

GRACE

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Keep your Bibles open there at Matthew 18. I'll pray. Gracious Father, a couple of days before Christmas, as you remember the great event of the Lord Jesus coming into this world, to live that obedient life, to die that substitutionary death, to be raised in a very powerful way, Lord, we pray that we would see the implications of your grace to us and the implications in terms of our grace to one another as we look at this passage.

So we need your help to do the thing that we cannot do, to not just see the facts of this story, but to see the glory of it.

And so, Lord, we pray that we would not just understand your grace, but that we would rejoice in it, that we would see the beauty and the glory of it this morning from your word so come and help us, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. A former American footballer with the Miami Dolphins was interviewed by Newsweek and he was asked the question, what motivated him to go to university?

And his reply was, my father and uncle were human cannonballs in the carnivals. He said, one day my father came to me and said, son, go to university or become a human cannonball.

[1 : 27] And he said, one day while I was contemplating my future, he said, my uncle came out of the cannon and hit the ferris wheel and that's when I decided to go to university. Motive is a strange thing to work out sometimes and especially as Christians.

What motivates us to be here this morning? What motivates us to pursue spiritual disciplines? What motivates us to give generously?

What motivates us to serve? What motivates us to do what we were doing even in the last week down at the mall? Often, it is true that our motives are mixed in the pursuit of right things, but it's also possible to have wrong motives in pursuing right things.

This is the last sermon in our short series on the grace of God. We started off being amazed by grace. It was right there at the very beginning.

I said that the grace of God is God's love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and in fact in defiance of their demerit. That is, neither all the good things we do nor the bad things we do actually count.

[2 : 41] God isn't drawn to us because that somehow we're better than other people and he isn't repulsed by us because our sin is so bad.

Grace is about God's free, unconditional, sovereign, electing love. In the end, it's not about us. It is about God and his character. Last week, we saw how this grace can scandalise us because our normal moral position is to think of ourselves more highly than we ought.

That is, we tend to play down our massive vices and we assume that the small occasional virtues will somehow cover up the massive vices.

It's like a bank robber before a judge and he's about to get convicted for armed robbery in a bank and he said, well, hang on a bit, judge, before you get too carried away here, just remember in your assessment of me that I didn't rob the bank on that corner and on that corner and that corner, I only just did this one here and the judge goes, oh, okay then.

I never considered that. So you're not such a bad bloke after all. Innocent. And now it's time for us to look at grace as grace being the motivation for us to live a life of grace and this is crucial.

[4 : 09] It's crucial because it's unfortunate that we often only get it half right when we look at the doctrine of grace. When we become a Christian, we understand that we are saved by grace but we get confused about what sort of comes after that.

We often are not clear about what it means to live by grace and there are two classic historical mistakes in response to being saved by grace. One, the first mistake is that I'm saved by grace but I

stay saved through doing good things.

It can be sort of like joining a sports team. You get into the team because the coach was gracious to you, he needed some spot field or because you signed the rego forms but you need to keep your spot in the team by earning your place by working hard and performing well to be part of the team. Another name for it is legalism and it is a great danger for us. Even good relational things like spiritual disciplines, things like evangelism and prayer and barberating and church and giving can easily become performance measures by which we gauge how things are going in our relationship with God.

Now don't get me wrong here, I want to actively promote disciplines like those things amongst Christians. They are absolutely necessary for growth as Christians but they are benefits.

[5 : 41] They are not duties. They are a privilege. Legalism is very, very dangerous because the legalist is often deluded by their own self-righteousness and pride becomes a massive problem and remember what I said last week and Deb's reminded us this morning, pride is the thick hide that grace cannot penetrate.

Legalism isn't how grace works. Salvation is all God's work from beginning to the end. from the moment you begin the Christian life until you enter heaven and I would even say that for all of eternity in heaven, it is all by the grace of God.

All by the grace of God. Take for instance Romans 8. If you're really quick with your Bible, flick to Romans 8, verse 28 to verse 30. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And here it is. And those He predestined, He called, and those He called, He justified, and those He justified, He also glorified.

It is all of God's work from beginning right through to the end, from eternity past to eternity future. It is His work in choosing, His work in saving, His work in changing, it is all His gracious action.

[7 : 22] So legalism is dangerous. The second mistake is that we are saved by grace, all of God's work, His doing, I contribute nothing, and so I can live however I like.

Augustine of Hippo summarized the Christian life with the saying, love God and do as you please. So there's legalism on one hand, on the other hand, there is license.

The German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called it cheap grace. The Bible says this about license, a couple of chapters, if you are in Romans chapter 8, go back to chapter 6, verse 15, what then?

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means. Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey, whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness.

But thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, you have been set free from sin, and have become slaves to righteousness.

[8 : 38] Now what Paul's doing here in Romans chapter 6 is he's actually quoting someone, and he's trying to help this poor fellow to understand the Christian life and the essence of the Christian life.

And this fellow, he listens to Paul's teaching about the gospel of justification by grace through faith apart from works, and he says, well if I have a right standing before God by trusting in his gracious actions towards me in the Lord Jesus, and if all of my past and present and future sins are all forgiven and dealt with by Jesus, well that's great, I'll have that, and I might as well go on living a life of sin because I can have that too.

I can enjoy all the desires of sin as well. And what's Paul's response to that? Paul's response is, that's the way a person talks about Christianity if it is just simply a group of ideas and not an experience of the preciousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a person whose Christianity is all truth and no treasure, all choices and no cherishing, all logic about Christ and no love for Christ, all decision and no delight.

That is, they know Jesus, but they don't treasure Jesus. We are being set free from slavery to sin.

[10 : 16] Why would you want to go back there? Is what Paul says. If I cherish the love of God towards me, the Lord Jesus, what is it that will please me? What pleases me is what pleases Him.

And I live accordingly. Not because I have to, not because of obligation or guilt, not because I'm forced or manipulated or I owe Him, but because I've experienced the love and the grace that God has shown me.

And this then brings us to this story of Matthew 18. So hopefully most of you have got your Bibles open at that point. If you haven't, flick there really quickly. Matthew 18. This is a story which helps us to see how grace, the grace of the Lord Jesus, should motivate us in a life of grace towards one another.

Jesus has been talking about how to handle things when someone sins against you. And so in verse 15, Jesus says this, if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you.

If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

[11 : 33] And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Those few verses there are so essential for good relationships within the church.

don't talk to other people about how you've been wronged. Don't hold a grudge and write a little payback list.

Go to the person directly and speak about the issue. Look them in the eye and seek resolution and reconciliation. And then straight after these verses, Peter's asked the question.

He's always the first one to come in with the question or to make a statement. And in verse 21, he says, Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me?

Up to seven times? You see, the attitude of the rabbis around that time was that you would forgive your brother three times and no more.

[12 : 34] And so Peter here, probably thinking that he's come up short a number of times already. Whenever he's jumped in with a question or made a statement, he always says the wrong thing.

And so Peter's thinking, I'm going to go down on record here for all of history and I'm going to say the right thing for a change. So Jesus, knowing it's only three times, should I forgive my brother seven times?

Jesus comes in, verse 22, not seven times, but 77 times. And Peter goes, oh my goodness, not again. Now some say here that Jesus doesn't actually mean 77 times.

What he means is seven times, 70 times, he means 490 times. The reality is though, either alternative is simply to miss the point of what Jesus is saying here.

Either it would be 77 or 490, it is to return to the pedantic calculation of forgiveness that Jesus rejects. And how do I know he rejects it?

[13 : 40] Because he says it in the parable. Next point. You see, forgiveness is unlimited. unlimited. That's what God's grace is towards us.

It is unlimited. And this next story makes this point clear. It gives us a brilliant insight into the enormity of the grace of God towards us.

There is a man who owes a king 10,000 talents. It was a debt, according to verse 25, that he was not able to pay. And that is an understatement.

The talent was the highest unit of currency and 10,000 was the highest Greek numeral. In other words, you put them both together and it meant to convey the largest sum imaginable.

And so when one of my children says to me, wow, how much does that cost? I say, squillions of dollars. Wow. The debt is incalculable.

[14 : 44] In fact, the debt was more than a thousand times the annual revenue of Galilee, Judea, Samaria and Edomia combined.

It's like taking all foreign debt of every country and lumping on top of one single human being and say, pay that back.

It's totally incomprehensible. And yet, even though this man who has lumbered with such an enormity of debt, he's bankrupt so many times over, he still has a sense of pride.

He hasn't grasped the enormity of his debt. Have a look at there in verse 26. The servant fell on his knees before him, that is before the king, and he says, be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay you back everything.

He's got no capability of paying it back. No amount of time, no amount of patience would do it. He is utterly bankrupt. He is powerless and helpless, no ability to trade out of this situation at all.

[16:05] And it is again the picture of our situation before God as we saw back in Ephesians chapter 2 where it describes us there as being dead in our transgressions and sins.

Dead people don't cut deals. They don't pay back loans. They are powerless. They cannot even walk. Of course, the king understood the plight of his servant.

You see, this story ultimately is about God and the way he has graciously treated us.

We who were bankrupt before God with a debt of sin that we could never repay have been forgiven through the Lord Jesus. Our debt against God has been piling up minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year.

But God in his gracious action towards the Lord Jesus has wiped it clean. He's forgiven us a debt that we could never repay.

[17:09] You see, the words, he'd be patient with me and I'll pay you back everything, Jesus. I'll go to church and I'll pull my socks up and I'll read my Bible and I'll pray and I'll give you some money. It is so pitifully untrue.

No amount of good Christian activity, no amount of pulling up the socks and rolling up your sleeves and trying a little harder morally, our debt against God is phenomenal.

We are bankrupt. We don't have the power or the ability to trade out of it and God comes along in the Lord Jesus and says, I release you from the debt.

Now, of course, the twist in the story comes when this servant who has been forgiven an incalculable debt walks out onto the deck and starts choking someone who owes him a trifling amount in comparison.

He makes sure that this other servant who owes him a few dollars pays him back right down to the last cent. Verse 28, But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.

[18:23] He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. And his fellow servant fell on his knees and begged him, be patient with me and I will pay you back.

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay back the debt. You see, the fact that the second servant's debt is one six hundred thousandth of the first debt, emphasizes the ludicrous nature of this servant's behavior.

Any limitation of grace and forgiveness that he shows to his fellow servant is just inconceivable. the second servant pleaded for mercy, be patient and I will pay you back.

And he could have paid it back with time. It's a few bucks. He could have paid it back. But what does the first servant do? He grabs him, hands him over to the jailers, he has him thrown into prison until he can pay the debt back.

And what happens when he's in prison? He can't earn the money to pay the debt back. And so the first servant will hold that debt against him forever. We know right at the very end of this parable and also at the very beginning of this parable because it's just flown out of Peter's question to Jesus, how many times should I forgive my brother, that ultimately this parable is about forgiveness.

[20:01] And it's a shocking picture, isn't it? the first servant throws the second servant into prison and holds the debt against him. My friends, resentment, the unwillingness to forgive, is a deadly disease and it is very common.

It can have quite negative physical consequences, but it certainly has very negative spiritual consequences. Verse 32, then the master called the servant in, you wicked servant.

He said, I cancelled all the debt that was yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? And in anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all that he owed.

This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. You see, the spiritual consequences here are severe.

Our relationship with God is strangled by resentment. Resentment is most often the reason behind spiritual dryness and decline.

[21:19] A good question to ask of one another in that state is, who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to forgive? When someone says, I cannot forgive so and so for what they've done to me, the answer is, according to verse 35, is you must forgive or you will never be forgiven by God.

The grace of God is dynamic and it is life-changing. We simply cannot go through heaven's narrow door if our lives are bulging with resentment.

Heaven is for penitent sinners only. God's grace, compassion, love, mercy, forgiveness is meant to motivate grace, compassion, love, mercy, forgiveness in us.

Whenever we are confronted with someone who has wronged us, the place to dwell in our thoughts and our emotions is not the gravity of their sin against me, but the gravity of my sin against God.

On the 25th of July 1993, three men rushed into St. James Anglican Church Kenilworth in South Africa and armed with machine guns and grenades.

[22 : 49] After the slaughter, 11 parishioners lay dead in the pews, 60 of them were wounded, some of them were permanently maimed. One of those who was killed was the wife of Dowie Ackerman.

She was sitting in the back pew, I think while Dowie was in the foyer handing, I know he might have been at the front of the church involved in some sort of ministry. She was one of the first to die.

Dowie attended the truth and reconciliation for the men who gunned down his wife. during the course of the hearing, the men turned to Dowie and said, will you forgive us for what we have done to you?

This is what he said. I forgave them unconditionally because they asked for it. God has forgiven us and all we have to do is ask for it.

They've asked for my forgiveness so I must give it to them. Tough call, isn't it?

[24 : 02] Forgiveness like that. But my friends, that is the way of Christian living. That is the impact, the dynamic transforming impact of the grace of God.

It is only possible when we see the enormity of our sin against God and his forgiveness and his grace to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. The grace of God towards us in the Lord Jesus is the motivation for us to put on the garments of grace.

And I use the term garments of grace from Colossians chapter 3 verses 12 to 14. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all of these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

You see, the main thrust of Paul's teaching here in this passage is that we are to be clothed ourselves with Christ-like virtues.

[25 : 19] But he grounds his exaltation on being clothed with these virtues in the grace of God. The fact that he has chosen us to be in him, that we are holy in his sight, that we are dearly loved by him.

It is difficult. Perhaps impossible for us to show compassion or patience to someone else if we are unsure if God is patient with us.

Or even worse, if we don't sense the need for God to be patient with us. These garments of gracious Christian character can only be put on by those who are continually experiencing the grace of God in their own lives.

And it's passages like this, Colossians 3 and Matthew 18, that undergird our core value here at St. Paul's of humble authenticity. Let me remind you of bits of it.

As a church, we are committed to serving others and considering them more important than ourselves, speaking to one another honestly and in private when problems arise, honoring each other by not engaging in gossip or malicious or slanderous talk, being careful how we interpret one another, asking clarifying questions before making judgments in disagreements, being slow to take offense, being quick to confess error and sin, to pursue reconciliation and work towards change when we have offended, being rigorously honest, being vulnerable with our imperfections that encourages openness and honesty rather than cover up.

[27 : 03] our core value of humble authenticity is so essential for our spiritual health, but not just for ours, but for other people's.

Their lives are at stake. Why would they want to know or experience the grace of God if they don't see it as life-changing and dynamic for the people of God?

why would we not put humble authenticity into practice amongst us? Why would we want to hold on to resentment?

Why would we not forgive? The only reason is that we have not admitted our own total and permanent spiritual bankruptcy.

Only as we see ourselves as basically good do we expect everyone else around us to be basically good and especially basically good to me.

[28 : 12] Living by grace means recognising our spiritual bankruptcy. It means seeing the vast contrast between the enormity of my debt against God and another person's trifling debt against me.

it means throwing yourself on God's mercy daily. It means responding to the Bible's instruction to forgive as the Lord has forgiven me. And so friends after three weeks we've come back full circle. We are back where we began with our spiritual bankruptcy. This is where we must begin and it's where we must end if we are to experience the daily joy of living by God's transforming grace. And so I invite you again to lay aside any remnant of self-goodness that you may think you still have. Admit your total spiritual bankruptcy bankruptcy and drink deeply from the infinite grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then in deep awareness of what you have received extend that same spirit of grace to one another. Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

[29 : 40] But it is his grace that has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home. Let's stand and sing.