

Living as a Grace-Based Leader

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Romans

Leaders Dessert

What I would like to talk with you about as leaders, I felt the Lord give me some instruction that I was to talk with you about grace and essentially to communicate to you the message of the book of Romans. I felt I should go through in very, very simple and clear terms the message of grace as it is communicated to us in the book of Romans.

You know, as leaders it is so easy for us to lose perspective regarding how we are going to counsel people, how we are going to find our own identity, how we are going to find energy to continue to juggle all the various things that we must do in life, how we are going to meet people's needs and on and on. We need to continually come back to first principles (and maybe that is why the Lord laid the book of Romans on my heart); we need to continually come back to first principles. To the basic message that gave birth to the Vineyard church, really to all of us, and that is the message of grace.

Now, let me give you a real simple definition of grace. I know the theological definition. The theological definition is "grace is God's unmerited favor or God's undeserved blessing which he freely gives to mankind." But, I guess I would like to give you another definition that I will try to work through this talk. Grace is "God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves." Let me repeat that. Grace is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. To be captured by the wonder of grace is to recognize God's initiative in all things. That God always comes first and we always come second. That all that we do, all that we are, all that is good, flows from God first of all.

So, let's start in Romans 1 with verse 16:

"I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

We are using the definition of grace that grace is God doing for us what we cannot do. And Paul says that the grace of God was revealed in the gospel because the gospel is the power of God for salvation. It is the ability of God, the can-do of God, and we enter into that can-do of God by simply trusting him. We all know that we can't do salvation. But the gospel message, in which God provides for people right standing with himself through simple faith in Christ, the gospel message is the product of the grace of God. God doing for us what we cannot do.

But, you know, honestly I think that we don't often apply the gospel message to ourselves. And so I want to apply this a little bit. God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves from the beginning of salvation to the end. At the beginning of salvation, we say, "I am aware of God's grace because he didn't treat me as I deserved. If I was treated as I deserve, I would never be able to be forgiven by God." Psalm 103 says he hasn't dealt with us according to our sins.

That's grace. To not be treated as you deserve. I shouldn't be forgiven, but God forgave me anyway.

But grace doesn't just start the Christian life. You know, Paul says that we live in this. The righteous will live by faith and its faith from beginning to end. It is the whole of the Christian life that is wrapped up with this wonderful gracious gospel.

I think here, not only of saving grace that we start the Christian life with, I think of restraining grace. You know, what the Psalmist says in Psalm 73: "As for me, my foot had almost slipped." How many times are you on the edge of an incredibly big mistake? You are just about to fall and the Lord comes alone and does for you what you cannot do. He restrains you. He gives you power to resist something that is too strong for you at the moment. You are not pulled back from falling or being cast head-long because of your wonderful morality or your great up-bringing. You are pulled back from going into the pit solely by the restraining grace of God.

Are you aware of that in your life? God's restraining grace? When is the last time you said "thank-you" to God because you were just about to say something, blurt something out and you didn't. There seemed to be a check on your anger, a check on your tongue. You were going to give your spouse the cold shoulder, but the Lord wouldn't let you alone and you felt convicted about how you were resolving conflict. And a scripture came to your mind: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Or "Husbands, do not be harsh with your wives." Or "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church."

Are you aware that when you are being convicted by the Lord in those private thoughts that that is God's restraining grace? You know, I personally rarely attribute that stuff to the grace of God until I reflect back and say, "But all that I am producing in my life comes from one source, God's grace." That is why I don't blow up more often in anger. That is why I don't run ahead and have an affair or get involved in some other kind of sordid business. That is why my pride doesn't run amuck. It is God's restraining grace.

And then when we do fall, why is it that we turn back to the Lord? Is it because we are just miserable? Is it because we desperately lack peace? See, we have to push our thinking back to first principles and first causes.

The reason why you and I return to the Lord after we sin over and over again instead of getting utterly despairing is because of God's restoring grace. Psalm 37:24 says: "Though I fall, I will not be utterly cast down."

Yes, I fall. But God always is holding me up by his right hand. It is grace when somebody says something to us that confronts us with our sin and causes us to repent. It is grace when we hear something in a message that really awakens us and challenges us. Salvation is grace from beginning to end. And for me, that is the whole of my faith. That is the reason why I believe in the eternal security of the Christian. Because God is doing for us continually what we cannot do for ourselves. Restraining us; restoring us; we might back-slide, but we will not ultimately be completely cast down.

Then the rest of chapter 1 talks about God's wrath being revealed as people involved themselves in idolatry and ultimately leads to immorality. And he

says that the ultimate issue is “though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” The source of all problems that we face is a failure to acknowledge God, a failure to worship God, ultimately, it is a failure of God-centered living and of grace-centered living.

So, what does this mean for you as small group leaders? People come to us and they share with us a host of problems that we may not have a lot of experience in dealing with the kinds of problems that the person is presenting. It could be a vocational problem. They present a whole list of issues that are going on in their particular job and they say,

“This is what is happening in my corporation. The president is doing this.”

“They are selling my company.”

“I have just lost my job.”

“I am suffering this financial problem.”

“We have had this kind of illness in our home.”

“I am so overwhelmed, I really don’t know what to do.”

And you, wise small group leader, being the wonderful counselor that you are, what is it that you say to people as they are sharing with you all of their problems? Do you need to be an encyclopedia of counseling wisdom? Let’s look up depression and see what we need to say there. Let’s look up this vocation and that vocation and see what we need to say there.

When folks are sharing with you their problems, what are you listening for? What is the one hook that you want to hang everything on? What I am continually listening for as people talk with me about their problems is are they connected with God in this problem or disconnected. In other words, I am always listening for where is God in this thing? Where is God in their thinking? Where is the grace of God and the plan of God in all that they are doing? Are they thinking about this and approaching this from a God-centered perspective or are they thinking about it from purely flat, secular perspective without reference to God?

See, all of our problems, Paul says, comes from the fact that we exclude God from our lives. We suppress the knowledge of God. We don’t acknowledge God, that God is in control, that grace is the operative word in the Christian life. That he hasn’t let go of us. We push those thoughts aside and we begin to function as if there is no God and there is no grace.

So, what I attempt to help people to do when I share with folks about their particular issues or their problems is I want somebody to walk away not saying, “Gee, Rich is so wonderful and he is so wise. Look at how he gave me particular counsel for this problem (sometimes we have specific counsel).” But I absolutely want people to walk away with, “Oh, I see. You are right. I have become disconnected from God. I haven’t thought about this as part of his processing or training of me. And this is all under the umbrella of God’s grace. So now with that in mind, I will attempt to reconnect with God and pray through this and see what my wonderful heavenly Father has for me.”

Chapter 2—In chapter 2 Paul begins to speak to the man who looks at others and says, “All these other folks have problems, but I am really above all of that. I am not like the man in chapter 1 who is involved in immoralities.” He is

really talking to the religious man. Men and women like all of us sitting in this room. And men and women like those you lead in your kinships. Folks who think they are doing pretty good with God because they go to Vineyard on Sunday and they come out to kinship group and they give some money. How shall we communicate the grace of God to religious people?

Paul says, “Do you show contempt (in verse 4) for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?”

In Eugene Peterson’s version of the New Testament called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, “God is kind, but he is not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life change.”

How are we going to communicate the grace of God to religious people? Well, C.S. Lewis had a wonderful way of communicating the grace of God to religious people. He said, “God is like a dentist who drills and drills and drills into your teeth until he digs out all of the decay.”

Somewhere in your communication of the grace of God, you must work in this image that God is like a dentist who drills. He is not adverse to using pain in somebody’s life. And that is part of the grace of God. It has to be worked into your understanding of grace. Like a dentist, the Lord doesn’t say to somebody who has decay in their life, “Here, have another piece of candy, honey.”

“No. It is time for you to be conformed to the image of my Son so that he might be the first-born among many brethren.”

Grace is not the product of an overly indulgent father. You may never think of grace that way. The life of grace results in people being pulled up out of their tendency toward selfishness and laziness so that they experience a radical life change. That is what repentance is. Because unless we do experience a radical life change, we will be injured.

Let me read to you again from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. He says,

“You are not getting by with anything. Every refusal and avoidance of God adds fuel to the fire. The day is coming when it is going to blaze hot and high, God’s fiery righteous judgment. Make no mistake. In the end you get what is coming to you. Real life for those who work on God’s side, but to those who insist on getting their own way and take the path of least resistance, fire. If you go against the grain you get splinters regardless of which neighborhood you are from, what your parents taught you, what schools you attended. But if you embrace the way God does things, there are wonderful pay-offs, again, without regard to where you are from or how you were brought up.”

You see, the grace of God that drills into our decay does so to keep us from getting splinters in our lives. So never communicate a soft grace, a pain-free grace or a grace that doesn’t call people to radical life change.

Chapter 3—Chapter 3 beginning in verse 21, Paul speaks of

“...the righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

And then Paul goes on and says,

“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

What Paul is doing in these two paragraphs is giving us the secret of the Christian life. It's often been said that there are no more two important paragraphs in the Bible than Romans 3:21-31. Here we have the secret of the Christian life. How to get right with God. And what we are told about the secret of the Christian life is that a person must shift their focus away from what they can do and on to what God alone can do for them. Stop concentrating on what you can do. Stop talking about what you can do. Stop listing for everyone or boasting before everyone what you have done. And instead, put your full weight on what God, alone, can do and that will be your security.

The secret of the Christian life is that we respond to what God, alone, can do and we stop trying to get God to respond to us. We stop trying to back him into a corner. We stop trying to manipulate him. We simply try to get ourselves in step with the Lord.

Do you know how freeing it is to let God lead and to focus your attention onto what God can do? Think about it as you approach ministry time in your small group. We are all so very self-focused. “Oh, my goodness, we are not getting any words. I need to be able to produce an effect. I am not like such and such a person.”

The secret to ministry time is to put your full attention on what God can do. As John Wimber says, “It's not about us. It's about him.” When we shift from what we can do and we stop talking about what we have done and what we need to do, you know, we also become much nicer people. As leaders, we give up the requirement that we control everyone in our group. That we fix everyone in our group. That we become the mother and father in the bad way that I talked about a few weeks ago in a sermon. That all of these people have all of these needs and what they ultimately need is me or you. We say no, that is not what Romans 3 is about. It is not about boasting in what I can do. It is about boasting about what God can do. Its about grace—his ability.

Chapter 4—Chapter 4 is the story of Abraham. And the question that I ask myself as I read chapter 4 is what makes a great leader? Chapter 4 gives us the definition of a great leader. Look down in verse 17:

“As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

The story of Abraham is really a God story. It is a story about a man who entered into what God could do for him. What made Abraham so great was not that he got God's notice because he was a great guy. What made Abraham great was that God took somebody who was a nobody and made him into a somebody. Paul goes on and says,

“Against all hope Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

See, the whole thing that made Abraham a great leader was that he clearly recognized that the job that God had called him to was too big for him. Only God could do it. And by faith, he entered into the promise that only God could pull this thing off. It’s all about what God, alone, can do.

When you are overwhelmed, as many of us are feeling right now—this job is way too big for us. We can’t lead. We can’t heal. We can’t counsel. We can’t juggle all the balls that are thrown our way. Great! That is the position we need to be in because what makes a great leader is saying, “Only God can pull this off. I am going to trust him to do it.”

Now, over and over again, I have been conscious in my own life that the reason why things are working out are purely because of God’s decision to bless me and to bless through me. He didn’t strike a bargain with me. He didn’t say, “Well, Rich, if you do this much, I will do that much.” There isn’t some contract between me and God. What I am simply asked to do is enter the promise that God makes that he will bless me and bless through me. That is what makes a leader. God is not asking for a contract between you and him. He is not asking for your part and his part. That is not really the way that it works.

Really the way that it works is that God has made you a promise. His promise is that he will bless you, personally. And he will bless through you if you trust him to do it. He wants you to be a blessing.

You say, “Well, how do I know that God wants to do that with me?”

Verse 16: “The promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring. He is the father of us all.”

Are you one of Abraham’s offspring? Is Abraham your father? Do you share the calling of Abraham?

If you are one of his children, you do share his calling. The calling on Abraham is to be a blessing to many nations. That same calling is part of the genetic code of all of Abraham’s children. You are called to be a blessing. And God will bless through you and God will bless to you, if you trust him to do it.

And, of course, in Abraham we see our faith father who decided to live not on the basis of what he couldn’t do, but on the basis of what he could do. And I would just say that that is the other important grace lesson that we see here for you as leaders and for those you are trying to nurture up in the faith. When we start living on the basis of what God can do instead of what we cannot do, we have a secure foundation for personal adequacy and personal identity. So much of our sense of personal adequacy and personal identity is rooted in our attempts to produce better and to perform better.

That is not what our faith father was about. Our faith father, Abraham, rooted his adequacy in the performance of God.

Chapter 5— “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

When you wake up in the morning, your first thought, your first thought, needs to be God has opened a door to me. God is available to me.

“When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will one die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him. For when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life. Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

When I read Romans 5, what I would call the chapter is the “much more of grace.” Paul tells us first of all that we are much more helpless and hopeless, we are much more miserable every day. Most of our lives are spent pretending that we are not as helpless and hopeless as we are. Paul says, “While we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” While we were still sinners, powerless, literally we are weak and feeble, unable to help ourselves, ungodly, the enemy of God—see, when we get a picture of how much worse we are, how much more helpless we are, then we stop trying to solve our own problems by a little bit of restructuring, a little bit of self-help, a few changes in our thought process.

“I know what I need. I need to get up 10 minutes earlier.”

We may need all of those things, but the much more of grace underlines for us the doctrine of the total inability of man. We cannot do what God wants us to do. We cannot stop being nasty. We cannot stop gossiping. We cannot stop holding grudges. We cannot stop pushing our own opinions.

And so he says that at just the right time, Christ died for us. And in this much more of grace he says, “Since we have now been justified, that is been made right in God’s sight by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him? If when we were God’s enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life?”

He is talking about the much more of grace. That you can stand here with all of your garbage and be much more secure with God than you generally feel. He says that at this moment you are justified. And if that is true of you, and let’s make sure we understand what it means to be justified—if in spite of all that you are, all the dark spots on your soul, all of your bad habits, all of your weaknesses—if despite this God at the present time chooses to pronounce on you, right now, the verdict of “not guilty” then what possibly can get in the way of your future salvation?

In other words, if your sin doesn’t prevent you from having God declare “not guilty”, if this verdict was rendered while you were still, in fact, a sinner, an enemy, then what can you possibly do to keep God from saving you? And then he just hammers it home in verse 10 and says:

“If when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son much more [Paul loves that phrase “much more”] now that you have been reconciled will you be saved by his life.”

He is saying, “Listen, you are God’s friend now. That is your identity. You are no longer his enemy. You are his friend.”

Chapter 6— “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” Chapter 6 is all about living as a grace-based person. And Paul basically says that the major reason why people continue in bad habits and sins is that we don’t believe we are what God says we are in Jesus Christ. We simply do not believe the extent of the grace given to us. That we really are alive in Christ. That he really has given us power to overcome sin. That we really are holy in the Lord. That we are clothed right now with robes of righteousness. That now, as you sit here, you have died to all the sins that beset you.

Paul says the major reason why people continue to sin is that they don’t really believe how much grace is there for them. It is not that they have too much grace. They lean into grace too hard. They don’t lean into grace hard enough and believe the extent of the grace. And so chapter 6 is basically making the statement that to the extent that you don’t believe what you really are, you probably are going to behave in a way that you really aren’t. It is all about what your expectations are.

You know the old story of psychologists who told some teachers at the beginning of the year that some very average students were incredibly bright and that they needed to really be treated as intelligent, bright kids because these particular students had scored on the IQ tests off the charts. And the teachers had this expectation that they were dealing with incredibly bright kids and these were real geniuses in their midst. And what they discovered over the course of the year is that as a result of this perspective, the kids’ performance was just enhanced immeasurably. They performed brilliantly.

See, we turn everything on its head all the time because we don’t know how to live in grace. We continually base God’s view of us on our performance rather than basing our performance on God’s view of us. God says you are holy. God says you are righteous. God says you are his friend. God says that you have died to sin. Therefore, I must perform in a certain way because these things are all true of me. And I start working this out, these various truths, out in my life in the concrete here and now.

Instead, what we do is try to work everything out in the here and now so that we can get God to say certain things about us. Grace-based living stops turning God’s view of us and our performance on its head.

Chapter 7 is all about how you and I can be productive for the Lord. How can we bear fruit for God.

“Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an

adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress...So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, [and here are the key words] *that you might belong to another to him who was raised from the dead in order that we might bear fruit for God.*"

How can you and I bear fruit for God? As leaders, how can we be productive? It is in the heart of every single person who God has really captured and who God has called into leadership to bear fruit.

I want to produce something with my life. I want to make a difference, Lord. I don't want to have to look back on my life and say basically that I fixed up my house. We have a really great house and everything is really fixed up. Man, I have wonderful decor.

I don't want to look back on my life and say that what I have really produced is that I have this incredible car. Or even that I produced a whole bunch of sermons.

I want my life to count for something and so do you. And it has to do, Paul says, with who you are married to and ultimately whether you get this concept of grace-based living. See, three times in the first five or six verses Paul tells us that our relationship to rules and the laws change. There is no more condemnation. There is no more penalty. There is no more trying to gain God's acceptance. You have to let the law die. You are not married to that rule-based, performance-based style of life anymore. It has to die.

Somebody comes into my office saying, "Well, I have been unfaithful to my spouse. I have been involved with this other person." One of the first questions that I would ask that person is "Are you willing to cut it off completely? Are you willing to let that relationship die right now? Cut it off?"

And if they say, "Well, I would really like to keep the lines of communication open. I would like to be friends with the woman at my job. I don't want to hurt her or hurt him. We can support one another. He needs me. She needs me right now." I know that there is no hope for their marriage.

And we live like adulterers, forgive me, who want to keep the lines open to rule-based, performance-based non-grace-based living. Yeah, I would like to be married to Jesus and I would like to hear what he says about me, that he can do what I cannot do. But I feel like I need to keep the channels of friendship open to performance-based living.

Well, there is no hope for your marriage with Jesus. And Paul says that if you want to live that way you are just going to live in bondage. You are going to live divided with a divided heart, wanting one thing and doing another thing. Every time you slip back into rule based living you are going to have a divided heart. You cannot live that way.

You have to live married to a grace-based savior.

Chapter 8, Paul tells us how to tap into the power of God by trusting in God's action in us to overcome sin. And I want to finish with these thoughts.

You know, you cannot focus on yourself and focus on God at the same time. When you focus on yourself, you ignore God. When you want to break a habit in your life, you want to go ahead and be productive, you must focus on

God and what God can do. Do it yourself stuff is just a dead-end. We put it to death. And it kindles in us a sense of wonderful adventure.

Let me read, in closing, from Eugene Peterson's version of Romans 8. He says,

"The law always ended up being used as a Band-Aid instead of a deep healing of it and now what the law code asks for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the spirit is doing in us. Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own moral muscle, but never get around to exercising it in real life. Those who trust in God's action in them, find that God's spirit is in them living and breathing God. Obsession with self in these matters is a dead-end. Attention to God leads us out into the open into a spacious free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God. He ends up thinking more about himself than God. So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There is nothing in it for us. Nothing at all. The best thing to do is to give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go. This resurrection life you receive from God is not a timid, grave tending life, it is adventurously expectant, greeting God with a child-like, 'What's next Papa?' God's spirit touches our spirit and confirms who we really are. We know who he is and therefore we know who we are—Father and children."

Let's pray.