

Romans 3:10-24

¹⁰ As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”^[c]

¹³ “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.”^[d]

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”^[e] “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”^[f]

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”^[g]¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”^[h]

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

John 1:16 - 17

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

On Friday morning, a huge tragedy hit the United States. All eyes turned to Newport Connecticut as a son of one of the teachers aids, was buzzed into the building. He walked into the peaceful Sandy Hook elementary school office and began to open fire. The principle, the school psychologist and the vice principle all rushed toward the sound. The principle was shot and killed as well as the psychologist. The vice principle was wounded and crawled to safety. Hearing the sound of gun shots, the teachers locked doors and barricaded themselves into closets. The gunman made his way down to his mother's kindergarten classroom where she worked as a teacher's aide. His mother of course wasn't there. He had already murdered her in her home that morning with her own guns that he now carried into the two adjoining kindergarten classrooms. There he opened fire with deadly accuracy. The current death toll associated with the Sandy Hook Elementary is the shooters own mother, 20 students, six adults and the shooter himself who committed suicide.

--Our minds have a hard time comprehending this sort of senseless violence. We want an explanation. We want to rationalize it. We want this sort of violence to be a preventable sickness that we can get inoculated against by living in a good neighborhood with nice people. We want to

dismiss this as a lone and isolated incident from a single broken individual. An tragic oddity. But even while our minds cannot comprehend it, our hearts are breaking for the families who will not be able to celebrate Christmas with their children. Those who will sit with their children's presents in their hands and weep for those lost years and experiences that they will now never have. --Our hearts break for the friends and families of the adults who gave their lives trying to protect the kids but failed in their attempt. We cry with a community that never expected such a thing to happen in their peaceful town, and who struggle to believe that it all wasn't just a bad dream. We cry with them and hold them in our hearts and prayers and we seek to make sense of it, but come up with no explanation.

This terrible shooting comes less than a week after the shooting on December 11th at a Portland Oregon Mall. Three people were shot and two died before the gunman took his own life. By now we know the details of the Portland shooting. The shooter was a 22 year old man named Jacob Tyler Roberts. Jacob was described as an average student with average grades. He was a fun loving guy with a heart of gold. After graduation from high school, he worked at a Gyro shop in the Mall. A week before the shooting, he quit his job, sold his stuff, bought a plane ticket to Hawaii and

broke up with his girlfriend before he was going to leave. The night before he was going to leave for Hawaii, Jacob got drunk and then missed his flight. Police believe that Jacob stole the semi automatic rifle, vest and ammo that he used in his subsequent shooting rampage at the Portland Mall. In that shooting, he gunned down A Hospice Nurse, Cindy Ann Yuille, age 54, and Steven Mathew Forsyth, 45, who was the father of two. Jacob also shot a 15 year old girl, Kristina Shevchenko, who was taken to the Oregon Health & Science University Hospital, where she is in serious, but stable condition with a bullet wound to her chest. Kristina, thankfully is expected to survive. But the family of Jacob Tyler Roberts are left with no explanation as why this young man did such a terrible destructive thing.

Romans 3 has an explanation for why these things happened. Romans 3 tells us that there is no one who is righteous. No one who is good. That all of us have sinned. That the only difference between all of us is the severity and the nature of our crimes. Romans 3 reminds us of the list of sins that we commit. Some people run to shed blood, but others lie. Many of us of course are selfish, we curse and are full of hate and bitterness toward others.

People are broken. Some in big ways and some in little ways. The

horrific events at Sandy Hook Elementary on Friday morning cracks open the facade that we are all doing fine and that we don't all have fear, anger, pain and darkness in our lives that cause us to lash out at others. For some their darkness is so big that letting it out involves killing kindergarteners with semi automatic weapons. For others their brokenness is not so dark or tragic or traumatic, but it still eats at their soul every day robbing them of joy.

We need to stop pretending that we are all fine and that we are all not in need of love, forgiveness and healing. We need to open up our hearts and souls and say, "I'm sorry" to God, to others and to ourselves. We need to give and accept forgiveness and work toward healing the brokenness that is in all of us. We need to let God's love and acceptance win over human fear and anger and hate.

There is a word that is used in scripture to specifically describe God's love and acceptance. That word is Charis, a word which we translate as "Grace." Now Grace is one of those terms that we use very often in church and we think we know what it means. But it is perhaps a bit tricky to define. One of our members in reference to Grace defined it as "Getting something that you don't deserve." And indeed, that is correct. The Grace that we

receive from God is not something that we work for. God doesn't watch us perform good deeds until we earn enough brownie points to qualify for it. In the English language, the word "Grace" also has the connotation of beauty or attractiveness. Charis is the root word for the word "Charisma", or a pleasing personality. All of these words are connected by this idea that the person exhibiting these qualities did nothing to earn them, they were simply theirs because they were born with them. --This is the exact same way with God's grace. There is no way that you or I can ever work hard enough to qualify for God's grace. It is simply given to us because we were born as human beings and therefore God gives it to us whether we recognize it or not.

The other thing that we have to watch out for is that we only think about this idea of God's grace in the context of our being "saved." The famous line from Eph. 2:8 is often quoted about grace, "By grace you are saved through faith. It is the gift of God, not of works, so no one should brag about it." --If we only think about grace as some magical ticket that gets us to heaven at some point in the future, we lose the impact that Grace has on our lives today. Robert Girdlestone, in his book, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* says that as Christians,

“We have to be on our guard against the supposition that grace is an abstract quality; it is an active personal principle, showing itself in our dealings with those by whom we are surrounded. ... In the great proportion of passages in which the word grace is found in the New Testament, it signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. We have gradually come to speak of grace as an inherent quality in man, just as we talk of gifts; whereas it is in reality the communication of Divine goodness by the in working of the Spirit, and through the medium of (Jesus) who is ‘full of grace and truth.’”

Or in other words, Grace isn't just some abstract force that we may experience sometime in the future as some sort of existential payment for the bill of sins that we racked up while we were alive. The Grace of God is the active working of the Holy Spirit in our lives every day. It is God leaning toward us, taking a great interest in us, helping us. It is the daily forgiveness that we receive from God and the strength to forgive others and ourselves. It is God presenting Godself in the most ordinary of things; getting better from a sickness, the beauty of the sunset, the glorious shape of the petals of a flower or a mountain; Grace is in all of these things that are simply given to us, over and over again, without question or price.

So what does this Grace mean for us today? It means that in your life, you are not alone to deal with all of the hurt, anger and fear that weighs you down. I don't know about you, but sometimes when I look at my life, and all of the things that I have to deal with and balance and all of the things that I am scared of, and all of the things that have hurt me; and all of the things that I get so angry and worked up about, often I just want to scream and give up and run away from it all. I realize, and accurately so, that I cannot do it all. And that is very true, humans don't have the infinite patience, the energy, the strength and the ability to take all of these things on. We will crack under the pressure and lash out at others, often with terribly destructive consequences.

But the good news is that you are not alone, and that you are not simply relying on yourself. The Grace of God is on your team, walking right with you, giving you the words and the courage and the ability to forgive and to help you to bear the pain and disappointments and the evil that often seems to be all around us.

So in conclusion, let us go back to the beginning. The deep horror and the sadness that we feel in the presence of the intense darkness and the hate that come from the hurt and pain of this shooter in Connecticut is all too common a sickness. To a greater or to a lesser extent, this human

brokenness is in all of us, overwhelming us, slowly unwinding the fabric of our soul. It is only the ever powerful and ever flowing grace of God that is always available to us that can give us the ability to forgive those hurts, dismantle that darkness and light up our hearts with God's unending love for others. So be it. Amen

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