

“Greater Than...Our Sin”

Every year there are a number of new words that get added to the dictionary. I always find it interesting to see what words are now being used that, in prior years, were not. When I see them, I like to guess what they mean before actually reading the definition.

I want to give a few words that are now part of our vocabulary that maybe you've (never heard of) and see if you can guess what they might mean. Then we can all start using them this next week.

Here's the first word: “phonesia.” When I read that word, I thought it was a noun to describe a person's fear of cell phones. What it actually means, the real definition, it's “The act of dialing a phone number and forgetting who you were calling just as they answer.”

So you can use this, right? The next time you call someone (and they say), “Hello.” You say, “Who is this?” They say, “You called me.” You can say, “I'm sorry, can you help me? It's just a case of phonesia.”

Here's another word: “disconfect.” Here's a clue. This is a word you can use around Halloween time, when your kids have a lot of candy. It means: “The attempt to sterilize the piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it.” Teach this to your kids and they can use it. It's all about keeping things clean...disconfect.

Here's another. It's a combination of a couple of words: “blamestorming.” This is a word that's used in the corporate setting. Instead of brainstorming, it's blamestorming. It means: “Sitting in a group and discussing who's responsible for the company's problems, rather than trying to solve them.” This is a common phenomenon. You're supposed to be working on fixing the problems, but instead you sit around and discuss whose fault it is...blamestorming.

One last one; this is a word (I think) you'll be able to use in this coming month: “intaxication.” It's a word to describe “The euphoria from getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize that it was your money to begin with.” I'll bet you can find a time (in these next few weeks) to use that one.

So there are these new words, with new meanings. We've never used them before and they get our attention. (We start using them.) But when it comes to familiar words, with familiar meanings, we tend to overlook them, not pay much attention. We assume we understand them, because they've been around a long time and we already know.

Here's what I want you to do in these next few weeks. I want you to approach a word as if you've never heard it before. I want you to set aside what you've thought about it (like you've never heard it) and hear it for the first time.

Years ago there was a commercial for Kellogg's Corn Flakes that came out when I was a kid. They did their research and realized that many people, who used to buy their product, when they were kids, hadn't done so for quite a while. So they came out with this slogan, “Kellogg's Corn Flakes...taste them again for the first time.”

That's what I'd like you to do during this series with the word “Grace.” I want you to (taste it again) for the first time. I want you to approach it as if you've never heard it before and receive it as if it's a new word. Because it's one of those words we've all heard (many times) and (as a result) don't pay as much attention to it as we should. It can lose its power. I want you to hear it again for the first time.

Take a look at this verse. The Bible says, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God...” (Hebrews 12:15). (See to it that no one misses the grace of God...) That's my prayer during this series. As a pastor, (as a congregation) what a tragedy it would be if someone comes to this church and misses the grace of God.

I'd be OK if you missed a lot of things. There's a long list of things you could miss. But don't miss the grace of God. Don't miss what it's all about. Because, as we're going to see (in this series), grace that makes all the difference. (Grace makes all the difference.)

When grace gets missed, when you replace it or try to redefine it, it's not present, fail to apply it, it doesn't take long before things start to become toxic. And when that happens, apart from grace, everything in life begins to change...and not for the better.

Today (what I want to do) is to set-up this series by taking a step back and thinking together about how important God's grace is in our lives and why (if it's going to have its full impact), we need to hear it again for the first time. This is more of a teaching sermon, today. I want us to look at a number of passages. Next week, we'll get into some of the actual stories (in the gospels) where the application of grace makes all the difference. Today it's laying a foundation.

Turn in your Bibles (or if you have a Bible app) to the book of Romans. We're going to be looking at a number of passages (today) where (the apostle Paul) lays out (for us) what God's grace is all about and why it is so important (and needed) in our lives.

In fact, I'd challenge you (during this coming week) to read through the first eight chapters. That's where Paul makes a case for why and how God's grace is so important, and the difference it makes. It's not a big assignment; only one chapter a day and on (one day), two chapters. I'd challenge you to read those first eight chapters before next week.

Now, I'm not going to walk you through the whole thing. There's a lot going on in the opening chapters that sets the stage for what Paul has to say about grace. But there are a few things we need to see, if we're going to (take hold) of what this is all about.

Before talking about God's grace, I want to talk about why we need it. If we're going to hear it (again) with fresh ears, we need to first understand our need for it. You can't talk about grace without talking about why it's needed. You can't talk about Jesus as our Savior (and have it mean anything) without first talking about what Jesus saves us from? It doesn't make any sense. And so the Bible does that.

In chapter one, and this is really the (theme verse) for the entire book, Paul says, (verse 16), "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Now, we could stop here and spend the rest of time on these two verses and still not cover their full meaning. (We're not going to do that.) But I do want to say a few words about some of the words we just read.

Start with the word "gospel." These might be familiar words, but they're important. The word gospel means "good news." It's a word that describes what God has done for us in Jesus. What God has done for us (in Jesus) is good news, because it leads to our salvation. On the cross, Jesus died for our sin, and in the empty tomb, Jesus was raised back to life. It all leads to the possibility of eternal life for us. That's why it's good news.

Paul says this good news is of "first importance." That was in our final reading this morning. It's primary to our faith; central to what we believe. Without the gospel, there's no hope for eternal life, because (apart from what Jesus has done) our lives come up short. Now, we'll say more about that in a moment. For now, we're just touching on some of the words, the word gospel.

The other word worth noting is the word "righteousness." Paul says, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith..." In other words, it's by our faith in the gospel (in this good news), in what Jesus has done for us, that we become righteous.

What does it mean to be righteous? It means that we become "right" with God. It means that there's nothing that stands between us. There's nothing that gets in the way of the relationship God wants. All of your sin is forgiven. All of your failings are erased. In Jesus, through the gospel, we become right with God.

Now, there's one other word we need to mention, that's not mentioned in these verses, and that's the word "law," the word "law." The Bible (in its most basic form) is a combination of both law and gospel. The law tells us what God wants, how we are to live. And so we have the Ten Commandments and the other teachings that tell us what we're to do.

In contrast, we have the gospel, the good news that tells us not what we are to do, but what Jesus has already done. There's the law and there's the gospel. The one is on us, and the other is on him. What we are to do, and what God has done.

What Paul is saying is that he's not ashamed of the gospel, because what the gospel does is something we'd never be able to do. It makes us right with God. It reveals to us the need we have. And then it gives to us (in Jesus) what we actually need. We become righteous.

Now, that's a lot, and I know (for many of you), this isn't the first time you've heard it. This might not be anything new. But if we're going to hear this (again) for the first time, then we need to lay a foundation for what it's all about and why we need it.

In the first two chapters, Paul makes his case. In chapter three, he draws a conclusion, and in his conclusion he brings it all together. The law, the gospel, how we become righteous; look at what he says (verse 21), “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made know, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,” (verse 23), “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.) That’s his conclusion.

And so, who’s he talking about in these verses? He’s talking about you. (You are part of the “all.”) He’s talking about me. We are all involved. We’ve all sinned.

Now, what most people do, when they hear his conclusion, (even if they agree with it) is to try to do an end run around it. They say, “Well sure, I know I’ve sinned, but I haven’t sin sinned.” I haven’t done anything that’s really wrong. What they do is to compare themselves to others and think they’re doing OK.

Do you know what that is? When we compare ourselves to others and think we’re measuring up? It’s pride. It’s what the Bible talks about as self-righteousness, and that’s as bad (if not worse) than the other sins themselves. It’s trying to be righteous (before God) based upon our “self”, and it doesn’t work.

Do you know what I think he’d do if Paul were here today? He’d pick up on the idea of taking “selfies.” He’d say, “Go ahead and take a ‘selfie’ and see what you see. If you’re honest (he’d say), it shows a lot; a lot more than most people want to see.”

The Bible says it’s like a sickness. It says our sin is a disease we all have. And until we recognize we’re sick, we’re not going to be able to do anything about it. It’s like when you’re sick and you refuse to go to the doctor. There’s nothing the doctor can do to help until you admit there’s something wrong. It’s the same thing.

So where does that lead? It says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” That’s the diagnosis. (We’re all infected.) It’s his conclusion. We’re all sick.

What’s the prognosis? In chapter six it tells us. It says, “The wages of sin is death” (6:23). The wages of sin is death. Where our sin leads is the grave, and it’s true. We’re all going to die. We all know that. (You can’t deny it.) The Bible says that. “Everyone has sinned, (and where it leads) is death.” Every one of us is going to die.

Over the past few weeks, (I don’t know if you’ve seen it), there have been a number of stories (in the news) about the Zika virus. It’s a disease that spreads primarily through bites from mosquitos. There aren’t many cases yet, at least not in the United States, so it’s not of major concern. Even when it happens, most of the symptoms are minor: a fever, a rash, red eyes, maybe a bit of joint pain. In most cases, people who have been infected don’t even realize they have it.

Now, it’s not the same, but it’s not that far off, either. In our culture, most of us realize that sin is real, and I don’t think any of us would deny it. But, because it shows up, most often, (in our lives) in little ways, most people function (from day to day) as if it’s not there. They’re infected, but they don’t even realize they have it.

Paul talks about that. In our second reading today, in chapter 5, he talks about how sin entered the world through one man, Adam, and because of Adam’s sin, the virus took effect. It started with Adam, but from there it began to spread. So, now, everyone has this infection. Everyone has death coming. We’ve all been diagnosed.

That’s when we’re introduced to this word “grace.” There’s an antidote for the infection we carry. There’s an answer to the sin (in our lives) that is real. Romans 5:15: “But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the sin of one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” So, Paul says, sin is great, but God’s grace is greater than sin.

I still remember some of the lessons in math when I was in Junior High and High School. There were these “greater than”, “less than” symbols we learned to use in some of the equations. That’s what Paul is saying. He’s saying that our sin is great, but God’s grace is greater than our sin. The things we’ve done wrong are many (and they add up); but the things God has done for us (in Jesus) are greater than whatever we’ve done. God’s grace is greater than...

You fill in the blank on this equation. Grace is greater than...whatever you put on the other side, grace is greater than whatever you put. Whatever sin that would come into your head, whatever mistake you’ve made (that you wish you hadn’t), whatever you most regret, whatever season of life you want to pretend never happened...Grace is greater than that. Grace is greater than sin.

I don't care what that sin is... Grace is greater than your sin. It doesn't matter if you've had an abortion. Grace is greater than that abortion. It doesn't matter if you've gone through a divorce. Grace is greater than that divorce. It doesn't matter if you were unfaithful, if you've been dishonest, if you're hiding something that no one else knows; if you've been abused, if you've been addicted, if you've been caught up in bullying, (at school or at work), it doesn't matter. If there's something in your life that (you think) will always be there and that can never go away. Grace is greater than even that.

When we understand the greatness of grace, it makes all the difference. When we understand the greatness of God's grace, it changes life. It gives freedom. It gives promise. It gives hope. It's greater than... no matter what you've done, how severe the infection, how debilitating your pain has become, God's grace is greater than...

Look at this next verse. Paul continues, (verse 16), he says, "The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many sins and brought justification (being made right with God.) For if, by the trespass of one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

How much more will God's abundant grace reign in your life through Jesus Christ! How much more!

(Verse 19): "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

Don't miss that. (Don't miss that.) You can miss a lot of things, but don't miss that. God's great grace is greater than your sin, and his grace is for all... and that means you and that means me.

The challenge with grace (and I'll close with this) and maybe even the problem is that it's not enough to simply understand it, to know what it means. We need to experience it to understand it. Before we can really know it, we need to experience it.

Paul will talk about grace in all of his letters. He'll use it hundreds of times and he helps us understand what it means. But Jesus never does. He doesn't use it. He only shows it. He shows us what it means by the way he lives, and by the way he deals (with people) and with us.

In the next few weeks, we'll be looking at some of the ways in which grace is lived out, how it became real in the lives of people. And I hope (and I pray) that in doing so, it'll become real for us as well. Grace is greater than...

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that your grace is greater than anything we might put on the other side; no matter what we've done, no matter what it is, no matter how far we've gone or strayed, your grace (in Jesus) is greater than any and all of that. Lord, we pray for the ability to not only know and understand what it means, but for hearts (and minds) to accept and trust and believe in what it promises. Be with us in these next weeks as we consider the greatness of your grace, and give us faith to know that your grace (in Jesus) is for us. Amen.