



Grace and Truth

For years I have focused on the subject of “truth” because it had become clear to me that truth is central to the process of healing the mind and emotions. As it says in John 8:32, “The truth will set you free.” And yet I kept coming back to John 1:17 where it says, “For the law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

In my counseling practice I observed Jesus setting the captives free with His truth. But, what is grace all about? How does grace fit into the picture?

Then I read Dr. Henry Cloud’s book, “Changes That Heal,” and in chapter one he clarified the relevance of grace and truth together. Let me try to summarize some of what he wrote:

Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward people. It is something that is never earned. It is a gift of unconditional love and acceptance. Grace is the “relational” aspect of God’s character - a relationship that offers the gift of undeserved compassion, unconditional acceptance and unmerited love.

Truth, on the other hand, is the “structural” aspect of God’s character. God’s truth contains the form that our soul and spirit should take. Without truth, God’s people keep falling into the same old unhealthy patterns over and over. They needed truth to steer them away from trouble. In the Bible, truth is given in the form of laws (ten commandments), parables and instruction. These truths are a blueprint and a structure for people to live by. They offer guidance and set limits.

The problem with the law was that people soon learned that they could never measure up. In Galatians 5:4, it says; “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Dr. Cloud says, “Truth without grace is judgment. The law and truth without grace destroys us. No one ever grows when they are under the law, for the law puts us into a strictly legal relationship with God. (I’ll love you only if you do what is true or right.) Getting truth before grace, or truth before relationship brings guilt, anxiety, anger, and a host of other painful emotions.”

Wow! Who wants to live in a place where, everywhere you turn, you run into a “should” and there is very little acceptance. While truth in the mind transforms the mind, truth in relationships without grace becomes legalism. We are justified by grace and the truth of the Word is there to help us live in freedom.

But what about the other extreme - grace without truth? It is not much better. Grace without truth can also have devastating results. A lack of truth and discipline leads to a life without limits, resulting in mistakes, confusion, pain and chaos. To have acceptance without direction means anything goes and that gets us into trouble. The lack of boundaries allows us to go where God does not want us to go and, as a result, we become disconnected in our relationship with God. Because straying from God’s helpful truth leads us into destructive behaviours and moral failures, guilt and shame enter the picture, causing us to hide. When the true self is hiding, the false self takes over and the false self helps us to become conformed to this world. When we hide, we cannot get help for our needs and brokenness. While Jesus does not condemn us, we tend to be hard on ourselves with self-condemnation. Lack of self-forgiveness is one of the ways that we humans get ourselves in a lonely, dark place where we feel that God is far away from us.

What Is The Solution? Grace and Truth Together.

Grace and truth together reverse the effects of the fall of Adam and Eve. Grace and truth together invite us out of isolation and into relationship. Grace, when it is combined with truth, invites the true self, the “me” as I really am, warts and all, into relationship making true intimacy possible. Jesus’ example of grace and truth is provided in the story of the adulterous woman in John 8:3-11. After all the men who wanted to stone her had left, Jesus offered her grace. “Then neither do I condemn you.”



He did not stand in judgment of her. He offered her forgiveness and accepted her as a person. But, Jesus did not stop with just acceptance. He accepted her with full realization of who she was - an adulteress. He accepted her true self, a woman with sinful desires and actions. He then gave her direction for the future (truth). "Go now and leave your life of sin." These two ingredients together - acceptance and direction - serve to bring the real self into relationship, the only way that healing ever takes place.

Dr. Cloud explains this further. A friend of his was a recovering alcoholic who said, "When I was in church or with my Christian friends, they would just tell me that drinking was wrong and that I should repent. As much as the church preached grace, I never really found acceptance there for my real state. When I got into Alcoholics Anonymous, I found I could be honest about my failures, but more important, I could be honest about my helplessness. When I found out that God and others accepted me in both my drinking and my helplessness to control it, I began to have hope. I could come forth with who I really was and find help." It is interesting to compare the legalistic church with a good AA group. "In the church it was culturally unacceptable to have problems. That was called being sinful. In the AA group, it was culturally unacceptable to be perfect; that was called denial. In the church setting, people looked better and got worse and in the AA group they looked worse and got better."

Dr. Cloud then makes a great point that healing takes time. It is a process where grace is needed because it is grace that provides the safe place that is needed for a person to look truthfully at oneself and then work at changing. When the alcoholic came into a culture where he did not have to be ashamed of his failures and was forgiven for his sins (as Jesus did with the adulteress), then truth and grace began to have their healing effect in his life.

Grace First, Then Truth

I now fully understand my professor at Tyndale Seminary, Dr. Brian Cunnington, who taught us that counselors need to be a "transitional grace object" for their clients. Counseling is a process where a person transitions from a negative, destructive story to a new, more positive and helpful story. In the beginning of the counseling process, the counselor needs to be part of a safe place offering grace, the unmerited gift of unconditional acceptance, so that the individual can come out of hiding and begin to understand how the false self has contributed to the pain and sorrow. As the true self is able to look at truth without condemnation, forgiveness can be received and the individual can begin the healing process. Similarly, in our relationships with family, relatives and friends, **we all need to begin with grace** before we venture into the offering of truth. I notice that in the story of the adulteress, Jesus did not keep coming back to check on the woman to find out if she had obeyed his truth. That was her responsibility. We need to be aware how we may try to control others with truth instead of giving those around us the space to be responsible for their own lives and grapple with truth in their own timing and in their own way.

I also observe that the Apostle Paul starts many of his letters with "Grace and peace to you." May you find the peace that comes from grace and may you experience the healing that flows from the harmonious balance of grace and truth together.