

# How do we get in on God's deal?

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**by Jo-ann Stenton**

Through Christ, God offers us everything while demanding nothing. However if we offer nothing in return we risk squandering the gifts that are on offer.

It is easy to lose appreciation for the benefits of faithfulness until we taste the alternative.

God's love for us is unshakable and the deepest love we will ever experience. It is a love that reaches out to us wherever we are and no matter how deeply we have spurned it in the past. God's love is not some kind of reward for effort. Nothing we do, could make God love us more than He loves us now.

So now let us take a look at where we stand in relation to God's love.

Themes of sin and confession and reconciliation with God are a prominent focus of the Lenten season. They are certainly prominent in the readings today.

In the reading from his letter to the Corinthians, Paul spells out in fairly simple terms what God wants to do to achieve a lasting reconciliation. We often stray from the path that God wants us to follow and become estranged from him. But God is keen for us to be reconciled with Him no matter how we may have spurned him.

Paul makes it clear that God's desire to befriend us far outweighs his consciousness of any sin they might be guilty of. He says that God keeps no record of their misdemeanours, but reaches out to them, an offer made concrete in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gets amongst us and shares our situation. He demonstrates what friendship is about; being willing to be there when the chips are down. Jesus is no fair weather friend, he shares the worst of our sin and brokenness so that we can have the opportunity to share the best of God's love.

It is that painful part of our experience, the worst of our sin and brokenness, that the psalm spoke of so well. The psalmist says "when I did not confess my sin, it wore me out, it drained my strength." If you bottle things up, it stuffs up your thinking. We've all got our own individual hurts and pains and brokenness, our dark sides that want to take revenge on the world for the evil we've suffered or possibly what we see around us, but the further you push them down the deeper they fester, and your spirit dries up like moisture in the summer heat.

However, the psalm moved on to a song of hope and joy. "I decided to confess my sins to you, Lord, and you forgave all of them." It's the opposite of pushing them down inside you,

letting them out, and facing up to them. And just like Paul said in the other reading, God is only too willing to forgive us. Instead of us feeling that we need to hide the bad things we have done from God, God becomes our protector.

The joy and exhilaration of that release is captured well in the psalm. But in reality, for many of us, after a few years of following Jesus, we get a bit used to God's goodness and take it for granted. Our Gospel reading addresses these issues directly.

So now let's take a look at the context of the parable before we go any further with it.

Who did Jesus tell this parable to??

What were they doing that provoked him to tell it??

O.K. So we have a group of very serious, diligent, religious people, people who did their utmost to live in ways that were pleasing to God, who are feeling put out because Jesus is behaving as though He prefers the company of the people who did everything that was irreligious and offensive to God.

And it is in the face of that response that Jesus tells three similar parables about God's desire to find the lost, and then he puts a twist in the tail of the third one. The three parables all make the same point Paul made in our earlier reading.

God will search frantically till the lost sheep is found. Or if you have chosen to take a different path and don't want to be found, God will wait anxiously, gazing down the road, hoping and hoping that you will have a change of heart and respond to His eager love for you. And the minute you come into sight God will be tearing down the road like an excited puppy welcoming you home. God's arms will be open wide, and the fatted calf will be on the spit and there will be celebrations.

It sounds fantastic, but then Jesus puts a sting in the tail of his story. Jesus is well aware that it is easy to appreciate the benefits of your father's love when he's throwing a big party in your honour, it's not so easy when he just want's your company doing ordinary things. A hard day's work and a square meal looks great when you're starving in a strange land, but it doesn't look quite so appealing when you haven't felt desolation and the pangs of hunger.

To demonstrate this Jesus writes another character into the story; the older brother. This is a character that most of us can probably relate to if we take a look at ourselves. This is the bloke who doesn't have a spectacular conversion story. He just grew up in the loving care of his father. There was never really a time when he felt alienated from that love. It had always been there. And he had always been faithful. He worked hard, and was the apple of his father's eye. He could always be relied on to do what was asked of him and more.

There are plenty of people for whom Christian discipleship has been like that. You grew up in the family of God's people. You never really went astray. Sure, you've had your moments but you never spat the dummy and told God to get knotted and lived the fast and selfish life. You've always been there, responsible and dependable.

And the danger for you is the same as the danger for the older son here; and Jesus wants to warn you about it. What do you hear Jesus warning here? what is Jesus saying can happen in the relationship between the faithful son and his father?

The older son has become so used to his father's love that he no longer values what he has. In fact he doesn't even see what he can do with it. He complains to his father, "All these years I've worked for you and you never even gave me a young goat to have a party with my friends." And the old man says, "I never gave you a goat. (because) They're your goats. Everything I have is yours. If you want a goat, have as many as you want, they're your goats!"

How easily we do that! We become so used to the good relationship that we no longer appreciate its value. We get hung up on doing our duty, on being faithful, on putting the work in that we forget to celebrate. We have a right to celebrate. In fact God wants us to be a celebratory people. Most of the images Jesus used to describe the reign of God were images of celebrations and parties.

The older brother reckons that the prodigal has had it good. There is a part of him that says, "Why have I always been so good? Why didn't I get out there and have a good time like others have done? Why did I bother staying at home and being a good boy?"

It's a bit close to the bone, really. Many of us have had thoughts like this at times. Similarly, you hear people complaining about the so called handouts to refugees and the welcome they receive and do not consider what hardships they had to endure. But the reality is that it is easy to think like that when you haven't tried leaving the protection of your father's love or your homeland.

The grass looks greener from the other side. But the prodigal found out the hard way, that the grass looked greener because it was mouldy. The prodigal had been to the other side and when the other side had chewed him up and spat him out, like it always does, he knew that the only good thing he could do was to swallow his pride and go home. He'd learnt the hard way that home was a good place to be.

There are plenty of people who are still finding that out the hard way, but who, like the prodigal, probably won't admit it until they hit rock bottom. People who have abandoned

the road that would have led to genuine love, and instead have attempted what they saw as a short cut to gratification, a life of cheap success, of excessive and conspicuous consumption of what they thought to be “the good life”. Their happiness is no more than skin deep. And, beneath the manic maintenance of appearances there is a nightmare of anxieties and regrets.

The prodigal son had blown his whole inheritance and lost something he could never fully recover from, but he knew his older brother was on a good thing. However, the older brother could not see it. He had become complacent.

If you've never been a prodigal, you haven't missed much. Those who have can tell you that it can take a lot of years to repair the damage even after you get back home. If you've always been the one faithfully working at home, then the message of this parable is this:

Appreciate the love and security you have and lighten up.

**Put more fun in your life.** That's how you get in on God's good deal.

Adapted from Nathan Nettleton, 21 March 2004