

“Greater Than...Our Shame”

We're spending these four weeks (following Easter) talking about a “Greater than...less than” equation. And here's the premise for what this series is all about. Grace is greater than...whatever. Grace is just greater than... That's what Paul says, in a couple of places, the glorious grace of God is greater. It's just greater.

I don't know what you would put in this blank. Last week we talked about how grace is greater than our sins and our failures. I don't know what those are for you. Take a moment and think about it, fill in this blank in your own head. I don't know what you would write.

I don't know the sins you've committed. I don't know the mistakes you've made. I don't know the failures you carry. I don't know the regrets that keep you awake at night. I don't know the things you hold inside. I don't know what you've said that you wish you could take back. I don't know what you've done (or failed to do) that you wish you hadn't (or maybe) had. I don't know.

What I know (what I know) is this equation: that God's grace is greater than anything you might write in that blank. It's greater than anything you might write. God's grace is greater than all of that stuff. It's greater than whatever.

We spent a good amount of time (last week) laying a foundation. We looked at number of passages. This one from Hebrews is where we started. It says, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God” (See to it that no one misses the grace of God.)

That's my prayer (in this series) that no one misses the grace of God. It would be tragic if that happened. You can miss a lot of things (in life), but don't miss the grace of God. It makes all the difference.

Now, I'm not going to go back and review everything we talked about. (We talked about a lot.) But I do want to encourage you, if you weren't here, to go on line and listen.

We dealt some of the basic truths of the Bible: what we teach about God's law (and its purpose); what we believe about the gospel (and what it does); what it means to be righteous (right with God), and what we (need to know) about sin and why we so desperately need what only God can give. We talked about all of that; even more.

We even said that all of what we (talked about), for many of us, was nothing new, but that if God's grace is going to have its full impact, then we need to hear these “familiar truths” with fresh ears, as if for the first time. God's grace is greater than... If you weren't here, go back and listen to what we shared.

Now, I love talking about (all of this), on the one hand. I really do. I love teaching on it. (It's a great topic.) But on the other hand, it's really frustrating to try to explain something that can't ultimately be explained. If you're teaching about a subject, it's helpful to be able to teach about it. But with grace, I can teach about it, you can read about, we can talk (all day) about it, but until you experience it, you won't be able to (fully grasp) what it's all about. The only certain (and effective) and sure way to understand grace is to experience it.

It's like (what happens) in the story (from Luke 7) about the woman who was forgiven much; she loves much. We didn't read that, but that's what grace does. Once you experience it, it makes all the difference. (It changes how you live.) You can talk about it, but until you experience it, it doesn't sink in.

I can talk about winning a million dollars and try to explain it. But it's only words until it happens. When it happens, it's a different thing. I can imagine what it's like to be sentenced to life in prison and then, out of nowhere, hearing your sentence has been dismissed. It would change your life. But if I haven't experienced it, it's hard to understand. It's the same thing with grace.

E. B. White puts it this way. (He says), “Grace can be dissected like a frog, but the thing dies in the process.” You can take an academic approach to understanding grace. You can read the definition from a theological dictionary. You can do the word studies and get what it means. (That's all good and you can do it.) You can dissect it (like a frog) but (in the process) you're going to kill it.

Until you experience it, you'll never understand it. An explanation does not do enough. And that's why the gospels, (the stories about Jesus) and what he has done for us are mostly stories. They're stories about Jesus and his experiences with people. And in those stories, that's where we learn about grace.

Today we're in John, chapter 8, if you want to follow along. It's a story about a woman and about grace. (We just read it.) You remember. It happened early one morning. John says it was "at dawn" when it happened. In the courtyard, one of the Temple courts, a crowd of people had gathered and Jesus sat down to teach.

I always find it interesting, when it comes to Jesus' teaching ministry, how many people came to listen and especially (in this case), early in the morning. Jesus was a great teacher. He taught with authority. He knew what he was saying, and the people had gathered. We don't know what he was teaching on; it doesn't matter. He was there (that day) teaching and there was a crowd of people.

That's when it happened. In the middle of what he was doing, Jesus is interrupted by this mob that comes bursting through the gates and all of the attention (immediately shifts) from (Jesus teaching) to this angry mob that's made up many of the religious leaders. John says it was the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who came bursting in.

Try to picture it. Being pushed in front of them is this woman. I think we can assume she's probably wearing not much more than a bed sheet, if that. She's shoved to the ground in front of Jesus.

One of the religious leaders picks her up and makes her stand in front of the group, and then asks, (he says), "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?"

This is quite the setting; not what anyone expected. All of a sudden, this teaching session comes to an end and Jesus is on the spot. (He knew what they were doing.) He knew it was a trap. So he bends down and starts to write on the ground with his finger.

That's interesting. We don't know what he was writing. (John doesn't tell us.) It would be a good question to ask Jesus when we see him. Some have suggested he was writing the sins of the religious leaders in the dirt. (It would be interesting to know.) We don't know.

What we do know is that it was a trap, on a number of levels. For one, it's only the woman who's being dragged into the courtyard. (Did you notice that?) Somehow the man involved was let off. That's a bit suspicious in itself.

Two, the Law (of Moses) referred to (by the leaders) doesn't prescribe the punishment they suggested (that she be stoned), except in the case of a woman who was engaged, and this woman was not.

Three, the woman's accusers must have been especially eager to humiliate her, since they could have kept her in (private custody) while they spoke to Jesus, but (instead) made this very public.

And four, it was somewhat of "rock and a hard place" for Jesus, because only the Roman government had the authority to sentence a person to death, so Jesus couldn't do that, even if he wanted. And if he didn't (do that), then he would be speaking against the Law of Moses, and that wouldn't have helped his credibility with the people. There's no question it was a trap.

So, what does he do? He bends down and writes in the dirt. Meanwhile, they continue to question him. Finally he looks up (and it's all quiet) and he (looks around) and says, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And then, again, he stoops down and writes.

When he did this (it says), one by one, the stones drop and they all walk away, starting with the eldest. (That's an interesting note.) The oldest ones walk away first. The further along in life you go, the more you realize we've all failed. The eldest ones walk away first, until finally it's just Jesus and this woman. (All the others have left.)

She looks at him and his eyes are not filled with condemnation and judgment. He says to her, "Where are your accusers? Is there no one left to condemn you?"

You need to understand, (when he says that), Jesus already knows this woman. He was human (while he was here), but he knows her. He knows (his Father) knows her. This is one of his children. (He loves her.) He created her. He's known her from the start.

He says, "Is there no one left to condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

My friends, this is guilt. This is sin. (It probably wasn't the first time.) But this time, she's caught in the act. The door's ripped open. She's pulled from the bed. There's no question about her guilt. It's the worst day of her life. Her darkest secret has been found out. What she doesn't realize is that the worst day of her life is about to become the best day of her life, because in her sin she meets Jesus.

Here's what this woman learns that many of us need to still learn (when it comes to grace), and that is that grace is greater than your secrets. Grace is greater than your secrets.

I think her worst fear was that someone would find out. I think that was her worst fear. (Maybe that's where some of you are at.) A lot of us keep things secret from ourselves. We keep it a secret by living in denial of our lust or our pride or our greed or our selfishness. We keep it a secret by comparing ourselves to others, thinking it's not that big a deal. We keep it a secret by justifying what we do or what we've done. We don't want anyone else to know. We don't want our secret to be found out, and so we keep it to ourselves.

But here's the thing. You think the worst thing that can happen is that someone else will know your secret. But here's the truth you'll find when your secret is told. God's grace is greater than your secret. God's grace is greater than your secret.

You don't know it until it's been brought from the dark into the light, until it's exposed. But when that happens and you're afraid that it'll be found out (what'll happen), that's when you'll be met with this beautiful truth: God's grace is greater than your secret.

That doesn't mean that you have to stand up and announce it to the world. Whatever it is, Jesus doesn't need us to go public. But don't live with it. Don't live with it. Bring whatever it is that's in the dark into the light and discover that God's grace is greater than your secret.

There's a book that came out called "Post-Secret." I wouldn't recommend it; it's rather dark. Written by a man named Frank Warren, he printed 3,000 postcards, and the postcards said, "You're invited to anonymously contribute a secret to a group art project. Reveal anything you want as long as it's true and you've never shared it with anyone." Then he left these postcards in a number of public places where people could fill them out and send them in. Then he published this book.

Some of them are weird, maybe funny, a bit disturbing. One woman wrote, "I'm afraid of other women who wear Capri pants." That's sort of random, but (for her) it's real. Another person wrote, "I get angry when people include me in a group text." I don't understand that, but I guess it happens. Someone else wrote, "I give decaf to customers who are rude to me." (I laughed when I read that one.) Some of them are strange. But most of them are just sad. They're sad.

- "I wish my father had forgiven me while he was still alive."
- "Sometimes I wish I was blind, so I wouldn't have to look at myself each day in the mirror."
- "My husband doesn't know he's raising his best friend's child."
- "I haven't spoken to my dad in ten years, and it kills me every day."
- "Every time I eat, I feel like a failure."
- "I'm only happy when I buy things."
- The last one in the book is an interesting one. It says, "I've told all my secrets and now I feel free."

But here's the thing: there is not freedom without grace. There is not freedom without grace. When you've finally confessed, you finally let it go, you'll discover this most beautiful thing; that this secret that you've been keeping inside, that's contaminating your relationship with other people (and with God), that this secret that you've (been holding), you'll discover that, through Jesus, God's grace is greater than that secret.

The other thing Jesus teaches this woman about grace (and he teaches us as well) is that God's grace is greater than shame. God's grace is greater than shame.

Jesus is left alone with this woman. She is humiliated and ashamed, and that's when he says to her, "I don't condemn you, either. Go and leave your life of sin." He gives her a second chance, a fresh start. She is not only free from her condemnation, (and her accusers), but she's (maybe for the first time) in a long time, free to start anew.

One of the things I think happens (with many people), even with Christians, is that they know they're forgiven. They know God doesn't condemn them. They've received grace, but they don't live in it. They can't let it go. They feel bad. It's still there. It hangs on; for whatever reason.

Even others in the church, they won't let (each other) let it go. They keep bringing it up. They won't let you get past it. It's been years, but you remember when this happened, or that happened, and it never goes away.

Jesus says, "What are you doing?" I removed that sin long ago. I nailed that sin to the cross. As far as the east is from the west, in the deepest part of the ocean, it's gone. Stop bringing it up!

Jesus came to set us free, not just from sin, but from the guilt (and the shame) of sin. My prayer is that (each of us) would encounter God's grace in such a way that we would not only be able to define it, but to experience it and (from it) tell a story.

A preacher (maybe you know), named Matt Chandler, he tells this story of a how he met this young lady, a single mom, named Sharon. He and some of his friends (from seminary) were trying to introduce her to God, so they invited her to this Christian concert.

After the band had played, this preacher got up. His topic was sex, and (it was obvious) he was angry out of the gate. He started talking about STD's and statistics and all of the dangers. Then he took out this red rose and he smelled it. It was fresh and beautiful. It looked good. It was perfect. And then he took the rose and threw it into the crowd and told them to pass it around and smell it. Meanwhile, he continues to preach about sex and he's pointing the finger and his voice is raised. Matt's sitting next to this single mom, a rough past. The (whole time), her head is turned down, feeling bad.

Then he closes out his sermon and he asks for the rose to be brought up to him; bring my rose back up. And so they bring the rose back up. It's broken. It's bent over. Most of the petals are gone. He holds up the rose and he says, "Now, who would want this rose? (Who would want this rose?) It's been handled. It's a mess. It doesn't even smell like a rose. Nobody would want this? Nobody would buy this?"

He's sitting next to this young lady, and he said the whole time, he wished he had done it. (He didn't.) He wanted to stand up and yell: "Jesus wants that rose! Jesus bought that rose!"

That's the whole point of the gospel! "The one who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in him we could become right with God." That's the whole reason Jesus came, to make us right with God. The whole reason he came is to take what is broken and turn it into something new. That's what the whole story is about.

Jesus wants that rose. Jesus wants that broken rose. No matter where it's been, no matter what has happened. And there's a word for that, and that word is grace. Amen.