

Hope You'll Join Us (Bedford)

8/16/2026

This is what she said, not at this church but another church. This is what she said when she saw people people coming into worship who were different. She said, "What kind of scum are we going to drag in here next?" Let me ask you a couple questions, maybe more than two.

Are you a rule keeper or a rule breaker?

Do you think, you know, there's a good reason we have rules and we should just follow them? Or are you of the mindset that has a motto, "Eh, rules, they're meant to be broken"?

I am mostly a rule keeper. There are notable exceptions, mostly related to interstate driving. We won't talk about that today. But mostly, with some exceptions, I am a rule keeper. I just, I don't know, I just think you should do what you're supposed to do, and there's wisdom in those things.

I was raised by a strict schoolteacher dad, and I a submissive mom, and in our home, breaking rules had consequences, literally painful consequences. And that extended beyond our home. For example, if I got in trouble at school, what happened at home? I was in bigger trouble. And so mostly driven by fear, I didn't get in trouble at school.

I didn't get caught at school very much.

I don't know, I still see rules as guidelines and guardrails.

I, I like to plan my work and work my plan, and rules, I don't know, they just kind of help me know where to stand. And where I stand, I don't always like the rules, but it's like, okay, well, they're there, I'll just I'm just gonna try to live in them.

I have a confession, and it's related to rule keeping.

As a rule keeper, grace, God's grace, is confusing to me.

As a rule keeper, I find grace honestly sometimes frustrating.

It doesn't seem fair because it's not. It doesn't seem fair because grace is not based on performance. It's not based on, on what I do.

Grace is often defined as unmerited favor— who, whatever that means. What it means practically is that God accepts us, accepts us as we are, and invites us into a relationship with him. And it's not based on what we do or have done, it's based on what he does. Paul says to Titus like this in Titus 3, verses 4 through 7. He says, when God our Savior revealed his kindness and love.

He saved us not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth, a new life through the Holy Spirit. Sounds like baptism to me. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace, he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

So we don't earn it, we don't deserve it. God makes the first move, he takes the initiative. And, and, and that makes God's grace— not knowing what kind of response it's going to get— it makes his grace almost seem reckless.

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God, the reckless grace of God. Some people really don't like that song and think it's heretical, and I understand it though, because to a rule keeper, grace that flows from God's love with not knowing how much it's going to be received or how it'll be received. It just seems like that's pretty risky. It's pretty reckless just to throw your love out there to everybody. Well, this, this concept of love, reckless love, it sure appeared that way to the Pharisees when they saw Jesus operating.

Let me say this: rule breakers need grace. Rule keepers need grace.

We believe that God is love, and we believe that Jesus is God in the flesh. So Jesus is God with skin on, and part of the reason, part of the reason he comes is to show us what God is like. You want to know what— You want to know what the Father's like? Look at me, he says. And so he shows us what the Father is like, but he's also showing us how he wants us to live as human beings, and especially how we should treat other people, especially people who are not like us.

And I tell you what, this created conflict when Jesus came. Jesus clashed with the religious rule keepers of his day. Why? Because he ignored their man-made rules. He broke their man-made rules when it came to having contact with sinners, contact with people that they said you should stay away from.

They are a bad influence. They are bad, and associating with them makes you guilty by association. Jesus didn't see it that way. Not at all. Now, he perfectly obeyed, perfectly kept God's rules, and while doing so, he spent time with the people that respectable religious people rejected.

He spent time with the outcasts. He spent time with sinners. He spent time with scummy people, people who were deemed unworthy. And to the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the law, They looked at that and said, "That's reckless.

That's scandalous even." And the scandal wasn't so much that sinners were attracted to Jesus, the scandal was that Jesus was attracted to them. What are you doing? What are you doing going to them?

Jesus didn't compromise his holiness and he entered into the messy lives of people. He got close to them so he could love them. He got close to them so he could show them God's love. He got

close to them so he could say, "There is a better way. There's a different way.

You don't have to live that way. Come and I'll show you a new way of living." Notice how Luke 15 begins: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus speak. But the Pharisees and the teachers of law muttered— I really love that, they just murmur— 'This man, okay, great, he welcomes sinners and he even eats with them. So reckless, so irresponsible, so, so wrong, scandalous.' Jesus hears them. He knows.

He knows what they're thinking. And he responds with some of the best-known and some of the most well-loved stories he ever told. He begins talking about a lost sheep in Luke 15. He says the shepherd will leave 99 and will go after the one that's lost. And when he finds it, he'll lovingly bring it back home with joy, and he'll call for a celebration.

Jesus says, in the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over 99 others who are righteous and haven't strayed away. Then Jesus tells a woman— tells a story about a woman who loses one of her 10 coins, probably in a headdress thing, and she searches, turns the house upside upside down. She finds it and she calls everybody, says, "I found it! I found it!" and celebrates. So there's this pattern of lost, found, celebration.

And then there's another story, one more story that Jesus tells. It's probably the best-known story of all. It's a story about a lost son.

This guy, this Younger son breaks all the rules. He is a picture of a rule breaker. He is rude. He is rebellious. He's disrespectful.

He essentially tells his dad, "I wish you were dead." He demands his inheritance and surprisingly the father says, "Okay, here it is." And so the boy takes the money and he runs. He leaves home and he burns through everything with wild living, it says. The money runs out, a famine comes, he finds himself alone, he's hungry, he's desperate, he can't find a job. He finally goes to a pig farmer and says, please let me feed your pigs. The guy says okay.

And this is about as low as you can go for a Jewish boy feeding pigs, but he's going to go even lower, because there in the mess and the muck and the manure of a pigpen, he finally bottoms out.

Jesus says, when he finally came to his senses, when he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ah, at home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger.

I will go home and I'll say to my father, Father, I have sinned against you, I've sinned against heaven and you, and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant. So he begins the long, humiliating journey home, tripping through the darkness. He's ready to beg to be a servant and not a son.

Well, meanwhile, the father I think has never stopped watching, never stopped praying, never stopped hoping that his son will return. And then one day he looks down the long road and he, he sees somebody coming. Could it be?

It is! It's him! It's my son! And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming and filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, kissed him.

The boy tries to confess. He tries to ask to become a servant, but the father interrupts him.

There is no lecture. There is no punishment. There's no demand that he make things right. Instead, the father calls for a party. "We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and now has returned to life.

He was lost, but now he's found." So the party began. So there's the pattern: lost, found, The towns celebrate. What a beautiful story! What a wonderful ending! But the story's not over.

Jesus isn't finished.

He's about to deal with the dark side of me.

He's about to deal with the muttering rule keepers. And I think this is the whole point of the parable. We often stop with the good part. This is the hard part. This is probably the point of the parable.

There's another brother. Who knew? There's an older brother.

And the older brother is out in the field doing what he's always done. He's working. He's being responsible. He's playing by the rules. He's faithful.

He's doing everything right, always has. A model child. Meanwhile, the older brother was in the field, and when he came near the house he heard music and dancing. And so he called one of his servants and says, "What's going on?" "Well, your brother has come, 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. He refused to go in. I kind of understand how he feels.

His younger brother broke all the rules. He humiliated the family. He disappeared. He wasted everything. And now he comes back And instead of getting a lecture about consequences, he gets a banquet.

Instead of punishment, he gets a party. That's not fair. It's just not fair. The older brother said, "I'm not going to that. I'm not going to go honor that.

I totally disagree with it." And then notice what the father does. The father goes out to the older

brother. The father ran to the rebellious younger son, and now the father goes out to the older brother to plead with him to come in. Please join, join us. Both sons need the father to come to them.

'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 killed the fattened calf!" The rule-keeping older brother resents his father's extravagant grace toward his sinful brother.

It seems to him reckless and literally ridiculous.

His heart is hard.

It's hardened by believing rule-keeping will earn love. He is bitter and he's angry because of grace.

But he's blind to the same grace that he's receiving in this moment.

Of course, the older brother represents the Pharisees and the religious leaders who are muttering about Jesus and his association with sinners. I mean, these guys, these are the ones you want in church because they obeyed the rules, they attended worship, they tithed, they prayed, they knew scripture, and yet in spite of all that, they missed the heart of God. And were furious that God would welcome sinners.

They were of the same mind and heart as the woman who saw people coming who were different and said, "What kind of scum are we gonna drag in here next?" Where does such judgment come from?

It comes from people who don't understand grace because they think they've earned their place with God by rule keeping and performance. And, and so if I think God owes me something because of my goodness, then I'm always going to struggle when God shows mercy to someone I think is unworthy and undeserving.

Rule breakers need grace. Rule keepers need grace. The parable continues and the father— I hope you notice this— the father does not condemn the older brother.

He shows the same love and the same grace to him. He says, my son, my son, 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.

Now Jesus ends this parable without telling us whether the older brother goes in or not. Does he go in or does he not go in? Jesus doesn't say, and that's on purpose, because the question isn't about the older brother at this point. It's, it's about us. And the question is, will we rejoice when God

welcomes people who don't deserve it?

The younger brother needed grace because he broke all the rules. The older brother needed grace because he thought rule-keeping made him worthy. The truth is that both brothers needed grace. And so do we. Rule breakers need grace, rule keepers need grace.

So which one do you identify with, the younger guy or the older one? I already told you what I identify with, but maybe you identify with the younger brother. Maybe you've wandered far from God and you've made mistakes and you squandered stuff, all kinds of stuff, and you carry shame and guilt and regret as a result. If that's you, I hope you heard the good news today. The Father is waiting not to condemn you, not to shake his finger, but come on in, come on in, welcome home, welcome home.

Or maybe you're like the older brother, like I am sometimes. You do the right thing, you work hard, you're faithful, You play by the rules, but somewhere along the line you become critical, negative, judgmental, resentful.

The father's invitation is the same for both sons. Come in, join the celebration, receive my grace as my beloved children.

Alright, so rule keepers, you already have something going on in your mind. I'm going to deal with it. Just really quickly. And that's a question. Well, if salvation's by grace, then why do we even try to live right?

Why obey God? Why be good? Grace has got us covered. Well, the answer is grace doesn't just forgive us, it also requires a response. And that response is gratitude.

Grace is a teacher. Grace changes us. Paul says it like this in Titus 2: For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, to live self-controlled lives, right, upright, and godly in this present age. So we don't obey to get God to love us.

We obey because he does. So we just— this is a response of gratitude. Grace received becomes grace given. And that means for a church like ours shaped by grace, we should look a lot like Jesus.

Tim talked about this last week. So good. We should welcome the very people that other people reject. People with addictions. People with failed marriages.

People carrying shame. People who don't know the Bible. People who don't know how to dress and wear inappropriate t-shirts and they don't know how to talk or they don't know how to act in church. And people with messy stories and complicated lives all should be welcome here because that's exactly the kind of people Jesus attracted and that's the kind of people Jesus was attracted to.

The church is not a museum for saints. It's a hospital for sinners. And so the invitation is simple: Come in, receive grace, and make room for someone else. Now here's a question that I'm not going to answer for you, but I want you to think about it. So based on everything we said, how does this change the way you look at your family?

And how does this change the way you look at the people you work with?

How does it Change the way you look at everybody.

As we come to the Lord's table, the story of the lost sons reminds us of something we should never forget. We are here because of grace. Rule breakers need grace. Rule keepers need grace. The bread and the cup remind us that our salvation is not It's not something we earned.

It is a gift purchased by Jesus on the cross. We are here not because we deserve it. We can't earn it. And that same grace is still inviting people to come. So let's receive, receive this gift today.

Let's examine our hearts. Are we grateful for what we've received? Are we grateful for for salvation? Are we grateful and praying for those who are still far from God? Are we ready to celebrate with another prodigal who comes home?

So the music is playing, the feast is ready, the father is inviting, and because of the body of Jesus and the blood of Jesus, there's room at the table for everybody. The invitation is there. The table is ready. Come in. Celebrate.

Everyone he welcomes home. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for such a powerful story of, uh, grace. Probably more of us in the room lean toward the older brother than the younger guy. Uh, so help us to see and to really get our minds around your love and your grace.

Thank you for this bread. Thank you for this cup, which reminds us of the body of Christ given for us.

And thank you for the blood that was shed for us. Jesus poured out his life so we could receive ours. We thank you in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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