

BELPRES CHURCH

Grace and Truth

LIVING IT

Dr. Scott Dudley

March 11, 2018

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. – 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 (NIV)

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹"No one, sir," she said.

– John 8:1-11 (NIV)
New International Version

Jesus, I ask that you would use your word to help us experience your great love for us, be changed by it, and be able to give it away. We ask this in your name, Lord. Amen.

Hello to those of you at home, online, our middle schoolers, our high schoolers, folks in our 11 o'clock service, as well as all of you here. How many of you think this business of changing clocks back and forth is just stupid? This weird 19th century thing that we keep doing for no good reason at all. Do you know that nationwide, this is one of the least attended Sundays in

Grace and Truth

church? You are here, so your house in heaven is going to be bigger.

That's how it works. If you go to my office here at church, most of my books actually are not mine. They belonged to my predecessor and maybe even his predecessor, but the other day I found a book that I'm pretty sure was not his. I think it had to have been put there by one of the staff, probably as a message for me. The book was called *The Perfect Kitten: How to Raise a Problem-Free Cat*. Because of how much I love cats, they put that book there.

It's a very short book. Do you know why? Because there's no such thing as a perfect cat. They are all disasters. All of them. They're a little bit like human beings that way. There is no such thing as a perfect person at all. We all mess up. That raises the question, what do we do when we mess up? How do we handle that? How do we handle it when other people mess up, especially if it's in a way that hurts themselves or others? Do we say something about it or do we not? On the one hand we don't want to be judgmental, but on the other hand not saying anything, that seems kind of weird. Do we condemn or do we condone?

That's a tension that we face in ourselves, where either we let ourselves off the hook for our own bad behavior, or we become guilt-laden and beat ourselves up over it. And, it's a tension we face with others. The friend who drinks too much, or the person who leaves their spouse for someone else, or the parent who is constantly shaming their kids. Can you think of someone in your life right now who is maybe doing things that hurt themselves or others, or that is just contrary to scripture? How do we handle that?

The passage on love in First Corinthians 13 says, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." That is, love doesn't just look the other way when someone is doing something destructive to themselves or others. That's not a loving thing to do. The same passage also says, "Love keeps no record of wrong," which means we don't judge, because Jesus Himself said, "Do not judge."

Grace and Truth

That's a complicated verse. To understand it you have to remember the list of exceptions that go along with it. You remember that list where Jesus said, "Do not judge except for ... " Remember? Some of you are like, "Really? Where is that? I'd love to know the exceptions because I love to judge people." There is no list of exceptions. It's "do not judge," period, end of sentence, no footnotes, no caveats, no exceptions list. Do not judge.

Do not judge. How do we handle it? How should we not be judgmental? How should we confront people with the truth? This passage and that verse says that Christians should have the reputation of being the least judgmental people on the planet. That should be our reputation because we don't judge, so that if you were on a bus, say, and the person next to you, let's say was just a disaster, embezzling funds and adultery and selling drugs and who knows what else.

Our reputation should be such that if that person found out you were a Christian, they'd say, "Oh, you're a Christian? Now I can tell you all the worst secrets about myself, things that I would never tell my 12-step group or my bartender or my dog because they'd judge me. But you're a Christian, and that means you would never judge me." That's our reputation, right? Not so much.

It's more like an episode of the Simpsons I saw, where Homer Simpson's annoying Christian neighbor, Ned Flanders, is returning from being away, and Homer says, "Well, where have you been?" Ned Flanders says, "I've been at Christian camp, learning to be more judgmental." That's our reputation. Condemn or condone; judge, tolerate. Fortunately, there is a third option, which we see in the story that we read, where the religious leaders bring to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery, and they say, "Should we stone her to death, or should we let her go free?"

Just parenthetically, if you read this in your Bible, you may see a note there that says, "The earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John do not include this story." Most scholars think this was a historical story, an eyewitness event, but some early manuscripts have it in Luke, others

Grace and Truth

in John. They just don't know what gospel it goes in, but most scholars think it's a historical event.

When these religious leaders ask this question, the text says they were using this question as a trap to have a basis for accusing Jesus. Because you see, Jesus is always talking about grace and mercy and forgiveness for everyone, and the religious leaders hated all that talk about love and forgiveness, as religious leaders do, and now they think they have him.

Because if he says, "Well, uphold the law," they can say, "Ha! See? See, that's your messiah, not so compassionate, is he? Come unto me with all your flaws and failures, and I'll have you executed." But if he lets her go, they're going to say, "See, he doesn't uphold the law." So they think they've got him, condemn or condone, mercy or justice, judge or tolerate.

Jesus shows us love's third way in a situation like this, in a couple of ways. The first thing is, real love tells hard truths. Real love tells hard truths. The coach who never corrects the athlete, a doctor who won't tell you what's wrong with you because he doesn't want to hurt your feelings – so you can't fix what's wrong with you – those people don't love you.

A coach who says, "Oh, you're doing great," and never confronts you, that's not a loving coach. Remember, love is not a feeling. Love is a commitment to seek the best for the other person. It's you before me. What that means is if you just love to confront people, you just love to tell hard truths to people because it makes you feel good about yourself and morally superior – who's that about? It's about you.

Likewise, if you hate to confront people, and you avoid it because it's uncomfortable, and you want people to like you – who's that about? It's still about you. Real love seeks the best for others, which means we've got to forget about ourselves, and sometimes we have to tell hard truths. If someone's doing something that's causing them to miss God's best or is hurting themselves, or hurting others – real love doesn't just let that happen. It tells the truth.

Next step: real love tells hard truth, starting with ourselves. The religious leaders bring this woman caught in adultery, and they say to Jesus, "In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?" Okay, there are a million problems in this one sentence

Grace and Truth

alone. First, while Old Testament law had harsh penalties, in some ways to protect people.

Adultery divided husbands and wives; separated them, and in that culture, women could not support themselves, couldn't work, so that literally, adultery would leave women and children starving. Yes, Old Testament penalties could be harsh. But because of that, Old Testament law was obsessed with fairness and avoiding bias of any kind. Bias of men over women, rich over poor – so the result of that was, in this case, both the man and the woman had to be punished for adultery.

Question, where's the guy? Where's the guy? This is clearly a case of the double standard. On top of that, the law also said there had to be two witnesses to the event. Not, "I saw her coming out of his hotel room;" not, "I saw him with her," no, no, no. You had to see the deed with your own eyes, and not just one witness, two witnesses.

Question, how did the religious leaders see this? Were they peering in her window? Because that's just creepy. Either they're voyeurs, peeping toms, or they set her up; probably with one of their buddies, who deliberately commits adultery with her, which is a sin for him too, just so they can trap Jesus, and potentially getting this woman killed in the process, all to bolster their power because Jesus was criticizing them.

They didn't bring the guy, so they're guilty of the sin of partiality, which is a major sin in the Bible. They're guilty of conspiracy, entrapment, and voyeurism. Wow. These people suck. See, that's the problem with judgmental-ism. It's so easy to see the flaws in other people and be blind to our own flaws.

Someone sent me a story about a man who thought that his wife was going deaf. So one night he stood about 30 feet behind her and asked what's for dinner, and he got no response. He got closer, and he said, "Well, what's for dinner?" No response, and he thought, "Wow, she really is going deaf." He got five feet behind her and said, "What's for dinner?" She said, "For the third time, beef stew. " Okay, the other service just laughed so much better on that. Some of you are just not awake yet, right?

Psychologists call it the fundamental attribution error, where we assume that someone else's

Grace and Truth

behavior is because of their rotten character, but our behavior is because of external pressures. For instance, if we drive crazy through traffic, it's because we're late for an important meeting, and we hardly ever do it. But if someone else cuts us off, there can be only one plausible explanation, he or she is a jerk.

We condemn others, but we let ourselves off the hook. Saying to ourselves things like, "You're not drinking too much. You're just relaxing." "You didn't lash out in anger at that person. You just told them truth for their own good." "You didn't gossip about that person. You shared prayer concerns." "We need to pray for Tom." "Really? Do tell." We let ourselves off the hook, but we condemn others in the process.

Real love tells hard truths. But if we don't start telling hard truth to ourselves, we should not go any further than that. If we're not starting by telling hard truths to ourselves first, do not proceed, do not pass go. Stop. Don't talk to anyone else till you deal with your own stuff.

That's exactly what the religious leaders were not doing. The text says, "Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger," which is kind of an odd detail that sounds like an eyewitness, historical account. You wouldn't just put that detail in, especially the way they wrote back then. Oceans of ink have been spilled over what was Jesus writing. I've got a theory I'll tell you in a minute.

Then, Jesus says this famous line, "Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," which is brilliant. He upholds the penalty, "Go ahead, throw the stones," but with a condition that makes it impossible for anyone to do it. Then it says, "At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first..." probably because, the older ones had more time to rack up more sins, and he forces them to confront their sin.

I once heard a pastor who was being criticized by folks in his church, and he said, "How dare they question my character?" Here's the thing, my character always needs to be questioned. We need people in our lives to tell us hard truths, so question, have you deputized someone in your life, some people in your life, to speak hard truth to you when you need it?

Because when we understand that our sins aren't just these trivial, little peccadilloes, that we're

Grace and Truth

not just morally sub-optimal, or that we need to target holiness as a growth opportunity for 2018; but that our gossip destroys someone's reputation, or when we hoard resources or indulge in lustful thoughts, we hurt ourselves, we hurt others. We miss God's best. When we get that, it becomes a lot harder to judge because we know that we're sinners too. Real love tells hard truths, first to ourselves, and then, next step, getting the order right. You've got to get the order right.

A few chapters before this story, in the Gospel of John, in the beginning, it says that Jesus was the word of God, and it said, "The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ... full of grace and truth." In that phrase, which comes first? Grace. Get the order right. After all her accusers left, Jesus says to this woman, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" That is such a powerful question.

"Who condemns you? "No one, sir," she said. "No one." That is so powerful. We need both grace and truth in our lives, but we got to get the order right. Jesus does not say, "stop sinning, and I'll forgive you." He doesn't say, "If you're really good, I'll give you a second chance." He says, "Neither do I condemn you. Now, leave your life of sin." Grace first, truth second.

When dealing with others, we've got to lead with grace, but also in dealing with ourselves because sometimes we just beat ourselves up for all the things we do wrong. Do you ever come in here on a Sunday morning and think, "Man, I must be the worst Christian in here"? Because if you think about it, somebody has to be. It might as well be you. That's how we think, but that's not how Jesus thinks.

Do you know what I think Jesus wrote on the ground in this story? I think it's a deliberate reference to the Ten Commandments, which God wrote with his finger on tablets of stone. Here Jesus, God in the flesh, writes with his finger, and I think he writes the accusations against this woman in the dust. The law was carved with God's finger on tablets of stone, but Jesus writes the accusations against us in the dust that is blown away and seen no more.

The reason we're forgiven is the same reason this woman is forgiven. Back then, the penalty

Grace and Truth

for adultery was death. Jesus does not suspend that penalty. It's just that he takes that penalty onto himself. He'll be put to death, so she and we can go free.

Pastor John Ortberg tells a story about a seminary professor named Dr. B. He was speaking in a church about reaching out to adulterers and pornographers and white-collar criminals and drug users and someone, a man in that church, raised his hand and said, "Well, what if I don't like that kind of church? What if I just wanna go to a regular church with normal people?" ...Whatever that means.

Dr. B said, "Well, there are lots of churches like that, and all of them are dying. What I want to know is, who's going to care about the whiskey-guzzling, wife-swapping, adult-channel-surfing, child-neglecting, tax-evading, ladder-climbing, self-obsessed SOB? Everyone was kind of shocked. They hadn't heard that language in church before.

Then one of the deacons raised his hand and said, "You mean sons of baptists?" Yes, them too. Who's going to reach the sons and daughters of Baptists and Presbyterians and maybe even Methodists, and everyone else who messes up, which is all of us?

Jesus will. He will take away our sin, and he will make us new. Here's a principle I'm borrowing from Pastor Tim Keller. Don't take your sin or anyone else's sin to the law; take sin to the cross. If I take my sin to the law, I just feel guilty, or it makes me want to sin all the more. Thou shalt not, oh really? Because now I kind of want to. When I take my sin to the cross and hear Jesus say, "Who condemns you? Neither do I," then I am motivated to go sin no more.

Some of you can't change because you're getting the order wrong. You're saying to yourselves, "Go and sin no more. Go and sin no more." You got the order wrong. That just makes us want to sin all the more. No, the order is, "Neither do I condemn you," which helps us want to leave our life of sin. Don't take your sin to the law; take it to the cross. Ask Jesus to help you experience his grace because when he starts to fill the emptiness inside that often drives us to sin in the first place, we will want to leave our life of sin.

Tell hard truths, starting with ourselves, getting the order right, mixed with tears in our eyes. Not in a condemning, judgmental tone, but with tears of compassion, because most people

Grace and Truth

who are screwing up know it, and they feel terrible about it. I wonder if the reason that Jesus showed compassion to this woman was that he knew what it was like to be judged and shamed harshly? See, he grew up with a mother who would've constantly been accused of adultery because she had him when she was an unmarried teenager.

As a boy, as they were walking to the market, Jesus would've heard his mom called names – not Blessed Virgin Mary like we call her, but harsh names, cruel names. In the Bible, sometimes when people encounter Jesus, they'll say, "Isn't this Mary's son?" In that culture, that was a huge insult because people were always referred to by their father's name. The polite phrase would've been, "Jesus, son of Joseph." To call him the son of Mary was to question his paternity and Mary's virtue.

Maybe this woman caught in adultery reminds him of what people said about his mom and how cruel judgment can be. If we can't tell hard truths to people with tears of compassion in our eyes; if we feel like we've got to say it in a judgmental tone, then we shouldn't say it at all. Keep our mouth shut, and let someone else talk to that person. We've got to be honest enough to admit that. Tell hard truths, starting with ourselves, leading with grace and tears in our eyes.

Next, casting a vision for the person's future. The original hearers of the love passage in Corinthians would not have heard it and said, "Oh, love is patient; love is kind. How nice. Let's read it at our wedding, George." Because this was a confrontation. The Corinthians, they didn't love like this.

They were fighting and bickering, and there were lawsuits and all kinds of things. So this passage rebukes them, but it does it by casting a vision for what life could be. Love could be patient. Love could be kind. Love could hope all things. Love could be like this. When Jesus says to this woman, "Go and sin no more," he's giving her vision for what her future life could be, and that inspires change.

See, the problem with judgmental-ism is that it says, "No change is possible." The problem with not telling hard truths is that it says, "No change is necessary." Grace and truth together say that change is both necessary and possible in Jesus. Tell hard truths, starting with

Grace and Truth

ourselves, leading with grace and tears in our eyes, casting an inspiring vision for what the future can be.

And then finally, give it time because transformation doesn't happen overnight. If you don't intend to stick with someone, do not speak hard truth.. We should not be confronting people that we're not in a relationship with. Otherwise, that's just a hit-and-run. Give it some time.

Now, I just said a whole lot of stuff, and it's Time Change Sunday, and you're sleepy, and you're not going to remember it; so let me put this down to a formula I gave you years ago. Let me remind you of this formula. Real transformation and love's third way does this: grace plus truth plus vision plus time equals transformation. For ourselves, for others; real love, love's third way, offers grace plus truth plus vision plus time.

When I was doing college ministry, I remember one day I came home and heard my wife talking on the phone in the other room to a student in our ministry. She was very impassioned. In fact, it sounded like she was almost yelling at the student. One of the things I love about my wife, and those of you who know her, you know this is true, I just love that you always know what she's thinking because she tells you.

If the thought occurs, it must be spoken, so it's just like a fiber optic super highway from brain to mouth. It's an interesting quality for a pastor's wife to have. I love it. That's one of my favorite things about her because you never know what she's going to say and you always know where you stand with her. It's awesome.

I heard my wife, and it sounded almost like she was yelling at this student. So I headed toward the room where she was, to see if I could be of assistance; perhaps offer a crash course in pastoral care, the first point of which would be – don't yell at the students.

But as I got closer, I heard what she was actually saying to this student, who I'll call Linda, who was in Christina's Bible study. Linda had this habit of going to parties, getting really drunk, getting in sexual situations with men she didn't even know, and then feeling used and terrible about it the next day. She had called to tell Christina that she had done that yet again and felt ashamed and guilty.

Grace and Truth

In this passionate voice, Christina said, "Linda, this does not affect how much I love you. This has no effect on how much God loves you, but why do you hold yourself so cheaply? You are a treasure, and you're just giving it away to people who are not committed to you. God wants so much more for you than this, and I want so much more for you than this. You deserve a man who is going to love you and honor you and not be in the most intimate relationship with you until he has promised in front of God and witnesses and the law that he will never leave you, no matter what. That's what you deserve. You don't have to do this."

As I got closer, I saw that Christina wasn't yelling at all. She was crying. Tears – not out of anger – but from a broken heart. The student later said it was one of the most important moments in her life. She said, "It's just not what I expected." The student said, "I expected Christina to judge me or give me some Stanford crap about how all behaviors are fine, and who's to judge, and blah, blah, blah." But what I got was just..." The word she used was "different." It was just different.

It was a turning point in this student's life. My wife stuck with her, didn't abandon her; we're still in a relationship with her. Eventually, she quit the party scene. Later she started dating a great guy who respected her. Now they're married; they have kids. It wasn't tolerance that changed her life, but it wasn't judgment either. Christina led with grace and literal tears in her eyes; told hard truths, casting a vision for what the future could be like, and she gave it time and walked with this person. The result was transformation.

To whom is God calling you to bring grace plus truth plus vision plus time? A friend, a parent, a co-worker, spouse, child? Maybe it's to yourself. Where can you speak grace, truth, vision, and time? Because, that's exactly how Jesus loves us. You've read through the Bible. Most of the people in the Bible, with the exception of Jesus, they're disasters.

Abraham lied, Jacob manipulated, David shatters the Commandments – not one good example in the whole darn bunch, but God loves them, and he uses them, and he calls them by name, and I know many of you, I know I, can relate. We all got stuff: adultery, pornography, gossip, injustice, materialism, broken relationships, all over. We're all on that list somewhere, but who condemns you? Who condemns you? No one.

Grace and Truth

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; and he gives us the power to become new people, which is why I see marriages being healed and families restored and addictions overcome. Because God's grace always has the last word. Compromise your integrity and lie through your teeth. If Jesus is in the mix, grace will get the last word. Shop too much, spend money you don't have, neglecting the needs of others. Still in all, if Jesus is in the mix, grace gets the last word. When lust and greed and bickering and rage multiply, the grace of God multiplies all the more.

The whole Bible can be summed up in four words; God never gives up. He makes all things new, and that includes you. "Yeah, but pastor, if you only knew what I've done," including you. "But Pastor, you don't understand, you see..." Including you. "Yeah, but..." Including you.

Through Jesus, the father is seeking you. He calls you by name and says, "I know. I know the enemy has made you do bad things, but you are not a bad man. You're not a bad woman. You are my son. You are my daughter, and I am your father who loves you and makes you new." God never gives up, not on you, not on me, and not on those people out there who need to know there's a God out there who loves them like crazy. God never gives up.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Jesus, thank you so much for that promise you give us, that you don't give up on us at all. That your love never runs out. Your love never gives up. Your love never fails. Lord, help that to be real to us. Help that to sink into our hearts, deep inside, God, so that we can be loving like you are loving. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions | Please read 1 Corinthians 13:4-6; John 8:1-11 NIV

1. How is the situation in John 8:1-11 a trap for Jesus? What would they accuse Jesus of if he said, "stone her"? What would they accuse him of if he let her go? How does he get out of the trap? How is his response spiritually wise and clever?
2. What is the significance of Jesus' question in verse 10?

Grace and Truth

3. How does the way Jesus treated this woman help you face your sins? How about other people's sins?
4. Where do you feel trapped between condoning someone's behavior or condemning it? What might be a 3rd alternative?

TRANSCRIPT

TRANSCRIPT

TRANSCRIPT