

The Gospel that Shows us Grace

1. Intro

- As we start the year it is worth us considering what we want C@P to look and feel like in 2016
 - Mike showed the video clip last week of Denis Denuto from the Castle telling the HC judge it was all about the vibe
 - Well what 'vibe' do we want to characterise C@P?
- What's going to take for you to rejoice at coming along each week?
- If you are visiting, what are you looking for? What are you expecting?

- You might say
 - Good Bible teaching
 - Welcoming church
 - Good music
 - Great food and coffee
 - Good kids programme
 - Liturgical dances!
- I want to suggest that C@P, any church, needs to be characterised by ongoing heart transformation
 - All those other things are good, and necessary
 - But you can have all those and still have a church that is at best spiritually dull and at worst ... spiritually dead

- If a church is to be alive, growing, joyful, repentant, forgiving, generous ... it needs to be characterised by ongoing heart transformation

- What do I mean by heart transformation?
 - That individuals – believers and unbelievers hearts are being spiritually renewed by the good news of Jesus
 - That is, unbelievers are hearing the grace of the gospel and coming to repentance and faith
 - Believers are likewise hearing the grace of the gospel and being transformed in godliness and Christ-likeness
 - In other words ... the grace of the gospel is at work in their hearts to bring about ongoing spiritual transformation in their life

- You see you can have lots of teaching that focuses on the Bible
 - But unless there's a heart transformation happening ... all you will have is a church that's moralistic and religious, but has little joy

- There will be no spiritual transformation taking place
- Or you can have lots of joy and great music and good welcoming
 - But unless the truth of the gospel is central ... it will result in a church that's liberal and relativistic > it becomes just another social club
 - Again, no spiritual transformation happening
- Religious and moralistic churches tend to stress the holiness, justice, and wrath of God
 - The underlying message implies that we must be moral or God will be angry at us
 - That we must earn our salvation by being good
 - This approach loses its grasp on the love of God
- On the other hand, liberal churches and more relativistic versions of spirituality put all the stress on the love of God
 - They believe that God loves and accepts you no matter how you live
- But we need to understand that the grace of God doesn't just mean 'God loves and accepts you no matter what you believe or how you live.'
- The biblical idea of grace doesn't simply consist of a vague idea of God's unconditional love for everyone
- If we are going to have a full and accurate understanding of God's grace, we need a rich understanding of the **holiness** of God **and** the love of God
 - Both are equally important
- If I think of God as all or mainly holy— then I am inclined to obey God out of fear as I seek to live a morally good life according to his righteous standards and hope to please him
 - Of course obedience driven by fear is oppressive, lacks joy, fails to understand God's love for us so clearly demonstrated in the cross
- If I think of God as all or mainly love—and believe that I am saved because God just forgives and accepts everyone no matter how we live
 - Then I might feel joyful about God, but I will have very little incentive to want to please him, obey him, and live for him
 - God's a god of love he forgives ... it doesn't matter
- If we are going to have our hearts transformed we need to understand the grace of God to us in the gospel ...

- And to understand the grace of God we need to get the balance right between God's holiness and God's love
 - Forget his love ... and we become religious moralists
 - Forget his holiness ... and we become liberal relativists
- Neither is going to produce life transforming change we need if we are going to be people and a church characterised by ongoing heart transformation
- One of the best passages in the Bible to help us grasp this appears in the parable of the lost sons in Luke 15 > p1035

2. Context

- If we're going to understand the story properly we need to understand the context
 - To do that we need to look at v1-2
- See there in v 1-2 Jesus preaching and teaching about the KOH > crowd around him
- Different groups of ppl there listening
- v1 > tax collectors and sinners
 - Tax collectors > despised > like used car salesmen
 - Known for overcharging and pocketing the extra cash
 - But the main reason these guys were so despised ... because they were helping finance the Roman army that was suppressing and ruling over Jews
 - And there's also the so called 'sinners'
 - Ppl of ill repute like prostitutes
- Got tax collectors and sinners there listening to Jesus ... but there's another group of ppl there too
- Pharisees and teachers of the Law
 - Muttering amongst themselves about Jesus saying *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*
 - These guys are at the opposite end of the spectrum – socially, religiously and morally
 - Pharisees & teachers of the Law
 - Super strict > super religious > know the scriptures off by heart > pray all the time
 - These guys are the religious gurus of the day

- So as we take a look at this parable in Luke 15 ... we've got to keep in mind who's listening to this parable and who Jesus is speaking to
 - Tax collectors & sinners
 - Pharisees & TOL

3. The Lost Younger Brother

- In v11 the parable begins with a father and two sons
- And it's the younger son who goes to his dad and demands his father give him his share of his inheritance
- He was basically saying "Dad – I wish you were dead, give me the cash, I'm getting out of this place and go and live it up"

- So the sons sets off with all his stuff and a big wad of cash ready to live the high life
 - He squanders it on reckless living

- **Illustration**
- Like a boy from Broken Hill, asking his dad to sell the part of his property that had been set aside for him ... moving to Sydney and then proceeding to spend all that money on going the races, visiting prostitutes in Kings Cross, abusing drugs, and drinking himself into a stupor

- It's the ultimate slap in the face to his Father – isn't it?
 - He's rejected the relationship he has with his father
 - He's treated his inheritance with contempt
 - He's only interested in himself and gratifying his hedonistic desires

- Eventually his money runs out
 - He becomes some down and out ... he wished he could eat the food he was giving to the pigs

- Jesus goes on in v17 ...
- The son is at a point of desperation ... he finally came to his senses
 - He realises he's lost and needs to return to his father
 - And so he resolves to go home to his father in humility and repentance

- Reminds of a quote by Mark Twain ...
 - *"When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."*

- Son realised he'd stuffed up
 - He realised he didn't deserve to be taken back by his father
 - He realised that he had sinned against his father ...

- **The Father**
- How does the Father react
 - Reject his son?
 - Say "I told you so"?
 - Banish him to the furthest part of the farm to get to work?
- The father's response is so unexpected ...
- v20 we see the father saw him while he was still a long way off
 - The father had been patiently waiting for his son ... looking out for him ... hoping that he would return
 - When he saw him ... he was so filled with compassion for his lost son ... that he **RAN** to meet him and threw his arms around him

- When he gets to him, the son starts saying how he didn't deserve to be treated like a son ... but the father does exactly the opposite
 - He put the best robe on him which would have the fathers robe
 - He put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet
 - These were unmistakable signs of the son being restored back into the family
- In effect the father is saying
 - "I'm not going to make you work to pay off your debts"
 - "You're not going to earn your way back into the family ... I'm simply welcoming you back in"

- And in addition ... the father throws a party to celebrate
- This is no ordinary party ...
 - Not just a couple snags on the BBQ type party
 - He kills the fattened calf ... an animal that would've been set aside for special occasions and worth a fortune
 - This is a massive party to celebrate the return and restoration of a son

- Despite all that the son had done in sinning against the father in the past ... we see the father so filled with love and compassion ... that he forgave his son and welcomed his son back joyously
 - v24 - *'this son of mine was dead ... but now he is alive. He was lost and now he is found.'*

- **Implication**

- Of course Jesus tells the story to show us the amazing grace and love of God (who is represented by the father) ... and how he welcomes back the repentant sinner
 - It shows that even though the son **deserved** to be cut off from the family ... the father showed him grace and love and forgiveness
- For the sinners and the tax collectors sitting there listening to Jesus ... this parable would've given them great hope
 - Because Jesus is speaking about them > they know they're the younger brother in the story
 - They know they'd turned their back on their heavenly father > lived life their way without reference to God
- But for the prostitutes and drunks and thieves and sinners and all those that the religious establishment looked down upon ...
 - Jesus is saying ... when you come back to him ... despite what the Pharisees and TOL might tell you ... your heavenly Father welcomes you home
 - There's no sin too big that your Father in heaven isn't willing to forgive and receive you back into his eternal family
 - And when you do ... God is so overjoyed ... he cracks open the Moet and Crown Lagers and he celebrates your return

- **Application**

- Unless you've grown up in a home where you've known nothing other Jesus as Lord and Saviour ... that's what it's like for all of us
- Because what this parable shows us is God the Father delights to welcome home those who turn back to him
- If you're a Christian here today ... it's because God has acted like this towards you
 - He's come to you in love and grace
 - And despite your sin ... he's welcomed you home and invited you into his heavenly feast
 - Did you deserve it? No!
 - Have you been unconditionally given all the rights and privileges of being a child of God? Absolutely!
- God didn't say to you ...

- "You need to get to work to pay off your debts"
- Because he's already paid off your debt for you at the cross
- There's nothing more to pay!
- And what's more ... the debt is so big you could never pay it off anyway
- If you're here this morning and you're not a believer ...
 - This parable shows you what is on offer
 - That God deeply desires to be reconciled with you and bring you to the feast!
 - And you don't need to get to rock bottom like the younger brother to come to him
 - You can do it today if you too humble yourself before the Father like the younger son

4. The Lost Older Brother

- The parable isn't just a story about a wayward son ... it's a story about two sons
- And the second son we are introduced to more fully in v24-32
 - He's the diligent son
 - He stayed loyal to his father
 - He didn't take off to fulfil he's own desires and wants
 - He stayed on the property, working hard
- He's coming in from his work overseeing the servants that day and he hears music and partying
 - He's thinking ... "what's going on? Is it Christmas? Did I miss the memo?"
 - One of the servants tells him his younger brother is back and dad's throwing him a party
 - He like "What? You can't be serious! Are you kidding me?"
- And he's **furious!**
- He's thinking my brother doesn't deserve a party!!
- What his anger shows is just how alienated he is from his dad
 - he doesn't share in his father's joy ... he refuses to go into the feast
 - he has no love for his brother ... he just calls him "this son of yours"
 - In v29 he speaks to his father it's with contempt and disgust - "Look!" = "Look, you!"

- "I've worked myself to death and earned what I've got, but my brother has done nothing to earn anything and yet you welcome him home and give him all the privileges of being a son again"
- The problem with the elder son is he thinks that by remaining on the farm, working hard and not running off ... that he's the one who deserves to be honoured by his father
- What he doesn't realise is that his inheritance is based on being a SON of the Father ... not because he worked hard and has been a good boy
 - Inheritances aren't earned ... they're given by grace to those who are in relationship with their father
- The sad thing about the older son ... is that despite growing up on the farm ... the reality is ... he's a million miles away from the father
 - He's just as lost as his younger brother once was
- **Implication**
- This would have been a massive smack down for Pharisees and TOL
- Because the elder son in this story represents them
 - Remember back in v1-2 these are the guys who don't like Jesus welcoming and hanging out with sinners
 - But in talking about the elder brother ... Jesus is exposing their hearts
- The Pharisees and TOL thought that being in a right relationship with God was all about ...
 - Be good > obey the Law > be moral > be religious
 - But that's not the basis of having a relationship with God
 - It's only by God's love and grace to us in Christ
- **Application**
- This is such a good parable for us on so many levels
- Because you can hear this parable about the younger son and be like one of the Pharisees and think to yourself
 - This doesn't apply to me
 - I'm not a wayward sinner that Jesus is talking about
 - I haven't gone off the rails
 - I'm a pretty good person
- But in the elder brother ... Jesus is challenging the person who thinks that they're okay with God ...

- but in reality they're just like the elder brother and a million miles away
- Elder brothers come in two forms – you can be a
 - Church-goer and be an elder brother; or
 - Never stepped foot in a church in your life and be an elder brother
- Church-goer elder brothers are like the Pharisees and TOL because they're very religious ... but they have no real relationship with God
 - They focus on doing the right thing and saying the right thing
 - might be a regular church attender, go to growth group, help out around church –
 - but their hearts affection is ultimately for themselves and not for God
- But a person can be an elder brother and not be at all religious
 - Like the elder brother in the parable they think ...
 - I'm ...
 - Conscientious
 - Loyal
 - Reliable
 - Honest
 - Morally upright
 - And because they're not as wayward as younger brothers ...
 - they think God ought to accept me
 - Just like the elder brother thought he was owed the inheritance for being a good son
- Jesus is saying to both the religious and the moralist
 - If that's you ... then you've got elder brother syndrome
 - And you are just as lost from your Father in heaven as wayward sinners like the younger brother
- If you're here this morning and your idea of Christianity is that it's all about rules and religion and morality
 - I hope you see this parable that Jesus tells really challenges that idea
 - That's it not about your moral goodness or religious observance
 - It's about knowing God, purely because of his grace

5. The Love of the Father

- This passage shows us in a most profound way the love and grace of the Father
- And if we were to leave it there ... we would be in danger of walking away and thinking it's pretty cool that God is loving and forgives sinners
- But we'd be in danger of forgetting that not only is God loving, but he is also holy

- As you read the rest of the NT ... you see that love of God to us, that forgiveness that comes to returning younger brothers ... comes at a great cost
 - Forgiveness is not cheap

- For the father in the parable to forgive his sons it cost him financially and emotionally
 - But for God to forgive us ... it cost him so much more ... it cost him his son
 - It took the death of Jesus at the cross to make our forgiveness possible
 - That's how serious our rejection of God is to him

- Because God **holy**, as well as loving ... he cannot sweep sin under the carpet
 - He cannot just forgive and forget
 - Sin needs to be dealt with ... and only Christ's death on the cross was sufficient to make it all possible

- It's vital we remember the holiness of God who must deal with our rebellion at great cost to himself
 - He cannot just ignore it

- And to the extent we can see both ...
 - The holiness of God who is so offended at our rebellion that it takes the death of Jesus on cross to appease his anger; AND
 - The love of God who is willing to forgive rebellious sons and daughters who don't deserve it
 - And not just forgive ... but reinstate them as his children and welcome them into his feast

- THEN ... we will start to grasp the amazing grace of God

- This grace that is made possible through the gospel / good news of Jesus death in our place ... is vital in understanding of what it means to be a Christian and grow as a Christian
- As we've seen in the parable, it is only by the grace of God we can come into relationship with him
 - And it's only by grace we **stay** in relationship with him
 - Religion and moralism won't cut it > that just alienates us from him and leaves us standing outside the feast
- Secondly, and more importantly for today ...
 - To the extent we grasp the depth of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ ... it will be the catalyst for the heart transformation we desire
- Religion and moralism will leave us like older brothers
 - Obedient – sure! ... but there won't be much joy ...
 - And while you might be conforming to religious or social goodness ... there won't be much transforming of the heart going on
- But if we ignore God's holiness and our need for forgiveness ... then we will be rebellious younger brothers who ignore God
 - And while that might make us happy for a while
 - Sooner or later ... the fun times are going to come to an end and we're going to realise we're so far away from our Father in heaven and being at his eternal feast
- Unless we get the grace of God ... we will remain spiritually dead and at best spiritually dull
- But when you understand God's grace to you ... seen perfectly at the cross
 - That God is **so holy** that Jesus **HAD** to die for you
 - That God is **so loving** that Jesus was **GLAD** to die for you
- Then that's what's going to melt our hearts and bring the transformation we desire
- One of the ways God's grace transforms our hearts is in our willingness and humility to repent
 - When we understand God's holiness ...
 - it reveals to us our lack of holiness and sinfulness
 - it exposes our guilt and our inability to make it right by our own efforts

- But because of God's love ...
 - we know we can be honest with God about our sin, we can humble ourselves and repent
- You see God's grace humbles us to confess
 - to acknowledge our failures
 - to put our hand up and admit the times we fail
- Because his grace means we can come to him like the younger brother, without fear of condemnation, with complete assurance of his forgiveness ... knowing Jesus Christ has dealt with it all

- As we begin 2016 ... one of the main things we want this year to be characterised by is heart transformation
 - When God is transforming hearts ... that's when we will be spiritually alive, growing, joyful, repentant, forgiving and generous
- And it's only as we continue to hold before us ...
 - The holiness of God
 - The love of God
- Then we see the grace of God to us in Jesus Christ

- May God by the power of his HS transform each of our hearts more and more so we grow to become more like Jesus

PRAY

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.