pleasure, ultimately we deny it to others as well, with precisely the harsh judgment which we mete out upon ourselves. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel—himself no stranger to the world’s suffering--tells the story in *Souls on Fire*, his anthology of Hasidic Judaism, of a wealthy man trying to impress his rabbi by fasting on just bread and salt:

“That’s very bad,” said the (rabbi). “I order you to eat white bread and cake, and also to drink sweet wine.” – “But, Rebbe, why?” cried the astounded Hasid. –
“If you are content with black bread and water, you will think that the poor can subsist on stones and spring water. If you eat cake, you will give them bread.”

As the writer of *Ecclesiasticus* put it, “How can a man be hard on himself and kind to others? His possessions bring him no enjoyment. No one is worse than the man who is grudging to himself; his niggardliness is its own punishment.” (14:5-6 NEB *The Apocrypha*)

Some cultures, in spite of many other, admirable traits, have elevated deprivation to an art form—such as that of my Scandinavian/ Norwegian Dalbey surname. (Email me for a more complete description of this cultural pathology, “The Spirit of *Jante*.”) Thus, in his *Pretty Good Joke Book*, Garrison Keillor tells of aging Ole lying on his deathbed surrounded by his family: “Is my wife here?” he asks. “Yes, Ole,” Lena replies, “I’m right here.” – “Are my children here?” – “Yes, Daddy,” the children all say. -- “Are my other relatives also here?” -- “Yes,” they say, “We’re all here” -- And Ole says, “Then why is the light on in the kitchen?”

A righteously disciplined light switch-offer, I cringe. How, I wonder, has my own compulsive deprivation not only distracted me, like Ole, from my Father’s goodness and deprived me of His joy—but indeed, disallowed it in others, especially those in my own home? *Father, forgive me for not enjoying your goodness. Help me to receive your blessings so I can bless others.*

It's a big order. I'm asking for a new heart, courtesy of the Father. But I'm not worried. With this Manufacturer, there's no charge.