

Reset

The Power of Truth and Grace

August 9, 2015

**PRELUDE – Carrollton Original
Congregational Worship – This Is Amazing
Grace / You Are Faithful**

Drama – “Kind of Rare”

We'll come back to that scene in just a bit but first, let's pray together.

<PRAYER>

Quite a few years ago, back in the early days of our church, our pastoral staff was wisely advised to develop a high degree of clarity on exactly what it is that we offer to people who choose to come and be part of our congregation. What are we trying to accomplish in the life of a person who devotes six months or a year or six years or 10 years or

longer to regularly and systematically engaging with North Heartland?

- Is it our intention to give people a place where they are accepted and belong and feel connected? People really do need that.
- Is it to provide a weekly gathering that leaves people feeling uplifted and inspired? People need that, too.
- Are we trying to help people know more about God? That would be good, as the knowledge of God continues to disappear from our culture these days.
- Should we try to go beyond helping people know more about God and help them know God more? There's a big difference.

- Is our goal to involve people in a cause that's greater than themselves? And there really isn't a much bigger cause than the one Jesus started.

There are lots of really-good-sounding possibilities to consider when you think about what a church and its leaders should aim for; how they should measure success or “mission accomplishment.”

In the end, after wrestling with the question for quite a while, we landed on the idea of *transformation*. What we offer to anyone who will come and go on a journey with us – regardless of where they are in their life; whether they have been believers in Jesus their entire life or whether they're still searching; whether they've got it all together or they're falling apart – *what we offer is to take people just as they are with no strings attached and help them to become more like Jesus.*

The goal is transformation: growing and changing in what we think and believe, how we act and behave, so much so that, eventually, *in our character* we begin to look more like Jesus and less like us. Or, to put it another way, more and more we experience His life being lived through ours.

Of course, that idea isn't original with us. It started with Jesus himself who told the very first believers to band together and go invite others to also become His disciples (and a disciple is one whose goal is to become like his or her teacher).

Then the Apostle Paul came along and did some preaching and wrote some letters that put it like this:

God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son ...

Romans 8:29 (NLT)

And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image. 1 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)

And there are other examples we could look at if we had time but the point is pretty clear. When people follow Jesus and Jesus lives in people, that's supposed to produce growth and change.

So, when we thought about it years ago, it was very clear to us that no matter what we did as a church – no matter how connected people felt, no matter how inspiring our services were, no matter how much good we did in the community – *if we were not seeing transformation taking place in the life of North Heartlanders, then we were not hitting the mark.* If people were not thinking and believing, acting and behaving more like Jesus

as a result of their involvement here, then we were not accomplishing the mission for which God had called us into existence.

Of course, once we answered that question we were faced with another question: “what will we *do* to facilitate that kind of transformation within the limits of time available to us?” And, as a church time *is* limited. This isn’t a Bible college or a seminary (or even a youth camp!) where people are able to devote large blocks of time. The average person who engages in the life of a church can typically devote at most four to five hours a week to it.

So with all that in mind, we decided we would focus on just three things: three high-impact habits that we do together that anyone can engage in ... that, if they *did* engage in those habits *consistently* (which is what makes it a habit) with an open heart and an open mind, would facilitate the work of God’s Spirit. Remember, Paul wrote that it is the Holy Spirit

that makes people more like Jesus. It's *His* power at work not ours.

And those three habits are what I want to talk to you about over the next three weeks. Over the next three weeks, whether you're new at North Heartland or you've been around for a very long time, my goal is for you to understand what we do here – actually, what we invite *you* to do here – to help you become more like Jesus and less like you.

And please don't hear what I'm not saying when I use that phrase. I'm not talking about helping you to become a super-saint who goes around quoting Bible verses in King James English. I'm talking about you (and me) becoming a person who is more and more characterized by ...

- Love instead of selfishness, joy instead of discouragement, peace instead of anxiety

...

- Patience instead of irritation, kindness instead of meanness, goodness instead of impurity ...
- Faithfulness instead of inconsistency, gentleness instead of harshness and self-control instead of overindulgence ...

... and can be part of helping others experience that same kind of transformation.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we all need that kind of transformation – and then some. I mean, if you look at Ted in our drama (and I know some of you were wondering if I had forgotten about that) ... don't you think he and everyone around him would benefit if he was becoming more like Jesus and less like himself?

Ah, but there's the problem. Being honest with ourselves is really hard. Even when we're confronted with our shortcomings by people who love and care for us and who want the

best for us, our first reaction is often the same as Ted's. We deflect and deny. We excuse and justify. "This is just the way I am. This is how I grew up. This is what was modeled for me."

And when those strategies fail, we feel exposed. We feel shame. We feel, as Ted did, like a fool. "I'm never going to get this right. I am such a loser."

Ever been there? I have.

Now, here's the conundrum. If Ted is going to change, he needs to hear the truth about himself – and probably many more times than he wants to. Part of the reason why he was the way he was is that everyone around him said, "Well, that's just Ted. You gotta deal with it." No one told him the truth. So, he needs to hear the truth.

But if he's going to be able to hear the truth and not be crushed and eventually embittered by it

– which is where that scene was going – Ted also needs to experience *grace* ... which, as we have talked about on many occasions is “acceptance and favor and blessing and goodwill that we do not deserve and cannot gain for ourselves.” Grace is being treated better than we ought to be with no strings attached for no reason at all other than the one giving the grace simply chooses to do so.

See, it’s the power of truth and grace *together* that produces transformation ... which is why ...

The first high-impact habit that we invite people to engage in consistently, with an open heart and an open mind, is to discover (and keep on discovering) the grace and truth of Jesus.

I’ll talk about the other two habits in the next two weeks but this is the one I want us to focus on this morning: the truth and grace that is in Jesus of Nazareth ... and what it means to

encounter that truth and grace over and over and over ... because without those repeated encounters you will never be all that God intends for you to be.

Grace, Truth & Jesus

Now, obviously, we chose the wording of that statement pretty carefully. We're not trying to help everyone get a general sense of truth and grace in their life. We're inviting everyone to discover the grace and truth *of Jesus*.

So, let's talk for a bit about where that idea comes from and what it means.

One of Jesus' closest friends, the Apostle John, after having observed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus ... after having spent decades leading others to Jesus and teaching them to follow ... summed up everything he had seen and taught and

personally experienced in one incredible paragraph.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 1 verse 14, he wrote:

*The Word (the Son of God)
became flesh and made his
dwelling among us. John
1:14 (NIV)*

In other words, God didn't stay distant from this world – he became a human being like you and me and entered into our existence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth ... which is pretty amazing in and of itself, but that's not the best part.

Because Jesus came, John says:

*We have seen his glory, the
glory of the One and Only, who
came from the Father ...*

Now, if John had stopped there, we'd say,

“Wow, that’s cool, John! You saw the glory of God in Jesus? What did it look like? Did He give off some kind of a glow wherever He went? Did he walk around with a halo over his head, like in the medieval paintings?”

And, John would say, “No, it wasn’t anything like that – although, one time, we did see him transfigured for just a moment – but Jesus himself kind of dismissed that.”

“What was glorious about Him,” John would say, “is that He was ...

... full of grace and truth.”
John 1:14 (NIV)

“Both of those characteristics were fully present in him at the same time,” he would tell us. “And we thought as Jews we had it pretty good already because ...”

“The law was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth

*came through Jesus Christ.”
John 1:17 (NIV)*

Whatever “grace and truth” means, it was a big deal to John – big enough for him to consider it an even greater blessing than the Ten Commandments God had given to Moses centuries before and to equate it with the glory of God!

So, what is it?

I like how pastor and author John Piper describes it when he writes:

The glory of God in Christ is his gracious disposition to us without compromising his truthfulness and his faithfulness to himself. This is really good news [for] God could have chosen to become flesh as a judge and executioner. And all of us would be found guilty before him and be sentenced to everlasting punishment.

But he did *not* become flesh that way. The Word of God became flesh to be gracious to us. But the Word became flesh so that this graciousness to us would [also] come in accordance with God's truthfulness. This [isn't] a wishy-washy, unprincipled, sentimental grace. This [is] a righteous, God-exalting, costly grace. It led straight to Jesus' death on the cross."ⁱ

See, a lot of people think of grace as saying, "Oh, it's OK that you are the way you are. Don't worry about your failures and shortcomings, God's really not all that concerned."

That's sentimental grace and there's a lot of it floating around these days in Christianity. But the glory of God that John spoke of is that Jesus is utterly committed to the truth about us at the same time as being exceedingly gracious beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

So, what is that truth? And what is the undeserved, un-earnable, unimaginable favor He offers?

Let me answer those questions in the way that Pastor Tim Keller of New York City's Church of the Redeemer likes to put it. Keller says that if Jesus were to speak the truth concerning us, He would say something that would shock us. He would say:

1. "The truth about you is that you are more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe."

"In fact, your rejection of and disobedience to God – even in the smallest things – puts you under such condemnation that it would take your breath away if you could fully comprehend it. You fall so far short of the Father's standards that it took me living the life you should have lived and dying the death you should have died in order to save you."

Now, that is certainly *not* the assessment that most of us would make of ourselves, is it? I mean, most of us tend to flatter ourselves and think we're better than we really are in almost every area of life.

For instance, I actually have a very special ability (and some of you probably have it, too) to look in a mirror and say to myself, "you know, Rick, you've put on a little bit of weight lately, *but it's not that bad.*"

That's how easy it is for me to flatter myself.

But the truth is revealed when I step on the scales ... or when my doctor says "I've had friends your age fall over dead because they didn't stay in shape" ... or when I try to put on clothing that doesn't fit so well anymore.

But the truth about me isn't just that I'm in bad physical shape. The truth about me is *even worse*. I'm so into self-deception and self-

flattery that I'll look at that scale and say "something's gotta be wrong with this thing." I'll ask the doctor if we can re-test just to make sure the lab didn't screw something up. And I'll wonder if something happened in the wash that caused my pants to shrink.

That's how self-deceived and blind I am on something as trivial as my physical appearance.

But Jesus would say to me, "you're barely scratching the surface, Rick. It's so much worse; so much worse than you've ever admitted to yourself. So many areas of your life are just as messed up at the core as your sin of gluttony.

"In fact, it is so bad that unless a miracle takes place, you will never be who the Father intended you to be – not in this life and not in eternity. You are more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe."

And, by the way, he'd say something similar to you, too. And maybe He would illustrate his point by poking around on gluttonous behavior if that's an issue with you. Or He might talk about ...

- Your attitude, your language, and the way you treat the people around you;
- The love you have for things that God hates; your laziness and excuse-making;
- Your problem with lust; your selfishness and your ungratefulness.
- Your habit of trying to please everyone because of fear (which is idolatry).

Who knows where He would begin? But where He would end is “you are more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe.”

That's truth.

But, fortunately, for our sake, as John writes, Jesus is about more than truth. He is also about grace – favorable treatment that we don't deserve and clearly have no prospect of earning. And, if Jesus were to express that to us, He would say something like:

2. “In spite of the truth about you, the grace I offer is this: more acceptance and love than you ever dared to hope for.”

... which might be even more shocking to hear than the truth.

I say that because, after Jesus strips away all of our pretenses and holds up the mirror for us to see what God sees and we try to deny it (“something's really, really wrong with that mirror”), something awful happens when we realize the truth *can't* be denied: *we turn away from what we see in disgust and shame.*

“It's not the mirror. It's me. Something's really, really wrong with *me*. And if even *I* can't face

the truth about me, who else will? Who else would ever accept me and love me with these flaws that run so deep that I can't bear to look?"

And in that moment of darkness and despair, Jesus takes the mirror and turns it face down. Then He stretches out His arms and says, "*I do. I will give you more acceptance and love than you ever dared to hope for.*"

That's grace.

Now, obviously, I'm using an analogy here for the purposes of understanding. But what Jesus actually *did* to express both truth and grace was more than theoretical. It was *real*. In fact, "truth and grace" was characteristic of the way he interacted with the people of His day.

For instance, John tells us that, once, the religious leaders brought a woman to Jesus

who had been caught in the very act of adultery. They literally dragged her out in public to her embarrassment and shame. She was literally exposed.

And they said:

"In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

John 8:5 (NIV)

John tells us that Jesus was silent for a while. He doodled in the dirt.

And then he replied:

"Whoever is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." John 8:7 (NIV)

One by one, John tells us, everyone left until only Jesus was left with the woman.

"Where are your accusers?"

*Didn't even one of them
condemn you?"*

*"No, Lord," she said.
John 8:10-11 (NIV)*

Then Jesus said:

*"Neither do I condemn you. Go
now and leave your life of sin."
John 8:11 (NIV)*

It's interesting to me that this incredible incident isn't recorded in any other Gospel. Only John includes it, and I sometimes think it shaped his entire understanding of Jesus. Remember how he introduced and summarized Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel?

He wrote:

"The Law came through Moses" ...

And *it* said, "This sinful woman

deserves death.”

“Grace and truth came through Jesus” ...

And *He* said, “I don’t I condemn you
– I’ll accept you as you are, not as
you should be” (which is grace) ...
“But, this life you’ve been living is
rotten and destructive. And you
need to leave it before it destroys
you” (which is truth).

Grace and truth was characteristic of the way
Jesus interacted with the people of first-
century Palestine ... and it’s characteristic of
the way He deals with people even today.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul described it to a
group of people like you and me who had never
seen or met Jesus in the flesh. All they had was
a relationship with Him through the Spirit.

Paul told them ...

*Once you were alienated from
God and were enemies in your
minds because of your evil
behavior. Colossians 1:21
(NIV)*

In other words, “you were more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe!” That’s truth.

And then he adds ...

*But now he has reconciled you
by Christ's physical body
through death to present you
holy in his sight, without
blemish and free from
accusation ...*

Colossians 1:22 (NIV)

Now, think about what Paul is saying. You and I can be reconciled to God ... seen as completely righteous and holy in God’s sight ... not subject to accusation or condemnation for sin ... and

we don't need to do anything to earn that status. It's already been provided for us through what Jesus did in his death the cross.

I don't know about you but, for me, in those moments when I see just how deep the sinful nature runs within me, that's far more acceptance and love than I could ever dare to hope for.

And, friends, when we talk about "the grace and truth of Jesus Christ," *this* is what we mean: you can be more accepted and loved than you ever dared to hope ... in spite of the fact that you are more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe!

Why "Discovery" Matters

And what we're claiming is that *to discover (and to keep on discovering) this attribute of God is transformational.*

Why? Let's talk for a few minutes about that and let's begin with what we mean by the word "discover."

At the most basic level, to discover something means to become aware of it or to find out about it. But there is an emotional connotation to discovery that goes beyond mere awareness or finding out. To discover something usually moves us to action.

For example ...

- When I discovered that my tire was going flat, I immediately drove to the nearest station and got it fixed.
- When she finally discovered the location of the buried treasure, she began to dig it up with her bare hands.
- When he discovered that Jesus said he was more lost and flawed than he would

ever believe, but that he could be more accepted and loved than he would ever hope, he ...

He what? What goes there? To what action was he moved?

Let's go back briefly to that passage we were just reading. Remember, Paul wrote "you were alienated from God by sin, but you are reconciled by Christ's death and seen as holy and blameless." And then he adds one little word that clues us in on how the whole thing becomes active in a person's life. It's the word "if."

"All of this stuff becomes real for you ... if ..." Paul writes ...

... if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

Colossians 1:23 (NIV)

The action was “to continue in your faith” which, of course, implies that there had to be a beginning to their faith; that there was a point in time where they had made the great discovery of the truth and grace of Jesus and they said yes to it and to him. They were so moved by it that they decided to believe what Paul had been telling them: that they were spiritually-dead sinners and needed a savior; and that Jesus had lived the kind of life they should have lived; that he died the death they should have died; and that He arose from the dead so that they could have new life.

That’s why the initial discovery of truth and grace is so important. There’s a moment in time where the reality of truth and the reality of grace grips you and moves you towards action: the action of trusting in Jesus and believing in Him.

Of course, not everyone will take that action.

Some people discover the truth and grace of Jesus and are moved by it – and then, for one reason or another, reject it.

1. But when you *do* take action on your initial discovery and choose to believe, that's when change begins.

And it's not just some kind of emotional change. There's a real change of nature. Something happens spiritually. John, in his gospel, calls it being born again or born from above.

He writes:

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. John 1:12 (NIV)

And those who are the children of God have the power of God to reflect God in their thoughts, in their words, in their actions, in their habits.

But remember, Paul said that we're to *continue in our faith*. The discovery of truth and grace isn't meant to be just a one-moment-in-time kind of experience. It's to happen again and again.

2. In fact, the cycle of “discovery and response” is the engine that drives long-term transformation.

And I think a lot of people who have been followers of Jesus for a long time tend to forget this. We think, “Ok, I accepted Jesus ... let the changes begin!” And then we get discouraged because, while there might be a lot of change that happens right away, in the end, it's still a long, long road. We still have to do battle with the original sinful nature that stays with us until the day our body dies.

That's why, if I'm going to become a different man, I still need to be reminded of truth. Specifically, I need to hear again and again that

even though Jesus lives in me and I am born again, there are still parts of me that are more flawed and lost than I could ever dare believe. I need to have the mirror held up again and again because it's that assessment of reality that motivates change. It's that assessment that reminds me, "Rick, you were meant for so much more."

And I need to hear again and again that, in spite of the fact that I sometimes stumble and fall; in spite of the fact that I sometimes give in to the flawed and lost part of me – that in Jesus, there is an acceptance and love that's far beyond what I could ever dare to hope. I need to be reminded of that grace again and again, or I will despair. I will say to myself things like, "I might as well be a jerk because I'm never going to completely get rid of these impulses to be a jerk and I'm never going to completely win in this life. What's the use? I'm so far gone that it doesn't really matter anymore."

And the only way to overcome that kind of despair is through grace. You see, when I think it doesn't matter, grace reminds me that it does matter because *I* matter. Grace says, "Yes, you are a mess, but you are a beloved mess and somebody cared enough about the fact that you're in this mess to come rescue you from it. His name is Jesus. Now, climb out of this pit and walk with Him."

Making It a Habit

So, we've talked about what the grace and truth of Jesus is ... and we've talked about why it has such power when we discover it and rediscover it again and again.

The question now is how do we make a habit of that? What can we do to engage consistently, with an open heart and an open mind, in discovering (and rediscovering) the grace and truth of Jesus?

The answer is very simple: regularly put yourself in environments where you are reminded of it.

For example ...

- On a daily basis you could carve out a time of quiet where you grab a Bible and follow a reading plan. Or watch some great teaching through Right Now media which we have available on our church app.
- You could listen to Christian music on K-Love or buy it and put it on your phone (or whatever you use to listen to music). Music is quite effective at expressing truth and grace.
- You can go to Christian concerts (like the one we're having this afternoon). I'm sure we'll hear truth and grace in what is sung and what is said.

All of those are great ways to experience the grace and truth of Jesus but, at the beginning of this message, I said that our goal as a church was to help people become more like Christ by focusing on high-impact habits that we do *together* ... collectively ... as a group.

And the habit that we can all participate in together that helps us to discover and rediscover the grace and truth of Jesus ... is what we've been doing for the past 55 minutes or so: *gathering together every Sunday morning to hear the exceedingly good news of truth and grace proclaimed and applied to everyday life.*

And that *is* exactly what we're trying to accomplish in our services. In fact, long ago we decided that the goal of our services isn't simply worship or teaching. Our goal – and this is why NHCC sometimes feels a little different from other churches – our goal is to provide a

creative presentation of truth and grace that moves people closer to God. And whatever is most effective in accomplishing that on any given Sunday – whether it’s singing, drama, feature songs, messages, video clips, or communion – that’s what we’ll do.

So, when you come in here each week – and I hope it’s obvious that you *should* come *each week* for your own good; it ought to be a habit in your life to show up regularly – when you come in here each week, your personal mission is “In this next hour, I’m going to discover some truth and grace.” In fact, if you’re a Christian, when you wake up on Sunday morning, your first thought ought to be “wow, lucky me. I get to go to church this morning and learn more about the grace and truth of Jesus!”

Now, here’s how that works: when you come to church, we might be talking about raising children, or simplifying your life, or dealing with difficult people, or handling your money,

or serving God by serving the less fortunate, or one of those hot topics like racism or transgenderism that made us all so uncomfortable last month.

In that service you're going to see or hear some truth about that issue ... and guess what? It's going to reveal that, in some way, you are missing the mark: you are thinking wrong or acting wrong. It's going to provide yet another piece of evidence that you are more flawed and lost than you ever dared to believe.

And the question at that point will always be the same: when you look into the mirror that the Holy Spirit is holding up for you in that moment, will you deny what you see? Will you fault the mirror? Will you despair and say, "I'll never be the person God wants me to be. I am such a loser. Why even try?"

Or, will you accept the truth and then turn to Jesus for a word of grace that says "in spite of

the truth, you are more accepted and loved than you ever dared to hope” – and then walk out of here renewed and encouraged; empowered to be a little more like Jesus and little less like you.

Conclusion

That, friends, is why we do these services week in and week out – because we desperately need both truth and grace.

We need to hear from Jesus “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.”ⁱⁱ And we need to know that God doesn’t expect us to clean up our act before we come to him; that He invites us to come, now, today, just as we are—in brokenness, in pain, in humility, in repentance, and in faith. We need to hear that wayward children, who have squandered their inheritance and lived an immoral, rebellious life, can come home to

their heavenly Father (Luke 15:20).

And we need someone as gracious as Jesus to tell us the truth: “*you are not okay. You are guilty.*”ⁱⁱⁱ And if you keep living this way, you will never experience the joy that God has for you. But God’s plan is to change you from the inside out, over time. So follow Me.”

Let’s pray together.

- Some need to take the first step of discovery and experience salvation and rebirth.
- Some need to agree with whatever truth God has been impressing on them and receive the grace He is offering right now.

Feature – “Lord I Need You”

CLOSING COMMENTS –

1. Promo the concert – free tickets available

in the commons (thanks to a generous donor)

2. Offering at the door

3. Next week ... the second habit that produces transformation

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/we-beheld-his-glory-full-of-grace-and-truth>

ⁱⁱ Matthew 11:28

ⁱⁱⁱ A great summary from <http://theaquilareport.com/full-of-grace-and-truth/>