

The Gift of Grace  
Romans 8:1–17  
Sunday, August 1, 2021

Over the next three weeks, we are going to be looking at what I think is one of the most theologically rich chapters in the Bible – Romans 8. It covers such a wide range of topics, but the way that *we* are going to be looking at it is to focus on three key concepts: grace, suffering, and forgiveness. How can we be more *gracious* people? How do we remain faithful in the face of suffering? And how can we be more *forgiving* people, letting go of the things that we have done or that have been done *to* us? There’s a common thread that runs through all of that, this question of, “How do we love *God*, how do we love *each other*, and how do we love *ourselves* when sometimes that is *very hard*?”

We’re going to start today with Romans 8:1–17, and I invite you now to hear the word of God.

(READ ROMANS 8:1–17)

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Have you ever received a gift that you felt like you did not deserve? I mean a gift that stopped you in your tracks, and you felt like, “This is too much. I can’t accept this.” I remember after my first year of college, as I was getting ready to go back for year two, my financial aid didn’t come through like we had thought it would. I had maxed out all my options – grants, scholarships, loans, work study, I had even been home working all summer – and it still wasn’t enough. And I really didn’t think I was going to be able to go back to school.

One Sunday night, I was over having dinner with my grandparents, and my grandfather said, “We want to give you something.” And they gave me a check for over \$5,000; just enough money to cover what I was short and get me back to school. I knew that they were not *wealthy* people. This was not an insignificant thing for them. And I remember at first, I had this feeling

of absolute humility; of being *humbled*. I was holding back tears, saying, “I can’t take this from you. This is too much. We’ll find another way. You don’t have to do this.” And I’ll never forget, they said, “We *want* to do this because we *love* you and we’re *proud* of you.” It was a gift that I had not done anything to earn. It was not by my own merit. They gave it simply because they loved me.

Have you ever received a gift like *that*? Unexpected, unmerited, overwhelming, and life changing. I mean, it seriously changed the way that I lived; changed the way that I approached the rest of my time in college. I knew how much it had cost them to do that, so I worked twice as hard to make sure I didn’t waste it. But I also went back to school with this awareness that every class I took, every book I read, every paper I wrote, every walk across campus was a *gift*. That I was not there by my own ability. I was only able to do any of that because of the graciousness of others. And I made sure I never took that for granted.

Paul starts off this eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans by kind of summarizing the previous three chapters and talking about the grace of God as a gift that has been given to us. That while humanity had fallen short of the glory of God and was deserving of God’s *condemnation*, God has instead condemned *sin* and set us free from it, to live *with* and *for* him. And God did this by sending God’s own son to deal with sin. Not because we had *earned* forgiveness or shown God that we were *worthy* of righteousness, but because we are God’s *children*, God *loves* us, and God wants us to have all that we need to live the fullness of life.

And so Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We were once condemned (or *deserving* of condemnation) because we couldn’t live up to the law of God, all these rules we had to follow. But God has set us free from judgment under the

law; from having to prove that we are good enough or righteous enough. God's grace, God's love is a *gift* that has been given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Paul says that gift has to change the way we live. We have to live in ways that show we know how much this *cost* God – it cost God's own *life* – and we have to make sure we don't *waste* that or take it for *granted*. But also, it's about seeing *all the rest of life* as a *gift*. Every thing we do, every relationship we have, every day we live, that breath you just took, *it is all gift*, made possible by the graciousness of God.

The grace of God is a gift that we now have to share with others. And that's what I want to *focus* on today, because I think that, for the most part, we *get* the grace of God toward us. Most of us have been around churches long enough to be familiar with that basic concept. And it's fairly *easy* to understand and accept the grace and love of God *for us*. What is *harder* – one of the biggest *challenges* of our faith – is extending that same grace and love toward others, especially those who are not *like* us and do not *agree* with us. We are experiencing such polarization and division right now – as a *country*, within *families*, even within *churches* – *political* division, *racial* division, *pandemic* division (vaccinated vs. unvaccinated, masked vs. unmasked). How can we be gracious to people on the other side of that divide? Because it seems like our default response – in politics, as well as in our own personal interactions – is to *condemn* one another.

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This past week, Simone Biles, the most decorated gymnast in American history, thought by many to be the greatest gymnast of all time, pulled out of team and individual competition in the Olympics, not because of a physical injury, but because of her mental health. This 24-year-old woman said that she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders, and it was too much. She'd had one falter and couldn't get out of her head. She knew that if she *stayed* in the competition, she would hurt her team and maybe even herself. So she made the decision to withdraw.

That decision was met by some with *praise*. “Good for her for speaking up and taking care of herself. That took a tremendous amount of courage.” But it was met by others with *condemnation*. Media personalities labeled her a *quitter*, *selfish*, *immature*, *a shame to the country*, and said she gave up when it got hard and wasn’t there for her team. She put herself above the team and the country. One media personality went as far as to call her a *sociopath* and said, “We are raising a generation of weak people.” They said she wasn’t “mentally tough.” An African-American woman who had endured sexual abuse at the hands of the team trainer and yet had *still* come back to be the most dominant gymnast in the world and an Olympic champion, was not “mentally tough.”

Those responses highlight a distinction that I think is helpful for us. Those who were *condemning* Simone Biles were focused on her as an *athlete*, on the competition, on *winning*, on a *medal*, on achieving glory. They were focused on the things of this world. Those who *praised* her decision were focusing on her as a *person*, as a *human being*; they were focused on her *well being* beyond sports and competition. They were focused on her *spirit*.

Paul says that those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh. And when he says “the things of the flesh” there, he is referring to the things of *this world*; the temporal things of life. It’s a mindset that is oriented to *this* world and its possibilities; to achievement in this world. But, Paul says, those who live according to the *Spirit* set their minds on the things of the *Spirit*. And what are the “things of the Spirit”? Paul says later that it’s love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The things that *transcend* and *transform* this world and this life. It’s a *bigger picture* mindset that is oriented to the world as transformed by God in Christ.

Do we live our lives according to the things of this world? Or do we live our lives according to the things of God? One of those paths, Paul says, leads to *death* – not just *physical* death, but *spiritual* death – while the other leads to *life*. One leads to *hostility*, while the other leads to *peace*. One leads to *condemnation*, while the other leads to *grace*. And Paul says, “*You* (we), as followers of Jesus Christ, are not in the flesh. We are in the Spirit.” We should be oriented, not to the achievements and accomplishments of the flesh, of this world. We should be oriented toward the things of God that transcend and transform this world. And that orientation should effect how we respond to one another. Do we respond with *hostility* or with *peace*; with *condemnation* or with *grace*?

Paul says, “There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus.” That means that God does not condemn *us* according to the things of the flesh and the standard of this world. But it *also* means that *we should not condemn one another*. That we should respond to one another with love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Not with *hostility* but with *grace*. And not just toward those whom we feel have *earned* it or *deserved* it, but especially with those who have *not*. That is what *grace is* – unexpected, unmerited, unbelievable love. It is a gift that is given freely, for no other reason than that we love this other person...or we’re *trying* to.

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I have a paper that hangs in my office. It’s a photocopied page from a book called *Children’s Letters to God*, and it’s exactly that – each page shows a letter that a child has written to God, everything from silly to serious. But the page that I have hanging up is from a boy named Frank, who says, “Dear God, I’m doing the best I can.” When I first saw it, it resonated with me because I was doing the best I could, even if it wasn’t good enough for others. But I keep it

hanging where I can see it every day as a reminder that we are *all* doing the best we can. Maybe not the best that *we* think they *should* be, or the best that *they* think *we* should be, but the best that we *can* at this particular moment in life.

I came across a quote recently that said, “If you were always at your best, then it wouldn’t be your *best*. It would be your *norm*.” The reality of life is that we are not always at our best. We are just doing the best we *can*. And it doesn’t matter if you think someone *should* be doing better, or that they’re *capable* of doing better. They’re doing the best they *can* right now. Understanding that about ourselves and about each other can move us away from responding with *condemnation* to responding with *grace*. If I am able to step back and see the *whole person* and say, “You know what, they’ve got some things going on right now, or there is something that has gone on in their past, and they’re doing the best they can right now,” that is the first step toward showing them *grace*. *That* is looking, not just at the things of the *flesh*, but at the things of the *Spirit*, taking into account not just what *can* be seen, but what *cannot* be seen.

Simone Biles was doing the best she could. Maybe not the best she has *ever* done or the best *we* think she *should* do. But the best she *can*. And at the same time, those people who condemned her were doing the best *they* could. Maybe not the best they’ve *ever* done or the best *we* think they *should* do. But the best they *could* given whatever they are dealing with in life at that moment or whatever has happened to them in the past that would cause them respond like that. We can criticize the *response* or the *action* and say, “That’s wrong,” but we don’t condemn the *person*. We do the best that we can do to respond with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. *Those* are the things of the Spirit. And that is how God responds to *us*. Not with *condemnation* but with *grace*. Because we’re all doing the

best we can, and sometimes the people who are the hardest to love are the ones who need love the most. Amen.