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Good Deeds

Carol Miles
carolmmiles@hotmail.com

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Good Deeds

Abstract

This is a film review of *Good Deeds* (2012), directed by Tyler Perry.

“There was a man who had two sons....” Luke 15:11-32 (New International Version)

Good Deeds is the twelfth film release by writer, director, producer, actor, Tyler Perry. Set in San Francisco, California, *Good* is the story of two brothers who run a highly successful corporation started by their father, Walter Sr., who is deceased. Wesley Deeds III (Tyler Perry) is the CEO. He is a decent, hard-working man, who has always adhered to the wishes of his parents. His brother, Walter (Brian White) is a quick-tempered, immature, misogynist who drinks too much, sleeps around and performs poorly at work. Walter’s role in the company, as well as the birth order of the brothers, is a matter for speculation. Their interactions reveal obvious tension between the brothers.

A separate conflict arises when Wesley and Walter have an intense encounter with a company janitor, Lindsey (Thandie Newton) who is oblivious to the fact that Wesley is her employer. Thus begins a series of run-ins between Wesley and Lindsey, all of which serve to underscore the gross disparity between the substantial wealth and power he enjoys and the dire poverty under which she, a single mother, struggles to survive. As abstract as his business ventures are for her to understand, he is equally in the dark regarding issues that affect ninety-nine percent of the population, such as the price of a gallon of milk or gas. These encounters also provide an opportunity for the two to spend time together. With each crisis in her life, Wesley comes to the rescue. He has the material resources to ease her circumstances. She has the courage to challenge him to live more authentically. Not surprisingly, they develop feelings for each other.

The love story that grows between this unlikely pair is at the heart of the film. However, there is an interesting subtext. *Good* is essentially a retelling of the parable of the Prodigal Son. What Perry has done is to reverse the roles of the two brothers in a way that challenges the conventional idea of the prodigal, as well as the efficacy of the instructive principles traditionally taught from the story: unconditional love, forgiveness and repentance.

We are told that Walter Sr. raised both sons to run his company. Wesley rose to the challenge. Walter, whose lack of business acumen, wastefulness and excessive indulgence in women and wine, is the obvious choice for prodigal. However, he actually wants to stay home and run the family business. It has always been his dream; and he believes being CEO of the company is the inheritance his father meant for him.

Wesley seems an unlikely candidate for prodigal. However, he surpasses Walter with his own tendency toward extravagance as he is lavish in his generosity. When Lindsey is unable to afford a sitter, he opens a free, night-time child-care center in the building. When she loses her daughter due to homelessness, Wesley gives her unlimited use of a corporate apartment. In the words of his mother, “He has a penchant for projects.”

The film begins and ends in voice-over narration by Wesley, who opens with a synopsis of his life. He is a “fifth generation ivy league graduate,” whose pedigree can be traced back to his “greatest grandfather’s tribe.” Groomed by his father to “run the company” and by his mother “to be a gentleman,” he is successful, accomplished and lives in luxury, which he supposes must

appear to the outside world as “perfect.” Yet for all the privilege that Wesley enjoys, he is unfulfilled.

Wesley, like his counterpart in the parable, resents having spent his life in service to his family. He has dreams of his own. He wants to join his friends, travel abroad and dig wells in remote villages. Lindsey encourages him to follow his dreams even as she cannot afford to follow hers on the salary he pays.

If there is an epiphany for Wesley, it has come at the end of a life long journey. In danger of losing everything their father worked for, he must find a way to save *the company*. Having accomplished this, he hosts a celebration for family and friends. Walter boils over in a jealous rage as he attempts to take credit for closing the deal. He feels as invisible to his mother as the help, who toil unseen by their betters. For all of the accolades that are heaped on Wesley, he too is invisible because his life is a façade. He is under constant pressure to maintain appearances, to “set [his] face right.”

A violent fight erupts between the brothers, leaving them stuck in an elevator. Walter, beaten and crumpled on the floor, points out the irony of their situation comparing their entrapment to Wesley who is “trapped in a career” that he never wanted. He articulates what Wesley cannot bring himself to say, “Get me out of here!” Walter’s cry seems hollow as there are no allusions to his belief in a higher power.

Interestingly enough, the one occasion in *Good* in which God's name is invoked, occurs after Wesley forces Walter into the elevator in an effort to end an initial confrontation with Lindsey. "God!" Walter bellows, still enraged by her insolence and his frustration at not being allowed to put her in her place. "God?" Wesley exclaims, completely flabbergasted and exasperated by his brother's intense rage. It is neither prayer nor plea, but a terse vent: the aggregate sum of feelings they cannot otherwise put into words.

Wesley eventually summons the courage to break free and take charge of his own life. In a closing voice-over, he ponders the uncertainty of the future. "I don't know what's out there, or what's waiting for me; but I know whatever it is, I'm going to find it." He is willing to lose himself in order to find himself. Whether out of resignation or acceptance, his mother offers her blessing as he departs. Walter, unlike his counterpart in the parable, is not restored to a place of honor but is demoted, as a trusted advisor is elevated to replace him as CEO.

Wesley credits Lindsey for helping to change him; but his insight seems limited. Their relationship begins out of her economic struggles. His transformation would have been more impressive had he raised all custodial staff salaries to a livable wage before his departure.

Good Deeds largely centers around characters who are well-educated, professional African-Americans. The majority of Perry's previous films contain overt Christian themes and imagery. The other exceptions being *Why Did I Get Married?* and the sequel, *Why Did I Get Married Too?* Like *Good*, those films also center around well-educated, professional African-Americans. While they deal with themes that are common across socio-economic boundaries – troubled

relationships, job stress, addiction and infidelity – upward mobility becomes the partition between those who have a need for religion and those who do not. The affluent, in Perry's films, are primarily secular and autonomous.

The film is a noble, if somewhat formulaic, attempt in dealing with the complexities of privilege, responsibility and personal happiness. I recommend its viewing during this Lenten season.