

How Jerry Falwell Jr. made me wrestle with my own sin

When I read Falwell's comments devaluing people who are poor, I thought of my encounters with Ted.

By [David Kamphuis](#)

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“Pastor Dave, there is someone walking around the parking lot looking a little haggard and talking to himself.” People and places that seem normal to me often put others on edge. In this case I was certain I knew what the person was talking about, but I peeked my head out the window anyway just to look. “Oh, I said, that’s just Ted. He helps out.”

“Ha ha, just Ted, all right,” responded the person with just a little hint of suspicion.

Ted is probably the person I encounter most in ministry at my congregation. In all honesty I can forgive, or at least understand, a person's initial suspicion around Ted. He is, shall we say, unkempt. Wild hair and a beard that is only shaved quarterly produces a kind of mountain man look. Ted had an accident early in childhood that left him with struggles in his mind and a difficulty vocalizing. Finally, Ted enjoys alcohol and will regale you with many a story surrounding the substance.

He is, well, loud. You always know when Ted is near. Sometimes the shouting is rather profane, sometimes it is just so that Ted knows he is heard.

On Fridays, Ted will ask me, "What time do you want me here for Sunday, Preach?" Preach has become my favorite title.

Two moments account for my most regular interactions with Ted. The first is when he comes on Sunday morning. Ted walks into church most Sunday mornings at 9:30. By 9:30 I'm halfway through my Sunday school lesson. Ted will walk up to me in the middle of the lesson and hand me a handful of loose change he has collected throughout the week. "Here," he will say, "that's for offering."

After church he walks up to me and says, "I'm ready for mine, preach." What he means is that he is ready for communion. During Sunday worship Ted is busy helping our custodian. However, if Ted ever started to fill out communion cards it would reveal that he is probably my most regularly communing member.

I tell this story because Jerry Falwell Jr. said something that I disagree with. That is nothing particularly earth-shattering. Other than the statement "Jesus is Lord" there is very little Falwell and I agree on. However this statement was different. In the middle of a [Washington Post interview](#) Falwell said this:

Why have Americans been able to do more to help people in need around the world than any other country in history? It's because of free enterprise, freedom, ingenuity, entrepreneurism, and wealth. A poor person never gave anyone a job. A poor person never gave anybody charity, not of any real volume. It's just common sense to me.

Predictably, Christians from my end of the spectrum have been finding all sorts of perfectly valid scriptural reasons to find this statement absurd. I will not recount this all to you. You, dear reader, can go to Twitter or read our Lord's words on your own.

Neither will be hard to find.

Instead, I tell this story because in a strange way I want to thank Falwell, because he has given me an opportunity to wrestle with my own sin at the beginning of a new year. I have to admit that I often grow frustrated with Ted. I do not want to be interrupted in the middle of a Sunday school lesson, and I frequently say “not right now” as Ted tries to hand over his offering. And right after worship it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that there a hundred better things to do than tending to communion for Ted.

Yet those frustrations come from the same place as Falwell’s comments. The kind of thinking that reduces people to volume of giving and their contributions to society on whether they have provided a job. Ted has never given in any “real volume,” as Falwell said. What he has given me is of far more importance than volume could ever measure. He has never really provided a job to anyone, yet Ted is more crucial to my discipleship and everyone else’s than Falwell can imagine.

And I confess that I have failed to acknowledge and appreciate this as much as I should. So I thank Falwell for reminding me that a person’s value is above and beyond volume.

Yesterday I got a call from a police officer: “There’s a Ted here at the Taco Bell. He says you’re his pastor and that he needs a ride home.” This particular Taco Bell was a significant distance away. When I walked in the door, I was greeted with a hug.

Doubtless Falwell would have viewed this incident as contributing very little. Little “volume” given and no jobs created by the incident. And before I read his comments I would have thought the same thing.

The Lord works in mysterious ways. As Psalm 94 says, “blessed is the one you discipline, Lord.”

So thank you, Mr. Falwell, for being so incorrect that it forced me to see my own sin.

Author’s note: this post was written with the permission of Ted, which is not his real name.

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