



“Am I a good Man?”

“Am I a good man?”

“Have I led a good life?”

Words of agony leak through tears of doubt as the former Private Ryan demands affirmation from his wife. A lifetime has passed since he received a soldier's final request. Propped against a crippled tank amidst the ruins of war, Capt. John Miller had whispered, “Earn this.” With his dying breath he tattooed the words onto Ryan's psyche: “*Earn this!*”

In this scene from Steven Spielberg's movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Miller refers to the six men who gave their lives to get Private Jack Ryan safely back to his mother. Six lives lost to save one; six mothers grieving so one could rejoice.

Fifty years later Ryan kneels at Miller's grave and recalls his captain's words. They have been his constant, chafing companions; the best years of his life have shivered in their shadow. Did he “earn this”? Was his life worth their sacrifice?

He looks to his wife in desperation. “Am I a good man? Have I led a good life?” Her furrowed brow rubs salt in the secret he has swallowed for decades. She knows nothing of the depth of his pain, the plague he suffers. The need to “earn” gags his subconscious like bile at the back of his throat. Yet those around him are never allowed to taste the bitterness he lives with.

As would the good wife of any decent man, she responds, “You ARE a good man!”

Do you think that Ryan's wife's answer eased his pain? Why? Why not?

Why was Ryan so concerned about being a good man? What do you think “good man” meant to him?

Michael Young, a British sociologist, created the term “meritocracy” in 1958 when he wrote a science fiction novel called *The Rise of Meritocracy*. It means that we get what we merit or deserve.

Is it a fair assumption to say that we grow up (school, sports, music, etc.) in a world that teaches us that we get what we deserve? Your thoughts?

Would you agree or disagree that Private Ryan's emotions were based on this philosophy? What leads you to that conclusion?

Do you feel like where you are now, that you've gotten what you deserve? Why or why not?

Let's take a look at the results of a *U.S. News & World Report* survey that asked, "Who do you think is most likely to get into heaven?"

- Mother Teresa
- Oprah
- Michael Jordan
- Colin Powell
- OJ Simpson
- Me (the person answering the question)

Out of the list above, what person do you think was most often selected by the survey respondents as most likely to get into Heaven? Least likely?

If you had to guess, what would you say they based their answers on?

Apparently country singer Kenny Chesney was right when he sang, “Everybody Wants To Go To Heaven.” Almost 90% of the survey respondents chose themselves.

What do these results tell you about the way people evaluate being or doing good, and its relationship to God and how one qualifies to spend eternity in heaven?

Let’s pause for a moment and compare Private Ryan to the *U.S. News & World Report* survey respondents.

Are there similarities or differences in how each viewed the quality of one’s life and their definition of “good”?

In your opinion, who deserves to go to “heaven”? Explain.

Luke 18:18-24 records an encounter between Jesus and a young man of significant power and wealth.

**A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone...”**
(NIV-New International Version)

Assuming that Jesus was not just being difficult, what is your opinion about Jesus’ response to this young man?

That story is in the second half of the Bible referred to as the New Testament. Let’s turn to another place in the first half the Bible (the Old Testament). In Isaiah 64:6 it says:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags, we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
(The Message)

How do you think the survey respondents would react to this statement from the Bible?

Based on Jesus' statement to the young man and Isaiah's declaration, how do feel about your chances of doing "good" and "getting into heaven?"

In the movie *Grand Canyon*, a tow-truck driver played by Danny Glover is called to pick up a stalled car in East LA. He soon finds a wealthy attorney next to a late model BMW, surrounded by a gang of street toughs prepared to do bodily harm to both lawyer and luxury car. Glover enlists the gang leader in private conversation.

"Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this," he says. "Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it is supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here."

Considering the war, hunger, poverty, and crime that exist in our world, it is easy to see eye to eye with the tow-truck driver.

How do you explain the mess this world is in?

Let's turn to Luke 15 and see how Jesus explains the mess we are in.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "(NIV)

If you were the Father in this story, what feelings would have been surging through you when the son came and asked for his inheritance?

What kinds of internal turmoil would drive a son to ask his father for his inheritance?

The cultural differences between us and first century Jews might make it somewhat difficult to understand the depth of this request. Ancient Near East Scholar Kenneth Bailey helps us out:

The father grants the Prodigal (younger son) the freedom to own and to sell his portion of the estate. The inheritance is substantial. This is a wealthy family that has a herd of fatted calves and a herd of goats. House servants/slaves appear. The house includes a banquet hall large enough to host a crowd that will eat an entire fatted calf in one evening. Professional musicians and dancers are hired for that banquet. The father is respected in the community, and thus the community responds to his invitation. Transferring the inheritance is a serious matter that should only be dealt with by the father as he approaches death.

Furthermore, the Prodigal "gathered all he had," or as the New English Bible puts it, "turned [it] into cash." This means that he is selling his part of the family farm. As that happens, this horrendous family breakdown becomes public knowledge, and the family is shamed before the entire community. Jewish law of the first century provided for the division of an inheritance (when the father was ready to make such a division), but did not grant the children the right to sell until after the father's death. (Kenneth Bailey, Unpublished paper-*The Pursuing Father*, p. 2)

Why would the father subject himself to public ridicule in allowing the son to sell his portion of the estate in a public auction?

The son's "leaving is, therefore, a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part. When Luke writes, "and left for distant country," he indicates much more than the desire of a young man to see more of the world. He speaks about a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The "distant country" is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.

(Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p.36)

After reading Henri Nouwen's insight into the son's leaving, how would you describe the wound the son inflicted on the father?

Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son puts a new frame around the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. Like the prodigal, they choose to leave the place they were designed to live in. They act on an inner feeling that life could be better apart from their Father, the Most High God and Creator of the universe. In Isaiah 53:6, the Prophet Isaiah describes this as the plight of all humanity.

**We're all like sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost.
We've all done our own thing, gone our own way.** (The Message)

Is it possible that this is what Danny Glover was describing above? Things are the way they are because we've all wandered off from our Father? What's your opinion?

When have you felt far from God or when has your world felt like things weren't like they were supposed to be?

We were made to live with God. Our very bodies and souls were designed to live a life that values what God values and feels his Fatherly love at our deepest levels. This requires we trust him and count his opinion as what matters most in our lives. Like the Younger Son, when we leave home/God, we leave that trust relationship and declare that we will make a way *on our own*. That is the definition of the Biblical word sin—simply living apart from God and doing our own thing.

In the Prodigal story it says “the son came to his senses” and realized he was living worse than his father’s hired servants. He has a Danny Glover moment when he realizes things aren’t the way they are *supposed to be*. So he decides to find his way back to his father.

When our lives are not as they should be, we often set out to find our way home and back to God. “Stage of life” issues like marriage or marriage failure, having and raising children, tragedies, health problems, loss of loved ones, or just the general discomfort of our soul--the feeling that things *are not the way they are supposed to be*--can instigate our movement back to God.

Looking at the story again from Luke 15, we see the departed son devising a plan.

‘I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ (NIV)

We might call this the “Earner” plan since he is determined to pay his father back for all that he took. You don’t have to be Einstein or an expert in Near Eastern Studies to see that the math just doesn’t add up! How many of his father’s servants have earned up to half their employer’s wealth?

For argument’s sake let’s say the son could pay back his father all that he took. Do you think that would repair the injury the son had inflicted on his father? Explain your answer.

The son’s debt is too steep to pay and besides, that is not the real issue. **The relationship was broken.** The son wounded the father’s heart. No amount of money can repay the pain the father felt as he watched his son turn away.

When you think about returning to God, do you feel the urge to repay him for your leaving? How do/would you go about paying him?

Notice what Paul says in Romans 3:23:

Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us-Jews and them-Gentiles) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us (The Message)

Are you ready to give up trying to earn God’s favor? What worries you as you think about answering that question?

Let’s turn our attention to the father’s peculiar behavior. He sees his son from afar. In fact, he has daily surveyed the horizon, expecting his return!

What does this tell you about the father and his feelings for his son?

We also learn that the father, upon seeing his son, runs to him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. Read what Kenneth Bailey says of this encounter.

And so, for the third time, the father breaks the mold of Middle Eastern patriarchy. He takes the bottom edge of his long robes in his hand and runs to welcome his pig-herding son. He falls on his neck and kisses him before hearing his prepared speech! The father does not demonstrate love in response to his son's confession. Rather, out of his own compassion he empties himself, assumes the form of a servant, and runs to reconcile his estranged son. Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. To do so is deeply humiliating. This father runs. The boy is totally surprised.

Overwhelmed, he can only offer the first part of his prepared speech, which now takes on a new meaning. He declares that he has sinned and that he is unworthy to be called a son. He admits (by omitting the third phrase) that he has no bright ideas for mending their relationship. He is no longer "working" his father for additional advantages. The father does not "interrupt" his younger son. Instead, the Prodigal changes his mind, and in a moment of genuine repentance, accepts to be found. (Kenneth Bailey, Unpublished paper-*The Pursuing Father*, p. 7)

As you read this and discover that Jesus is telling a story to change our view of the Heavenly Father, what is going on inside as you think about this Father who longs for your return? How does this change your concept of God?

Here is a father who longs for his son's return and we know this because:

- He surveys the horizon
- He drops what he is doing and runs in public to greet his son despite the humiliation
- He publicly acknowledges his love for his estranged son with hugs and kisses
- He shuts down his "business operation" and invites the public to join the celebration of his son's return

Do you see the Heavenly Father watching for your return?

Do you sense his excitement watching for your first movement towards him?

Don't make the same mistake the Younger Son makes. His initial plan to "earn" his way back into his father's house was quickly put away. Why? He knew he could never earn the kind of love he was experiencing; that kind of love is a gift.

We too find that same love!

Remember Romans 3:23? A small portion of that verse was left out a few paragraphs ago.

Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us (*Jews*) and them (*Gentiles*)) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. (The Message)

Notice how Paul says it to his protégé Titus in the third chapter of his personal letter to him.

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit... (NIV)

We can't repay God for the debt we owe for leaving. No amount of clean living can un-break God's heart. You have wounded his heart by leaving and living away from him. But His love for you is so strong that he has paid your way back into his family.

Notice the son is not just welcomed back. The robe, ring and sandals demonstrate that he is reinstated as an heir and son in the father's family. The position he freely gave up to pursue his own purposes is now freely and fully restored despite the wrongs he has done.

God offers the same reinstatement to you! As Paul said in Romans 3:23, God did it for us and He offers it as a free gift. Paul further explains this in Romans 6:23:

The payment for sin is death. But God gives us the free gift of life forever in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NCV - New Century Version)

Often times we know something, even believe something, but it takes action to put it into action. Maybe a question can help clarify.

If you died today and met Jesus outside the gates of heaven, what would you say if He were to ask, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" Remember, the debt you owe is too steep to repay!

Jesus is the answer! He paid your debt and granted you access not only into heaven but also into a heavenly relationship with his Father. John 17:3 says:

And this is eternal life: that people know you, the only true God, and that they know Jesus Christ, the One you sent. (NCV)

The certainty of heaven is a fruit of this new understanding. Just as important is the confidence of living in this world with the resources of a child of the Heavenly Father.

But wait! Let's get back to putting this into action.

Do you need to pause for a moment and talk to the Father? Tell him you want to return home? Thank him for making it possible by paying the price, by cancelling your debt and reinstating your place in his family?

If you need help, below is a simple prayer used by another wayward child returning to the Father.

"Father I am sorry for leaving, for not trusting you and trusting myself instead. Thank you for paying the price for my return through Jesus' death and resurrection. I want to discover all that it means to be your child."

We've quoted Paul's letters frequently in this study. Let's look one more time at how Paul describes what happens when we return home in Romans 5:1-11:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man

someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (NIV)

You have peace with God and now the opportunity to discover the way it **IS** supposed to be. This won't be easy. But it is rewarding to allow the Father to find His way to the center of your life. The next 6 Journeys are designed to assist you along the way.