

# Getting in on the Deal

*A sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 & Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 March 2016*

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## Message

In Christ, God has made an agreement with us, offering us everything and demanding nothing, but if we offer nothing we will be at risk of squandering it all.

## Sermon

In most of the trouble spots around the world, there are people putting in a lot of effort behind the scenes trying to hammer out the details of cease-fires and peace treaties. Even when they are successful, they seldom get much credit for their work; the credit usually goes to the respective leaders for whom they have acted. Frequently, to everyone else, their work seems far too slow: as the bombs continue to fly, all we get are dribs and drabs in news reports about how the peace negotiations are grinding on with a final agreement still not reached. But without these people, and their diligent work, the world would be an even more fraught and dangerous place than it already is.

In most cases, the peace negotiators' job involves trying to piece together a patchwork of compromises such that each side gives up enough of what they were asking for to secure the end of hostilities, but not so much that they lose face and are left even more bitter and hostile. If they can succeed in piecing together such a patchwork, so that both sides can agree to accept it, then an end to the violent hostility can be secured, and the work of building a lasting reconciliation can begin. In most cases, some of the onlookers will not be altogether happy with some of what was given away – perhaps some monster was guaranteed immunity from prosecution for past crimes – but often the only real alternatives are either to give these things away or to let the bloodshed continue.

According to the Apostle Paul, in the reading we heard from his letter to the Corinthian churches, God has hammered out a peace agreement with the world, and has made some astonishingly big concessions in the process. Indeed God has made exactly the sort of concessions that often cause angst in peace agreements; most notably offering all of us, the worst of us as well as the best of us, immunity from prosecution. In fact, if you put the agreement that God offers on the table next to some of the convoluted cease-fires and treaties that are painstakingly negotiated between hostile nations, you might start to wonder what was in it for God. You might be tempted to describe it as an almost complete capitulation by God. God seems to give up everything, offer everything, and demand almost nothing in return. In particular God promises to wipe the record of everything we've ever done wrong and hold nothing against us. And as if such a complete immunity from prosecution was not enough, God also offers us high-ranking jobs as his ambassadors to represent him in the ongoing task of promoting the agreement. It is a bit like the USA opening its negotiations with ISIS by offering Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi immunity from prosecution and a new job as their Secretary of State.

I don't think any of us could imagine any of the world's superpowers ever making such a monumental capitulation. Such a capitulation might sometimes be able to be extracted from a very guilty party who has been single-handedly responsible for the mess, but in the case of the reconciliation deal which God offers to the world, the one who clearly holds the moral high ground is the one rolling over and conceding everything. We are the ones who took

God's gift of a beautiful planet and set about polluting it, and tearing it apart by war, hatred and injustice. We are the ones who were invited to live in peaceful communion with one another and who instead hardened our hearts and succumbed to the demons of selfishness, greed and cynicism. We are the ones who squandered our gifts, blew our inheritance, and dragged our own names and God's through the mud. So what is God doing making such enormous concessions to secure a peace agreement with us?

On the micro scale, you can hear this same scenario being played out in the story Jesus told about the prodigal son, the story we heard earlier. The prodigal knows he's got no bargaining power. He has blown his father's trust and money, and dragged his father's name through the mud of the pig sty. And he is desperate. He is ready and willing to give up everything for whatever shreds of his father's care might be forthcoming. But instead it almost becomes a competition to see who can give up the most. The ageing father bounds down the street in a most undignified manner, throws himself on his errant son, forgives him everything, and then crowns him in glory and throws a huge welcome-home party for him.

What more could God give? Well actually, says the Apostle Paul, there is more. Reputation. God was in Christ, trading reputations with us. Christ, who was not implicated in any wrongdoing, accepted guilt by association with us. Christ put his hand up and implicated himself in our callousness, injustice and hostility. He put his reputation on the table along with everything else to secure the deal. And, says the Apostle, in doing so he paved the way for us to be implicated in his goodness, for us to receive righteousness by association.

Again you can see this illustrated in the story of the prodigal son. In that culture, as in many, the behaviour of the son is seen as reflecting directly on the parents, and this is one of the things that gives rise to so-called honour killings in some such societies. Indeed, in a passage that is almost certainly being alluded to in the prodigal son story, Deuteronomy 21 mandates death by public stoning for a son who disgraces his parents by rebellious, gluttonous, drunken and disobedient behaviour. The surrounding culture was not going to commend and congratulate this father for his generous forgiveness. They were going to see him as failing to fulfil his legal and moral obligations, and they would now regard him as the same sort of moral reprobate as his disgraced son. The father is effectively swapping reputations with his humiliated son. And in holding this up as a picture of the love and mercy of God, Jesus is completely upending the accepted image of a stern and removed God who demands that a price be paid for every sin before there can be any pardon.

No wonder the Apostle Paul says we'd be mad to turn our backs on this peace deal that God is offering. It's a take it or leave it deal, but why on earth would you leave it? We've got everything to gain and almost nothing to lose. The deal is completely stacked in our favour. We are offered complete forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, a new identity, a fresh start, mercy and healing and life and love beyond our wildest imaginings.

And what are we asked in return? What do we have to put on the table to complete the deal? Well, there's a paradox here, because the answer is both nothing and everything. God actually demands nothing of us except our willingness to accept the deal, to sign our names on the line. Everything else is completely voluntary. God signs off on the deal regardless of our response. It is sheer gift. There is nothing you can do to undo God's gracious acceptance of you. God will be all over you like the prodigal's father, lavishing love and generous gifts on you. And it costs you nothing at all.

And yet the paradox is that if you give nothing in return you will probably fail to appreciate and enjoy even the lavish gifts you are given. You can end up as sad and twisted as the prodigal's older brother who is now the sole heir to all his father owns, but stumbles around weighed down like a slave by yesterday's angers and resentments. You can be forgiven and still feel burdened by guilt. You can be accepted and still exclude yourself. You can be loved and still feel yourself unlovable.

It is easy for us to fall into taking sides in the story of the prodigal. We tend to identify with one or the other brother and to judge the other. We can easily look down on the younger brother for his callousness and irresponsibility, and we can easily condemn the elder brother for his self-righteousness and his insensitivity to his father. But disappearing down either of those paths misses the point and cripples our own capacity for love and celebration. The prodigal's father does neither of these things, and it is his example that Jesus is calling us to follow. He does not berate the younger son for leaving and wasting everything, and neither does he chastise his elder son for being such stuck-up sourpuss. He just invites both of them to the party, to an all-welcome celebration, where reputations are forgotten and only forgiveness and unconditional love matter. Can we rise to the challenge of the prodigal father and renounce our irresponsibility and our self-righteousness?

In this season of Lent we are reminded again and again of the discipline and commitment required to experience the full fruits of life's greatest gifts. They are gifts, and our response is purely voluntary, but unless we do volunteer and respond in full, the gift may again be squandered and we may again short-change ourselves horribly. God calls us to become ambassadors for Christ, to be the ones who take the news of God's gracious reconciliation and proclaim it and live it out to the full so that the full dimensions of God's gracious love might be readily apparent for all the world to see. God's offer of peace and reconciliation is not dependent on our acceptance of that call, but those of us who don't accept it will probably find that we are cutting off our noses to spite our faces by depriving ourselves of the here and now benefits of that gracious and healing love. They will still be there for us, but we may make ourselves the last to know it as we stand stubbornly and miserably outside the party.

So as extravagantly free and generous as God's gift of reconciliation is, let us respond to the challenge of this Lenten season by committing ourselves to the way of Christ, to the way of disciplined love and scandalous mercy that leads all the way to the cross and beyond, and which in its very willingness to give up everything, opens our hands and our hearts to receive the fullness of life and love and peace that we hunger for with every fibre of our being. Perhaps that's precisely the method in God's madness. Perhaps that's the secret God is enjoying and trying to let us in on: that only in putting everything we are and everything we have on the table and letting it go can we free ourselves to enter the party and know the fullness of life and love for which we were created.