

Luke 15:1-2 & 11-32
Understanding Grace – Treated as Sons
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

It's easy to think that the failures we have, as individuals and as a society, are demonstrated in the things that we do.

So traditional religious people think our failure is measured by legislation allowing cloning and embryo research. And progressive liberal people think our failure is measured by the vast wealth owned by a tiny number of rich people in the world.

And it's certainly true that our actions can be a reflection of the attitude of our hearts – we'll see that in this story, which is probably one of the two most famous stories ever told in the history of the world, in a few minutes.

It's also a notable feature of the other most famous story ever told – the parable of the good Samaritan where the actions of the characters betray what's going on in their hearts.

But we should beware. Because in this story Jesus wants us to know that there are more ways than we think to be alienated from God. There is, Jesus teaches, an essence to sin. A fundamental thing that is wrong with human beings. But it is expressed not in one, but in two different ways.

Let's look first, then, at sin's first expression...

1 Sin is expressed when we are bad

It takes Jesus just a few sentences to tell one of the saddest tales ever heard. A man, a father, who, as we'll see later, is actually the main character in our story, has two adult sons.

We don't know if trouble had been brewing for a while or if this just came totally out of the blue. But, either way, one day the younger son marches up to his Father and demands his share of the family estate – which would almost certainly have been the land that the family farmed.

The younger son's share would, probably, have been one third of the total value of the estate as the tradition in that culture was that the elder son got a double portion compared to any other children.

It's a shocking request. And, perhaps just as shockingly, the next thing we know is that the Father has done exactly as his son asks, liquidated the

assets and handed over what was presumably a large sum of money to his younger boy.

A few days or weeks later with all that money burning a hole in his pocket the family farm out in rural North Wales is beginning to seem like a pretty cramped and restrictive place. So the younger son packs his best stuff into the back of his new car (thanks dad) and heads off for the bright lights of Liverpool.

The big flat in town costs £1,000 a month. Then there's the car insurance, gym membership, clothes from the MetQuarter, meals at Malmaison and the Carriage works, gifts for the string of girlfriends, home entertainment system and an escort girl and a few lines of coke for Saturday night. And then he gets started on trips to Leo's casino.

And it's not long before all the money is gone just as the credit crunch hits. The rent on the flat goes up, the car gets sold for half the new price, the girlfriends don't want to know and the younger son is living in a hostel and his weekly giro won't even stretch to buying fruit and veg.

This son has got himself into a mess.

He didn't get into a mess when the money ran out. Not at all. In fact, as it turns out, that was a great blessing to him because it was only crawling around with the pigs, an unclean animal in his culture, that brought him, as v17 tells us, to his senses at all. It all went wrong before that.

And he didn't get into a mess when he was, as the older brother suggests later on, messing about with call girls or drinking or gambling or worshipping his 40" TV. It all went wrong before that.

It went wrong when he decided that he wanted his father's estate more than he wanted his father.

There's no doubt that this story is addressed by Jesus to a particular audience. And that he has some very definite people in mind as he speaks. The father in this story, of course, is God himself. And the younger son? Well he represents all those tax collectors, v1, and sinners who were gathering round to hear Jesus teaching.

And Jesus wants them to know that they really are sinners. That their behaviour and attitudes to money

and to other people are squandering their inheritance.

I guess there are a lot of us here this morning whose sin is expressed by our badness. By doing those things that we all know are against God and his law.

We squander our inheritance when we commit adultery. When we drink ourselves under the table. When we give everything to our career. Or even when we value that gingerbread latte more than we value the God who gave it to us. Are you not guilty of those things? Some of them, all of them or many more besides?

Have you not wanted your father's estate more than you have wanted your father? I know that I have.

Not just in some far off time before I became a Christian – though I certainly was like that then. But this year. This week. This morning. My sin is shown when I am bad.

Sin is expressed when we are bad.

2 Sin is expressed when we are good

We don't hear anything about the older brother, apart from his existence in v12, until right at the end of Jesus story.

And when we do meet him he is out in the field – presumably working on the crops or the flocks, grafting away to ensure a good economic return for the family.

That's the older son all over to be honest. At least in his own evaluation. Look at how he describes his life in v29 – he's a slave. Working away for his father, year after year. He hasn't been out and wasted the family money on flash cars and flash girls. He hasn't run away from home and abandoned the other members of the family as if they were not worth bothering with. He has been there all the time. He has stayed. He has worked. He has obeyed.

But, and of course this is patently obvious as we read the text, he is just as lost as the younger son was in his pig sty.

Because his relationship with the Father is just as damaged and destroyed as that of the son who has physically left the home.

The older son's problems didn't begin when he refused to go in to his brother's party. You know maybe they even began before the younger brother

left home. They began the moment he began to think of himself as a slave.

Did you notice how he is just the same as his younger brother? He thinks about going home and asking to become a hired man – probably an apprentice to one of the skilled men on the farm so that he could begin to pay back his debt to the father.

And that is exactly how the older son thinks too. Except that instead of thinking he needs to work to pay off a debt the older son thinks he is in credit through his work and needs to be paid back by his Father.

Now I know that we have some here this morning who have been lost because of your badness. Whose relationship with God our Father is suffering even today because you have done bad things.

But I suspect that we have more people here this morning who are lost because of what Tim Keller calls "our damnable goodness". Whose relationship with God our Father is being destroyed because we think that we have been slaving away for him and he simply isn't paying us enough back.

Who look at people who come from a life of immorality and wickedness and trust in Jesus and get saved and are JEALOUS. For that, truly, is the problem of the elder brother in this story, is it not?

You can't help but get the impression from the way he speaks about his younger sibling that, if he had realised he could go off with prostitutes and still be welcomed back into the family that is exactly what he would have done.

He doesn't understand the misery and heartache of the field of pigs that his younger brother has endured. He hasn't seen the misery of wickedness. Rather the bright lights of the big city are full of allure for him.

Who is the older son? Well it's clear from Jesus audience who he is. He is the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. He is the religious right. The morally upright person. The respectable, working man or woman who despises the benefit cheats, the scroungers, the layabouts, the criminals and the homeless. He, not to put too fine a point on it, is us.

And he has stayed with the father not because he loves his father more than he lives sin. But because he believes that he will get the father's stuff only if he stays.

And that is why the younger brother and the older brother are exactly the same. Because both of them want the father's stuff and not the father himself.

3 Sin's essence: we want God's blessing not God himself

A widow has a valuable box of gold jewellery. There are two ways to get hold of that box. You can walk into her house and steal it off the table, just take it straight off.

Or you can befriend the widow. You can hang out with her. Clean her windows. Mow her lawn. Bring her meals. Not because you love her – but because you think she will leave you the box in her will if you are the one who looks like you care for her more than anyone else does.

That is exactly what the man's two sons in this story are like.

To the outside observer, the casual neighbour on the next door farm, it might look like the older son is doing a lot better. He appears to be the respectable one. He looks loyal. The kind of son a man might want to have.

But he's not really. He's just the same as his brother – he is after the inheritance. He wants his father's stuff not his father's love.

And it's exactly the same with us. Sometimes we try to find happiness through moral conformity – because we think that God or others will approve of us if we are good and we will earn benefits.

That's the life of the Muslim who believes that by carefully adhering to Islam's 5 pillars they will merit Allah's mercy.

It's the life of the people I meet all the time who tell me that they believe God will look with favour on their obedience to the 10 commandments – even if they don't actually know what the 10 commandments are.

And it's the life that many Christians lead from time to time too isn't it? Where we believe that because we have prayed very hard about something we are entitled to have an answer from God.

That because our good deeds serving Jesus are considerable God ought not to make us face the consequences when we mess up morally.

Others of us, or the same of us at other times, try to find happiness through self-discovery. By throwing off the constraints and just going out and doing what we darn-well please.

But in the end we're all the same. Because neither group loves the Father. In both cases we just want the best out of life and we act in the way we think will achieve that for us. We want God's blessing – not God himself.

And that is the universal story of the human race. The reality of the life of every man and woman on the earth. Some of us try and manipulate God by our good deeds. Some of us stick two fingers up at him through our bad deeds. But neither son loves the Father.

So what do we need? What is the solution to this universal problem of sin with its different expressions?

It's grace. Transforming grace.

4 God's solution to sin: transforming grace

Most of us, I think, reckon that the younger son solves his problem and sorts himself out in v17. And the way Luke tells the story does tell us that this is a significant moment – "he came to his senses."

But I'm not convinced that even at this point the younger son has realised the true extent of the Father's love for him and the astonishing possibilities for a better life that await him.

Let's look at what his plan is. He decides that he will go home and confess his unworthiness to be a son and ask to be made like a hired man – not a slave, perhaps, but certainly not a son.

His intention, it seems, is to seek some way of paying his Father back for all that he has squandered and wasted during his orgy of self-indulgence.

He has come to his senses – in that he has realised that he will be much better off this way. And, just like the sinners that Jesus was addressing, he has seen that there must be something more and better to life than what he has at the moment.

But his thinking is still quite profoundly self-centred. It's still about him and what he's going to do.

And when he actually arrives at the house that's nothing like what actually happens. The Father sees

him coming from, we're told, a long way off. However long this son has been away for – and it must have been at the very least many months, the father has been looking out for him.

And as he enfolds his son in an embrace the boy can't even get out his carefully planned words before his father orders that the best robe – his own robe no doubt – be placed on him and all the symbols of power and authority given him.

His father is not interested in pay back – he wants his son back.

Though it might look like the son who takes the initiative in returning from a far off country – and it's certainly important that he takes responsibility for his own wickedness – in the end it is only the father who can initiate the relationship that restores the boy as a son.

The father goes out to the son.

And that's exactly what happens at the end of the story too.

Sometimes to hear Christians speak you'd think that Jesus had no time for the self-righteous religious people – the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And it's certainly true that he didn't mince his words with them and told it straight.

But he wasn't going to abandon them. Jesus was determined that they would know the possibility of restoration and forgiveness. And so, just as the father left his house to run down the drive to welcome home his younger son... he is also willing to leave the party to go and sit on the step with his older son.

Whether we are lost in our wickedness or in our self-righteousness goodness God in Christ takes the initiative to come to us and plead with us to come in.

God's solution to sin is grace. A loving giving of himself that not only makes reconciliation possible but which ought to move our hearts to desire nothing more than this one who loves us so much.

And that is where Jesus leaves the story. It's a cliffhanger. The father sitting on the step with the older brother. Will he come in? Will he not? Will he accept the Father's grace, and with that admit that he is no different to his disreputable younger sibling? Or will he keep his pride and lose his soul? We're never told. And so the story hangs as an ongoing challenge to us if we are one of those people, as I

know I so often am, who thinks that God ought to love me because I'm better than other people. And, in doing so, love God's stuff more than I desire the Father himself.

But I think it's not just the older brother who we're left to wonder about. The story isn't over yet for the younger brother either. The Father has demonstrated his love for him. He has sacrificed a costly offering – the fattened calf – so that he can be welcomed back into the family. But the question that remains for the younger brother is whether he will be transformed by the grace that he has now been shown. Will he respond to the love and grace demonstrated to him with genuine love for the one who loved him? Or will he, once more, abuse that love and seek the father's stuff not the father himself?

And so the story hangs as an ongoing challenge to us if we are one of those people, as I know I so often am, who thinks that the world is a much more fun filled and exciting place if I ignore God's warnings and laws and seek to exploit his gifts with no reference to the giver. And, in doing so, love God's stuff more than I desire the Father himself.

God's solution to sin is transforming grace – brought about and made possible by a sacrifice far costlier to the Father than a calf.

Transforming grace made available through the self-giving of a son. A perfect son. A son who always loved the father more than he loved anything or anybody else. A son who loved his Father so much that he went to his death to bring many brothers and sisters home to glory.

Transforming grace is available to all of us here today. Whether you're a younger brother lost in your wickedness, an older brother, lost in your self-righteous goodness or, like me, someone who battles both those tendencies in life.

No matter how many times we have messed up we can come to the transforming grace of God. The God who treats us like sons.

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September 2008*

Special note: Tim Keller's sermon on this passage alerted me particularly to the parallels to be drawn between the two sons and was particularly helpful in preparation.