

# **A Well-balanced Mind**

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## **A Well-balanced Mind**

*Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Luke 8:35*

One of the delightful things that the Lord Jesus will do for us, if we sit at his feet and listen to his word, is to adjust our thinking so that we achieve a healthy balance in our beliefs, our preaching and our behaviour. Naturally, we tend to be creatures of extremes. Like the pendulum of a clock we go from one extreme to the other; but unfortunately, unlike the pendulum, we tend to get stuck for long periods of time in one extreme. And then, when we discover how unsatisfactory that is, we shoot off to the other extreme where we can again become stuck. What we really need is a well-adjusted mind that, like a pendulum in its balanced movement, takes in both extremes without getting stuck at either.

Like his Master, Luke was concerned that our understanding and experience of salvation should be well rounded and not one-sided, and should produce a well-adjusted attitude to life and service. With that in mind he compiled his Gospel with great care so that as we read it, think about it and spiritually digest it, we receive (whether we realize it or not) a balanced diet calculated to maintain us in healthy spiritual equilibrium.

### **Prodigal sons and prudent stewards**

Take, for instance, the famous parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11–32). It assures us that if we return to the Father in true repentance and faith at the eleventh hour after a completely wasted life, he will receive us unreservedly. The fact that we have wasted our time and energy and resources will make no difference to his welcome. His loving arms around our necks will assure us of our complete acceptance and of our eternal security in his home and heart.

So wasting our lives does not matter then and makes no difference? Well no, it doesn't if you are thinking about salvation and acceptance with God. These things are by grace, they do not depend on our past performance. Indeed, if, like the elder brother in the parable, we thought that the Father's love and salvation had to be earned, we would never enjoy them, even if we tried never to waste a penny of our money or a minute of our time.

But there's another side to this question; and from that point of view it will matter immensely if we waste our lives. To make this point and to keep our thinking balanced, Luke immediately follows the parable of the Prodigal Son with the parable of the Unjust Steward (16:1–9). At first this steward wasted his master's possessions; but when he was given notice

to quit, he suddenly woke up to reality and used his last days in office to secure as good a future as he could. The lesson our Lord draws for us is: 'And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings' (16:9).

So we should be very foolish to waste our lives and resources. Admittedly, what we are to gain by them is not salvation—that is a gift and cannot be earned or bought—but friends. Yet a little sanctified imagination will help us to see how great a blessing it will be to have special friends in eternity and what a permanent loss it would be to have none. When the Lord Jesus reviews our works at his judgment seat (1 Cor 3:11–15; 2 Cor 5:10), suppose it becomes known that it was your sacrificial giving that paid for the New Testaments that brought a whole tribe of people in the forests of Ecuador to faith in Christ. Will not those people feel a special gratitude and friendship towards you? For all eternity they will never forget what you did for them.

And suppose it becomes known that I spent my money on my own personal petty interests, not necessarily on sinful things but simply on self-pleasing, who will feel any special gratitude or friendship towards me for that?

Let us, then, make friends by means of our worldly wealth; not, of course, of the doubtful kind that the prodigal made by squandering his wealth in the far country, but true friends whose everlasting gratitude will add an extra dimension to our eternal joy. But at the same time let us never lose hold on the other side of the balance, that salvation itself is an utterly free gift.

## Faith and works

Or consider the way in which Luke carefully balances the twin truths that salvation is by grace and not by works, and yet that salvation leads to good works.

In his chapters 7 and 8 he has gathered together a number of stories that between them illustrate all the different aspects of our great salvation. The centurion's servant and the widow of Nain's son are examples of salvation in the sense of the gift of new life (7:1–15). For the woman in Simon's house salvation meant, above all other things, forgiveness, release from the guilt of the past and re-entry into decent society (7:36–50). For the demon-possessed man forgiveness by itself would scarcely have been enough. What he needed, and what salvation effected for him, was deliverance from the power of the devil (8:26–39). The woman suffering from bleeding was saved from a debilitating weakness of the flesh (8:43–48), while Jairus' daughter, when the Lord eventually came, was saved in the sense of being raised from the sleep of death (8:41–42, 49–56).

How appropriate it is that the raising of Jairus' daughter should stand last in the series. It points forward to the last phase of our salvation, when at the coming of the Lord 'the dead in Christ will rise' and 'through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep' (1 Thess 4:14–16). But for our present purpose let us notice the balanced presentation of the gospel that Luke has achieved in chapter 7. The first two stories spell out the terms and conditions on which new life was given to the centurion's servant and to the widow of Nain's

son. It was not on the basis of works, worth, or merit (7:4-7); it was on the basis of faith (7:9). It was in fact an unconditional gift (7:15).

But to these stories Luke presently adds the story of the woman in Simon's house. In that story our Lord made the point that where someone has been freely forgiven by a creditor, it will lead that someone to love the creditor. The woman received forgiveness full and free without works. But it led her to profound love and affection for the Saviour, so much so that he could appeal to her love and works as evidence to prove to Simon that she had been genuinely saved. Do our works similarly validate our claim to have been saved by faith?

A similar balance is maintained by Luke's two later stories about tax collectors. At 18:10-14 the tax collector in the temple, unable to boast of any good works like the Pharisee could, simply cast himself in repentance and faith on the mercy of God. And again unlike the Pharisee he went home justified, free, *gratis* and for nothing. At 19:1-10 Luke tells the story of another tax collector. He too was accepted by Christ freely and without works, but once accepted he announced such a programme of restitution and positive good works that quite outshone the Pharisee's.

God help us to show the same balance between faith and works in our thinking, in our preaching and in our behaviour.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.