

Growing In Grace

Grace for the Corinthians

Lesson 3

Introduction

1. As we continue in 2008 to grow in grace, I will also continue this series of lessons titled “Growing in Grace”. So far we have talked about:
 - ⇒ Growing In Corinth [Our culture compared with Corinth]
 - ⇒ Getting To Know The Corinthians [Understanding issues our culture has]
2. Today our lesson is titled, “Grace for the Corinthians” and we will be focusing on allowing God to be the source of change and growth, while we extend open invitations and welcome our culture to experience the body of Christ (the representation of Christ) even with the doubts and struggles that they have in life.
3. But why would someone so seemingly hostile and hurt by what they know to be Christianity (negative stereotypes) get plugged into a congregation of disciples and want to assemble with them? That is the question!
4. We need to be willing to communicate with people who are far from God who do not typically trust Christians enough to come close to them or feel safe enough in church to stick around to seek and find God.
5. How many people outside of the family of the Lord never feel comfortable enough to even come to an assembly of those who are following Christ? How many of our neighbors have the impression that Christians will love them only if we sense we can get them to be like us or believe what we believe?
6. Isn't this the dilemma that Jesus addressed with the Pharisees? The Pharisees were absolutely certain of all that they believed. If asked, they would say that they knew God and kept His commandments. They often boasted about how wonderful it was to be one of God's people as compared to those who are “messed up” in the world. The Pharisee always had the “us and them” mentality. There is no grace in this picture. Read Luke 18:9-14 and notice that the tax collector (sinner) can't even stand close to the Pharisee, but had to stand some distance away. Many people in our culture are hurting and they are crying out for grace, but often Christians will only look with contempt upon the world until they are just like us.
7. What this world needs is God and His grace. We are often quick to point out who God is going to condemn. Let me remind you that the Lord will condemn those who go around pointing fingers at sinners but are unwilling to lift a finger to help them (See Luke 11:46). The real problem with this mindset is that when God chooses a people for Himself, it is not merely for some reward but for responsibility.

I. The Grace of Christ

A. Think about what Jesus did.

1. He left the glory of heaven to come to the culture of this world. What a contrast! Jesus sought, served and saved the lowliest classes of people and the most sinful among them. Jesus was called by the Pharisees a “friend of tax collectors and sinners”. He must have been doing something to earn that classification.
2. The same Pharisees that gave the Lord this title were chastised by Jesus with these words, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

3. He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” (Mark 7:8-9)
 4. What are the commands of God but to love Him and love others (Matt. 22:36-40). Ask yourself, “How much do I really love those who are not in the family of God? Do I subtly consider myself “better than” those who are outside of Christ?”
 5. Jesus would also tell the Pharisee that in the process of trying to keep the law that they had forgotten about what was most important. He said in Matt 23:23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” Being just and fair, gracious and loving and showing commitment and dedication to the same are all important; even more important than all that they were doing. The Lord called them to see their hypocrisy and imbalance.
- B. We need to follow our Lord.
1. Paul spoke about false superiority when he dealt with the church in Corinth. He told the church, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, {I} wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you” (1 Cor 4:7-8). Can you sense the sarcasm? It’s obvious!
 2. We have all received grace and that from God through Christ (John 1:14, 16)...quit acting like you have something that you obtained by yourself...because you didn’t. Remember that this church that Paul addressed was positioned in Corinth. Do you think that a church with an attitude of personal superiority and self-sufficiency can be attractive to a culture like Jesus was? Not at all! That is why Paul sought to correct their attitude and we will also seek to correct our own mindsets if they are not where they should be. We need to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5ff).
 3. Jesus humbled Himself and became a man to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). If we hope to be the representation of the Lord in our world, then we had better be more like Him. Even when Jesus had all of the answers, even Divine answers, He still allowed others to take the time to think openly, doubt, ask questions and form their own opinions and conclusions; The Lord even extended his patience, mercy, love and grace as others changed to become what they ought to be before God.
 4. Even though Jesus proclaimed truth with authority, He did not force others to obey Him. He simply showed others that He cared for them and had a genuine interest in their soul. It was because of the love that Jesus had for others that motivated Him to share the truth with others (Mark 10:21). It wasn’t a legalistic law keeping process.
 5. Isn’t it ironic that we are taught to preach the truth in love and then the church will grow (Ephesians 4:15-16). This is the passage that our vision for 2008 is based upon. We preach the truth in love because that is what the Lord did. We are His body, the church. We will only be built up in love if we have this love in our work of sharing the gospel with our Corinthian culture.
 6. We need to have a mutual respect and value for all people as worthy of the love and grace of Jesus. This environment respects where people are and helps others feel comfortable to explore and investigate truth without condemnation.

7. This will require immense trust and reliance upon God. Think about how many times during the ministry of Jesus, that He sought His Father for help and strength. We must be willing to let go of the need to constantly fix, change, or control the beliefs and actions of others, while letting the sword of the Spirit pierce hearts and move people to act in obedience to the Lord.
8. When we create a culture of dialogue we have to be willing to walk in the shoes of others. It is not easy! Remember when you were lost in sin and how God and others were patient and graceful with you. Demonstrate those same benefits to others.

II. The Grace of the church of Christ

A. A culture of grace or not?

1. I remember going to a Hare Krishna temple a few years ago with some friends and I can vividly remember the uneasy feelings that we had when we entered buildings not knowing what to expect or what to do. Should we remove our shoes...are we even allowed in this place...what if they have some practice and I don't know how I am supposed to act...if someone starts praying how should we react? You get the point.
2. Cultures exist within religious groups that other people fear or question. These cultures will either accommodate all people with grace or there will be hidden rules and unspoken expectations that will push a spiritual seeker away.
3. Most of us will naturally steer clear of any cross cultural setting that will cause us to feel out of place. We like our church family because it is comfortable to us. This is due to the fact that we have a clear understanding of who we are and what we do. How does an outsider get to where we are? It is simple...grace.
4. For most spiritual seekers in this postmodern post Christian Corinthian culture it is just as uncomfortable for them to come to an assembly of the Lord's church as it would be for you in a Buddhist temple. Think about that.
5. People who don't know what we are about feel automatically out of place. They don't know the songs and whether it is okay to sing if they really aren't sure that it is what they believe. They feel odd when they see the local church drinking grape juice and eating bread and saying that it represents their Master's body and blood. They don't know just yet how to navigate a Bible to find those passages that the man in front is yelling, and in some cases many don't own a Bible at all. Then if they have a question, they wonder if it will be acceptable to ask without being reprimanded by some disgraceful member. We need to take these things to heart.

B. Doubters and skeptics are welcome?

1. So how can we have doubters among believers? First we have to accept that doubt is not the opposite of faith. We all have doubts because our knowledge is imperfect and our understanding is incomplete.
2. As a matter of fact, creating a culture where questions can be asked and doubts can be vocalized is not only healthy, it is biblical. In the Bible, those with a so called "perfect faith" were not heroes listed in Hebrews 11 but were Pharisees in Luke 11 who eventually, by their faith (what they believed to be true and right), put Jesus on the cross. True heroes of the faith had their doubts and struggles while wrestling with what it means to do the will of God (Heb. 11:11; Gen. 18:12-15).

3. Do we honestly believe that we are “above” being deceived by our religious cultural conditioning? Do we really have faith all figured out and are we practicing all that we believe? At what point do we ourselves rely upon the grace of God to help us with our weaknesses and shortcomings?
4. Understand that the opposite of faith is a deliberate choice not to trust in God. Consider the man in Mark 9:23-24 who said to Jesus, "I do believe; help my unbelief." What could that mean apart from the fact that someone could seek the Lord with some level of belief but still have human difficulties with faithlessness in certain aspects of what the Lord can do for us? The point is that this man had a trust in the Lord in the midst of struggles with unbelief.
5. Remember that Jesus showed grace to this man even while he had unbelief issues by performing a miracle of healing on his son. Why? That is what grace is; God loving us even when we are yet sinners and those who don't fully trust in Him (Romans 5:6, 8). The call of God in Christ is that we will love Him, because He first loved us (I John 4:19). If God takes the initiative of grace, so should we.
6. Now that we have been commissioned to re-present the Lord to our Corinthian culture it is up to us to love and demonstrate God's grace to others with the hope that they will come to love Him as we love Him.

C. We are all works in progress

1. In this process of growing in grace and then sharing that grace with those in Corinth, we must be careful not to let our efforts turn into a free-for-all of trying to merely “help” the seeker, because this will not work. We need to see everybody that assembles with us as works in progress. We are to be loving, helpful and graceful because we also need others to extend to us these same blessings.
2. God is looking to do great things in every one of our lives and yet none of us can say with humility that we are fully compliant to His will. To help level the playing field we realize that we are all in the daily process of continually trusting in God, even with our doubts and difficulties weighing upon us.
3. When someone has never taken the first step of trusting in God to obey the gospel, that is what they need to do. Then, those of us who have trusted in the Lord through obedience to the gospel have a daily need for trusting in the Lord and obeying His will for our lives. As a congregation we must be patient with one another and with those who are seeking spiritually so that we can receive the grace of the Lord. So it is a culture of grace that we need to create and we need to extend that grace to all. Are you willing to help with that culture?
4. Instead of looking at someone with contempt we should congratulate them in their interest in seeking spiritual things. Jesus told those questioning Him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). This meant that at least they were encouraged to know that they were heading in the right direction.
5. Paul, demonstrating this same spirit, walked into Athens and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects” (Acts 17:22). Starting with grace toward those that we want to reach with the gospel will open the door to lead others to repentance (Acts 17:30-31). When Paul spoke of repentance, the judgment and the resurrection, some sneered, others were interested in hearing him again, while others became believers in the Lord (Acts 17:32-33) Was Paul successful in sharing the gospel? Yes, and he had to work among the Gentiles.

6. Progress should always be validated, as this bridges the gap of trust in our religious culture and let's the people know that they have begun to draw closer to God (Acts 17:26-28). [Paul was even willing to quote the poets of his Gentile audience in order to build a common thread between their culture and what is true.]
7. Since Christianity has been slowly becoming less of a part of our culture, the faith with its terminology and practices has become less familiar to those who live here. Our approach to reaching those around us cannot start with assuming that our society understands what we are talking about or what we are doing. Ken Ham says that at one time we were working with those who had the mindset of a Jewish audience that understood God, sin, and other foundational truths in the Bible. Today we are dealing with more of a Gentile audience, a Corinth, and it is our job to make sure that we approach them with openness as they share their questions and concerns.
8. Creating this culture of grace where people can talk about their inner most fears and doubts is not a replacement or a compromising of confronting wrongdoing or of challenging people with truth. We simply need to pray and ask for wisdom that we might say and do what is in harmony with God's timing for each of our individual processes of growth.
9. Remember that it is not our job to control the responses and results of the gospel. It is our job to tell the story of redemption and allow people to come to the Lord in their own time. God is in the business of causing growth, while we trust Him and do His work. This can get kind of messy and at times it may be quite overwhelming. People will be skeptical, cynical and even challenging. We must be willing to value, listen and encourage in the midst of our bold challenges to this culture. This is our calling in Corinth.
10. George MacDonald said the following, "The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace." And can I add, this is what the world really wants and needs (Rom. 15:5-7).
11. Philip Yancey once said, "you only learn grace by being graced". John Burke wrote, "If we offer acceptance based upon grace, it is only because it was freely given to us at the greatest cost." He continued, "Many people can't believe God will accept them and love them until those who claim to know God start to show them".
12. Look at how Jesus taught others about the grace of God. He taught that God was like a shepherd that left 99 sheep to find just one that went astray. He taught that God is like a father whose son rejects Him and take his inheritance and loses it with sinful living. Yet, when the son returns home in regret and repentance, the Father humiliates himself and runs to meet His son with open arms. God is like a housewife jumping up and down with excitement after finding one seemingly worthless coin that was lost. And indeed the coin was precious to her. God is like a Father that throws a party for His Son and then welcomes all who will come.

13. Jesus is saying that God is not against us but for us. He wants to bring us to His side and show us His love, mercy and grace. He is searching for lost souls to have a relationship with Him in this life and in the life to come. He wants us to come to Him in submission to trust Him in obedience. Only then do we grow.
14. If you went to an antique store and found a muddy Rembrandt, you wouldn't focus on the mud at all or treat it like mud. You would cherish the image before you and pay whatever it costs to take possession of it. In wanting to see it clean and restored, you would realize that you would damage the image if you tried to remove the dirt yourself, so you would find a master of restoration to do that work. You get the point, right? When people start treating souls like God's masterpiece waiting to be revealed, we will let the Master clean them up by His grace and in the meantime we will be ecstatic to have something so valuable in our care. What a masterpiece each of us can be. Do you see the mud or the masterpiece in others?
15. So if we accept people while they are struggling and allow them to search spiritually, will they confuse our acceptance with agreement with sinful behavior? They might, even though acceptance or acknowledgement is not the same as agreement. If you are fighting with this issue, you are not alone. But let me ask you...isn't this what God did with us. Imagine God saying, "what if I give my Son to die on the cross and then nobody accepts my grace." What if we show love to others and they don't respond to the grace of God. That was a chance the Lord was willing to take and I hope that you are too. We are indeed telling people to come as they are, but we also exhort them not to stay there. By the grace of God they will change. We need to give them patience and time like God has done for all of us (Rom. 2:4)

Conclusion

1. Since we have received grace we must give grace to others no matter where they are.
2. A man tells of an advertisement on the side of a plumber's van in South Africa: There is no place too deep, too dark or too dirty for us to handle. What a wonderful explanation of grace!
3. If you have not been blessed to have God's grace bestowed upon you through trusting in Him and obeying the gospel, let us encourage you to come in humble submission today.
4. If you are under grace, you know that you cannot go on sinning so that grace might increase. You need to turn from your sin and return to a loving Father and his family that will support and strengthen you through prayer and spiritual encouragement.
5. Grace is available even now for those who are in need. The Bible says in Hebrews 4:16, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."