

**Grace Makes Us Gracious**  
**Sermon for 12/26/2021 at Grace Road Church**  
**1/2/2022 at Palmyra Reformed Church**

We'll be in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 to start today, and back in 1 Peter next Sunday. Our plan is to finish up 1 Peter in February, then go through the Apostle's Creed through May, then on to 2 Peter until July, Psalms all summer, and then TBD in the fall. So if you read ahead, reading 2 Peter, the Apostles Creed, and Psalms would all be helpful.

But today the simple message is this: "Grace makes you gracious."

Gospel belief has many fruits in our lives. Long-term worship always transforms us into the image of the One we are pursuing. And worshiping our God who is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in committed, steadfast love, and who went to the lowest place to pay for our sins, has to transform us.

And one of the ways we are transformed is in the graciousness of our speech:

**Proverbs 16:24 "24 Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body."**

**Proverbs 22:11 "11 He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend."**

**Colossians 4:6 "6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."**

So we are called to be gracious in our speech, we are told there are rewards for gracious speech - it opens doors, it will make the king your friend. Gracious speech is commended and commanded again and again.

But what about when something hard needs to be said? What about when a person needs real correction? What about when we see a sin or a failing in a person or a group of people? It's not good to never say anything, Jesus did plenty of correcting, and I can think of a number of times that people speaking to me to correct me have kept me from allowing sin to grow in my life, they've sharpened me, they've kept me from idols.

So how do we maintain gracious speech, but also speak truth when it is unpopular and

not necessarily appreciated, and speak to correct and be really helpful? I would guess, based on what I see on social media, that we haven't mastered this balance yet.

But I think there's a place where we do see that balance in the New Testament. And maybe surprisingly, it is in the apostle Paul. He gets a bad reputation for being too blunt and harsh because of the boldness of his writing, but listen to how he instructs Timothy:

**2 Timothy 2:23-26 “23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”**

He gives this picture of someone who doesn't jump into dumb controversies and quarrels. Who is kind to everyone, including his opponents, knows his stuff (able to teach), but patiently endures evil from others while only correcting them with gentleness.

And his whole hope is that they would turn from their destructive belief or practice and escape a snare. He's correcting people, but he is patient with them, absorbing the evil they're spewing at him, while still trying to patiently help them come to their senses.

And you see this in Paul in 1 Corinthians as well.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians church to help them, and they were a church with problems.

They had the sins that most young, urban, churches have: pride, divisions, going to church to get something out of the church instead of wanting to serve and love one another.

They were suspicious of one another, assuming those that weren't on the same page as them with all of their practices were somehow beneath them or ignorant or unclean. It seems the upper class Christians became elitist and snobby and disregarded the poor. And then on top of that they had moral sins galore in the church like sexual sins and divorces without grounds.

So Paul wrote 1 Corinthians with the epic hope of cleaning up the Corinthian church.

And what made it all the more challenging for Paul is that many of them didn't respect him at all.<sup>1</sup> They denied that Paul even was a legitimate apostle. So with no authority in many of their eyes, Paul set out to correct this church with graciousness. And we won't look at the individual issues that Paul had to correct them for, that would require a study of the whole book. But we will look at how Paul was able to graciously correct these erring Christians (and if 2 Corinthians is any indicator, it seemed to work!)

**1 Corinthians 1 4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge-- 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

So Paul starts with thankfulness.

**1) To correct others, we have to be more aware of the evidence of God's grace in them than we are of their failings.**

So Paul writes to correct them, but first comes on strong with his thanksgiving for them. He thanks God that they have received God's grace.

And then he commends them in a number of areas of their lives where they are far from perfect and very flawed, but where he still sees evidence of God's grace.

He thanks God that they are enriched in speech and knowledge and spiritual gifts. But in *chapters 12 and 14, he is going to be correcting them for their abuse of their gifts. He still sees evidence of God's grace in them.*

He commends them because they are *anticipating the return of Jesus* even though they would probably be pretty embarrassed at the way they were living if he came back today.

He commends them for their *knowledge*, even though he later tells them that their knowledge made them arrogant, or puffed them up.

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and 2 Corinthians 11 for Paul's struggle with those that didn't believe he was an apostle, and who believed he was inferior to the "super-apostles."

He is calling out all of this evidence of God's grace in their lives. He is genuinely thankful for these people.

This is hard when you see something in someone that needs to be corrected. It is easy for their deficiency to dominate your view of them. Paul was fully aware of their deficiencies, but he was dominated by his awareness that God was at work, and he commended them for the areas God was at work in them.

He helped when he saw deficiencies, but actively looked for evidence of God's grace.

This is the opposite of my default mode. My default mode is to look for problems so I can start fixing them. That feels like the most productive thing to do for me, because stuff that is right about people can be left alone - that doesn't need attention because its all set. I wake up looking for a hole in the boat. Give me something to fix. *And if it ain't broke, I'll ignore it.*

But Paul didn't approach people that way. He was a go-getter, he was a problem solver, he was type A, but he was able to step back and genuinely enjoy the work of God in the hearts of messed up people.

And he was able to commend them.

So if you think about the people around you that you would like to help, are you so affected by their deficiencies that you could never commend them for their strengths? If that is your posture, you'll never be able to correct them with any persuasiveness.

And if you haven't invested in them relationally, it is unlikely they'll listen to you. Paul knew these people well enough to be able to speak of their strengths and weaknesses with real authority.

According to Acts 18:11-12, Paul had spent 18 months in Corinth, teaching them the word. He was known for laboring long hours to teach people the word, he had close relational connections, he sacrificed for them. They knew him and he knew them.

In chapter 16 of this book, Paul names names left and right of the people who ministered in Corinth, and who ministered to Paul from Corinth. He had spent enough time getting his hands dirty getting to know these gifted but deficient people and knowing them well

enough to be able to speak with some authority about what their lives were like, for good and for evil.

It hasn't been uncommon during the pandemic for our pastors to get emails that are often quite angry at those other people in the church. People see others as part of a group of unnamed people who are all egregious in some way and want me to fix those other people.

But I've never gotten an email that said, "I could use your help with Bob. I felt like his position on this issue was wrong, so I asked him to lunch, we talked for a couple of hours, I heard him out, we prayed together, and now I think he's an even worse person than I thought he was before." Usually, they say, "I actually understand Bob better now" and don't need help - because they no longer see Bob as a problem to solve but as a person with strengths and weaknesses.

If we see people as nameless and obscure parts of a problem group, we will never be able to effectively correct them.

There is little hope of ever effectively correcting people without a previous relationship. This is why we as pastors are commanded to be relationally connected to the people in our church. 1 Peter 5:2 will tell us "**2** shepherd the flock of God that is among you..." (not beneath you, not removed from you, but among you. You have to know the people you want to lead, and church leadership is hopeless without it.)

So Paul knows the people he is trying to correct, he knows them by name, he knows their strengths and weaknesses. And is more aware of the evidence of God's grace in them than he is aware of their failings.

And this is not just technique - its not just, "Say three nice things to a person before you correct them." People can smell when you're trying to soften them up so you can drop a bomb. They don't want a shady sales technique.

Its not just a technique, but a genuine awareness of God's grace in their lives. You really see that grace in them.

**You view people through the rose-colored glasses of grace.**

But should Christians really do that? Should they focus so much on grace in people's

lives, especially when there are real problems in them?

Turn for a second over to 1 Corinthians 4:5

As followers of Christ, we need to take our cues from Christ. We need to follow his pattern. And I think that even He does this with Christians.

**1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.**

So he says that God is coming as a judge. He is going to judge our hearts. And for me, I would think that would be a bad day. God knows every motive. Every wrong thought. Every intent. Every insult that I thought but didn't speak.

But this says, "God is going to disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive...wrath? A disappointed lecture from God? God's expression of displeasure?"

No - a commendation. God will commend me. Reward me. Me?

God will disclose my heart and then commend me? How could that be?

Its grace. Christ has taken away my sins and reproach. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

If he is going to do that for me, then surely I can do that for others. Surely I can commend them for the evidence of God's grace in their lives, and really feel that way.

Because grace makes you gracious.

If I have experienced the grace of God in my salvation, if I am experiencing the grace of God in his constant patience with me in my day-to-day sins and failings, and if I will experience his grace yet again on judgment day - if I believe all of that, won't I be gracious with others?

Grace has to make you gracious.

So to correct people well, we have to be more aware of God working in people than we are of their deficiencies. We also have to...

## **2) To correct others, we have to be committed to those we correct.**

This church in Corinth was pretty messed up. But despite their failings, he is willing to be associated with them, and doesn't even mind having his name being attached to them. In fact, he goes so far as to say in chapter 9:

### **1 Corinthians 9:2 "You are the seal of my apostleship".**

*In other words, you folks ARE the evidence that I am a legitimate apostle.*

If this were me, I'd probably try to distance myself from the church at Corinth. If I had to make up a resume to get a pastor job somewhere, I'm probably not going to put on that I started the Corinthian church.

Paul started the Ephesian church which started dozens of others. That looks good on your resume'. He started the church at Philadelphia that was persevering faithfully. But he boldly puts Corinth on his resume'. Thessalonika goes on the resume- they were persecuted but still joyful. Philippi goes on the resume - they became so generous and helpful to the spread of the Gospel.

Corinth wouldn't go on my resume'. I'd be sitting for the job interview and they'd ask, "I see there is an 18 month gap in your resume here, what did you do then?" I made tents. Let's leave it at that.

But Paul is committed to this messed up church and says- you are the seal of my legitimacy in the ministry.

They'd say, "So you planted the church at Corinth. The church with all of that immorality and backbiting and fighting, guys getting drunk on communion wine and stealing food from the poor? That's your work?"

And he says, "Yep, they're the evidence that I'm a good pastor!"

*He didn't distance himself from them at all. He wasn't at all ashamed of them. These people, that everyone else was treating like the deplorables, were the people that Paul*

*loved and wouldn't hide his connection with them.*

To commend them took a big risk: he was commending people who had a lot wrong in their lives. Which meant that others, who knew what they were really like, wouldn't respect Paul anymore because his judgment was obviously so poor.

When you start saying someone is great, everybody who knows them well is going to think you're an idiot. Paul was willing to accept that.

He was willing to accept the religious folks not respecting him because of who he was associating with and tying his name to.

But he was willing to be committed to them even if it got hard for him.

And that's how we need to be if our correction is going to be heard.

We have to be like Paul and not attach our egos to those we are trying to help.

**You see parents make this mistake sometimes** - we find our identity and sense of sufficiency in the performance of our children. So if our kids don't perform, we get extra angry when people are watching. Because they reflect on me - they are there to reflect my glory and when they tarnish it they get my wrath. They make me look bad and that gets me upset.

**Or on the other hand**, some parents never believe that their kids would do anything wrong. Because to admit that would be to admit something that would reflect negatively on me as a parent. So they deny the reality of their kids' failings.

**OR if you are at work** and someone you supervise keeps messing up. You almost feel this need to belittle them to others so that nobody will think their mistakes were because of you. You have to distance yourself from them so that you can be seen as a success.

Paul didn't get his identity from his successes, but from Christ's success.

He had a strong sense that he was loved and accepted by God because of Jesus, so if people rejected him, he would be ok.

Paul really got his sense of identity and sufficiency and worthiness from the fact that he



was a Christian: he was loved and accepted by God not because he produced great results as a pastor but because of Jesus' death for him on the cross.

That gave him the ground to correct someone, not as a needy person who had to have them perform so he could get his glory, but as one who was just helpful unconditionally.

And you also see in Paul a genuine confidence that God was at work in these people.

### **3) To correct others, we have to be confident in God's work in them.**

Look again at our main passage, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9.

In this passage, Paul keeps talking about God's work in these people: what he had done for them, and what he was sure God would do for them:

**1 Corinthians 1:4-9** **4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge-- 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

He knew that God had started something in them. He had given them his grace.

And he was confident that God finishes what he starts, and that He would be the one to sustain them until the end and be faithful to them.

Paul understood that God was the Father of these misfit children in Corinth, God was in control. Paul knew that Paul couldn't fix these people, only God could. And God would - God would be faithful to his errant children.

Paul writes in

**Philippians 1:6 "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."**

He had real faith that God would continue to change them. So he could look at them and their flaws, and see past them to the God who was at work in them.

*When our kids were little and learning to walk, we would stand over them and they'd reach up and hold our hands while they walked along. And they would stumble all over, like a marionette, and we were constantly catching them and pulling them up so even when they stumbled they'd be able to stay on their feet.*

*Now if you didn't see the parent there holding them up, it would be a really scary thing to watch them walk. You'd think they were constantly ready to crash. But if you see a parent there, then you know its going to be OK, because dad isn't going to let him fall and crack his head. He cares for his kid.*

And Paul was able to look at these Corinthian Christians and see them stumbling all over the place, but he lived among them for 18 months. During that time, he saw God work on them, even in some small ways. He saw some changes, he saw evidence of God's grace, he knew God was among them.

And now they're a mess, but God doesn't let go of his kids, and He always finishes what He starts.

Paul is able to see past the stumbling baby to the faithful Father who is helping them walk, and because he is confident in the Father, he is confident in the baby.

**Because God is a faithful Father shepherding his children, Paul is able to look into the chaos and see something beautiful.**

Paul had a huge faith in God that knew how He worked. Paul had seen it before, God had to start somewhere, but soon they would be established and be made BLAMELESS.

He knew that God works with the worst of sinners to wash them, and on the day of Jesus return they would stand before Christ as a radiant bride because God had washed them up.

If we know God and we know His faithfulness, we can have confidence that his kids will be sustained.

And if we really believe in this grace, it makes us gracious.

We so want this to be a distinctive of people at Grace Road - we are concerned when we see sin in others, or false belief in others, but we are more aware of the grace. We are loving and hopeful and give the benefit of the doubt. We look for God's working in people when all we see on the surface is failure.

I want to be a person like that. And ultimately, it comes from drinking deeply of grace ourselves.

We have to constantly fight off the belief that we are loved and accepted by God because of what we do. We have a bad day and think God hates us, we have a great day and think God must love us now. That's not Gospel Christianity.

Gospel Christianity says we are worse than we know and always in need of a Savior. But we always have one.

And living with that realization makes us more gracious toward others. I can't be an elitist who thinks I'm better than them, I won't be led to distance myself from them. Because I am them. I am the problem as much as they are. I am in need of grace as much as anyone, so I can't think of myself as better than these people in need of grace.

The Gospel says that while its true that we are yet sinners, Christ died for us. God does demand justice and payment for sin. But if you believe, your payment has been made by Christ. God looks, not at us to find a reason to accept us, but looks to the work of Christ. He looks at Christ and because of Christ's work, he pardons us.

If God can love and accept even me because of Christ, surely I can love and accept others because of Christ. Even when the sins and weaknesses are many.

### **Prayer of Confession**

Adapted from a Prayer entitled "Reconciliation" on page 176 of the prayer book, Prone to Wander by Barbara and Wayne Duguid.

*Father,*

*We marvel today that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We were rebels and strangers to you, living in outright opposition to your wisdom and grace, yet you loved us, pursued us, and brought us into your family. You not only forgave our many sins but have been patient with us, you've kept us, you've remained true to us when we stumbled*

*along, and when we were faithless, you were always only faithful to us.*

*Such great love from you should surely melt our hearts with deep love and compassion for other sinners. Yet we confess that we find it hard to forgive those who have hurt us, and difficult to love unlovely people that we disagree with. We expect others to forgive our sins against them and to extend undeserved love toward us, even though we are slow to do the same. Forgive us, Lord, for our hypocrisy.*

*As you are determined to forget sins and not hold them against us, so too make us holy forgetters who leave vengeance in your hands and move graciously toward those who have wounded us, whether carelessly or willfully. We ask you to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and give us hearts that are like yours, aggressively devoted to forgiveness and reconciliation. Whenever we see a sin in another, may we see it in ourselves as well, and remember how dearly we have been loved by the one whom we have wounded.*

*Father, we pray that you would surround us with skilled comforters and wise counselors, who will walk alongside us and encourage us in our struggle to follow you. By your Spirit, allow your grace to make us gracious. In Jesus' name, amen.*

#### Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) How does receiving grace make us gracious?
- 2) Read 2 Timothy 2:23-26. How is the godly servant described there to act with his opponents? How do you interact with your opponents?
- 3) Why might we want to distance ourselves from people who are acting wrongly? When is this justified? When is it not?
- 4) Why do you suppose Paul had such joy in the Corinthian Christians? Was it genuine?
- 5) How is pride the enemy of effective correction?