

THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD'S GRACE

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory,
the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.
For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."
JOHN 1:14, 17*

Not long ago, I broke the law. I was driving a friend's car, unaware that it was not displaying proof of current registration. Sometime later, I found myself sitting in court with a traffic violation in hand, listening to endless "law-breaker" stories while waiting my turn. Finally, it was time to face the judge and the officer who issued the ticket.

"How do you plead Mr. Nichols?" the judge asked.

"Guilty, sir," I said, "but I'd like to explain the circumstances."

"Case dismissed," he responded with little fanfare.

"But judge," I said, "I have a really good explanation."

"Mr. Nichols, it doesn't get any better than 'case dismissed,'" he said, quickly motioning for the next person in line.

What a perfect illustration of truth and grace. The law, necessary as

KENNETH W. NICHOLS

the ultimate standard of behavior, is "truth." I violated that law, so a penalty was appropriate. Yet, I was pardoned despite my infraction. The judge didn't have to give me leniency, but it was his prerogative to gift me with a free pass, even though I didn't deserve it according to the standards of truth—that is pure grace!

The same relationship of truth and grace is illustrated throughout the Bible. The Old Testament primarily teaches obedience to truth, the Law given through Moses. The New Testament presents the exhilarating message of grace, mercy, and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. At first, truth and grace seem to be paradoxical and opposite, but they are both at the core of God's purpose and plan for His creation. Randy Alcorn, founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries, says it best, "There's certainly grace in the Old Testament—lots of it—but it was overshadowed by truth." Just as the Pharisees "never emphasized grace," Alcorn points out, "it was Christ who gave [His followers] their first clear view of Grace."¹

God's Word, whether viewed from the Old or New Testament perspective, is the absolute summary of universal truth in the context of encompassing grace.

Truth or Grace?

Is it possible to keep a biblically sound and personally healthy balance between the two? Imagine a set of parents who raise their children on an exclusive diet of grace, love, and mercy: there would be few or no rules in their home and, therefore, little or no need for confrontation or consequences. Many well-meaning parents living by this "grace only" philosophy discover too late that marginalizing truth-based rules of conduct often lead to self-indulging and immature children. On the other hand, a family committed to enforcing rigid rules without exercising a gracious and loving relationship with their children often yields rebellious attitudes. **Rules without relationship are first resented, then resisted, and ultimately rejected.**

Do you suppose the same could be true spiritually? Could living exclusively

As we consider the biblical teaching on God's grace and truth in the context of counseling, we need to remember that it has nothing to do with our personal views or opinions. We cannot earn or deserve God's grace, and we cannot select what part of His truth we want to embrace and abide by. This is the message we need to understand—the message we need to bring into our counseling sessions.

in the context of either truth or grace lead to lawlessness or hollow legalism among other spiritual consequences? Randy Alcorn remembers, "Martin Luther said that the devil doesn't care which side of the horse we fall off as long as we don't stay in the saddle. We need to ride the horse with one foot in the stirrup of truth and the other in the stirrup of grace."² How true! God's plan never offers either truth or grace as exclusive of one another. His plan includes both characteristics.

Truth and Grace

The apparent conflict between grace and truth can sneak into our personal lives, but it can also infiltrate entire organizations. Many churches and religious institutions gravitate toward one extreme or the other. Environments that become legalistic, rule-oriented, and guilt-driven, for example, promote an impossible (often unspoken) expectation: follow all the rules and one day you will be "good enough" to deserve God's grace and favor.

Churches or organizations that primarily focus on imparting grace, on the other hand, often avoid condemning sinful choices and behaviors. The focus is love and forgiveness, not consequences. Not surprisingly, many interpret this openness as license to live any lifestyle. They expect forgiveness.

Even the current political climate demonstrates our human tendency to embrace grace without abiding in truth. For example, the idea that society needs to find "common ground" and show grace to those who disagree with our views has been popularized by some political leaders. The appealing "common ground" argument is based

on grace and tolerance alone without regard for truth. The debate on abortion is a perfect illustration. Is there a "common ground" that everybody can stand on? No, because abortion is a "truth" issue—a moral issue—not a matter of personal opinion. Either life begins at conception or it does not (Psalm 139:13-16). There is no common ground when looking at truth.

Yet, the good news is God's grace covers all sins, including the sin of abortion, when there is sincere repentance.

Isn't it comforting to know that a grace-motivated balance did not determine the issue of slavery? Like abortion, slavery was a "truth" issue—that all men are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28). Truth became the plumb line that ultimately restored freedom for African-Americans!

As we consider the biblical teaching on God's grace and truth in the context of counseling, we need to remember that it has nothing to do with our personal views or opinions. We cannot earn or deserve God's grace, and we cannot select what part of His truth we want to embrace and abide by. This is the message we need to understand—the message we need to bring into our counseling sessions. **Jesus did not come to offer grace or truth... He came to offer grace and truth!**

- Truth does not minimize grace—it magnifies it.
- Truth without grace leads to legalism.
- Grace without truth leads to license.
- Truth provides the message—grace provides the method.
- Grace does not provide freedom to

sin—it provides forgiveness for sin.

- Grace never supersedes or compromises truth.
- Grace does not replace truth—it reflects it.
- Truth and grace lead to liberty.

So, when you think of grace and truth, consider that they are the summary statement of God's love and His requirement for judgment. It is His truth that draws us to Himself and allows us to fully embrace the scope of His grace.

Randy Alcorn states, "We show people Jesus only when we show them grace and truth. Anything less than both is neither."³

Truth and Grace in Counseling Settings

In the work of counseling, I have often observed clients with a menu or cafeteria style mentality... "I'll have grace please; hold the truth." Or some will order selective truth, which suits their personal appetite for the moment. If a client is intentionally living in such a way that ignores biblical truth, teaching on godly character, he or she is imposing on, and presuming upon, God's grace. I can recall hundreds of clients who acknowledged they were living in sinful disobedience, but refused to repent. They often said, "I know God loves me and, by His grace will forgive me." Is this a true statement? As emphasized earlier, God's grace should not be viewed as independent of His truth (Romans 6:1-2).

As professional or pastoral counselors, we are required to come face to face with the uncomfortable tension between grace and truth. Som

counselors are natural “truth tellers,” quickly expecting clients to shape up and get their lives in biblical order. On the other hand, many Christian counselors think they can “grace” their clients to health with a counseling style of continual love, compassion, forgiveness, and hope.

Just like the parents who raise their children exclusively with an emphasis on truth or grace, we do our clients a disservice if we respond in the same manner. Imparting grace or truth alone, as an exclusive counseling strategy, is woefully incomplete. We know that counseling outcomes can be deceiving, and a counseling strategy that does not intentionally and sensitively incorporate grace and truth often results in short-term gain and long-term pain for the client.

Our counseling goal is to provide hope, help, and healing to those who

are the benefactors of God’s grace and truth. We need to be specialists at truth telling and grace giving, just like Jesus.

Blessed Indeed

Do you realize how blessed you are? God loves us so much that He gave us His only Son (full of grace and truth), as a sacrifice to pay our debt for sin. What a grand and glorious demonstration of God’s grace. Grace is God’s unmerited favor. Grace is God’s undeserved mercy. Jesus Christ, during His ministry years here on earth, demonstrated, emulated, and epitomized grace and truth. His love and mercy were contagious. His anger and disgust for sin were relentless and intimidating. Both grace and truth are essential elements in His gift of eternal life.

I am personally grateful for God’s grace, both for myself and those to whom I minister. Jesus took the

judgment for my sins and declared to the Father, “Case dismissed!” ✠



KENNETH W. NICHOLS, PSY.D., is the Associate Director for the International Board of Christian Counselors through the AACC. Dr. Nichols served as the Associate

Pastor of Family Ministries at Shadow Mountain Community Church from 1999 to 2008 and as the Dean of Behavioral Science at Southern California Seminary from 2005 to 2008, both located near San Diego, California.

Endnotes

- 1 Alcorn, Randy. *The Grace and Truth Paradox: Responding with Christlike Balance*. Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, Oregon. (2003) p. 15.
- 2 Ibid. p. 20-21.
- 3 Ibid p. 92.

Posted with the Permission of the Publisher