

This Tuesday is Election Day.

I'm glad that we will at least get a short reprieve from the election flyers in the mail and the ads littering the streets and the commercials that don't tell us why we should vote for a candidate- just that the other guy is the worst choice in the world!

Sadly, our election process is anything but civil these days. We are seemingly divided between two polar opposites. The result is a stalemate in bringing resolution to the pressing issues that affect all of us locally, throughout the state, the nation and globally.

Think about how labels, which we began talking about last week, affect our election process. We label people as liberal, progressive, conservative, moderate; we speak of people being left-leaning or right-leaning. I don't think we do justice to our political process when we use sound-bites and loaded phrases to demonize and demean our opponents.

Mike Slaughter writes in his new book, *Hijacked*, 'As Christians, our first goal is to hold positions consistent with our faith commitments...' Those positions should not be considered Republican or Democrat; but positions consistent with who God calls us to be as his disciples.

I hope that you will join me in not participating in the political rhetoric during this election season. That means that we will not label candidates and we will not create simplistic opinions about polarizing issues that are anything but simple. If we would take these simple steps it could begin to transform our political system so that we might actually get something productive out of our elected leaders on every level.

Above all, I hope that you remember Jesus was not a republican or a democrat and that voting for a particular candidate is not what makes you a Christian or keeps you from being one.

With that said, I hope that you will all extend me some grace for talking about politics!

But seriously, I can't think of a better backdrop for talking about extending grace to others. If we learn, and practice, today's lesson about extending grace to others it could revolutionize our approach to politics and change the way we relate to others in general.

Learning to extend grace to others that are on the other side of an issue could have easily been the reason that the Apostle Peter came to Jesus with the question we've all asked before, "How many times shall I forgive?"

Open your Bible to Matthew 18:21 and follow along as I read.

Peter was demonstrating grace when he offered to forgive seven times. The religious authorities of Peter's day said you only needed to forgive three times. But Jesus, in

telling the parable, made the point that grace is not about numbers; as a matter of fact grace is, and always should be unlimited!

In Jesus parable of the unmerciful servant, he used a sum that was inconceivable to his listeners in explaining the amount of money owed by the servant. We can see where Jesus is going with this parable when we begin to think about the unmatched gift of God's grace that we have received. There is simply no way that the servant could repay his master and for each of us there is no way that we could ever repay God for his gift of love in Jesus.

What the master expected of his graced servant; and what God expects of us as those who have received grace, is that we Extend Grace as we have Received Grace.

The problem for the servant in Jesus parable was that he didn't experience the grace of his master in a way that transformed his relationship to others.

Our experience with grace- good or bad- often informs our ability to offer grace to others. If we believe that grace must be earned, then we do not give grace unless someone earns it. If we believe that grace is free; then we freely offer to grace to others.

If grace transforms your life; then it becomes evident in the way that you extend grace to others. And that process of allowing grace to transform his life is where we find Peter.

Up to this point in Peter's life his experience with grace enabled him to forgive up to seven times- generous in Peter's eyes- in a world not marked by grace but by mathematics.

Jesus, in responding to Peter with this parable, was trying to teach Peter and the other disciples that grace- or forgiveness- was not a matter of math; but a matter of recognizing that having received abundant, free and amazing grace; we have no reason NOT to extend grace to others.

C.S. Lewis has a great quote: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

Unfortunately, we live in a world of un-grace. In this world of un-grace: Grace is not free, but something that must be earned. Grace is not abundant, but sparse. Grace is lacking in our world; especially in the church!

Breaking the cycle of un-grace means that you and I take the initiative- the first step- to extend grace- to forgive, even when we would say that it doesn't add up. We take the initiative because we realize that God treated us with grace; as Paul writes in Romans

5:8: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Peter watched Jesus take the first step. It happened after the resurrection on a beach. Jesus took Peter aside and offered him grace and forgiveness and in the process restored Peter.

On that beach Peter learned that grace is not about mathematics. I wonder if all the stories of grace that Jesus had told came rushing back to Peter? Stories about a lovesick father who runs to meet the prodigal, an employer who pays his workers the same wage whether they worked one hour or twelve, a banquet giver who opened his table to undeserving guests from the highways and byways.

Peter’s experience of grace didn’t end on that beach. Peter had one more lesson to learn about God’s grace.

After Pentecost the number of disciples continued to increase- however at this point the gospel was still only being preached to the Jews.

In Acts 10 Peter has a dream. It’s the middle of the afternoon- he’s been traveling, he’s hungry and dinner isn’t ready- so he goes up on the roof to pray. While he’s there Peter falls asleep and has a dream. In the dream Peter sees a large sheet descending from heaven with all kinds of food in it- the problem is Peter’s Jewish and the food isn’t kosher. But Peter hears the voice of his Lord say kill and eat. Three times it happens. Each time Peter objects to eating what isn’t kosher and each time Jesus says “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

When Peter woke up a few un-kosher Gentiles arrived looking for Peter. To make a long story short, Peter broke every rule he had ever been taught in his un-graced life. He invited these Gentiles into his home and went with them to the home a Gentile named Cornelius. (BTW, we have Cornelius to thank for opening the way for us gentiles to become Christ-followers!)

Peter learned that grace wasn’t just for people like him- grace was available to everyone, including the Gentiles!

So what? What does all this mean for us? If God is willing to extend grace to those of us who are unworthy and undeserving; then shouldn’t we extend grace to others?

Peter learned that grace is not about the number of times we forgive but the greatness of the One who forgave us. Peter learned that everyone deserves a second chance.

Extend Grace as we have Received Grace

