Romans 5:12-21 *Grace is Greater: Greater than Your Guilt*

***The Hungry Alligator***Math has never really been my subject. There’s a reason I went into a profession that mostly works with words.

But there’s one math lesson that has stuck with me all these years. I’m not sure when I learned it first, maybe in second grade? But it has to do with the **“greater than, less than”** symbols.

These symbols are used for comparison. It’s when you take two numbers and you want to know which is bigger. And the reason I remember the lesson is because teachers have this cool way of helping you remember it: they say that the symbols are like hungry alligator mouths. Think of them as a big set of jaws, and the alligator is really hungry, so his mouth is always open towards the bigger number. The symbol with the mouth open to the left is the “greater than” sign, and it indicates that the first number is the bigger number. And the symbol with the mouth open to the right is the “less than” sign, and it indicates that the first number is the smaller number. The alligator always wants to eat the bigger number.

Let’s try a couple. When I first started doing these, they were pretty easy, because we started with whole numbers. So, consider:

**18 > | < 5**

Pretty easy, right? 18 is bigger than 5. Always has been, always will be. So **18 > 5**.

But then, my teachers started making it harder. They had us comparing fractions:

 **½ > | < 7/32**

That’s a little harder, because the fraction on the right side has the bigger numbers, but the fraction on the left is actually bigger. It should be, once again, a “greater than” **symbol.**

And then, one more. Sometimes the teachers would get really mean, and ask us to perform operations on both sides of the comparison, so something like this:

**5(8 + 3) > | < ½(6 x 6)
 10 3**

Now, some of you have a really good head for numbers. Some of you are math teachers. So you can look at this and just know which is bigger. I have to do a little calculating. But I think, if I did it correctly, the answer on the left is 5.5 while the answer on the right is 6. So, in this case, we need a **“lesser than**” symbol.

Anyway, the hungry alligator math symbol is the image we are using for our current sermon series. It’s called “Grace is Greater” and the idea is that whatever you compare it to, grace will always be bigger.  **Grace always gets the hungry side** of the alligator mouth. No matter what you put on the blank side, grace is always greater than. Greater than **Brokenness.** Greater than **Bitterness**. Greater than **Circumstances.** Greater than **Weakness**. Greater than **Shame.** Greater than **Sin.**

Here’s a verse that tells us that grace is greater. **Romans 5:15**, from the New Living Translation:

For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace.

This is a very important verse for understanding grace, and it comes in a very important section of scripture. In order for us to understand just how great grace is, we first need to understand how much we need it. As I often say, there is no good news unless we grasp the bad news first. This verse, this section of scripture, is about helping us understand how bad our situation is so that we can fully appreciate God’s wonderful grace.

The full passage is **Romans 5:12-21**. You can open there in your Bibles if you like. I’ll read it out of the New International Version, which is what we have for our pew Bibles:

**12**Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

**13**To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law.**14**Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

**15**But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! [This is the verse where the NLT says God’s grace is greater. The NIV uses the expression “how much more”. Notice how often that phrase gets used in the next few verses…]

 **16**Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. **17**For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more [there it is again!] will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

**18**Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. **19**For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

**20**The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, [same idea!] **21**so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, that’s a mouthful. Paul, who wrote the book of Romans, has a very robust mind. He uses a lot of logic in Romans. And he is covering a lot of ideas. It isn’t always easy to just sit down and read a passage from Romans and grasp it in one go.

But I looked the same passage up in *The Message*, which is a modern translation by Eugene Peterson that really strives for readability. And *The Message* uses several word pictures in this passage that I think are helpful. So what I’m going to do is I’m going to go back through this scripture and explain it, but I’m going to put verses from *The Message* on the screen. And if you like, if you already have your Bibles open, you can keep them open and compare them as I go; and hopefully as I explain it and as you look at the way Peterson puts it, it will be easier for you to understand what it is saying.

So, again, the idea we are looking at today is that grace is greater than our sin and guilt. And for that to matter to us, for us to grasp how monumental that is, we first need to understand what a problem we have. So I want you to think of this passage like a trip to the doctor’s office. We’ll have three parts: the diagnosis, the prognosis, and the antidote.

***The Diagnosis***First, **the diagnosis**. We need to know our predicament. And the predicament is that **we have all sinned**. We are all infected with this thing called sin. Here’s how *The Message* puts **verses 12 and 13:**

You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we’re in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death. That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses.

No one is exempt from sin.

Paul is telling the story of the world here, so he goes all the way back to Adam. We know the story: Adam is the first man. God gives him a beautiful garden to live in and free reign of the place. Just one, simple , command: don’t eat the fruit from that one tree. But Adam, and his wife Eve, with a little prompting from the serpent, eat the fruit. They disobey God. Sin enters the world.

And when that happened—when Adam sinned--the Bible says we all sinned. Sin got loose in the world. Because of Adam--who was acting as our spiritual representative, the father of all humanity—we all became guilty of sin that day.

It’s like this illness, this virus, that was loosed on the world. You know about Ebola. Every once in awhile we’ll hear about another outbreak of the Ebola virus. It’s a terrible virus, and apparently pretty easy to spread through contact and even airborne pathogens. So when there is an Ebola outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control have to track the victims, and figure out who they’ve been in contact with, and how they got it, and keep tracing it backwards until they find Patient Zero. The first contact.

And the Bible says that Adam is Patient Zero for this sickness called sin. He’s our first human father, and he had sin, and he has passed it along to every son of Adam and daughter of Eve that has lived since.

Now, maybe you don’t think that’s fair. Maybe you don’t like the idea that because Adam messed up, we’re all considered sinners. Maybe you don’t like the idea that God is holding us all up to this impossible standard.

But, think about it. We really didn’t need Adam’s help, did we? I’m guessing that we all recognize that if we had been in Adam’s place, we wouldn’t have done so well either. Maybe we would have passed the fruit tree test, but eventually every one of us would have disobeyed God. I know, because we all have a hard time even living up to our own standards.

Let me tell you a story about myself: I’ve got an electric garage door opener. It’s one of the greatest things ever. I can sit in my car, push a button, and this heavy garage door on rollers will open right in front of my car. It’s great. I get to put my car inside a dry garage every night. I get to get in and out of my car without ever stepping out into the elements of nature. It’s great.

Except, my garage door has this safety feature, these two little glass eyed things, that sit near the bottom and have to be able to see each other or my garage door won’t go down. They have to be lined up so the little lights on the side are green, and then the garage door works; but if something gets between them: like a basketball, or my dog, or a toddler, then the garage door stops and automatically goes back up. It’s a safety feature so that nobody gets hurt. And the problem is, if anything ever bumps one of those glass eyes, or if cobwebs get in front of them, of if a stray leaf blows in, the garage door won’t go down. And there’s no way to bypass it.

And when that happens, it drives me nuts. I don’t know why, but about once a year something will happen to knock those eyes out of alignment, and I just can’t fix it. I try everything. I clean the lens. I hunch down and make minute adjustments. I push the button over and over again, and it won’t go down. And when this happens, I just get more and more agitated. I lose my temper. I start to stomp around. I yell at the garage door. I kick the rails. Even talking about it now is getting me worked up.

My point is: I’m not proud of the way I act when I’m trying to get the garage door to close. It’s not behavior I would consider acceptable. But every time it happens, that’s the way I act. It’s sin. And I engage in it. And I didn’t need Adam’s help or anybody else’s.

I’m sick.

***The Prognosis***Now, second, **the prognosis**. What does this sickness called sin lead to?

Imagine the doctor comes in to give you the news: “We’ve run tests, and it’s clear that what you have is *hamartia.”*

That doesn’t sound good. You’ve never heard of that. It kind of knocks the wind out of you a little to hear that. But then you rally a bit. You decide you’re going to fight this thing. So you say: “OK. Give it to me straight, doc. What does this mean? Am I going to have to take some time off from work? Is this going to put me on bed rest for awhile? Am I going to lose my hair?”

And the doctor says: “No. You don’t understand. *Harmartia* is the Greek word for sin. And I’m afraid it is terminal. You have sin, and it’s going to kill you.”

That’s the prognosis. **Sin leads to death**. We all have this condition, it’s universal, and it is going to kill us. **Verse 14 in *The Message****:*

So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses. Even those who didn’t sin precisely as Adam did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of life, this separation from God. But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it.

I appreciate the word picture here: there’s this huge abyss separating us from God. That’s how that new song we are singing here at church—“My Living Hope”- starts out. That first line: “How deep the chasm that lay between us.” That’s the word picture for what sin does to us: imagine something even deeper and wider than the Grand Canyon, and on one side this huge crowd of people, all of us, every human from Adam on; and on the other side God. And there’s no way across the divide. And one by one, people are falling off the edge of this abyss. They are trying to reach God, but they can’t.

That’s death. That’s the result of our sin. Physical death, in that since Adam every human must face the “termination of life.” But also Spiritual death, “separation from God.”

The diagnosis is that we all have hamartia. We all have this condition called sin. And the prognosis is that we are all going to die. We are separated from God by a great chasm that we cannot bridge on our own.

***The Antidote***But there’s a specific reason that Paul is talking about Adam in this passage. Not only is Adam Patient Zero who is the first to be infected by sin, but Adam is also a type who is pointing us to a second Adam. That’s what the last line in verse 14 is hinting at: “But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it.”

You see, you might not love the idea that when Adam sinned we all sinned. Why does Adam get to represent us? But Paul wants us to know that while that one act of disobedience brought death into the world; there is a second Adam whose act of obedience brought life into the world.

The second Adam, of course, is Jesus. And He brings **the antidote** to our sin problem. It’s **the life-giving gift of grace.** Here’s how *The Message* puts it:

Yet the rescuing gift is not exactly parallel to the death-dealing sin. If one man’s sin put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God, just think what God’s gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do! There’s no comparison between that death-dealing sin and this generous, life-giving gift.

Eugene Peterson gives us such wonderful images to help us understand the scriptures. Sin is pictured here like a card sharp: a casino dealer in a dingy, smoky backroom. But what he’s dealing out is death. Every card he flips over is a death sentence.

And then, there’s Jesus. And he’s handing out gifts. He’s like the world’s greatest version of Santa Claus. Handing out the gift of life over and over again. **Verses 16 and 17:**

The verdict on that one sin was the death sentence; the verdict on the many sins that followed was this wonderful life sentence. If death got the upper hand through one man’s wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, sovereign life, in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides?

I love the descriptions: “the breathtaking recovery life makes.” “Sovereign life.” “This wildly extravagant life-gift.” “This grand setting-everything-right.”

So far, *The Message* hasn’t used the word grace in this passage. But if you still have your pew Bible open, you’ll see it is used repeatedly in verses 15-17. Instead, Eugene Peterson chooses to use the word “gift.” “Life-gift.” He does this, because that’s what the word grace means. It’s a free gift, totally underserved. It’s the no-strings attached love of God for us, made possible by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

But the other reason Peterson doesn’t use the word grace early in this passage is because he’s holding it in reserve. He’s building to a climax. Skip ahead a few **verses to 20 and 21:**

Sin didn’t, and doesn’t, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call *grace.* When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that’s the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

I love that line: “the aggressive forgiveness we call grace.” Aggressive forgiveness.

Now the image is that of a wrestling ring. And sin is in the ring. And it’s tossing you around. It’s got all kinds of moves: the choke hold of guilt; the arm-bar of condemnation; the half-nelson of shame. Sin is accusing you and reminding you of every wrong thing you’ve done. It’s body-slamming you with secrets and regrets. Threatening you with death.

But then, all of a sudden, grace shows up ringside. Grace in the person of Jesus Christ. And for the purposes of this illustration I’m going to imagine Him looking like Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson. And Grace jumps into the ring and just destroys sin. We’re talking about a clothesline leap from the top rope. Sin versus grace is not a contest. Grace wins, hands down.

Sin is a disease we are all infected with. We can’t minimize or deflect or rationalize our sin. We all know, we all feel it, we come up short.

And sin is bad. It leads to death. It leaves us standing on the wrong-side of a deep divide.

And sin is always hanging that threat of death over our heads. It is always accusing, pointing out our flaws, rehashing our guilt.

But Jesus is the antidote to sin. Jesus has the life-giving gift of grace. “This aggressive forgiveness we call grace.”

Set up the equation however you want, put your sin on one side and God’s grace on the other, and the answer will be the same every time. The hungry alligator mouth always faces grace. God’s grace is always greater.

***Stories of Grace***Finally, let me finish this morning with a couple of stories. We said last week that grace needs to be experienced in order to be understood. And we do that through stories.

The first story comes from John 8. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts early in the morning. And there are a lot of people there. There’s no indication that it’s Daylight Savings weekend or anything like that, people are just up early to listen to Jesus teach. And then, all of a sudden, Jesus gets interrupted by this group of religious officials pushing a woman in front of them.

This woman is a bit of a mess. She looks like she was just ripped straight out of bed. And one of the religious officials explains that they have just caught her in the act of adultery.

The official notes that the law says to stone such a woman. She’s a sinner. She’s been caught in sin. The prognosis is death. What does Jesus say?

At first, Jesus doesn’t say anything. He knows it is a trap. But He bends down, and He starts to write in the dirt with His fingers. We don’t know what He was writing. It’d be fun to know. But it’s even more fun to guess. Maybe He’s just doodling. Maybe He’s writing out scripture. Maybe He’s writing down the names of some of the people standing in front of Him with stones in their hands. Or maybe He’s writing a list of the sins that He knows some of these people are guilty of. We don’t know.

But when they insist that He give an answer, He stands up and says: “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And then He just goes back to writing in the dirt. And one by one the stones are dropped until it’s just Jesus with this woman. She looks at Him, but His eyes are not full of condemnation and judgment. He says to her, “Where are your accusers? Is there no one left to condemn you?”

That’s what sin wants to do. It wants to condemn us. It threatens us with death. It holds out the threat of shame and secrets exposed and humiliation when the worst things about you are exposed to the world.

But Jesus already knows all the worst things about you. He knows all about this woman’s guilt. And He touches her with grace. He says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” That’s the aggressive forgiveness that we call grace. Grace that is greater than all my sin.

The second story comes from Matt Chandler, who is a preacher in Dallas, TX. He tells a story about his freshman year in Bible College. He met a young, single mom named Kim. She’d been in some bad relationships, she made some mistakes, and now she was struggling to raise her kid and get her education back on track.

So Matt and her friends were getting to know her and wanted to tell her about Jesus. And one night there was this Christian concert, and Matt and his friends invited Kim along. And after the concert, as will often happen at these things, a preacher got up with a message for young people.

And this preacher talks about sex. Right out of the gate he’s angry, and aggressive, and he talks about STDs and statistics. And then he gets a rose out, a single red rose, that’s pristine and beautiful and smells nice, and he hands it to somebody in the front row. And he says “I want you to pass that rose around while I’m preaching. Everybody gets a chance to pass it and to smell it, and then I’ll have you bring it up to me later.” And then he continues to preach about sex, pointing his finger and raising his voice. And Matt says as he sat there next to Kim, this young single mom with a pretty rough past, she just had her head bent down in shame.

Let me just say, I get the illustration with the rose. I’ve seen a similar thing done with duct tape. It’s a reminder that every sexual relationship affects us. It changes us in some way, takes something from us spiritually, can even have an effect on our physical health. It’s a powerful illustration of the cost of promiscuity.

But what the preacher was missing was grace. He was good with the diagnosis, but he forgot the cure.

He gets to the end of his talk and he says: “Now someone bring that rose back up to me. I need my rose back up here.” Someone brings the rose back up to this preacher onstage, and it’s a mess — completely broken. Half the petals are gone.

The preacher holds up the broken flower and says, “Now who would want this? It’s been handled. It’s been broken. It doesn’t even smell like a rose. Who would want this? Nobody wants this. Nobody would buy this.”

But Matt says he’s sitting next to this young lady, and he says that as the preacher is talking, everything in him wanted to just stand up and yell, “Jesus wants that rose! Jesus bought that rose!” That’s the whole point of the Gospel: “Sin… doesn’t have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call *grace.* When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.”

That’s the whole reason Jesus came: To fix what Adam had broken. To make things new. The whole reason Jesus came was to take what’s broken and turn it into something beautiful.

That’s what this whole message is about: Jesus wants the broken rose.

Grace wins.

Grace is greater than all our sin.