

When a father and husband walked out, grace called him home

## **I preached a word of judgment. The stranger in the back row heard grace.**

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [January 1, 2020](#) issue



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I noticed a stranger in the back pew one Sunday. He was gone by the time I got out to shake hands at the end of the service. But he was back the next Sunday, and the next. He made himself known by coming up for communion. But he always slipped out at the last hymn.

He never wrote his name on the fellowship pad. He was like the homeless at the homeless shelter who will come inside for a shower and to wash their clothes and for a meal but will not register their names or stay inside overnight. They are wary. They aren't sure what might happen to them. They don't trust anyone enough.

One Sunday, though, he stayed through the final hymn and came through the line to introduce himself. He was Don—just Don. That was the Sunday he heard me say in my sermon on Luke 3:7–18 that we need to die. I didn't tell them they needed to

change. I told them, “The old sinner we are, the old Adam and Eve, needs to die.” But the Holy Spirit filtered out the qualifiers. All Don heard was “You need to die.” And he knew it was the truth.

Some months before, Don had walked out on his wife of more than 20 years. He stretched thin the bonds of their marriage with a string of affairs. He had two daughters—one in high school, the other just finishing college. He walked out on them, too.

His older daughter was planning her wedding, and she called him. She wanted him to walk her down the aisle. She didn’t ask for money. She only wanted him to be part of the wedding. She wanted him in her life. That brought him back in proximity to the church. Not a physical proximity to the church to which he belonged. He couldn’t walk back into that place. But picturing the wedding in the church where he and his family had worshiped all those years got him thinking about the songs and words and the kind of man he had hoped to be. His daughter’s call and her wedding brought him back in conversation with his wife.

In one of those conversations, she said to him, “Come home, Don. Just come home.”

The effect this had on him—his daughter’s kindness and his wife’s invitation—forced him to look at the kind of man he had become. He was disgusted with what he saw. That disgust was the means the Holy Spirit used to get him to cross town to hear this comfortably middle-class pastor (who didn’t even know he was impersonating John the Baptist that day). Don was already in the wilderness. When he heard me say “You need to die,” he knew it was the truth. And so, he died with Christ.

That offer was in my next breath. After saying “You need to die,” I said, “Come die with Christ and rise with him forgiven and changed.” Hearing this is why he stayed to introduce himself to me. And it’s why he came to see me the next day the way those who heard John came to see him. The word of judgment is good news when it is coupled with forgiveness and repentance.

The next day, toward the end of a long conversation with me, Don asked, “What shall I do now?” I led Don into the nave and stood with him by the baptismal font. I handed Don a copy of the worship book as I grabbed one for myself. I asked him to turn to the brief section called “Individual Confession and Forgiveness.” I asked, “Are you prepared to make your confession?” Don said he was.

Together we read verses from Psalm 51, concluding with “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin.”

At my invitation, Don summarized what he had told me in my study. Together we read more of Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with your free Spirit.” I asked him, “Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God himself?” He answered, “Yes, I believe.” Following the order of service, I laid hands on him and said, “God is merciful and blesses you. By command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

As I said the words “the Son,” I marked his forehead with the cross. I reminded him that this cross was first traced on us at our baptisms. It is traced on us in ashes every Ash Wednesday. I said, “Peace be with you.”

“And also with you,” he replied as we shook hands. We stood looking at each other. Don asked, “What shall I do now?”

I said, “This is not hard. The answer to this is obvious. Go home. Your wife has called you home. Take it as God’s voice gathering you home. Your shame has turned to rejoicing.”

He did. He went home. He walked his daughter down the aisle. The father of the bride often sheds a few tears as he walks his daughter down the aisle. Usually, however, he does not bawl his head off, as Don did from the moment his daughter slipped her arm into his.

*This article is excerpted from Bruce Modahl’s new book, The Banality of Grace. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title ““You need to die.””*