

Even more than we deserve

by EARL PALMER

In the novel *The Firm* by John Grisham the main character, Mitch, is an impressive young man. He is number two in his class at Harvard Law School; as the story begins he has two solid job offers, one with a Wall Street firm, but an even smaller firm from Memphis, Tenn., wins him over, and he goes to work there. What did it was the salary this firm offered, plus mind-boggling benefits and incentives, including a new BMW. In the middle of this avalanche of good fortune, only his wife, Abby, seems uneasy. She senses inroads of control that inevitably accompany such largesse.

What intrigued me was that such an outstanding person could be so oblivious to the dangers of these hooks into his life. Then the answer came to me. Mitch wasn't suspicious because he was convinced he deserved the money! After all, he had been elected to Harvard Law Review. It made sense that the partners in the Memphis firm recognized his brilliance, and they were simply rewarding competence when they saw it. This dizzy self-confidence probably made Mitch the easiest person at Harvard to con and deceive, which is exactly what happened.

I was relieved to know that real law firms cannot do what this Memphis firm did, but the story became to me a parable about how pride and convictions of self-importance can make us very vulnerable to just the kind of deception (perhaps on a smaller scale) that Mitch and Abby faced.

It is the deception that goes with importance, either perceived or actual. It is the loss of the sense of my own ambiguity, so that I somehow feel above the ordinary folk who make up the rest of the world. It is therefore the deception that become one of the main contributors to corruption, isolation and, finally, loneliness. The other cause is the opposite feeling: I am so unworthy that I deserve punishments beyond ordinary and reasonable boundaries. Both deceptions confuse the soul of a man or woman, where such temptations occur, and not only are the young susceptible. More than I deserve can go both directions and both are roadblocks that make it hard for truth and grace to show up in the room.

The story made me think of the Christians at Corinth to whom Paul wrote his marvelous Corinthian letter. They too were, in many different ways, entrapped by their giftedness. *Already you*

have become rich; without us you have become kings ... (1 Cor. 4:8). Fortunately, 1 Cor. 13 follows soon afterward in Paul's letter to settle us down with healthier self understandings and priorities.

What is the cure for such dangerous pride? First Mitch should have listened to Abby! When we learn how to listen to people who love us, we are at least at the beginning steps on the way to a cure from the isolation of both pride and despairing self-rejection. Friends who know us best often help us to gain early clues that some part of our life is in danger of spinning out of balance. This is one of the important roles that Christian fellowship plays in our lives. For this reason I believe that friendship building must stand as one of the four main goals of a young pastor's training in a theological seminary: (1) The first goal needs to be to grow in personal faith as we walk with Jesus Christ; (2) the key to the

second goal is to intellectually learn the great disciplines of the Bible, theology, church history; (3) it is also necessary to become competent in the craft of study, preaching, and pastoral ministry. But the (4th) goal

is to make lifelong friends. These friends are essential to my health and balance and I to theirs too.

Second, we find the cure for the isolation caused by pride in the very same way we find the cure for the isolation caused by humiliation — in grace. The discovery of God's love in Jesus Christ enables us to outgrow the two preoccupations with myself: false self-pride and false self-condemnation. These conditions are often a phase of our life journey, and it is God's truth and grace that finds us and draws us beyond that unpleasant and joyless phase into genuine fulfillment and maturity.

The good news is that together truth and grace help me to recognize my ambiguities, to face up to my own sins, to experience "belovedness" by God, and in these three discoveries we are protected from the temptation to pride and the temptation to despair. Best of all, God's grace heals brokenness, gives to us self respect and frees us up for real fellowship with people we love and who love us.

These three are better by far than a BMW from the firm.

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