

GRACE 3: GOD'S GRACIOUS LOVE

This is the third article in a series on grace. We'll start out by reviewing what we considered in the previous two articles:

PART 1: THE OLD WAY OF THE WRITTEN CODE

We started out well enough when we came to faith and met Jesus. We were full of love, joy and passion. But slowly through the law, the 'shoulds', we became aware of our need to change. But the harder we try to do what the law told us, the more we failed. We found that God's standards stir up the sin in us and prove to us our need for a saviour. God's highly counter-intuitive answer to our sinfulness is to set us free from the rules. Romans 7v4-6: So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

We saw that we're completely forgiven. We're free from the rules. Trying hard to keep the rules will not make us holy, it only proves how sinful we are. We're free. And because we're free we're confronted with the question: What to do what we want to do? This is a scary question because it probes our heart.

PART 2: THE NEW WAY OF THE SPIRIT

Whereas the law sought to control us externally through rewards and threats, the Spirit changes us from within by transforming our desires. When we want the Godly thing more than anything else the law is irrelevant. I don't need a law telling me to eat chocolate truffles. I'm already highly motivated in that department. We said that the holy person is the person whose thoughts are shaped by God's thoughts, whose desires are shaped by God's desires, whose character is modelled on God's character, whose actions express God's intentions. A holy person is not dull and repressed, a holy person is a passionate person. The holy person is passionate for the things of God and does not sell out cheaply to the world.

Psalm 42 & 84: As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls... How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

To help us become holy, God transforms our desires so what we want is what he wants. We saw several ways he does this: Revelation, love, a new heart, renewing our mind and retraining our body. Grace sets us free from the rules, but it doesn't abandon us to sin. It teaches us to rule over ourselves so that our heart, our mind and our body are working together under God as he intended. Then we're free to find the truly satisfying life for which we were created.

Grace and Love

We've seen how God has set us free from sin and the law. God is transforming our desires so we use our freedom well. Where's this heading? In a word: Love. Matthew 22v36-40: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

In the first article we saw Paul's two word summary of the gospel was: "God's Grace" (Acts 20v24). Jesus' one word summary of the Old Testament is "love". The grace of God and the love of God belong together. The word 'grace' comes from the Latin "gratis" meaning free. When we think of God's love being gracious it works 2 ways: God's love is given freely and God's love gives freedom. God's love is given freely. This means that he loves us regardless of our conduct. His love can't be earned, bought or demanded. He loves us because he chooses to, never because he has to. God's love gives freedom. He's not looking to box us in like overprotective mother. God longs to set us free to be all that he has created us to be. Psalm 18v19: [God] brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.

God loves us unconditionally and God loves to set us free. In his love he desires that we should know him deeply and enter into something of who he is, his heart. He longs for us to know his love and the way for that to happen is for his love to be reproduced in us. God wants his love to be formed in our hearts. This enables us to love him, but it also means that his love begins to be reflected in all our other relationships: John 15v12-13: My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

That's the love we will consider in this article. We'll try to come to a place where we can answer with absolute confidence the question: How does God feel about me right now? Let's start with a story:

THE RUNAWAY

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She's visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car - she calls him "Boss" - teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body piercing jewellery she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word for - a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to

whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realises the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologised to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. Oh, God.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noisemakers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorised speech, "Dad, I'm sorry, I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

(From What's so Amazing about Grace by Philip Yancey, Zondervan)

THE HEART OF A FATHER

Every time I read through that story by Philip Yancey there's still a little part of me that wonders if it's still going to work out at the end. Can it be that good? It's not that I believe the words on the page changed while it was sitting on my shelf. I wonder because I know it's really a story about me and God. I wonder if God can really be so kind to me. But this is the grace of God. The first person to tell this story was Jesus. And he didn't tell it to the audience you might expect. Luke 15:1-2: Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them..."

This is Jesus' audience, religious people who are looking down their noses at the 'sinners' that Jesus is hanging out with. How could 'bad' people possibly have any place in the purposes of God? The Pharisees were the ones

who'd tried hard. They kept the law. They were the 'good' people. If Jesus really was from God, he'd be hanging out with them. Luke 15:11-32. Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

WHAT DOES GRACE LOOK LIKE? THE YOUNGER SON:

Let's dig in to this amazing little story and see what we learn about God's gracious love: v11-12. Jesus continued: There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

There are at least two shocking things in these verses. The first is that the son asks for his share of the estate. He's asking for what he would get in his father's will. The problem is that his father is not dead! The son's effectively saying to his father "I don't care about you at all. In fact, I wish you were dead. All I'm interested in is the cash which will be coming to me anyway. Can we save some time and you just give it to me now?!"

It's this attitude towards our Heavenly father that the Bible calls sin. We help ourselves to all that God gives us (his creation), whilst pushing him away and completely ignoring him. We want rid of him so we can get our hands on his stuff and go and blow it all on our pleasures. And the Bible says unequivocally that we're all guilty of treating God in this way. Why did the son treat his father this way? It's pretty clear from what happens next. He was seduced by the distant country. He saw the bright lights, the music, the women and the parties and his heart was drawn in.

The second shocking thing is that the father gives him what he asks for. Surely the father knew what would happen next. Rather than refusing his request and disciplining him, the father treats his son with great dignity and respect by giving him his freedom. To me, this is more amazing than when the son comes home. When the son comes home it costs the father dearly to take him back, but here it costs the father dearly to let him go. Here the son is getting what he wants but breaking the father's heart. The son treats the father with utter contempt. The father pays very dearly to give his son freedom. And this is exactly what our heavenly father does for us. He doesn't demand that we do what he says, but he sets us free even though it breaks his heart and leads

inevitably to the cross. God's love gives freedom: he sets us free. God's love gives freely: everything we have is an undeserved gift of his love.

v14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

So the son discovers that the distant country is not what it at first appears to be. The wild life isn't sustainable. This is the nature of sin. It offers us hope, intimacy, excitement, passion and joy but in reality it never delivers. There is short term pleasure and novelty but these are both addictive and their ability to satisfy wears off over time. The deeper needs grow, the pleasure diminishes and the sin enslaves us. We're left starving. We find ourselves desperately clinging to our idol which slowly destroys us, be it lust, alcohol, drugs, work, food, image, popularity, security, family, romance or whatever.

The younger son discovered that though he loved the distant country, the distant country did not love him. To feed pigs, gentile pigs at that, is particularly bad news to Jews for whom pigs and gentiles were unclean. He'd hit rock bottom. And his lowest point, there's a flash of realisation and honesty: "I got it wrong, this is killing me." The mirage of the good life and the clouds of self deception lift. And in that moment of insight, he sees that his father is a good man.

From this realisation comes a plan. He'd go home, appeal to his father's pity, become a servant and see if his father would let him work off a bit of his debt. The story doesn't fully expose the son's motives, but it's worth remembering that he goes home not out of remorse for what he's done but because he's hungry. This is an important point for our lives. If we wait to do the right thing until our motives are perfect and pure we'd never do the right thing. Being overly introspective will only tie us up in an endless and irresolvable tangle of guilt and confusion. We're to get on with doing what we know to be right and God will sort out our motives as we go.

The son realises he's blown it all. His motives we're not perfect, but at least he was willing to abandon the pride that would refuse to admit defeat. He abandons the distant country and sets off home. The father really has set his son free. He doesn't come to the distant country to march his son home. This was no freedom on a long rope. The father had let the son go. His son could have died in the distant country. This is the fearful wonder of the freedom that God gives us. He doesn't come and march us home, he allows us to go and never come back if we choose.

v20b But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Again this paragraph is loaded with insight into the love of God. Firstly, the father saw his son coming from a long way off. Why? The father was looking out for him. Who knows how long the son had been away for, but the father's love had never given up hope. The father didn't wait for his son to get home but rushes out to meet him as soon as he turned back. Again, this is a picture of God's love for us. The father doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up and sort ourselves out. The moment we leave the distant country he runs to us and embraces us where we are. The only requirement to receive his love is to resolve to leave the distant country. God's love gives freely.

In this culture it was possible that the villagers may have tried to stone the son for the shame he'd caused his father. By running out to him the father was literally protecting his son showing that mercy and love were more important than justice. The fact that the father runs is also huge in the culture at this time. Young men and children ran. Older men never ran, it was seen as undignified and unbecoming. But by running to his son the father was showing that he held his love and affection for his son to be much more important than his reputation



before others.



The father runs to his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him. The disgraced son would have been regarded by Jewish ceremonial law as unclean because of his contact with the pigs. Anything that the son touched would also have become ritually unclean. The father is showing that his love for his son takes precedence over fastidious adherence to religious practices. The father's kiss represents restoration to intimacy and peace in their relationship.

This must have stuck in the ears of the very 'religious' people who provoked Jesus to tell the story in the first place. Unlike the father, they'd uncoupled justice and love. They put their reputation before their less 'spiritual' brothers and become obsessed with religious practice rather than God's heart. The father that Jesus presented did not fit into their theological boxes. I find it extraordinary to think that this story is a picture of us and God. That God would run to us, throw his arms around us and kiss us.

So the son starts his rehearsed apology. True, he has sinned against heaven and against his father. True, he is no longer worthy to be called his son. This he needs to acknowledge, not for the father's benefit, but for his own, to reconnect him with the reality of his situation. Only when he's real with his father and himself can the father's love engage his experience. However, the father interrupts his apology. He does not allow his son to offer himself as a hired hand. He can only return as a son. This is really important to see. God will not have us back as a butler, only as a son or daughter. He's not looking for our service, he's looking for our heart. If we think God needs our service to help him out as his workload is rather heavy, we need to remember that he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (Acts 17v25). What can we really do for God that he could not better do for himself?

"Quick", says the father. He leaves no time for the son to sit in the dog house feeling unsure. The robe, the ring and the sandals in this culture represent full restoration to the family as a son. They also clean up the mess the son would have been in after a long journey as a destitute. God does not leave us as a mess, he covers our sin, our spiritual nakedness and our shame. He restores our dignity and our confidence.

Then the father throws a party, precisely what the son left home for in the first place. I can't help thinking of Newcastle city centre on a Saturday night when I think about this. The drunken debauchery is a fake party, a celebration without a reason to celebrate, an attempt to simulate joy and passion and intimacy and wonder but without meaning. The only way to escape the emptiness is to hide in a haze of alcohol, drugs, violence and sensuality. By contrast, the love of the father and the salvation of the son is a real reason for a meaningful, satisfying, joyful celebration. The father describes his son as lost but now found, as dead but now being alive again. Obviously the son was not physically lost. He knew the way home. Neither was he physically dead. The father is speaking from his perspective. When his son was away he was lost and dead to the father.

From the first half of this story we see that the father's love gives freely. He gives all he has for his son. We also see that the father gives freedom. He lets his son go. His son comes back as a son, not as a servant. But this, of course, is not any old father. The father is illustrating God's love for us. There's an obvious question both for the lost son and for us as we think about our long-suffering and loving heavenly father: We see the father's response to his son: joy, forgiveness, love, affection, extravagance, richest blessing. What we don't see is any sign of the father's hurt, resentment, anger, sternness, rebuke, sense of betrayal, bitterness, disapproval. Didn't the father feel any of these things? If he cared then he must have felt these things very deeply. Was he naive? No, like the elder son, he knew what happened. So what happened to all the father's pain? The answer is that his father had dealt with his pain long before the son got home.

As with the parable, so it is with us and God. This is crucial for us to get to grips with. We must see that God has dealt with his pain, anger and bitterness long before we get home. This is what the cross is all about. As 2 Corinthians 5v21 says: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As Jesus dies on the cross he takes upon himself all of my sin. He takes upon himself all of God's pain, anger, bitterness, disappointment and betrayal for all I've done. He takes upon himself the punishment that justice demands for my sin. Everything that would make God poorly disposed to me has been dealt with at the cross.



+ Because of this, God sees me as forgiven, cleansed, new. This is not because I've been good but I've been given forgiven and renewed as a free gift. My reception from God doesn't depend on me but on God. Every time I genuinely turn back to God I receive the reception of the lost son. Every time. We need to ask ourselves some serious questions: Do I know this? Do I believe this? Again, it doesn't depend on what we've done or not done, it depends on what Christ has done. Every time. But the person caught up in the law can never embrace this. +

WHAT DOES GRACE LOOK LIKE? THE ELDER BROTHER:

v25 Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

The older brother was not impressed, and it's not hard to see why. He'd worked hard. He'd been the good boy. He'd done what he was told. And now his scoundrel of a brother crawls home and gets a royal reception. The Pharisees listening to the story, hot with indignation, must have felt that Jesus had just made their point for them. But as we reflect on this we sense some disturbing undercurrents. He's more concerned with justice and what he deserves than about his brother.

How does the father respond to his older son? The first thing that we see is that the father goes out to him. The father does not have favourites, he longs for both his sons to share in his heart. He doesn't order him back in but pleads with him. This is extraordinary. It is normally sons that plead with fathers, not the other way around. But just as with his younger son, the father is not prepared to sacrifice his son's freedom in order to get what he wants. To plead is to lay down our right to demand. The father respects and honours his elder son's freedom. God's love gives freedom.

v29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

The elder son spells his anger. "All these years I've been slaving for you..." It's not fair. He didn't work and got the stuff, I worked like crazy and got nothing. And in his anger and bitterness, his heart is exposed. He describes himself as his father's slave. His bitterness has completely blinded him to the fact that masters don't plead with slaves. Unlike him, slaves do not have freedom.

The truth becomes painfully clear. The elder son has no interest in his father's heart. He's just in it for the stuff as well. The main difference between the older and younger son was that the younger son had the nerve to come right out and ask for what he wanted. The older son wanted to earn it, but he had no more care for his father than his brother. All he had was cold, calculating pride and seething bitterness when he didn't get his way.

"This son of yours" is his caustic description of his brother. Effectively, he's saying to his father, "if this is the way it's going to be, it's him or me. If you line up with him then you're nothing to do with me". The religious legalists listening to the story can hardly have missed the point. This was them, the older brother exposed their attitude towards God.

"This son of yours" seethes the elder brother contemptuously. The father responds with pure grace "My son", he begins. He goes on to set out what's always been true "everything I have is yours". However, the son was so focussed on getting "the stuff" and so locked into his pride that he was blind to the generosity and love of his father. To the father, "the stuff" was unimportant. What he sought was for his sons to share his heart.

This is what legalism does to us. Our desire to prove how good and righteous and deserving we are blinds us both to reality and to love. It pushes us into denial, separates us from others and slowly kills us. If we sell ourselves into slavery for some desired "treasure" we invariably end up hating our master. Then we discover at the end that the treasure could never be all we had hoped it would be. We seethe in our self-constructed cage. +

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If you simply read the story as a story, you see a problem. Jesus doesn't tell us how the story ends. The older brother has been left hanging. How will the story end? What happens to the older brother? Remember Jesus' audience, Luke 15:1-2: Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."...

Jesus has painted his audience into the story. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law are the older brother. The tax collectors and 'sinners' are the younger brother. Jesus is the son and the brother the Father was looking for. But what of the end of the story? The older brother, the Pharisees, have the next move. How they responded to Jesus would finish the story. If they embrace Jesus, the older brother repents, embraces the father, goes into the party and is reconciled to his brother. If they reject Jesus and his disciples, the older brother remains outside in his furious self-righteousness, appalled at this injustice and blind to his own arrogant contempt for the pleading love of the father.

Jesus is brilliant. The story exposes his hearers hearts. How about our hearts? This is God's love for us. It asks nothing of us but to live within the freedom it gives. It gives us everything regardless of our conduct or attitude. The sinful heart cannot cope with this love. The sinful heart is desperately trying to prove how righteous it is in order to feed its pride. This kind of love is way beyond its grasp and it hates being shown up. We cannot drink deeply from the gracious love of God until we can own up to our own sinfulness. We cannot receive grace until we drop our demand that we deserve it.

There's one last thing to point out from the story and it's this: At every point in the story the father is willing to give all he has to both of his sons, regardless of their attitude towards him. The father never stops giving. But neither of the sons are able to appreciate the depth of the father's love while they're focussed on getting the stuff or on proving how worthy they are.

Do you know this as the father's love for you? Do you believe this is his generosity towards you right now? Do you believe that he longs to run to you, throw his arms around you and kiss you? His arms are wide open to you now, and always will be.

God wants to give you everything he has. God wants to set you free in his creation, directed by his love and goodness. But the most precious of all God's treasures, the thing that he wants to give us above all else, is not his "stuff" but the opportunity to share in his heart. If we're self-aware we can easily recognise the sons in ourselves. Ultimately, God would have us know something of the love of the father.

God's gracious love is given freely. God's gracious love gives freedom. This is the love God has for you. This is the love God wants to fashion in your heart and life. Do you know it? Do you live in it? Who are you in the story? The younger son? The older son? Would you like to know what it's like to be the Father?

Ultimately, the life of grace is the life of love. The way in is to open ourselves up to the freely given love of the father and to enter into his heart. Grace is not simply the means by which we are to become holy. It's the fundamental character of the love of God. It's the basis of our relationship with him. Jesus said the whole of the law can be summed up in two commands, to love God and to love our neighbour.

Grace is the geometry of that love. When Paul describes the gospel as "the gospel of God's grace", this is what he means. If we miss this, we miss God. This is the love with which God embraces us. This is also the love which God wants to fashion in us and to express to the world through us. Do you believe that you are indeed loved like this? Would you like to become the sort of person who loves like this?

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