

“True Grace is Unconditional” based on Luke 6:27-49, Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on February 23, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Once again, our service this week is centered on the joyful event of a baptism. Once again, our readings present for us the challenge of living a faithful life. In this, we must ask ourselves what it means to take Jesus seriously, and to set the right example which fulfills the great commission to baptize and to teach all that has been commanded. Nora has not yet been taught the faith in a formal way, but she is already learning it from her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, family friends, and those in her life who profess a faith in Jesus.

A friend and parishioner who led the children’s ministry at my last church was fond of saying that for most people, the first bible they will ever encounter is the way we live the word of God in our lives. Their first bible is you. It’s reminiscent of the words of Jesus toward the end of our gospel, in which he said, “Why do you call me Lord, and not do what I say?”

If we claim the mantle of Christianity, this must be our goal – to actually follow the words of Jesus. If we take Jesus seriously, we must heed his words, no matter how difficult it might seem to us. After all, it is the way in which we live that demonstrates what we actually believe and worship.

On March 22, 1987, in Dallas, a young executive named Jeffrey Young was robbed and murdered. It was a high-profile case. This up-and-coming executive, along with his father and father-in-law knew many important people. The police were under a lot of pressure to get justice for him, and his family, especially his wife and two kids, whom he planned to meet on vacation.

There was only one lead right away, but no one was willing to talk to the police at first. But then because of his prominence a large reward was offered and suddenly people started to talk. Three people pointed to a 22-year-old newlywed, who was not the initial person of interest. One of these witnesses was so compelling that the police arrested Ben Spencer.

Ben Spencer was a pastor’s kid who was expecting his first child, a son, with his new wife. Ben Spencer had a good job. He was trying to make ends meet. He was trying to be responsible. Ben Spencer had an alibi, and still, Ben Spencer was convicted. The key witness, who was friends with the initial person of interest said it was Spencer, and she received reward money afterward. A jailhouse informant, who was facing prison time got a plea deal when he said Spencer confessed. He hadn’t. So, Ben Spencer was convicted and imprisoned. The key witness was found to have lied and so, he got a second trial. Again, he was convicted, and sentenced to life in prison.

Ben said that his wife struggled with her faith – “How can you say there is a God?” she asked. He remained faithful, remembering the words of Jesus – “Pray for your enemies.” He did not know why the key witness lied, saying that she saw him that night. Yet even before he knew who his accusers were, he prayed for them.

Ben talked about his experience recently on the Good Faith podcast. “God has this ability to work in our lives,” he said. *“Throughout my ordeal, I started praying, even before I knew who my accusers were...I began to pray for these people, whoever they were.”* He said he doesn’t harbor hate, *“Because it’s hard to hate someone you pray for and mean it...Of course, I started praying for them that God would have them tell them the truth...but I honestly prayed for them, and I meant every word I said in those prayers.”*

He said that if we hate, we are not doing what God called us to do. Barbara Bradley Hagerty wrote the book, “Brining Ben Home.” She was on the podcast with him, and echoed our Psalm, saying Ben and other wrongly accused inmates like him, often love their enemies because “hate is a cancer.”

Beloved, for the people around Ben in prison, he was their bible. He was how they encountered the good news of Jesus. Those fortunate to know Ben Spencer see him as a person trying to live out his faith. Surely, he's not perfect. He has made mistakes. But in the hardest trial of his life, he held on to his faith, knowing that he was innocent, and he continued praying.

In 2007, a judge said he was innocent, but his release was denied. The Texas Board of Appeals refused to release him, because even though it seemed he was innocent, there was no DNA evidence to prove this with 100 percent certainty. There was also no DNA evidence for his guilt.

Several years ago, Ben Spencer was finally fully exonerated, and he is finally free. The initial person of interest is most likely the one who murdered Jeffrey Young. He is in prison for a series of very similar robberies, but has not been charged, let alone convicted of this murder.

The family, which fought Ben's release, has now even come around. They've tried to reconcile with him, realizing that the wrong man has been imprisoned all these years. Ben has struggled to adjust to a very different world now – there was no internet, let alone email or smart phones when he went in. He says he still harbors no hate for anyone.

Hagerty's is sympathetic in her book to the challenge of police. They want justice and needed to figure out what happened. They believed these witnesses and once they believed them, even when their stories didn't add up they cut corners to make them fit. This is known as "noble corruption." This happens when we think we know what is right, so to achieve that end, we tell ourselves we're just going to do whatever it takes, by any means, to achieve the right outcome. We all do this at times, or at least we are susceptible to it.

This is the heart of the challenge we face as Christians. If we read the words of Jesus, we may wonder is it right to do something wrong, if our intent is good, our intent is righteous or just? Jesus says categorically – "NO." Bad fruit does not come from good trees. Good fruit does not come from bad trees. Figs do not come from thorns; grapes do not come from brambles. Evil sprouts from evil.

There are two words in Greek translated as evil and the one used here, *'poneros'*, is rooted in the word for "misery." The miserable one then from out of their misery, brings forth that which causes misery. Jesus says that what is abundant in our hearts it what comes out of our mouths. If hateful speech comes out of our mouth, hate is in our heart. If loving speech comes out of our mouth, it is from the love that is in our hearts.

This is at the heart of why we speak so much about our confidence in God's love for us. If we are truly confident that God loves us, we can let go of the worries of this world and turn from evil. We can turn from misery because as Paul says, the Spirit pours God's love in our hearts. Therefore, it is not ok to judge others – thus narrowing their identity, to our perceptions of who they are or what we think makes them evil. It's hard.

Ben Spencer could have judged his accusers and hated them, and we'd understand. Yet in recognition of God's love for him, even as he languished in prison for 34 years, he prayed for his persecutors, and those he perceived as his enemies.

Judgement is not to ignore the wrongs, the evil, or misery that someone has done to us. To judge, in Jesus's context here in Luke and in Matthew's gospel, is to label a person. As I've said before, if you steal, justice requires you to call out that which was stolen. However, to call a person a thief is to judge them and take away their humanity. It takes away the fact that they are a human being made in God's image, and it defines them by their sin.

I am always amazed when I'm translating the Hebrew language, how almost always the words we usually translate as nouns, turn out to be verbs, noting the action being done, and not the identity of the person. In English, this makes for awkward sounding sentences to most of our ears. If you know Psalm 37 or were reading a different translation you may have noticed.

The opening line of our Psalm is often rendered, "Do not fret because of the wicked." That just flows. But literally, it is "Do not be angry in yourself because of those doing evil." The usual translations contain this, but the verb "fret" here is a reflexive command. It is a worried 'anger,' and the latter noun 'wicked' or 'evil' is really a participle, or 'ing' verb, referring to a person who is 'doing evil' or 'doing wickedness.' Most translations say "not to be envious of wrongdoers," but the literal here is that we should not "become envious," of those who are doing "wicked things."

I don't want to undermine translations, because it's really hard to do. You might also think I'm quibbling over words here. These are good translations for their readability. To read Hebrew or Greek literally in English is hard, but choices affect our understanding. "Refrain from anger," is readable, but if we are not careful it makes it sound like anger is a choice. The ancient writers know that anger swells up inside us beyond our control. However, the Psalmist says to "put your anger to rest." Once your angered, the Psalmist says, set it aside, or "desist from anger."

We are told to forsake, or abandon, our wrath, our anger, and our fury. As Spencer and others recognized, anger and hate will only harm us. The Psalmist says, "those causing evil will be cut off" and those of us "who wait on the Lord will inherit the earth." We must rest in the Lord, trusting the Lord and being patient waiting for our God to act.

This is not inactivity, but a call for response to God's action, because God is acting. We do this by combating hate, not with more hate or anger, but with love. As hard as it is, this may sound naïve, because we could get walked over. But if we truly believe that Jesus is God, and that the Psalms are the word of God to us, we must take this seriously.

By worldly standards, an all-powerful God should and could destroy the world for its sin. But instead, God's plan was to enter into creation with the Son of God living in our human limits. He died for us, and then he rose again, offering us new life – his life. God gets nothing out of this deal, but God is humble. God does not need us, but instead God loves us and wants us. God calls us to love as we have been loved.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies," to a people who were living under the occupation of the Roman Empire. There is no greater enemy than that for them. He says, "do good, lend expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great." By this we become children of the Most High, children of God, by adoption, because God is kind to the ungrateful and God is kind to the evil, or miserable. We are to be compassionate, or merciful, just like God, who in Jesus was so compassionate as to suffer as one of us and die for us in mercy – even when we ourselves are sinners.

Our foundation is not the success of this church. Our foundation is not our personal success and careers or our identities. These will be washed away by a flood. Our foundation is to be the love of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. That foundation is the solid rock. It is only from this foundation that we can meet the challenge to love those whom we perceive as our enemies.

Jesus says that anyone, absolutely anyone, would love their own family and friends, or those who love them. Loving those who agree with us is easy. Loving those who are part of our community is easy. Loving our country is easy. Those are things that are expected. That's a basic love. Faith in Christ asks us to love beyond our circles. This means loving those who are foreign to us, whether because they don't think the way we do, look the way we do, or believe the way we do.

If we love those who love us, do good to those good to us, then what “credit” is it to us? Literally here, the word in Greek we translate as ‘credit’ is the word ‘charis’ or ‘grace.’ There is no grace in loving those who already love us or are good to us. God’s grace is unmerited favor. It is unconditional favor, in that it is given freely to us. God loves us first. This is true grace. Grace comes when we do not suppose we deserve God’s favor, much like these babies we have baptized. Nora is wondering why she got water splashed on her head, but we have responded to God’s grace, recognizing it in her because God loved her first.

Beloved, once again, I will stress that this is not easy. It is easy to get really frustrated with people, especially on social media. I think that only amplifies it because even the people we know become faceless to us on social media, even with the pictures. It is easier to take Jesus’s words out of context and explain them away, trying to justify ourselves in the divisions and judgements we make.

Likewise, it is easy to take Jesus’s words out of context about reward and focus on the reward for our actions or our thinking. The Psalm is usually translated that God will “give us the desires of the heart.” But in the Ancient Hebrew culture there was little concept of a mind apart from the heart which was considered the seat of our understanding. It was the seat of emotion and thought. God will give us the desires of our understanding – how we understand God.

Jesus says that what we give will be given back and multiplied, but the reward Jesus is talking about is not that if you give \$10 you will get \$100 back. The reward is that when you give that \$10 you are a part of what Jesus is doing, part of a community of love. Your giving puts you in a community where your relationship with God grows and your relationships with one another grow. This is far more valuable than getting \$100 back. If you give \$10, you’re out \$10. Trust me. But you gain being part of what God is doing in this world.

We gain the relationships we build with others through our restraint, by refraining from judgement, and instead forgiving others, and giving freely. This builds real relationships. In the community we create by living like this, the “more” we get is our blessing of being nearer to God and nearer to one another.

Beloved, we have a choice. There is the path of evil and misery and then there is the path of goodness and compassion. Evil and misery lead us to name our enemies out of fear and create tests for who we think we belongs in whatever group we value most. Goodness and compassion lead us toward God’s love for every human being by trusting that God will transform us into the image of Christ. The unconditional grace of Jesus challenges us to love one another as he has loved us. Amen.