

[The inspiration for this sermon came from an article by Michael Card, “God’s Unfailing Loving-Kindness” in the Decision magazine, February 2011.]

Text: Psalm 103

We are in the season of Lent. It is considered a season in that the word “Lent” comes from the German word for spring. The Bible doesn’t mention any observation of Lent but the church decided in the 4th century to establish a ritual of repentance in the days leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. It is a time for fasting, meditation and spiritual reflection. They took as their inspiration the 40 days which Jesus spent in the wilderness after His baptism. So starting with Ash Wednesday, we observe this 40-day period of soul-searching and prayer.

Today I am meditating on a word that appears in the Old Testament more than 250 times – the Hebrew word “hesed”. The translators of the King James Version of the Bible used 14 different words to convey its meaning. I am fascinated by such words because not only are they difficult to define, like love, but they defy perfect translation from the Hebrew into English. You have heard me talk about the word “shalom” and the complication of trying to explain its full meaning. Well, this word is the same.

The reason why we need to grapple with this word is that it describes part of God’s nature. This morning in our call to worship, number 822, we read Psalm 103. In it we read the words “steadfast love” four times. Now let me compare this translation with the King James. In the first reference, “who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,” the King James uses the word “lovingkindness.” This is a word which the translators coined in order to try to define hesed. In the second reference, “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”, the King James says “slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.” There we have a third meaning. In the third reference in the Psalm, “so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him”, the King James again uses the word “mercy”. The same word “mercy” is used in the last reference, “but the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”

Recently I considered in several of my sermons the word “grace.” It is a New Testament word meaning God’s unconditional love and unmerited favor. Now, listen to the definition I found for the word “hesed”: “When the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing, gives me everything.” Sounds like grace to me.

But like a diamond there are several facets to this word. Let’s look at some references. It often appears in prayers and praise and worship. It appears some 150 times in Psalms. In Exodus 15:13, Moses and the Israelites sing a song of praise to God.

13. "In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode."

In contrast to praise, the word is also used in prayers for mercy. In Psalm 51, King David is repenting his great sin with Bathsheba and he prays to God.

1. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

We also hear in this passage another attribute of hesed – abundance. This was echoed in our text this morning where it speaks of God as “abounding in steadfast love.” If you have felt the great forgiveness of God in your soul after you have realized a great personal failure in your life, you know the meaning of His abundant mercy – His hesed.

But this abundance can also mean blessing and furthermore, it is everlasting. At the end of that beautiful Psalm of praise, Psalm 100, it says:

5. “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

This verse gives us another aspect of hesed – faithfulness. In Psalm 25 verse 10 we read this:

10. “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.”

In the Old Testament, God makes a covenant with Israel. They keep breaking it but God is faithful to keep it. He keeps forgiving them for their unfaithfulness. We hear that constantly in the pleading of the prophets. Even after He sent Israel into exile for their idolatry, He does not destroy them but brings them back to their land. At the end of Isaiah in chapter 63, the prophet says:

7. “I will recount the gracious deeds [the word is hesed] of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.” [the word hesed again]

Another idea that often appears together with the word “hesed” is the word “truth”. In Psalm 57:3, David is seeking protection by God from King Saul. He expresses his faith in that rescue.

3. “He shall send from heaven, and save me from the reproach of him that would swallow me up... God shall send forth his steadfast love and his truth.”

I want you to see the echo of this phrase in the New Testament. The Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as “full of grace and truth.”

We could go on for some time looking up the many uses of this word. But what does it mean for us? Let me read you two familiar passages, one from Hosea 6:6 and one from Micah 6:8. In Hosea, God is lamenting the unfaithfulness of His people.

4. “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early...”

6. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

The prophet Micah has the same message:

6. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

7. Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8. He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness(hesed), and to walk humbly with your God?"

So, my friends, we see that God expects this same attribute in us. We are to have steadfast love both for Him and for other human beings. As He pours out His love to us, we return this love to Him and to our brothers and sisters.

But now let's carry this concept of hesed into the New Testament. Let me stop for a moment and give you a thought. One of the great commentators on Paul said this: Paul is a great Jewish scholar so he thinks in Hebrew but he writes in Greek. Therefore it is often helpful in understanding him to imagine the Hebrew words behind his Greek teaching. I think this is so for Jesus.

Jesus speaks often of faithful love. Certainly He must have had hesed in His mind. He may even have used the Hebrew words and the Gospel writers translated them into the Greek. So we need to associate this love that is given to us in a covenant in the Old Testament as the renewed covenant in the person of Jesus Christ. He says to us at the communion table, "This is my blood of the New Covenant."

Think of two great parables. First, think of the prodigal son, who takes his share of his father's wealth, spends it all and comes home. The father welcomes him home with abundant love and mercy – hesed. Second, think of the story of the good Samaritan. A hated foreigner, a Samaritan, offers life-saving care and extended support to a wounded man to whom he owes no obligation to do anything. He shows pure grace, unmerited favor, hesed. You can think of this story as an example of God's grace to us, the wounded ones -- or you can think of this as an example of the love we should show for our enemies.

Finally, at this season of Lent, let us consider Calvary – the cross. It is the absolute embodiment of hesed. The Son of God renounces His heavenly existence to come to earth to give us everything – love, forgiveness, mercy, abundance, faithfulness but most important of all, a new relationship with the Father, a new covenant. We can come to God forgiven as His beloved sons and daughters. Do we deserve any of this abundant relationship? Not at all. It is all grace – hesed.