

More Than a Building
The Grace Place
October 27, 2019

Good morning everyone.

We're in week two of our series *More Than a Building* and the reason we're doing this series is because a lot of us – maybe not all of us – but a lot of us need to change the way we think about church, and radically so.

So, I'm going to start off this message with a question that is purposely designed to make everyone in this room or in the café or watching online uncomfortable.

And if, after hearing this question, you are *not* uncomfortable, I'm just going to apologize in advance because my goal is to include every one of us in this. As I say from time to time, I'm

committed to being an “equal opportunity offender.” And if everyone isn’t mad at some point, I haven’t done my job very well.

So here’s the questionⁱ ...

What do you call a group of ...

Lying, cheating, greedy, self-centered, lustful, porn-watching, tax-dodging, racist, jealous, judgmental, angry people ...

Who ...

- Eat too much
- Spend too much
- Drink too much
- Medicate too much
- Worry too much
- Smoke too much ...

But who gather together because ...

- They believe Jesus is the hope and light of the world
- And they need more hope and more light?

You call them *the church*.

And if you're new with us today ... or you're new to church in general ... or you haven't been to church in a long, long time ... and you showed up today thinking "I'm not sure this is a good idea, I'm not sure this is the place for me because I'm going to be surrounded a bunch of people who have it all together," I hope I just put your mind at ease.

More importantly, I hope that question and what I'm going to say in the rest of this message will change the way you think about church – and radically so – because the church was never intended to be for perfect

people. And it was never intended to be for religious people.

Now, over time, it's certainly developed a *reputation* along those lines. But that's not how it was in the beginning.

A Unique Characteristic

Way back in the first century when Jesus of Nazareth began the movement which eventually became "the church" – which we learned last week wasn't even called "church"; it was called "the gathering" or "the assembly" or "the congregation" which come directly from the word Jesus used, *ekklesia*.

Way back when Jesus began his ministry, the thing that was so unique about him compared to all of the other Jewish leaders and teachers of his time was that people who were *not* like him, *liked* him. People who were

not religious, people who were far from perfect were attracted to Him.

But why? Why were people attracted to Jesus? Why did people who were not like Jesus, like Jesus?

One word.

Grace.

People who were not like Jesus liked Jesus because of grace.

But what is "grace?"

There are lots of good definitions out there but here's one that I came up with several years ago. Some of you may remember it.

Grace is "being treated better than you deserve and better than you have earned – with no strings attached."

By “no strings attached” I mean there’s no expectation you will somehow “pay back” the favorable treatment you received. That wouldn’t be *grace* because you would then be earning that treatment.

Now that definition is a bit academic which is OK but, in real life, *grace* is much more personal and relational.

Grace is ...

- What you crave when you hurt someone you love.
- What you long for when you offend someone you need.

Grace is ...

- Someone leaning in your direction when

they are justified in leaning away

- Someone seeing your sin for what it is and then treating you as if it never happened.
- Someone giving you what you deserve least when you need it most.

And that's the kind of person Jesus was ... which is why people who were not like Jesus liked Jesus.

But how do we know that?

"OK come on, Rick. It's because the Bible tells us so."

Not exactly.

We know it because the people who followed him at first – the eyewitnesses – eventually wrote down what they had seen.

And what they wrote was copied by hand and distributed all over the Roman Empire until 300 years later those writings were put into a book we call "The New Testament" and combined with the Old Testament in what was simply called "the books" or "ta biblia" in Latin which is "The Bible" in English.

Point being ... what we know of Jesus isn't because of some *book* but because of some *people*; people who were with Jesus; people who saw him executed, entombed and then had dinner with him three days later and for six weeks following that – which is the only reason why his story was worth remembering.

John was one of those who followed Jesus from the very beginning and his remembrances are recorded in what we call *The Gospel of John*.

And at the very beginning of his telling of the story, he highlights what he considered to be the most amazing characteristic of Jesus.

He writes:

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

John is saying, "I don't know how to explain it but God – the Word, the Logos which is how the Greeks referred to that which set into motion everything that is ... God somehow inhabited a human body in the person of Jesus of Nazareth."

And then he continues:

*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)

And, again, when John says “we” he means it personally.ⁱⁱ

In other words, “This isn’t something I and everyone else heard about or read about. It’s something we – Peter, James, John, myself and hundreds of other men and women – saw with our own eyes. We were there.”

“And what we saw was stunning. It was amazing. It was glorious. Jesus was full of grace and truth, which was so different from what had come before.”

And what had come before were the 613 commandments of Torah – the Law of Mosesⁱⁱⁱ – which, for the Jewish people, told them the truth about what they *should* be doing that they often *weren’t* doing.^{iv}

Sadly, a lot of people think that's what church is about, too.

- A lot of non-Christians, for example, think it's where you go to hear what you're *not* doing that you *should* be doing ... which is why they *don't* go, except for maybe Christmas and Easter.
- And a lot of Christians think it's where you go to hear what everyone "out there" is or isn't doing that they should or shouldn't be doing ... which, of course, makes us feel morally superior and better about what we are and aren't doing that we should or shouldn't be doing.

That's what "truth" by itself looks like and does.

But when Jesus came into the world, John

says, something new came with him ... *grace*.

Now, it didn't *replace* truth. Instead, was *added* to the mix in a way it had never been. In Jesus, grace fully complements truth.

In Jesus, grace completes what truth begins.

And that's really important to understand because, what's happened in recent days, is that a lot of Christians and Christian leaders have become aware that "church" is perceived in our culture as being judgmental and intolerant.

I'm sure you've heard that.

And sometimes that perception is valid; sometimes it's not.

But the result of this awareness is that there is now a great temptation among Christians

never to speak of what we *should* be doing that we *aren't* doing and vice versa. There is a great temptation to let go of the "truth" component in order to become "full of grace."

And that kind of makes sense because, again, what was most attractive about Jesus? It was grace.

Unfortunately, what actually happens when you do that –

When you remove "truth" from the mix, what you're left with is not grace. It's simply *tolerance*.

Tolerance says "there's nothing wrong with you. You're OK just as you are. And if you're not OK, it's probably somebody else's fault. It's not you."

Tolerance says, "whatever you want to do and whatever you've done is just fine and no

one has the right to ever question it. Whatever you think is right for you is what is right.”

And that *sounds* like a great message because it’s obviously not judgmental.

But there are two huge problems with that approach at least from a spiritual perspective.

#1. No one needs a *church* to tell them that because the culture says it constantly ...

... through books, music, TV shows, movies, social media, education, government. That message is everywhere you turn.

...which means that when the church minimizes truth in service of maximizing grace, the church is basically signing its own death wish. It’s made itself superfluous. It’s become unnecessary.

#2. We all know better. We all know that something is wrong with us.

We all know that we are not totally OK and that it's not all someone else's fault.

And we all know that some of our attitudes and actions are *not* "just fine" or "right" – even by our own standards.

And being told otherwise – whether it comes from the culture or the church – doesn't help us in the least to become the kind of person we want to be and are meant to be.

My point here is this: *Grace isn't really "grace" without truth.*

You can't "be treated better than you deserve and better than you have earned" if you're not aware you've done something wrong or messed up or fallen short in some way that merits some kind of rejection or negative

consequence, even punishment.

Grace without truth isn't really grace.

And this is why it's so important that that Jesus wasn't a *mixture* of grace and truth. He wasn't grace one minute and truth the next.

Instead, Jesus never watered down the truth and never turned down the grace.

He called sin "sin" and sinners "sinners" and then, on the cross, he laid down his life for the sinners and paid for their sin.

He was all truth, all grace, all the time.

And sometimes it got awkward.

Encounters With Jesus

For example ...^v

John was there that afternoon along with the rest of the disciples when Jesus was stopped by a tax collector by the name of Levi or Matthew. Matthew was Jewish but he worked for the Romans which meant that He was a traitor. He was despised even by his own family.

And to the shock and dismay of John and the others, Jesus leans in and says to Him – to Matthew, “Come and follow me.”

And amazingly, Matthew got up from his table and said, “OK, where are we going.”

And Jesus said something that freaked everyone out even more: “we’re going to your house.”

Peter said, “I’m not going to this guy’s house.”

Jesus said, "yes you are because you're following me, too, and we're all going to his house."

"Wait a minute, Jesus, he's a tax collector. You haven't even asked him to repent or to give back the money he's stolen. You're just going to ask him to follow us just like that and go to his house?"

This is crazy.

So Matthew invites all of his tax collecting friends to dinner because Jesus wants to meet them. And Matthew is thinking, "OK, but you're not going to like my friends because my friends are nothing like you and you're nothing like them. This probably isn't going to go well but, because you say so, I will."

And everyone shows up and, as Matthew said, they're all the wrong kind of people. And

all the other disciples are still thinking, “this isn’t going to go well” because Jesus is Jesus and those people are those people.

And it’s just so awkward. It would be like if you were having a party and everyone had had a bit too much to drink and at that point, and I walked in.

It would be like, “we like him on Sunday but not Saturday night. How long are he and Jetta going to stay?”

That’s how this was.

So here’s Jesus the rabbi in the house of Matthew the tax collector. And it’s awkward because grace makes things awkward sometimes.

And then the Pharisees show up. Remember they’re the protectors of the truth in that

culture. They're the religious leaders trying to make sure that everyone does what religious people are supposed to do.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Matthew 9:11 (NIV)

Notice that they didn't ask Jesus directly. They weren't going into Matthew's house. No way.

And Jesus should be in there either. After all, he's a rabbi. If he's eating with anyone it should be them.

So somehow word gets to Jesus that the Pharisees are outside and they have a question. And I'm sure whoever asks the question asks it out loud in front of everyone so as to shame them.

“Jesus, the Pharisees are outside and they want to know why are you here? Why are you eating with this rabble?”

And Jesus answers – again out loud – so that everyone in the room can hear him.

“Don’t call Matthew and his friends ‘sinners.’ That might hurt their feelings.” Matthew 9:12 (NIV)

And they might raise your taxes, too.

No. That’s not what Jesus says.

Instead, he says something that makes an awkward situation even more awkward. He does that all grace, all truth, all the time thing that characterized his ministry.

He's at Matthew's house with all of Matthew's friends and everyone is listening, waiting to hear what He is going to say in response to the Pharisees.

And Jesus says ...

*"It is not the healthy who need
a doctor, but the sick."*

Matthew 9:12 (NIV)

Matthew is like, "wait a minute Jesus. You're my guest here. Are you calling me *sick*? Are you calling all of my friends sick?"

To which Jesus would have said "Yes. You're stealing from your people. You're greedy. You're sick. BUT, I still want you to follow me."

"What? That doesn't make sense."

"Yes, Matthew, I want you to follow me. I want *all* of you to follow me. Thanks for inviting me

over.”

And everyone is thinking, “Jesus, you’re messing up all the categories. If you’re going to ask people to follow you, you should ask people who are already like you to do that. You don’t ask people who are unlike you to follow you unless they’ve already decided to be like you.

“But you’ve asked people who are nothing like you to follow you. You’re messing up all the categories, Jesus.”

And then Jesus said, “tell the Pharisees outside the following.”

And this was so offensive.

“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but

sinners.” Matthew 9:13
(NIV)

Whenever you tell the smartest person in the room to “go and learn” – and the Pharisees were – whenever you do that, you’re offending them.

What you’ve said is “You’re so smart but I’m smarter. You need to learn something that I know that you don’t.”

So this is offensive. They need to learn what their own really scripture means.

“I desire mercy not sacrifice. I’ve not come to call the righteous but sinners. I’m not afraid to call a sinner a sinner and I’m not afraid to go to their house for dinner.”

Here’s another example. Even if you haven’t

been in church I'm sure you've heard the story about the woman who was caught John says, "in the very act of adultery."

One day Jesus and the disciples went to the Temple in Jerusalem and John says that the religious leaders drag in this woman to see what Jesus would say and do. It was a trap because they'd been watching Him and they had a pretty good idea.

"Teacher," they said, "you know that the Law of Moses says that this woman should be stoned to death. But what do you say?"

Jesus doesn't say anything for a while. John says he stoops down and starts writing in the dirt.

Eventually he stands back up and says – and this is so brilliant and counterintuitive that no one could make it up – Jesus says, "OK, go

ahead and stone her.”

And the woman at this point is terrified because there’s no mercy and no compassion. There’s no “tell me how you came to this point in your life where you thought this was a good idea.”

And just as the crowd is about to pick up stones and do what Moses said, Jesus adds, “Oh, and when you do that, start with whoever among you has never sinned.”

And then he stoops down and starts drawing in the sand again.

John writes “At this, they all began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.”

And she’s even more emotional than before.

And she's stunned at what has just taken place.

And then Jesus leans in and completely ruins the moment.

He says "leave your life of sin."

He doesn't say, "Hey, it's ok what you've been doing. I know how your dad treated you. I know how your husband treated you. I know you have a good reason why you do the things you do."

There's none of that. It's "leave your life of sin." It's all grace and all truth, full on.

It's "you are guilty BUT I don't condemn you."

"Wait, what? How can that be? I'm guilty but you don't condemn me? Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? Isn't it supposed to

be that I'm *innocent* and you don't condemn me?"

It used to be that way. But at this moment, Jesus has established a new law.

Jesus has become a new lawgiver greater than Moses; a new representative of God the Father. And he was all grace, all truth, all the time.

Over and over, Jesus leaned in towards pre-repentant, guilty people and invited them to follow Him. Over and over, he leaned in towards people who had not yet acknowledged their sin and said "follow me."

One more example and then we'll move on.

On the day that Jesus was crucified, the

Gospels tell us that a crowd gathered. And the people watching were yelling at Jesus and insulting Him. "Let him save himself if he is really the messiah. Come down off the cross Jesus."

The witnesses tell us that there were two criminals crucified with them. One of them joined in with the crowd but the other said, "Don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly. He has done no wrong."

In other words, "if the Kingdom of Heaven is reserved for good people; reserved for those who did it right every time, we have no hope, no chance."

For some reason, this guy knew that his only hope was what he deserved the least so, in an act of desperation, he says to Jesus, "when you come into your kingdom would you

remember me.”

To which the people in the crowd would had said, “what a ridiculous thing to ask. Is he repenting from a cross? Is he saying ‘from now on I’m going to do it right, clean up, make restitution.’”

“From now on is only about 30 minutes, dude. There’s no way to do any of that stuff, no way to do anything good for the rest of your worthless, despicable life. You have nothing to promise, nothing to offer, no bargaining power with man or god.”

But again Jesus upsets the order of things; blows away the categories; does the unthinkable.

Jesus answered him.

“Today you will be with me. Where I’m going

you're going."

Jesus honors this last minute request of a deathbed convert and promises him the same eternity as Stephen – one of the Apostles who was going to die for Him in a few short months; the same as Peter who had followed Him for the past three years.

This was mind boggling.

- It was one thing for Jesus to show grace to the woman – she had a history, she had reasons.
- And Levi, he was a bad dude but he wasn't not really hurting anyone, at least not physically.

But this guy – he was in a completely different category. He was a hardened criminal and probably even a murderer.

Why would Jesus offer him the same thing as those lesser sinners to say nothing of Stephen and Peter?

Because grace is not fair. It is better than fair.

Friends this is Jesus. If you're a Christian, this is our leader. And this is how He did things.

Over and over and over, He brought grace and truth not in half measure, not in either/or categories, but in full measure – all grace, all truth, all the time.

So What?

Now, at this point a good question is – as always – “so what?”

Well, since we're talking about "the church" in this series, I think – I hope – the answer is somewhat obvious.

“Church” is to be “the grace place” ...

- Where we treat others better than they deserve with no strings attached because that's not only how Jesus did it; it's also how *we ourselves* have been treated by God.
- It's "the grace place" where we preach and teach the truth not merely to point out what people are *not* doing that they *should* be doing (and vice versa) but to point to the One who offers grace for all of our sin and failure.

At the grace place ...

- We don't cheapen the cross of Jesus –

his body and blood – by minimizing the seriousness of our sin.

- And we accept that sometimes things are going to be messy because people are messy, and consistency and fairness aren't always possible and sometimes aren't even the goal but grace always is.

Because "church" is the grace place ..

- We accept people where they're at on their spiritual journey and even invite them to be part of the church in ways that might be surprising.

For instance, at NHCC, we let people who are not yet Christians serve in as many volunteer roles as possible. But not all.

- We'll allow people to serve in the

parking lot that we wouldn't allow to volunteer in Adventureland or the Well.

- We'll allow musicians to play on stage who we wouldn't allow to lead worship.

... which seems confusing and inconsistent.

Because it is. Again, it's messy because truth and grace are messy.

Finally, "church" is to be the "grace place" ...

- Where people who are Christians are constantly amazed that they – sinners that they are – got to be a part of it.
- And where people who are *not* Christians or people who have been

away from God and away from church for a long time ... know that they are *welcome* just as they are.

And sometimes ... that actually happens.

Last week after service, someone turned in a note that said ...

It has been 8 years since I have been to a church service. I didn't even know that was what was wrong.

In a difficult time I reached out. And the simple words from <a friend> were, "My church helps."

I asked and the reply was amazing. There were no demands. I had never even stepped inside. You never asked me to do anything.

Thank you so much. I will see you next week.

It doesn't always happen like that. Sometimes we – both as leaders and as members – fail to make this a place of grace and people walk away.

But our intention – our hope, our prayer, our calling, our challenge, our desire – is to be like Jesus who, because of grace, was so attractive that people who were nothing like him actually liked him.

An Invitation

Now, at this point, I suppose I could say “I hope all of this has changed the way you think about church – at least a little bit if not radically so. I hope you see that church was never intended to be for perfect people or even for religious people.”

And then I could pray and we'd be done.

But, when we planned this service and when I thought about this message, it occurred to me that there was one more "so what" that we ought to talk about, just briefly and then I'll be done.

And I'll put it like this.

If grace is "being treated better than you deserve and better than you have earned – with no strings attached."

And grace is ...

- Someone leaning in your direction when they are justified in leaning away
- Someone seeing your sin for what it is and then treating you as if it never happened.

- Someone giving you what you deserve least when you need it most.

Then grace is clearly a no-strings-attached invitation from God.

It's an invitation from God because, *in his grace*, those things are exactly what He has done for us in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, who was once an enemy of Jesus, put it like this.

He wrote:

At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:6 (NIV)

... people who didn't want anything to do with God.

But then Paul does something very interesting. He narrows the field from the generic “ungodly” and gets personal.

He writes:

*While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us. Romans
5:8 (NIV)*

While God was totally justified in leaning away from you and from me because we wanted nothing to do with Him ... and God saw your and my sin for exactly what it was ...

Right when you and I needed it most – when we were powerless to do anything to make amends ...

- God leaned in our direction ...
- Gave us what we deserved least ...

- And treated us as if our sin never happened ...

... at the cross of Jesus where, in a way I don't fully understand, his blood washed away all of our sin – known and unknown, past, present and future.

And when someone does something like that for you when you are their enemy ...

- It means they love you in spite of you.
- It means they want to know you and be known by you.
- It means their arms are open wide to you.

And you should walk towards them and accept the grace they are offering you.

And this morning, some of you need to do that. Some of you have heard about God's grace over and over but you have never personally received it.

You have never crossed the line that says, "I accept Jesus and what He did for me. I accept God's acceptance of me."

So, how do you do that? I like to think of it in terms of ABC.

First of all "A" ... Agree with God.

Agree with God that you are a sinner and you need a savior. That's the first thing.

Second, "B" ... Believe that Jesus died for your sins and that He rose again.

Trust that what He did on your behalf is enough; that you don't need to try to make up for or atone for your sins – which isn't even possible.

Then, finally, “C” ... Come and follow Him.

That was Jesus' invitation to whoever would listen; whether that person was a great saint or a great sinner or a great skeptic (which pretty much covers all of us in this room).

So you express your agreement with God and your belief in Jesus and what He did and then you say “yes, I'll come and be part of your movement and your community called 'the church.'”

Agree, Believe and Come – that's how we accept God's invitation. That's how we accept his grace.

And as we close out this service, I want to give you a chance to do just that.

In just a minute, we're going to stand and sing

a song together that expresses God's invitation to receive his grace.

And if you have never you have never personally received, if you have never crossed the line of faith, if you have never agreed, believed and come to Jesus, you can do one of two things.

- You can pray the ABCs right where you are while we're singing.
- Or, you can come down front and I'll help you pray the ABCs. We'll do it right here together.

No pressure to do that, I just know that it's sometimes easier when someone helps.

And just to be clear, if you need someone to pray with you about *something else*, please *don't* come now. You come *after* the service

because this is just for people who want to receive Jesus today.

So, let's stand together <wait for people to stand>.

Let me pray very quickly before we sing.

Holy Spirit I invite you to take control right now. I ask that you would draw people who *need* Jesus to Jesus.

I ask in His name. Amen.

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. If you prayed today to receive Jesus and his grace, would you please let us know by dropping off the response form into the offering basket on the way out?

2. Also, if you prayed today to receive Jesus, your next step is to be baptized. And I'll talk about why that is in part of next week's message but I want you to know that we're going to be doing baptism in our service three weeks from today, November 17th. Information on that is available at the info center.

3. BTW, in case you're a parent and you're wonder, we don't baptize infants. We do baptize kids 1st grade and up but only after they attend a class, which is schedule for a week from this Thursday on November 7th. Info on that is also available at the info center.

4. Finally, when you leave today, if you're a guest, please don't feel obligated to drop anything in the offering basket. That's for people who call NHCC their home church.

5. And as you leave, you might want to go out via the lower lot exit to avoid the potholes at the exit of the upper lot.

Endnotes

ⁱ Stolen without shame from Andy Stanley's message [Do You Hear What I Hear](#) in his series "The Unsettling Solution for Just About Everything."

ⁱⁱ Andy Stanley, Undeservable.

ⁱⁱⁱ John says this in John 1:17

^{iv} "The Law was a tutor until Christ came" see Galatians 3:24

^v These examples are from Stanley's message Undeservable.