

GRACE AND TRUTH

John begins his Gospel with a line that is as profound as it is simple.

John 1.1: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

IN GREEK 101 FORTY-EIGHT YEARS AGO AT RICE UNIVERSITY
THIS WAS THE FIRST SENTENCE WE TRANSLATED.

I WAS THEN AND I STILL AM TODAY
STRUCK BY ITS ELEGANCE AND ITS POWER.
I HAVE IT PRINTED ON YOUR NOTES IN GREEK.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, καὶ ὁ Λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD
AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD,
AND THE WORD WAS GOD.

THE WORD, OF COURSE, IS JESUS
AND JOHN DESCRIBES HIS COMING IN V. 14 OF THE SAME CHAPTER.

John 1.14: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

WHEN JOHN DESCRIBES THE LIFE OF THE JESUS,
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LIFE EVER LIVED,
THE IMPACTFUL LIFE THAT HAS EVER GRACED OUR PLANET,
HE SAYS THAT JESUS CAME WITH GRACE AND TRUTH.

GRACE: THAT'S COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE.
THAT'S BEING BETTER TO PEOPLE THAN THEY DESERVE.
THAT'S CARING FOR THEIR NEEDS
AND TAKING ON THEIR BURDENS.

TRUTH: THAT'S SPEAKING THE WORDS PEOPLE NEED TO HEAR.
THAT'S REFUSING TO COMPROMISE THE MESSAGE
EVEN WHEN IT'S UNPOPULAR TO PROCLAIM IT OR
WHEN IT MIGHT BE COSTLY TO DECLARE IT.

AND WHAT JOHN TELLS US IS THAT THE BEAUTIFUL LIFE OF JESUS
 WAS COMMITTED TO BOTH: COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE AND PASSION
 FOR TRUTH.

NOT ONE INSTEAD OF THE OTHER,
 NOT ONE MORE THAN THE OTHER.
 BUT BOTH TOGETHER.

AND IF WE ARE GOING TO LIVE LIKE JESUS LIVED –
 AND THAT IS OUR CALLING AND OUR MISSION –
 IF WE ARE GOING TO LIVE LIKE JESUS
 THEN WE WILL HAVE TO BE MEN OF GRACE AND TRUTH.

NOT ONE INSTEAD OF THE OTHER.
 NOT ONE MORE THAN THE OTHER.
 BUT BOTH TOGETHER.

This is hard for us,
 for many reasons.
 But all of us tend to lean more towards grace or more towards truth.
 Getting the balance just right is hard.

Some of us are gracers by nature.
 It's our natural inclination
 to love people and
 to feel compassion for people.
 We really believe that people with problems and who are living wrongly –
 if they just knew how much God loved them,
 if they could just love themselves,
 they would start making better decisions
 and acting like the wonderful people they really are.

Others of us, we are truthers by nature.
 And we think that's the problem –
 people have been told how wonderful they are
 and that nothing they ever do is really all that wrong.
 There are no standards anymore
 and if nobody else is going to stand up for what's right,
 we'll be that person.

Let's take a little poll.

Gracers, let me tell you something you need to take to heart.
 If you can't tell people the truth they need to hear,
 it's not because you're so kind and loving.
 It's because you're a coward and a wimp.

Truthers:

If you can't feel compassion for people who are
 struggling,
 far from God and
 making bad decisions,
 it's not because you are so virtuous and such a great defender of the faith,
 it's because you're a self-righteous jerk.

Now that I have offended all of you,
 let's look at what compassion matters and why truth is essential.

WHY COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE (GRACE) MATTERS:

1. JESUS COMMANDED US TO BE COMPASSIONATE.

Jesus said that "love your neighbor as yourself" was the second most important commandment.

The only one greater, he said, was the command to love God with all our being.

He commanded us in what we refer to as the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And he said:

John 13.35: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

He didn't say everyone will know that you are my disciples
 if you get your doctrines right or
 you speak the truth or
 you refuse to compromise your principles.

All of those are important.
 If you've listened to me long enough
 or if you know anything about my work with the national church,
 you know I believe that proclaiming the truth and defending right doctrine are
 critically important.

But I also believe what Francis Schaeffer wrote is true:

Francis Schaeffer: There is nothing more ugly than an orthodoxy without
 understanding or without compassion.

Orthodoxy simply means having your beliefs right
 and holding onto the truth.
 But proclaiming and defending the truth without compassion doesn't
 make us faithful disciples.
 It makes us ugly and hard and mean.

Look at this quote from Richard Needham.

Richard Needham: The man who is brutally honest enjoys the brutality quite as
 much as the honesty. Possibly more.

(Jerry Maguire clip)

None of us wants to be like that.
 And that's not the kind of truth that we find in Jesus.
 But he did speak truth.

Here's another reason:

2. THE TRUTH SPOKEN WITHOUT LOVE IS A LIE.

Several years ago I read that statement,
 and I have thought about it so much
 that I think I almost understand it.

I believe it's saying that God means for truth to be a blessing in our lives.

Sometimes it's hard to hear,
 but God speaks truth into our lives
 not to tear us down or but to build us up;
 not to belittle us but to make us better.

And if **WE** ever speak the truth without love,
 if we speak truth without real concern for the other person's well-being,
 then we're using truth for something it was never intended for,
 and instead of being a blessing, it becomes a curse,
 and instead of being truth, it becomes a lie.

God doesn't give us discernment about another person's mistakes so we can
 blast him, but so we can bless him,
 not so we can stand over him and wag a finger in his face,
 but so we can stand beside him and put an arm around his shoulder.

3. PEOPLE DON'T CARE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW UNTIL THEY KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE.

People are almost never
 argued into the Kingdom or
 lectured into the Kingdom or
 guilted into Kingdom.
 Most people are loved into the Kingdom.

People do have questions.
 And honest questions need to be honored and answered.
 But people are unlikely to hear the answers they need
 unless they know the person speaking to them cares about them.

Who was most open to Jesus when he walked the earth?
 The people who had the most to feel guilty about.
 The people that the Pharisees called sinners.

These were people who did not follow the law
 and whose morals were often loose
 and whose lives were often far from what God wanted.

But they listened to Jesus when he told them to repent and change their lives.

Why?

Because he spent time with them.

He listened to them.

When others condemned them,
he stood up for them.

And when life broke their bodies or their spirits,
he healed them.

And because they knew he cared about them,
when he spoke truth into their lives,
they cared about what he had to say.

And that brings us back to the beginning.

Why is it so important for compassion to characterize our lives?

4. WE ARE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AND HE WAS MOTIVATED BY COMPASSION.

The Bible tells us,

that when Jesus saw a hungry crowd,
he was moved by compassion and he fed them.

(Matthew 15.32)

And when he saw a man suffering from leprosy,
moved by compassion,
he reached out, touched the man, and healed him.

(Mark 1.40-42)

And when he saw a widow on her way to bury her only son,
moved by compassion,
he stopped the funeral procession,
raised the boy from the dead,
and gave him back to his mother.

(Luke 7.13-15)

And when he saw the masses broken, blind and diseased,
moved by compassion,
he made them whole.

(Matthew 14.14)

Now here's one I want you to look at closely.

Mark 6.34: When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, **he had compassion on them**, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things.

Compassion caused Jesus to do what?
To speak truth to people who needed to hear it.

The same compassion that caused Jesus to heal the sick and feed the hungry,
caused him to speak truth into the lives of people.

WHY TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL

1. SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH REQUIRE TRUTH.

Back to Mark 6.34,
the verse we just read.

Jesus saw a mass of people who were without a shepherd,
that is, without a teacher.

No one had taught them who God is,
how to recognize truth from error,
how to walk in paths of righteousness,
or how to find green pastures and still waters
where their souls could be nourished.

And the same compassion Jesus felt for the sick and the hungry
and the diseased,
he felt for people who were ignorant of the truth.

And without apology,
Jesus did the loving thing – he spoke spiritual and moral truth into
their lives.

When the woman was caught in adultery,
he showed her compassion and said, “Neither do I condemn you.”
That's grace.
But he also spoke truth.

John 8.11: Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.

He told her: Go, now and leave your life of sin.

When a man asked Jesus, “Make my brother share the inheritance with me,”
Jesus refused.

Instead of empathizing about what it’s like to have a jerk brother,
Jesus spoke the truth the man needed to hear.

Luke 12:15: Watch out. Be on guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does
not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Jesus told the man the truth he needed to hear:

There’s something more important than what you fill your wallet with is
what you fill your heart with.

And no amount of money is worth a heart full of anger, bitterness and greed.

One more.

Do you remember the man that had been paralyzed by the pool for 38
years?

Jesus heals the man.

And later that day,

Jesus runs him down in the temple and says what?

How the legs holding up?

You getting around ok?

How you feeling on the first day of the rest of your life?

No, Jesus runs him down this guys who has been paralyzed 38 years,
who has been his feet for a couple of hours max,
and here’s the first thing Jesus says to him.

John 5.14: Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again.
Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."

Get the picture?

Jesus was just as committed to speaking the truth
as he was to showing compassion.

Why did Jesus speak difficult truths into the lives of people?
 Because people need the truth
 To grow spiritually and emotionally people need the truth.

Why did he at times speak truth so straightforwardly,
 without pretty please and sugar on top?
 Because people will do all they can to avoid the truth they need.

Herbert Agar put it well: The truth that makes men free is for the
 most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.

We don't want to see the wrong things we do,
 much less the wrong things we are.
 We don't want to be naked before God, or before others,
 or even before ourselves.

And so cover up, and hide, and pretend.
 And when we do, we live lives that are false,
 we never grow spiritually, and
 we fail to become men of truth.

What does the alcoholic need?
 What does the person who is chronically unhappy, negative and self-
 defeating need?
 What does the 40 year old man who's never grown up need?
 What does the guy who goes to church on Sunday
 and lives like hell on Monday need?

We need the truth about ourselves made so plain that we quit playing
 games and lying to ourselves.

Story of Annie Mae

The cornerstone of genuine spiritual and emotional growth is honesty.

People who have worked with others who are trying to grow and
 change know that.
 And they know how difficult it is for people to be honest.

With the exception of the church,
 the force that helped more people change their lives in the past
 century was the 12-Step Movement beginning with Alcoholics
 Anonymous.

That's not surprising because the 12 Steps are built on Christian principles
 that you find in the Bible.

Here's what AA says about the necessity of honesty.

The Big Book: Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our
 path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely
 give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are
 constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.

In Mark's Gospel the very first words Jesus speaks are:
 Mark 1.15: The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and
 believe the good news!

“Repent” – that means: get honest about where you are and where you're
 headed; and where you're wrong, turn around.

I've told you before so I won't go into the stories at all,
 but I am grateful for people who have told me the truth about myself.

The student at Rice who called me on my sarcasm
 that was going way too far and hurting people.

The church member here who told me nearly 40 years ago
 that if I worked for him and had wasted people's time at his firm
 the way I had the church meeting we were leaving
 that he would be firing me –

that no one was paying me to think I was smarter and to know better
 than everybody else in the room.

The friend who told me in 2000 that I had a problem with alcohol.
 Since that time I've had one drink – Italian facists.

I have needed and I still need people who will tell me the truth about myself.
 I have needed them to make me be honest with myself
 because without that honesty
 I would never change and grow and get better.

And that means there are times when people will need me to speak the truth to them.

Why?

Because Jesus said, The truth shall set you free.

Another reason truth is essential.

2. IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES.

There's a lot of truth in this statement by

James Allen: You are today where your thoughts have brought you. You will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.

Look at

Romans 12.1-2a: Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Look what this passage tells us to do:

1. Positively: Offer your bodies as living, holy and pleasing sacrifices to God. Behave in such a way that you please God.
2. Negatively: Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. Don't live the way you see everyone else living.

In other words, don't follow the other lemmings off the stupid cliff.

How is this going to happen?

What does it say?

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Our lives begin to change when our thinking changes because ideas and beliefs have consequences.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.

Ideas and thoughts have consequences.
And different ideas and thoughts will have different consequences.

Thoughts that are true will lead to lives that are true.
Beliefs that are right will lead to lives that are right.

But thoughts and beliefs that are false and wrong,
will lead to lives that are false and wrong.

And there is no place where it's more important to believe what's true
than when it comes to who God is.

For many years when it was being published,
each December on the cover of Life magazine there was a religious
question that people all around the world were asked to answer.

One year it was: What is the soul?
Another year: Understanding the mystery of Jesus – Why does it matter
today?
In 1990 the question was: Who is God?

Here's a picture of the cover.

Picture

That year twenty-four very different people gave twenty-four very different
answers to the question.
Listen to some of their ideas about God,
and listen to how those ideas have shaped the emotions and the actions
of those who hold them.

Ramon Correa, 21 years old,
 a thief and a murderer living in the slums of Medellin said:
 God pardons everyone who seeks him,
 so pretty much you can do what you want.
 He is very understanding.

Baldeva Ram could not have a more different understanding of God.
 Ram is a middle-aged beggar sitting beside the Ganges River,
 his fingers and toes eaten away by leprosy.
 God, he said, has written out my fate.
 I am being punished for sins I must have committed in my last life.
 God is vengeful.
 He really punishes.

Sheik Ahmed Ibrahim, after 18 years in an Israeli prison for terrorism.
 I am ready to kill and be killed in fighting the jihad because it is Allah's
 wish.
 Killing for the jihad is a holy deed.

Hollywood producer Lynda Sparrow said,
 I do believe in God.
 But I don't know how to be a Jew,
 and I don't even know what my soul is.
 I can't make a connection with God.
 It's a hopeless feeling that I'm all on my own.
 I want my daughter to know about God because I don't want her to
 be in the terrible place I am.

Do you hear how beliefs matter?

Ramon Correa – I can do anything I want because God will forgive me.

Baldeva Ram – believing that a vengeful God is punishing him with leprosy
 because of sins he committed in another lifetime.

Do you think that his internal life would be different,
 if he believed that when God walked the earth in the person of Jesus,
 instead of punishing lepers,
 he put his arms around them and loved them until they were well?

Sheik Ibrahim – ready to kill in the name of his religion.

Lynda Sparrow – has everything, but she feels hopeless and alone.

Ideas have consequences.
All ideas have consequences,
but none more than what you believe about God.

False ideas, when they are believed, create false and broken lives.
True ideas, when they are believed, create lives that are true and
strong and whole.

Truth matters because

3 A LIE UNCHALLENGED OFTEN BECOMES ACCEPTED AS REALITY.

Tyrants and despots have always known this.

This quote is attributed to Vladimir Lenin.

Vladimir Lenin: A lie told often enough becomes the truth.

Paul wrote

I Corinthians 5.6: Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole
batch of dough.

A little influence over time can have a powerful ability to change
something much larger than itself.

A lie that is told and not corrected,
is like a virus on your computer.

It corrupts the whole system,
and it can spread to others who are connected to you,
and then to others who are connected to them.

Falsehoods about who God is,
 or what is right,
 or what it means to live the good life,
 unless they are corrected,
 falsehoods act like parasites,
 they look for a host,
 usually the weak, and the unsuspecting and the innocent,
 and they infect their victims and destroy them from the inside.

John Donne the 17th century English poet wrote words that are familiar to all of us: No man is an island.

Before I read the entire poem,
 I assumed that Donne was simply saying that we all need someone else.

That's true but that's not what Donne had in mind.
 The lesson he was trying to teach is much more profound.

John Donne: No man is an island, entire of itself;
 every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

Donne isn't saying that we all need others,
 that's a given.

What he is saying is that we are all a part of others
 and others are a part of us.

We are not disconnected islands,
 we are threads in a social fabric,
 all intertwined and bound together.

And so what happens to someone else,
 and what someone else does,
 it affects all of us.

That's why Donne finishes his thought with these words:

Donne: Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind;
 and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

When truth dies in one of us,
the bell tolls for all of us.
It's telling us that the whole human race
has died just a bit.

When a lie is accepted as reality,
when it is woven into the social fabric,
all of society is corrupted just a bit.

When morality is changed to fit the moment,
then it is cheapened for all of us.
And if no one speaks the truth,
then the bell tolls for all of us
because all of us have been diminished.

There is a Jewish story about a righteous man
who went to Sodom to save the city.
He walked down one street after another,
shouting and preaching:
Men and women of Sodom, repent.
What you are doing is wrong.
It will destroy you.
They laughed at him,
but he continued to shout.
One day a child stopped him.
Old man, don't you see it's useless.
Why do you continue to shout?

In the beginning, the man said,
I shouted so that I could change them.
Now, I shout so they will not change me.

Why must we continue to believe and speak the truth whether
people listen or not?
So we will remember that a lie is still a lie
no matter how many people believe it.
And so our children will know that wrong is wrong
no matter how many people say it's right.

Why does the truth matter?

Because a lie uncorrected becomes accepted as reality.

4. TRUTH IS AN ESSENTIAL WEAPON IN OUR ARSENAL AGAINST EVIL.

President Reagan is often given credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the dynamic that brought down the Evil Empire and the iron curtain had begun decades earlier when men like Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke truth to power.

In 1966, long before he became an international figure, Solzhenitsyn gave a public reading at the Soviet Union's Lasarev Institute.

Instead of reading from his novels, He launched a blistering attack on censorship and the KGB.

The effect was explosive.

Later Solzhenitsyn would recall that almost every sentence, "scorched the air like gunpowder. How those people have yearned for truth. Oh God, how badly they wanted to hear the truth."

Writing of Solzhenitsyn and others like him,

Os Guinness: (They) saw ... there were only two ways to bring down the mighty Soviet tyranny. One was to trump Soviet force physically, which was impossible for a tiny handful of dissidents ... The other was to counter physical force with moral, staking their stand of the conviction that truth would outweigh lies and the whole machinery of propaganda, deception and terror. They chose the latter, and the unthinkable happened. They won.

In his Nobel speech, this Russian prophet Solzhenitsyn would state, "One word of truth outweighs the entire world."

Truth matters because it is how we fight evil.

The evil that is in the individual human soul

And the evil that is in societies and governments

Is fought and overcome by the power of the truth.

I do not expect evil men to give way to Absolute Truth.
The power of Truth is not that a Hitler or a Pol Pot or an Osama Ben Ladin will bow to the claims of Moral Truth.
The power of Moral Truth is that
it allows us to recognize and condemn evil for what it is,
it convicts us that we cannot be neutral toward evil,
and it empowers us to make the sacrifices necessary to defeat
evil.

Men and women will not sacrifice all that is dear
for beliefs that are nothing more than little-t truths and personal
moral preferences.

But for the Absolute Moral **virtues**
of justice
and liberty
and truth (not just for themselves but even for others)
men and women will sacrifice and suffer
and they will give their fortunes and even their lives
and they will count it a privilege.

And it has been that belief which has stirred the hearts of men and
women throughout the centuries to fight and defeat evil.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Let the lie come into the world, even
dominate the world, but not through me.