Amazing Grace III: Share It

The Church Sinners (and Saints) Love to Attend November 17, 2013

PRELUDE – O The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus Worship Songs – Our God / Great God Who Saves

Drama – "Old Dog" Feature Song – Those Crazy Christians

Good morning everyone.

Well, we are almost finished with this *Amazing Grace* series – only one more week to go – and I need to tell you that this has been one of the best series I've ever done in terms of how it has affected me personally. I can't say that I learned a whole lot of *new* information as I studied and prepared to speak each week. But, doing a deep dive into the radical mind-blowing paradigm-busting nature of what it means to be saved *by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone* has been so good for me.

- I feel like I know God better
- I feel more confident in approaching God because I trust His heart more
- *My* heart feels like it is growing softer and more compassionate
- And my love for God is stronger than it was before.

For what a God we have, friends! He has taken it upon Himself to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves even though we do not in any way deserve it. He has offered to us a no-strings-attached way of being declared 100% righteous – totally forgiven of every sin past, present and future – at the same time as we are, in our flesh, still 100% sinner ...

- By simply choosing to believe that Jesus is Lord and that the Father in Heaven raised him from the dead.
- By simply trusting in what He did for us on the cross and in his resurrection to pay for our sins

And because of that, when we have trusted and believed, we no longer need to worry about unintentionally crossing some unmarked line where we "fall from grace" and lose our salvation. There is no need to obsess over confessing and repenting of every individual sin before the proverbial "bus" hits us. When Paul writes that *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, that's exactly what he means. <u>No condemnation</u> – not now, not ever – because of God's grace freely given, motivated by His love for us.

And that changes everything. For me, it changes how I look at and relate to God, how I look at and think of myself and how I look at and relate to the world around me ... which brings me to what I want to talk about today.

Full Circle

You might not be aware of it, but, as we finish out this series, we're actually coming full circle. We're coming back around to the point where the series began or, at least, to what motivated this series in the first place.

If you've been part of our church since last summer, I'm sure you remember the now infamous "God &" series where we looked at several of the cultural flashpoints that have generated so much controversy not only in the political realm but also in the church world. Our goal in that series was to try and get a handle on what the Bible says about those issues so that *our*

thinking would be shaped according to what *God thinks* instead of what *our culture thinks*. And I felt like that series was fairly effective in meeting that goal. From the things I heard and the feedback I got, it seemed like we, as a church, were able to get a pretty good grasp on "truth" and the fact that, on some of the less controversial issues, there's actually a pretty wide range of things that are acceptable.

At the same time, however, I had a nagging sense that we didn't have quite as good of a grip on *grace*. And I sensed that specifically after the messages that dealt with the issue of God and gays. If you were here for those, you probably remember that I said that I think it's pretty obvious from the scripture that God intends for sexual expression to be limited to a man and a woman who are husband and wife ... which also means that the implications concerning *homosexual* expression are also pretty obvious. It falls short of God's intention. It's sin.

However, what I picked up after those messages and what bothered me greatly is that more than a few of us, especially those who (like me) have spent much of our lives in Bible-based theologically-conservative churches (like this one), believe that homosexual behavior is not only sinful – it actually falls on the wrong side of the line that *delineates whether someone is or is not a Christian and in right standing with God.* More than a few of us believe it to be in the realm of what is often labeled the "unpardonable sin."

And the reason that bothered me greatly (besides the fact that it's poor theology) is because of what it logically requires the church to then communicate *to anyone who is outside the faith.* Let me explain.

Let's say there's a gay man who's never been involved in a church and who has only a limited understanding of who Jesus is. One day he comes across a Christian book like "The Case for Christ" or "Blue Like Jazz" or "The Reason for God" and he reads it. It doesn't quite convince him that Jesus was the Messiah – that He lived and died and rose from the dead as the scripture says – but he thinks, "You know, that church over by 152 and Green Hills Road keeps sending me stuff in the mail. Last winter, they put a bag of popcorn with an invitation to something called a 'movie series' on my doorstep. I think I'll go over there and sit in the back for a few weeks and see what they have to say."

So, when that guy shows up, what's he going to hear? What are we going to communicate to him in word and deed? Is he going to hear that his sexual behavior determines his eternal destiny and that he needs to stop – or at least *promise* to *try* and stop – in order for Jesus to forgive him and accept him? In a lot of churches, that is exactly what he will hear. "You can't be a Christian and be gay."

Now, to show you the logical implication of that, let's take our example out of the realm of the controversial and put it in context of a sin that is much more common in our culture and, quite frankly, much more common in our churches. Let's say there's a married couple who have a big problem with money. They don't make enough of it and they spend too much of it. They're in serious debt and going the wrong way fast. They give very little to help others in need. 99.95% of their income is spent on themselves and their tiny circle of influence. The sin of covetousness (or greed) has a stranglehold on their lives.

If they show up here at NHCC, what are they going to hear? What are we going to communicate to them in word and deed? Are they going to hear that their handling of money and possessions determines their eternal destiny and that they need to quit being greedy – or at least *promise* to *try* and quit – before Jesus will forgive them and accept them?

If that's what we say to the gay man about his gayness, that's what we need to say to this straight couple about their greed.

After all, the Bible says that God considers those two sins to be on the same level. Paul writes:

You can be confident of this one thing: that no person who is immoral [sexually], impure, or <u>greedy</u> (such a person is an idolater) [they actually worship their money and their stuff – they put more trust in that than in the God of the universe] <i>has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Ephesians 5:5 (NET)

And if we tell the greedy couple and the gay guy that they both need to quit or at least *promise* to *try* and quit their sin in order for Jesus to forgive and accept them, guess what we need to tell e*veryone* else whether they are "big" sinners or "little" sinners; whether they have a problem with lying or lusting, stealing or slander, bad morals or bad language; whether they're guys addicted to porn or gals addicted to romance novels; whether they're gluttons or gossips? We need to tell them the same exact thing because the Bible also says that to break one part of God's law is to break the whole thing.

And if that *is* what we say – if our message is "God loves you, Jesus died for your sins ... but in order to be forgiven and accepted by Him you have to agree in advance that everything we say is sin *is sin* and promise to turn away from it or at least try," we are going to put a barrier in front of every single person that Jesus never intended to be there.

And that really, really bothered me because then we would be preaching salvation by "works" as the Apostle Paul labeled it. We would be saying "you must behave in order to belong" when the overwhelming message of the New Testament, as I hope we have made clear through this series, is that *belonging comes through believing*, while behaving is something that God enables you to do more and more over time *after you come to believe* as His Holy Spirit fills your life more and more.

So, that's why we've done this series on grace. I want us to be clear about what we are communicating as a church (and why) to those who are not yet believers in Christ. That's what I mean by coming full circle on this.

Of course, not everyone is comfortable with this. In fact, some would say, "Rick what you're saying even this morning – doesn't that contradict what Paul said in that verse from Ephesians? It sounds like he's saying that belonging *does* require behaving."

Yes, it does sound like that but only if you don't read it in context. So, let's do that. Let's spend a few minutes chasing this down because it's really important.ⁱ

Here's what Paul writes beforehand.

Be [*he's speaking to believers*] *imitators of God as dearly loved children and live in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. Ephesians 5:1-2 (NET)*

That's the goal for every believer. "God's been good, loving and gracious to you, now you turn around and be good, loving and gracious to everyone else. You let what you have received overflow into the lives of others."

But among you there must not be either sexual immorality, impurity of any kind, or greed, as <u>these</u> <u>are not fitting for the saints</u>. Neither should there be vulgar speech, foolish talk, or coarse jesting—all of which <u>are out of character</u>—but rather thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:3-4 (NET)

For you can be confident of this one thing: that no person who is immoral, impure, or greedy (such a person is an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Ephesians 5:5 (NET)

Now if you stop right there you think Paul is saying "beware of becoming immoral, impure or greedy because if you go too far in those areas, you will lose your place in God's Kingdom." But that is *not* what Paul is intending to communicate. Besides the fact that he is talking about inheritance (or rewards) and not membership (or belonging) the next verse clearly reveals why.

Let nobody deceive you with empty words, for because of these things God's wrath comes on the <u>sons of disobedience</u>. Therefore do not be partakers with them, for you were at one time darkness, but now you are <u>light in the Lord</u>. Walk as <u>children of the light</u>. Ephesians 5:6-8 (NET)

Two simple questions about this paragraph:

- In the final two sentences what does Paul call these Ephesian Christians? "Light in the Lord" and "Children of Light."
- In the first sentence who does he say is the target of God's wrath? "The Sons of Disobedience."

There are two distinct groups of people here. And you and I are either in one group or the other. If you are in Christ, you are part of the Children of the Light. If you are not in Christ, you are part of the Children of Disobedience.

And Paul's point here is very simple: *if you belong to the Children of Light, don't act like the Children of Disobedience* ... because all the things those children naturally do – everything from sexual immorality, impurity, and greed to vulgar speech, foolish talk, and coarse jesting – are why God, in his perfect justice, had no other choice but to condemn the world. Paul is saying "that's the stuff that Jesus had to suffer for when he took on your sin at the cross. That's the stuff He came to free you from. You used to be part of that group but God has saved and rescued you from that and brought you into the light."

What Paul is doing here is not threatening believers with the possibility of God's wrath for crossing some unknown line of disobedience. He's just saying "why would you want to participate in the very things for which God must judge the world? It makes no sense. It's out of character he says. It's not fitting behavior for people who, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, are saints."

Once again, grace is exactly what it sounds like: a gift freely given with no strings attached and no conditions other than faith.

Who Is Church For?

And I know that I just took you through a long and winding road with all of that but I wanted to try and make it as clear to you as it has become to me that understanding what grace is – just how deep and wide and bold and audacious it really is – has incredibly significant implications for what a church communicates and, more importantly, for what it's like to be part of that church especially if you are a person who is "on the outside" – someone who is considering whether or not to believe in and follow Jesus.

See, a church can be one of two things. It can be a collection of "crazy Christians" (to quote the Brad Paisley song) who are in many ways a little goofy (like everyone else) but who are anxious to forgive just about anything because they themselves have been forgiven of everything. Or, a church can be what "Jeff" in the drama perceived it to be – a bunch of holy rollers obsessed with scrutinizing everyone's life, constantly pointing out their shortcomings (without also reminding them of grace) and then expecting them to hand over a donation!

At NHCC, just in case it isn't clear, we want to be the *first* of those two options. We want to be a church that sinners (and saints) not only love to attend but want to be part of. And that's been our vision since the very beginning of this church, which, coincidentally, was almost 20 years ago to the day. I was looking back through some of my notes the other day and I realized on November 14, 1993 we held the first meeting of the small core of eight adults that eventually grew to the 40 or so who launched the church a little less than a year later in October of 1994.

And I was thinking about that whole process of recruiting people to that core group, and people would ask me "why in the world do we need another church in the Northland? There's a church on every corner!"

And I said, "Yes, there is. But almost all of those churches are designed for church people. Our goal is to be a church for people who are *not* church people. Not that we don't want church people to come and be part of us. Absolutely we do. In fact, we want to be a church where church people feel like it's safe to bring *their friends* who are not church people."

And I can remember so many folks looking at me funny like "what planet are you from? Everybody knows that church is for church people!"

Sometimes people would say, "Oh, I get it. I know what you're really up to. You're just going to try and attract a big crowd by putting on a show. You're just going to entertain people with those little skits you do and that country music. You're going to water down the gospel and compromise the truth."

A lot of church people just didn't get what we were doing. And quite frankly, it's been that way for almost 20 years. But that's OK because the tension about "who the church is for" is not new. It actually predates North Heartland by, oh, about 2,000 years. In spite of the fact that one of the very last things Jesus said to his disciples was to go and share the good news of grace with people who were not church people, the early church quickly forgot what business it was in. Instead of the grace business, the church got confused and thought it was back into the religion business.

As Andy Stanley writes, "Graceless church raised its ugly head about fifteen minutes after Jesus said his final farewell. Well, maybe not 15 minutes, but sooner than you might expect."ⁱⁱ

The Book of Acts tells us that things got off to an incredible start. Within the first few days, thousands of men and women in Jerusalem – mostly *Jewish* men and women – put their faith in Christ as Savior and Messiah. And then something quite unexpected happened. Some of the disciples began traveling to predominantly Gentile areas to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus and just about everywhere they went, people believed!

However, as you might expect, these new believers brought their Gentile customs, habits, and values right along with them. Problem was ... many of their Gentile ways were highly offensive to the Jews. Beyond offensive, some of their practices were outright sacrilegious.

So, a movement began within the already established church to require all Gentile Christians to first become Jewish, which in addition to circumcision for the men, meant that they would be required to submit to the entire Law of Moses, which included not just the 10 commandments that you and I are aware of but 600-plus laws addressing things like what you could and could not eat and what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. As you might expect, this was very demoralizing to these new believers. For them, the good news had become the bad news.

Fortunately, one of the traveling evangelists – the Apostle Paul – realized requiring non-Jews to become Jewish meant that salvation was no longer a free gift; it was something a person had to work for and earn by being good and being religious. He realized Christianity was on the path to becoming just another graceless religion.

So, to address this problem, Acts 15 says that Paul and another teacher by the name of Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to get an official ruling from the original apostles – the guys who had hung out with Jesus for three-and-a-half years. If anyone would know what Jesus would want to happen with regard to these non-church people, it would be them.

Luke says that when everyone gathered together in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas gave their report of all the incredible things God was doing and how hundreds and thousands of Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus and how the Holy Spirit was doing these amazing things. They give this glorious report, and when they finished, a group of Pharisees who, at some point, had also become believers in Jesus stood up and repeated the demand of the Jewish-first movement: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses."

After a lengthy debate, Peter addressed the group. He began by reminding them of his own experience with Gentiles and the gospel. God had made it abundantly clear to him that salvation was to be offered to everyone on the same terms: faith in Christ.

He said ...

"God, who knows the heart, showed [the Gentiles] that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Acts 15:8-9 (NIV)

And then he cut to the chase:

"Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of these new disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? Acts 15:10 (NIV)

Translation: "Friends, who are we kidding? We can't even keep the law ourselves! Why would we want to burden the Gentiles with it?"

Then he concluded:

"On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are." Acts 15:11 (NIV)

When Peter sat down, all eyes turned to James, the brother of Jesus – the most influential church leader in Jerusalem. After quoting a short passage from the prophet Amos, James made a statement that, in my opinion, ought to be the guiding principle for every church everywhere when it comes to how to relate to people who are not part of the church.

He said ...

"It is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." Acts 15:19 (NIV)

"We should not put any barriers in place that would discourage anyone from seeking the grace of God. We don't want the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone confused with a big long list of moral and religious to dos and not to dos."

And so he wrote a short but amazing letter to the church at Antioch, 300 miles north of Jerusalem, where this issue had become extremely divisive, tearing apart the congregation. Here's what it said:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.

Greetings,

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. [i.e., the proponents of the Jewish-first movement]. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. Acts 15:23-27 (NIV)

Here's the amazing part:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

What is he going to say? How difficult is it going to be?

Here's what he wrote:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. Acts 15:28-29 (NIV)

Over a thousand years of Jewish religious morals and tradition boiled down to three basic ideas:

- Don't do things that make it look like you are worshipping the pagan gods.
- Be careful what you eat around your Jewish brothers and sisters.
- Don't be immoral.

And just to be clear, these were not conditions for salvation or what it would take for God to give them His grace. Remember the Gentiles in question had already said yes to Jesus, and God had already given them the Holy Spirit. These guidelines were for *after* a person had believed that Jesus was Lord and that God had raised Him from the dead.

When Church Becomes a People Magnet

Now, I don't know about you but I when I read that story, I am just blown away. I'm blown away at how committed Jesus' inner circle was to the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But I'm also blown away at how easy it was just a few years after Jesus for the church to drift from that truth.

Again, Andy Stanley writes: "There has always been what amounts to an invisible force, something akin to a gravitational pull, drawing the church back in the direction of graceless religion and legalism. It shows up in every generation with a variety of labels, styles, and faces. It has disguised itself as orthodoxy, holiness, morality, and conservatism, among others. But when all is said and done, the message is the same: *The church is for church people. The church is for those who will sign on to a brand and abide by a custom set of rules.* 'fii

When I read that I thought, may God save NHCC from ever becoming a church like that. That kind of church isn't the "friend of sinners" that Jesus was. It *repels* sinners – whether they're big sinners or little sinners.

And this, friends, is why it is so important that we understand grace. It's why we have spent so much time on it. It's why, going forward after this series, my hope and prayer is that God will help me or whoever stands here speaking to clearly communicate grace more than ever before in every message, regardless of the topic ...

... because the church is most appealing when the message of grace is most apparent. ^{iv}

When grace is clearly proclaimed and clearly practiced, that's how a church becomes a people-magnet ... because *everybody needs grace.* Anybody with an ounce of self-awareness, at some point in their lives, realizes that they are subject to the universal human propensity to screw things up. And at that point, they need the grace and forgiveness and mercy that God freely offers in Jesus.

And when the church becomes known more as the place where sinners get *that* than as the place where they are condemned, people are drawn to it.

Of course, some would say, "But Rick, isn't there a danger if all you talk about is grace?"

Absolutely, because while it's true that the church is most appealing when the message of grace is most apparent ...

God's grace is only as visible as God's truth is clear.

It's pointless to tell someone they're forgiven if they're not sure why they need forgiveness in the first place. That's what truth does. Truth helps us see where we are falling short, how we are screwing things up morally, spiritually, physically, relationally, financially, etc. *Without truth, grace simply becomes tolerance.*

- Tolerance says "It's no big deal what you do sexually. God doesn't really care about that. That's your choice."
- Tolerance says "it doesn't matter whether or not you are good steward of the financial resources God has given you. God just wants you to be happy. That's all that matters."
- Tolerance says "whatever you feel is right for you is what is right."
- Tolerance is deadly because it says "there are no absolutes to be violated and there is no sin, only mistakes."

But the New Testament is very clear. We are not "mistakers" in need of correction. We are sinners in need of a Savior. We need more than a second chance. We need a second birth which is what we've talked about repeatedly in this series.

Fortunately, Jesus modeled for us how grace and truth work together.

One of his best friends, the apostle John, summarized Jesus' approach this way:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1: 14 (NIV)

Three verses later he repeats this same idea.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1: 17 (NIV)

Jesus did not come to strike a balance between grace and truth. He brought the full measure of both at the exact same time.

- He didn't dumb down sin to make it more palatable. Because of grace he didn't have to.
- And he didn't turn grace into mindless and meaningless tolerance. As we follow Jesus through the Gospels, we find him acknowledging the full implications of sin and yet without condemning. (The only group he consistently condemned were graceless religious people those who misused truth to control through guilt, fear, and condemnation).

And if our church is to reflect his approach, we have to be characterized by a full dose of truth along with a full dose of grace. And where the two meet, wow, it can get messy.^v In fact, it has been messy for almost 20 years.

- It's messy because when you talk about grace, a lot of people think you're giving people a license to sin. It's messy because when you talk about sin a lot of people think you're being judgmental.
- It's messy because people who have been believers for a long time mess up. And you have to go to them and confront them. You have to figure out how to take their sin seriously at the same time as not leaving them hopeless. You have to figure out a way to help them be restored and, if you can't, sometimes you have to tell them to leave for the health of other believers around them.
- And it's messy because just like the Gentiles of the first century when irreligious folks come to faith in Jesus, he takes them as they are greedy, gay, gluttonous, gossiping, immoral, impure. He says "You belong to me and I will put my Spirit in you and begin to change you from the inside out." And because they are part of this family we, too, have to take them as they are greedy, gay, gluttonous, gossiping, immoral, impure giving them lots of time and space because people don't change overnight. Sometimes, they never change.

Embracing the tension of grace and truth is hard. In some ways, it would be much easier to be an all-truth church – "here's the line, don't screw up or you're out." Or an all-grace church – "Oh, it doesn't matter, whatever you want to do." But I like how

Andy Stanley responds to that idea. He writes:

If the idea of embracing the mess is uncomfortable for you, remember this: Either you were a mess, are a mess, or are one dumb decision away from becoming a mess. And when you were your messiest version of you, what did you need? You needed somebody to take you just as you were. That's what Jesus did for me. That's what Jesus did and will do for you. That being the case, it seems to me that's what we should be about as the local church.^{vi}

Conclusion

Now, I'm sure that some of you are wondering "why are you telling us all of this? I mean, this is very interesting, but you could've ended this series last week and we would have had *plenty* to go on for a long, long time! What's the point?"

The point is that what I want for you, especially if you are a believer, especially if Jesus is in your life and he is your savior, I want you to understand a little of why we do what we do but, more importantly, I want you to part of this. I want you to go all in. I want you to experience the joy of being used by God in making this go. I want you to be fired up about what we get to do together.

And, you heard Nathan talk about Santa's Workshop coming up. That's an event that's designed to reach 1,000 or more people who are not church people. It's going to be one of the most exciting seasons of our ministry year. And I don't mean Christmas, though that is a lot of fun around here. I mean "outreach season." What happens is, we start this thing with Santa's Workshop, which is a huge opportunity to connect with people who are not church people. And then we come up to Christmas Eve. I know a lot of you go away on vacation or to visit family, but we do three services here and we have about 1,000 people who will come in and out of here that night, many of them have never been in a church. They got dragged here like the guy in the drama. Then, we've got January and February, and in February we're going to do another movie series. We've got this whole plan of how we're going to reach out into our community for people who are not church people. It is going to be so much fun. It is so exciting. Some of you are here today because you were part of what we did last year and I want you to be part of that. It's so cool.

Next week we'll talk about that a little more but for now, let's pray together.

<prayer>

God, thank you so much for the love you have for us. Thank you so much for truth, which tells us why we need grace. And thank you for grace, which gives us hope in spite of the awful truth we sometimes have to look at about ourselves. What a God you are. I pray you would use us, imperfect as we may be. I pray you would use this church, as imperfect as it is, to reach other people who are imperfect so that we can all become children of the light, children that belong to you, and children that have a future and a hope in eternity. We thank you so much for that. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Feature – Perfect People

CLOSING COMMENTS / Offering at the door

Endnotes

ⁱ A most excellent exegesis can be found here: http://www.biblestudymanuals.net/eph5v14.htm

ⁱⁱ This quote and what follows is taken from Stanley, Andy (2010-10-19). The Grace of God, Chapter 13 – Commissioned for Grace. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanley, Andy (2012-09-25). Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend (Kindle Locations 1002-1006). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Yeah, another awesome Stanleyism. Deep & Wide, (Kindle Locations 889-893). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^v Stanley, Andy (2012-09-25). Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend (Kindle Locations 799-809). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Ibid