

SERMON TRANSCRIPT



Ormskirk Christian Fellowship  
Sunday 17 March 2013

# The Grace of God

This is the story of a father who compassionately loves his two sons. Unfortunately, his sons don't love him. Both sons are rebels; they dishonour him and they do this publicly. This is the story of a loving, gracious, merciful, forgiving father, and the way his sons respond to him. This is a story about two kinds of sinners. One who is outwardly, manifestly wicked, immoral, irreligious and rebellious; the other who is inwardly immoral and rebellious, but outwardly toes the line. At the end of the story the one who disobeys and flagrantly dishonours his father is reconciled, and the one who appears to honour and obey his father ends up estranged.

The sons are alike in many ways. Each resents his father and has no love for him. Each wants his share of the father's wealth and feels entitled to it. One asks for it outright, the other waits to receive it, but each wants his share of the estate. Each wants to do with his share whatever he will with whomever he pleases. Each of them dishonour, insult and try to live separately to the father; the youngest son in a far off country, the eldest son at home but among his own group of friends. The father loves them both and makes a shameful public demonstration of that love. Each is given the opportunity to receive forgiveness and reconciliation, to repent, and to enter into the richness of a genuine relationship with their father, enjoying full access to all of his wealth. This is a story about the choices that they make.

The father in this story represents God, the loving, lifegiving redeemer of sinners, the Saviour, who forgives those who repent and believe. The sons represent sinners, void of a relationship with God. In each case, we see God giving them freedom to sin in whichever way they want. It's the same choice that all sinners have. It's not a case of choosing whether to sin or not to sin; it's a choice about which category of sin to engage in. There are some who choose to sin flagrantly and blatantly and immorally and irreligiously, without any regard for public courtesy and the feelings of others; they don't care what people think. There are others who choose to conform to certain ethical and moral standards, and to gain their position in society by being perceived as good people. But those are the only two choices available to a sinner; everything else simply falls in between. Don't ever imagine that sinners have any more freedom of choice than that, because they don't.

The amazing truth however, is that God loves both types of sinners; religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, outward or inward. He loves them both. He offers them grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship and eternal blessing, whether they are extremely wicked or extremely moral, and that's the point this story was intended to illustrate. One of the sons doesn't care about anything except satisfying his lust to the maximum, and he's as bad as you can get. The other wants to parade and wallow in his own self-righteousness, which is why he thinks that everything his father does is a violation of what seems just, right and proper, and is therefore shameful. The point of this story is that God loves sinners at both these extremes, and of course, every sinner who falls somewhere in between.

It's a very well known story, especially the part about the youngest son returning to his father when he is destitute. He repents for his sins, trusts in his father's goodness, mercy, kindness, compassion and love, and receives forgiveness. He's reconciled to his father and experiences lavish blessing. It's a picture of every sinner who repents and receives salvation. It's an example of the kind of people that Jesus often associated with; the tax gatherers, sinners and public outcasts. They were the ones who kept coming to him, despite Jesus being condemned by the Pharisees and scribes for welcoming, befriending and eating with them. The youngest son is the one that most people think about when they read this story, but it's the eldest son I want us to think about today.

In verse 25 we meet him. He's been out in the field working, and it's clear from the outset that his father doesn't tell him anything. He doesn't send a messenger to say, 'Your younger brother's back, we're going to have a party; stop work, come home, greet him, rejoice with me and let's get the celebration started.' The eldest son would have been the party planner of the family. In Jewish culture, family celebrations are always arranged by the firstborn son. It was his responsibility, but nobody bothered to tell him. Why? There was absolutely no relationship.

The father knew he had no interest in his brother; he'd already proved that right at the start of the story when he didn't try to prevent him from leaving in the first place. He had no interest in his father either; he'd proved that by not intervening to defend his father's honour when the younger brother behaved so disrespectfully. Oh, he was very quick to accept his share of the inheritance, but he had no family relationship whatsoever. Being out in the field is perhaps a metaphor for where he was in life generally. The youngest son went to a far off country, the eldest son was out in a field, but the symbolism here is that they were both a long way from the father. Both of them came home that day, but to very different receptions.

So, he's been out in the field, the day ends, and now he approaches the house. It must have been a big estate, if you can be in a field so far away that you don't realise there's a huge celebration going on, with dozens of people already there. He comes back, and hears music and dancing. If you were here a couple of years ago, on the last occasion that I spoke on this passage, you'll perhaps remember me explaining that everything up until this point has been shameful; the behaviour of the younger son, the response of his father, his repentance, his homecoming, his reconciliation and now a celebration ... it's completely at odds with everything the Pharisees would believe to be right and proper. They've been listening intently to the story and no doubt making their own moral judgments along the way. Jesus was a master at reeling in his audience like this. It's a very simple story, but there's some strong ethical content too. The Pharisees would have been in their element. They were experts on honour and shame; they'd have been surprised, shocked, no doubt outraged by the conduct of everybody involved so far, but they're finally about to meet a character that they **will** like ... the eldest son.

The Pharisees understood nothing about divine grace, they resented it; they didn't understand the loving heart of God. They didn't understand mercy, tenderness, compassion, forgiveness or God's desire to reconcile with sinners. They knew nothing of that; that's why they couldn't understand Jesus spending so much time with sinners. But now, here comes a character in the story who **is** going to make sense to them; someone who knows exactly what honour is. He approaches the house and hears music, dancing, clapping, singing, voices and instruments; a party obviously in full swing, a huge celebration. He discovers that the fattened calf has already been killed. At this point he's stunned, shocked, surprised, confused, but most of all suspicious, because legalists are always suspicious, particularly of joyful people.

To put things into context, a party this big could never have been planned in a day, it would have taken weeks of preparation, which makes it all the more incredible that he didn't have a clue. He is, after all, now the owner of the land, because his father has already divided up the estate. He's the one who's going to be footing the bill for all this, because everything for the party is coming from his resources! The fattened calf and all the rest of the things belong to him, but he hasn't even been consulted ... the biggest event the village has ever known, the largest event the family has ever celebrated, and he doesn't know a thing about it! It's outrageous really, another shameful act on the part of the father, who continues to behave appallingly as far as the Pharisees are concerned. This is an insult of the worse possible kind.

When he discovers that the return of his younger brother is the reason for the party, let alone that everything is being provided at his expense, it's more than he can bear. The younger son has already depleted the family coffers by taking his share, selling it cheaply and squandering the money; now he's back again and depleting even more. The eldest son's worst fear has just been realised; his younger brother has returned, his father has embraced him, and now he's throwing a huge party at **his** expense. He's more than angry, he's furious. The Pharisees are saying, 'Well, that's exactly the right attitude, that's exactly how he should feel. He should be outraged. His father and younger brother have brought shame upon themselves. The rest of the community are now involved in a shameful celebration. Obviously, he's not going to be part of such a shameful event. He can't be a part of it. Of course he can't.'

And that's the issue here, isn't it? The Pharisees just couldn't understand that God would find joy in receiving repentant sinners, prodigals, the immoral, and outcasts. The eldest son didn't care any more about his brother coming back, than he did when his brother left. He was livid, but that's the only emotion he felt. You see, legalists don't believe in grace, unmerited favour, forgiveness and the removal of punishment. They don't understand the idea that somebody else would willingly bear their shame and take their scorn. Legalists believe only in rules.

What we're seeing here is a public display of private hatred. He's undoubtedly done a much better job of hiding it in the past; probably had the community believing that he was very respectful of his father, honouring to his father, maybe even caring towards his father. He stayed at home. He hung around the house. He did whatever his father wanted him to do. Everybody thought that he loved his father, but now, his true colours start to show. He can't enter into this joy because he has no love for God, and no love for the kind of sinners that God welcomes either. This is religious hypocrisy; it's still in the world today, it's everywhere. What Jesus is saying here, is that salvation only comes to the spiritually bankrupt, destitute and impoverished, to those who fall on their faces as beggars, before a God they trust is willing to forgive them. If they repent of their sins, they will receive lavish love and all that comes with it, but legalists don't like hearing that. To them, it's about what you deserve, what you earn, and how good you are.

Well, back to the party, and a message comes to the father that his eldest son is outside and refusing to come in. Jesus is about to show us how God feels about religious hypocrites. What the Pharisees are expecting Jesus to say is that the father was deeply insulted. It **was**, after all, a blatant insult. The actions of the eldest son showed utter disregard for the honour and joy of the father, as well as his younger brother's well being. They proved that he had no love for either of them, and the traditional Middle Eastern response would have been to take hold of the eldest son and give him a public beating. But nothing in this story is ever as you'd expect.

Instead of the father ordering him to be beaten and then taken away to be dealt with later, the insulted, dishonoured father comes outside and begins entreating him. The eldest son shows nothing but condescension; the father shows nothing but mercy and grace. The father leaves the party, comes outside and steps into the night. Everybody is watching this; the word soon gets round about what's going on. Here, in the space of just a few verses, this becomes the fathers' second act of selfless love, this time directed towards the eldest son, in just the same way that he ran to embrace the youngest son a few verses earlier. Now he reaches out to the hypocrite, just as he reached out to the rebel. Wow.

The father pleads with his eldest son; he calls him to come into the kingdom, to come into his house, to come into the celebration. The eldest son says to his father, "Look!" Everybody would have taken a sharp intake of breath at this point. How rude! Even the prodigal son, when addressing him said, "Father." You don't just say, "Look!" There's absolutely no respect here whatsoever. "All these years I've been slaving for you" ... slaving! Really? Well, there's a no-fun, no-joy kind of attitude if ever there was one! It shows us the heart of this son; that he approaches life with a horrible 'grit your teeth and grind your way through years of slogging things out until your father finally snuffs it, then you can get what you want' kind of attitude. He's no different to the younger son; they both want exactly the same thing - he just has a different way of going about it. He doesn't have the courage of his younger brother though. He doesn't have, you might say, the same brass neck. He decides the safest plan is to hang around and wait until his father dies, then get what's due to him. In the meantime he thinks of his life as nothing more than slavery ... a bitter, resentful, begrudged allegiance.

If you want a self-portrait of a hypocrite, it's right here: "I never disobeyed your orders." Who does that sound like? It sounds like the rich young ruler, doesn't it? It sounds exactly like the rich young ruler in Luke 18 where Jesus says to him, "You know the commandments," and he replies, "All these I have kept since I was a boy." Here's the proud hypocrite. Here's the guy who thinks that because he has **done** good, he **is** good, but he's buried the **real** truth of who he is so far down, that even he can't see it any more!

'I'm perfect' he's saying, which is to suggest to his father, 'And look, you're not. I understand righteousness and justice and honour; I know how you're supposed to behave, and you're not doing it. That youngest son of yours ... you've just taken him back ... **and** you ran. You've heaped shame upon yourself. You've protected him, forgiven him, embraced him, kissed him, given him full sonship, honour, authority, responsibility and now a massive celebration ... for what? He's an absolutely shameful, disgraceful, unworthy sinner!

The eldest son has no love for his father, and no interest in his father's love for the younger brother either. He has no desire to share in his father's joy. He has no joy in anything really.

He thinks he's perfect and needs no repentance! Shall I tell you something? Nobody gets into the Kingdom of God without repentance. Nobody. His heart is wretched. His heart is wicked. His heart is alienated. His heart is selfish and he's blind to spiritual reality. Again, we see a picture here of the Pharisees and the scribes; religious sinners in the house of God, making a public display of affection, wearing their garb, attending religious activities, behaving perfectly morally on the public front, outwardly good, outwardly obeying the law, keeping all the rules, but having no real relationship with God. They had no concern for the honour of God. No joy whatsoever. No understanding of grace.

But the eldest son hasn't finished yet. He's going to dig his claws deeper. "I never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." What's all that about? 'I've been working my socks off' he's saying, 'and I don't even get a goat. He's done nothing for you and he gets the fattened calf. It's not fair, it's not equitable, it's not just, it's not righteous.' You know what he's really saying? 'I don't need to ask you for forgiveness, I haven't done anything wrong. But I'll tell you something; **you** need to ask **me** for forgiveness for what **you've** done.' Oh, the Pharisees would love that. 'Yes,' they'd say, 'that's right, that's absolutely the right attitude to take. This is outrageous behaviour by the father, and completely unacceptable.'

The eldest son has made a mistake here though; he says, "You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." **My** friends, notice. Here he is, accusing his father of favouritism and being unjust. But he's also admitting that when **he** has a party, it doesn't include his brother, and it's not going to include his father either. He lives in a different world. He has a completely different group of friends. Yes, he still lives at home, but he has no relationship with the family. All his friends are outside the family. He parties with those who think the way that he thinks. He parties with those who have no connection to his father. He doesn't understand his father's love, compassion, kindness, mercy, forgiveness and joy. He has no fellowship with his father. He's just angry, resentful, jealous, envious, impenitent, and greedy. He thinks he's worked as a slave for far too long and what does he have to show for it? Nothing. So, when he does eventually get what he wants, he's not going to celebrate with the family ... oh no ... he's going to party with his friends.

Verse 30 continues with a further assault on his father's character, integrity and virtue. "But when this son of yours," he can't even bring himself to say the word brother here, there's so much disdain in his voice ... "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" Wow, you can almost cut his contempt with a knife.

Look at the contrast here. Now, inside the house we've got a celebration going on with music and dancing; the youngest son and a feast, a time of great joy. Outside the house, we've got this horrific assault going on; the eldest brother attacking the virtue, integrity, and character of his father. Everything he's been holding back all these years suddenly erupts, fake respect and honour is gone; the facade comes off and his cover is blown. While everyone inside the house honours the father, he's outside the house pouring contempt on him. That's the picture Jesus wants to paint here; inside, a party representing multitudes of sinners gathered around the throne of God, honouring him for their salvation ... and outside the Pharisees, too proud and indignant to admit they've ever got anything wrong, ultimately left out in the dark.

In verse 31, the father says to him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." What a tender response. Even that would seem shameful in the eyes of the people listening to the story. By this stage they'd be thinking 'Wait a minute, wait a minute, someone needs to give him a slap! I mean, enough is enough, this grace and mercy business is getting out of hand here.' In the NIV the father's words are translated "My son" but read this in the original text, and eight times Jesus says "My boy". There are undertones here of a grieving, painful, compassionate and agonising father's heart, filled with love and mercy.

The father tells his eldest son that everything has always been available to him; it's all here he says, "Everything I have is yours." This is a picture of the magnanimity of God, the sheer endlessness of his grace and resources, for all who come to him. It will never be yours with

your attitude he's saying. It will never be yours by works. You'll never be able to earn it. But it **is** here, and it's always **been** here, if you ever want to establish a relationship with me.

Verse 32, "We had to celebrate and be glad." We had to. There was no other option. "This brother of yours was dead and he's alive again; he was lost and is found." We had to. Why? Because it causes joy to God. This is heaven's joy. It can't be restrained. It can't be delayed. It can't be postponed. It can't be subdued. It can't be mitigated. It can't be lessened. Divine joy is released when just one sinner repents and is reconciled to God. Heaven's joy is released not only for a prodigal, not just for someone who's been immoral and irreligious and blatantly sinful, but also for secret sinners, the religious, the self-righteous, the hypocrites, the ones for whom lawlessness is all on the inside. You too can come to the party if you like, his father is telling him. If you come home, you too can take possession of everything I have, everything that's always been there for you.

The younger son was overwhelmed by his father's grace. He immediately confessed his sin, confessed his unworthiness and received instant forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship and all of the rights and privileges the father had at his disposal. He entered into the celebration of the father's joy; eternal salvation and that will continue in heaven forever. The eldest son, despite being offered the same tenderness, the same kindness, the same mercy and the same grace, reacted with bitter resentment, attacking the virtue and integrity of his father. The story ends with the father making a final appeal. My son, it's all here. "Everything I have is yours." We had to celebrate, and (implied) we will celebrate for you as well, if only you will come.

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Father, this story isn't remote, it's very close to home. It's a story of every irreligious sinner, every youngest son who has run as far from God as he can; every eldest son who's attempted to hide his sin. Thank you that you're still in the business of rescuing and welcoming sinners, prodigals and hypocrites, because that's where you find joy; that's when heaven rejoices.

We want to have your heart; we want to share that heart and abandon our own lives as Jesus did, to seek and to save that which is lost. Thank you for your kindness and mercy towards all who know that they're sinners and outcasts. Thank you that everything you have can be ours, if only we will come. Thank you for your amazing grace.

We know there are some who have not yet come to you, not yet turned to the one they have rebelled against, not yet sought your grace and mercy with a penitent heart. Holy Spirit, we pray that you'll draw them too. May they come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and find you running to them also, smothering them in loving grace, and welcoming them into your kingdom, your house, and that party in heaven.

We ask all these things for the glory of your name. Amen.