

Luke 15:1-3,11b-32  
Psalm 32

The problem with grace

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Let us imagine that I owe EEEE \$10,000, and that I'm happy about this – partly because I needed the money, and partly because I know what I now need to do, and can do, which is pay back the loan. And, in due time, I repay EEEE according to our agreement – at a very fair interest rate – and we are *done*. This is what an “economy of exchange” looks like – a simple engagement in which “this” is exchanged for “that”, obligations are met, and we both know that the transaction has come to its end.

Now imagine that NNNN *gives* me \$10,000. I'm now *very* happy, because he doesn't want repayment; this is a real gift and he just wants me to enjoy it. And I do enjoy it.

A week later, I bump into NNNN at café when we both front up for our morning coffee. And he is his normal friendly self, acting as if nothing has happened. But I wonder to myself, Should I offer to buy his coffee for him? After all, \$10,000... And so I do offer, but he smiles and refuses. He pays for himself, takes his coffee and goes his way. And I think, What was all that about? Should I have insisted? Was he testing me?

I worry about this, because I am an exchange economy cynic. I know how these things *really* work.

A week or so later, I notice that NNNN is talking with EEEE at a table in the café, but he happened to be looking at me just as I saw him. And he smiles and turns back to his conversation. But I wonder, *Why* is he looking at me? What's with that smile? Does he want something? Are those two comparing notes on their \$10,000 loan and gift? I'm now feeling quite unsure about where I stand.

A week later again, NNNN and I pass each other in the supermarket, and he smiles *again* and says Hi, and continues to where he was going.

And now you're really starting to freak me out, man. What do you want? And why are you everywhere I go? What can I do to get you off my back? It was so much easier with EEEE. I knew where I stood. I knew what I had to do. And it's over. I don't owe her anything. But NNNN... Will you please stop smiling at me?

What we've been imagining here reveals something of the difference between an economy of exchange and an economy of gift, and this is interesting because Jesus' parable of the man and his two sons splashes around in this difference.

*“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”*

The Prodigal invokes the “economy of exchange”. He realises that he might be able to trade his labour for food and shelter in his father's house. Of course, we all know how the story unfolds: before the exchange can even be proposed, the father enacts the economy of gift, and receives the son back with open arms. And so we've become accustomed to speaking here of the father's “forgiveness” of his son and to extend this allegorically to a word about divine “grace”. This, then, becomes grounds for celebration and the singing of doxologies or whatever – on the presumption that the parable tells us God can do the same for *us*.

But perhaps we celebrate too loudly, too quickly.

Because grace is harder than it seems. We might not notice this because the difficulty of grace kicks in at just the point where the parable ends, a problem which has to do with what it is like for those of us who live in economies of exchange to shift to life in a gift economy. That shift is not easy.

The economy of exchange is straightforward. We know where we stand. It might be *uncomfortable* sometimes, if I don't have enough to trade or to pay my debts. But it is clear where I stand. I know it, and you know it. And we can usually "work something out" if I can't pay my way. "Tell you what, Dad, how about I serve as one of your hired hands? "

But the economy of gift is a different matter. You don't *know* what to do next. What does God *want*? By which we mean, what is the "then" which follows from God's gift, God's grace understood as having an "if" - *if* I forgive you, "then"... What do we exchange for salvation?

Good Protestants that we are, we know the answer here is "nothing"; this is what grace means.

But what we do next often contradicts this. While we celebrate God's gracious gathering of us home, we then return to the graceless economy of exchange, back to salvation by works. We imagine that the Prodigal *must* now get up early the next day and drudge out to work with his older brother. *This* is the payment for his forgiveness, because forgiveness has now become the possibility that he who previously did not impress God might *now* be more impressive. The forgiven Prodigal cannot sleep-in the next day, because that would hardly be impressive in view of the gift he has received.

In this way, we turn grace into something like the "reset" button on a video game. Each time we play, we get a little further into the game but fail, and then reset and start again, and again, and again – O Glorious Reset Button, Gracious Source of New Life – until finally we *can* get all the way through the game and no longer *need* the reset button.

Grace now becomes what we rely upon *until such time* as we hear God's "Well done, good and faithful servant", now having impressed God all "on my own".

But the gospel is *not* that God has a reset button by which we are made loveable again, and by which we might once more try to *prove* ourselves to be loveable. The gospel is that we do not *need* a reset because *God* doesn't need one, because God's love for us *is not the result of what we do* – *not* the result of what we do. And so, in astonishment, and in fear and trembling, we are made to declare the impossible: we do not need a reset button, because it does not *matter* what the recipients of grace do.

*It. Does. Not. Matter. What. We. Do.*

It does not matter *in the sense* that, while it might be clear what the *wrong* thing to do is, it is not clear what the "right" thing is

But what then does faithfulness – the next thing we do – actually look like if indeed God's grace is truly unconditional? More to the point – to acknowledge the anxiety grace can bring – how can I *justify* what I do as a forgiven person, if God has not stipulated a condition or two I can point to?

And this brings us to the problem with grace. If it doesn't matter what we do, we have to *guess* what to do next, because there are no conditions to grace. There is no "now you must" which follows from God's "I forgive", because there is not "then" which follows God's "if", because there is no "if" with this God.

For those of us who just want to know what we *should* be doing in exchange-economy mode, this is an almost terrifying freedom. We have to *decide*. We have to take a risk.

For the most part, we prefer to be like craftspeople who know the proven methods and techniques of our craft and simply apply them in some new situation: if this type of wood, then that kind of cut; if this colour thread, then that place in the weave. “If, then; if, then; if, then”. No risk.

But grace transforms us from mere craftspeople into *artists* who create things which even God hasn’t imagined, regardless of the wood, the thread, or the circumstances. In a gift economy, nothing is determined before it happens: there is no “should”. And so, our “works” of righteousness become more like experiments in righteousness, or even just *play*; our speech becomes more like *poetry*; and so our actions become a most unexpected *raising of the dead*.

And this is why NNNN keeps smiling at me. He’s *not* messing with me, not wondering whether I *know* what he expects me to do with his gift. Rather, he’s wondering *himself* what I’m going to do with it, because he doesn’t know: there was no condition attached to the gift, there was no specific obedience upon which the gift rested. What happens next is – by the grace of NNNN – up to me.

But NNNN does know – as God does – that if I have received his gift as a *true* gift – if I have understood God’s grace – then I could do *anything* with it, because it doesn’t matter what happens next, because what happens next cannot change the fact that

neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor stupidity, nor laziness, nor miscalculation,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
is able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus the Gift.

Upon this affirmation rests the strange, disorienting freedom of the children of God. The shape of faithfulness to the gift of God is not prescribed because faithfulness is freedom itself.

God says to you, Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. (15. 31)

It is all gift.

Let us see, then, what surprising thing we can do with that.

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