

The Castoff

Duncan, a deacon in an affluent south side congregation, walked proudly into church one Sunday morning and sat down in the front pew just as always. Joining him were his wife Susan and youngest son Thomas. The service proceeded as usual, with songs, the usual announcements and the collection. Once these were finished the pastor stood up to preach, again, as usual. But today's message wasn't anything but the norm. Instead of the typical flowery beatitudes and messages about prosperity that regularly spewed from his mouth, the pastor spoke that morning on giving. And not just any type of giving. This was about the kind of sacrificial giving that hurt. It made the congregation cringe. But it wasn't a reaction of conviction, but more akin to a whiny child's complaint of "Do I have to?" when being asked to do something. Duncan listened to this plea with nearly the same disdain and antipathy as the as the rest of the congregates, and hoped beyond hope that the pastor would soon return to his normal beatific pep talks and prosperity affirmations that Duncan preferred.

But the pastor didn't. He kept droning on about the less fortunate and that, given how God had given so generously to each of them because of their godliness, they should each give something of their bounty in return to help those less fortunate. Duncan would have nothing of it. He wasn't interested in giving. He was only interested in getting, and the more he got, the happier he was. Or so he thought. He then glanced over at his wife and son, expecting them to be just as equally put off by the pastor's atypical message. But to his surprise both of them were beaming with excitement. Duncan cocked an eyebrow slightly. Were they actually considering what the pastor had suggested? He hoped not. Just then a thought crossed his mind.

What if he *did* give as the pastor was asking? What would that gain him? Could he use it to show himself even more pious and godly than the others? Would God be impressed? Or more importantly his wife, and ultimately those around him? He'd always struggled with appearing as "Christian" as everyone in the congregation thought him to be. He was the kind of person that wanted to look like a faithful Christian, but not actually have to do anything. Being a deacon was one way to do that. But he wanted even more than that. He wanted status, respect, and the many benefits that came with that. A sly grin crossed his face. While he didn't want to actually sacrifice anything, the idea of him possibly gaining some extra social clout from this was irresistible. Now all he had to do was figure out how to look generous without actually being it.

That afternoon on the way home from church, Susan began to talk about Pastor's sermon that morning. Duncan could see the excitement in her eyes. It felt like getting blasted in the face with a lighthouse. Double strength halogen bulbs even.

"Oh, I'm so excited about this!" she said with giddy glee. "The pastor's idea to make a donation to the poor and needy is so great! It'd be wonderful to help those less fortunate. Well, I mean, during times other than just the holidays. We always give to the poor during Thanksgiving and Christmas. But to give of our bounty to help those who are struggling year round, especially during the summer, it just gives me goosebumps!"

To others her excitement might seem intoxicating. To Duncan it was just annoying. Getting excited about anything that required him to give up something just seemed wrong. Or if not wrong, it didn't excite him very much. But if he wanted to earn more brownie points with everyone, he was gonna need to go with the flow, even if that meant faking an equivalent excitement.

"Absolutely!" he exclaimed, doing his best to sound enthused.

He hoped that it hadn't sounded fake.

"Yeah, God has given us so much that we could give a ton of food and stuff and not even scratch the surface of what we have," said Thomas. "For example, dad could give a hundred of his suits and not even make a dent in his stash!"

Duncan cringed. To even consider touching any of his expensive, and quite elegant suits was probably the single most dangerous thing someone could suggest. He loved his suits, and anyone who so much as hinted at separating him from them risked a fury not unlike Hell itself. But knowing that his son's suggestion was more in jest than seriousness, Duncan let it slide. Just then a thought hit him. Suits. They were definitely something he had in great abundance. In fact, he had too many of them. Not that it was a bad thing. But some of them were no longer wearable, either for fashion or practical reasons. Even so, his wife refused to get rid of them. He thought it funny how he clung to his newer suits and she clung to the older ones. She'd done the same with her sizable wardrobe of dresses to some degree as well. Even though they weren't wearable anymore, she still held onto them. A slight grin notched the corner of one cheek. This sudden interest in charity might be a good way to get rid of those old eyesores.

"Ya know, son, that's not a bad idea," he said.

Thomas and Susan looked at him in disbelief. On any other day they'd have gotten a drill sergeant style dressing down for making suggestions like this. Yet here he was completely open to the idea. Thomas narrowed his eyes.

"Alright, who are you and what'd you do with my dad," he said, half in jest.

"No, I'm serious! We have more than enough and to spare. We should give of our excess to help the needy and those who are struggling just as the pastor suggested," said Duncan.

Thomas and Susan looked at each other with furrowed brows, and then smiled.

"Alright, then we'll begin gathering everything we plan to give away today, and hopefully we'll be done sorting and packing by next Sunday," said Susan.

She leaned over and gave Duncan a peck on the cheek.

"You're a wonderful husband," she said.

Duncan smiled. He was starting to get what he wanted. Now all he had to do was take this to its logical conclusion and he was almost certainly guaranteed a higher standing in church, and more importantly, with his family. Oh yeah, and with God too. Duncan didn't want to forget about him because he didn't want to lose all of his incredible wealth and blessings. Not that a "good" Christian like him ever would. The only thing he had to do now was make sure that nobody touched his newer suits. Especially the really expensive. Losing those would be a disaster, and no brownie points, no matter who he was earning them with, was worth that kind of sacrifice.

Duncan yelped with pain as he bumped his head on a rafter. He gently rubbed the tender, painful little bump on his forehead and groaned slightly.

"Now I know why I don't get up here too often," he grumbled.

He dragged the box along the floor until it got to the edge of the ladder.

"Thomas!" he shouted.

The young man's head popped through the hatch.

"Here, another one to take down," said Duncan.

Thomas happily took the box and carried it down the ladder and into the living room. Several more boxes appeared one after another at the top of the ladder until the entire attic was empty. Duncan then crawled down the ladder, closed the access hatch and dusted himself off. When he glanced over at the pile of boxes gathered in the living room, he was stunned at how many there were.

"No wonder it took so long," he thought.

The boxes were soon dived up between the various family members and sent their separate ways. As Duncan began pulling one box apart and groaning at the out of date, dusty, and tired outfits inside, he glanced over at his closet and was glad they weren't part of his normal wardrobe anymore. Instead his closet contained some of the latest fashions, tailor made suits, sharp ties and snappy business shirts. It was days like this that made him thankful for the high fashion men's clothing stores. He walked over and gently caressed one of the suits enjoying the silky softness of its fabric. He soon stepped back and further admired the elegant wonders before him. He then turned and studied his wife's closet. To his surprise, hers wasn't the same. In fact, it looked less fashionable than it had. Wondering why this was, he soon noticed that she was taking older, fashionably obsolete outfits out of her boxes and replacing them with some of her newer, nicer outfits in the closet. This made him cock an eyebrow in confusion.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She spun around and playfully showed off an older sun dress.

"Oh, the memories this brings back," she said happily.

Duncan looked at his wife oddly.

"You're not gonna keep that, are you?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" she exclaimed.

His jaw dropped slightly.

"You're what?"

"I'm gonna keep it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm giving a selection of my best cloths to the poor. It just doesn't seem right that I give them all my worn out, second hand cast offs. They should have the opportunity to enjoy good quality clothing just like we do."

Duncan gave her a bemused smirk.

"I certainly don't have a problem with that," he thought.

He wondered if she wasn't trying to guilt trip him into giving far more than he wanted to. Yet at the same time the idea held merit. If he could look like he was doing the same, and possibly more, it could gain him even more brownie points than he'd previously expected.

"Then I guess I should do the same with my closet as well," he said.

Susan beamed with joy.

"You will!?" she said excitedly.

He took her shoulders and gently kissed her on the forehead.

"Yes dear. For you I'd be happy to."

"And God?"

Duncan laughed.

"Yes, and God as well."

Susan gave him a suspicious look, but didn't say anything. Duncan soon set about picking the best suits and cloths from his closet and replacing them with items from his own personal box of castoffs. All he had to do now was make sure his best stuff found its way into the attic for a while while ensuring that Susan didn't catch on to his little bait and switch. Once finished he piled the boxes by the door based on contents, gathered up the family and headed off to evening church. As he did he patted himself on the back. In his eyes his coveted brownie points had been earned, and he'd avoided any true sacrifice in the process. He liked that. It made him feel good, and he hoped deep within that God approved as well.

Later that evening, as they were arriving home from evening services, Duncan's phone rang. It was his boss. He answered the call.

"Yeah, Larry, what's up?" he said.

He listened intently and then gave a confused look.

"No, I haven't yet. Why? Sure, I'll be there as soon as I can. Bye."

He flipped the phone shut.

"What was that about?" asked Susan.

"Eh, it's nothing. Larry was going through the monthly logs and he thinks we're missing some data. So he wanted to know if I could come in and look it over. It's probably nothing. Even so we need to get this sorted out tonight as our reports are due into corporate early tomorrow morning."

"Will you be long?"

"Nah, this'll probably take an hour at most."

He then smacked himself on the forehead.

"Doh, I almost forgot about the boxes. Pastor is waiting for us to bring them to the church. I told him we'd drop them off tonight."

"I can take them down, if that's alright."

"Would ya, dear?"

Susan smiled.

"I'd be happy too. But which ones should I take? There's two piles of them."

"The pile on the right goes to the church. The left goes into the attic."

"Right, church. Left, attic. Got it."

Duncan soon pulled up to the house and stopped the car. As his wife was getting out Duncan leaned over to her.

"When you get to the church, go around to the back. Pastor will be waiting for you near the nursery entrance."

"I will, thanks."

She closed the door and then turned and walked into the house. Right by the door, just as he'd said, were Duncan's boxes. Hers were in another larger pile closer to the door.

She looked at his boxes, and said to herself, "Right, church. Left, attic."

But then she paused. Which side was right? The way the boxes were stacked, right could be different depending on how you approached the stacks. She mulled this over.

"Which one is it?" she thought.

Eventually she shrugged.

"He must have been thinking about right being from the direction you enter the house. Yeah, that has to be it," she thought.

Just then her son stepped in the door.

"Thomas, help me move these boxes."

"Sure, mom," said Thomas.

Duncan walked into the house two hours later with a frustrated look on his face. His wife peeked around the corner and smiled upon seeing him.

"You're home," she said happily.

"Yeah, I'd have been here sooner but it took us a while to find what was wrong. It wasn't anything big. It just took a while to find," grumbled Duncan.

Susan walked over and gave her husband a gentle peck on the cheek.

"Well, I'm happy you sorted it out. Thomas and I took the boxes down to the church as you

asked and left them with the pastor. He called later and said thanks for the things we sent. He was really impressed with the selection, and the obvious sacrifices we made. Especially the suits you sent. He was really surprised to see you give up your prized Brionis."

"Good, I'm glad he...was..." said Duncan, pausing in confusion. "Brionis? Those are my best..."

A feeling of dread began to flow over him. He immediately bolted upstairs towards the attic access. His wife watched as he hurried away and cocked her head slightly in confusion.

"Is something wrong, dear?" she asked.

"No, nothing's wrong. I just want to be sure I didn't forget something," came the distant reply.

Susan shrugged and headed for the kitchen as her husband scrambled into the attic. He soon flicked on a light, scurried across the crawl boards and over to a neatly stacked pile of boxes in the very back. He pulled one down off the stack, ripped it open, and then sat there ashen faced as the color drained from his cheeks. It was the wrong box. Instead of the expensive, high dollar suits and dress cloths he'd hoped to see, he was instead faced with a box full of the low grade, dime store wonders he'd worked so hard to get rid of for years. Ever since he'd been able to afford the higher priced, hand made and custom tailored suits he now coveted, including the hard to get, and very costly Brionis, he'd wanted nothing to do with the lower grade, less fashionable suits that now stared up at him.

The only really nice suits he had left now were a few leftover Jack Victor models from his middle management days. He smacked his forehead in disbelief, and wondered how this could have gone so horribly wrong. But as he knelt there contemplating what to do, an idea hit him. He'd always wanted to show off his humility and godliness to others. Perhaps being forced to wear some lesser grade suits for a while would still gain him the much coveted brownie points he'd been seeking all along. A sly grin grew across his face. Maybe this wasn't quite as big a disaster as he'd original envisioned. He rubbed his hands together greedily. Yes, this would work perfectly.

The next Sunday at church Duncan sat in his usual place in the front and reveled in his new found fame and perceived piety. News of his apparent deep sacrifice, and obvious step back in fashion extremism, the latter of which was most apparent by his choice of attire for that Sunday, had spread through the congregation like wildfire. Much to Duncan's surprise, it'd even lit a fire under the other congregates, encouraging them to sacrifice as selflessly as he had. Or at least as it appeared he had. But that's what he wanted them to think. He wanted them to think he'd done something great, noble, and sacrificial. The truth however was something completely different. But so long as nobody knew what'd really happened, he was more than happy.

The service began as usual with song and the gathering of the offering. Eventually the pastor stepped up to the pulpit and gave the morning announcements. Smug and proud in his new found social standing, Duncan listened gleefully as the pastor told about the current and upcoming events on the church calendar, including the resource drive to feed and cloth the poor that was already in progress. But those were pittance in comparison with what came next.

"Thank you everyone for your wonderful, generous gifts last weekend, and especially the incredible sacrifice our brother Duncan has made. We all know how he loves and idolizes his very expensive Italian suits," said the pastor.

The congregation chuckled at his thinly veiled, but playful jab at Duncan. It even made Duncan grin a little.

"So for him to so willingly give them up in order to help the poor says a lot about the heart of our fair deacon and his commitment to serve the Lord. It also proves that the rumors of his idolatrous love of hand crafted Italian clothing are greatly exaggerated," he continued.

Again the congregation laughed. Even Duncan was enjoying the playful banter.

"This single act of giving, while not on the same level as the widow's mite, is still a sacrifice. For it is better to give of your best in truthful, loving sacrifice to help others, than it is to give of your least in jealous, lustful, selfish hypocrisy."

That hit Duncan between the eyes like a sledgehammer. He applauded hesitantly as the congregation loudly clapped their approval at the pastor's statement. He knew the pastor hadn't jabbed at the heart of his pride intentionally, but his words had stung none the less. It'd even brought about a twinge of guilt, something Duncan rarely experienced. But he quickly shoved that aside. Again, it hadn't been intentional, so why make a big deal out of it. The service soon continued and when it came time for the pastor to give his sermon, much to Duncan's surprise, it was on the topic of giving. Again. He'd done this to dovetail into the morning's announcement about the giving project. Once more the hot knife of guilt cut Duncan deeply. It was beginning to make him angry, and he didn't know why. Even so he didn't let it show. He instead smiled, nodded, and agreed with the preacher's every words. But try as he might to quench the flames of guilt, they continued to grow hotter and hotter within him as though someone were dousing the fire with gas.

The following Monday Duncan drove into work just as he always did, driving his expensive and luxurious town car as though he were royalty, and eventually pulled into the office parking lot and his own reserved parking space. But as he turned off the engine he was surprised to see a large, very visible security presence all around the corporate campus. Even more curious was the wide selection of tents and operations vehicles scattered all across the lawn. This wasn't normal. Even so he didn't expect to run into any major issues getting to his building. He stepped out of the car, straightened his suit, and strolled down the sidewalk towards the front door. As he did, two security guards, who were standing on either side of the door, watched him approach. But neither said anything. Not thinking too much of this, Duncan pulled out his security card and swiped it across the reader pad. The tiny LED display flashed the code "10-62" in bright red, blinking numbers, but nothing else happened. Confused he tried again. He got the same code as before. He tried yet again and got the same result. Seeing this, one of the guards approached him.

"Is something wrong, sir?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm trying to get into the building, but the pad here keeps blinking 10-62. Do you know what's up with that?"

The guard cocked an eyebrow slightly and raised his clipboard.

"What's your name, sir?" he asked.

"Duncan Silas."

The guard flipped through several pages of names and soon found what he was looking for. He marked it with a green highlighter, and then pointed to his left.

"Sir, I'll need you to please step over there and wait for further instructions."

"What?" said Duncan in surprise.

"I need you to step over there and wait for further instructions," repeated the guard.

"What's going on?"

"It'll all be explained to you shortly, sir. Now please, go over there."

"Did something break? Or is this some kind of drill? I mean, I really gotta get up to my office. Our reports are due in the next hour and if we don't get them submitted, corporate will have my butt on a platter, if you get my meaning."

The guard furrowed his brow.

"You. Tent. Now," he said flatly.

Duncan's eyebrows twitched angrily.

"Listen here, bud," he growled. "You either let me into this building, or I'll have you run so far up the flagpole you'll be catching satellites with your teeth!"

But the guard didn't flinch.

"That is unlikely, sir," he said calmly.

To say that Duncan was impressed would be an understatement. Very few people of this man's rank or occupation had ever held their ground so well in the face of someone who was very obviously far above their pay grade. Even so, Duncan would have nothing of it.

He stuck his finger in the guard's chest, and said, "Son, I make more money in one day than you make in an entire year, and you're going to tell me I can't get into this building!?"

"Yes, sir."

Duncan blinked in disbelief. Either this man was incredibly brave, or he knew something that Duncan didn't. He glanced over at the tent briefly, and then back at the guard. As much as he wanted to get inside and get his reports submitted, the tent was starting to look appealing, if for no other reason than to satisfy his growing curiosity.

"You say the answers I'm looking for are in the tent, right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the guard politely.

Duncan grumbled angrily and began storming towards the tent.

"This better be good or someone's gonna be eating their shorts," he muttered.

He soon reached the tent, a large, red, stripped two pole structure not unlike what one would find at a circus, and found it inhabited by a number of his employees, as well as his boss. He stepped inside and over to his boss.

"What's going on?" he asked.

His boss shrugged.

"Heck if I know. I came in this morning to submit my reports and was sent in here by the goon squad, just like you, I assume."

Duncan frowned and put his hands on his hips in frustration.

"Yeah, I was greeted by a couple of low paid rent-a-cops when I tried to get into the building. They said to come over here and wait for further orders. It's like Auschwitz or something."

His boss grimaced slightly.

"My father was in Auschwitz, so I wouldn't say it's that bad, but it's definitely not good either."

Duncan grunted.

"Eh, maybe. But we definitely need to get some answers, and soon."

"Answers, Mr. Silas. Yes, answers you will get," came a voice.

The two men turned and spotted the regional VP walking up to them.

"Hey, Fred, what's up with the goon squad, and why doesn't my key card work?" said Duncan, a hint of anger in his voice.

The VP sighed slightly.

"That's because you don't have a job anymore. None of us do."

The two men looked at the VP in utter confusion.

"What are you talking about? We scored our biggest sales month ever! The company should be swimming in cash!" protested Duncan.

"Yes, our division did exceptional. But the rest of the company didn't. As a result the courts have begun liquidation of our corporate assets," said the VP.

"The courts ordered...what are you talking about?"

"About six months ago our largest creditor decided they'd had enough of us and called in their loans. Since we couldn't pay, they ordered our company liquidated to pay off the debt. Our president pleaded for an extension, one long enough to prove that we could pay off what we owed. The creditor

refused. So the president filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. He thought that would save us. But the creditor argued to the courts that we were hopelessly insolvent and should thus be liquidated. The courts agreed, and as of this morning the liquidation has begun."

Duncan and his boss looked at the VP in stunned disbelief. As hard as they'd worked to turn a profit in their division, it now came to this.

"Are they at least going to keep us open since we're clearly profitable?" asked Duncan.

The VP frowned.

"I wish. According to what I understand, they're firing everyone, canceling all contracts, and selling off our hard assets for whatever they can get. So the chances of keeping our jobs is utterly and absolutely zero."

Duncan shook his head in disbelief.

"So what now?" he asked.

"Well, from what I was told they'll soon be taking each one of us up to clean out our desks and turn in any keys or other company property we have. After that we'll be unceremoniously sent home with nothing. It's the end of the line, guys. It's time to find a new job."

Duncan sat in his car at a stop light and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. What'd happened to him was intolerable. He desperately wanted to find out what creditor had forced them into liquidation. He planned to start by giving them a major piece of his mind. He would then file an injunction or something to prevent the liquidation from continuing and put the company back into operation again. If that didn't work there were always other legal options. As he thought about this he tipped his coffee up and realized that it was empty.

He growled slightly and crushed the cup in his hands. It was bad enough being fired unceremoniously by a bunch of fat cat bankers. It was even worse being completely out of coffee. He pulled into a nearby coffee shop to get a fresh cup, but immediately noticed that the drive through was closed. Right next to the menu was a big sign that read, "Drive through out of order. Please go inside to order your coffee."

Duncan rolled his eyes.

"Sure, what else could go wrong," he muttered.

He pulled forward, found a parking space, and stepped inside. What he found made him groan. There was a line twelve deep and only two baristas on duty. He grunted furiously.

"Oh, sure, why not?" he groaned. "It's not like today could get any worse."

Just then he heard a sound that was far too familiar to him. It was the sound of his car. He spun around just in time to see two men driving away in his car, tires smoking. His jaw dropped in disbelief. They soon exploded out of the parking lot and into the street, barely missing two oncoming cars as they did. They weaved over the center lane, tires still spinning, and then roared down the street. He didn't move or blink or even twitch. He merely stood there and stared in utter shock. A moment later something akin to a crack of thunder rattled the windows and set off car alarms up and down the street in both directions.

He and most of the patrons raced outside a second later to see what had caused the sound. To their combined surprise, a little over a block away, a black, angry column of smoke rose up from the street. Duncan simply stared at the scene of carnage in utter denial. His car was dead smack in the middle of it. Or at least what was left of it. He looked on in utter shock, but said nothing.

Duncan leaned in the window of the taxi cab and handed the driver the last of the money in his

wallet. The man tipped his cap and then drove off. Duncan turned and looked at his house and sighed in frustration. What'd started out as a great day had turned into a complete nightmare. First he'd lost his job, then his car had been first stolen, then totaled while he'd stopped for some coffee. He then lifted his arm and studied the shredded, ravaged remains of his suit, the handiwork of a dog who'd been a little too eager to play. Despite all this, he'd at least come out of the encounter with little more than some newly minted rags and a generous helping of dog slobber on his face. He plodded quietly up the driveway towards the house and soon spotted his wife standing in the doorway waiting anxiously for him. She studied his shredded suit was horrified at what she saw.

"Honey, are you alright!?" she exclaimed.

He sighed and explained to her the day he'd had so far. To his amazement, she didn't seem all that shocked. He cocked an eyebrow slightly.

"You're taking this rather well," he said in surprise.

She grimaced slightly.

"Well, yes, kinda. It's probably because of the day I've had as well."

He looked at her in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Well...I kinda wrecked my car. Actually, I didn't do it. I went into the store for some groceries and a garbage truck ran over it. Flattened it right into the pavement."

Duncan blinked.

"Wow, thank God you weren't in it when that happened!"

"Yes, it was God who protected me. But it kinda gets worse from there."

Duncan gave her an incredulous look.

"Alright, you may as well tell me the rest. It's not like today could get much worse."

"Well, okay. Here goes. Our bank called today and said our account was emptied by hackers, the house has been reposed, all of our investments got swallowed by a Ponzi scheme, and Tommy's car caught fire and burned to the ground."

Duncan screwed up his face in utter shock and awe.

"The...the..." he stuttered.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. As for the bank account, they said there's no way to get our money back. I'm not sure why, but it's apparently gone for good. I asked if the bank had some protection or things like this. Evidently they don't. So there's no way we can get our money back. As for the house, the mortgage company said they haven't gotten any payments from us in over six months. They think someone was stealing the checks and cashing them illegally. Even so they're still taking the house as they say it's our fault for not ensuring that the payments were being received. I checked with our lawyer to see if he could help us, but when he heard that we have no money he refused to even talk with me. Oh, and the mortgage company said they filed an an eviction notice on us three weeks ago, so we've got till the end of the week to be out of the house."

Duncan simply stood there in absolute incredulity.

"Wow," he said, his mind failing him for words.

He then stumbled past her into the living room and plopped down in his chair to think things over. As he did, Thomas walked up to his mother.

"Dad doesn't look so good," he said.

"It's been a hard day, sweetie. But God is with us. However, I'm not sure how well your father is handling all of this. I think he'll need some time to think this through."

Thomas looked at his dad for several moments, and then turned back to his mom.

"Do you think we should tell him about the other stuff?"

"No, I think he's heard enough already."

Duncan studied the boxes of cloths piled in the back of the rental truck and sighed in frustration. It was still hard for him to grasp just how far and fast they'd fallen, from glorious high to terrible low. As he was arranging one of the piles his son Thomas walked up to the truck.

"Here's the rest of the stuff from my bedroom," he said, tossing a box to his dad.

"Is that everything?" asked Duncan.

"Well, it's the rest of what we're taking with us. The guys from school will be coming by later to grab the other things and take them down to the auction house. Hopefully we can get a few bucks from them to keep us going for a while."

Duncan sighed.

"So do I. By the way, I really appreciate you doing this for us. I know you were saving that money for college, but it really came in handy to help us salvage what little we have left."

Thomas smiled.

"Hey, you're my dad. It's not like I'd leave you out in the cold. Besides, there's still another year before I can head up to State anyways. So I've got time to make it up. I just hope you can find another job soon or we're gonna run out of money fast. My paycheck and what's left of my savings will only go so far. After that we're kinda screwed."

"Well, God willing, I'll have a job before you know it. But getting back the rest of what we had will take some time."

Thomas smiled.

"Hey, God said he's got our back, so I know he'll get us through this."

Just then Susan came running up to them happily waving a check in the air.

"Good news, guys! The insurance company agreed to pay off the loans on all our cars, and give us just enough to buy another one!" she exclaimed.

"Praise God!" exclaimed Thomas. "How much did we get?"

His mother grinned sheepishly.

"Eh, about five thousand."

"That's all!?" said Duncan in surprise. "That was the monthly payment on my car alone!!"

Susan grimaced.

"That's all I could get, and they almost didn't give me that."

Duncan rubbed his eyes and groaned in frustration.

"That won't be much more of a car than what I had," said Thomas.

"Yes, but it's less than I was hoping for."

"Honey, it's better than nothing. So give thanks to God that he allowed us to get another vehicle," said Susan.

Duncan sighed heavily.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's just this..."

"I know, dear. It's hard on all of us. But if we take this one day at a time and lean on God for our provision, we'll do just fine."

Duncan smiled. No matter what happened, his wife was always there for them...and always giving credit to God for everything. This made him think a little. He'd grown up in the church, sang the songs, spoke the words, and did everything that was expected of him as a Christian. Yet his wife was so much more than this. In a way it made him feel like a complete fraud. He then pushed this out of his mind. He had other, more pressing things to worry about than thinking about God at a time like this. He'd deal with that subject later.

"Agreed," he said after a moment. "So, since we're done packing, why don't we make one quick

sweep of the house, lock up, and then head across town to our new apartment. Thank God we at least have that."

"Yes, we do. Despite the terrible things that happened, God's given us so much, and has taken care of us richly, even in this tragedy," said Susan.

"Yeah, it's really cool too. I mean, I didn't even expect us to get an apartment that quick. The only reason we got it was because one of my buddies called me up out of the clear blue yesterday and asked if I knew of anyone who needed a cheap apartment. I couldn't say yes fast enough. God really came through for all of us on that one," said Thomas happily.

"Amen!" exclaimed his mother.

Duncan smiled and gave a sheepish, "Amen."

The large rental truck soon reached their new apartment complex on the west side of town and carefully pulled into the broken, rutted driveway that led back to a row of old, single story apartments that'd very obviously seen better days. As they rolled into the center of the complex Duncan looked around in disbelief. Everyone from young men with their pants seemingly down around their knees to old people lathered up with industrial sized quantities of BenGay either sat on their front steps, or wandered suspiciously around the complex. Even more depressing was the incredible numbers of broken down, beatup old cars and trucks that had very obviously seen better days.

This was definitely the shadier side of town. Nobody here had much of anything, and what little they had wasn't in the best of shape. For someone recently impoverished with not much themselves, he and his family would definitely fit in well here. Shortly after they parked the truck, a church van pulled up behind them and unloaded a group of men who'd volunteered to help them move everything into the apartment. But it quickly became apparent that they were questioning their offer of help because, even in their work cloths, it was obvious that they had money. It also didn't help that the church van advertised their affiliation with one of the richest churches in town.

"So, where should we start, Duncan?" asked one of the men.

Duncan studied the dark, angry glares of the other apartment residents, jealous of either him, or those who'd come to help him, and became somewhat nervous. While he didn't want to look like too inviting a target, he also didn't want to make enemies of his new neighbors either.

"Um, well, just grab something and take it inside. I just want to get everything offloaded and the truck back to the rental place as quickly as possible. We'll worry about sorting everything once we're done with the truck," he said.

"Well, fine with us. Alright guys, let's get unpacking," said the man.

As he and his wife helped the others get everything off the truck quickly, he could tell the men were growing increasingly nervous. Oddly, this seemed to energize them, making the boxes and other items fly off the truck at almost inhuman speeds. It wasn't long before the truck was empty, the men were back in the van, and the group of them out on the street speeding away as though racing towards safety. Duncan soon found himself alone. He stepped into the house, loaded a rifle and leaned it against the stove. In some ways he felt like second guessing that action, not because he felt it was rash, but because he was afraid that roaches might start pouring out of the old, beatup culinary appliance and chew his gun into little pieces. He then slipped a pistol into a holster on his hip and headed for the door. But just as he reached it his pastor appeared in the doorway.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Eh, it could be better. The move went alright. But everything has happened so fast I don't really know what to say," said Duncan sadly.

"Well, cheer up. God will take care of you, and we'll help as much as possible."

He then pulled a business card out of his pocket and handed it to Duncan who took it and looked at it in confusion.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"It's for the pastor of a neighborhood church not far from here. I figured you might want something closer, what with you not having a car anymore and very little money right now. You're still welcome at our church. But since it's such a long drive I figured this might be best for you for the time being. I hope you don't feel offended or anything."

Duncan studied the card.

"New Hope Worship Center. Douglas Barnes, Pastor," he read aloud.

"Yeah, he's an old friend of mine. His dad and I went to seminary together. He's not what you're used to hearing, but I think you'll enjoy his sermons none the less."

Duncan smiled.

"Thanks."

Just then he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. One of the apartment residents was taking an unhealthy interest in him. Or possibly his pastor. Either way he had to make sure that at his wife and son were safe. If he was going to have trouble on his first day here, he'd rather his family weren't in the middle of it.

"Hey, Thomas, why don't you and your mother follow pastor back into town, and then you two go car shopping after you drop off the truck," he said.

Thomas turned and looked at his dad in surprise.

"You're serious?" he said.

"Yeah, you'll probably take the car for collage anyways, so you may as well pick something you like now while you can."

"Sweet! Thanks dad!" exclaimed Thomas.

Duncan chuckled and then saw everyone off. As the vehicles were pulling away the man got up and started towards Duncan.

"Whoever these guys are, they're not hesitant to go after fresh meat, I see," thought Duncan.

He watched as three more men joined the first. He then became slightly nervous as they appeared to be reaching for something. He reached into his jacket and fingered his pistol.

"What a way to start our first day here," he thought anxiously.

The men continued to approach. Duncan in turn continued to grow more nervous.

"How do I solve this? I don't want to hurt anyone," he thought.

Just then a single word echoed through his mind.

"Pray."

He blinked in surprise. It was so logical an idea as to almost be ludicrous, and yet at the same time the idea felt almost novel to him. For someone who'd grown up in the Christian church, it shouldn't be. Yet it was.

"Oh God, please protect me," he thought.

It wasn't much of a prayer, but it was enough. He'd no more than finished it when an unusual sound, almost like clacking wood, echoed off the buildings. But it wasn't pieces of wood smashing together. It was someone's voice.

"T'cup! Enough of this! Stop terrorizing every new resident that comes in here!" snapped an old, but highly authoritative voice.

The group of men stopped, much to Duncan's surprise. Then they turned their attention to an elderly black woman who looked to be no less than a hundred and nine. Yet the small group of men, not one of which was much older than twenty five, appeared to actually fear her. Even if they didn't, the air of respect they had was incredible. One of the young men took a toothpick out of his mouth and

glared at the woman.

"Grandmama, I ain't messin' wid nobody," he said.

"Oh yes you is! You ain't the king of this castle, and ain't nobody gotta listen to you. Now get!"

"But grandmama, I was just gonna introduce myself!"

The old woman cracked her cane on the ground, making nearly everyone jump.

"Now I ain't gonna say it again! Git! Go home!" she snapped.

The group of men grunted in disapproval, shot Duncan a withering glare, and then meandered off towards their houses like nothing happened. Duncan gulped slightly. He took his hand out of his jacket and studied it. His fingers were shaking. Actually, his whole body was. He then looked at the woman in wonder. She smiled at him and then hobbled his way as fast as her little feet could carry her. As she walked her cane gave a clickity clack on the broken concrete walkway that lined the front of his apartment row. She soon stopped in front of him and studied his face. Duncan was impressed. The woman couldn't had been more than four feet tall. Yet the authority she exuded was like having Godzilla and King Kong all wrapped up in one little cane wielding package. She smiled kindly at him and held out a thin, withered hand. He shook it carefully, afraid that he might break off if he wasn't careful. To his surprise her grip was firm and strong.

"Hello, young man. I'm Mrs. Oddie. But everyone just calls me grandmama," she said happily.

"I'm Duncan. It's nice to meet you, ma'am."

She gave him a bright, denture filled smile.

"So, where you come from?" she asked.

"The south side," said Duncan, a hint of sheepishness in his voice.

She studied him with interest.

"You wouldn't by chance be the one who had a Job experience, would ya?"

Duncan studied her in confusion.

"Job experience?"

"Lost all your stuff. Ended up in the ash heap."

A look of embarrassment came over Duncan's face.

"Yeah, that's me. It was the worst day of my life, and it's not over yet."

"Ah, good. So you *are* the one God told me was a comin'. I'm glad yer here. I was wonderin' when you'd show up. Was almost gettin' tired of waitin'."

Duncan blinked in confusion.

"God...told...you..."

Mrs. Oddie beamed joyfully.

"Yup, he sure did! Said he's got a whole lotta work to do on ya. Said I should help. I don't know what to do just yet, but I'm sure God will reveal it in time. If you need anything, just ask."

Duncan grinned slightly at this peculiar woman.

"Um, sure. Thanks."

Duncan sat anxiously in the main offices of an lower south side corporation and waited patiently as a group of men in another room discussed his resume. So far he'd struck out at fourteen other locations just today alone. He hoped this one would be a win for him. Especially since he was running out of places to apply at. After a bit he noticed the men come to a consensus and then go their separate ways, save for one who came over to him and handed his paperwork back to him.

"We've discussed your application at length and I'm afraid we can't hire you," said the man.

"Can't hire me? Why?" asked Duncan.

"Because, we don't need you. You have an impressive skillset, but it's not what we need at this

time. I'm sorry I couldn't help you, but that's the board's decision."

"Couldn't I start at a lower position?"

"That's just it. We're not hiring at all, Mr. Silas."

"Why?"

The man crossed his arms.

"Because we don't hire people like you."

Duncan looked at him in surprise.

"Like me? What is it about me that makes me unemployable?"

The man frowned.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, sir."

"So I've been blacklisted then."

"You have."

"For what?"

The man said nothing. Duncan sighed slightly. He didn't understand what he'd done to deserve this. But whatever it was, it must have been bad. He frowned slightly.

"Thank you for your time, sir. I'll see myself out," he said sadly.

He then walked quietly out of the offices and to the street below. As he stopped near the curb he looked at his watch. It was close to five o'clock. He'd have to try again tomorrow. He just hoped he didn't run into another wall because of this...blacklisting. It intrigued him a lot. It also explained the rather unusual way most of his interviews went and why he was so flatly rejected while other, less qualified people were taken instead. He scratched his chin slightly. What was it that he'd done to get himself blacklisted. While it wasn't an official declaration and his name was on no lists, he knew enough about the corporate world to know that one didn't need to exist.

There was an unspoken list that existed, and nearly everyone knew it, or knew about it, and almost all of them knew who was on it and why. But not him. If he knew the reasons for his blacklisting it might go a long ways towards getting his name cleared, or at least minimize the damage. But not being one of the top dogs anymore, that was going to be rather difficult, if not outright impossible. But that was another problem for another day. For now he just needed to get home. The problem was, he'd already spent all his money just getting downtown.

He stood on the street and watched in muted sadness as dozens of men, each wearing suits and jackets much like he'd once worn, streamed by in expensive cars, and in some cases chauffeured cars and limousines. They glared at him in disdain as he stood there on the street. He sighed heavily as he remembered how at one time that'd been him, riding along in kingly glory staring with disdain as he passed by the less fortunate. Yet now *he* was the one being looked down upon. Surprisingly to him, it hurt. He'd never though of what it must be like on this side of things. He'd just assumed that anyone who was not well to do was not holy or a good Christian. Or a believer at all. He for many years believed that God only rewarded the saintly and the righteous. Anyone who was not well to do must be suffering punishment for their sins. Or so he once thought.

The last few weeks had changed those beliefs considerably. If he were so holy, righteous, and pious, why did God put him down in the gutter like this? Whatever the reasons, he couldn't figure it out. He then groaned slightly, turned, and began his long, multi-mile trek home. But as he began to walk a man called out to him.

"Hey, buddy!"

Duncan turned in the direction of the voice. Before him stood a man in a simple suit and tie. In his hand was a slip of paper.

"Hey, do you ride the bus?" he asked.

Duncan nodded.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Need a ticket to get home? I was gonna use it today, but my wife is picking me up in a few minutes so I don't need it. But since it's only for today I don't want it to go to waste."

Duncan blinked.

"Um, well, actually, I do," he said in amazement.

The man handed him the ticket.

"Well, here ya go, buddy. It's all yours. Have a great day!"

He then hurried off to a car waiting not far away. Duncan looked at the ticket in amazement. A tear formed in his eyes. He clutched the ticket to his chest, and smiled.

"I know I don't deserve this, but thank you, Lord," he whispered.

To his surprise, the soft, loving words "You're welcome" echoed in his ear. He didn't know where they'd come from, as he couldn't see anyone nearby. But he had an idea.

"Next!"

Duncan walked up to the counter and stared at a big, mean looking lady who sat on the other side of a large window covered in bullet proof glass. She glared at him.

"Name," she said, almost growling.

"Duncan Silas," came the somewhat sheepish reply.

"Papers."

Duncan slid his paperwork under the window to the lady. She looked it over briefly, pushed it back to him, and then handed him a ticket.

"You're number one four seven two. Take a seat in the blue chairs to your left. Your number will be called when an advisor is available to speak with you."

Duncan nodded slightly and took a seat as instructed. He found it odd being there, surrounded by the same people he once looked down upon. He quietly studied the other people around him. Some were sad, some angry, some aloof. But one of them seemed different. Despite his ragged cloths, bad teeth and tired, wrinkled face, he was happy. Almost too happy. He was dark skinned, scarred, wrinkled with digits missing from his fingers, and clearly suffering from a slight case of Parkinson's. Yet despite all of this, he continued to smile. This baffled Duncan. How could someone in such a state be so happy? Just then the man locked eyes with him and, almost as though drawn by a magnet, immediately bounded out of his chair and sat down next to Duncan with a dull thud.

He held out his arthritis ravaged hand, and said with a crooked, but excited grin, "How are you, young man?"

Duncan hesitated. He wasn't certain he wanted to touch the man, let alone shake hands with him. Yet there was something addictive about the joy he had. He eventually took the man's hand and shook it gently, afraid that it might break off if he wasn't careful.

"I'm doing well. What's your name?" asked Duncan.

"Benjamin Williams! But everyone just calls me Uncle Ben," said the man happily. "What's yours, good sir?"

"Duncan Silas."

"Silas? Well now, there's a good biblical name. Speaking of which, do you know Jesus?"

Duncan chuckled. He had to give the old man credit for being direct and to the point in his witnessing. Yet something troubling tugged at his heart. Duncan had spent his entire life in the church, even becoming a deacon at one point. Yet this man had asked him if he knew Jesus. Then again it was understandable since the old man didn't know him. But it still bothered Duncan none the less.

"Yes I do," he said proudly. "I'm a deacon at the South Side Community Church."

"South Side? Well now, ain't that a rich man's church?"

Duncan nodded slightly.

"Well, sorta. Even though most of our congregation is rich, anyone is welcome."

Benjamin laughed.

"Where, then we's in good company! While we ain't got no money, our God is rich, and we's his children, so we's rich!" he said happily.

It made Duncan chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess we would be."

"So if you's a decon there, and all them gots money, how come you's down here?"

Duncan shrugged.

"I lost my job. The company went bankrupt."

"No, no. I don't mean this place. I mean, why's you down here?" he said, pointing at Duncan's chest. "Fo someone who says he has Jesus in there, your heart is awful low."

Duncan sighed and looked at the floor.

"Well, I lost more than just my job. We lost nearly everything else, including our money, our house, our cars, and all the comforts we had."

Benjamin chuckled slightly, surprising Duncan.

"That's somethin' awful small for someone with such a big God," he said. "So where you live now, since ya'll lost everythin'?"

"Shady Grove Apartments."

"Shady Grove? That's where I live! Apartment twenty four."

Duncan was surprised at this.

"We live in twenty five."

Benjamin smiled excitedly.

"Well now, then we's neighbors!"

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card and handed it to Duncan.

"Since we're neighbors, and brothers even, it's only right that I invite you to my church. It's the little congregation just down the road."

Duncan studied the card and was surprised at the name on it.

"New Hope Worship Center. Yeah, my pastor told me about that. It's run by a Reverend Barnes, I believe," he said.

"Yes, sir! Brother Barnes is a real man of God! You should come listen to him sometime. Why, I could even give you a lift over there if you need one."

Duncan cracked a smile.

"Well, we have a car. But I'll gladly take you up on your offer to come visit. I was thinking about it anyways. It'll be easier than driving an hour across town to get to our church."

"Sure, come visit us anytime."

Susan looked up as the front door opened.

"Ah, you're home! How'd the job search go?" she asked happily.

Duncan plunked down in a chair discouraged.

"Nobody wants me," he said, the air of discouragement very obvious in his voice.

"Did you call anyone at church to see if they knew someone who was hiring?"

"Yeah, I called everyone I know and nobody could help me."

A look of concern spread quickly across Susan's face. She walked over and put her arms around her husband's shoulders.

"It's alright, dear. God will provide us with something. At least we have a place to stay, a small income and a working car."

"Yeah, but I wish I had more."

"It's enough, dear. God will supply all our needs. Even if it's the bare minimum required to survive, it will be exactly what we need."

Just then the door bell rang. Having spent a couple weeks in the new apartment, and knowing the rather rough state of the neighborhood, nearly everyone either reached for a weapon or made sure one was within easy reach. Duncan then got up and checked the peep hole. What he saw excited him. It was his friend Jake from church. He unlocked the door, yanked his friend inside, much to his surprise, and then closed and locked the door behind him.

"A little nervous?" asked Jake.

"Can't be too careful in this neighborhood. There's some very scary people out there. I've had a few run ins already," said Duncan.

Jake scanned the room, and then cocked an eyebrow.

"Given the firepower on hand, I'm guessing so."

Duncan frowned.

"You have no idea. I just wish we didn't have to live this way."

Jake pursed his lips at this and cleared his throat.

"Yeah, that's kinda why I'm here."

He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a letter.

"This is for you."

"What is it?" asked Duncan.

Jake frowned.

"I think you should read it for yourself."

Duncan opened the letter and read it quietly. His eyes soon grew wide.

"I've had my status as deacon and my membership in the church revoked on account of my sins!? Jake, what are they talking about!?" he said in shock.

"Recent events have alerted us to a major sin in your life, and because of your obvious ongoing state of rebellion we can't have you as a member, and especially not as a leader in our church."

"My sins!? What sins!? What are they accusing me of?"

"I don't know. But given what we've seen, it's clear that you're living in some kind of sin that needs to be dealt with."

Duncan looked at him in confusion.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Duncan! Look around you! God doesn't take someone as rich as you and pitch them into the gutter like this unless they've committed some kind of heinous sin! Now while I don't know what that is, I don't care. You've sinned, and because of it God's judging you. So until you repent of whatever it is you've done, you're not welcome at our church."

Duncan's jaw dropped open.

"I'm being kicked out because I'm poor?"

"You're being kicked out because you've sinned, and your loss of prosperity only proves that! Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go. In the meantime, find out what you've done, and then fix it. We'd love to have you back, but not until you get this sorted out."

Jake then turned and stormed out of the apartment. Duncan tried to follow after him, but Jake was gone before he could get in another word. As he stood there in stunned silence he heard someone walk up next to him. He turned his head and was surprised to see Benjamin, the old man from the unemployment office, standing next to him. Duncan studied him slightly and noticed an air of

contemplation on his face as though trying to digest a thought.

"Prosperity gospel, eh?" said Benjamin.

Duncan's eyebrows were knitted with confusion.

"Huh?" he said.

"The prosperity gospel. It's that newfangled belief that, if you ain't rich, you ain't right with God. It's a bunch of hooley if you ask me. Just because you ain't rich don't mean you is good nor bad. Look at Hitler. He was fabulously rich and as evil as they come. Yet Jesus was the poorest of the poor and still remained the sinless son of God. Money ain't got nothing to do with how you is with God. It's nice to have. But if I was to decide between Jesus or a few Benjamins, pfft, there wouldn't even be a question in my heart. You can keep your money, and I'll keep my Jesus."

He then gave Duncan a happy, but crooked smile. Duncan gave a nervous smile in return as he stared at the man's teeth. They were enough to give a dentist nightmares. Even so, the old man didn't seem to care. He smiled anyways. This intrigued Duncan. Just like before he was amazed at the old man's infectious joy. Wherever he was getting it from, Duncan wanted some of it.

That Sunday Duncan and his family drove down to the New Hope Worship Center and pulled up to what appeared to be a run down old civic center. The building had very obviously seen better days. As they pulled up he noticed that most of the people were arriving on foot, while only a few came in cars. In some ways it made him feel rich again. They soon parked, got out, and studied the gathering congregates. Even though most people's "Sunday Best" wasn't much better than dressed down casual, most of them had the same addictive joy about them that Benjamin had. The more Duncan saw it, the more he wanted it. But how could he get that? Especially given the situation he and his family found themselves in.

They soon made their way inside and found a worn out, splintered, hard wood floor covered in places by pieces of tin nailed in place, or improvised planks used to plug holes so people wouldn't trip over them or fall through. On top of this broken down floor sat row upon row of broken, beatup, worn out folding chairs. At the front of the church was a tired, dirty old piano that had obviously seen far too many days. Up at the very front where the pastor stood and preached was a simple wooden podium that appeared to be made out of leftover scraps of wood. He then remembered his old church. Everything they had in their sanctuary was either new, or nearly new. Even at the worst of times the things they had were better than this.

The part that surprised him the most was that, despite the extremely obvious poverty all around them, almost everyone was happy. Additively happy at that. There were obviously a few who weren't, but they appeared to be unsaved men and women who were searching for the reasons why everyone else was so happy, just like he was. He continued to scan the gathering crowds as he waited to see how the crowd would settle in before picking seats for his family. As he did this noticed something unusual. Scattered throughout the church were small groups of people who had gathered together into little circles and begun praying. There was no call to pray, or gather, or anything like that. They'd simply came together without prompting, bowed their heads, and just prayed.

This was something he'd never seen before. Especially not at his old church. He then looked around for bulletins, but saw none. An eyebrow went up slightly. How would they know how the service would unfold without a bulletin? What about announcements? As he was contemplating this a voice lifted up from the center of the congregation. It started quietly, and then slowly grew in volume as the words poured forth. Duncan listened in wonder. They weren't calling for attention. They were singing! It wasn't long before another voice joined in, then two more. The room soon became silent, save for these four voices. The song was beautiful and sincere. Others soon joined in one by one until

the joyous melody swept over the entire congregation. Duncan listened in raptured wonder.

*Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home;
all is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.
God our Maker doth provide for our wants to be supplied;
come to God's own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home.*

The song sent chills down Duncan's back. It moved in him something he couldn't explain. He soon found himself joining in, and through this singing he felt as though he'd gotten a little taste of heaven. And for the first time in months his heart felt at peace. He then studied the others who gathered there and was amazed at the joy on their faces. If he'd looked in a mirror he would've seen a bit of that joy on his own face. He then heard crying. He turned to see a big, heavy, hardened man, one who'd obviously had a very hard life, in utter tears. That was something new.

"Praise the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is in me, praise his holy name," said a deacon.

"Praise the Lord," came the reply.

Duncan found this interesting. None of these actions were scripted in any way. No liturgy, no well practiced mantra, nor anything like that. This was entirely from the heart. The congregation soon found seats, as did Duncan and his family, and studied the pastor.

"Please turn in your hymn books to number three twenty five," he said.

Each person reached under their seats and grabbed a dirty, beat up, and in some cases disintegrating hymn book and flipped to the song. Duncan was amazed at the condition of them and wondered how his was staying in one piece. Thomas, who was sitting to his right, held something in his hand akin to a third grade craft project. It was more duct tape and sewing thread than book. Yet it was more sturdy than his own. Whoever had patched the old book together had done quite the job, despite their rather odd choice in materials.

The congregation continued to sing for nearly thirty minutes with a brief break in the middle to give announcements. While these were being given, a series of old wicker baskets, the kind you'd see filled with candy on Easter morning, were passed up and down the aisles. As they passed by each person either cash, a check or an envelope was tossed in. Duncan couldn't see what the envelopes contained, but he could certainly see the cash that was being given, and it wasn't much. A five here, a ten there. Quite often it was a handful of change; all that the money the person possessed. Six months ago Duncan, with his four digit giving, wouldn't have been able to comprehend such a small offering. Yet now these offerings seemed like a kingly gift.

Soon a basket reached his aisle and he studied it with amazement. On top were several checks, none of which were more than twenty dollars in size. Given the scarcity of cash in the basket, combined with this humble offering, it didn't take a genius to figure out how badly these people were hurting. If twenty dollars was all they could give, they likely didn't have much to give to begin with. Yet they gave anyways. Duncan had always given of his excess. These people were giving of their poverty. The widow's mites.

Duncan was starting to understand the parable more. He pulled two beatup old one dollar bills from his suit pocket, the grand total of what he had left, and tossed them into the basket before passing it on. If others were willing to give all they had to God's work and his glory, then Duncan would do the same. The announcements and the offering soon ended and Duncan half expected the sermon to begin shortly afterwards. But instead something interesting happened that he'd never seen before. As much as he'd hate to admit it, today was turning into a marathon of firsts for him, and it wasn't over yet.

"Brothers and sisters, thank you for your giving, and may the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob bless you for your generosity. Now, before we hear the word of God, let us pray," said the pastor.

Every head bowed.

"Oh Lord, our Father God, thank you for the bountiful blessings that has come upon this church," said someone in the congregation.

Duncan, who'd been bowing his head, cracked an eye slightly in confusion. Bounty? What blessings? The place was full of poor people just barely getting by. How was there any kind of bountiful blessings here? He soon closed his eyes and listened further. The remaining prayers offered up spanned the gambit of problems. Some sounded worried, others hopeful. One of the prayers that really got his attention was an older lady who was dying of cancer. Despite the pain, which could be clearly heard in her voice, her attitude was one of peace, joy, happiness, and thanksgiving. Again, Duncan couldn't understand this.

How could one be dying and yet praising God with every breath they had? It made absolutely no sense to him. Yet here she was lifting up praises to God in her suffering, and even displaying some expectant excitement that it wouldn't be long before she would see her savior face to face. Many of the other congregates affirmed her prayers and offered up thanksgiving for the wonderful faith that this sister had displayed despite her suffering. For all of Duncan's forty plus years of life, and probably thirty five years of Christianity, he'd never seen anything like this.

To praise God for blessings was one thing. But to praise God for one's trials, that was new. The prayers continued to pour out for at least another half hour or more. But the ones that caught his attention the most were those who talked to God as though he were their best friend. This too was new. Where he'd grown up, God was the big man in the sky, and he was most certainly NOT your friend. To him it was akin to a master/servant relationship. Yet to these people it was more like the relationship a father and child shared. Duncan wanted that so badly he could taste it.

He'd only been in the gutter a few weeks, but already he could feel his life changing. And despite the difficulties, it was a good change. Eventually the prayers ended and the pastor opened his bible and began to preach, and for the first time in years, Duncan listened intently with all his strength, attention, and every ounce of focus he could muster. If this pastor had anything to do with what made these people so happy and at peace, he was gonna listen as closely as humanly possible.

As they sat in their living room talking about the last several days, a knock came at the door. Without even thinking about it, Duncan leapt up and checked the peep hole. It was Pastor Barnes and, to his great surprise, Benjamin his next door neighbor. Duncan invited them in. Both Thomas and Susan's faces lit up at seeing him.

"Pastor Barnes, it's so good to see you!" exclaimed Thomas.

Barnes smiled.

"It's good to see you as well. How have you been?" he asked.

Thomas shrugged.

"Eh, it could be better. But we're getting by, through the grace of God."

"Amen!" exclaimed Benjamin.

This drew smiles from everyone.

"So what did you come down here for?" asked Duncan.

"I heard about what happened with your old church. So I thought it might be a good idea to come check on you," said Barnes.

Duncan and his family frowned slightly.

"Yeah, I don't know what to say about that. We're still trying to process it all. Long time friends, people we talked with every day now want nothing to do with us, nor does the church. They think we're big, evil, sinful heathens or something," said Duncan.

A look of disappointment and mild anger grew across Benjamin's face.

"They ain't no friends if they only wanna be your boy when you got dough," he said.

"Agreed. It's the result of bad preaching and the prosperity gospel. To say I'm disappointed with your pastor is an understatement. His dad was a real man of God. But he's become only a man after the almighty dollar. It's such a tragedy."

Duncan perked up slightly as he thought about this.

"You just mentioned the prosperity gospel. Ben mentioned that the other day when my buddy Jake dropped the news on us about our ejection from our old church. What exactly is this prosperity gospel I keep hearing about?"

"It's a false belief that God blesses the holy and punishes the sinful by either making them rich or poor respectively. They also believe, falsely as well, that if you ask in faith and ask hard enough, God will bless you with incredible riches. So if you're not rich, you're doing something wrong, and if you're made poor you're being punished for some major sin in your life. According to the bible, that's complete nonsense."

"Well that's a relief to me. I was worried I'd done something wrong."

"That doesn't mean you haven't. All it means is that your prosperity or poverty is not chained to your godliness. Just look at Jesus. He is the holy, unblemished, sinless Son of God and he was likely the poorest of the poor during his time here on Earth."

Duncan nodded in understanding.

"That does bring me a little peace."

Barnes looked at him curiously.

"A little? If you're in God and following his word, even in the deepest, darkest trials, you should always have peace in your heart."

Duncan grimaced sheepishly.

"I'd honestly love to have something like that right now. But I don't."

Barnes studied him with interest.

"What's your salvation date?"

Duncan looked at him in confusion.

"Salvation date?"

"The day you got saved."

Duncan thought long and hard about this, but try as he might, he couldn't think of a date.

"As far as I know I don't have one. I've just always been a Christian my entire life."

"Why, everyone has a spiritual birthday! You can't be a Christian and not have one. Mine was August 26th, 1958 in Ida, Louisiana!" exclaimed Benjamin.

"May 26th, 1980," said Susan in wonder.

Barnes smiled. He could tell this had answered a pressing question in her life.

"What about you, young man?" he asked.

"July 19th, 2002. It was at summer bible camp," said Thomas with a smile.

All attention then focused back on Duncan. For the first time in years he felt as though he was under the interrogation of the inquisition.

"To be honest, I can't think of a date. I grew up in the church, got married in the church, raised a family in the church, became a deacon of it, and one of its top earners. Yet I've never had a specific date that I can say was my salvation date," he said.

He then paused for a few seconds, as though thinking through something, before continuing.

"But...I've...last Sunday, at your church, I saw something in the congregation that I haven't seen in my entire adult life. Or childhood for that matter. There was this...incredible faith in your church. Even though they had so little, the widows mites if you will, they were still happy. I've never seen a

joy like that, or had it myself."

"That's the joy of Christ. You can only have it if you're one of his children."

"And if I don't have it?"

"Then you may not be his child."

That hit Duncan like a ten ton Acme anvil. He began to quiver. Almost immediately, without anyone saying a word, his son and his wife drew close and put their arms around him.

"Honey, if you're not saved it's important that you get right with God. But no matter what happens I will always love you."

"Yeah, dad. If you're not saved, we'll still love you. But we'd also want you to get saved because I want our entire family to spend eternity with God in heaven," said Thomas.

Duncan continued to quiver as he thought about this.

After a bit he look at Barnes sheepishly, and said, "I've considered myself a Christian my entire life. However, what you've said today makes me question that, which now that begs another question. If I don't have a salvation date, or at least one that I can remember, does that mean I'm not saved?"

"Most likely," said Barnes kindly.

Duncan sighed slightly, and then asked, "If that's true, sir, what must I do to be saved?"

Barnes smiled.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, soul and body, and believe that he died and rose again to take away your sins, and you will be saved."

And Duncan did.

Later that week Duncan got a call at his home about a possible job interview in the financial district. It wasn't what he wanted job wise, but at this point he'd gladly take anything. He caught a ride with his son downtown, slipped into the building and upstairs. Upon arriving at his destination he was greeted by a grumpy, almost narcissistic secretary with horn rimmed glasses. He'd heard about people like her many times in the past, but this was the first time he'd seen one in real life. In some ways she looked like a flash from the past. A very scary flash.

"May I help you?" she said in a grouchy, librarian like voice.

"Duncan Silas. I'm here for an interview."

"Papers," she said flatly.

This was becoming such a cold, heartless, and all too common request that he almost expected to see jack booted Nazi shock troops step out of a side office at any moment. He handed her the papers which she looked at and nearly threw back at him. She then pointed at several chairs against the wall.

"Wait over there," she said in an annoyed voice.

Duncan complied and a few minutes later he was called into the back. He held his own as a group of three men grilled him about his work experience, prior occupation, and much more. But despite all that he did, and the incredible amount of prayers he was lifting up throughout the meeting, he was flatly denied the job. After being unceremoniously ushered out of the office he plodded down the stairs and out onto the street. However, unlike previously failed job interviews, he didn't feel sad or in despair. Yes, he was upset, but for the first time in his life he actually felt at peace about everything. Deciding that he'd better hurry if he wanted to catch the bus across town he walked briskly down the street towards the bus stop.

As he did he came upon a suit shop. Surprisingly he knew the place well and had even bought from them in the past. He stood in front of the main window and studied the expensive custom tailored suits that hung in the window. At one time he'd have happily employed large amounts of cash to buy them. But now they seemed like hollow, empty pieces of cloth. No longer were they the very idols of

his life. Now they were just expensive rags hanging on a mannequin body.

He then looked down and studied his suit jacket. Even though it was old and many years out of fashion, it seemed like a kingly garment to him now. Strangely enough, it also reminded him of the way he'd once lived. His former pastor's comments about his idolatrous love of suits hadn't been all that far off. He *had* been in an idolatrous relationship with them. It'd been so bad that he'd become extremely angry when they'd been taken from him. But now he happily thanked God that he'd taken those suits away from him. He no longer wanted idols in his life. He wanted God, and him alone at the center of it all. He then turned and strolled joyfully down the street whistling a hymn of praise to God as he went. Even though he didn't realize it, he was finally beginning to understand the incredible joy he'd seen in church the previous Sunday, and he liked it.

Time went by and summer soon turned into fall and, as the leaves began to fall the seasonal charity drives began. As a result signs began popping up all over the city reminding people that it was the "season of giving" and they should pitch in to help the poor. As many times as Duncan had been on the giving end of things before, it felt weird being on the receiving end this time. Even more intriguing were the things being collected. They weren't the latest fashions or the best cloths or the best food. These were all second hand castoffs; things that people no longer wanted. He was quite appalled at the quality of the giving. Then he remembered his giving. Comparatively it hadn't been much better. Sure, his lesser things were much better quality than most people's good things, still he was surprised at the bad condition and low quality of them.

This was most apparent during one afternoon while standing near a row of large collection boxes just outside a large department store. As he stood there, graciously thanking each person that left a donation, he spotted a mother and her child approaching him. But this wasn't a happy, joyful family unit. The poor mother looked tired, frustrated, and beyond the limits of her patience. One look at the child said everything. As they walked he yanked on her, bounced, screamed, cried, and threw a temper tantrum of epic proportions every step of the way.

"Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! I want candy! Give me that toy! I want that toy! I demand that toy! Mommy, I don't wanna walk! I want something to drink! I'm hungry!" cried the child.

It was apparent by his apparel that he was not in the slightest big neglected, nor abused. If anything he had far too much. Duncan cocked an eyebrow at this. He wondered if that was how he'd looked at one time. The thought of that being a possibility made him sick. Before he wouldn't have thought twice about acting like that. If he wanted it, he was gonna get it one way or another. But now it bothered him a lot. As he watched this dynamic duo of temper and exhaustion approach, he watched as the lady pull a small boxed toy out of a bag around her arm. The child went completely ballistic, trying futilely to rip the toy from her hands.

"Is there a specific box this should go in?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. You can put that in any of the boxes," said Duncan politely.

But manners was the last thing he was thinking about at that moment. He could see that Benjamin was thinking the same thing. Both wanted to spank the child post haste. But instead they restrained themselves and simply smiled. The woman gave them a somewhat apologetic smile, and then tossed the toy into one of the boxes. The child immediately turned and leapt at the box like Superman leaping over a tall building in a single bound. Duncan, thinking fast, reached out and intercepted the child mid-air like he was grabbing the game winning pass at the superbowl. It didn't take him long to wish he hadn't as the kid kicked him viscusly in the knees and shins.

"That's enough!" cried the mother.

"I want that toy! *I want that toy!* I WANT THAT TOY!" screamed the boy.

"NO!" replied the mother.

Duncan watched as she then grabbed the child by the hand and dragged him, kicking and screaming to the car. She soon backed out of her parking spot and drove away. The fact that the child didn't come flying out of the car made him wonder if she'd duct taped him to the seat. Everything soon calmed down and the small crowd of stunned onlookers began to gradually disperse to their respective destinations. Benjamin sighed and shook his head and grunted.

"That woman and her child needs God something bad," he said.

Duncan grimaced.

"What scares me is that I was like that child at one point in time. Not as loud obviously, but certainly as covetous and greedy. Probably more so in some ways."

"Yes, but you gots Christ on the inside. So you can neva' be like that again."

Duncan frowned.

"I don't know. Once able, always able. That's what scares me the most."

"In Christ yous a new creature. So fear not the old you, cause it's gone."

Duncan looked at Benjamin with a smile.

"That's an interesting take on an old verse. I remember that from high school."

Benjamin gave a big, crooked, toothy grin,

"It's just as good then as it is now."

Duncan laughed.

"Yes it is. Probably even more so."

Susan looked up as Duncan and Thomas walked in the door, tired, but energized. She was even more impressed with the beaming smile on both of their faces.

"You look surprisingly happy," she said.

"Oh, mom, you should've seen it! I've been to a lot of events where we handed out things to the poor and needy, but being poor these last few months has given me a whole new perspective on what they're going through. To see their smiles when we gave them each their gifts was one thing. But for them to realize that we're just like them, and yet still generous, it completely blew their minds. In fact, dad was a machine tonight! He spent most of his time witnessing, and only a brief time actually helping us hand out food and gifts to needy families," said Thomas excitedly.

Susan looked at Duncan in surprise.

"Witnessing?" she said, both in excitement and amazement.

Duncan smiled sheepishly.

"Yeah, I started with handing out gifts. But people kept asking me how I could do this and be so happy even though I wasn't much better off than they were. When the night was over I'd led nine people to Christ, and had at least four re-commitments."

Susan's jaw nearly hit the floor. This was an entirely different husband than before. For years she had to nearly drag him kicking and screaming to events like this, and not once could she say he'd led anyone to Jesus. Yet in one night he'd helped bring nine new people into the kingdom. This was definitely an improvement she could get behind. She only wished that it hadn't required God taking them down to nothing to make it happen.

"So what's your plans for tomorrow?" she asked.

"I'm going with pastor to work at one of the local shelters. After what he saw me do today, he wants to give me a little hands on training in ministry and witnessing. While I did good, he says that I'm still a rough stone and in need of a good mentor to improve my witnessing. Of course, if God keeps blessing me like this, that may be a unnecessary."

"Nothing is unnecessary with God, dad. He puts everything we learn and master to his uses, and the more we learn and the more we use them the better and more useful we become for Jesus. So take the training. God will be glad you did," said Thomas.

Duncan smiled as he thought about this.

"Ya know, I think you're right. Well then, I guess I should get to work mastering my witnessing abilities," he said.

"What about job hunting?"

Duncan sighed.

"I'll have to do that too. But whatever happens, it's God's will now, not mine. If my work is to be entirely for him, then so be it, because I know that no matter what happens, he will supply all of our needs. He's already proven that greatly in the few months we've been here."

Susan smiled.

"Amen."

Two Years Later...

"Six hundred. Six twenty. Six forty. Six fifty. Praise God, we have enough for rent this month," said Susan as she counted out a small pile of bills on the table.

"Yeah, but that doesn't leave much for gas or food, and I don't get paid for another week, not that it's all that much to begin with," said Thomas.

The three of them sighed.

"But at least we're getting by and God is helping us. We'll probably have to continue eating lean for a while longer, but we'll get through this as always with God's blessing and provision. He hasn't let us down in over two years, and I know he won't now," said Duncan.

"Amen," said the other two.

But there was evidence that the long two and a half years of lean living and near famine had severely tested their faith. Just then a knock came at the door.

"I got it," said Duncan.

He walked over, checked the peep hole, and then undid the several levels of locks and bolts on the door, including two anti-breach bars. Eventually the door opened. Standing in the doorway was Pastor Barnes. Duncan beamed with joy.

"Pastor!" he exclaimed happily.

"Hey there, Duncan!" said Barnes cheerfully.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm good. How's thing's going here?"

Duncan shrugged.

"It's rough as always, but we're getting by."

But Barnes wasn't convinced.

"You sure about that? You look a little gloomy."

"No, we're fine. Really."

But Barnes didn't buy it. He gave Duncan a piercing look. Eventually Duncan folded.

"Alright, we're not all that fine. We're still having trouble making ends meet and it's starting to take its toll," said Duncan, a hint of discouragement in his voice.

"I know the feeling. I struggle too. In fact, everyone in our congregation struggles."

"Yeah, I know. I see it every Sunday, and all through the week."

"Yes, but God is good and he always provides for every one of our needs according to his riches

and glory. He's never failed me yet, nor will he ever, and that goes for you as well."

Duncan nodded.

"Agreed. But there are times it's so hard to keep the faith."

Barnes smiled.

"I know, and that's the best time to draw closer to God, because when you come out the other side you will always be better than when you went in."

"Amen. So, what'd you come down here for?"

"Well, I have something that you've been wanting for a very long time."

Duncan perked up slightly.

"A job?" he said expectantly.

Barnes nodded.

"One of my friends at Wright's Wheels contacted me and said he overheard a couple guys in the office talking about a position opening up down at the Barker street factory. So I came here tell you about it since you've been waiting for work the longest of anyone in the congregation."

Duncan laughed and hugged his pastor with bouncy, excited joy. Barnes chuckled at the surprise outpouring of thanks.

"Thank you, pastor! This is the best gift you could give me!"

"Don't thank me. God sent this along for you. Thank him. I'm just the messenger."

"Amen! Thank you God!!"

Duncan went down the next day and applied at the factory. He was hired on the spot, much to his joy and relief. Even though it was a factory job, and very hard work, he put all of his energy into it and gave his best. It didn't take long for his employers to notice. Within a year Duncan went from machinist to shift manager. Eventually he was earning enough that he and his wife could afford to finally send their son off to college. Shortly afterwards Susan found work at a local grocery store as a cashier and, just like like Duncan, so impressed her employers with her hard work that she was quickly promoted through the ranks all the way up to store manager. Eventually Duncan and his wife found themselves flush with cash and doing well. But instead of moving back to the south side, or returning to their old lifestyle, they instead remained where they were, serving in their community and using their incredible new wealth to help those who needed it most.

Some of the money was given back to God for his service and used through the church for various types of charity work, including fixing up other people's homes. They even helped pay for a complete remodeling and repair of their church, including a new piano, chairs, hymnals, and hundreds of free bibles that were given out to all who needed them. Through all of this charity and sacrificial service to God Duncan and his wife began to get a name for themselves. Even their employers and employees spoke highly of them. But despite the ever growing fame and fortune that was flowing their way, they continued their sacrificial giving and service to God. To them the many, many gifts and blessings that God was giving them was not meant for their needs alone, but rather to help others and to spread the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

In doing so their ministry reached out to all the poor and hungry in the city with the gospel, transforming them in ways that nothing else could. Through all of this the number of people who were saved grew and grew and grew, and despite the ever present hard times that filled their streets, there was a joy there that nobody could explain, and few understood, save for those who knew Jesus. After the better part of fifteen years living and working among the poor and less fortunate in their city, something interesting happened. Duncan showed up to work one morning, just as he always did, and

was greeted at the front door by a group of men in business suits.

"Are you Duncan Silas?" asked one of them.

It was apparent that the man already knew the answer, but he'd asked it anyways.

"Yes I am. Can I help you?" asked Duncan curiously.

"Follow me, sir," said the man.

He then led Duncan into a back office where the plant manager and two other men stood, one of whom was the company owner. Duncan was both impressed at this, and slightly confused. But as he studied them, something caught his eye. It wasn't the owner himself which had gotten his attention. It was the suit the owner wore. Seeing it was like a flash from the past. He looked at it in amazement.

"Pardon me, sir, but is that a Brioni you're wearing?" he asked.

The owner studied him curiously.

"A Brioni?"

"The suit you're wearing. It looks like the kind made by Brioni. They're an Italian suit maker. One of the best in the world last I knew."

The owner studied Duncan curiously.

"How do you know about them?"

Duncan shrugged.

"I used to wear their suits a long time ago. In fact, I prided myself on my collection of suits. I had probably the best, most fashionable suits money could buy."

The man looked at him in confusion.

"When did you ever have enough money to own one of these?"

"I used to work as upper management at CompTechTron way over on the south side. But when they went into bankruptcy I lost my job. Actually, I lost it all that day. Everything. House, money, cars, pension, and pretty much everything else. Oddly though, it'd actually started the Sunday before. We were putting together a collection for the poor and my wife thought it'd be a good idea if we sorted out some cloths from our wardrobe and gave them to the needy. I of course didn't want to give up my nice suits, so I cleaned out the old, junky ones from the attic and intended to give them to the poor instead. But God had other plans, and all my best suits, my Brionis, Gucci's, Newman's and many others, were sent to the poor instead. Shortly after that everything fell apart. However, I'm not all that upset really. Thinking back about it, that was the best thing God could have done to me. It was a real wakeup call for me, and helped me realize that it's not money or cloths that makes the man. It's God that makes the man."

The owner smiled.

"That it does. But it's funny you should mention how your best suits were given to the poor, because that's where I got this," he said, tugging at the collar of his suit.

"Come again?" said Duncan in confusion.

"Well, it's rather strange, really. Years ago I used to be a down in the dumps loser with no money, no food, and no home. I found my way into a mission one night, more to get out of the cold than anything else, and was confronted by one of the men there. He talked with me about Jesus and led me to the Lord. The next day they received a box of cloths for the homeless. In one of the boxes was a bunch of high end business suits and dress cloths. About that same time I was offered a job at this company. But I only had rags to wear, and didn't dare show up to the interview looking like that. So the mission gave me this suit to wear that day. I showed up and immediately got the job. From there I rose quickly through the company until I eventually become the owner of it."

"Wow, praise God!" exclaimed Duncan.

He then thought of something.

"Can I ask a favor of you, sir?" he asked.

"Sure, what'd you have in mind?"

"Well, it's a rather odd request but, because I was somewhat paranoid of losing my high value suits at the cleaners, I had my name sewn into the inseam of the outfit. Can I look and see if it's there?"

The owner took off the suit jacket and handed it to Duncan who carefully looked through the expensive suit and soon found what he was looking for. It made him almost want to cry.

"All things work together for good to those who love the Lord," he said.

He then handed the jacket back to the owner.

"For years I coveted those suits and protected them like a dragon protects its treasure. But then God took them away from me, along with everything else, and brought me down to the lowest gutter to teach me that it's better to give of your best to help those in need, than to give of your worst in selfishness and greed. I have since given all I have, and the best of what I have, to help others."

The owner smiled.

"Yes, so I've heard. It seems that people all over are talking about you and the things you've been doing. Your commitment to God has also showed amazingly in your work. Speaking of which, what did you do for a living before coming here? You obviously had to do something very important to afford suits like this."

"Well, I was an upper level manager at CompTechTron. It was my job to oversee most of the daily operations for our Northeast technical division. I was basically a glorified comptroller with manufacturing and assembly systems oversight. Between my boss and I, we made our division the most profitable in all of CTT. Actually, I think we were the ONLY profitable division, which is probably why they went bankrupt."

The owner blinked in surprise.

"You were....but why are you working here with experience and skills like that!?"

Duncan blushed ashamedly.

"Nobody wants to hire someone like me."

The owner's jaw dropped slightly.

"Are you kidding me!?! We want to hire someone like you! I've been looking for a qualified applicate for ages, but most of them were...well, let's just say they didn't fit the bill. Tell you what. How about we get you cleaned up, then take you over to headquarters and you show me what you can do. If I like what I see, you've got yourself a promotion."

Duncan looked away in embarrassment.

"I'm not sure I want the job, sir. When I worked in upper management I was a monster; a man who was more worried about his own well being than those around him. Here...well, here I can be around the people who I need my help the most. Living among them like I do I'm always mindful of the lives they live, and the needs they have. I can minister to them directly and help them wherever and whenever I can. But if I go back to the life I had, I don't think I'll be able to help them like I should or can if I stay here. So if it's alright with you, sir, I'd like to humbly decline your offer."

The owner smiled slightly. He was impressed with Duncan's humility. It was something he felt was severely lacking in so many others.

"If it'll make you feel any better, I agree with you. It's why I've located all my factories here in the lower end of town. Giving the poor the jobs they need to feed and cloth their families has been part of my business mantra since the day I took over this place. It's why I pay you guys so well. I want to help those in need, because I too was once in need myself. Tell ya what, I'll make you a deal. You come work for me at corporate, and I'll see what I can do to make sure your ministry here among the poor isn't interrupted. In fact I may even help it out a bit. That way you can have the best of both worlds. So, what'cha say? You interested?"

Duncan smiled.

"Yes, sir. I think I would be."

The End