

Probation or Acceptance — A Tale of Two Baseball Careers

By Bob Nyberg

Years ago, my dad was a pitcher for a semi-pro baseball team in North Dakota. For as long as I could remember, he ate, drank, and slept baseball. His ultimate dream for me was that one day I would play for a Major League Baseball team. Considering my skill set, that was not meant to be.

My career as a baseball player began poorly. My earliest recollection of learning the game was the first-time dad took me out into the yard to play catch. I was excited about the prospect of playing catch with my brand new glove and softball. Dad tossed the ball toward me which missed my glove and hit me in the eye. I ran into the house crying to find comfort in the arms of my sympathetic mother. Soon dad came into the house uttering a string of profanity laced with a few disparaging words about my lack of skills for catching a baseball. And so, it began. Things only seemed to go downhill from there for my career as a baseball player. From then on, anytime I wanted to play catch it was with mom and never with my dad.

In little league baseball, I was probably the worst hitter on the team. But the highlight of my little league career was when I made solid contact with the ball and hit a screaming line drive into center field. The ball got past the glove of the centerfielder and I found myself standing on third base with a triple. After scoring a run that inning, I was greeted by the welcoming cheers of my teammates. But that is not what stands out in my mind about that glorious day. Even though that event took place over 50 years ago, I still remember the stinging rebuke of my father like it was yesterday. He grumbled, “Any other kid on the team could have stretched that triple into a homerun. Your problem is that you run too long in one spot.”

That incident pretty much sums up my dad’s view of me regarding not only baseball but for all my pursuits in life. There was absolutely nothing that I could do to please him.

Sadly, when I accepted God’s free gift of salvation, I projected my warped view of my dad’s parenting skills upon my Heavenly Father. I was continually on probation and I knew that there was nothing that I could do to please either my earthly father or my Heavenly Father.

Unlike my baseball career, Keith Hernandez was an amazing Major League Baseball player. He played first base for the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Mets. Keith was a five-time All-Star who shared the 1979 National League Most Valuable Player award. He had a lifetime batting average of .296. He received 11 consecutive Gold Glove awards, which was the most by any first baseman in baseball history. He won the American League batting championship for having the highest average. He won the American League Most Valuable Player award. He won the World Series Most Valuable Player award.

Yet with all his accomplishments, Keith missed out on something that was crucially important to him—his father’s acceptance. In a candid interview about his relationship with his father, Keith revealed a major disappointment in his illustrious baseball career.

One day Keith asked his father, “Dad, I have a lifetime batting average of .296. What more do you want?”

His father replied, “But someday you’re going to look back and say, ‘I could have done more.’”

Keith Hernandez never felt accepted by his earthly father. That is one thing that Keith and I have in common. It seems that nothing we could do in the world of baseball could ever please our dads.

Miles Stanford once wrote: “There are two questions that every believer must settle as soon as possible. The one is, Does God fully accept me? And the second, If so, upon what basis does He do so? This is crucial. What devastation often permeates the life of one, young or old, rich or poor, saved or unsaved, who is not sure of being accepted, even on the human level.” (*Principles of Spiritual Growth*)

For the child of God, a key issue that affects our Christian growth is the question: “Are we accepted by our Heavenly Father or are we on probation?” For years I felt like I was on probation always wondering what more I could do to make myself acceptable in the eyes of my Heavenly Father.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul wrote that “He made us accepted in the Beloved.” (Eph 1:6; NKJV)

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer elaborated on this concept of acceptance: “The child of God under grace has been delivered from the burden of ... works. He is not striving to be accepted, but rather is free to live as one who is accepted in Christ (Eph. 1:6). The child of God is not now called upon to live by the energy of his own flesh. He lives in the power of the indwelling Spirit. The child of God is not under law as a rule of life, but he is under the counsels of grace. What he does under grace is not done to secure the favor of God, but it is done because he is already accepted in the Beloved. It is not undertaken in the energy of the flesh, but it is the outliving and manifestation of the power of the indwelling Spirit. It is a life which is lived on the principle that: ‘The just shall live by faith.’” (*Major Bible Themes*; Ch. XXVII)

Likewise, A. J. Gordon wrote: “So far as the question of the Christian’s acceptance and standing before a righteous law is concerned, God sees nothing from His throne but Christ Jesus alone and altogether. And since the believer is in Him and one with Him, he shares His place in the Father’s heart, and unworthy as he is in himself, yet he may know without a doubt that he is ‘accepted in the Beloved.’” (*In Christ*)

As believers in Christ, we are totally accepted by our Heavenly Father! As God the Father views us according to our position “in Christ,” He sees us clothed in the righteousness of His Son. While we do not always live up to our position in our daily walk, yet we are “accepted in the Beloved.” But how many of us really believe that?

Think for a moment about the contents of the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament. It contained 1) the broken law which Israel could not keep; 2) Aaron’s rod that budded which spoke of Israel’s rejection of God’s leadership and 3) the pot of manna which spoke of Israel’s rejection of God’s provision. The contents of the ark spoke loudly of Israel’s sin.

The ark was covered by the mercy seat which had two cherubim that faced each other. In Exodus 25:20, we are told that “the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat.” In other words, their faces were looking down. Without the covering of the mercy seat, they would have been gazing upon the items that would remind them of Israel’s sin. Without the covering of the mercy seat which was sprinkled with blood, the cherubim could see nothing but Israel’s sin and failure. But instead, they saw the mercy seat sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

That is a beautiful picture of the child of God covered with the righteousness of Christ. As God the Father looks at us, He sees us in the righteousness of His Son and accepts us in the Beloved. You cannot be condemned if you are in Christ. Christ is without sin. For us to be in Christ means to be accepted in the Beloved. Jesus Christ presents us to the Father clothed in His own righteousness.

On what basis are you accepted? By His grace. It is not by your attainment. It is not by your works or self-effort. It is not by your striving. It is only by His free grace and grace is completely contrary to human nature.

One day I happened to hear a song by Dolly Parton called *Hello God*. The song ends with these words:

Hello, God, we really need you we can't make it without you.

Hello, God, we beseech you in the name of all that's true.

Hello God, please forgive us for we know not what we do.

Although I am not a huge fan of country music, those lyrics did not sound too bad. But this was the line that hit me between the eyes.

Hello, God, give us one more chance to prove ourselves to you.

How many times had I fallen into sin as a believer and prayed that exact prayer? Countless times I failed in my walk with the Lord. Then I would pick myself up out of the dust, ask forgiveness and ask for another chance to prove myself to God. But do we really have to prove ourselves to God? Doesn't He already know how deceitful and desperately wicked my heart is? The real question is: "Do **I myself** know how wicked my own heart really is?"

The apostle Paul discovered the reality of his own wicked heart in the 7th chapter of Romans. As a believer who had been justified by God, Paul wrote:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells ... (Rom 7:18; NKJV)

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Rom 7:24; NKJV)

In response to that question, Paul gives us the answer in the next verse:

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:25a; NKJV)

It was Jesus Christ who freed us from the body of this death when we died positionally on the cross with Him.

And for that reason, Paul was able to say:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8:1; NASB)

The bottom line is that though we may struggle in our daily walk as Paul did in Romans 7, we can confidently say that there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. Paul concludes Romans 8 by writing:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him

also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. (Rom. 8:31-33; NKJV)

The fact is that there is no condemnation because we are in Christ Jesus. If God does not condemn us then why should we wallow in self-condemnation? God is for us. He is not the one bringing a charge against us. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, is the one who brings charges against us. But we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 Jn. 2:1). As prosecutor, Satan throws all kinds of accusations against us. But Jesus, our Advocate, died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins.

Are we on probation? No! Have we been accepted in the Beloved? Certainly! There is absolutely nothing in and of myself that will make me more acceptable to God—even as a Christian!

Andrew Murray wrote about the necessity of grace for our walk with the Lord: “There are earnest Christians who are jealous for a free Gospel, with acceptance of Christ, and justification by faith alone. But after this they think everything depends on their diligence and faithfulness. While they firmly grasp the truth, ‘justified by faith,’ they have hardly noticed the larger truth, ‘the just shall live by faith.’ They have not yet understood what a perfect Saviour the Lord Jesus is, and how He will each day do for the sinner just as much as He did the first day when they came to Him. They know not that the life of grace is always and only a life of faith, and that in the relationship to the Lord Jesus the one daily and unceasing duty of the disciple is to believe, because believing is the one channel through which Divine grace and strength can flow into the heart of man. The old nature of the believer remains evil and sinful to the last; it is only as he daily comes, all empty and helpless, to his Saviour to receive of His life and strength, that he can bring forth the fruits of righteousness to the glory of God.” (*Abide in Christ*; Ch. 5)

C.H. Spurgeon noted the true source of our assurance: “It is ever the Holy Spirit's work to turn our eyes away from self to Jesus; but Satan's work is just the opposite of this, for he is constantly trying to make us regard ourselves instead of Christ. He insinuates, ‘Your sins are too great for pardon; you have no faith; you do not repent enough; you will never be able to continue to the end; you have not the joy of His children; you have such a wavering hold on Jesus.’ All these are thoughts about self, and we will never find comfort or assurance by looking within. Keep your eye simply on Him.” (*Morning and Evening*; June 28th)

Although my skills as a baseball player left much to be desired, my dad's parenting skills were equally lacking. Unfortunately, I projected my dad's shortcomings onto my Heavenly Father.

What a blessing it was to find out that my Heavenly Father loves me and accepts me because of my standing in Christ. No longer do I see myself on probation. No longer do I live in fear that I'm not doing enough to please Him. I can rest assured in the fact that I am accepted in the Beloved, and that I am secure in my relationship with Him.