

The parable we have been looking at starts half-way through chapter fifteen of Luke's gospel following immediately on from two other brief parables celebrating the finding of a lost sheep and a lost coin. And as we have discovered over the past two weeks, this theme of celebration has continued with a great feast being arranged at the return of the son who in the words of the father, "was lost and is found".

So far, we have looked at the parable through the actions and words of two of the three main characters. Firstly, Revd. Jon looked at the parable through the lens of the father and God was clearly seen in the unconditional, even reckless love of the father as he rushes out with open arms to welcome back the wayward younger son.

Last week Jane offered intriguing insights into the younger son's motivations, soul searching and eventual return seeking forgiveness from his father. She showed us this picture alongside the suggestion that it revealed "an image of heaven seen in an embrace". A picture of reckless love of God. A picture of repentance and salvation.

Today, we come to the third character – the elder brother - and things take an unexpected turn. His behaviour towards the return of the younger brother is in marked contrast to that of the father. He becomes angry; his words are dripping with resentment, and he doesn't even acknowledge that he has a brother – he merely uses the phrase "This son of yours".

And what's even worse, he doesn't even acknowledge that he is speaking to his own father – just saying 'listen' as if he was speaking to a servant or slave, displaying a sense of his own superiority by not only comparing favourably his upright, obedient and dutiful behaviour to that of a wastrel of the first order but also being totally disrespectful.

In a culture where respect and deference to elders was all important, such behaviour would have been seen as outrageous. Perhaps not quite the same outrageous confrontation as between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in Star Wars but in Jesus's day a father could have dis-owned his son on the spot for far less.

Instead, the father responds again with amazing tenderness "My son, despite how you've insulted me publicly, I still want you to come to the feast. I'm not willing to disown your brother and I don't want to disown you too. Swallow your pride and come to the feast".

But a proud man, as C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* "is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."

And of course, the elder brother is totally oblivious to the fact that through his behaviour, it is now his turn to disgrace his father. Not only by refusing to attend what is probably the biggest feast and public event his father has ever put on. But also, his non-attendance publicly shows he has no interest in forgiving his brother for his behaviour.

And that really is the crux of the parable because Jesus is redefining sin for his audience; what it means to be lost, and what it means to be saved.

Luke tells us in the chapter's opening verse who Jesus's audience were – not only the tax collectors and sinners who we can identify as the younger brother but also the Pharisees – who we can identify as the elder brother.

The elder brother illustrates the way of moral conformity. The Pharisees of Jesus's day believed that not only were they a people chosen by God, but also the only way to final salvation was through strict obedience to the religious laws.

The elder brother has been fastidiously obedient to his father and therefore by analogy to God and yet it is the tax collectors and sinners like the younger brother who were celebrating at the heavenly feast. This was the complete reversal of everything the Pharisees had been taught.

I doubt the Pharisees understood that both sons are wrong, yet the father cares for them equally and invites both of them back into his love and feast. And of course, at the end of the story the Elder Brother has the opportunity to truly delight his father by going into the feast. Instead, his pride is too great; he remains resentful and refuses. And of course, by doing so, merely hurts the father more.

Many people define sin as breaking a list of moral rules. Here, Jesus redefines sin and shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviours can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person.

This parable tells us that a prerequisite for receiving God's grace is to know you need it. It took time and it took humility, but the younger son came to realise the truth of that.

We never find out if the elder brother comes to understand he is lost just like the younger brother, but the truth of the matter is that the elder brother syndrome is still very evident in today's world....think Racism which smacks of one group feeling superior to another; think cancel culture which stems from an I'm right, your wrong attitude....and think of all the situations and relationships where forgiveness is never on the agenda.

But fortunately, God's grace is amazing and as Jane said last week, the Father is waiting. His arms are open wide. [picture again].

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Let's stand and sing about that Amazing grace.

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 24 Oct 2021