

The gift that was rejected
9 August 2015

Hebrews 12:14-17

Mary opened the pink envelope addressed to her, and was surprised to see an invitation to Josephine's 10th birthday party. Josephine was a girl in her class at school, but they were not exactly friends. In fact, they hardly had anything in common.

Josephine's family was considered to be very well off. Her Dad was a respected doctor, and her Mum was a top lawyer. Every year, her family went on holiday overseas, and Josephine had even gone to Disneyland last year.

Mary had never been overseas. She hadn't even seen much of her own country: the only time she had ever travelled was when her family moved from Christchurch to Paraparaumu to seek a new life after the big earthquake in 2011. She was only six, and she was really sick on the ferry.

Their new life in Paraparaumu had started out alright, but Mum suddenly got sick, and died a few months later. Dad had never really got over it, and now he really struggled to support Mary and her brother on the minimum wage.

That was four years ago, but Mary still thought about Mum every day. She thought of her then and wanted to cry, but she held back her tears and thought about something else.

Why had Josephine invited her to her party? The truth was Josephine hadn't really wanted to her invite her. She had invited every other girl in the class. But not Mary. And she wouldn't have if her Dad hadn't intervened. He had been one of Mary's Mum's doctors, and he knew their family situation. He had told Josephine she would be not getting a party if Mary was not invited.

But Mary didn't know about any of that. She only knew she now had a party to go, but she didn't know what to take as a present. She did at least have something to wear: a party dress that was a few years old and a little tight, but it would still fit. Just. She didn't know what do for a present though. She did have a piggy bank, but when she tipped out the coins she only had \$2.90. That was not going to go far. But Dad came to the rescue. He gave her \$8, which they really couldn't afford, giving her more than \$10 to spend. She had never had that much to spend on herself.

Mary walked to The Warehouse after school the day before the party. Most of the toys there were way too expensive, but she found a travelling set of dominos for \$4.90, and some playing cards for \$2.10, which meant she had some change she could give back to Dad, so he could buy some milk that day.

The next day was the day of the party. Mary still couldn't believe she really had been invited. She squeezed herself into her only party dress. She sadly reflected that it really was quite out of fashion, but it would have to do.

When Mary got to the party, she couldn't believe where she was. She had never been in such a nice house before, and she had never seen such a big TV outside of the shops. Josephine didn't pay her any attention, but that didn't matter. She was having fun, her friends were there, and for the first time in a very long time, Mary didn't think about her Mum, or about how poor they were.

Then it was time for Josephine to open her presents. Sophie gave her a game for her Xbox. Bella gave her a Kinetic Sand Box set. And Kirsty gave her a DVD. Then she opened Mary's present. A cheap set of dominos and a pack of cards. She was not happy.

"What is this?" she almost spat. "NOBODY plays with this stuff anymore. These are like so dumb. Did your Mum get these or something?"

Josephine knew full well that Mary's Mum had died, and she only said this to hurt her.

Mary knew her gift was not going to be the best one, but she wasn't expecting it to be rejected outright. And Josephine bringing up her Mum was the last straw. She got up and ran out of the house before anyone could stop her, then burst into tears.

Grace is a word we often use, but do we really understand what it means? It has been the subject of much theological discussion and writing, but it will suffice for today to say that when we speak of the grace of God, we are referring to unmerited favour: a gift we don't deserve.

When we look at what God has done for us, we have been blessed with much that we probably do not deserve. Humankind had become

estranged from God, but we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus the Christ, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death. But Jesus triumphed over death with his Resurrection, which brings hope for us all.

Our second lesson tonight is from the Letter to the Hebrews. This is one of the more enigmatic books of the Newer Testament. It was traditionally attributed to St Paul, but we can be fairly certain he did not write it, and its intended audience was quite likely Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. Its content has been the subject of much discussion, but it is essentially an exhortation to Jewish Christians to stand firm in the face of persecution, with a specific emphasis on the role of Jesus as mediator between humankind and God.

This lesson contains a specific warning against rejecting God's grace. And we are reminded of the story about Esau selling his birthright for a single meal¹, or, as it says in some older Bible translations, "a mess of pottage". Esau's very name has become synonymous with those who sacrifice their heritage for short term gain.

So what does it mean to reject God's grace? An answer we may sometimes hear is rejecting Jesus through lacking faith in him. But that is far too simplistic. And scripture makes it clear that faith without works is dead².

Jesus gave us two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others³. In the Older Testament, these two commandments are in completely separate books. It took Jesus to bring them together and show that it is through loving others that we can demonstrate we love God. But by failing to follow these two simple commandments, we are rejecting Jesus' pivotal teaching, and rejecting God's grace. And as Jesus made it abundantly clear to us, "... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me"⁴.

But let's go back to Josephine's party, which Mary has just left in tears. As soon as her words had left her lips, Josephine realised she had gone too far. She saw how much she had hurt Mary by rejecting her gift, and was deeply ashamed she had abused the memory of Mary's dead mother out of pure spite. She was embarrassed to see

her friends looking at her in disapproval, not to mention the disgust on her mother's and father's faces. She knew what she had to do.

Before anyone could say anything, she ran outside and chased after Mary, who was now running down the street.

"Mary, stop," she called. Mary stopped

"I am really, really, really sorry I said those horrible things," Josephine continued. "I really, truly am."

Mary turned around slowly. Her face was a complete mess, but through her tears she could see Josephine was now crying as well.

"I was really stupid. I am so sorry I hurt you."

Mary could have told Josephine exactly where to go. And nobody would have blamed her. But Mary had already experienced enough pain in her life to have learned it was sometimes best to let things go. And she could see Josephine was genuinely repentant.

Mary paused, slowly walked towards Josephine, looked at her for a few seconds, and then hugged her.

Nobody said anything when the two girls came back to the party. There was a brief moment of awkward silence. But Josephine broke the ice by looking straight at Mary, and thanking her for her gift. And it was clear to everyone she meant it. Josephine then opened the rest of her presents, and the party vibe was soon back.

When it was time to eat, Josephine insisted on Mary sitting next to her. The food was amazing, although Mary avoided the cheerios, because they reminded her of the saveloy soup they sometimes had at home when it was a really tight week.

And when it was time for Mary to go, Josephine hugged her again. She didn't need to say it, but she had learned a very important lesson that day. And gained a new friend.

We reject God's love daily when we fail to love others.

We reject God's forgiveness daily when we fail to forgive others.

And we reject God's grace daily when we fail to show grace to others.

But just like Josephine had found a true friend in Mary when she stopped rejecting her, we will find a true friend in Jesus when we stop rejecting him.

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- 1 Genesis 25:29-34
- 2 James 2:14-26
- 3 Matthew 22:34-40
- 4 Matthew 25:40