

“When Gracie Met Truthy”
by Rom A. Pegram

We are right in the middle of a series called ‘Christian’ as we begin today. And we’ve been talking about the fact that you could be a Christian and believe just about anything you want, do just about anything you want, and adopt just about any lifestyle you want ... because the Bible doesn’t even tell us what a Christian really is. *Christian* was a term used by those outside the faith ... to negatively describe or label those inside the faith, but it wasn’t the term used by Jesus to describe his followers. Jesus gave his followers a very, very specific ... very, very technical term; he called them *disciples*. And that’s why we said there are Christians on just about every side of every single issue talked about today—because you can define *Christian* just about any way you want to. But when you open up the New Testament and ask the question ‘*What does it look like to be a follower of Jesus?*’ it’s terrifyingly clear: *Disciples* are those who *love one another*. Do you remember what Jesus said? “By this everyone will know that you’re my disciples, if you love one another.” So, what proves our relationship/connection with God...

- It’s not your gold cross hung around your neck...
- It’s not your Sunday morning routine...
- It’s not your bumper sticker...
- It’s not what kind of family you were born into...
- It’s not the fact you were baptized (although that’s important too)...

Jesus said, ‘Here’s how they’re going to know—*by how you love one another*.’ And then in the same conversation he said, ‘And let me tell you how I want you to love one another; I want you to love one another the way I loved you! I want you to love the way I loved.’ And therein lies the problem, because all of us think we know something about love ... and each of us has our own ideas about that broad subject ... but, Jesus says ‘you need to be loving one another like I loved you.’ So, we go to the New Testament and check it out—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—and we look at the way Jesus loved. But what we find is ... it’s a bit terrifying ... and it looks a bit *inconsistent*...

Folks, when you honestly look at the way Jesus loved in the Bible (NT), *there’s a tension there* ... and, as is human nature, *it’s a tension that all of us have a tendency to want to resolve* (especially us men—we love to ‘fix’ things). In fact, folks, it’s a tension many of us are uncomfortable with. Many of us went to churches, for instance, that leaned toward one end of the spectrum of Jesus’ love ... or the other end of the spectrum of Jesus’ love. But regardless of where you went to church, it may have seemed like something was missing; and the reason is ... *perhaps there was!* Because when you open up the NT and ask the question ‘*How did Jesus love?*’ here’s what you discover: It was messy, it seems inconsistent, and at times you just want to say *Okay, that’s just unfair*. And at the end of the day, a lot about how Jesus loved is just really, really confusing ... because *there’s a tension*. And our temptation, as human beings, is to try to resolve that tension that’s created around Jesus way of loving others. But today, I want you to hear this: *If you try and resolve the tension that’s created around*

Jesus' way of loving, you lose! You give up something that's very, very important ... and we're tempted to do that all the time... Let me give you an example of the tension I'm speaking of:

One of the hardest scriptures I've ever had to teach on is Matthew 5:31-32, where Jesus teaches about ... *divorce*. When I preach on this, I sense it's a horrible Sunday for those who've actually experienced divorce. For those folks, it's kind of like getting a root canal without any Novocain if they're here. And, of course, I never say what I'm going to talk about—exactly—ahead of time, because if I announced this particular topic, many wouldn't be in church. It seems so condemning. And I get similar responses every time I touch on this particular scripture. It's like ... *Oh, Rom, that was agonizing! But I'm so glad we were here, even though it was agonizing! We went home and had a conversation like we've never had before. But, it was terrible. I felt so condemned, and yet I gained insight into why we struggle the way we do in marriage. But, Rom, I felt so condemned. Is it OK that I continue to serve at church?* And of course the answer is YES, but there's a tension there—in the way Jesus loves. At times he seems so forgiving and at other times he holds everyone accountable. At times, Jesus seems harsh, and at other times more kind; at times Jesus points out sin, and at times he seems to ignore sin altogether. *What are we to do with this tension?*

Folks, here's the deal: as human beings—our nature, we're all tempted to want to resolve this tension, but if we resolve it ... we give up something that's very important! This is what drove people crazy about Jesus, but he was comfortable with it. Jesus was able to minister in the midst of this tension ... and we dare not walk away from it, even though it seems messy, inconsistent, and confusing at times... Why? Because...

We see this tension throughout Jesus' ministry. We cannot ignore this; it's a part of who Jesus was ... and is ... so we cannot change it; instead, we need to learn to work with it...

John, the Apostle who lived into old age (very rare for any Apostle), gives us some words in his Gospel that help describe this tension we've been talking about. And John gives us an image to remember when he says this: *It's as if Jesus painted a picture full of people and then walked right into the painting to interact with the people in his painting. And the people in his painting did not recognize him as the artist and they threw him out.* How powerful is that, to try and describe the conflict he sensed among the people Jesus came to love?

And then in the opening section of this incredible piece of literature (Gospel of John), he gives us the terminology—the words—that best capture this tension, that if you're a follower of Jesus you're going to bump into at some point or another. If you're a follower of Jesus, this love of Jesus described by the Bible is messy, and it's hard, and it seems inconsistent ... but if you choose to go one way or another, you leave something out. Here's what John says:

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

There's this great imagery with these five words ... *made his dwelling among us*, which means Jesus 'camped out with us', or 'moved in with us', or 'lived with us'. Then, John says he's (or we've) seen something you haven't seen ... that you had to be there to get and he goes on:

John 1:14 (NIV): "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Full to the brim of *grace and truth*—and *there's the tension!* I think most here have a general idea of what GRACE & TRUTH is: You know...

- TRUTH says ... *Hey, you're accountable* ... and...
- GRACE says ... *Oh, you're forgiven...*
- GRACE says ... *You're fine* ... and...
- TRUTH says ... *No, you're broken...*
- GRACE says ... *It's going to be O.K.* ... and...
- TRUTH says ... *Oh, you're going to have to work on it...*
- GRACE says ... *No matter what you do, I'm going to love you* ... and...
- TRUTH says ... *Yeah, but you'll be held accountable...*

There's a tension, isn't there? And you know what, all of us because of our humanity want to lean in one direction or the other, don't we?

Some of you were brought up with parents that leaned one way or the other—you know, one of them was 'Ms. Grace' and the other was 'Mr. Un-Grace'—the one who was all about TRUTH (or visa versa). And your parents would argue behind closed doors about how best to raise you ... and which one did you like better? Let me guess... Hmmm... I'll just bet you liked 'Gracie' better. I like grace. I like 'I'm fine, and you'll just love me the way I am'. But ... if you grew up in a great home, you probably got a good dose of both...

And here's what John said which is nothing short of remarkable: *I spent years watching. I spent years watching him navigate some of the most difficult circumstances I could think of. And as I begin my gospel—my description of what it was like to be with Jesus, here's what I saw—that he was absolutely full of both GRACE and TRUTH...*

Now, I want it to be one or the other. I want to push Jesus in one direction or the other. I like the verses that lean toward TRUTH ... when I'm telling other people what to do; I like the verses that lean toward GRACE ... when it's about me. But John said, *I watched him, and the best way I can describe it is he was to the brim full of GRACE AND TRUTH.* And then he said this...

John 1:16 (NIV): "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another."

Which literally means we've all received grace upon grace upon grace; Jesus poured the pitcher of grace and it overflowed; then, Jesus clarifies this...

John 1:17 (NIV): "For the law [*this is like the 10 Commandments and the 600 other commandments in the OT*] was given [*and this is so important*] through Moses [*You saw the movie, didn't you? I can see Charlton Heston coming down the mountain now ... his face all white...*]; grace and truth came [*not given, but physically came as a full package*] through Jesus Christ."

Folks, Jesus said (Matt. 5:17, NIV): "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." So, Jesus wasn't against the LAW that was given through Moses; he came to fulfill it—to bring GRACE to it ... and TRUTH ... and he lived comfortably with both!

As John would say to us today, *He was all of it. And he brought all of it to bear on every individual he talked to—on every single situation. And just when we thought he was going to go one way or another (toward truth or toward grace), he was the embodiment of both grace & truth!* And if you re-read the Gospels through that lens, I'm sure you'll see it, like in this story...

One day Jesus shows up (and you know this story if you grew up in Sunday School) at this well and a Samaritan woman comes out. And he's alone with the Samaritan woman, and he talks to her, which you're not supposed to do. **There's grace.** She's like, *Why are you talking to me? You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan.* And he says, *I'd like to drink some water. Would you use your jar and get me some water?* And she's so amazed that Jesus is talking to her. *What's up with this?* she's thinking... Then, just when things are going well, Jesus says, *Hey, I want you to go back into Sychar, get your husband, and bring him here.* And she says, *Well, I have no husband.* And Jesus says *I know...*

It's at this point, folks, Jesus reaches into the most painful, shameful part of her life. And he says, *You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now, you're not even married to him, and even Samaritans know you don't do that. You've had five husbands, and you either divorced them or they died. Either way you've done a horrible job as a woman when it comes to men. You're not good with men. There's truth.* Jesus, hello? Did you not even go to seminary? That wasn't very pastoral. I thought this was truth AND grace, but where's the grace?

Then Jesus reveals something to this woman we don't find him revealing to anyone else in all the gospels. He looks into her eyes, out alone by this well, and he says, *Guess who I am? I haven't told anybody this yet. I've chosen you, a Samaritan woman. You are now eyeball-to-eyeball with the Messiah.* And he said to her, *and I can give you water that will quench the thirst of your soul in a way that no man will ever do it.* And she leaves her jar and she goes back into town and she tells folks—with whom she has no credibility—*I've met the long-awaited Messiah of God...* **There's grace.**

And I could go on and on with examples from scripture—*The Apostle Matthew, the thief on the cross, the rich young ruler, or the woman caught in adultery*—all great examples of Jesus living out both grace & truth... And, as a church we so try to get this right, but many times we don't. We find ourselves in these difficult, difficult situations and we say, God we're not going to be just the truth church; that would be way too easy. We keep trying to figure this out when in the midst of these situations, but it's just so messy! Well, folks, I have to get back to this now (a truth I spoke a couple weeks ago)...

If you want to know what Jesus meant, you have to watch what Jesus did! If you want to know what Jesus meant when he asked us to love one another, then you have to watch how Jesus loved...

Do you know how Jesus loved? He called 'sin' sin ... and then he paid for it... Basically, Jesus says I don't condemn you. Now that I've called 'sin' sin and paid for it, and I've said I don't condemn you, I want you all to leave your life of sin. I want you to ask me and I will fill you with my Spirit ... and if you obey that Spirit that I place in you, you won't have to sin. You'll experience the freedom that I so want you to have! But either way, I love you. I want you to recover from whatever it is that's dragging you down, from any kind of self-destructive behavior you may be involved in. But either way, I love you...

Folks, the truth is ... you're a sinner. But the grace is ... I don't condemn you. And no one will ever love you more...

But, let's be honest now; there's a tension, isn't there? There's a tension—in loving like Jesus loved—that if you were to ever give up a part of that—try to resolve it, you'd be giving up something very, very important...

- Do you know why we can't let go of TRUTH? The reason we have to keep saying what's true is because sin has a GOTCHA. Sin has a GOTCHA ... and God doesn't want it to get ya...
- Do you know why we can't let go of GRACE? To some extent, it's because sin's already *gotcha*, and grace is your only way back... The grace Jesus brought to this world is the only way back home; it's the only way for you to know that you've connected or re-connected with your Heavenly Father...

And so we need both grace & truth... The same is true for the Church. ***The Church is at its best when it embraces grace AND truth ... and refuses to let go of either!***

So, if you want to know what Jesus meant when Jesus said 'love one another', there it is... This tension, folks, is real; it's messy; it's difficult; it even seems inconsistent at times. *The next time you're tempted to speak just truth, remember grace; the next time you're tempted to go the easy route of grace; remember truth.* And let's ask God to help us manage this tension for his glory—that others might know his incredible love, changing their lives forever...