

“A Tale of Two Sons”

Luke 15:11-32

3/14/10

Whether we are just getting to know Christ or have lived with Him all of our lives, we can misunderstand the way God works through Christ in the world—that we live under grace. Our sins are not counted against us, neither can we earn God’s love. We are all equally blessed by God.

“Games You Can’t Lose”

Connect the dot.

Find the elephant.

What page is this?

Can you help Arnie find his way home?

Don’t I wish sometimes that life was that simple. Now, how do I know someone is sitting out there thinking, “But you can’t connect one dot. It’s impossible.” Yes, I know, we can over-think and complicate just about anything.

But the fact is, there are some things that are simple. There is a “game you can’t lose”. There is a reality that’s right in front of us, surrounding us, ready to be noticed. As the Apostle Paul said to the Athenians long ago, *“In Him we live and move and have our being.”*

We are loved beyond measure. Rich beyond any earthly wealth. But either by our own desires or misunderstandings, too often we just don’t get it.

Yes, we have always struggled to understand our Maker’s ways.

[READ Luke 15:11-24] Mike Nisonger

In just about every way imaginable, the younger son disgraced his family and himself. He went about as low as a Jewish man of that day could go, even to stoop to the same level as pigs. Because all this was also a disgrace to God. The son not only disregarded and disrespected his family, but he did the same for God’s Law and way of life. Not a good picture.

Let me pause for a minute and ask you what this parable is called. Someone shout it out.

And yet, Jesus says, “There was a man who had two sons.” Yes, much attention is given to the younger son because he is the one who outwardly rebels. But if you look at this parable, there is almost equal time given to each. Both sons are vital to helping us, the hearers of the story, understand what Jesus wants to make clear. This is a tale of two sons.

[READ Luke 15:25-32] Youth

Now we have the older son, the one who stayed home and remained loyal to his father. We sometimes look at the older son as this noble, steadfast character who was the good and just son. And on the surface, the older son felt that way himself. He did what he was supposed to do, and so he should have been rewarded. But, upon a second look, we can see that the older son wasn’t exactly innocent of sin. He became angry with his father and brother, jealous of his brother, resentful, bitter, self-centered, unforgiving, prideful, and by saying to his father, “This son of yours”, he denies his brother. It turns

out that he really was just as flawed as the younger son when you dig a little deeper into the story.

He was discontent inwardly for many years, while the younger son was discontent outwardly. One son left home for a while, and the other stayed with his father his whole life, yet neither really understood their relationship with their father. They didn't understand what he was all about. And so Jesus tells this parable because He knows that, just like the two sons, we do not always understand what our Father in Heaven is all about.

God's love for us through Jesus Christ is not about punishment, nor is His love about keeping tabs on how good or bad we are doing. Jesus says in John 3:17, *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."*

God's love is about grace, about blessing us with life and His richness without us having to earn it through punishment or good works.

How many times have I heard someone say that they do not feel worthy? I am not good enough. God couldn't love a wretch like me.

Shelley and I were listening to the wonderful old hymn "Amazing Grace" the other night, just sitting, immersed in its beauty. And the words hit me again like for the first time. I think because, as I sat and listened to the words, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me", not only do I connect with that, but remembering again who wrote that.

John Newton was an atheist and a slave trader. But one day he woke up to the grace of God and eventually became a minister.

Wake up to the richness of God.

Connect the dot.

I know, we think we're being duped. It can't be that simple.

Whether we are just getting to know Christ or have lived with Him all of our lives, we can sometimes misunderstand the way God works through Christ in the world—that we live under grace. Our sins are not counted against us, neither can we earn God's love. We are all equally blessed by God.

We simply need to accept God's love.

Frederick Buechner wrote:

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

"But there's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

"Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Frederick Buechner in Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC. Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 4.

No, this does not mean that our good works are not important—they are. This does not mean, as Paul makes clear in Romans 6:1 that we sin so that grace may abound—sin just because we know we're forgiven. No, this is a genuine acceptance from the heart of God's love for you. Because God made the first move.

We hear John 3:16 all the time, but verse 17 is just as profound: God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but save it. The world. We know what the world is like.

I read an article in the news this week about the deadly London Fog.

"[In December 1952] a toxic mix of dense fog and sooty black coal smoke killed thousands of Londoners in four days. It remains the deadliest environmental episode in recorded history."

Here is what happened:

As the smoke coming out of London's chimneys mixed with natural fog, the air turned colder. Londoners heaped more coal on their fires, making more smoke. Soon it was so dark some said they couldn't see their feet. By Sunday, December 7, visibility fell to one foot. Roads were littered with abandoned cars. Midday concerts were cancelled due to total darkness. Archivists at the British Museum found smog lurking in the book stacks. Cattle in the city's Smithfield market were killed and thrown away before they could be slaughtered and sold—their lungs were black.

Funeral director Stan Cribb of T. Cribb and Sons has led thousands of funeral trains through the smoggy streets of London. But he says the 1952 event dwarfs all others he has seen. He remembers the moment he saw the first gray wisps: "You had this swirling, like somebody had set a load of car tires on fire."

London's killer fog is a metaphor of the spiritual world into which Jesus came: a malevolent, sinister, deadly darkness covered the world when the Word "made his dwelling among us."

Scholar D. A. Carson writes:

The "world" in John is a symbol for all that is in rebellion against God, all that is loveless and disobedient, all that is selfish and sinful. When we read therefore in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son," we are not to think that God's love is being praised by reference to the world's bigness...but by reference to its badness. This ugly, sinful, rebellious world, this sewer of infidelity, this glut of endless selfishness, this habitation of cruelty, this lover of violence, this promoter of greed, this maker of idols—this world God loved, and loved so much that he sent his Son. *National Public Radio, "All Things Considered," (12-10-02); Donald A. Carson, The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer*

"But while the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Unconditional love. Grace.

God's love for us is a profoundly simple celebration of life.

That is our heavenly Father, God, our Maker, our Redeemer.

Neither son in Jesus' parable realized the wonderful blessings they had from their father—that all he had was theirs too.

Neither son was really aware of the love that their father had for each of them. One felt like a slave and the other thought he'd have to be a slave to return to his father's house.

It turns out that this is a tale of two sons, who center this entire picture upon their father. We hear the least about the father, but learn the most about him from the lives of his sons.

Off in the distance, the father sees his son returning home. What does the father do? There is no, "Where have you been?, What have you done with all your money? Are you back to stay?, You can only come back unless you...". No, the father is filled with compassion for his son, runs to him, puts his arms around him, and kisses him.

And so then the older son gets upset with all this. What does the father do? He pleads with his son to understand. “Son, you don’t get it do you? You are always with me. You have always been next to me so that I could always express my love to you. And what is more, all that I have has always been yours.”

Both sons had to learn the hard way that gaining their father’s wealth and love was not about anything either of them did or didn’t do. All that was already theirs. Why? Because they were their father’s sons, and he loved them unconditionally. That sounds so profoundly simple as we look into this parable. But Jesus doesn’t tell this parable because everyone already understood all this. He knew that understanding God’s grace can be a difficult thing, as wonderful as it is.

We are God’s children. God is always waiting for us with open arms, ready to wrap us in the robe of His love, put on us the ring of our salvation through Jesus Christ, and fit us with the sandals of His Living Word which empowers us for living. Every time we realize this, whether we are for the first time right now or are again for the 100th time, God celebrates. Because that fatted calf waiting for us represents all the wonderful blessings God has in store for you.

It’s nothing we can earn. It’s nothing we can stray too far from. Because it’s already done for us, and waiting for you to accept.