

Over the next weeks and in the run up to the summer holidays we are going to be thinking about this idea of God's grace. Grace is a word we use quite a lot in the church. Every Sunday we finish our service with the words **and may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ**; we talk about God's grace and the gift of grace.

Do we really understand what grace is?

We're going to be using 5 words, **Mercy, Patience, Discipline, Purpose and Surrender** to try and understand what we mean when we talk about grace, because actually the grace of God is central to all we believe as Christians, how we understand our salvation and come to know forgiveness.

Our first word today is **Mercy**. Grace is knowing the mercy of God.

In 2 Samuel chapter 12 we read the story of the Prophet Nathan confronting King David about his affair with Bathsheba. We know the story. King David had sent his army to fight a war, but instead of going with them to battle, which he should have been doing as king, he chose to stay behind in Jerusalem.

One day he was on his roof terrace and saw Bathsheba bathing. Bathsheba was a married woman, her husband was Uriah the Hittite, but that didn't stop David from sending for her, they slept together and surprise, surprise, she would soon send word that she was pregnant.

Instead of owning up to what had happened, David called Uriah home from the battle and encouraged him to go and be with his wife in the hope that after being away for such a long time they would sleep together, and that Uriah wouldn't work out the dates and so everything would be alright.

Except, Uriah had more integrity than David, he wouldn't go home while the men were in the field and so David sent him back to the battle with orders that he should be placed where he was sure to be killed... and there we have it. Bathsheba mourned her husband and then moved in with David and had the child.

David may have thought he had been quite clever, but God saw what had happened and he knew David's motives and he was not pleased. Nathan the Prophet was sent to David with the story of a rich man stealing a poor man's only lamb and while David burned with anger Nathan said, '**You are the man!**' (2 Samuel 12:7)

Psalm 51 is David's response to what happened with Bathsheba, Uriah and Nathan. It is a cry for mercy because God had been very clear, David would be punished for his sin. David's life would be traumatic, his son Absalom rebelled against him, slept with his wives humiliating him and most painfully of all, the son born to David and Bathsheba did not survive.

This leaves us with the question what is mercy? In terms of the kingdom of God mercy is not escaping the consequences of sin. David very much had to live with the consequences of his sin. We sometimes think of mercy, of God's grace as being some kind of whitewash that simply covers and pretends sin has not happened. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than covering sin, mercy demands that sin is confronted.

When we read Psalm 51, we see very clearly how David owns his sin, he doesn't hide from it, he doesn't make excuses, he confesses and acknowledges it as his own. ***For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*** (Psalm 51: 3-4)

To know mercy, is to first of all acknowledge that we have committed a wrong. This is not something at which we are good. Maybe it is because of our shame, or maybe because to admit guilt is to look weak and lose face – whatever the reason we are reluctant to name our sins, own our guilt, there's something in us that always wants to blame someone else. Ask a youngster why they pushed another kid, it will be because someone said something or did something first – it's always someone else's fault.

In Genesis when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, Adam blamed Eve for giving it to him and Eve the serpent for deceiving her. Are we not exactly the same, we snap because we are tired; we cheat because we feel life has been unfair, we always sin because of something other than ourselves.

In Psalm 32 we read about the effects this refusal to own our sin has on us: ***When I kept silent my bones wasted away thorough my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength sapped as in the heat of summer.*** (Psalm 32:3-4)

Sin, be it the sin of adultery and murder that David committed, or the sin of lies and deceit, or unfaithfulness towards God in any other shape or form, it consumes us, crushes us, weighs us down, saps the life out of us. It is a burden that we find impossible to carry. The mercy of God is that burden is lifted. ***Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*** (Psalm 32:5)

It's not just that we should confront specific sins. David's problem wasn't just that he slept with Bathsheba or that he had Uriah murdered. Our problems aren't just in the things we've done or said (although it is vitally important that we address specific issues), our problem is that we are inherently sinful. ***Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*** (Psalm 51: 5-6)

John Calvin, the great reformer and one of the fathers of Presbyterianism, explained this as our total depravity. Now, he wasn't saying that we are depraved in the sense that we are just about as sinful as it is possible to be. He doesn't mean depraved in the way we would say someone who had committed a heinous crime is depraved.

What he does mean is that such is the extent and effect of the fall, sin in our lives, that everything we do, every choice we make, every emotion we have is tainted by sin. Our natural inclination is to sin. David's problem wasn't that he slept with Bathsheba, but that his natural inclination was to put his attraction to her above the importance of faithfulness. His needs above hers and Uriah's; his desires above the will of God.

Each and every one of us is faced with this same problem. We steal because we are inherently sinful. We argue because we are inherently sinful. We have affairs, we hurt people, we give into our pride, because we are inherently sinful and if we are to know mercy then we have to

confront this aspect of who we are. Mercy requires an admission of guilt in order that it can be received.

So, what does mercy look like?

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

(Psalm 51:7) Mercy isn't that God somehow protects us from the consequences of our sin, when we lie and are found out, we live with the consequences. If we cheat and are found out, we live with the consequences.

Mercy is the way in which God cleanses us, washes us, purifies us. We said that unconfessed sin is a weight that we cannot bear, a crushing of our bones that saps every ounce of life out of us. Mercy lifts that weight, it restores joy. ***Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity.*** (Psalm 51: 8-9)

That crushing weight we feel is the absence of God's smile and favour in our lives. It is us having to carry our burden ourselves because God is not there to carry it for us. Mercy is Jesus carrying that burden, his bones being crushed, his anguish in order that he would be able to say to us, ***'Take my yolk upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yolk is easy and my burden is light.'*** (Matthew 11: 28-30)

This morning know God's grace by knowing his mercy, not because we think God will ignore our sin, or by sticking our heads in the sand in the hope that it will simply go away, but by owning out sin, confronting our sin and acknowledging that we do what we do because we are totally depraved, to use John Calvin's words, because it is in this confession to God that the burden is lifted and our joy is restored.