

December 25, 2022
Sermon Manuscript Revised

Loving In Both Grace & Truth (Jn 1:1-18, Rom 14:17)

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

-John 1:16-17 (NIV)

For the kingdom of God is ...righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...

-Romans 14:17ac (NIV)

I speak to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. {Please be seated.}

On this Christmas morning, the good news I have the privilege of sharing with you is that in Jesus, the incarnate son of God, we find both a model and help to love people in an entirely new way.

Well, this morning I am determined to not give you just another Christmas sermon (about the nativity of Jesus), and instead share with you about a teaching that's been a real gift to me over the past year. Last night we heard the story from St. Luke's gospel of Jesus' birth being announced to shepherds outside of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. But today's passage from St. John's gospel shifts our attention away from the images of a manger scene (>) and onto a cosmic view of the Triune God coming out of eternity and into life on earth in the person of His son. And we know him as Jesus Christ, but John refers to as 'the Word (of God) made flesh' and the true light of the world.

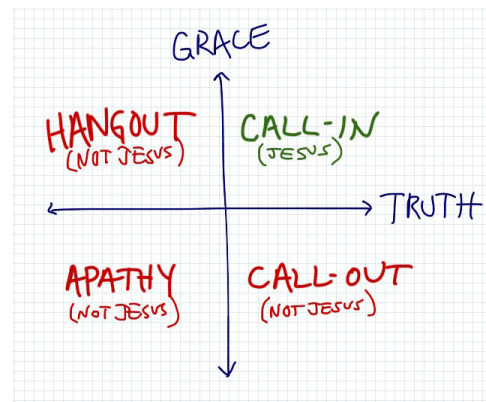
St. John borrows language and illusions from the first chapter of Genesis - such as "in the beginning" the imagery of light into darkness - to indicate that in sending his son to earth, God was doing something entirely new. But just to review: prior to Jesus, God had begun revealing himself to humankind *since* Genesis 1. And since Genesis chapter 12, with His calling of Abraham, God began using the people of Israel in particular, both to reveal who he is - in his acts of kindness & deliverance for Israel - and how he intended for all humans to live - by giving Israel His law in the Ten Commandments. As John writes in verse 17 today, "For the law was given through Moses"

But the *new* thing God did in sending his Son was to reveal himself in full: both that He *is* love and showing us humans *how* to love, what love really is and looks like. And John concludes verse 17 by writing that this way of (true) love involves both *grace and truth*. [For the law was given through Moses; (but) grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.] So, the good news is that in Jesus, the incarnate son of God, we find both a model and help to love people in an entirely new way.

A lot is made of the word 'love' these days. It's a word that seems to be understood in countless different ways, such that it can be sort of hard to figure out what it *really* means. And this makes things particularly hazardous for Christians, since we know that the two Greatest Commandments are to *love* God and our neighbor. How can we have *any* chance of doing that faithfully if we can't even get clear on what love really is or means??

Even *among* Christians, some of us seem to think that love is about just being nice to everybody, while others seem to think love looks like speaking to truth no matter what (so called "tough love"). But this morning I want to share with you why the guys at Gravity Leadership - Fathers Matt Tebbe & Ben Sternke - suggest both of those approaches - being nice or being tough - fall short of the love we see in Jesus, and therefore also short of the way of the love Jesus wants to train us in.

To help us understand, the Gravity guys have provided what they call the Grace & Truth matrix,¹ which I've included for you in your bulletin. They explain that, as Christians, we tend to live like we have to choose between



¹ <https://bensternke.com/community-full-of-grace-and-truth/>

grace and truth, that we have to pick one or the other - while they suggest that Jesus modeled a way of truly loving people that embraces both truth and grace. And more on that in a minute.

Call-Out

But first, they explain the ways we tend to fall short of this as Christians. Sometimes we are committed to loving people with truth, but with little grace. This is what the Gravity Guys have dubbed “Call-Out” mode, which is the bottom right quadrant on the matrix. When we’re in call out mode - this could be with someone we’re in authority over like a coworker or in parenting OR with a peer like a spouse a friend or just someone we’re interacting with on social media - in call out mode our goal is for the other person to line up with our understanding of what’s true or right. That is the goal; and we’re willing to cause harm to the person or the relationship if it's necessary to get them in line. So we play bad cop in our parenting or we use sarcasm to demean others perspective.

Now we do this because sometimes it works, at least for achieving the goal of a person getting in line with what we think is right. But it’s not love, because we’ve leveraged power over the person, which will always cause some level of disconnect and intimacy in the relationship. So our kid or employee may comply, but they may be less likely to be honest & open with us moving forward, or the overall peace between us and them may be diminished. Or we may own someone in a battle of ideas or opinions on social media, but in doing so we create relational separation between us and them.

So that’s call-out culture - truth without grace - it uses truth as a weapon and falls short of the way of love Christ reveals. As I describe this, I wonder if the Holy Spirit has brought to mind any arenas where you have the tendency to mistake Christian love for truth without grace? I know I’ve detected strong reflexes toward call-out mode in myself. That’s why I’m grateful for the good news that in Jesus we find both a model and help to love people in an entirely new way.

Hangout

But in contrast to Call-out mode, we may tend instead toward what the Gravity Guys have dubbed “Hangout” mode. This is the top left quadrant on the matrix, where we seek to love people with grace, but without much truth. This is what We’ll know we’re in hangout mode when we’re so committed to keeping the relationship together and keeping the person happy that we shrink back from difficult conversations. We’re doing this when we’re never willing to share our experience with a spouse, coworker, or friends if we (tend to) stuff our feelings when they hurt us, or if they’re about to make a tragic (foolish/hasty) decision and we don’t encourage them to reconsider. We do these things because it keeps the relationship intact, but only superficially, spiritually there *is* a breakdown in connection.

In parenting or supervisory roles, we do this when we just want our kids to be happy, so we don’t help them mature by giving them consequences for bad choices or when trouble comes we swoop in and try to spare them from it. But it’s actually bad for everyone because it keeps them dependent, rather than empowering them to take ownership of their lives.

So that’s HANG-out culture - grace without truth - it seeks peace, but destroys righteousness - and so falls short of the way of love Christ reveals. As I describe this, I wonder if the Holy Spirit has brought to mind any relationships you tend to engage in with grace-without-truth? Even if there are some arenas where you tend to operate in call-out mode, there may still be others where you tend to operate in hang out. In fact, for me, I’ve noticed that when I realize ways I’ve been in call out mode, I sometimes have a tendency to switch to hangout mode, which is not actually any better. Or even worse, I go to Check-out mode.

Apathy (Check-out)

The harsh reality of Call-out mode *and* Hangout mode is that they’re *both* emotionally exhausting. Believe it or not, it is exhausting to live as judge and jury for other people and play god in their lives. But it is also equally as exhausting to live in the hangout modes of pretending with peers or micromanaging those under our authority. Who knew? So with both approaches, over time, we Check-out, which is the bottom left quadrant. Whether it’s in our marriage or parenting or friendships: our spiritual stamina to keep up the call-out or maintain the hangout often eventually leads us to just give up on the relationship, if not by leaving it altogether, by shutting down and just sort of surviving it.

Call-in

But as discouraging as it can be to recognize how much of our lives we live in these three fleshly quadrants, the good news is that in Jesus we find both a model and help to love people in an entirely new way. As we read about the way Jesus interacted with people in the gospels, he didn't seek to *balance* nice and tough. In other words, Jesus never became less truthful in order to express grace or less gracious in order to express truth. Rather, his grace was full of truth and his truth was full of grace! And let's just briefly consider a two examples.

Take the woman caught in adultery, in John 8. The Pharisees brought this woman to Jesus - and only the woman - and said "the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"² But he neither condones stoning her, nor does he say that her adultery didn't matter. He began drawing in the dirt, and as he spoke said, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," which led her accusers to walk away. So first, he protected her from those who were in call out mode and sought to shame her. And then he said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And she said, "No one, sir." And he said, "Neither do I condemn you" - GRACE And then he declared, again with the crowd dispersed: "Go now and leave your life of sin" - TRUTH.

Call-in mode 1) connects with people & empathizes with them while 2) maintaining boundaries and inviting them into responsibility. {Repeat: Call-in mode 1) connects with people & empathizes with them while 2) maintaining boundaries and inviting them into responsibility}

Or what about Jesus' exchange with Peter on the beach in John 21. This was Jesus' first encounter with Peter not just since the resurrection, but since Peter had denied him three times before his crucifixion.

- What would Jesus have done in Call-out mode? He would've condemned and shamed Peter, "Peter, how could you have turned on me like that after all our years together." He could even give Peter an 'I-told-you-so': "Peter, I even predicted you would do it and you still couldn't help yourself!"
- But what would Jesus have done in Hangout mode? He wouldn't have mentioned anything about Peter's denial.
- And, of course, in Apathy - or Check-out - mode, Jesus would've given up on Peter; he never would've shown up

But what does Jesus do instead? First he makes all the disciples breakfast. And then he pulls Peter aside and says, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" And Jesus asks him this not once, but three times: the same number of times Peter had denied him. And three times, Peter said, "you know I love you," and Jesus replied each time, "Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...and feed my sheep." And then finally he said, "Follow me."

Jesus loved Peter in grace and truth by connecting with him and empathizing with his weakness, while maintaining boundaries and inviting him into responsibility. And Jesus does the same with us. As we sing in 'Joy to the World': "He rules the world, in truth and grace."

The true approach to love of the Call-in mode seeks both righteousness³ and peace together, not one at the expense of the other. Love sees people as more than the wrong they do and seeks to reach out to them in order to set them free. And this does not mean people always accept the invitation to what we call them into, not at all. But when they do, we can rejoice! And even when they don't, we can still rejoice that God doesn't give up on them and cares even more about them than we do. So what sets the call-in approach - the Jesus way of love - apart from the other three is that while the other three result in exhaustion & hopelessness, call-in results in joy. As Romans 14:17 said today, "For the kingdom of God is ...righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit..."#

So the good news of God becoming man that I've highlighted for us today is this entirely new way of loving people that he models for us and seeks to help us with. Will you join me in beginning to ask God to cultivate in you an imagination for how to follow in his footsteps as we relate to our fellow man - in your marriage, in parenting, in the workplace, in friendships, and in all of us in this Church. Pray that he might spark in us vision for how to love others in both grace *and* truth.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Now, I invite you to stand and join me in praising the Lord for the gift of His son, in "Joy to the World"?

² John 8:5

³ The Gravity guys explains that grace wasn't invented for sin; it existed before sin (in the Trinity). Grace is god's desire to be with us, in relationship.