

“Greater Than...Our Hurts”

The Bible says (in Hebrews 12), “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 during this series, that no one misses the grace of God, because if you miss the grace of God, you’re missing what it’s all about.

A lot of people miss what it’s all about. They try to replace it with things (they think) might work: rules to follow, things you’re supposed to do, thinking those things (you do) will make you right with God. It doesn’t work. The only thing that makes us right with God is God’s grace.

We’ve been dealing with a rather simple formula (in this series): Grace is greater than...whatever you put in the blank. Whatever you put, God’s grace is greater. It’s just greater.

We started by talking about how God’s grace is greater than our sin. It’s greater than the mistakes you’ve made; greater than the failures that follow you. It’s greater than the guilt that haunts you. It’s greater than all of that.

Last week, we talked about how God’s grace is greater than our shame. We all have things we’re ashamed of, wish we’d never done. We all have times in our life we wish had never happened; we don’t want the world to know. Those secrets we hold inside; those experiences we try to forget (or deny). It doesn’t matter what they are. God’s grace is greater. It’s greater.

Now, we also said (last week) that it’s one thing to talk about grace. It’s another to experience it. Until we experience it, we’ll never really know what it’s like. It’s like we’ve all been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and then find out that there’s a cure. (All of a sudden it becomes real.) It’s like we’ve all racked up this incredible debt, and then find out it’s been paid off. (It changes life.) Who doesn’t love grace when we’re on the receiving end? We all do. It’s wonderful to receive what God has to give.

But here’s what we’re going to do today. We’re going to flip this grace point over and instead of talking about receiving grace, we’re going to talk about giving grace, about offering grace, and that’s when it starts getting messy.

Grace is a lovely concept, as long as we’re not talking about the father who berated you, about the spouse who cheated on you, about the boss who fired you, the co-worker who stabbed you in the back, the relative who abused you. It’s a fine idea, as long as you’re on the receiving end. It’s a lot harder when you’re on the giving end.

The Bible says (in the book of Proverbs) that “each heart knows its own bitterness.” In other words, we’ve all been hurt. We all have things we carry with us. Maybe it was from years ago. Maybe it was when you were a child. There was this sin that was committed against you. Maybe you were betrayed or you were abandoned or you were victimized, or you were ignored or you were rejected or you were bullied. That’s when grace isn’t so easy.

Today we’re in Matthew 18, the parable of the unmerciful servant. Here’s what we’re going to learn (in this story): Grace is only grace if it goes both ways. Grace that comes from God is only grace if it goes both ways. If all you do is receive it, but you don’t give it, then you’ve stopped short of what grace is all about.

So here’s what this message is all about. This is what Jesus wants us to hear. He says the extent to which you are willing to give grace reveals the extent to which you have (understood) and received grace. How we give it reveals how much we have understood (and accepted) it. It all becomes real when we’re called to give.

That’s when you know that all of this is real. That’s when you know it’s real, when you’re called to give grace and not just receive it, especially to someone who has really hurt you and who doesn’t deserve it. It’s in that moment that you find out that God’s grace in your life is real.

Here’s how this passage starts. It starts with Peter coming to Jesus with a question, and it’s a general question. But, in this case, I have to believe there was a situation Peter had in mind when he asked.

He said, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” (He sets up this math problem.) He says, “How many times should I forgive my brother who sins against me?” (And then he suggests an answer.) He says, “Up to seven times?”

Now, we don't know (for sure) what Peter was thinking, but I have to believe (when he asked) that he thought (seven times) would be enough. The Jewish rabbis taught that you should forgive three times, but on the fourth time, you no longer had to forgive. Peter says seven times. I have to believe he thought that was enough.

Now, we don't know what he was thinking, but I wouldn't be surprised if there was a specific person (or situation) or face or story Peter had in mind, when he asked. And I wouldn't be surprised if Peter had been hurt and had already forgiven (not once) or twice or three times, but seven times, and he was ready to be done.

Maybe for you, it's not a certain amount, but it's the degree of. It's not seven times. It's just one time. But it's times seven. That's how deeply you've been hurt or wounded and it doesn't go away.

I don't know who it was for Peter. I don't know who it was (or is) for you. It doesn't matter. For all of us, there's probably a name or a story. And so Peter's question is good. How far is too far? How much is too much? When does grace run out?

Here's what Peter wants to know. When does our hurt become greater than grace? When does what has happened to me (in life) become greater than what grace is able to do? When does this "greater than" symbol get turned around?

Jesus answers (verse 22), "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Some versions say "seventy times seven.") What's Jesus saying? He's saying grace is never less than. Grace is always greater than.

Now, intellectually, (in our minds), we understand what Jesus is saying. We might even agree with it. But it's hard to bring the two together when it's your hurt or your pain, or you were the one who was abandoned or betrayed. It's hard to figure out how that might work.

And so, Jesus tells this parable to help us. (Verse 23): "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him."

That's a lot of money. Some translations say "ten thousand bags of gold." It's the equivalent of about 150 million dollars. Or, (another way to think about it), it was about the same as ten times the national budget for the people of that day. (It was a lot of money.)

Verse 25: "Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt." That's the way it worked in those days. If you couldn't pay the debt, you could either be thrown into prison or you (and your family) could be sold (as slaves) to pay it off. In this case, even if they were sold, the debt was still too great. So, the master decides to cut his losses and to simply close the books and move on.

Now, clearly, this is a huge debt and there's no way it can be paid off. In the parable, it's meant to reflect our standing before God. (That was week one.) All of us have sinned, and that sin has racked up a debt we can never repay.

Now, we (often) live as if we can. We try to convince ourselves that it doesn't really matter, but it does. All of the things we've done that (we think) no one knows, and that (maybe even) we've forgotten, God knows. They're still there, and the debt continues to build.

Like that paper in college you turned in (that wasn't really yours); the teacher never knew, but God knew. Or that flirting at the gym that (has crossed the line)? Your husband may not know, but God knows. Or the history on your computer that's been deleted (of all of those websites you've visited), God knows that history. Or the windows on your house that you've shut, so the neighbors can't hear what's going on, God hears what's going on. Or the boss may not know about the embezzlement, but God knows it happened. (God knows all of it.) God even knows the pride some of you are feeling (right now) because none of what I just listed applied to you.

The Bible says "nothing in all creation is hidden from his sight." So what happens? He pulls up our account and there's this huge debt. There's no way it can be repaid.

Verse 26: "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'" No he won't. (It's not possible.) Jesus uses this astronomical number to make the point that repayment is not an option. It's not going to happen.

Here's what happens (verse 27): it says, "The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." (He let him go.) 150 million dollars and he canceled it. It's unbelievable! He doesn't extend the note. He doesn't reduce the monthly payment. He just cancels it. It's completely erased. It's this incredible act of grace.

Now, here's where the story takes a disturbing twist. Verse 28: "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (twenty bucks). He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me' he demanded."

So this servant who was forgiven 150 million dollars refuses to offer twenty dollars of forgiveness. So (verse 29) "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'" (The exact same quote as this guy had said to his master.) He's asking for the same forgiveness (or grace) as he had received, only to a much lesser degree. (What happens?)

(Verse 30): "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." (He has him thrown into prison.) And then verse 31, (an important verse that's easy to overlook). "When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened."

So, Jesus says it was the other servants who reported him. The other servants saw how much grace had been given and how unwilling this other servant was willing to offer, and they were outraged. How come? Why were they so upset? (I'll tell you why: because they all lived in community. They all lived (in this community together) under this master who doesn't treat them as servants but as his children. They have this master who is over-the-top gracious and it all works.

But, when one of their own, (receives this kind of grace), but refuses to give it, there's a big problem. It says they were outraged (greatly distressed.) That might sound harsh, but it's appropriate. When we all live in community and we know how much we've been forgiven, and one of our own refuses to give it, it's not going to work.

It's not going to work if we just receive it, but we refuse to give it. When we see brothers and sisters who have received God's grace act ungracious toward others...there's a big problem. When we see someone whose debt has been fully paid act out of judgment toward someone whose struggles are different than their own...greatly distressed. When we see legalism set in, trying to impose rules (on each other) that don't finally matter as if they do...that's a problem.

And so, within this parable of grace, there's this call for righteous outrage; that as a church, we're not going to be OK with un-grace. (We're not.) It's not OK when one of our own is judgmental, or condemning, or gossiping about someone else who comes in and is different and has troubles that are not like ours. It's not OK.

You see, (in the story) within this community, there's this determination (among the servants) that they're going to reflect the master's heart. That's what they want (in their community) more than anything. They want the master's heart to be reflected in how they deal with others. (That's what the master wants, too.)

And so what happens? The master is outraged when he finds out. (Verse 32): "'You wicked servant,' he said, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."

That's going to take a long time. How long's that going to take him...in prison, to earn a hundred and fifty million dollars? A long time. It's going to take him forever. He's never going to pay it back. He's going to spend the rest of his existence in jail with this incredible debt and overwhelming guilt. Do you know what that's called (in the Bible)? It's called hell.

So, sometimes Jesus' parables are a bit unclear. You have to go home and think about them for a while before the meaning sets in. It needs to marinate before you finally get it. Not so with this parable.

Here's how the story ends. Jesus says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Now, I know some of us would want to push back on that and say "So, you're telling me that if I don't forgive the person who hurt me, who abused me, who betrayed me, who abandoned me, that God's not going to forgive me?"

I'm not saying that. I'm just telling you what Jesus said. It's a clear lesson. Jesus says, "I've paid your bill. I've washed it all away. It's over. It's gone. It's all been erased, thrown away. And all I'm asking is that you extend the same kind of grace to others that I've extended to you." (That's all I'm asking.)

We can't just receive grace and not give it to others. That's not OK. And that's not always easy. I get it. I understand it. (I've experienced it.) It's not always easy. The hurt doesn't just go away. It might still be there, but it needs to happen.

Maybe that person owes you a lot. (I'm not making light of that; neither is Jesus.) It might be a lot...a childhood, for starters. Maybe they owe you a marriage? Maybe they owe you money? Maybe they owe you a career? Whatever it is, it still hurts. But here's how it works. Jesus will never ask you to give more of it than you've already received. He'll never do that. It's called grace.

And so Jesus answers Peter's question (his formula) with one of his own. Here's what he says. 150 million dollars is greater than twenty bucks. (In case you weren't sure.) What you've been forgiven of (by God) is greater than you'll be asked to forgive. (And that's not to make light of how much you've been hurt.) It's simply to say that the more you understand the holiness of God and how great the debt you owe really is, the more you'll realize how true this is.

Let me close with this (and I know this is a hard lesson), but "The key to giving grace (hard, messy grace), is to stop thinking about what's been done to you, and to start thinking about what Jesus has done for you."

It's hard. I'm not saying it's easy. (Often times it's not.) But when the bitterness begins to grow, the anger seems like it's out of control, and the resentment (you're feeling) toward that person (who hurt you) won't stop, you need to stop thinking about what's been done to you, and replace it with thoughts of what Jesus has done for you. Because what Jesus has done for you will give you the grace (you need) to forgive (whatever it was) or is that has been done to you. Amen.