

Ephesians 2:4-9

Grace; it's more than a quick prayer we offer before a meal.

Grace; is more than a girl's name.

Grace; is more than just a favorite hymn.

Grace seems to mean so many different things; but do we really know what grace is? (One thing I don't plan to do in this series is give you a definition of the word grace. Too often we settle for knowing the definition and miss the application and truth of the word.)

Theologians know that grace is the one thing that sets Christianity apart from all the other religions in the world. Christianity is the only belief system that dares to make God's love unconditional. (That is until people begin adding in their own conditions to receive God's love or we could say to receive their love. But that is a topic for later.) The Bible, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation is story after story of grace.

Grace- the unmerited, undeserved, abundant and amazing love of God- is the greatest gift that the Church/Christians have to offer the world; yet when you ask people to describe the Church/Christians, grace is not usually one of the words that they use.

Instead they use words like judgmental, intolerant and hypocritical. And those are not just the thoughts of the unchurched; they are actual answers from youth and young adults who are in the church today!

Philip Yancey in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, opens with the story of a prostitute who was down and out in Chicago.

She was in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year old daughter. Through sobs and tears she told of renting out her daughter to men interested in kinky sex. She made more money renting out her daughter for an hour that she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit.

When asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help the woman got a shocked look on her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

What is most troubling about that story is the fact that women like this once fled to Jesus, not away from him. And so the question must be asked, "What happened?"

What happened is that the church forgot about grace and the Second Chances that grace gives everyone. We went from making God's love unconditional to conditional; conditional based upon what we think God expects from others before they can be loved by God and loved by us.

Throughout this Holy Week, and for the next three Sundays; we're going to learn about grace. We will learn about grace through stories of individual lives. We will be challenged to experience grace both inwardly and outwardly. By the time we reach the end of this series my prayer is that grace will be more than a word; but most importantly that we practice extending grace to others and experience grace in our own lives.

Thursday night our choir will introduce us to the story of grace in the musical, *Never Thirst Again*. This is the story of the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well that is found in John 4. This is a story that reminds us that grace breaks through barriers; and most importantly that redeeming grace and Second Chance living is possible for anyone. We will celebrate grace that evening by concluding our service with a service of communion.

Good Friday evening at 7:00pm we look at the lives of two men who betrayed Jesus- Peter and Judas. Two men who struggle to understand what grace means to them when they have betrayed Jesus. (Drama vignette)

Next Sunday, Easter Sunday, we celebrate that Second Chances are made possible by the resurrection of Jesus. We will finish the story begun on Friday night and remind all of us that through Jesus we all get a Second Chance at life!

And, what a great opportunity we will have to share the reality of Second Chances through our Easter Offering! Your gifts will be visible signs of grace to people that many think don't deserve a Second Chance.

The final two weeks get real personal. We will learn how to receive grace and how to extend grace to others. In receiving grace we will learn how grace sets us free from the labels that the world has attached to us. If you take any time to look at the images on the screen you've probably read the captions with each picture: "You are..." and "You will always be...". Second chance living, the kind of life that comes with receiving grace, frees us to live beyond the lies that label us. I'm excited to see how God's grace can remove the hurtful labels from your past and give you a new name.

In the final message on extending grace to others we will learn how to offer grace in a world that too often lives apart from grace. One author refers to our world today as the "vulture culture." Like circling vultures, we wait for the next victim to fall so that we can feast on their wounded carcass. What the world needs now; what the next victim of the vulture culture needs now is a group of people who will commit to being grace extenders.

Let's bring this message home this morning with this closing thought about grace.

How many of you know John 3:16? "For God so loved the world..." That's grace. Grace is the fact that God loves us; plain and simple. God doesn't love us *if*, or *more*, or *depending upon*; God simply loves us! And nothing will ever change God's love for you. That is grace! That is the message the world needs to hear now more than ever!

And you and I are the only plan God has for making that known to a world desperate for grace!

I'm glad you know John 3:16; but how many of you know John 3:17? "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

This week leading up to Easter I want to challenge you to not only learn that verse; but most importantly to practice that verse! This week leading up to Easter is all about the grace of God. And I want you to not only experience that grace personally; (as you reflect on how much Jesus loved you) I want you to extend that grace to others by following God's example.

The simple thing that all of us can do this week is to practice grace. So instead of condemning, demeaning, excluding and criticizing others this week; practice loving the world and showing grace.

Stop living up to the label that we talked about earlier: don't be the kind of Christian who is judgmental, intolerant and hypocritical. Instead, I want to challenge you to be...

Forgiving. When that person cuts you off in traffic; or better yet pulls out in front of you in the circle- smile and remember grace.

Accepting. When your child makes a mess 5 minutes before company arrives; remember grace.

Rush to someone's side when no one else will.