

# The House that Grace Built and the Family that Lives There

*Jude 17-25; James 5:12-20*

Last week, we began to look at what a kingdom founded on grace, unarmed, invisible, multinational, multicultural, what a kingdom like that would look like in the flesh and blood, brick and mortar world in which we all have to live. Which is a tricky business because we're all naturally wired to form relationships and make decisions based on affinity. It is only human for us to look for people who look and sound and think like us, only natural for us to make decisions based on principles that we've always known, always been taught would work. But God hasn't given a kingdom like that!

God doesn't care what suits our design, what fits our experience here in this fallen world where everyone has to earn their way. In Matthew 20, Jesus put it this way, he said, *"For the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And after agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard..."*. So far, the story works. A denarius was about what a worker would expect to get for a day's work.

But the story starts to unravel from there. The master goes out again at 9am and hires a second crew for the same price, and then again at noon, and then again at three, and then again just an hour before sundown. And then when the farm hands line up at the pay window, they all get a denarius, no matter how long they did or didn't work. Every time I've ever preached this passage, I've had to point out that you could never run a farm this way. Eventually, all the farm hands would hide all day, show up an hour before sundown and stick out their hands, looking for a denarius.

The point being that the kingdom of heaven isn't founded on our virtue, isn't geared to reward the hardest worker with the highest pay. Because this weird story in Matthew 20 was prompted by Peter's words to Jesus, *"See, we've left everything and followed you! What then will we have?"*

And Jesus answered in so many words, the whole denarius! He said, *"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And anyone who's left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* Because in a kingdom founded on grace, the right to belong, and to work and prosper is given as a gift to anyone from anywhere who trusts and follows Jesus.

So in a kingdom founded on grace, the best we can do is the denarius we're promised, no one gets less and no one earns more. We don't earn a denarius for our work, we get it as a gift from the master by calling on, trusting in the name of his Son. So Jesus has earned for us the denarius we get at the end of the day.

This is why Jesus in Matthew 5 and James in our Scripture Lesson this morning forbid the swearing of any oaths. Twenty one centuries after the fact, we've lost all concept of what oaths are about or why this matters. We think of swearing as any impolite speech, saying words about nasty things that don't belong in polite conversation. But in the ancient world an oath was something you swore to establish your own good character or the truthfulness of something you said.

So if you were accused, if someone doubted you, you would invite a god, some deity, to curse you if you hadn't been faithful to your king, or honest in your dealings. And under Moses, the Israelites were commanded to swear their oaths to Israel's God, the God Moses had written about starting in Genesis. But all God's people had ever accomplished in 1400 years of swearing oaths and inviting curses was to bury themselves in trouble. Because their God was a king with whom they could not keep faith, who demanded a level of truth and integrity that Israel couldn't bring to the table.

So Jesus solved the problem by taking God's people out of the realm of swearing and oaths and curses, and into a realm of grace where truth and integrity is given to us as a gift, and that only after we admit that we don't have and couldn't earn what Christ wants to give us.

So God justifies us, bestows on us the righteousness that only Jesus ever really lived. And God sanctifies us, sends his Spirit to live in our hearts and to mold us and teach us the love, purity, and honesty that lives in God's heart and belongs in ours. So God gives forgiveness for sins and power to change to us as a gift. He gives the full denarius without even looking at our time sheet to see what time of day we came into his service. That's grace. And it's given to every soul who knows he needs and welcomes a Savior. And what does it look like, this kingdom of grace, gospel seeds sprouting up here and there among all the world's peoples and cultures? It looks kind of ordinary.

In 2nd Corinthians 4, Paul wrote that Christians look like old clay pots from the garden shed, stains and cracks on the outside, treasure on the inside. Who knew that the old garden shed was actually Ft. Knox? Jesus taught in Matthew 13, that while the crop is growing, you can't always tell what's a weed and what's a gospel seed. But on Judgment Day, Jesus said, then the angels will know who's a weed and who's been justified, he said, "*..the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*"

Because grace will out. Paul put it this way in Romans 8, he wrote, *“But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”* Christians look like ordinary people, we fail, we limp, we hurt, we cry, because in this life we’re subject to the same troubles as our unbelieving neighbors. But in those ordinary sufferings which feel like death, the Spirit crafts in us a response of faith and hope and courage and generosity that speaks of grace and life over and against the heartbreaks that might take us down if the Spirit didn’t live in our hearts.

So James writes to his readers all over western Asia and asks, *“Is anyone suffering?”* He knows the answer to that question! Christian refugees, far from home, many of them slaves, most of them persecuted by Jewish families or pagan neighbors. *“Is anyone suffering? Let him pray!”* James teaches. It’s not exactly novel advice, but it works! The act of telling God what’s gone wrong brings evil into tow and pain down to size. Suffering will happen, must happen, but no suffering is quite so overwhelming once God is in the room, once the heart of the sufferer is focused on him.

*“Is anyone cheerful?”* James asks. *“Let him sing praises!”* This may actually be harder than praying when life is hard. Let us get our acts together, let the things we long for come into reach, and the zeal can leak right out of our affections for God and Christ and Church and Kingdom. *“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!”* But once life sorts out, we don’t feel ourselves to be wretches for long. But the truth is that our brighter, happier, snappier selves continue to need grace about as badly as we did when life was wrong and we were low. So James calls us to pray through what breaks our hearts and to praise, to worship God for what fills our hearts.

*“Is anyone among you sick?”* James goes on. *“Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”* Right up until the development of antibiotics during and after the Second World War, any illness could gang up on a person and take his life with doctors unable to do much but trim around the edges and alleviate some of the symptoms. It was a terrifying reality that I never knew, but my parents and grandparents knew it. And even now people all over the world, in places less wealthy, less developed than here, still lose love ones to common illnesses that we don’t give a second thought.

I think James wrote these words about illnesses that had taken hold in this terrifying way. That the elders of a congregation be called and pray and anoint their sick brother or sister *“with oil in the name of the Lord.”* The whole passage speaks of a mindset in which physical, and emotional and spiritual suffering were known to be interwoven in ways that we in the secular, materialistic west have forgotten. His promise that *“the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up”*, faith like that tries the faith of a generation of Christians who have seen prescriptions and surgery and diet and therapy accomplish wonders.

But James believes that prayer can raise up the critically ill and so should we. He says, “...*the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. And if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him.*” The truth be told all the verbs in this passage for illness could be taken spiritually or psychologically, one verb for “sick” also means “weak”, the other also means “weary”.

But I think James’ point is that weakness and weariness and physical illness are all shadowy threads in the whole fabric of life, and grace offers three means to combat them. First, “*the elders of the church*”. We belong to something bigger than ourselves, something powerful and formal. The church as an institution is a means of grace against all those forces that might tear us apart. We are less alone, less vulnerable, better informed, and better focused when we confront illness and loneliness and confusion and heartbreak together as God’s people in the church, under the leadership of elders, under the teaching of a gospel that is handled and vetted in common.

Second, “*oil in the name of the Lord*”. The commentators really puzzled over this. The use of oil came to the church through Old Testament Israel, where it was always taken as a picture of God’s Spirit calling an individual to be a priest or a king. In the case of severe illness oil could have served as an invisible reminder that the person taken ill shared an anointing with everyone praying for him or her. We are all anointed, we all are united with Christ and are children of the Father because God the Holy Spirit has anointed and does indwell us.

And, third, “*the prayer of faith*”. To be a Christian is to be a supernaturalist. Christ warned us that we would bear a cross, suffer in his footsteps. There is no spiritual technique that can ward off all illness. But he also promised that our prayers would issue in real, tangible, material answers and Jesus commanded us to ask, seek, and knock on heaven’s door together in the face of the wants, needs and adversities we face together. “*And if he has committed sins,*” James writes, “*it will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.*”

It’s not that every illness is occasioned by some sin the patient committed. The whole book of Job and the things Jesus said about the man born blind in chapter 9 of John’s gospel all teach that in fallen world a person can become sick entirely unrelated to any sinful behavior on anyone’s part. The point here is that spiritual wholeness and physical wholeness are at least indirectly related to each other. Making spiritual peace with God, being spiritually one with God’s people does have a healing effect on our physical well being. There are a host of verses in Scripture that say so.

Solomon wrote, “*A tranquil heart brings life, but passion rots the bones...Don’t be wise in your own eyes, fear the LORD and turn from evil. It will bring healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.*” The point here is not that there is a one for one, quid pro quo connection

between spiritual fidelity and physical well being. The point here is that living in grace, telling the truth, being surrounded by people who will let us be who we are, and who will work with and pray with us through our sins and struggles does have a healing, building, uplifting effect on our entire lives.

But to be entirely honest, it's complicated. The foundation of my own personal life has been the absolute, unconditional grace God has promised anyone who will trust Christ for forgiveness and look to Christ for the holiness, and goodness and purity that God both promises to and commands from his people. Solomon also wrote about this, he said, "*He who conceals his transgression will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find mercy.*" God has shown me an ocean of mercy for what is twisted and bent and all knotted up inside me. These have been tangled knots and slow to relax and untie, but God has worked with me in season and out, and I've seen some measure of progress through the years. People, on the other hand, are a different proposition. We want things from church, expect things from each other that sometimes prevent us from receiving grace from God or sharing it with each other.

That balance between the holiness and discipline we're called to and the forgiveness and grace we need to get there is a difficult art because it often works contrary to what our experiences in the world tell us can work. We've all learned that there are people out there who will use our weaknesses to hurt us, or at the very least, will stop trusting and wanting us if we ever let them know we struggle. Even in church, we can't tell just anyone what we wrestle with in our hearts. Yet there needs to be someone. Solomon wrote, "*A man with many companions can come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*"

James concludes his letter, "*My brothers and sisters, if anyone wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering ways will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*" The presumption here is that we know and care about each other here in church, that the wanderer has a brother or sister who knows something about him, and cares enough to say what needs said, and do what needs done, to convince our guy to return to the path Jesus set for us all.

Because to say that holiness doesn't matter, that obedience isn't necessary is to show that we haven't understood grace, didn't grasp the trouble we're in. And that way lies "*death*", James warns us, judgment, eternal condemnation. But, on the other hand, grace is still good for the person who struggles toward holiness, but needs help from the rest of us, some number of attempts to get it right. James promises that the simple act of "turning" back toward God, trusting forgiveness, will "*cover a multitude of sins*", however many tries it takes.

Peter wrote in his letter that "*...love covers a multitude of sins.*" The point being that grace doesn't lead us so much to a certain standard of behavior as it teaches us to love God and to love each other enough to want God and to want each other. Grace leads to love and love leads to

obedience and the sins we commit learning the art get “covered” by the grace God gives us and the love he teaches us.