

Grace Like That

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[0 : 00] Well, this evening we're back in the Gospel of Luke, we're in chapter 5 of Luke's Gospel, verse 27.

Okay, how much are we loving the World Cup already? Absolutely fantastic. Although, probably some of you have already just grown inwardly and thought, oh no, not more football, I'm going to be so sick of football by the end of the month.

And so, if you don't like football, I want to ask you, please, don't resent us and our obsession, okay, but please pity us.

Because football is actually really important for a lot of people because it helps them form community and bonds with other people.

And that's especially important for men because of course we're emotionally inadequate. And when we talk about football, we can talk about our lives, we can talk about being happy or gutted or delighted or in despair.

[1 : 16] And we express our emotional life through sport very often. So football is a healthy thing for some of us because it just helps us connect.

And that's kind of what we're thinking about this evening is how we connect with people and how we form community. And in particular, what I want to say to everybody is that Jesus is amazing at forming community.

And all of us go through life with a need to connect with other people, a deep-seated desire to belong, to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

And there's nobody better at doing that for us than Jesus Christ. And that's a little bit of what we read about in this story.

Now, I want you to imagine an old woman living on her own in a remote cottage in a Highland Glen. And it's a damp, dreach summer's day in the Highlands.

[2 : 30] She's in the house on her own and there's a knock at the door. And she opens the door and they are standing in front of her, are two absolutely soaking wet 14-year-old plebs from Glasgow.

And so she kind of looks at them and they look at her and they're lost and they're miserable and they're soaked through to the skin because they've had to wade through a river that came up to their chests.

One of those boys was me and the other was my friend Kenny and the lovely lady looks at us and she just looks and she smiles and says, you better come in.

And so she turns and she leads the two boys into a neatly kept home where everything is in its place. And the two lads drip water everywhere, squelch through to her second room and the fire's on a lovely peep fire and they sit down and huddle beside the fire and begin to dry out.

And while they sit there drying out, the old lady starts bustling about. She gets out a white linen tablecloth and puts it on the table. She goes and finds her bone china and sets out the table and all the crockery and the cutlery and then she's bustling about in the kitchen making sandwiches and boiling the kettle.

[4 : 03] And soon there's a feast, a beautifully laid table and a feast and these two hungry, damp boys are invited to sit at the table and the old lady just sits and smiles and watches them as they devour every last morsel on the table.

And then one of the boys picks up the sugar bowl and using his other hand he scoops out every last grain of sugar and the smile never left her face.

It was a warm room, a feast around the table and a lovely, gentle, generous host. An unlikely coming together of two grubby wee Glaswegians and a kind old lady.

And yet together they just had a great moment of friendship and community. And that's what's happening here in this story.

What did the women do? Well, she showed grace, didn't she? She showed grace and generosity. And we live in a world, that's the first thing I want to say is that we live in a world that really needs that kind of grace and that kind of generosity.

[5 : 17] There are people who are different, people who might even be afraid of each other or suspicious of each other or even people who see themselves as enemies. Wouldn't it be great if in this world those different kinds of people could learn to sit down around the table and just have a great feed together?

Because a good meal, what do we like about a good meal? Well, of course, we like the food. We love the ingredients. We love the taste and the pleasure of eating. But a good meal is more than that, isn't it?

It's the company. It's the moments of friendship and intimacy and learning about each other and sharing joy with people who've previously been strangers.

So we long for a world where Russians and Ukrainians, instead of shooting each other, sit down around the table, tell jokes and have a feast or where we long for a world where Shias and Sunnis and Christians would learn to sit down and eat together and feast and forge friendships.

What a different world it would be. Now, it's hard for us to imagine that kind of world, but really that's exactly what happens here in the story that we've got.

[6 : 41] We have a huge party going on. We read the New Testament. If you're familiar with the New Testament, we just skim over. But we read in verse 29, Levi holds not just a banquet, a great banquet.

This is something out of the ordinary. This is a huge party with great food and amazing hospitality. And what he does at that party is he brings different groups of people together who would not normally associate with each other, people who would normally be really suspicious and even afraid of one another.

And Levi, with Jesus, brings those people together in a way that's really quite shocking for everybody who's there.

They are shocked that this tax collector, Levi, has invited Jesus into his house and that Jesus has accepted.

And not only has Jesus gone along, but his disciples have gone too. And then all Levi's buddies turn up and they're tax collectors and other kinds of really disreputable people, and Jesus isn't expected to hang out with these kinds of people.

[8 : 03] He's not expected to be in that kind of company. Finding Jesus, socializing, eating, feasting, enjoying life with these people takes the onlooker aback.

So the religious fantasies are complaining, aren't they? What on earth is good on here? Look at your teacher. Why are you people eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?

You see, they're shocked by Jesus' generous, open heart. In the ancient world, eating with somebody was a sort of ritual that was really laden with meaning and symbol.

You know, it wasn't just like popping in McDonald's, quick bite to eat and off again. It wasn't fast food generation. When you sat down to eat with somebody, that symbolized friendship, intimacy and unity.

So as Jesus sits down with these scandalous people, he's expressing intimacy, friendship and unity with them.

[9 : 18] And so the question is, can Jesus really be showing such friendship to the most despised people in Israel? Now why was it so shocking for Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Well, if you take yourself back in time, if you were back 2,000 years ago in Palestine in Israel where Jesus is, then of course Israel is ruled by Rome.

And Roman rule was really a bitter pill for the Jewish nation.

The Romans were the enemy of Israel, but they're also the enemy of God. Because this is the Holy Land and these Gentiles have come and overrun it.

And the Jews find that so, so infuriating. So there's this struggle going on between Israel and Rome.

[10 : 25] And the problem with the tax collectors is that in that struggle, even though they're Jewish, they've chosen Rome.

These are men who've decided to associate themselves or take the side of God's enemies.

They collected money from everyone in Israel and that money was used to support the Roman rule. So the tax collectors are traitors standing with the enemies of God.

And that's why when Jesus begins to sit and eat and feast and party with the tax collectors, the Pharisees' eyes are popping out of their heads.

They can't believe this. What on earth is Jesus doing? They're scandalized, they're offended.

[11 : 26] Now I want to say this, that we all have a Pharisee inside ourselves. And we need to learn to kill that Pharisee off.

We easily find ourselves in the position where we begin to look at others with real disdain and dislike.

And subconsciously we think of some people as being unclean and best avoided. We look at people who are different, we look at some people around us and we're afraid of them.

And so we criticize them and we push them away. People who are difficult to get on with, people whose lifestyle we disapprove of, people who we think are against us and what we believe in, and so we start to condemn them, criticize them.

Who are the worst Pharisees? Well the worst Pharisees of course are religious people. And it's very true that often the church is known not for amazing grace, but for amazing self-righteousness.

[12 : 34] But what does Jesus say? Well He says, I'm not here for perfect people, am I?

He says in verse 31, it's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Jesus is not here for righteous people or for good people, but for sinners, for rebels, for people who know they've done wrong, for people who see the brokenness in their relationship with God.

And so if we're Christians, we have to start by seeing ourselves as sinners. And not only do we have to start by seeing ourselves as sinners, but we have to go on seeing ourselves as sinners.

Because unless we see ourselves as sinners, we're not going to want Jesus as our Savior.

And once we see ourselves as sinners, what does that do? Well it humbles us, doesn't it? It humbles us.

[13 : 45] Because as we become more and more, and the more the gospel works in your life, the more God works in your life, the more you begin to see the ugliness and brokenness of your own heart and the selfishness and pride that lives in you and the greed and the lust and all the other things that offend God, the lovelessness, the bitterness.

And yet when the gospel is working, we see more and more of that within ourselves. And the more we see that, then the more we know that we're just like everyone else.

In fact, as the gospel works, we begin to think, I'm worse than everyone else. And that's what kills the Pharisee inside us.

We're just like the rest of the world. We're just like every other person. We're just as broken, just as bad. We may look different on the outside sometimes.

We may look more respectable. We may appear to have it all together. But inwardly, you know, and God, you know, that's what God's really interested in is, is your heart tonight.

[14 : 58] Inwardly, God sees what you're really like and that humbles us. So the gospel humbles us and makes us more accepting of other people and allows us to be kind to all sorts of people, makes us want to love other people because we've been loved, makes us want to reach out to lonely people and broken people and hurt people and comfort them and console them and make them feel valued and loved and appreciated.

That's what the gospel does because that's what Jesus does. He associates with the outcast, the vulnerable, the marginalised, the despised.

So as we think about church together or as I think with the people in Cornerstone about the church we're trying to create in Morningside, then we want to be those kinds of communities, don't we?

And this to be a church where all kinds of people are welcome and where the miracle of the gospel is seen to be at work, where disparate people become united around the life and the love and the power of Jesus Christ.

And so that's hard work, I have to tell you. You know, loving the marginalised, loving the outsider, loving the lonely sounds easy, but you know, you've got to work away at it.

[16 : 46] You've got to be real about it. Love is a practical thing. And so you need to work hard together and we need to work hard together to love, to care and to create community, to show the kind of grace that this world needs.

That's what the church is called to be, isn't it? A beacon of light in a dark world, a community of grace in the midst of the brokenness.

So this world needs the grace of God and Jesus shows that great grace, but not only does the world need the grace of God, but obviously clearly we have to remind ourselves from this story, we need the grace of God.

Now in this story, there are different kinds of people, aren't there? What kinds of people do you see in the text? Well, there are self-righteous people.

And then there are people who live very clearly sinful lives. And then there are people in this story who side with the enemies of God.

[17 : 59] And what the story teaches us, of course, is all these people are the same. And they're the same because they've all got a broken relationship with God.

They're the same because every one of them needs grace. And we're the same because every one of us needs grace.

Some of us hear ourselves righteous. Some of us might see ourselves as being enemies of God. And some of us may have a clearly broken life in different ways.

But we all need the same thing. We need grace. And the good thing about this is Jesus is willing to eat with all these different kinds of people, even with the Pharisees.

One of the nice things about Jesus is He's not self-righteous about self-righteousness. He welcomes them all. So because of grace, Jesus is willing to welcome you and me.

[19 : 08] That's the happy truth of the gospel, isn't it? No matter who we are, no matter what we think, no matter how we're feeling this evening, no matter the reason we turned up in this church tonight, the great thing is this.

Jesus is willing to welcome us to His party, to welcome us into His fellowship, to welcome us into His life. Jesus is willing to have you come round and sit at the table with Him and be one of His friends.

Now that's a great thing. Don't take it for granted. God offers you friendship.

That's a remarkable thing. God in all His glory, holiness, majesty and power is willing to meet you in all your brokenness and sinfulness.

His friend, His intimate friend, His precious friend.

[20 : 23] So Jesus welcomes you, welcomes us and welcomes all kinds of other people. And that's part of the joy of the church. I've alluded to it already.

It's part of the joy of the church that we become family and friends with all kinds of people. We normally have become friends or family with.

It's this dysfunctional group of people who have nothing in common often, apart from the fact of their shared relationship, union with Jesus Christ.

That's one of the signs of authentic church, isn't it? Authentic churches are places where you don't just find clones, where every day isn't just lovely and nice and easy to get on with.

Authentic churches are full of messed up people learning to love each other as the Bible teaches them to. So being a Christian is a great privilege.

[21 : 25] For me, two great privileges that I've been thinking about recently as a Christian. One is simply the fact that I have the friendship of the Lord Jesus Christ in my life every day.

That is unbelievable, isn't it? When I'm lonely, when I'm sad, when I'm bored, when I'm frightened, whatever my situation, there is my friend Jesus.

Ready to listen, ready to engage with me, ready to comfort, ready to strengthen, ready to help.

Every day my friend Jesus puts his arm around me and is kind, he's generous, he's just lovely to me.

The second amazing privilege, of course, is you guys. That's an amazing privilege to be part of the church.

So earlier this year I had surgery, so that was at the end of January. I had a very slow recovery.

[22 : 39] I spent weeks and weeks lying in bed, watching Netflix. So that's how the time passed.

Most of the time I was quite chirpy and content, but on Saturdays I kept feeling really depressed.

So week after week, as Saturday came along, I kept thinking, why is Saturday such a miserable day for me?

And after a couple of months of that, I worked it out, my heart is aching on a Saturday for Sunday.

My heart is aching for my Christian family and for my brothers and sisters in Jesus, because it is a joy to be part of the family of God.

[23 : 41] And I never really realised that, I suppose, quite so much until I couldn't access it anymore.

I ate for you guys, isn't that amazing? You see, that's what God does. So as you look round church, you look at each other, I say, don't take each other for granted.

You're given to each other as a community to be a blessing. So look around the church, these are your people, your family, given by God to you to be your blessing.

And what do we want to do? We want to share the blessing of the family of God. We want to share the blessing of community. And so we go out to bring others in.

So because of grace, we have belonging with Jesus and with each other. Because of grace, Jesus is willing to die for us. See, Jesus isn't just willing to welcome you, Jesus isn't just willing to have you at his table.

[24 : 59] Incredibly, Jesus is willing to die for you as well. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. What is a sinner? A sinner is a rebel against God.

Somebody who doesn't want God to rule over their life, somebody who doesn't want to love God, worship God.

And a sinner is somebody who's spiritually unclean. Now the Pharisees were panicking in this situation because Jesus, a religious Jew, was eating with people who were wretchedly unclean and sort of religious social outcasts.

But the real uncleanness is not about a failure to comply with dietary laws or purification rituals. We're unclean because we've failed to keep the most important laws of all, which are to love God and to love one another.

So how can unclean people sit down to eat with a holy God? He tells us he's too pure to look on sin.

[26 : 16] Well only, can only happen when they take the consequence, when Jesus takes the consequences of their sin on himself. Jesus becomes unclean when he's crucified.

He becomes a sin bearer. He has made sin so that we can be made clean. Jesus becomes the outcast at the cross so that we can be brought in.

Jesus is offered as a sacrifice in the cross for the healing of the nations. This is God's perfect, wonderful, holy, glorious, majestic Son crucified for us, for us, so that we would begin to love Him. I don't know if any of you did Tough Mudder, but Tough Mudder is a 12 and a half mile race round Edinburgh with lots of obstacles and mud.

Supposedly very grueling, and I was reading a story this morning about running the race of life. Only one person ever ran the race of life perfectly.

[27 : 28] Who was it? Jesus Christ. Why did Jesus run the race? For the joy set before him. So what was the joy?

What was the prize for which Jesus ran? What did Jesus not have in heaven that he had to come to the world to find it?

The prize Jesus ran for is you. He ran. He gave himself for us. He removes our sin, removes our hostility and our enmity.

And he takes that away through the cross. Why? He wants to replace our enmity, our hostility. He wants to replace that with.

He wants to replace it with love and worship and wonder before the cross of Christ.

[28 : 27] That's what God wants to put in your heart tonight, is love for Him. Love for Him in all His goodness and His beauty and His mercy.

And so the cross is right in the heart of what Jesus is doing here. Bringing people into fellowship with Himself. And that makes the cross so important for every one of us.

We need to really absorb the message of the cross. Read it. Meditate on it. Think about it. And absorb that message, that truth, until it starts to break your hard heart.

And make you see that your sin is truly abominable because Christ suffered for sin.

Make the cross so real that it will break your heart and bring you on your knees to Jesus.

[29 : 53] And let His goodness and His love conquer your heart tonight.

And the more we are conquered by the love of God and the more we love God, the more that love will overflow in our lives to love others.

And the more we will start to make room in our diary, I don't have a diary. I have this though. And I spend a lot of time with this.

More time than with any human being probably. So we are deeply, deeply attached. And I've got so many spaces in my diary and I fill them with meetings and busyness and all kinds of stuff.

But what God wants me to put in there, He wants me to put people in my diary. Especially people who don't yet know Him so that I can begin to extend to them something of the goodness of God and speak to them the Word of God.

[31 : 10] And so in your diary every week I would just say make space for other kinds of people and for all kinds of people to go and share your life and to share the gospel with them.

Because we want to build a really great church here. We do. We want to build an absolutely, I can't say absolutely fabulous because that's such a terrible saying and program.

Anyway, we want to build something extraordinary here, don't we? We want to build something here that is only explicable by the power of God. We want to build a community that tastes of heaven.

And we want to build a place where people come and feel a bit closer to heaven. Where people begin to see the extraordinary things that God does in the human heart.

We want to create a church of joy and love and hope and kindness and truth. We want to create a church where people will listen to each other and learn from each other and speak to each other and be kind to each other and serve each other.

[32 : 25] Where you'll take away the loneliness from one another and where you'll help everyone to feel loved and valued and precious and celebrated. And where together we will be the happiest people in the world because of Jesus.

The church is an amazing thing. And so we want to not just play at church. We want to live church. We want to be church. And we want to create church in a way that people's lives will be absolutely and wonderfully changed.

The gospel is transformative. And so the church should be a place where transformation occurs.

And that means you and I need to be changed and transformed. And then this will be a place where people are changed and transformed too.

[33 : 36] So we've got so much good stuff to do in this world. And so many good things to enjoy right at the heart of them all is the friendship and the hospitality of Jesus.

So let's stop there. I'm going to pray, then we sing a hymn called Name of All Majesty. Lord God Almighty help us to love the name of Jesus.

Because of all that that name symbolizes and speaks of, it speaks of love, of hope, of forgiveness, of goodness, of truth.

May we find in Jesus a refuge tonight. May we find in Jesus life and hope. Oh God, do bless us and bless this church with extraordinary blessing.

Not for our sake, but for your glory. Amen.