

# Gospel: The Best and Most Terrifying News

Several Years ago Fred Craddock was returning from vacation in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. Together with his wife, he stopped at a favorite little country café called the Blackberry Inn. They hoped to savor the last few moments of their romantic getaway, before returning to the rigors of city life, children, pastoring and teaching at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

Just wanting to be left alone, they found a little table out of the way and hid behind the menus looking for the cheeseburgers. It was then that they noticed an old man, a “country bumpkin” walking from table to table talking to anyone and everyone. Fred prayed, “Oh God, don’t let him come talk to us!” Of course that’s just what the old guy did. “Hey, you folks on vacation?” “Yeah.” “Having a good time?” the old guy asked. “I was” thought Dr. Craddock. “Well, what d’ya do?” Craddock loved that question, for with his answer he thought he could end the conversation. He replied, “I’m a professor of homiletics at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.”

The old guy got a huge grin on his face. “You’re a preacher man! Well I got a preacher story for you,” and he sat down. “I was born here in these mountains,” he said. “I didn’t have no Daddy. That’s not such a problem today, but it was back then. The ladies in town used to guess as to who my Daddy was. I didn’t know who my Daddy was. The other kids weren’t allowed to play with me. At lunch I’d hide in the weeds behind the schoolhouse and eat my lunch alone. They had a name for me: ‘Ben the bastard boy, Ben the bastard boy...’” By now, the old guy was tearing up.

He caught himself and said, “I’m sorry, what I was fixin’ to tell ya, was that there was this church in Laurel Springs. The preacher had a voice big like God. I knew that church was no place for a boy like me, but sometimes I’d sneak in after the service started, sit in the back and cut out before the service was over. But this one day, the preacher just went on and I got caught up in what he was sayin’. Before I knew it, the service was over. I jumped up and made it for the back door... but the aisles jammed up. All at once I felt a big hand on my shoulder. And I heard a voice. It just boomed, ‘Boy!’ It was the preacher man. I froze. He spoke really loud. He said, ‘Boy, who’s your Daddy?’ It was like a knife in my heart. He went on, ‘Boy I know who your Daddy is!’ I thought, ‘Does he really know?’ He was talkin’ so everyone could hear, ‘Let’s see? Why you’re a child of... Your Daddy is... Well son, your Daddy is... God. And I see a strikin’ resemblance. Now you run along and claim your inheritance!’ The old guy looked Professor Craddock square in the face. “Preacher man,” he said. “*I was born that day.*” Then he left.

That’s the Gospel, The Good News—That the Love of God the Father is unconditional, unearned and relentless; that He has done everything to not only create you, but redeem you, and claim you as His own. It’s Grace, received by faith and that faith is not your own but the gift of God.

Immediately after the old guy left, the waitress scampered over to Craddock’s table. “What’d he tell ya? What’d he tell ya?” Craddock answered, “Well, he told me a story... Why

do you want to know?" She responded, "Don't you know who that is? You don't know who that is? That's Ben Hooper, the illegitimate boy elected twice the Governor of Tennessee."

*"I was born that day."* To be "born again" or "born from above," is to hear and believe the Good News that God is your Father and that you are loved unconditionally and relentlessly, as revealed in Jesus the Christ, who died and rose from the grave saying to Mary, "I'm going to my father and your father." That's your inheritance—God and all things with Him.

"For God so loved the world." It's the best news and the most terrifying news. For He loved you... and He loved the world. Grace is the best news... and the most offensive news that any "self-respecting" person could ever hear. People love it when I preach, "God loves you." But nothing is as controversial as "God so loved the world."

Jesus told a story about two sons who both desired their "inheritance." Actually they wanted their father's "stuff" and wished he were dead. The youngest asked his father for it and the oldest didn't stop him. He then travelled to a distant land and squandered his inheritance, or what he thought was his inheritance, on "reckless living." Having blown all his money, consigned to live with the pigs (bad news for a Jew), he "came to himself." But his "self" was the problem in the first place. He devised a plan to return home, work for his dad and get more of his stuff—but it's clear in the way Jesus told the story—he didn't want his dad, he wanted his stuff. His father spotted him at a great distance and ran to him out on the road. Before the son could say a word, before he could promise anything, vow anything, do anything, while his heart was still in a distant land, this father seized him, lavished him with kisses and made it clear, "You may think you're a bastard, but you're my beloved son." The prodigal grace of this father melted the boy's heart and the boy longed to be what he was, the son of his father, his gracious father... that was his inheritance, and all things with him.

The father threw a lavish and wild party. Heaven is a wild party. The older brother, the dutiful and self-righteous brother, the brother that thinks he has earned his father's kingdom, the brother who also coveted his father's riches, storms out of the party and stands in a field in the dark... "The Outer Darkness." The father goes out to this boy as well. The Father loves Pharisees as well. And that's where Jesus ends this story... told to the Pharisees.

It seems that the surest way to be "out" is to hate the idea that others are "in." But even so, the Father pursues Pharisees into the outer darkness. His Love is unconditional, unearned and relentless. King David wrote, "If I make my bed in Hell, you are there!" (Psalm 139:8).

You are no bastard. But the person you most despise is no bastard either... even if they're a Pharisee. It was a Pharisee named Saul (whom you know as St. Paul) that wrote most eloquently about Grace. He wrote, "It is no longer I who live." His "self," the bastard self that he had created, his arrogant, self-righteous self had been destroyed in the burning fire of His Father's love. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ (the Spirit of the Son), who lives in me."

Grace is terrifying if you're standing in outer darkness—arrogant and convinced that you have earned your "inheritance," convinced that you are a self-made man, that is

convinced that you really have no father (... and there's a word for that.) Grace is terrifying if you're proud. And then it's the best news a human heart could ever hear.

*"I was born that day."*