

“Greater Than...Our Circumstances”

Today we're wrapping up a four-week series on grace that we've simply been calling “Greater Than...” It really doesn't matter what you put at the end of that sentence, it's true. Grace is greater than...whatever. God's grace is just greater.

What I knew would happen when we began this series is what has actually happened. I knew I would get frustrated because, as the explainer, it's hard to try to explain something that can't actually be explained. That's frustrating, because there are some things in life that can only be experienced. That's true when it comes to grace.

You can't really define it with words. You can't picture it with a diagram. We can study the verses, talk through the definitions. But, ultimately, grace is something you can only experience. Until you've experienced it, it doesn't really make sense.

That's why my prayer has been (throughout this series) not so much that we would understand it, but that we'd be able to experience it. That when you hear grace talked about, that it would bring about more than just a definition, but an emotion, because of the difference it has made in your life. My prayer (has been) that no one misses the grace of God, because if you miss the grace of God, you miss what it's all about.

Today we're talking about God's grace being greater than our circumstances. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, (the apostle Paul says), “...give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” Give thanks in all circumstances.

Now, when we think about our circumstances, we're thinking about what's around us, our situation. In fact, the word “circumstance” comes from the same root as the word “circumference.” It's this idea that if you could draw a big circle around you, whatever happens within that circle would be your circumstances.

Now, what we learn (early in life) is that much of what happens within our circle (our circumference) is beyond our control. We like to think that we have some control and (to a certain degree) we do. But there's still so much beyond our control. There's much that happens within our circumstances that we don't get to choose.

And yet, Paul says, “...give thanks in all circumstances.” But it's hard to (grasp that), because we have this idea that the reason we don't give thanks is because of our circumstances. If only our circumstances would change, then we'd be able to give thanks. We think the problem is our circumstances.

I wouldn't be angry or disappointed or discouraged, or I wouldn't be frustrated or irritated or depressed if my circumstances were different. So, we create this kind of “if, then” relationship with our circumstances. If this changed (in my life) or if this were different, within my circumference, then things would be different.

If I could get that promotion at work...If I could meet the right person...If we could just get pregnant...If my husband would be more patient...If my wife would be more willing...If my neighbors would move...If my health was better...If the parking lot was closer...If my parents would stop fighting...If the boss was more understanding...If my co-workers were more of a team... If my children were more obedient, if the house was bigger, the car was newer, my teacher wasn't so tough, the kids at my school weren't so mean.

We have all these things, we think, that if just a few of them would change within my circumstances, then things would be better. Then we could be thankful, we could be joyful.

What this is, this is often referred to as “The Happiness Illusion.” We have this illusion that our happiness is determined by our circumstances. And so, when it doesn't happen, (we're not happy), we get frustrated because there are always things within our circle that we can't change.

And yet, Paul says, “...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” How can he say that? How can he expect us to be thankful no matter what's happening within our circle? Is he that much different than us? Does he have something we don't? Maybe he's just wired differently? Maybe he had a good life? Maybe he never went through anything that was not his choice?

Now, if you know Paul's story, you know that's not true. We read part of it today, our second reading. (I'll read just a bit.) It says, “Five times I received...the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been

constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. (That's a lot of danger.) I have labored and toiled and gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (That's quite a list.)

In Paul's situation, within his circumference, he's gone through a lot. And so, how can he tell us (in all of that) to "give thanks in all circumstances?" After all he's gone through? How you do that?

Now, some of you might point me to a preposition. (You've looked at this before.) It says we're to give thanks not "for" all circumstances, but "in" all circumstances. (I get it.) There's a difference. We're not thankful for being beaten with rods and for being shipwrecked and for being in danger, or for whatever, but "in" those situations, we can still give thanks. I get it.

But really? Maybe the first time I could do it. But (beaten with rods) the second time and the third time, (shipwrecked), treading water? Is Paul crazy? How does he do it? What allows him to do it? No matter what comes inside of his circumference, he still says we're to be thankful. I don't want to make this too simple, but I would have to say (for Paul and for us) it all comes down to grace.

There's a simple formula were looking at this week, that grace is greater than my circumstances. Grace is greater than my circumstances. It's God's grace that allows us to look at whatever circumstances we face, and to be able to be joyful and give thanks.

In fact, at the end of this same chapter where he says "give thanks in all circumstances," he closes out the book by saying "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (That's how he closes his letter.) And it's not just in this letter, but in every letter he wrote, except for one. It's how he closes out all of his letters.

What he does, (what he's doing), is he's asking us to hang on to God's grace, because the only way we can be thankful (in all circumstances) is by the grace of God. There's no other way. It's the only way it can happen. And it happens, because God's grace is so much greater than anything circumstantially we will ever face.

That's what we've been saying for the past three weeks. God's grace is greater. It's just greater. It's greater than our sin. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Whatever guilt we're carrying, whatever shame is part of our past. It's greater. It's greater than our secrets, those things we try to hide, we want to run away from, we don't want the world to know. God's grace is greater.

It's greater than our hurts. It doesn't matter what it was or is. It doesn't matter what pain you've experienced because of another person. God's grace is greater than all of that. You don't have to be bitter any longer. It doesn't matter what's been done to us. What's been done for us is greater. God's grace is greater.

Now, I know it's hard to put it into (that kind of) perspective when you're going through it, but we need to do it. In light of what God has promised for us (and what awaits us), the things we're facing (while we're here) don't even compare.

In fact, it's interesting, when Paul says that we're "to give thanks in all circumstances", when it comes to the word for giving thanks, it's the word "eucharisto." (You might have heard that word before.) The Eucharist is the meal of thanksgiving we call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. What that word is, is a combination of two words: the word "good" and the word "grace." What it means is God's good grace.

So, in the Bible, it's hardly ever used to thank God for specific circumstances (or things), like we often do, but (instead) it's used to thank God for who he is in the midst of our circumstances. And so (within our circumference), no matter what is happening around us, we are to thank God for his good grace.

Now, that might not seem like such a big difference, but it is. And it is because God's good grace is not dependent upon the things we're experiencing or what's happening. We know (in the midst of difficult experiences) that God is bigger and better and greater. In the midst of tough situations, we know that God is superior and sovereign. And so, for that, we give thanks in all circumstances.

Now, the verse we've lifted up (for the past few weeks), from Hebrews 12, says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God." The writer says that we need to make sure that no one misses the grace of God. We've been spending time (each week) with that verse. (And we should.) It's what defines us as a church. It's what identifies us as a community. It's God's grace that makes us who we are. Without it, we'd be something else, something less. It says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God."

What we haven't done is to look at the second half of that verse. It says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God...and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

Now, I've been pastoring long enough to know that people can come up with all kinds of reasons to stay away from the church. And, from what I've seen (over the years), more often than not, those reasons are nothing more than an excuse.

I also know that some of the reasons people stay away is because they've experienced churches where the grace of God has been missed. People hear about God, but they don't hear about grace. And, at some point, a bitter root begins to grow.

And so these seasons in life show up where they turn their back on it and walk away from it. They become bitter towards it. That's what happens when you miss grace.

In the Hebrew culture, a poisonous plant was called a bitter plant. So, when the Hebrew writer says "a bitter root," he's talking about a poisonous plant. He's using this metaphor to describe what happens. When a church misses grace, it becomes a poisonous place. (That's the idea.) When a church misses grace, it becomes poisonous. The roots may be small and it may be slow in growing, but it carries a poison and it causes trouble and it defiles many.

There are a lot of stories that capture that. I want to close out this message (this series) a bit differently by sharing just a few stories that (I hope) underscore the importance of this idea that "no one misses the grace of God."

The first story is from when I was in High School, in youth group. I grew up in this church. It wasn't in this church, but it was in a church one of my friends attended. I was probably 15 at the time. This girl (I knew) was 16 or 17 when she became pregnant.

Now, in a big city (like San Jose), you can hide (from a lot of things), but not at school or at church. She was attending this other church and once she began showing, some of the parents began complaining. It was getting uncomfortable. They didn't want their kids exposed to that whole thing when they came to church. It didn't take long before she got the message that she wasn't welcome...not in her condition. I could be wrong, but I have to believe that it was at about that time that a bitter root began to grow.

Story #2: Again, when I was in High School. This one was at our church, right here at St. Timothy's. We didn't have a youth pastor back then; we had youth leaders, some of the adults who cared enough to commit their time. I didn't realize it (at the time), but their involvement (in what we were doing) had as much to do with my faith growth as anything else. I thank God for them, especially now looking back.

I was a senior at the time and there was this kid who was socially a bit awkward. He was there (almost all the time) and he fit in, but he never really fit in. At school he had a tough time. We didn't call it bullying (back then), but that's what it was, and he was often on the receiving end.

For the most part, in youth group, we did everything we could to reach out and to make him feel like he mattered and we cared. Except for one night, one of the kids in the group made fun of him (in front of the others) and that awkward kid stopped coming.

It was early in the school year when it happened. He didn't come back until almost the end, when the kid who made fun of him (in front of all the other kids) apologized and actually started crying. That kid who made fun of the other kid is now one of your pastors. And I still remember. (What was shared was poisonous.) I hope I never forget.

Last story; a pastor named John LaRue tells about some work he did with a ministry called "Love In Action." Love In Action is a ministry that helps people who are caught up in some kind of sexual addiction. John tells about sitting in one of their group meetings. He'd never been to one before. He didn't know what to expect.

It was a rather large group of men who had gathered and one of the men went to the front and began telling his story. He told about driving home from work (earlier that week) and how he passed this adult night club and how he really wanted to stop. And when he said this, a number of the men raised their hands. And he said it was uncomfortable, he didn't know what they were doing, why there were so many questions.

But the man continued. He said he wanted to keep on driving, but he didn't. He pulled into the parking and went into the night club. And again, a number of hands went up. And then he said, he spent the evening at this adult place and he confessed some of what he did. And again, hands went up, more hands kept going up.

And then (in his story) he said, "When I left, I felt so ashamed and I didn't think God could love me." And when he said this (John said), almost every hand in the room went up, except for his. He didn't understand. Why were there so many questions and why weren't the questions being answered? He didn't get it.

After the meeting was over the director stopped him. He said, “You looked troubled during the meeting.” John said, “I was troubled, and I still am.” He said, “Why were there so many questions? Why so many hands raised? Why didn’t anyone try to answer them?”

The director said, “You don’t understand.” (He said), “We have one rule at ‘Love In Action’ and that is that when you’re struggling with something, you’re never alone. And so, when someone shares their struggles and if you’ve ever struggled with the same thing being confessed, then you need to raise your hand.”

Now, everybody look up here for a moment. That needs to happen here. That needs to mark who we are as a church in a more significant way than ever before, if we are ever going to have an impact in this community and world for the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we’re going to be sure that no one misses the grace of God, then this needs to be a place of raised hands. This doesn’t need to be a place of pointed fingers and, thankfully (over the years) it hasn’t been. But it does need to be a place of raised hands, where people know it’s OK to be broken, where people raise their hands and say “Me, too. I’m broken, too.”

That’s my prayer, that this would be a church where people aren’t afraid to raise their hands, because it’s not happening in the world. There are a lot of broken people (in the world), but not nearly as many raised hands. This place needs to be a place where that’s OK.

So, as we close today, don’t be looking around to see whose hand goes up, but as I read this list, feel free to raise your hand if it fits.

Grace is greater than my addiction. Grace is greater than my pride. Grace is greater than my materialism. Grace is greater than my lust. Grace is greater than my abortion. Grace is greater than my affair. Grace is greater than my abuse. Grace is greater than my loneliness. Grace is greater than my anger. Grace is greater than my selfishness. Grace is greater than my unkind words. Grace is greater than my divorce. Grace is greater than my cancer. Grace is greater than my diabetes. Grace is greater than the pressure I feel at work. Grace is greater than the experience I’ve had at school. Grace is greater than the damage I’ve done to my marriage. Grace is greater than the father who was always disappointed in me. Grace is greater than the mother who never wanted me. Grace is greater than the kids who bully me. Grace is greater than the walls I’ve built to protect myself from being hurt. Grace is greater than my ugly past. Grace is greater than my broken family. Grace is greater than my guilt. Grace is greater than my secrets. Grace is greater than my shame. Grace is greater than my sin. It doesn’t matter what you put at the end of that sentence. Grace is just greater. Grace is greater. In this place, (and that’s my prayer), it’s always OK to raise your hands. Amen.