

Grace-Based Relationships
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We are in a sermon series entitled Relationships: A Mess Worth Making. We have seen how God created us for relationships, but sin and selfishness make relationships messy. However – our relationship with God gives us hope that we can have godly relationships with people.

My sermon today is entitled Grace-Based Relationships.

We usually think of grace in terms of God's grace towards us. Grace is God's unconditional love, unmerited favor and unlimited power. And the God who is gracious to us wants us to be gracious to others. He wants our relationships to be grace-based. For instance, 1 Peter 4:10 says:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

In other words – we have all received undeserved gifts from God through His grace – and so we should minister that grace to other people. And believe me, it requires receiving God's grace for ourselves in order to give grace to others. That's why Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:12:

We have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

In other words – we can only act right towards others by God's grace!

As we've seen: all relationships experience difficulties. There are no perfect relationships - no perfect friends, no perfect spouses, no perfect parents and no perfect children. In fact, when we officiate at weddings, we always say that marriage is an unconditional covenant with an imperfect person. But God made us to be connected to one another, so what are we to do? Be gracious to one another!

A lot of people think that communication is the most important thing in a good relationship. Communication is important, but the *most* important thing is grace. That's why Colossians 4:6 says: *Let your conversation be always full of grace.*

Communication only works when it is grace-based!

We need grace-based relationships because people are imperfect and they will let us down, fail us and hurt us. Every relationship you have, from your spouse to your neighbor, requires grace.

And the more important the relationship, the more grace you will need to give—for the more deeply you know someone, the more deeply flawed you will discover them to be.

So, “What are your relationships based on?” Many Christians would say my relationships are based on the Bible - and that’s good.

But you can be right on one level and totally wrong on another!

You can believe the Bible but enforce it in an ungodly way.

You can be right in what you believe but wrong in how you express it.

You can be so extreme that you become legalistic. Legalism is a strict or excessive conformity to the law or to rules. In fact, legalism chooses rules over relationship. Legalism is performance-oriented rather than people-oriented.

Legalism is more concerned with outward appearances than the heart.

Some of us were raised in legalistic churches where holiness was based on outward appearance. For instance, some churches didn’t let women wear makeup or cut their hair.

My dad was a Baptist pastor – we were not allowed to have playing cards in the house or play pinball games because people might think we were gambling. It was all outward conformity to rules. I’m telling you that that kind of pressure from the outside to keep rules does not result in true holiness. In fact, it results in a curse because Galatians 3:10-11 says

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

The New Living Translation says: *Those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under a curse.*

In other words – people who think they can make themselves holy by keeping God’s law are under the curse of the law because no one can keep all of God’s law in their own strength. We are made righteous by grace through faith, not by works.

And wherever there is an absence of grace - the result is always a curse – or a lack of blessing. That’s what I mean by a curse – the absence of God’s blessing.

And we have an enemy who wants us to be cursed, not blessed. He wants us to be graceless pastors pastoring graceless churches. He wants us to be graceless people living in graceless families and graceless relationships.

How do you recognize a family or a church or a friendship that is operating apart from God’s blessing?

Using the word CURSE as an acrostic we can see five symptoms of graceless, legalistic relationships.

C Controlling

Graceless relationships have the goal of control. This can happen in families when parents are overly concerned about what other people think - it leads to parents controlling children or one spouse trying to control the other.

To have a grace-based family – we must realize God created us to rule in life together – not to rule over each other. Genesis 1:27-28 says:

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Man and woman were created to rule in life together. That's the way it was until sin entered the picture and messed up their relationship! When Adam and Eve sinned – everything changed because a curse entered the world. We find this in Genesis 3:14-19 where God cursed the serpent. God cursed the ground and made man's work harder. But listen to what God said to the woman in verse 16:

And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.

Adam and Eve ruled together until sin entered the picture. Then there began a struggle between man and woman to rule each other. The first symptom of graceless relationships is control! And most homes have this fight for control going on to this day!

I grew up in a time when the man ruled the roost and the woman's role in life was just to do what the husband told her to do. The husband ruled and the wife submitted. I thought that was a pretty good way of life until I got married and this fight for control started.

Many husbands never read their Bible, but they can quote one Scripture: wives submit to your husbands. I can't tell you how many times in the early days of marriage I told my wife – submit! I used that to try to control her and get my own way. But as I studied the word of God – I realized that God's original intent was for us to rule together as partners in life.

Jesus died to redeem us – but not back to the curse!
He did not die to redeem us back to the place of fallenness.
Jesus died to redeem us back to God's original intent.

God's intent is not for families to live under the curse where we fight for control – but that we would love each other and be mutually submissive.

As I said, men love to quote Ephesians 5:22 to their wives:

Wives, submit to your husband as to the Lord.

And women love to quote Ephesians 5:25 to their husbands:

Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church.

But this whole passage on family begins in Ephesians 5:21 by saying:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

It starts with mutual submission.

Then it goes on to tell wives are told to submit rather than to contend for control. Then it tells husbands to love rather than dominate.

Mutual submission is the foundation of a grace-based family! God wants us to be partners, not enemies. Working together, not against each other. Ruling together, not ruling over each other. So stop trying to control other people!

And if you are in a controlling relationship, you need to act!

You might need to confront some issues with some people.

You might need to get out of a controlling friendship.

If you're married – you might need some help to learn to rule together rather than trying to rule each other.

Here are some signs that a relationship is controlling:

- Constant criticism over every little thing
- Conditional love
- Creating a relational “debt” – you owe me because I did this for you
- Overactive jealousy, accusations or paranoia
- Not respecting your boundaries or need for alone time
- Trying to isolate you from others
- Arguing to the point you are worn out and give in to what they want
- Inability to hear your side of the story
- Pressuring you into doing things you don't want to do
- Using putdowns, intimidation, guilt or threats to get their own way
- Using the Bible to get their own way
- Blaming you for their bad behavior
- Telling you that you are nothing without them
- Or they tell you that they are nothing without you.

Listen - people who want to control you don't really love you.

Love means meeting other people's needs – but controlling people only want you to give them their way so their needs are met.

A controlling relationship is never a grace-based relationship.

Here are some other symptoms of grace-less relationships:

U Unforgiving

Relationships without grace do not practice forgiveness. Everyone holds grudges forever and nothing ever really gets resolved. This is another attempt to control by refusing to let go of past wrongs.

R Rejecting

Relationships without grace practice rejection rather than acceptance. It is a sin to be different in any way in these relationships. You cannot have your own feelings or opinions or you will be shunned.

S Shaming

Relationships without grace are shame-based. Shame gives the message “You’re worthless, defective, unloveable.” Shaming is another way to try to control behavior.

E Ego-driven

Relationships without grace are self-centered rather than other-centered. The reason control, rejection and shame are used is to keep others in line so I will look good. I want to look like a good husband and a good father so I control my wife and kids. They must toe the line so I don’t look bad to others. Bottom line – I might look spiritual, but I’m selfish because it’s all about me.

These 5 characteristics of graceless relationships are the opposite of the characteristics of grace-based relationships.

Where graceless relationships have the goal of controlling people -
Grace-based relationships have the goal of empowering people.

Where graceless relationships withhold forgiveness -
Grace-based relationships give and forgive.

Where graceless relationships reject people -
Grace-based relationships accept people.

Where graceless relationships shame people -
Grace-based relationships build people up.

Where graceless relationships are self-centered -
Grace-based relationships are God-centered and other-centered.

So – what do we do? How do we have grace-based relationships?

By receiving God's grace for ourselves and being empowered to give grace to others.

Think of the story of the prodigal son found in Luke 15. In this story – the father represents God. This story shows what grace-based relationships look like.

Grace-based relationships are giving

The father gave the prodigal son his inheritance even though his son was not really ready to receive this money. He was not mature enough to go into the world and make his own way. The father knew that – but the son did not.

Here's an important point: the Father did not wait for perfection before He gave to the son. And we must be willing to allow people to make some mistakes in the learning process.

Grace-based relationships empower others, rather than control them

God – like the father of the prodigal – lets us go into situations that initially may hurt us, but ultimately help us grow up. Obviously, there's a time to protect children and to keep them from certain influences. But there's also a time to prepare them for life in the world.

We do not prepare them by being fear-based or controlling. Instead, we should gradually empower them – in an age-appropriate way to make decisions and live with the consequences.

The father of the prodigal son did not panic when his son went off the deep end, nor did he go out of his way to prevent the consequences of his son's foolish behavior. He simply kept trusting that he would return home as a broken and better person.

In the meantime, he left the porch light on. How do we leave the porch light on? By not turning on them when they leave. By not trying to control them or shame them.

Grace-based relationships forgive

When the prodigal son repented and went back home – his father did not make him go through a time of penance or earning his way back into the family. He immediately forgave and restored the son to the family. He saw his position – as a son – rather than his dirty condition.

Last time I checked, none of us are totally holy yet. We're on our way, but we're still a great ways off! Yet, He who knew no sin became sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ. God sees us as righteous in Christ! He sees us through the eyes of grace and we are accepted in the Beloved.

Likewise, grace-based relationships look at people through the eyes of grace and see their position in Christ in spite of their condition.

Grace-based relationships accept others rather than reject them

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Luke 15:20:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

His father did not shame him. He did not say, “How dare you show your face here after all you’ve done.” His father ran to him – even when he was a great ways off – even in the stinky mess he was in – and loved him anyway. He showed grace and mercy to him. Isn’t this what drew the son home?

Grace-based relationships accept people rather than reject them. This does not mean all behavior is acceptable. But we love everyone regardless.

The father was full of love, acceptance and forgiveness. But, the older brother was rule-based, legalistic, and judgmental. As a result, he could not accept the prodigal back. The older brother obviously had not entered into the grace of his father. That shows us that we can only be grace-based to others to the degree we’ve experienced the grace of God for ourselves.

We’ve all rebelled against God at some time in our lives. And what did your father do when you repented? He showed you grace. And He’s still showing you grace. And He wants us to show His grace to others. He wants us to have grace-based relationships.

But how do we do that? By receiving God’s grace for ourselves and being empowered to give grace to others. We can’t do this in our own strength, but God told Paul in 2 Cor. 12:9”

My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.

According to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, the word sufficient has two main meanings: “to be possessed of unfailling strength; and to be enough.”

So, God’s grace is God’s power and God’s power is always enough. Listen – there are many messy relationships in the Bible that were restored by God’s grace!

Grace enabled Jacob to fix his messed-up relationship with Esau - the brother he deceived.

Grace enabled Joseph to be restored to the brothers who sold him into slavery!

Grace enabled Hosea to forgive his wife who cheated on him!

Grace enabled David to not retaliate against King Saul who was out to kill him!

Grace gave Jesus the strength to forgive those who were crucifying Him!

If grace was enough for that – grace is enough to help your messy relationships today!