Ephesians 1:7-8, 2 Corinthians 8:9; Hebrews 12:15 *Grace is Greater: The Best Word*

***New Words, Old Word***The English language is a living language, which means it is always changing and developing and adding new words. Every year there are articles that come out about new words that have been added to the dictionary. Here are a couple of words that have not yet made it into Websters, but they have made it into the slang that people use. You can find them defined on Urbandictionary.com.

Here’s the first one: **phonesia**. Anybody got a guess as to what this means? It looks like a combination of two words: phone, and amnesia. So you might think this is the phenomenon of forgetting where you put your phone. Which is good, and maybe we need a word for that. But the actual definition is even better: **It’s “the act of dialing a phone number and forgetting who you were calling just as they answer.”**

That ever happen to you? I can honestly say that I have had to look at my phone to see who it is I am calling. That’s phonesia.

Or, how about this one, **intaxication.** Any guesses? This is **“the euphoria from getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to begin with.”** All right! The tax refund came, look how much money I have…oh, wait a minute, I should have had this money all along.

And, one more, really a good one for tonight: **disconfect.** I’ll tell you that this has to do with candy. It’s a verb. Any guesses? This is: **“the attempt to sterilize a piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it.”** We’ve all done this, right? This is what you do after the 5 second rule no longer applies. Everybody knows the five second rule is scientific fact. But if you aren’t sure how long that candy has been down there, all is not lost! You can disconfect it. Just give it a good puff of air, a quick rub to get any lingering dirt off it, and you’re good to go.

Those are new words, and they are fun. But for the next several weeks, I want to invite you to think about an old word. A word that’s been around for such a long time, and one which gets used so often in the church, that maybe we don’t think about its meaning all that much. A word that we’ve maybe gotten so comfortable with that it has kind of lost its ability to get our attention. That word, of course, is **“grace.”**

I want to suggest to you that grace is the best word. Philip Yancey calls it “the last best word” and suggests that it is “Christianity’s best gift to the world.” Yancey tells a story of a British conference on comparative religions, where experts from around the world were debating what belief, if any, was unique to the Christian faith. They could find stories of “incarnation” in other religions and also stories of “resurrection.” They were a bit stumped.

As the debate ground on, C.S. Lewis walked into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked. When they told him they were trying to find Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions, his reply was quick: “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” (*What’s So Amazing About Grace,* p. 45)

And Lewis was right. The notion that God’s love comes to us as a free gift, no strings attached… that salvation is not earned, but given… that God loves unconditionally; that’s grace, and it is Christianity’s gift to the world.

We love to sing about grace. Some of the songs in the hymnal:

Grace! 'Tis a charming sound,
harmonious to the ear;
Heav'n with the echo shall resound
and all the earth shall hear.

Wonderful grace of Jesus, Greater than all my sin;
How shall my tongue describe it, Where shall its praise begin?
Taking away my burden, Setting my spirit free,
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount out-poured--
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

And songs more recent:

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross
You lay down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me

Grace is the definitive word of Christianity. It is the word which--from baptism to homegoing—should ring like an anthem in a Christian's ears.

* Have we been brought into the Kingdom of God? It is of grace.
* Have we been kept safe through trials and tribulations? It is of grace.
* Have we been blessed by the fellowship of the redeemed? It is of grace.
* Have we been comforted even as we passed through the valley of the shadow of death? It is all of grace.

 Grace, grace, marvelous grace. Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
 Grace, grace, infinite grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin!

For the next 5 weeks we are going to focus in on grace. I’m sure, if you’ve been going to church very much at all, that you’ve heard many sermons on grace. But I’m hoping that for this month, you’ll see this word again for the first time.

The message today can be outlined under three points: the word "grace" defined, the word "grace" illustrated, and the word "grace" applied.

***Free Gift, Undeserved***
First, **the word "grace" defined.**

There are several ideas that can be expressed by the word grace. One is the concept of beauty or elegance, as when we speak of the "graceful" movements of a ballet dancer. Another is the idea of thanks, as when we say "grace" before a meal. Or, there is even a picture of modesty, as when we speak of someone as a "gracious" winner.

It's one of those church words that shows up even in the non-church world. Banks and libraries give “grace” periods. Musicians add “grace” notes to their music. When you want to leave a gift for your server at a restaurant, you leave a “gratuity.” We even use it for seedy politicians and other celebrities who fall from “grace.”

But the idea that is most prevalent when we talk about the grace of Christianity--the concept the Bible usually has in mind when it uses the word--is the idea of a gift, freely given, totally undeserved.

The Apostle Paul, in **2 Corinthians 8:9** defines grace like this:

**9**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. One that, if you’ve been around here for very long, you may recall hearing me talk about.

This is the grace of God: Jesus Christ, God's own Son, the essence of the invisible God, was incredibly rich. He had all of heaven at his command. His Father's entire kingdom was His, all the earth and all that is in it.

And yet, Paul tells us, He became poor. He gave it all up. He exchanged His immortal being for a body of flesh and blood. He came to earth as a tiny, helpless baby. He subjected Himself to poverty, to want, to hunger, to need. He walked the dusty streets of Galilee and he associated with the outcasts of society. He even allowed Himself to be tortured, beaten and killed.

Why did He do it? For us, says Paul. "For your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." He gave up all that He had so that we might receive the benefit. He became poor so that we might become wealthy. He gave up so that we might receive.

This is the grace of Jesus Christ. This is the definition of grace. God--who so richly deserves all that He has--giving it up so that we--who don't deserve a thing--might benefit. A free gift, totally undeserved.

Or, again, we can look at **Ephesians 1:7-8**. It’s the same understanding of grace, but it ties the idea even more closely to what Jesus did on the cross:

**7**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace **8**that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding,

“We have redemption by his blood.” Grace comes from His sacrifice. It’s not by our religious rule-keeping, it’s not by virtue of our bloodlines, it’s not anything we’ve done to earn or deserve it. It’s what He has done that brings us “the forgiveness of sins.” It’s His sacrifice, Him taking the punishment that our sins deserve, on the cross. He did that for us.

That’s grace. That’s the “riches of God’s grace.” God’s grace isn’t stingy, it’s not in short-supply. It’s lavish. He lavishes it upon us. There’s this great storehouse of heavenly blessings and it is God’s good pleasure to pour out these blessings on us through Jesus in grace. That’s the wisdom of God.

Grace is the best word because it talks about a free gift, totally undeserved. And the greatest example of that is, without a doubt, the gift of salvation—redemption, the forgiveness of sins—that Christ has purchased for us through His blood, shed on the cross. Christ, who was rich, became poor; so that we, who were spiritually poor, might experience the rich blessings of God.

***Pictures of Grace***That’s a good definition of grace. It’s a good start to understanding this word.

But, here’s the thing, grace is not just an intellectual concept. Just because you can define the word grace on a vocabulary test, that doesn’t mean you fully understand it. Grace, in order to be truly understood, needs to be experienced.

It’s like romantic love, in a sense. You can do a word study of romantic love and come up with a definition of when love is happening and when it isn’t. You can even take a scientific approach, and talk about what’s happening with your hormones and your nervous system when romantic love happens. But if you really want to know what love is like, you have to fall in love. It’s not really something to be explained, it’s something to be experienced.

Grace is like that. It isn’t just a word to be defined, it also needs to be described. We need stories that can give us a sense of what grace looks like, that can help us feel when grace is happening. If you’ve ever experienced grace, then you too have a story.

So, that’s the second part of my outline: **the word** “**grace” illustrated**. Let me see if I can give you some pictures of grace.

And to do that, I want to tell you some stories of Jesus. It’s said that the Apostle Paul, in his New Testament writings, uses the word “grace” over 100 times. Both verses we looked at to define grace were written by Paul. Jesus, on the other hand, virtually never uses the word grace. And yet, His life is the embodiment of grace. He told stories which illustrated grace. He lived out grace. John 1:14 says that Jesus came into the world “full of grace and truth.” It’s like His life was an overflowing fountain of grace. It just spilled out.

So you have Jesus beginning His ministry and gathering disciples around Himself. Now, you have to understand, in that culture to be chosen as a student of a rabbi was a big deal. It was like there was this application process. Rabbis were very selective, like Ivy League schools. They needed to know that you were capable of doing the work, that you came from the right kind of family, that you had the right kind of character. There were interviews and reference checks and trial periods.

But then Jesus comes along, and He starts selecting his disciples, and He doesn’t hand out applications. Instead, He starts issuing invitations. He says, “Come, follow me.”

And there’s one, in particular. Matthew. That’s his Greek name. His Hebrew name is Levi, which tells you something about his parents’ hopes and dreams for him. Levi was the name of the tribe of Israel that became priests. Most likely, Levi’s parents hoped he would become a priest. But he didn’t. Maybe he flunked out of Rabbinical school. Maybe he never got in. But by the time Jesus met him he was the polar opposite of a Rabbi. He was a tax collector. A traitor to his people. Classified as the worst of sinners.

And Jesus comes to him and says: “Follow me.”

It’s a huge picture of grace. The crowds were scandalized. The teachers of the law thought He was joking. There was no way Levi (Matthew) was qualified to be a student of a Rabbi. But Jesus wasn’t waiting for Him to get His act together. Jesus wasn’t checking his references. He just said, “come.” (Mark 2:13-17)

And that teaches us something about grace. That tells us that no matter what you’ve done, no matter what your life has become, no matter what people have said about you…you still get the invitation. Grace hasn’t given up on you.

Or, again. A story of Jesus healing a man with leprosy in Luke 5. In that culture, leprosy was considered incurable and terrifying. They didn’t understand germ theory, but they recognized that the people around someone with leprosy often got leprosy too. If you were diagnosed with leprosy, you were pretty much sentenced to a lifetime of never being touched again. You had to live outside of the village. You had to warn people you were coming when you walked down the road. You were unclean.

Imagine that: if you had leprosy, you never got another hug. Nobody would come up and put a companionable arm around your shoulder. Handshakes were off limit. If you had leprosy, human contact was over.

So when this leprous man begs Jesus to heal him, he’s truly desperate. He says: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

And here’s what Jesus does: before He says a word, before He pours out His healing power, before the man is clean…Jesus reaches out and touches him. Luke 5:13: “Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.”

He didn’t have to do that. He could have stood at a safe distance and spoken the leprosy into healing. He could have ordered the man to go wash himself in a pool and then report to the priests to verify his healing. He could have healed him and then touched him.

But Jesus doesn’t do that. He touches him, then He heals him. And there is something about grace that gets conveyed here. The miracle reveals the power of Jesus. But the touch reveals the grace of Jesus.

Grace doesn’t wait for us to get cleaned up. Grace doesn’t wait for us to get our act together. Too often, people will talk about their desire to re-connect with God. People who have slipped away from church, or maybe their upbringing, will say things like: “I’m gonna come back to church…I’m gonna get myself straightened out with God…but first, I have to get this area of my life fixed. I’ve got to repair this relationship. I’ve got to kick this habit. Let me clean up a little, and then I’ll turn back to God.”

But grace isn’t like that. Grace isn’t waiting for us to get well. First grace touches us, then grace heals us. It meets us right where we are.

Or one more, a story that Jesus told. Most of us know this story. It’s the most famous story Jesus told. We know it as the story of the prodigal son.

Prodigal is a word that means reckless, extravagant, even wasteful. It refers to the way this boy demanded his share of his inheritance—while his father was still living, mind you!—and then ran away to blow through that inheritance in wild living. He squandered his father’s wealth until he found himself penniless and friendless in a foreign country in the middle of a drought. He hired himself out as a swineherd where the only nutrition available to him was the slop the pigs were eating. Finally, at the end of himself, he comes to his senses and decides he’ll go back to his father’s house and throw himself on his father’s mercy and beg to be taken on as a hired hand.

But before he even gets to his father’s front door, and before he can even begin his carefully rehearsed speech of repentance, his father falls on him and covers him with kisses and commands his servants to bring out the trappings of sonship. Forget mercy, the father hits him with full-on grace!

Now it is the father who becomes prodigal as he throws an extravagant party. He becomes recklessly, wastefully generous as the fatted calf is killed and his lost son is celebrated.

And here, too, we learn something about grace. Grace is not dependent on whether we are deserving or not. Grace doesn’t get doled out in proportion to what we have earned. Just the opposite, really: Even though this boy did not even deserve to be made a servant in his father's household...even though he had insulted his father and abused the privilege of being his son...even though he had run from his father and treated him as though he wanted him dead...still the father welcomed him back and made him a son again it and gave him all of the privileges which sonship entailed.

This is grace illustrated. This is a picture of one--who so richly deserves all that he has--giving it up so that another--who doesn't deserve a thing--might benefit. This is a picture of a free gift, totally undeserved.

***Do Not Miss Grace***Now, the third part of my outline: **the word “grace” applied.**

What should you take home from this message today? What does this definition, and these pictures, of grace mean for you?

Let me give you one more verse, from **Hebrews 12, verse 15:**

**15**See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

The word translated “falls short” here can also be translated as “misses”, or “fails to receive”, or “fails to experience.” The idea is that we don’t want anyone to miss the grace of God. It would be a tragedy, a failure of epic proportions, if anyone were to come into contact with Hope Church and fail to experience the grace of God. I’m not doing my job as a preacher of the gospel if that happens. We’re not living up to our name—Hope Church—if that happens. If we are not helping people to see and receive and experience the grace of God, then we have no business being here.

But, I hate to tell you, sometimes it happens. Sometimes grace is missing in the church. Sometimes grace is missing in people who call themselves Christians. Sometimes, instead of receiving the free gift, undeserved, that Jesus is offering; we want to turn it into something we work for, something we strive for. Sometimes, instead of being conduits of God’s grace, touching people before the healing, we want them to clean themselves up before we are willing to have anything to do with them. Sometimes, instead of lavish, extravagant, prodigal grace; the church get’s stingy and tightfisted with it.

The first part of this verse is a command: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God.” The second part is a warning: “that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

That’s what happens when grace is missed. A bitter root grows up. In Hebrew culture, any poisonous plant was considered “bitter.” The author is using a metaphor here. When grace is absent, things get poisonous. Religion without grace is toxic. Relationships without grace are poison. A church without grace is deadly. When we miss grace, we miss life.

This sermon series, called *Grace is Greater*, is something we are doing in conjunction with a small group series of the same name, based on a book by Kyle Idleman. That’s where we got the video that we showed at the beginning of the sermon. And a lot of the ideas I’m going to share these five weeks come from Idleman’s book.

And Idleman says there are three phrases that we often use that can keep us from receiving God’s grace. As we wrap up this morning, I want to share these phrases and ask you if you’ve ever said them, or something similar. And if so, can you apply the truth that grace is greater? Can you believe that God’s grace is available, even for you?

The first phrase is: **“Not after what I’ve done.”** Sometimes we just can’t believe that God’s grace could be available to us. We are only too well aware of our sin, our mistakes, our rebellion against God. We love to hear about other people’s redemption stories, we just can’t believe it could happen to us.

But grace doesn’t qualify. It doesn’t draw limits. It doesn’t say: “Forgiveness is available, but only to a point.” Grace is greater than our past mistakes. **Grace is greater than our guilt**. Grace is greater than our regrets. Do you believe that?

Or, again, sometimes we say: **“Not after what has been done to me.”** Sometimes we are o.k. with accepting God’s grace to us, but we struggle with the idea of God’s grace working through us. Some of us have had terrible things done to us: horrific abuses and betrayals and disappointments. And so the root of bitterness has grown up. We can’t imagine extending grace to that person who took everything from us. We can’t even contemplate the idea that we can move past the hurt.

But the grace of God which forgives us also gives us the strength to forgive. The God of all grace invites us to be people of grace. Grace is greater than our hurts. **Grace is greater than our wounds.** Grace is greater than our desire for vengeance. Do you believe that?

And third, sometimes we say: **“Not after what my life has become.”** Sometimes the circumstances of our lives have become so heavy, so hard to bear, that we just can’t imagine that there is any more grace left. The medical diagnosis is just so hopeless. The job search has met dead end after dead end. The pregnancy test keeps coming up negative. Night after night ends in loneliness. It just doesn’t seem like you have the strength to go on.

But God says, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Even in the midst of your trial, grace abounds unto grace. Grace is greater than our circumstances. **Grace is greater than our weaknesses.** Grace is greater than our disappointments. Do you believe that?

Grace isn’t something we explain, it’s something we must experience. We don’t so much apply grace to our lives as we allow it to wash over us. Will you let grace be a part of your story?

***Amazing Grace***Finally, let me give you one more story of grace. In the 18th century a rugged, coarse sailor was making his way across the Atlantic. He had much in common with the prodigal son. He had left school and home at the age of 11 to become a sailor, and he had little time for God or the practice of organized religion. In fact, he was a slave trader, engaged in the despicable practice of capturing natives from West Africa and selling them all around the world.

But on this particular journey across the ocean, his ship was caught in a tremendous storm. He awoke to find his cabin filled with water, a circumstance which should have meant the boat was minutes from sinking. Pleading with God for mercy, he and the crew threw themselves at the pumps. Miraculously, the ship survived.

From that day forward the sailor was a different man. He was convinced that it was only by God's grace that he had been spared and he left the slave trade forever to follow God's call into ministry. At the age of 39 he was ordained a minister of the Anglican Church and he continued to preach right up until his death at the age of 82. In fact, shortly before he died he is remembered as saying during a sermon: "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!"

His name was John Newton, slave-trader turned preacher, and the author of these timeless words:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.