

June 21 (Father's Day) – "Grace Beyond Mercy"

The Long Road Home
fresh eyes on a timeless tale

Grace Beyond Mercy

Luke 15:17-24

Image by Dawnyell Reese

Special Music: "Finally Home" Mercy Me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9NjLkHQNUU>

Luke:15:17-24

17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

20 So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.

24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

PEANUT BUTTER GRACE

A young single mother went shopping with her toddler. She did not want to take him with her, but the day care center she normally used was still closed because of COVID, and the normal plan B options of friends and family had all fallen through. So, there she was at her local grocery store, toddler in tow.

She attempted to put her son in the shopping cart seat, but he would have none of that. There was way too much to see, feel and touch. So rather than fight the battle of trying to keep him in the seat with him constantly crying and trying to climb out, she took him by the hand and let him help her push the cart. It was predictably awkward, but manageable.

The woman had a fairly long list, but upon considering her circumstances, she decided she would shorten it to keep their time in the store to a minimum. Children are often enamored with the colorful boxes and jars found in a grocery store, not to mention the candy racks, which she did her best to avoid in her navigation. But she knew she was going to eventually head for a register and accepted the fact that it was going to be a battle when she got there.

She needed peanut butter. You cannot have a pantry devoid of peanut butter if you have a toddler in the house. She went to the condiment's section and there in the middle of the aisle was a tower of premium brand peanut butter in glass jars, built into the shape of a pyramid. It must have been seven feet high. But even on sale, the brand was not in her budget. No, she needed to settle for

the generic brand. While it did not taste quite as good as the premium brand, her son would hardly notice, and it was half the price of the premium jars.

Reaching to pull a plastic jar of store brand peanut butter from the shelf, she felt her sons hand slip from hers. Before she could turn around and prevent the impending disaster, he had already pushed two of the glass jars from the bottom tier of the pyramid.

The moments seem to pass by in slow motion as she grabbed her son and pulled him out of the way while trying to stabilize the tower with her other hand. She was successful with the first. She failed miserably at the second. In horror she watched as the jars slip out from each another and the tower collapsed. The sound was deafening as jar after jar hit the tiled floor, spreading peanut butter and glass in every direction.

It was all over in a few seconds as employees and shoppers both rushed to discover the source of the commotion. The mother wanted to find a place to hide. The embarrassment was overwhelming. She had enough of her wits about her to place her son, who was now screaming at the top of his lungs, into the cart as the streams of tears ran down her face. How was she ever going to pay for all this? She was just barely getting by on her meager income as it was.

She was struggling to keep her feet from sliding out from under her as the peanut butter made the tile surface so very slippery. Why does peanut butter stick to the roof of your mouth, but make your feet slide? Everyone around her stood gawking. It was if she could hear their every thought as she did her peanut

butter dance trying to stay upright by holding onto the side of the cart. “I’m glad that wasn’t me.” “How could she allow her child to run wild like that?” “Why can’t she get the child to stop screaming?” “Boy, she’s in for it now when the manager shows up.”

Managing to get her feet somewhat under her, she slowly and carefully maneuvered the cart to the end of the aisle where the tile wasn’t so slippery. She lifted her child out of the cart and pulled him to her chest where he slowly began to stop crying. Her tears continued to run down her face as she comforted her son.

It was the assistant manager that showed up first. “What a mess,” he said. “Mam, are you responsible for this?”

The mother paused and then nodded through her sobs. She was truly trying to keep herself together and knew she was failing miserably.

“You do understand that it is your responsibility and you will need to pay for this? Are you prepared to do that?” the assistant manager said sternly.

The woman shook her head. “But somehow I will figure it out. I am so very sorry.”

The assistant manager called several of the stock people over and told them to get the area cleaned up. He also reminded them that they needed to be very careful so as not to cut themselves on the broken glass.

It was at that point that the manager arrived. He looked over the peanut butter drenched landscape, noticed the woman in tears clutching her son, realized that most of the people there were gawking or just curious about all the excitement. The woman with the child looked embarrassed, humiliated and degraded, feelings that were exasperated by those looking on and the occasional laughter. He put himself between the crowd and the mother while quietly asking her if she and her son were okay. Then he requested that she to accompany him to his office. She knew what the manager was going to tell her. She had no idea how she was going to make this right. She had no one to call. Everyone she knew was hurting just as much financially as she was. Her sobs had lessened but the tears still flowed.

The manager had her sit in a chair in his office. She continued to hold her son close to her chest. He had since drifted off to sleep, the excitement having been too much for him. Again, the manager asked if she and her son were okay. She nodded knowing that this was the moment when she would have to face the music.

The manager looked at her clinging to her son and said, "It's a little quieter here. I know that must have been so difficult for you. Can I get you anything? Something to drink, maybe? I am so very glad you weren't hurt. My name is Harry and I'm the manager here. Can I have your name, mam?"

"Jane. Jane Alexander," the woman replied softly. She waited for him to drop the other shoe. Instead, he said, "You can rest here as long as you like.

You shouldn't feel rushed to leave. I want you to have time to regain your composure after all you have been through."

Was that it? When was he going to tell her how much she owed the store for this disaster?

"... and by the way Ms. Alexander, what brought you in to the store today?"

She didn't really want to be patronized, but she did explain, "Well, I have long list of groceries I need, but my day care provider was still closed due to COVID and all of my back up sitters were busy. I had to have groceries so, I had no choice but to bring my son along. I decided to get only the necessary items on the list to keep my visit short. I truly was trying to keep everything under control, and I feel terrible that my son's hand slipped from mine. I tried to keep it all from happening, but it was just too much."

"Can I see you list, mam?"

"Here it is, Harry, but after I pay for all that peanut butter, I won't have any way to cover the cost of groceries. I know this is my fault and I have no right to ask, but could you possibly work with me on paying the store back? Can you give me a couple of months to make right?"

The manager took her list. "Just relax, Ms. Alexander. Take your time. Your son seems to be sleeping well. Don't you worry about this." With that, the manager left the office and shut the door behind him. After about thirty minutes he returned.

“Not to disturb you, Ms. Alexander, but are you feeling better? Would you like to go home now?”

“I really would, Harry, but before I do, I really need to work out how to pay you for all that peanut butter. I have to know how much this will set me back. I will need to find a way to fit it into my budget.”

“Is that what you are worried about, Ms. Alexander? I told you not to worry about it. It’s been taken care of. No need to fret. You owe the store nothing. The aisle has been cleaned up and you can’t even tell there was a problem. Most of the patrons that were here when it happened have already left. Everything’s good. Can I walk you to your car?”

“Harry, how can I ever thank you. This is much to kind.”

“No worries, Ms. Alexander. The store has ways of covering these kinds of things. Everything is good.”

This is the nature of mercy. And I could stop this story here, but there is more to tell.

Together, they left the office. Jane’s son was still asleep on her shoulder. Exiting the store, they headed for Jane’s minivan. Harry helped her settle her son in the car seat and held the door for her as well as she got in.

“Ms. Alexander, could you please pop your rear door for us?”

Us?, thought Jane. Who’s us? And then she looked in her rear-view mirror and there were four employees waiting behind the van with shopping carts filled

with groceries, all things she had on her list and more. “But Harry, I can’t pay for all that. I am on a very limited budget. And I still feel awful about the peanut butter”

“It’s already been taken care of, Ms. Alexander. No worries. Consider it a blessing in a day of trial.”

“God bless you, Harry. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You already have, Ms. Alexander. You already have”

And that, my friends, is the nature of grace.

In the scripture passage for today, our prodigal son has begun to come to his senses. He starts to grasp what he has done to himself and realizes that even his father's servants are treated better than he is being treated. They have more than enough to eat while he is waste deep in mud and excrement feeding pigs and starving to death. He also realizes that didn't just spend all the money his father had given to him, he had also thrown away his good name and his reputation. He could apologize to his father, but the young man could not ask his father to forgive him. How could he? He had no way of paying him back. He had no way to repair the damage he had caused. He had no reason to expect his father to take him back or welcome him home.

But maybe there was a possibility, if he could show true repentance, beg for forgiveness, maybe, just maybe, he could convince his father to hire him as a field hand or a servant. He might never be able to have that father/son relationship again, but at least then he would be able to eat. That very slim ray of hope shining into the deep and darkened well of his soul was just enough to get him to gather what little he had and travel back home. He also knew in his heart that it was going to take a lot of persuasion to get his father to trust him again, even as a laborer.

Isn't it strange how we always anticipate the worst outcome? We even hear people tell us that we should expect the worst and then we can be surprised

and happy when it doesn't happen. If we prepare for the worst, then we can be pleasantly surprised when things work out. That's no way to live life. That's living in fear. That's living with an attitude of defeat. As Christians we have three ways to approach how we look at our lives.

One way is to live in fear of God's judgement. If we don't accept Jesus as our personal savior, if we don't allow Him to guide us and turn us around, if we are foolish and turn our backs on Him, then we will face the fires of Hell. If you are a Christian because you are choosing between heaven and hell, you are missing out on the most important relationship you can ever be involved in. I am not saying that heaven and hell don't exist. I'm saying that they shouldn't be our reason for choosing a relationship with God through Jesus.

The second perspective is believe that by choosing heaven, that is enough. That our goal of salvation has been met. Everything is good to go. We can die happy.

Having said that, there is a third perspective to ponder. That perspective is to embrace God's promises of new life and hope, not just the promise of heaven. The promise of heaven is there, but it isn't the reward that will fulfill us. It is the relationship with our Heavenly Father that we truly need for our lives. By choosing a constant relationship with God, we begin our rewards now. We get to

start eating our fruits now. The reward becomes something immediate. We don't have to wait for death to take us to enjoy the blessings of having God in our lives.

We can see all three of these perspectives in both the story of Peanut Butter Grace and The Prodigal Son.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

The father in the Prodigal son struggled with the loss of his relationship with his younger son and longed to have him back. This is exhibited when he sees him from a long way off and rushes to him to welcome him home. He doesn't greet him with anger, chastisement, or finger wagging. No! He runs to him and kisses him. He doesn't even allow his son to give him the long speech that he had prepared. He cuts him off, pulls him close and throws a party.

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.

Again, there are three ways this parable could have gone.

1. The son could have let his negativity rule over him, assume his father would never forgive him, and not even attempted to come home. These are the times that cycle ends in destruction, when we judge ourselves to the point that we deny ourselves mercy and grace. When we allow Satan to convince us that we are not worth saving. This has never been, nor ever will be, the promise of God. **“For He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.”** But we have to believe and embrace that promise.

2. The father could have seen his son, wagged his finger, said angry things, berated him and then allowed him to come home in spite of all he had done. He could easily have made his son feel miserable. He could have taken an ‘I told you so’ attitude. In a situation where mercy is involved, both parties know that the debtor owes restitution to the person or organization that has been harmed, but the debt is forgiven out of compassion. Unfortunately, human mercy is often laced with codicils and judgement. “I’m going to help you out, but you have to stop drinking.” “I’m going to help you out but if you are going to live under my roof you are going to follow my rules.” “I’m going to bail you out, but you are going to have to get a job and pay it back.” “We both know that you owe me, but it is obvious that I will be unable to collect, so, with great reluctance I am going to forgive the debt. And to make myself feel better about myself, I’m going to wrap in in a pretty package, tie a bow on it, and call it mercy.” We leave the impression that the debtor must accept our terms, or they will not only lose their redemption but their forgiveness as well.

True mercy is about wiping the slate clean to bring balance to a relationship. It is not about paying back what is owed. True mercy is wrapped in genuine forgiveness, not this cloak of “I need to move on, so I forgive you, but I am not going to let you forget it.” How many relationships have been destroyed because people forgive their debtors but then remind them of that debt and forgiveness every time they mess up?

3. The third outcome is what we see in the story of The Prodigal Son. The father welcomes the son home, no strings attached, no wagging finger, no expectations. Genuine forgiveness that doesn't even bring up the transgressions. He presents an environment for his son that will encourage him to rethink his choices. He provides mercy but takes it a step further by turning that mercy into grace. Grace is a difficult thing for us to understand. It is something even harder for us to employ. It is easier for us to embrace mercy than to embrace grace.

But that is what God does for us. When we come before God and join our spirits with Jesus Christ, God doesn't spank us for the things we have done or the life we have been living. He doesn't make us wallow in our pain and self judgement. He doesn't wag His finger at us, although He has every right to do so. He doesn't put any requirements on us for coming home. He doesn't bring up our past mistakes every time we make new mistakes. He is just thrilled that we have returned home seeking a right relationship with Him.

Instead of expressing His anger and punishing us, He throws a party. The angels sing. Jesus does the happy dance. Heaven spreads out the buffet table. The music is loud and glorious. **For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.** Our decision to come home outshines all the shadows of where we have been and what we have done.

In our opening story today, Jane truly expected the worst. Why shouldn't she? Isn't that the way the world usually treats us when we mess up? Instead, she found what she thought was mercy, but eventually discovered that it was grace. We can all live with mercy. We can be grateful for it. Mercy can be a wonderful blessing in our lives. But it falls short of the blessings and promises that God has in store for us with regards to grace. Grace is beyond mercy.

Let us embrace God's grace for us knowing how very much He must love us. And by doing so, let us allow God's grace to flow through us into others. Let us set our judgmental attitudes aside. Mercy terminates at the end of our nose. Grace is what lies beyond the end of our nose. Let us choose mercy over judgement and then step into grace, just as our heavenly father does for us.

AMEN

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