

**May 3, 2009**  
**Riverside Covenant Church**  
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**Luke 7:41-43 – Grace**

Last week I discussed how when I was in law school things were pretty strict and tough. 1 test for each class at the end of the semester which was worth 100% of my grade. Well by my third year in law school we had classes that did not have final exams or at least had other coursework throughout the semester that was a percentage of my final grade. But it was still strict. **When we were told to turn something in it had to be time stamped by a secretary** for the time it was turned in. And if it was a minute late, then it was a 0 on the assignment. Well, I got used to that system and made sure I never missed the deadline.

Then I went to seminary and in my first seminary class I stayed up all night to get a paper done that my professor had told us was due in the morning. I held on to my paper throughout the class and then at the end of the class my professor said that everyone needed to bring their papers forward. As I started to stand up to go forward, several students began speaking with the professor about their papers. One by one they told the professor that they had not been able to complete the assignment because of X, Y and Z. I thought here comes the “too bad for you” speech from the professor. Here comes the talk about how this is the real world and you can’t just skip out on your responsibilities. You have to make choices and there are consequences to your choices. But the professor had other ideas and simply said, “no big deal, make sure you get it to me by the end of the week.”

**What!!!** I stayed up all night to get the thing done and the professor just nonchalantly says, “no big deal” to those students that probably watched a movie and went to bed early. Nice!!!

Grace. It is one of those Christian words that we toss around. We know it is a good thing and something for which we are to be happy, but what is grace.

Here is how Jesus explains it.

**Read Luke 7:41-43.**

Jesus shares this parable with Simon because **Simon needs to learn a few things about grace**. This parable appears in Luke 7 and in the context of a time when a **Pharisee invited Jesus over for dinner**. So

Jesus goes over to the Pharisee's house and they are eating dinner and this woman finds Jesus. She comes up behind Jesus and she is crying. The Pharisee recognizes her as a woman that has lived quite the sinful life. We don't know her identity for sure, but her reputation was not good and many scholars presume she was a prostitute. Whatever her sin, the religious leaders clearly saw her as someone that righteous people would not want to associate with.

The woman comes up behind Jesus and **contravenes every social convention of the day**. She lets her hair down, she touches Jesus' feet with her hair, and then it says that she anoints his feet with perfume. For a woman to let down her hair in public was usually considered a shameful and seductive act, something no respectable woman would do. To anoint Jesus' feet, kiss them repeatedly, and dry them with her hair would have all been viewed as erotic and shameful acts, if it were not for her tears. If not for her tears and her clear overwhelming emotions, everything she did would have been obscene.

And the Pharisee, Simon, says to Jesus . . . **come on, if this guy were a prophet he would know who this woman is**, he wouldn't let her do that . . . she is a sinner.

Jesus looks to Simon and says, (in the way only the Son of God could) Simon, I have something to tell you. "Tell me, teacher," he said.

**And Jesus tells our parable.** Two guys owed money to a lender. One guy owed \$45,000 or a year and a half worth of wages. The other guy owed \$4500, or two months worth of wages. Neither of the guys had the money to pay the lender back, so the lender canceled both the debts. Now which of the two guys will love the lender more?

The Pharisee says, "well, I guess the one with the bigger debt." And Jesus tells him that he is correct.

Then our text says that Jesus turned and looked at the woman, still speaking to Simon. **Read vs. 44-48.**

Jesus treatment of this woman and the reaction of the Pharisee help us go a long way in understanding what we mean when we talk about "grace."

The first thing that is abundantly clear is that **Simon has an issue with Jesus associating so closely with such an obvious sinner.**

**Did anyone's parents ever tell you that you need to only hang out with "good" people** because you will be known by the company you keep. Well Jesus often blows that out of the water. Jesus doesn't hang out with the "good" folk. Actually, earlier in Luke 5, the Pharisees complain to Jesus' disciples about the fact that he is eating with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners . . . and Jesus says to them, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."**

In Jesus' day the righteous or the so-called "good" people did not associate or spend time with the so-called "sinners" because they feared becoming unclean. But Jesus did not fear becoming unclean because he believed that **holiness was much stronger and more contagious than defilement.**

**I can remember when I was in grade school,** and I am ashamed to say this and have apologized that I participated in this, but one way we made fun of one of the kids in our class was to act as if his germs were being passed between us. So if someone ran into this kid in the hallway or something, the person that touched him would say "Bill germs, Bill germs" and then touch someone else as to pass them on. It had to be horribly hurtful, but it is this same idea . . . that to associate with a particular person is inherently harmful.

We put similar boundaries around our own lives. Out of fear, we set up so-called "Christian" rules that tell us to **stay away from particular people that are too dangerous.** The presumption is that their sinfulness is to be feared as if our God is not bigger and far more powerful.

There is a big difference between this and what Jesus does. Jesus does not ask people to come to him in faith and then tell them to hide out in a secluded building so that no one can negatively impact them. No, Jesus asks people to have faith and then he sends them out. Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 10, **"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."**

In this story, **Jesus and the Pharisee view the woman with the perfume radically differently.** The Pharisee looks at her and sees a prostitute. Someone that has thrown her morality out the window.

Someone that has not only not done what God wanted her to do, but is flaunting herself before Jesus by letting her hair down, kissing his feet and pouring perfume on him. Before the Pharisee, this woman is a sorry sight and one that “good” and “faithful” people do not associate with.

**Jesus sees someone different though.** It is not that he does not of her indiscretions, it is that he sees her not as a sinner, but as a forgiven sinner. And Jesus takes the incident a step further, even, by implying that this repentant woman is better than the “thinks he is all that” Pharisee.

As we see in the parable that Jesus tells to illustrate his point, the Bible often talks about **our sin as a debt to God**. And the canceling of this debt is forgiveness which is a result of God’s grace.

Jews had a context for the complete forgiveness of debts owed. For instance, in Deuteronomy 15 it says, **“At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.”**

**So when Jesus discusses sin as the accumulation of debt to God and that God simply cancels this debt, there is a context for this type of action.** In our world today, there is little context for this. At year 7 in my mortgage **I plan to call the bank** up and ask to speak to a Christian and then let them know that I have been in my loan for seven years and thus would like my debt cancelled and see what happens. I imagine they will laugh and hang up.

In our culture, no one just cancels debts. That is not even called generous, it is called reckless.

**When you work for a couple weeks** and you have done what you are supposed to do, then you are given a wage. Your employer benefits from the work you have done and in exchange gives you payment or compensation.

**When you compete well in a contest** and you follow all the rules and perform better than the other competition, then you are given a prize. You are declared the champion and given a trophy because you are the best.

**When you have been doing something very noble** for a long time or your actions are particularly impressive others take notice and you are given a reward. You are told that your contributions have been remarkable and you deserve special recognition.

But **what is received when you have not done** the work justifying a wage, or you aren't the best at anything, or you have no history of significant contributions . . . what then is it that you receive? Usually nothing . . . and we often say, rightfully so, because you have not earned it. But this is where God steps in and gives unmerited favor – God's grace.

**I believe one of two things prevent us from truly receiving and giving grace: thinking too much of ourselves and not thinking enough of ourselves.**

**The Pharisee, Simon, is an example of someone thinking too much of themselves.** The Pharisee is looking at his nice clothes, his monogamous relationship with his spouse, his spotless giving record to the church, his practice of never watching movies with cuss words, his nicely trimmed haircut and tattoo-free body and saying to himself . . . God pour your favor upon me for I am such a righteous man.

And Jesus looks at those amongst us like that and says, **"I don't know you."** If you think for a second that you deserve God's love or that you have earned it then you are blinded to your sinfulness and far from God. For before a perfect God, **none of us . . . even Mother Teresa or Billy Graham or name your Christian all-star . . . can think they are "good enough."**

The reality is that the more that we know about God and what he calls us to, the more we become aware of how short we fall from His perfect standard.

**Justin Gravitt showed a few of us after the Men's Bible study a diagram** that he learned one time about grace. He called it the grace gap illustration.

**(Show slides and explain)**

The illustration has as scriptural support 3 verses in particular from Paul. The first is 1 Corinthians 15:9, which says, **“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”**

Ephesians 3:8 says, **“Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”**

And then 1 Timothy 1:15 says, **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”**

**Paul says,** I am the least of the apostles and I am less than the least of all God's people and then I am the worst of sinners. And when we think of the Christian life we would presume that we are becoming better people and we are, but we should also be increasing in our understanding of the goodness and perfection of God. And as we understand God more and more, our image of ourselves as a fallen sinner becomes clearer and clearer.

**These verses appear this way in time.** First Paul says that he is the least of the apostles, then later in life he says he is the least of God's people and then finally he is the worst of sinners.

The point is that as we mature in our Christian walk **we don't think of ourselves as super-Christians** but we more and more recognize how awesome God is and how, though we are moving in the right direction . . . we don't measure up.

God's favor upon us becomes all the more important then. The person who understand the enormity of the debt forgiven is naturally more grateful and should love more.

I mentioned that I believed that there were two things that prevented us from truly receiving and giving grace. **The first was thinking too much of ourselves and the second is not thinking enough of ourselves.**

Anyone that has spent anytime in the Gospels knows that what makes Jesus exceedingly counter-cultural and a revolutionary is that he spends his time with those that his society had cast aside as unimportant and insignificant.

**God does not care what you have done**, where you have been or what crap you are carrying in the depths of your heart. Clearing all of that out is absolutely not a requirement for a relationship with the creator of the universe. God first wants devotion. That is it. God just wants us to get to a point where we will simply say, enough is enough, I can't live this life on my own anymore. And once you do that God can start working on the other things.

But first and always first, is God's deep deep love. His gracious favor. His Grace. You do nothing, yet God gives.

In the story in our passage, Jesus praises the woman to the exclusion of the Pharisee for this exact reason. **While the Pharisee is busy doing all of the "right" things, the woman is busy worshiping God.** The woman has taken advantage of God's grace, while the Pharisee doesn't even think about his need for it. The Pharisee thinks he is already there and the woman knows how desperately far from God she is. Most importantly though . . . she knows you can never be too far.

**Jesus is the debt canceller.** Every single day of every single week we build up a tab of sin debts before God. We can do one of three things with our tab. We can say it is no big deal big deal because of all the good stuff we have done like the Pharisee. Or we can do nothing, wallow in despair because the debt is too large, and act like we don't care. Or we can present ourselves honestly before God and experience the unexplainable joy that comes with forgiveness.

**It is important to recognize too that with God's grace comes a response.** The cancellation of our sin debt is pure grace, but it is grace that then transforms, creates love and relationship and requires – even demands – a response.

Jesus ask the Pharisee, **"do you see this woman?"** Luke does not say it, but I picture the Pharisee saying, "uh, yeah."

**He had allowed this woman's past to mar her future and her present.** Because of what she had done . . . she was not valuable. Well, he did not understand God's grace. God's grace is infinite.

And that means something for how we treat others.

**When you look at others what do you see?** Do you see clothes? Or style? Or alcoholic or jerk or unimportant? What do you really see when you look at others?

**I believe that when God looks at us, he sees his image.** He sees his good creation. Then he sees all the things we have done to mess that up . . . and he yearns for us to let him start to fix us up. And he wants us to share his heart.

He wants us to look at others as good creations . . . as people created in his image that need Him to fix them up.

**Try that this week.** When you see people think about trying to find signs of the image of God in them. I told someone this past week that I like to think about evangelism as working with God to help people see the image of God in themselves.

**Saint Augustine said that grace does not come by merit, but merit comes by grace. Our experience of God's grace propels us to extend charity and grace to others.**

Grace is radical. Debt forgiving is radical. No one does that. Our God does.