Matthew 18:21-35 *Grace is Greater: Greater Than Our Wounds*

***Random Pain***On November 13, 2004, Victoria Ruvolo was driving to her home in Long Island. It was raining that night, and the rain was turning to snow; so the forty-four-year-old New Yorker decided to stay off the parkway and take a local route. Little did she know she was putting herself in harm’s way.

On the same night, Ryan Cushing, an 18-year-old college freshmen, and some friends were out looking for some excitement. They had stolen a credit card and had used it to purchase—of all things—a 20-pound frozen turkey.

Now, as these teen-agers travelled one direction in their silver Nissan, and Victoria Ruvolo traveled the opposite direction in her Honda, Ryan Cushing leaned out of his window and launched the turkey.

It crashed through her windshield, bent her steering wheel, and shattered her face.

Victoria Ruvolo was rushed to the hospital and placed in a medically induced coma. She did not wake up for weeks, and when she did, she didn’t even realize she was the patient in the hospital. She assumed she was there to visit someone else, until she saw a mirror, and the tube down her throat, and a face she didn’t recognize. Her face had to be entirely rebuilt, titanium plates attached to her skull, wires on her jaw, and synthetic film on one eye. She endured months of painful rehabilitation.

This is a sermon about wounds. What do we do when we are hurt by someone else? What role does grace play when our brokenness is the direct result of someone else’s poor choice? Max Lucado puts it like this:

You weren’t hit by a turkey, but you married one, work for one, got left by one. Now where do you turn? (*Grace*, p. 56)

Lucado relates another story: A US soldier in Afghanistan received a Dear John letter. His girlfriend back home was breaking up with him via the U.S. postal service. Even worse, there was already someone else, and she was already engaged. Plus, she included this outlandish request: “Please return my favorite picture of myself because I would like to use that photograph for my engagement picture in the county newspaper.”

That’s cold. But the soldier’s buddies came to his defense. They went throughout the barracks and collected pictures of all the other soldiers’ girlfriends. They filled an entire shoe box. Then the jilted soldier mailed the photos with this note: “Please find your enclosed picture and return the rest. For the life of me I can’t remember which one you were.” (Ibid.)

That kind of retaliation has its appeal. When we are wounded, we want to wound back.

But our sermon series is about grace. For three weeks now, we’ve been talking about God’s wonderful and amazing grace to us. We’ve been marveling at God’s free and unmerited favor in spite of our sin. It has been, I hope, encouraging. We all love grace when it is given to us.

But now we have to ask a question that might make us a bit uncomfortable: **If God gives grace to us, should we give grace to others?** If we have received grace from God when we wound Him, might we be expected to give grace to others when they wound us?

***Peter’s Question***We’re going to go through a portion of Matthew 18 today, where Jesus shares what we call “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.” The story begins in **verse 21** when Peter asks Jesus a question:

**21**Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Peter asks Jesus how many times he needs to forgive somebody when they sin against him. “My brother or sister” he says. Maybe Peter means it literally. Have you ever had a family member who kept repeating the same mistake, and then kept apologizing for it? If you have a sibling you probably have. If you are married, then you know the pattern as well.

So Peter asks, “How often must I forgive?” How many times do they get to mess up and say “sorry”, and I’m supposed to forgive? The rabbis of the day said: “Forgive three times, but not the fourth.” Peter takes their number, multiplies it by 2, and then adds one more for good measure. He thinks he’s being generous. He probably expects Jesus to call all the disciples around and praise him for how gracious he’s being.

It’s a good question. How many times do we have to forgive someone who hurts us? It’s a math problem:

**G > | < O x 7**

Is grace greater than or less than an offense times seven?

You get the feeling Peter has someone in mind. Someone who has hurt him, I don’t know—just guessing here—7 times. And Peter has had enough. He’s ready to throw in the towel.

What about you? Have you ever been hurt so many times by the same person that you just want to be done? Or, maybe it’s not the number of times, but the degree of the offense. It was just one wound, but it was seven times worse than anything else that has ever been done to you. What are you supposed to do then? Shall you forgive that?

When does grace become less than? I don’t think this is a random theological question for Peter. I think he has someone in mind. And maybe, when you hear the question, someone pops into your mind: the person who lied to you, the person who hurt you, the person who abandoned you, the person who robbed you of your innocence, the person who took away your hopes and plans and dreams. Maybe there’s someone in your life who has hurt you to the seventh power. Surely Jesus doesn’t expect you to forgive them?

Here’s Jesus’ answer, **verse 22:**

**22**Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Some translations have “seventy times seven.” But I don’t think the specific number is the point. It’s not like Jesus is saying if you hit 78 (or 491) then you can wash your hands of the relationship. What Jesus is saying is that if your brother keeps sinning against you, but he keeps repenting (cf. Luke 17:4), then you should keep forgiving. There’s no limit. Jesus is pointing at our math problem and saying “Grace is always greater than.”

Now, let me say, some of us might be getting a little defensive here. Some of you might be objecting inside your heads: “But you don’t know what has been done to me.” You’re right, I don’t. I don’t mean to be dismissive. Not at all. I know there are some wounds in this room that are just horrific, and I’m not trying to minimize that.

But I know that Jesus says that grace is greater. And He wants His grace to flow through us.

***Grace Received***And so, to help us wrap our hearts and minds around that, He tells a story. **Verses 23-24**:

**23**“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24**As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

This is an outlandish story. The king in the story is like a powerful CEO-type who decides it is time to call in his loans. And he’s got this one man who owes him “ten thousand bags of gold.” I don’t know how many bags of gold you have, but this seems like a lot of gold. Scholars estimate that it would be the equivalent of about 150 million dollars today. In that day, it might have been around 10 times the annual, national budget. In other words, Jesus chose an amount of money so outlandishly high as to be inconceivable that anybody could possibly owe such a large debt. The point is, this man has no hope of paying it back. **Verse 25:**

**25**Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

This would be the normal result of failing to pay what was owed. His life would be liquidated, his family sold into slavery, in an effort by the king to recoup some of what he was owed.

The parable is meant to reflect our standing before God. Maybe you remember the image we looked at in Romans 5, a couple of weeks ago. There is this deep abyss, a great chasm, between us and God. It is a canyon that we cannot cross on our own. It is an unpayable debt.

That’s the consequence of our sin. And someday God is going to call us to give an account.

The man in the story recognizes his predicament and chooses to beg for mercy. **Verse 26**:

**26**“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’

Yeah, that’s not going to happen. There’s no way he can cover the debt.

And yet, amazingly, the king is gracious. **Verse 27:**

**27**The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

Here is a picture of what Jesus does for us. The man owes 150 million dollars, and the king wipes it off the books. We owe God an unmeasurable debt of sin, and yet he wipes it off the books.

Verse 27 uses two verbs, and they could both be translated “forgive.” First, the king “canceled the debt.” There was nothing left to pay. His debt was wiped out. Second, the king “let him go.” He wasn’t going to hang this over his head. He was a free man.

This is a picture of God’s grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.

***Community Outraged***But now Jesus’ story takes a dark turn. **Verse 28:**

**28**“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

The contrast here is intentional. The servant who has been forgiven a debt of ten thousand bags of gold goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred silver coins. This is the difference between 150 million dollars, and 20 bucks.

And we get a hint of where this is going, because when our guy finds his fellow servant, he starts to shake him down like he’s a character in a mob movie. **Verse 29:**

**29**“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

Now, pretend you have never heard this story before. What should happen next? The guy with the $20 debt says “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” That is exactly what the guy with the $150 million debt just said to the king. And the king forgave him, right? The king was gracious with him, right? So, of course, this man who has been forgiven so much is now going to be gracious in return, right? **Verse 30:**

**30**“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

Here’s the shocking twist in Jesus’ story, and here’s where it starts to get personal for us. We want to know when the debt owed to us is too great for us to forgive. Jesus wants us to think about just how great the debt is that we’ve had forgiven. **Verse 31:**

**31**When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Here’s a detail that we might not always notice. When the other servants see what has happened, they are outraged. Some translations say “greatly distressed” or “very sad.” These other servants live in this community with a generous king who is gracious towards them. They have a master who is known for his extravagant benevolence. But when they see one of their own, someone they know who has been on the receiving end of the master’s grace, refusing to extend that grace to someone else, it bothers them. It outrages them. It really ticks them off.

And there is a lesson there for us, as well. In the church, where we celebrate God’s grace to us, it should bother us when we see members of the community who refuse to extend grace to others. As a community claimed by grace, we should be outraged by examples of ungrace.

Kyle Idleman writes this:

Here’s my concern: often the church is known for its outrage toward people outside of our community who need grace rather than outrage for the people inside our community who refuse to give it. When we sniff legalism in our community, or see someone who has received God’s incredible grace being judgmental and condemning toward those whose struggles are different than their own, we should become very distressed. (v. 78)

Grace is one of the core values of the church. We are saved by grace. And so we should share grace. And we should oppose those who withhold grace.

***The New Equation***Now, the end of the story. **Verse 32:**

**32**“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **33**Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ **34**In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

How long do you think it will take him to pay back all he owes? I’m guessing it’s going to take forever. He’s never going to pay it back. He’s going to spend the rest of his existence in a cell, imprisoned by his unwillingness to give grace and overwhelmed by the guilt of what he’s done. We have a word for that…it’s called hell.

Then Jesus gives the point of the parable, and it’s a hard one. **Verse 35:**

**35**“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Jesus makes it clear that we cannot receive God’s grace and then refuse to give it to others. If God has forgiven our sins, then that is a huge debt that He has wiped off the books. So who are we to be keeping accounts on the sins of others?

Remember Peter’s math problem, the question that started this passage? Peter wanted to know when the number of offenses committed against us was greater than the grace we could be reasonably expected to give. Jesus answers with a math problem of his own. Jesus’ answer looks like this:

**$150,000,000 > $20**

Or, if you want to think of it differently:

**The Grace You have Received > The Grace You are being asked to Give**

When you remember how much has been done for you, you are going to be better able to forgive the things that have been done to you.

And, again, I’m not making light of your wounds. I’m not trying to equate the worst hurt in your life to someone cheating you of 20 bucks. That’s not what Jesus is trying to do either. But if we understand the gospel, then we understand how big is the debt we’ve been forgiven. I’m trying to help us see that the grace that flows to us must also flow through us.

Forgiveness does not mean you make light of your hurts. It does not mean you endorse the misdeeds of your offender or put yourself in a position to be hurt by them again. “Grace isn’t blind. It sees the hurt full well. But grace chooses to see God’s forgiveness even more.” (Lucado, p. 83)

The book that we are using as a guide for this sermon series is *Grace is Greater* by Kyle Idleman. Max Lucado also has a book on grace. It’s called *Grace.* And he has a chapter on this same topic: forgiving those who have wounded you. But the Bible story Max looks at is the story of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet.

It’s the night before the crucifixion and Jesus takes up the towel of a servant and performs a task that most of us would find humiliating and demeaning. When Jesus is done washing their feet, this is what He says in **John 13:14-15:**

**14**Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. **15**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

I had always thought of that story as an example of how we should serve one another. That we should never take ourselves or our positions so seriously that we cannot humbly and gently help one another out. I’d never really thought about it in terms of forgiveness.

And yet, Lucado uses it to illustrate just that. Whose feet, he asks, did Jesus wash? He washed the feet of the disciples who, in just a few short hours, were going to abandon Him at his moment of greatest need. He washed the feet of Peter, who despite all his bluster about loyalty, was soon going to swear up and down that he had no acquaintance with Jesus at all. Jesus washed the feet of Judas! (You can check, the footwashing takes place before Judas heads out into the night, John 13:30). Jesus washes the feet of the one who sells him out for 30 pieces of sliver. His betrayer.

And then Jesus says: “you should do as I have done for you.” What did Jesus do for you? He forgave you. He wiped your debt off the books. He closed the gap between you and God. He gave you grace.

And if Jesus gave you grace, shouldn’t you give grace to others? If Jesus washed the feet of His Judas, shouldn’t you wash the feet of yours? Your betrayer? Your turkey-throwing miscreant? The good-for-nothing villain in your story?

**Colossians 3:13** says:

 Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

**Max Lucado** says:

To accept grace is to accept the vow to give it.

And **Kyle Idleman** says:

Grace is only grace if it goes both ways. Receiving it from God but refusing to give it to others isn’t an option.

They’re all saying the same thing: Christ has left us an example, that we should do for each other what He has done for us. As the king said to the unmerciful servant: “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

***How Grace is Greater***God is calling us to forgive those who hurt us. Grace is greater than our wounds.

Let me give three more equations to help us understand the forgiveness we are called to give:

**Grace is greater than repayment**. Repayment is the idea that when you hurt someone, you need to “make it right.” Sometimes we call it “reparations”. Maybe a judge will order a vandal to scrub the walls that he or she defaced. Or a thief will have to pay back what was stolen.

Sometimes, when somebody hurts us, we don’t want to forgive until they make it right. When they say or do something to make up for what they have done, then we will forgive. When they repair the damage they have caused, then we will be gracious.

The problem is: that’s not grace. If we wait until the damage is repaired, if we insist on repayment, then we need a new word: because it isn’t grace. All we are doing then is exactly what the unmerciful servant did: demanding that the debt is paid in full before we will wipe it off the books.

Besides that, what do you do when the hurt is so bad that there’s nothing that can be said and there’s nothing that can be done to make it right? What are you going to do then? Some of you know exactly what I mean: you’ve been hurt so bad that nothing will ever make up for it. If the debt can’t be repaid, then isn’t it going to require grace?

In the story of the unmerciful servant Jesus says that the master “canceled the debt.” He didn’t just extend the note or make it interest only. He canceled it. Wiped it off the books. It wasn’t earned. It wasn’t fair. The master simply absorbed the cost of what the man owed Him.

When you decide to offer grace to someone you are doing the same thing. You are taking the consequences of their sin upon yourself. You don’t make them earn it.

It isn’t fair.

But it is exactly what Jesus did for you.

Or, again, **Grace is greater than revenge.** Revenge says, “I’m going to hurt the person the way that I’ve been hurt.”

And that’s what a lot of us do. We spend our lives with that approach. We keep a scoreboard in our heads and we always try to make sure that the hurt we dole out is equal to or greater than the hurt we’ve received.

I’ve heard this referred to as “sitting in God’s chair.” The Bible says that vengeance is the Lord’s (Romans 12:19). It is God’s job to judge. It is God’s place to balance the accounts on the sins of humanity. Every sin will be paid for: either by the individual who committed that sin or by Jesus, if that person puts their faith in trust in Him. But it is not our place to sit in God’s judgement seat.

So if we say to ourselves: “I’ll forgive that person as soon as I get even. When I make them feel the way I feel, then I’ll show them grace.” Well, that’s not grace either. Grace releases the need for retribution.

The second thing the master did in the parable, after cancelling the man’s debt, was to let him go. We’re called to do that as well. Release the person who has sinned against you. Let him go. Let her go.

I know it’s not fair.

I know it doesn’t feel even.

I know they don’t deserve it.

Let them go.

And then, third, **Grace is greater than resentment.** Resentment says: “I’m going to quietly become more and more angry.” Resentment holds onto to grudges. Stews over them. Plays them back over and over again on a YouTube channel in our brains.

We know that life will go on, but we hold onto bitterness. Maybe it’s a lot of little things that build up, and we quietly become more and more angry. Maybe it’s one big thing, a gigantic betrayal, that keeps coming back to our minds.

But when you choose anger, when you choose resentment, you know who it really hurts? It hurts you. Someone once defined resentment as “drinking a bottle of poison and waiting for the other person to die.” It’s not very effective.

In the parable Jesus told, when the unmerciful servant wanted to throw the other guy in jail over $20, do you know who had to pay for that? In the ancient world, if you wanted someone jailed over an offense they committed against you, you had to pay the cost of that imprisonment. So instead of forgiving the $20 debt, the guy was prepared to pay to see the other man punished.

That’s how it works. You can punish your offender. You can say that they deserve it. And you can lock them up and put them in prison and you can make them pay for it, but guess who ultimately pays that bill? You do. You’re the one who pays for it. You’re the one losing sleep. You’re the one whose stomach hurts. You’re the one who is seeing your other relationships wrecked by bitterness.

Sometimes, when you forgive, it’s not the person you are forgiving who receives the most. I love the words of the Matthew West song “Forgiveness” where he says, “The prisoner that it really frees is you.”

So let grace flow through you. Let the grace you receive become the grace that you distribute. As Jesus has done for you, do unto others.

***Turkey-Tosser Set Free***Finally, allow me to finish the story of Victoria Ruvolo, the woman whose life was changed by Ryan Cushing’s careless act. Nine months after their first disastrous encounter, Ruvolo was in court as Cushing was being sentenced. For New York City, the case had been a media sensation. It came to symbolize an out-of-control generation and kids who were too entitled and privileged to know right from wrong. The courtroom was packed for Cushing’s comeuppance. The sentencing guidelines said he could receive as much as 25 years in prison.

So when the judge read the sentence, there was outrage: only six months behind bars, five years’ probation, some counseling, and public service. Nobody could believe the leniency. Everyone objected.

Everyone, that is, except for Victoria Ruvolo. The reduced sentence had been her idea. The boy walked over, and she embraced him. In full view of the judge and the crowd, she held him tight, stroked his hair, and said: “I forgive you. I want your life to be the best it can be.”

She allowed grace to shape her response. “God gave me a second chance at life, and I passed it on,” she said. "If I hadn't let go of that anger, I'd be consumed by this need for revenge. Forgiving him helps me move on."

She says she was bothered by some media reports that made it appear that she said that what Cushing had done to her was OK. She says: “No, I never condoned the act itself. I simply forgave the person who committed the act.”

Since then, she has made her mishap into her mission. She regularly volunteers at the county probation department, talking about the power of forgiveness. She wrote a book called “No Place for Vengeance.” And she travels the country as a public speaker talking about grace.

She says: “I’m trying to help others, but I know for the rest of my life I’ll be known as ‘The Turkey Lady’. Could have been worse. He could have thrown a ham. I’d be Miss Piggy.”

Grace flows through Victoria Ruvolo. What about you?