

PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

John Grisham's murder mystery, *The Firm*, introduces Mitch, an impressive young man who is second in his graduating Harvard Law School class with two solid job offers upon graduation. Both the Wall Street law firm where he had been a summer clerk and a prestigious Chicago firm court him for employment. A small firm from Tennessee, however, wins him over by offering an exorbitant salary, plus a mind-boggling package of benefits and financial incentives: a new BMW, a six-figure special annuity package, the payment of his law-school debts, down-payment assistance for his new house in Memphis, a \$3,000 clothing gift, and generous funds for home furniture. In the middle of this avalanche of good fortune, only Mitch's wife, Abby, seems uneasy, sensing subtle inroads of control and domination that inevitably accompany financial largesse.

I was intrigued that an outstanding person like Mitch could be oblivious to the dangers of financial hooks in his life. After considering this fictional character, I concluded that he wasn't suspicious because his performance at school and his election to Harvard Law Review convinced him that he *deserved* the deal they offered him. It made sense to him that the partners in the Memphis firm recognized his brilliance and were simply rewarding competence when they saw it. Mitch's dizzy self-confidence made him easy to deceive, which is exactly what happened to this brilliant young man early on in the novel.

The Firm is a parable about how our pride and convictions of self-importance make us vulnerable to deception—albeit on a smaller scale than Mitch and Abby faced. The potential to be deceived goes with greatness, both perceived and actual greatness. My position or accomplish-

ment may deceive me into ranking myself above the ordinary folk who make up the rest of the world. I falsely believe that I especially deserve rewards beyond ordinary boundaries. I lose the sense of my own ambiguity and humanity. Living in that deception leaves me lonely. The opposite deception, feeling unworthy and deserving of punishments beyond the ordinary boundaries, also leaves me lonely. Both deceptions isolate and confuse the soul of a man or woman.

When I feel that because of my own greatness I deserve special and even luxurious benefits beyond the range of normal people, I begin a journey toward the entrapment of pride and power. I spoil in myself the possibility for being genuinely surprised by grace when I deem myself deserving of every reward. In *The Firm* this entrapment makes Mitch into a self-referential hero, intoxicated by power and therefore easily deceived by those who also have power.

Entrapped by Giftedness

The Christians at Corinth, to whom Paul wrote his marvelous Corinthian letter, were entrapped by their giftedness. So were the recipients of James' letter. Seeing the danger of the trap played out in *The Firm* helped me better understand the no-nonsense approach that James takes in his letter. He plainly warns us against the temptations of power, boldly asserting that the appetites stirred up by excessive expectations are the cause of war itself.

What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on

your passions. (James 4:1-3)

How could Mitch—how can we—elude the dangerous trap of pride? First, Mitch should have listened to Abby. Learning to listen to people who love us frees us from the isolation of pride. From friends who know us we often gain early clues that some part of our life is in danger of spinning out of balance. Being an early warning system is one of the roles that Christian fellowship plays in our lives.

A second cure for isolation caused by pride is the same as the cure for isolation caused by humiliation: grace. Discovering God's love in Jesus Christ enables us to outgrow both false self-pride and false self-condemnation. Our life journeys often include phases of pride and condemnation; God's grace finds us and draws us beyond a phase into genuine fulfillment and maturity.

The good news of God's grace helps us to recognize our ambiguities, to face up to our sins, and to experience being beloved by God. In these three discoveries we find protection from the temptation to pride and the temptation to despair. Best of all, God's grace resolves our lives, gives us self-respect, and frees us up for real fellowship. These three are better by far than a BMW from the firm. ♦



Earl Palmer is pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle.