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CULTIVATING GRACE IN THE HEARTS
OF TRUTH-ZEALOTS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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December 2014

APPROVAL SHEET

CULTIVATING GRACE IN THE HEARTS
OF TRUTH-ZEALOTS

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I dedicate this thesis to my wife, Lynn, who by God's grace has patiently endured my growth in graciousness. Although we met a few years into our Christian lives, and after the Lord had already knocked a few of my rough edges off, she has been by my side for many more steps of refinement. May God help us both to be more like our Lord, who was full of grace and truth.

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PREFACE

The study behind this work about cultivating graciousness in the hearts of those enflamed for God's truth is highly personal. Early in my Christian life the Lord used biblical debates with Christians from many different theological traditions to sharpen my understanding of the teaching of the Bible and develop a passion to know and communicate more and more of God's truth. Sadly, in those early days, my sincerity and earnestness was not always coupled with Christlike sweetness; in other words, I sometimes used the Bible as a club, leaving fellow Christians battered and bruised.

The Lord has used his truth and many wonderful people to help me grow in graciousness. Serving as the pastor of Faith Bible Church, Sharpsburg, Georgia, for over nineteen years has been a precious place to minister God's truth while becoming refined by it. I am grateful to God for the wonderful Christian brothers and sisters alongside whom I have served within the church throughout these years. They have patiently allowed me to preach and teach many of the subjects of the assignments that I have worked on for the seminary course over these past three years. One fellow church member, Anna Maupin, has been an especially great help to me with her editorial work in this thesis. I am also grateful for fellow ministers of the gospel with whom the Lord has surrounded me, both locally and throughout the world. Their examples and encouragements have been God's instruments of change in my life, helping me to grow in both truth and grace.

The professors at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the Biblical Spirituality emphasis, Don Whitney, Michael Haykin, and Joe Harrod, have all helped me with their investments of wonderful lectures, meaningful assignments, and personal time. The program has been a shot of spiritual life into my long-term pastorate. I especially

appreciate Don's personal encouragements and suggestions throughout this thesis.

My precious wife, Lynn, and our children, Charissa, Danielle, Chloe, and Josiah, have been patient with their busy husband and dad throughout this seminary program, which has culminated in this thesis. I thank God for the grace he has given to our family as we seek to serve him and love one another, and have a great time doing both. Thank you for your encouragements, sacrifices, patience, and love during these past years. Hopefully, we have all appreciated the Lord's grace to us and even grown in graciousness as we have tried to practice what I've been learning. May he help us to excel still more in love.

John Crotts

Sharpsburg, Georgia

December 2014

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a massive revival of the study of the theological teachings of the Protestant Reformation. In the late twentieth century, a great many evangelical pastors and church leaders were drawn primarily to pragmatic conferences and read a diet of devotional and practical Christian titles. Today, however, attendance at Christian conferences, especially those that feature distinctively theological and in-depth biblical messages, has now swelled to the thousands. Publishers are springing up to produce more and more theological and biblical books to satisfy the appetites of hungry readers. The demand for expositional sermons and even Reformed theological lectures online has multiplied, too.¹ This awakening in appetite for biblical and theological truth among Christians all over the world positively reflects more of the Bible's ideals for Christians and churches. Is it enough, however, for faithful believers to be merely zealous for God's truth?

The Christian life must be filled with an increasing knowledge and application of biblical truth. Accurate knowledge of the Bible and theology apart from a thorough application of that knowledge to one's own heart, however, leads the Christian to be swollen with pride (1 Cor 8:1). Many have recently referred to "the cage phase," in reference to young Christians who discover Reformed theology for the first time. In their

¹These trends have been traced out in John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); Jeremy Walker, *New Calvinism Considered* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2013); and Mark Oppenheimer, "Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2014, sec. U.S., accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/us/a-calvinist-revival-for-evangelicals.html>.

first months of being convinced of correct doctrine, these passionate Christians tend to use their new understanding of God's truth to impress, crush, or coerce those around them, and should be put into a cage until the phase passes. The antidote to this raw Christian zeal for the truth, however, is not to diminish love for and knowledge of the truth, but instead it is to elevate the graciousness that corresponds to that truth.

The Lord Jesus Christ provides the greatest model of one with a zeal to both know and to apply the truth of God. Although he knew the truth better than anyone who ever lived, he was never guilty of sinfully showing off his understanding of the Scriptures. While he used the Bible to correct and admonish others in need of it, these necessary corrections came accompanied with virtues such as love, gentleness, and kindness. These virtues can be summarized as graciousness. The Apostle John described Jesus as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). For zealous Christians to faithfully follow their Lord they must pursue God's truth in their minds and practice, but they must also intentionally cultivate graciousness in their hearts and lives.

Familiarity with the Literature

Many works have been written in order to help Christians recognize the importance of graciousness. Even if not in the entirety of these books, at least sections about godly attitudes like love and graciousness have appeared in works on biblical counseling, Christian living, Christian ministry, and within commentaries dealing with relevant texts of the Bible itself.

David Powlison has a Ph.D. in counseling and has spent years giving leadership to the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation in Philadelphia. His book *Speaking the Truth in Love* compiles many of his journal articles and essays on biblical counseling. The first nine chapters relate specifically to the subject in the title. Then his specialized application of the concept to the counseling room yields broader fruit for the cultivation of grace in the lives of believers. His chapter on "Hearing the

Music of the Gospel” includes sections on various facets of Christ’s grace and using the gospel in counseling to move towards practical changes in the lives of counselees.²

John Piper’s long time associate at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Sam Crabtree, has much to offer in his book *Practicing Affirmation*³ showing how the image of God in man and the facts of God’s creative and sustaining work in the lives of others call for positive affirmations which give glory to God and encourage the hearers. He spends time working out the implications of affirmation in practical situations. The author also interacts with potential objections and problems, such as tempting others to become proud by affirming them.

In a world where tolerance has become sacrosanct, New Testament scholar D. A. Carson provides analysis of how the practical meaning of tolerance has shifted from defending the rights of those with competing views to coexist to having to affirm each of these sometimes opposing views as equally valid. Carson also seeks to show how Christians should live in such a new world order. Because truth claims are of the essence of Christianity, Christians must assert truth claims in such a world that refuses to tolerate truth claims. Carson includes civility as part of the way forward.⁴

Mary Beeke, the wife of long time Grand Rapids pastor Joel Beeke, spends most of her book, *The Law of Kindness*, applying the Bible’s teaching about kindness to the various roles Christians have. Although she does not address the subject as an academic, her years of Christian experience as a pastor’s wife add weight to her practical words. She instructs spouses, parents, teenagers, and others on ways to cultivate kindness

²David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2005), 42–45.

³Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

⁴D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).

in their speech and lives. Beeke is concerned about more than outward actions, as she challenges her readers on the heart level with wise and pithy counsel in the arena of the thought life. “Let’s color our conclusions with compassion,”⁵ is an example of her style and substance.

I Beg to Differ by Tim Muehlhoff brings the light of a communications professor at Biola University onto the issues of speaking truth in a loving way.⁶ He combines biblical knowledge, ministry experience, and academic research into this practical work. He emphasizes the importance of communicating with people, finding out their reasons for their views, considering the timing of the conversations, as opposed to just communicating raw positions. The author uses significant amounts of jargon from the field of communication, but defines the terminology. Many illustrations contribute to the book’s readability and usefulness.

Peter O’Brien is a New Testament scholar from Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia. His commentaries and works are among the finest sources for evangelical pastors serious about understanding Paul’s language and intent of each passage. His outstanding work on Ephesians in the Pillar commentary series combines scholarship and readability. Special attention will be given here to his work on understanding Ephesians 4:15—“speaking the truth in love”—in its context within Ephesians and Paul’s writings.

Leon Morris’s work in the New International Commentary on the New Testament is a classic evangelical exposition of the Gospel of John⁷ by the late well-

⁵Mary Beeke, *The Law of Kindness: Serving with Heart and Hands* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

⁶Tim Muehlhoff, *I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Truth and Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014).

⁷Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans, 1995).

known principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia. His many other evangelical commentaries on the Gospels as well as other New Testament books add a wealth of insight into his work in each text. Particular attention will be given to his handling of John 1:14 which describes Jesus as “full of grace and truth.” Morris consistently writes as a scholar and a Christian gentleman, providing not only exegetical insight, but also helpful ideas to lead his readers to put God’s Word into practice.

Jay Adams has been a pioneer in the area of biblical counseling. Although he is known for strong biblical views plainly stated in his opposition to the Christian psychology movement, he also conscientiously tries to honor the Lord in the cultivation of graciousness. He also seeks to train other pastors and counselors to do the same. His many decades in the classroom, pulpit, and counseling office make his brief work, *Compassionate Counseling*, invaluable. Adams cannot help but to work out biblical indicatives into practical realities. He observes, “As love for God increases, proper love for others will increase. As love for God increases, a correct focus on the principles and practices of counseling will fall in line. Love for God is basic. So pursue it and, in time, other matters will come into clear focus.”⁸

Void in the Literature

While much has been said in both practical and technical works about the importance of Christians cultivating graciousness, there is a notable absence in practical instructions for working this grace out in a Christian’s life. The purpose of this thesis is to address that absence. A Christian may well grow in his or her passion for, and quality and quantity of biblical knowledge, but will discover a void in specific practical help in cultivating the virtue of graciousness that must correspond to that acquisition of knowledge of the truth. Some helpful ideas for practicing graciousness can be drawn by

⁸Jay Adams, *Compassionate Counseling* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2007).

broadening the subject to include virtues such as gentleness and kindness from works on the Fruit of the Spirit, such as by John Sanderson⁹ or Jerry Bridges.¹⁰ Commentaries explaining biblical texts that commend graciousness are excellent in aiding the mind to put together the pieces of the grammar and the flow of the context, but often lack ideas for application. Even books specifically on Christian communication and conciliation, while they strongly exhort readers to practice appropriate graciousness, do not offer many helpful suggestions for heart-level growth towards that biblical ideal. As a Christian becomes more zealous for doctrinal truths of the Bible, it is critical for him or her to correspondingly develop the gracious tone of the Bible.

Thesis

The faithful Christian life cannot be lived merely with a zeal for truth, but must also include cultivating corresponding graciousness. This thesis will describe graciousness biblically and demonstrate its essential place in the hearts of faithful Christians. This will involve the study of positive examples and commands about graciousness, as well as the negative consequences for those who lack grace. Further, the thesis will then demonstrate a wide variety of practical methods for Christians to cultivate graciousness in their lives. This will equip Christians, who are passionately committed to truth, to put on a corresponding, Christ-like heart of graciousness.

⁹John W Sanderson, *The Fruit of the Spirit: A Study Guide* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985).

¹⁰Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1983).

CHAPTER 2
THE IMPORTANCE BUT INADEQUACY
OF ZEAL FOR TRUTH

Against the backdrop of a Western culture that has become uncertain about absolute truth and a church culture that has often downplayed certainty about truth in order to accommodate and reach out to unchurched truth-doubters, there has been an incredible surge in churches, church leaders, and individual Christians who are zealous for truth. While there may be sociological and technological reasons for this amazing dynamic (for example, the internet allowing the rapid spread of Bible teaching and theological resources all over the world), ultimately such a massive surge in Christians zealous for the truth of the Bible can only be explained by a powerful working of the Holy Spirit. If raging rapids of new people passionate for truth can be observed in 2014, it has been surging only for the first years of the millennium, although a variety of streams of Christians seeking to understand and use the Bible have been trickling forward since the final decades of the twentieth century.¹

Since the 1970s strong Bible teachers like John MacArthur gathered seven thousand hearers at Grace Community Church to listen to hour long biblical expositions on Sunday mornings. Pockets of Christians all over the world listened to his cassette tapes and radio ministry. Southern California's Jesus People Movement of the 1970s did bear some lasting fruit of new Christians beginning to hunger for spiritual truth. At that

¹Josh Byers and Tim Challies created an infographic to chart the dates of the key people, books, and conferences in the development of the New Calvinist movement called "Where Did All These Calvinists Come From? A Visual History," accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.challies.com/resources/where-did-all-these-calvinists-come-from-a-visual-history>.

same time, small theological movements were happening in other parts of the country. R. C. Sproul created a study center in Ligonier, PA. In the 1970s, he began producing theological books, videotapes of some of his theological lectures, and hosting small conferences. Professor John Piper left Bethel College to assume the pastorate of Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1980. Although he was unknown to most Christians outside of the Twin Cities of Minnesota, he began to preach biblical and theological sermons and write books driving his readers to think about God's greatness and the profound truths of the Bible. In 1993, R. Albert Mohler became president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the denomination's flagship school, albeit also its most liberal seminary, with the specific intent of bringing the school back to its truth-oriented foundational roots. In yet another part of the country, the early 1990s saw just a few become a few hundred church leaders within the Southern Baptist Convention gathering together to listen to biblical preaching designed to return the convention to the Reformed roots of the founders of that demonization.

In the mid-1990s these movements were small, independent of one-another, and not well known. During the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, The Shepherds' Conference, John MacArthur's conference designed to train church leaders in biblical ministry, topped out at about 750 men. In 2001, The Shepherd's Conference was reorganized and added outside speakers such as John Piper, R. C. Sproul, Albert Mohler, and Steve Lawson. The attendance figures those next years rose to 1,500, 3,000, and then selling out at 3,500 with a waiting list two-months in advance. The Ligonier conference now regularly draws over 4,000 mostly lay-people to Orlando, FL to hear Bible drenched sermons and theology lectures. John Piper's influence has grown exponentially through his books, preaching, website, and conferences. The Together for the Gospel conference began in 2006 in Louisville, Kentucky as Mohler, Ligon Duncan, Mark Dever, C. J. Mahaney were joined by MacArthur, Sproul, Piper and nearly 3,000 church leaders

rallying around the Bible, God-centered views of life and ministry, and of course the gospel. This biannual conference has seen its attendance grow to 5,500, nearly 7,000, and nearly 8,000 in subsequent years. The Gospel Coalition has also gathered thousands in conferences in the opposite years as Together for the Gospel, beginning in 2005, encouraging some of the same truth-oriented priorities. 9Marks is a ministry begun by Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, devoted to helping churches engage in more biblically driven church ministry. Their impact is felt through a series of books, an interactive website, an electronic journal, and conferences in Washington, DC, and throughout the world.

While the Passion Conference has been mostly filled with college students since it's founding in 1997, the massive attendance figures also document the growing truth-movement across western churches. The format of their conferences has changed many times, however, their commitment to a passion to promote God-centered, truth-driven lives has stayed the same. The Passion Conference filled Atlanta's Georgia Dome with around 60,000 students in January of 2013. Twenty years after Mohler came to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as president, it is thoroughly committed to the truth of the Bible and has grown to become one of the largest seminaries in the world. It took John MacArthur's *Grace to You* thirty-two years to distribute 13 million of his teaching tapes, but after 2008, when they opened their website for free downloads of the sermons in MP3 format, 14.4 million sermons were downloaded in less than two years.² *Time Magazine* called *New Calvinism* one of the top ten influences in all of America in 2009.³ *The New York Times* featured a picture of Mark Dever at the head of a feature

²Iain H. Murray, *John Macarthur: Servant of the Word and Flock* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 158.

³David Van Biema, "The New Calvinism," *Time*, March 23, 2009, 50.

article about the impact of God-centered biblical ministry in American churches.⁴ Entire books have been written to track the growth and development of this movement, such as Colin Hansen's *Young, Restless, and Reformed*, and Jeremy Walker's *New Calvinism Considered*.⁵ Publishers have been selling thousands of massive new study Bibles, which Christians are using to understand more and more of the truth, such as *The MacArthur Study Bible* and the *ESV Study Bible*.⁶

These individual conferences, books, speakers, and participants would not agree with one another on every point, but they all are known for promoting a passion for God and his truth. These diverse individual streams of zeal for the Bible have gathered into a river of revival for the truth of the God. This passion has spread all over the United States and to many other cities and countries throughout the world in ways that did not exist twenty years before. These new attitudes embody the heart of the authors of Psalm 119 and Psalm 1, who wrote, "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" (Ps 119:72), "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps 119:103), "Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold" (Ps 119:127), and "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:1-2).

Those valuing the Bible's perspective about its own importance in the lives of Christians rejoice at the new zeal for God's truth flowing across the western world.

⁴Mark Oppenheimer, "Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2014, sec. U.S., accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/us/a-calvinist-revival-for-evangelicals.html>.

⁵Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008); Jeremy Walker, *The New Calvinism Considered* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2013).

⁶John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV*: rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013); *The ESV Study Bible*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

According to the Bible, zeal for the truth is a vital part of the life of a faithful Christian. Although this attitude is essential, it is inadequate. Before considering the reasons that zeal for truth is inadequate, let us establish the essential place the Bible's truth holds in the heart of faithful Christians.

The Essential Place of Zeal for the Truth

Because humans are creatures in God's world, their perspectives are always limited. A dog may be very intelligent, do many tricks, and be familiar with the places they live, but he or she will always carry the cognitive limitations of a canine. Collectively, humanity knows much more than it knew 500 years ago, and it has learned so much about God's world even in the past 50 years. No matter how many years the world continues and no matter how much humanity learns, though, it will always be limited to the perspective of a creature.

In addition to being limited by the Creator/creature distinction, every human also carries a skewed perspective because of depravity. Ever since Adam and Eve plunged humanity into sin, men and women have been born sinful. As David confessed his sinfulness he declared, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). While no human is as bad as they could be, all people are affected by sin in every part of their humanity. Sin affects a person's thinking, feeling, and choosing. It distorts their perspective about God, sin and righteousness, and the way of salvation. Jeremiah laments, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). As the Apostle Paul makes a case that all humanity is trapped in sin needing a Savior, he gives sin's litany through a series of quotations from the Old Testament:

As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one . . . Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. . . The venom of asps is under their lips. . . Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. . . Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and

misery, and the way of peace they have not known. . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Rom 3:10-18)

Although humans have sought to discover God and his ways in the world for as long as humans have walked upon the earth, because of the limitations of creatureliness and sinfulness, all of their discoveries have been inadequate. Because of God’s General Revelation, men and women can learn some things about God. Romans 1 and 2 describe the benefits God has given to all humanity through their awareness of creation and the conscience he placed within everyone. Even sinful people can learn that God is a great and powerful creator, and that there is a right and wrong and a judgment to come. Sadly, even these insights are wasted because of man’s sinfulness. Paul said,

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom 1:20-22)

In themselves, people have no hope of figuring God and his ways out on their own. But, in God’s kind graciousness, he has chosen to reveal himself to his creatures in the Scriptures. Theologians refer to this as the completion of God’s Special Revelation. The proclamation of God’s good message about himself to fallen creatures causes Paul to celebrate. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom 10:14-15).

For travelers who become lost, a GPS or a map can help them find out where they are and where they need to go. Similarly, the Bible designates itself as a map to orient a fallen human. The Bible tells men and women who they are and who God is. Even though they can learn some truth about God in a general way, that he is a powerful creator or that he is a judge, the Scriptures reveal far more about God’s holy character.

While people feel guilty when they break the laws of God written on their hearts (Rom 2:14-16), God's Word reveals God's standards with tremendous thoroughness. Sinful people who compare their morality with the commandments of God discover how desperately they have missed God's mark. God's judgment is described with frightful details. But God's love and mercy is also revealed in the Bible, as is his wonderful plan of salvation. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to live perfectly and die as a substitute for sinners on the cross, bearing God's wrath. On the third day, God raised him from the dead, offering eternal life to all people who will repent of their sins and trust in Jesus (John 3:16; Rom 6:23; 10:9-10). Paul calls the Word of God, "the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15).

If the Bible told sinful humans only these wonderful facts wouldn't that information deserve a consuming zeal? If the Bible truly reveals the character of God and the only way sinful creatures can be in a right relationship with their creator, every creature should be devoted to devouring the contents of these sacred writings. One can appreciate the incredible sacrifices men like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale made to translate the Bible into the English language. Certainly, zeal for God's truth is an essential part of the life of a faithful Christian.

The Inadequacy of the Truth

According to the true Word of God, however, zealously believing in God's truth is not enough to be a faithful Christian. Although exponentially growing numbers of Evangelicals are listening to Bible-based sermons, studying the Bible, and ordering their churches around an in-depth understanding of the truth of the Bible and its theological assertions, many of these same people are personally obnoxious. They are using their newfound knowledge of the truth like a club to assault those around them who have different understandings of the Bible. Although it may have taken them years to understand a point of theology and advocate it as a conviction, they impatiently and

aggressively challenge those who delay agreeing with them. In a contemporary expression of Reformation theology, authors Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones describe the Bible’s teachings about God’s sovereignty over man’s salvation. As they advocate the proper application of these teachings as humility and grace, they confess that they have been guilty of expressing the truth with more zeal than love. “At times Calvinists—the two of us included—have defended these five points about grace in ways that showed little grace toward fellow believers. And, for that, it’s time to repent. Calvinism for the sake of Calvinism is not worth fighting for—but grace is always worth fighting for.”⁷

Some suppose the antidote to the harsh tones of truth zealots is a lessening of love for the truth. Instead of fighting for truth, let us ignore theological distinctiveness and all get along, they advocate. But the truth of the Bible is manifestly so important for a person’s grasp of the identity of the Creator God, his character, his ways, and his will for humanity, one cannot love truth too much. The Lord Jesus Christ proves to be the ideal to which Christians must strive. John described Jesus as “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). While Jesus knew God’s revealed truth like no other man, he never used God’s truth in inappropriate ways. His graciousness always matched his knowledge of the truth.

In his first letter to the Corinthians preserved in the Bible, Paul used hyperbole to emphasize the profound importance of Christian love. In three overstated examples, Paul moves from extreme high to extreme low in examples to demonstrate the importance of love. He said, “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver

⁷Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 137.

up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-3). According to the Apostle, a person can fluently speak the language of angels, know all spiritual mysteries, and sacrifice every single thing they have for others, but if those extreme virtues don’t also come with corresponding love, they accomplish nothing, they count for nothing, and that person is nothing. Love is that important to the Lord.

What is the real antidote to the crisis of Truth-Zealots who verbally club people over the heads with their Bibles? It is the rich contents of the Bible that must work through their minds and down into their hearts and lives. Jesus’ brother James said, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas 1:22). The Bible tells us about God and his ways. It tells us that God is loving and kind, and that all of his followers should be loving and kind as well. Christians must put that truth into action. They cannot love in the ways God wants us to apart from the truth, but they must never try to separate God’s truth in their minds from God’s love in their lifestyles. The Bible describes the graciousness antidote that zealous Christians are to pursue.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL GRACIOUSNESS DEFINED

Different people can believe the same truth from the Bible, but express that truth in different ways, resulting in different responses in their hearers. Evan is convinced that the church gathers to reach unbelievers with the gospel, but Rick believes that the church gathers for believers to worship God and build one another up in the Lord with unbelievers as welcomed guests. As these two sincere Christians run into one another at the local coffee shop, they exchange perspectives. Tensions begin to rise as the conversation continues. Both Evan and Rick support their points of view from the Bible. Rick, however, becomes heated as he makes his case to Evan, not only motivated by his conviction that the Bible is true, but also because he believes that he is giving the most biblical position. Rick's confidence becomes strident. Rick starts to mock those who believe like Evan, comparing Evan's views to a shallow celebrity preacher. Rick assumes he is completely right, and impatiently finishes Evan's sentences. Rick even begins retorting before he really understands Evan's concerns.

Although God uses his truth to change the minds and hearts of his people, he works through means. While every person whom God uses to express his truth will be flawed, according to God's design, added graciousness produces added persuasiveness. The exact same truth can be delivered in entirely different ways. The inspired authors of the Scriptures teach the importance of using graciousness throughout their writings. The pure Word of God is designed to come through people so gripped with God's grace that they express that truth even to opponents of the truth with tact and kindness.

To a group of wives of men training for ministry, long-time pastor's wife Carol Mack offered these profoundly simple words of instruction for such occasions, "Be nice." As we will see, there are times when all Christians should be firm, but there are far more situations when simple niceness is the precise medicine. Pastors and their wives have a unique vantage point in the front and center of all kinds of manifestations of church life. Although the Christian life ought to be consistently joyful, because of remaining sin, Christians regularly live inconsistently with the life and teaching of Jesus. Pastors and their wives not only struggle themselves on occasion to honor the Lord, they also encounter others in the church at their weakest moments as well. Sometimes pastor's wives endure the added temptation to lash out those in the church critical of their husbands. Carol Mack's advice proves timeless, "Be nice." What is true for pastors and their wives is also true for all Christians.

Long before Carol Mack, God spoke through King Solomon with equal clarity about the importance of graciousness in a person's speech. He clarified his instruction using contrasting parallelism, which is a device of Hebrew poetry. In these cases the sweet fruit of graciousness appears in complete contrast with the destruction of a harsh mouth. "A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches. A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself" (Prov 11:16-17). "The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD, but gracious words are pure" (Prov 15:26). Other Proverbs simply make the positive case for grace. "The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body" (Prov 16:23-24). "He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend" (Prov 22:11).

In order to know one's direction, the destination must be clearly identified. This chapter will define graciousness and its biblically parallel ideas like gentleness,

kindness, and love by considering how the terms are used in key texts of the Scriptures. What exactly is gracious speech? Gracious speech is words and tones marked by pleasantness, kindness, the will to help, to encourage, and to convey regard. It is pleasantness; it is being kind; it's having a desire to help and to be a blessing to another person.¹ Clifford Pond said, “Graciousness is an absence of deliberate aggravation and any kind of rabble-rousing; it is impregnated with courtesy, love, humility, and transparent sincerity.”² Such speech is not being harsh, critical, or judgmental. Pond added, “A gracious speaker always has the good of others at heart and not their hurt.”³ As David Hubbard noted in his commentary on Proverbs, “Kind words from a respected person are a prescription for incredible effectiveness.”⁴ Graciousness is the right medicine for all kinds of maladies of the heart.

Sometimes Christians must say hard things, such as when rebuking and correcting a stubborn friend, or warning a false teacher. These words need to be clear and firm—they will not always seem to be encased with pleasantness. As Christian lawyer and mediator Ken Sande observed, “Of course, there are times when you must speak to others in a firm or even blunt manner, especially if they have refused to pay attention to a gentle approach and are persisting in sinful behavior. Even so, it is wise to take a gentle approach first and get firmer only as necessary (1 Thess. 5:14-15).”⁵ There is also a place for righteous indignation against those who have hardened themselves into heresy and hypocrisy. To those in danger of drawn away from the truth, the prophets, the apostles,

¹David Allan Hubbard, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 225.

²Clifford Pond, *The Beauty of Jesus* (London: Evangelical Press, 1994), 33.

³Ibid.

⁴Hubbard, *Proverbs*, 224.

⁵Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 171.

and the Lord himself would sometimes burst forth with a passionate warning.⁶ And yet, there can still be a gracious intent within even a firm rebuke. Rebukes are given in order to help a person in sin or to halt someone heading down a foolish path, not to harm the one being rebuked. A person nearby will raise an alarmed voice to alert someone carelessly stumbling forward into a busy street. Such communication may be strong and clear. The volume elevates and the tone sparks with urgency. But what is the motive behind the mouth in such situations? Is it to be harsh and critical or is it to rescue a friend from danger? “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov 27:6). Christian communication must never be self-motivated, but marked by graciously building up other people based on their needs (Eph 4:29). Sometimes Christians must speak with firm directness, but usually they should begin with sweetness. On the related virtue of gentleness, Paul Tripp commented, “Gentleness means I don’t damage the very person I am seeking to help. Gentleness doesn’t mean compromising the truth. Rather, it means keeping the truth from being compromised by harshness and insensitivity.”⁷

While such descriptions seem simple, there is a depth and breadth to the Bible’s teachings about graciousness. Like Carol Mack’s simple yet sage counsel to be nice, cultivating graciousness requires a patient pursuit of the profound implications of way the Bible unfolds the concepts.

The Depth of Graciousness

The Lord Jesus described the pipeline that exists between a person’s heart and mouth. As Jesus exposed the Pharisees, who spoke bad words in bad ways, because their hearts were bad, he declared, “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you

⁶David Bailey, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Life & Legacy of Roger Nicole* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006), 189.

⁷Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 189.

are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matt 12:34-35). In another place, Jesus taught his disciples the place of outward actions and the priority of the roots of a person’s heart condition. “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone” (Matt 15:18-20). In addition to the words that can be gracious or harsh, tones of voice, facial expressions, or other non-verbal noises also originate from the heart of those communicating.

In the biblical usage of anatomy, the heart is the center of a person’s inner self. It is where he or she thinks, feels, develops attitudes, and makes decisions. The heart is the fountainhead of a person’s true self, which explains Solomon’s strong admonition, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23). The direct connection between the heart and the mouth was already seen in Proverbs 16:23, which said, “The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.” Behind every outward manifestation of graciousness and harshness there is always a heart-level source. In order to appreciate the full depth of gracious communication, one must always consider the hearts of the people involved.

The Breadth of Graciousness

Surveying four key passages in the New Testament enlarges one’s grasp of the breadth and the significance of biblical graciousness. In addition to using the term graciousness, the Bible uses parallel ideas of love, kindness, gentleness, and patience. These qualities overlap and blend together to produce the God-like virtues that God calls his children to manifest in their dealings with each other and among the rest of the world.

Graciousness Humbly Seeks to Strengthen Others

In his first biblical letter to the church, Paul answers a series of questions that the Corinthians had asked him. The phrase, “now concerning,” which appears several times in the second half of the letter, introduces these questions that Paul in turn addresses. The issue of food being offered to idols is the question raised in chapter eight, but Paul answers in a way to instruct the church about the larger issue of loving Christians who have consciences easily offended by certain matters. He says, “Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1).

The specific knowledge to which Paul refers is the theological truth that idols aren’t real gods, and therefore, eating food offered to idols is a non-issue. Although he says, “all of us possess knowledge,” he notes in verse 7 that, “not all possess this knowledge” and opens up a discussion about those who came to Christ directly from idolatry and maintain some scars from that world. The quotation marks in verse 1 represent that this is a citation from the Corinthians’ letter to Paul, which included their series of questions. Paul affirmed that theological knowledge is a good and necessary acquisition for all believers. But in this specific case, some members of the Corinthian church had large amounts of theological knowledge dangerously divorced from loving practice. They used their “knowledge” to harmfully cause some of their fellow church members to stumble into sin. Instead of letting their theological knowledge flow through their hearts into loving actions, they became filled with pride.

Israel’s Dead Sea is the lowest spot on planet earth. It receives input from the Jordan River, meager amounts of annual rainfall, and streams that provide small seasonal offerings, but the Dead Sea has no outlet. Water and minerals flow in, but they do not flow out, which stagnates into a chemically toxic situation for anything trying to live below the surface. People with great zeal to take in and understand God’s truth, who do

not then work that truth out in their character and within loving relationships will also develop a stagnation of spiritually toxic pride and ultimately spiritual death.

According to Paul, love takes theology and uses it to build up other Christians. If biblical knowledge is compared to an instruction manual for assembling a project, one could foolishly devour the manual in order to become a mere theoretical scholar of building things. Such a person could pounce on others who had different ideas about putting together projects. Citing exact page numbers, he could even quote the manual in the original Chinese language in which it was written. While his head became inflated with facts, he missed the entire point of the manual. In this illustration, the manual exists for the actions of building the project; in the case of true Christianity, love uses theological knowledge to build up the spiritual character of fellow Christians.

The same idea of building up fellow Christians appears in other places in the New Testament. Later in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions building the church up by means of spiritual gifts. Each Christian has been given gifts and abilities by the Holy Spirit to strengthen other Christians in the church. A symptom of pride within the Corinthian church was their desire to use their spiritual gifts to show off or to build themselves up spiritually. Paul exhorted them, on the other hand, to use their gifts in ways that built up others in the body of Christ (1 Cor 14:1-5, 17-19, 30-33). In another letter Paul told the Ephesians that all of a Christian's words should be uttered in ways to build up others in the church family. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that is may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29). The Bible's standard for speech is incredibly high. Every single word that comes across one's lips must be infused with grace in order to build up the people who hear. There are no vacations or even coffee breaks permitted in order to unleash harsh, critical, unkind, or harmful speech—a believer's mouth must always be on duty, speaking good words in good ways at the right time.

Graciousness Accompanies Truth in Mutual Ministry among Christians

The Apostle Paul lays out the Lord's comprehensive strategy for churches to bring themselves to maturity in Ephesians 4:11-16.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The Lord Jesus first gives gifted men to his churches (that would be the church leadership). Their task is to equip the members of the church to minister to one another. As the whole church family serves each other a stabilizing maturity develops—the church is less susceptible to cunning and craftiness of false teachers. The major means of ministry given to the church for this equipping and ministering is the Word of God. But a critical component of the comprehensive strategy is that the Word must be communicated to others in a particular manner. “Rather, speaking the truth *in love*, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15, emphasis added). Notice several observations about this sentence.

The term *rather* shows that Christians serve each other in a different way than the false teachers. Dangerous people will come with destabilizing crafty schemes and will intentionally try to lure vulnerable church members away from the truth. In order to counteract these influences, true believers are to verbalize God's truth to one another.⁸ As

⁸Cf. John R. W Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 171-72. Stott interprets the participle “speaking the truth” as “truthing,” understanding it to be more comprehensive—Christians both speaking and living God's truth in love. But the term is used of verbal testimony and in this context it is in direct contrast to the verbal contents of the false teachers. See P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1999), 310–12.

believers draw near and interact, each one's spiritual needs will become apparent. A different times Christians need different things. Some need encouragement while parenting a rebellious teenager, others need a rebuke because they are willfully sinning, others need wisdom about a job change, some need comfort at the loss of a friend, and others may need to understand more of what the Bible teaches about the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible has everything Christians need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3-4). Christians receive this biblical help as fellow church members communicate it personally during times of specific need. There is no craftiness or scheming to undermine the other Christian. Instead fellow believers express and apply God's truth to give strength and support to the one in need.

Another contrast with the false teachers in Ephesians 4 is the motivation of the teaching. The false teachers desire to deceive those they spoke to. God's truth, however, must be ministered in love. The confession of Christian truth can be cold and unattractive if unaccompanied by the spirit of Christian love.⁹ Love seeks the welfare of the person being addressed. Frank Thielman writes, "Love involves seeking the benefit of the undeserving, even at one's own expense (2:4-5; 3:19; 5:2, 25; cf. Gal. 2:20b) and is bound up with humility, gentleness, and a willingness to work together for unity and peace (Eph. 4:2-3)."¹⁰ Love appears as a lofty theme in this entire letter to the Ephesians. Love motivated God to choose a people for himself before time began (1:4-5). Love motivated God to raise spiritually dead rebels to life and give them saving faith (2:4-5). Paul prays for the Ephesian church to be spiritually strong enough to be able to grasp the amazing love of Christ for them (3:17-19). Paul includes love, alongside of humility,

⁹F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 352.

¹⁰Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 285.

gentleness, and patience, as vital ingredients in maintaining Christian unity within the church (4:2-3). Christian husbands are to love their wives after the self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for his church (5:25).

The goal of this truth and love ministry is comprehensive growth in Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect head or ruler of his body (Eph 1:22-23), but like a human baby with an oversized head and an undersized body, the body of Christ must grow to match up to its head. Each part of Christ's body has a part to play in ministering God's truth in godly ways to see Christ's maturity goals for his people accomplished.

Graciousness Evidences Trusting God to Change Others

In his final, Scriptural letter, Paul instructs Timothy to persevere in Christian ministry. As Paul nears his own death, his priorities for his protégé rise to the surface. Timothy must be a man of God's inspired and profitable Word—learning it, holding on to it, and passing it on to others in private and public ministry. It would not be enough to merely hold to the truth in a cold and calculated manner, however, Timothy was to live out the grace of the Lord that is revealed in that true Word.

Theological controversies often breed quarrels. The dangers of theological wrestling matches are repeated throughout the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus (e.g., 1 Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-5; 6:2-5; Titus 3:9-11). While Timothy is to fight the good fight and hold to the truth with a iron strong grip when the truth itself is being attacked (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7), he must not be drawn into speculative debates which often move beyond the bounds of the Bible. These are most likely to produce quarrels. Even when holding firm to the truth, fighting the opponents is not allowed.

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim 2:23-26)

The root term for quarrels and quarrelsome in verses 23-24 was used of fighting with weapons, but it was used in the New Testament for non-physical wars of words, where one set out to verbally destroy his opponent (2 Cor 7:5; Titus 3:9; Jas 4:1).¹¹ Paul had already told Timothy that an elder must not be characterized by this kind of fighting spirit (1 Tim 3:3). Here in the context of theological fighting, Paul reiterates its prohibition. Instead of seeking to destroy the theological enemy, the servant of the Lord Jesus is to be kind to everyone.

The minister is not to hurl invectives at his opponent, but to offer instructions. He must clearly seek to communicate the truth. The fact that Paul mentions patience and enduring evil implies that these gentle instructions might not go over with the other person right away. There may be returned a lack of kindness and gentleness in response to the gracious efforts of the instructor, but Paul calls Timothy to bear up under such without resentment.

A gracious heart flowing in kind and gentle manners does not exclude correction from happening. Teaching can be both positive and negative. An elder, according to Paul must know God's truth well enough to positively exhort God's people in sound doctrine, and to negatively rebuke those who contradict that truth (Titus 1:9). Timothy must take a stand on God's truth; gently instruct others faithfully, but also to correct those who are teaching against that truth.

The phrase *with gentleness* is emphasized by its forward position in the sentence in the original language.¹² This term adds to the gentleness notes of humility, courtesy, consideration, and meekness. It is the opposite of brashness, haughtiness, and

¹¹John A Kitchen, *The Pastoral Epistles for Pastors* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2009), 383.

¹²*Ibid.*, 384.

rudeness.¹³ This gentleness is part of the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in God's children (Gal 5:23). Gentleness is also an essential virtue when seeking to rescue a brother or sister caught up in any kind of trespass. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1).

A pragmatist justifies harsh, aggressive, and firm tone of voice, along with loud volume when dealing with those that disagree with him or her. They rationalize that harshness lets the other person know how serious the person is about their point of view. Such contests can be won because of intimidation and submission rather than persuasion about the disputed truth claims. The pragmatist would not appreciate harshness being removed from his cache of weapons. But true change doesn't come through brutal tones and language. According to 2 Timothy 2:26, it is always God who changes hearts and minds. These opponents need to repent and come to the knowledge of the truth. There is a moral and intellectual component that needs to be addressed, but it is not intensity of argument that yields the desired effect. God causes change. He uses his truth graciously conveyed to create the different heart direction within the opponent. This change should always be the desired outcome, not proudly winning a battle and leaving an opponent flattened and humiliated in the dust. Because the outcome is always in the hands of God, God's methodology can be utilized with confidence. God works through the means of his Word being clearly, patiently, and gently taught.

Graciousness Creates Gospel-Openings with Unbelievers

In addition to consistent kindness displayed in communication with fellow Christians, believers are also to speak kindly to unbelievers as a means of opening up

¹³John R. W Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy: Guard the Gospel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 78.

doors for the gospel message to be proclaimed. Paul eagerly asked the Colossian church to remember him in their prayers. His main concern was for his own opportunities for the gospel and clarity of speech when they came. “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak” (Col 4:2-4). Although he is an apostle engaged in frontline evangelism requiring a steady supply of prayer support, he also tasked the Colossians to be part of the process of evangelism as well.

“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4:5-6). Gracious speech was part of what they were called to do. Notice that the context, however, is still about sharing the gospel with outsiders. As Christians went about their daily work in the world, they were to walk wisely. Their heads were to be up; their eyes were to be open. Because the total time of every life is limited, Christians needed to take advantage of chances to prepare other people for the life to come. Being opportunistic in the world takes wisdom, but also grace. As believers interact with outsiders to the faith, they were called to relate to others graciously as God had graciously related to them. Earlier in the letter, Paul described the church believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, “which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth” (Col 1:6). As the Christians in Colossae heard about God graciously offering to forgive their sins through the person and work of the Lord Jesus, and seen the fruit of their faith develop in their lives, gospel grace became the platform of engagement with all of those around them in the town who had not yet trusted in Christ.

Colossian gracious speech was to be seasoned with salt. As food becomes more appetizing when the proper seasonings are applied, so also gracious conversations also create positive interest and opportunities for deeper explanations of the gospel sources of the sweetness.

The Lord has kindly dealt with his people and he calls them to emulate his example in their dealings with fellow believers as well as with outsiders. Gracious speech begins in the heart. It is loving, pleasant, and kind, seeking the welfare of the one being communicated with. It uses God's truth to strengthen the character of others. When someone strays from the truth, God rescues and restores those people as others come and gently speak God's truth. Sometimes clear corrective words must be used, and even rebukes. But the motivation of strong speech is not to win an argument, to be critical of others in order to elevate oneself, or even to seek revenge on someone taking a different view. The motive of God's people speaking graciously is love, based on the love that God showed to his people through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As Christopher ordered his coffee, he noticed his friends Evan and Rick intensely engaged in a discussion over something in the Bible. As he approached them he realized the debate related to the goal of the gathered church—for believers or unbelievers. Christopher's entrance functioned like a time out, giving Evan and Rick a chance to catch their breath and settle their hearts. When the discussion resumed Christopher weighed in. Like Rick, Christopher understood that the church gathers for believers to worship God and build each another up with unbelievers as welcomed guests. He even used some of the same arguments as Rick, but without Rick's argumentative style. Rick sat still watching Christopher choose to be gracious in his tone and choice of words. Christopher patiently listened to Evan's point of view, and then respectfully challenged Evan to consider other truths from Scripture and their implications. Although

Evan didn't decide to change churches that day, he genuinely listened to Christopher's perspective. Because Evan realized that Christopher had considered his point of view, his heart was opened to Christopher's kind approach.

If Evan did change his understanding of the primary purposes of the gathered church, it would not have been because Christopher was nice. God uses his truth to change the hearts of others. Christopher's graciousness, however, was the conduit God used to convey that truth to Evan. Just as God graciousness revealed his truth to rebellious, unworthy creatures, he expects his truth to be spread through gracious men and women. The story of the three Christians debating theology over coffee was created to illustrate the biblical definitions of graciousness. The Bible, however, provides other clear real life examples of graciousness in action, the greatest of which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL GRACIOUSNESS EXEMPLIFIED

God made people to imitate. Children learn to correctly use complex language and grammar by imitating those around them long before they enter a classroom. Solomon wisely warned his son to pay careful attention to those he spent time with because of the power of example for good or bad. “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (Prov 13:20). In order to expand our understanding of the Bible’s teaching about graciousness, let’s consider some examples. The ultimate example of every virtue is the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was fully God and fully man, he lived on the earth as a man filled with the Holy Spirit. He lived perfectly to fulfill all righteousness and qualify to die on the cross in the place of guilty sinners, but he also lived perfectly among us to give us the ultimate example of how to live. Included in his model life was a pattern of graciousness in his dealings with others. In addition to the perfect example of Christ, let us also consider the example of a sinful man transformed by the grace of God into a gracious servant leader, the Apostle Paul, as well as the profound importance of graciousness within a church context in the case of the church at Ephesus.

The Gracious Example of the Lord Jesus Christ

The Incarnation

The graciousness of Jesus began before Jesus even came to earth to be born of Mary. For God the Son to give up perfect fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, as well as the adoration of the hosts of heaven, to empty himself of his

independent use of his divine attributes, to add humanity to his deity, and to live among fallen humanity, all revealed the amazing graciousness of Jesus. Paul used Jesus as the ultimate example of giving in 2 Corinthians 8:9, when he said, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” His journey of giving from the extreme riches of preincarnate glory to the extreme poverty of living among us and dying on the cross is summarized by Paul as “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

His Actions

The gracious heart of the Lord Jesus manifested itself time and again in Jesus’ activities throughout his earthly ministry. Heart level grace comes out in kind words and actions that seek the welfare of the people being engaged. Certainly, the perfect Son of God could have scornfully condemned the moral filth spewing from every person he ever met. Even if he did choose to meet some unworthy’s need, he might have done it in a cold calculated manner, just dutifully demonstrating his deity. Of course, the Lord Jesus did not do anything like that. His actions modeled kindness, compassion, gentleness, and patience; in other words, graciousness.

The Gospels consistently describe Jesus as feeling compassion for the needy people around him. The common term translated compassion literally means bowels, the place where warm sympathy for someone was deeply felt. Jesus felt compassion for the Jewish people who were harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd and prayed for them (Matt 9:36). He felt such sympathy for the needs of the crowds that he bypassed his own needs and taught them God’s Word and healed those who were diseased (Mark 6:34; Matt 14:14). When the multitudes had been taught for days without food supplies, Jesus felt compassion for them and fed them (Matt 15:32). He even broke up a funeral after feeling compassion for the widow at the loss of her only son and raised him from the dead (Luke 7:13).

The term for compassion is not used of Christ in the account of the Rich Young Ruler, but the term love is used. After this man confidently asserts that he had kept all of God's commandments from his youth up, Jesus looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21). Consider what Jesus did not do at this point in the story. He did not critically correct the egotism of this young man. Jesus could have rattled off the man's sins like a machine gun, shattering his arrogance into a million pieces. Yes, Jesus did expose the man's covetousness by calling him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, but the Lord's words were not born out of a heart of harshness. Jesus loved him, and put before the man the prospect of treasure in heaven and a relationship with Jesus himself.

The Lord Jesus also displayed his graciousness by the company he kept. Jesus ministered to women and welcomed children and sinners to himself, none of which were done by the self-respecting religious leaders of that day. Jewish rabbis didn't speak to women in public, especially not Samaritan women, but the Lord Jesus intentionally put himself in Samaria by a well when a woman came to draw. John 4 recounts the surprising conversation that followed. Jesus graciously helped her see her sin and her need for eternal life through him. He met the needs of many other women as well. Although the account of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts of the Bible, many scholars assume that the story is authentic even if not enscriptured. Instead of condemning that guilty woman, Jesus mercifully called her to repentance.

While Jewish and Roman families loved their own children in the time of the New Testament, children on the whole were viewed as nearly without value to society. So when some people sought to bother Jesus to lay his hands on their children and offer a blessing, his disciples intervened. "The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid his hands on them and went away" (Matt 19:14-15). What kind of

man must Jesus have been to take little children up in his arms and pray for God's special blessing to be upon them? Theologically speaking, these depraved children were born in sin and already deserved God's wrath in Adam's fall (Ps 51:5; Rom 5:12-21). Did Jesus scowl with disgust as the sinful babies were brought near? Did his eyes flash with divine judgment? The disciples would not have had to work so hard to keep kids away from such a stern man. Instead, the Lord Jesus graciously received these children and held them up as an illustration of receiving the kingdom by dependent faith in him. While the disciples sought to keep the children away from Jesus, the religious leaders sought to keep Jesus away from notorious sinners, like prostitutes and tax collectors. Far from worrying about his reputation, Jesus literally ate and drank with them and ministered to their needs. He was called a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt 11:19).

The disciples of Jesus, who were often marked by a slowness to understand and believe, experienced the graciousness of Jesus time and again. Although Jesus regularly pointed out their small supply of faith and understanding, he did not expel them from his school; instead, he patiently cared for them with further instruction and more opportunities to make spiritual progress. The nineteenth century Anglican bishop of Liverpool, J. C. Ryle, described the Lord's dealings with his disciples as

nothing but unchanging pity, compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, longsuffering, and love. He does not cast them off for their stupidity. He does not reject them for their unbelief. . . . He teaches them as they are able to bear. He leads them on step by step, as a nurse does an infant when it first begins to walk.¹

His Teaching

The Lord Jesus Christ preached what he practiced. His tender dealings with those in need around him matched his words of instruction and invitation. While the worst of men and women can love people who love them, shockingly Jesus called his

¹J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishing, 2001), 251.

followers to love those who could not return the favor. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36). Meeting the needs of undeserving people is one of the most God-like things a person can do. Jesus holds up his Father as the standard of mercy for his people to strive after. A man’s pride allows him to show kindness only to those he deems worthy of such kindness, but if a man’s pride is strong enough, no one beside himself will ever qualify. Such a proud heart produces attitudes, words, and actions across a spectrum that includes indifference, disdain, criticism, impatience, and cruelty. Jesus, however, replaces pride with mercy.

When Jesus encountered the flint-like hardness of heart from the people in the cities where he had done many of his miracles during his Galilean ministry, he turns to God the Father in prayer. After rejoicing in God’s sovereign grace in opening the eyes of all those wished to, Jesus issued this sweet invitation. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). As the Lord opened the doors widely for burdened sinners to find forgiveness through him, he also revealed his gracious character. He described himself as gentle and lowly in heart. Unlike the Pharisees who crushed the people of Israel with their exacting demands not only of the Mosaic laws, but also of their tedious traditions and meticulous Midrash, Jesus was gracious with an easy yoke to bear. He promised rest for the weary.

Seven hundred years before the Lord Jesus came to the earth the prophet Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would be God’s special servant. These prophecies for the servant included descriptions of graciousness that Jesus perfectly fulfilled. Matthew wrote his Gospel with particular sensitivity to a Jewish audience, pointing out many of

the Jewish predictions that Jesus fulfilled. After Jesus withdrew from premature opposition from the religious leaders in Israel, he healed many people in need. Matthew recalled Isaiah 42 in his analysis of the event.

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope.” (Matt 12:17-21)

Jesus lived out this Messianic mission. The weak and needy did not find a Christ who blasted their failures, but one who gently sought to keep their tiny spark kindled. Sinclair Ferguson, writing about the influence of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in his earthly mission noted:

Here we find reference to his meek and gracious spirit in the pursuit of righteousness. He does not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick; he does not draw attention to himself or parade his own abilities. This is the consequence of the divine gift, ‘I will put my Spirit on him’ (Is. 42:1). What Paul will describe as ‘walking in the Spirit’ and bearing ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:22-26) finds its prototype in Jesus himself, as does Paul’s rich description of love as the first and most essential mark of the Spirit (1 Cor. 13:1ff.).²

At the Cross

Nowhere is the graciousness of Jesus more fully displayed than in his suffering and death on the cross. Peter uses the example of Jesus at the time of the cross to instruct church members to respond to unjust suffering.

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:18-23)

²Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 52.

In this section of his letter, Karen Jobes notes, “Peter points to the slave, who was the most vulnerable in Greco-Roman society, as a paradigm for the Christian believer who follows Jesus Christ.”³ Submission to unjust masters is possible because of the grace of God. God intentionally calls his people to endure persecution such as this. When he does, God commends a kind, merciful response because it is exactly the response Jesus made to those unjustly accusing him and ultimately executing him. The way Christians can be gracious in such extreme circumstances is “to be mindful of God” (v. 19), just like Jesus, who “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (v. 23). Thinking about God’s sovereignty, wisdom, providential outworking of his greater plan, and faithfulness enables quiet hearts and gracious replies to undeserved abusive treatment. To underscore his point, Peter specifies the ungracious, sinful things that Jesus did not say on the cross. There were no sinful slanders, deceitful retorts, or bitter threats. He did not suggest the possibility of unleashing an army of angels or even warn them that God would be bringing these things up at the judgment.⁴

The Gospels record sayings that Jesus uttered with great effort during the time he fought asphyxiation on the cross. Each of Jesus’ seven sayings are full of insight into his heart as he endured those agonizing hours of physical, emotional, and even spiritual torture. In spite of such a massive trial, Jesus maintained graciousness. He was nailed to the cross; he felt the shock of having it dropped into the hole in the ground shamefully placed between a pair of convicted criminals. But Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This unjust, cruel punishment cried for justice. The innocent victim, the Lord Jesus Christ, prayed for mercy instead.

³Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 180.

⁴When facing unjust charges, Paul, in contrast to Jesus, actually did threaten God’s judgment to the high priest in Acts 23:3, “Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck.”

The crowds were inspired by the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers to mock those being crucified before them, especially the man in the middle. Amazingly, the criminals being crucified on both sides of Jesus joined in the jesting. After some time, one of the criminals felt remorse, repented, and went on to rebuke his partner in crime. Luke recorded the sequence, “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong’” (Luke 23:39-41). At this time the penitent thief turned to Jesus appealing that Jesus would remember him when he came into his kingdom. The gracious reply of Jesus to this undeserving man, who was guilty as charged of his crimes, and who had initially participated in the mocking of Jesus, was “truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). While dying for the sins of all who would ever believe in Christ, including this very thief, Jesus graciously met the man’s deepest need for mercy.

When Jesus Did Not Seem Gracious

Although Jesus lived a life full of grace and truth, an honest Bible reader must recognize the few times in Jesus’ earthly ministry when he did not appear gracious. Would that temple money changer have thought that the Lord Jesus was being nice and gentle while Jesus trashed his tables and scattered all over the ground the money the man had been profitably exchanging? What about all of the others in the temple that day who had turned God’s house of prayer for the nations into a den of robbers (Matt 21:12-13; cf. John 2:12-14)? If someone from Capernaum or Bethsaida or Chorazin (Matt 11:20-24) was in the crowd, how might they have heard Jesus’ denunciations of their cities? Jesus literally said about Capernaum, “You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I

tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt 11:23-24). Could an unfavorable comparison to Sodom ever count as graciousness? Would kind be the way the Pharisee would describe to his wife and children at the dinner table how Jesus had pronounced the devastating series of woes against them and the scribes in Matthew 23?

These situations might not have felt as gracious to the guilty individuals being addressed by Jesus as would have Jesus tenderly embracing a child, for example, but careful thought needs to be given to these special examples before one judges Jesus to be sinfully ungracious. These incidents in the ministry of Jesus were not like reactions that a person might have to a difficult situation that they experience. In other words, the Lord Jesus wasn't just having a bad day and decided to take it out on the moneychangers in the temple. He wasn't merely frustrated with a few random Pharisees that believed differently as he cursed them to hell. His condemning comments about the Galilean cities do not draw a parallel with a harsh review someone might post on a website after a bad experience traveling through a town.

These examples from Jesus' ministry were straightforward, direct, and even included strong threats of God's judgment. After much gracious revelation to the nation and its leaders, in his role as the Messiah of Israel, the Lord Jesus finally made pronouncements of judgment towards those who repeatedly rejected his message. Even at this final hour, however, Jesus still had gracious intentions within some of his strongest indictments. Many individual Pharisees and first century Jews did respond to Jesus, repenting and believing in him. But even if those immediately addressed did not realize this, others overhearing these things did repent, and still others benefitted from the evil influencers being exposed and judged. A good shepherd cares for his sheep by eliminating the wolves. Beyond those present in the historical situation, millions of others who have read the inspired record of these events in the Bible have also bowed the knee

before King Jesus as he revealed himself in both in grace and even in his true judgment pronouncements.

The Lord Jesus was concerned with God's glory and the good of the people he addressed and those whom they affected. It may not initially appear gracious when a doctor pulls up a sick person's sleeve and pierces his or her skin with a sharp needle and injects medicine or when he uses a razor to cut through the patient's skin to remove a cancerous tumor. Needles and razors can be quite painful, but in the hands of a skillful doctor they are instruments of ultimate healing. The doctor does not inflict pain against his patients as a way to retaliate for feeling offended; he is doing what is necessary for their ultimate good. Sometimes the doctor graciously cares for a community by removing someone so contagious that he or she requires being quarantined. The Lord's strong words included all of these kinds of godly intentions.

While a father or mother's discipline can be harsh and angry, which is always sinful, God's Word assumes that all loving fathers and mothers should rightly discipline their children. According to the author of Hebrews, human fathers and the heavenly Father discipline their children out of love and for their children's ultimate good.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live. For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 11:9-11)

Discipline is "painful rather than pleasant." But when rightly performed, is this discipline to be thought of as harsh, critical, judgmental, or unkind—which are all categories opposite of graciousness? Absolutely not. Discipline is motivated by love for the one being disciplined. "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb 11:6). Discipline could be thought of as short-term pain lovingly motivated by a desire to do the child long-term good; in the case of God's discipline it is so that his children will share his holiness. When Jesus spoke strongly to

the believing but wayward among the Jews, it could be compared to the strong words of a father to his child.

Although fallen man's motives are often tainted by hidden sins and selfishness, Jesus' motives never were. Righteous anger is seen a few times in the ministry of Jesus, but it is more difficult to discern in those with deceitful hearts (Heb 3:13). When Jesus intensely communicated with others, he was never sinfully angry; rather, defending and declaring the glory of God motivated him. When Jesus was attacked personally, he was gracious, even when reviled on the cross, but when God's glory or God's divine purposes in his mission as Messiah were at stake, he answered boldly.⁵

The Lord Jesus Christ is a wonderful priest to his people. He represents his people before God, and through his righteous life, sacrificial work on the cross, and intercessory ministry he provides access to God for all who trust him. Because the Lord lived among us, he sympathizes with our weaknesses, and he deals even more gently with his people than a sinful priest ever could (Heb 4:15; 5:2). He is a loving, kind, and gentle shepherd. Although he never compromises on God's Word, which reveals God's glory, he is gracious to his imperfect followers. He is the greatest model of graciousness anyone could ever follow. Because of remaining sin, however, even redeemed humans will never attain the standard of grace that Jesus set. Thankfully, the Scriptures also offer intermediate mentors in graciousness that move Christians towards them as they sought to follow Christ's perfect example. A wonderful example of a harsh man turned gracious, by God's grace, is the Apostle Paul.

⁵John MacArthur, *2 Timothy*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 99-100.

The Gracious Example of the Apostle Paul

While the Lord Jesus Christ never gave in to the temptation to be sinfully harsh one time, the same cannot be said for Saul of Tarsus, who is better known to Christians as the Apostle Paul. According to Paul's own testimony, he fully imbibed the strict Pharisaical Judaism in which he was raised. Therefore, when the Lord Jesus' ministry began overturning the Jewish system of laws and traditions, Paul became enraged. His zeal for what he thought God wanted led him to vent fury against Jews who had turned to Jesus. He stood by holding the garments of those who stoned the preacher of the Lord Jesus Stephen in a position of approving oversight and assistance (Acts 7:58; 8:1). After that pivotal event, Paul's rage intensified. The first church historian Luke recounted that "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

As the persecution developed, Paul was deputized by the chief priests of Israel to expand the mission of cruelty toward Christians. "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2). Elsewhere Paul described his actions during this time as binding men and women, imprisoning and beating those who believed in the Lord, casting the death vote against Christians, persecuting the church violently and trying to destroy it, being a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent (Acts 22:4; 26:10; 1 Tim 1:13). He says of himself, "And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:11). Even after he repented and trusted in Christ, his reputation so preceded him that the Christians were afraid to take him in. When the Lord told Ananias to go to see Paul and baptize him, Ananias felt compelled to remind the Lord about Paul. "But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has

authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name” (Acts 9:13-14). When people heard Paul in the Jewish synagogues, they were literally amazed and asked, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?” (Acts 9:21). Not until Barnabas confirmed Paul’s conversion did Christians in Jerusalem overcome their fear and meet the man (Acts 9:26-28).

When people are converted to Christ, they are made new, but not completely new. They are declared righteous before God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and given new desires and abilities to please the Lord (Phil 3:8-10; 2:12-13). But throughout their lifetime, they will progress in putting off their old sinful attitudes and ways of the flesh and putting on the new spiritual ways of the Lord (Gal 5:16-18; 2 Cor 3:18). On the very trip to Damascus, Syria, where Paul, furious with zeal, was leading a team to persecute more followers of Christ, the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul and changed his direction. Paul repented of his sin and believed in Jesus. This conversion stamped the rest of Paul’s life. His raging anger towards the Lord Jesus and his followers melted into grace. The mercy of the Lord toward such an awful, unworthy opponent affected Paul to the core of his being, and would be worked out throughout the rest of his lifetime.

After his conversion Paul’s temper would flare at times, lashing out against other people as it had done previously. He had an intense disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark, and one time Paul threatened the chief priest with the judgment of God when Paul was on trial unjustly (Acts 15:36-40; 23:3). The Bible does not tell us everything about such occasions, so it is appropriate to be cautious about reading into the material that is recorded. The Lord Jesus Christ never crossed the line into sinful anger; his concerns were always God’s glory and the good of those to whom he spoke. Paul, like the rest of sinful humanity, on the other hand, sometimes failed to be gracious. But doubtlessly, a viciously angry man can be transformed by the grace of God more and more into a gracious man. This is the hopeful, encouraging example of the Apostle Paul.

Paul's gracious example shines through his dealings with churches and individuals. After the four Gospels, the book of Acts gives the inspired record of the early church. The rest of the New Testament is comprised of letters to churches, groups of Christians and individual Christians, followed by the book of Revelation. Paul authored thirteen of these inspired letters. Within his sacred mail we see glimpses of the historical occasion for the letters and the caring heart of the one who sent them.

Of the churches that Paul founded, he enjoyed the least personal experience with the church at Thessalonica. Although the book of Acts only describes Paul's team working in the city on three Sabbaths culminating in a hasty escape to Berea, there are clues in his two letters back to that church that Paul ministered there at least a few months. His first letter to the Thessalonians is perhaps Paul's most personal. He seeks to encourage them to continue on in the Lord in spite of the persecutions that they were experiencing. He encourages them to grow even more in their love for one another and corrects misunderstandings about the coming of the Lord. But Paul also had to counteract some that were calling into question his character and ministry. While Paul did not make it a habit to defend his reputation for its own sake, the fact that he was sent from the Lord himself and established that church on the Lord's gospel meant that defending his ministry in this case was actually a defense of the Word of God. His motivations for ministry were not about greed or glory but were marked instead by graciousness and sacrifice.

“But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess 2:7-8). Paul compares his relationship to these young believers to the gentleness of a mother caring for her children. A newborn baby is utterly dependent on its mother for care and nourishment. God gives mothers a special tenderness, which they use in their

care for their fragile little ones. Paul loved the young church; he communicated with them tenderly for their benefit. He wasn't selfishly sharp with them; instead, he gave them his very self motivated by his sincere affection for them. The term translated gentle here is the same word Paul used in 2 Timothy 2:24 about the kind way the minister must handle opponents, "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone." This attitude of kindness must mark ministers of the Lord's truth as they serve everyone from the youngest Christians to those who directly oppose the minister's understanding of the truth.

Certainly Paul also needed to be straightforward with the young Thessalonian church from time to time. This plain talk, however, was not born out of a heart of bitterness or impatience. Rather Paul compared his strongest engagements with this church to a father and his children. "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:10-12).

Unlike his brief interactions in Thessalonica, Paul had years of personal experience with the church in Corinth. But in both situations Paul's reputation, which was directly connected to the gospel and its foundational instruction for the churches that Paul had taught, was being attacked and required a defense. By the time of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had to boldly defend himself. If false apostles and their false message were going after the hearts and minds of the church he founded, he needed to intervene in every way that he could. He wasn't ashamed to beg. The tone of the final three chapters in 2 Corinthians shifts remarkably from the first nine chapters. He had to make his point. He had to win back their confidence, not to him personally as much as to the message of Christ that he had proclaimed. As strong, clear, and even aggressive as he

would be, he begins these closing chapters with these sweet words, “I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1). The Lord Jesus’ gracious attitudes and actions were the exact goal Paul tried to emulate. Even though he would be bold when God’s glory or God’s Word were at stake, like his public opposition to Peter’s face when Peter’s actions contradicted the gospel (Gal 2:11-14) and later in this very letter to the Corinthians, Paul was mindful of Christ’s grace to him and wanted to interact with even wayward Christians with entreaties based upon the Lord’s grace.

A final example of Paul’s graciousness is the way he wrote to Philemon. Philemon was a leader in the church at Colossae. When his runaway slave Onesimus found Paul in Rome, Paul introduced him to Jesus. When Paul reunited his new friend Onesimus to his old friend Philemon, Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae with a letter in hand. The letter to Philemon is a model of gracious appeal. Instead of Paul pulling apostolic rank and demanding that Philemon forgive Onesimus’s sins and financial debts and even to send him back to serve Paul in his Roman house arrest, Paul appealed to Philemon again and again. “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, *yet for love's sake* I prefer to *appeal* to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I *appeal to you* for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (Phlm 8-10, emphasis added). Later after offering to pay for any debts Onesimus had incurred, Paul continued to appeal, “Yes, brother, I want *some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.* Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you” (Phlm 20-22, emphasis added).

His gracious communication in Christ was followed by the hope that Christ would graciously take Paul from captivity in Rome to Colossae and Philemon’s guest room. Of course, coming from an Apostle of Christ these appeals carried a great deal of

weight. But it must not be overlooked that Paul did not throw his weight around in a cavalier, arrogant, or authoritative manner. He treated his Christian friend with kindness for Christ's sake. The Holy Spirit superintended all of these circumstances and included Paul's inspired letter within the pages of sacred Scripture as a model of the graciousness all believers in churches of all kinds since that time should emulate.

The Need for Graciousness within the Church

The Ephesian church may have been the most truth-loving church in the Bible. You might even say they were the original Truth Zealots. Paul taught in the city of Ephesus for three years—longer than any other single city's church on record. Some of his ministry in Ephesus is found in Acts 19—speaking boldly in the synagogue, equipping the disciples in the hall of Tyrannus, and apparently launching out church planters because during his time in Ephesus, “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). While Asia here refers to the region that surrounded Ephesus, sometimes called Asia Minor, which is found in modern western Turkey, this is still a remarkable accomplishment. Luke, the author of Acts, summarized Paul's time there by stating, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20).

The next chapter of Luke's chronicle recounts Paul's meeting with the Ephesian church's leaders. Their appetite for God's truth is revealed even in the way Paul addresses them. He said that these church leaders knew, “how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21). Paul told them everything that was profitable—“for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). He then charged the elders:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert, remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. (Acts 20:28-31)

This was a church with elders trained and equipped. They knew the truth; they loved the truth; they were on guard for their lives and their teaching. Their spiritual radar was on high alert for any distortions of the truth. They even received an inspired letter from Paul, which was recognized to be part of the New Testament Scriptures. Paul's letter grounded the church even further in the gospel from eternity past to the full inclusion of the Gentiles in the salvation promises to Israel. The letter to the Ephesians then spent its second half working out the implications of the gospel in daily living in the church, at home, and in the frontlines of spiritual battles.

Later, in Paul's first and second letters to Timothy, we find Timothy left in Ephesus. Paul reiterates his mission in that city, for Timothy's sake, but no doubt also for the Ephesians' sake as well. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia," Paul begins, "remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine" (1 Tim 1:3, emphasis added). Then he continues. The Pastoral Epistles passionately emphasize the truth. Know the truth, preach the truth, live the truth, breathe the truth, guard the truth, entrust the truth to others, and watch out for anybody teaching anything different than the truth. Church ministry done God's way is all about the truth. The church at Ephesus received their passion for the Scriptures straight from Paul for several years and then from his right hand man, Timothy, for many more years. Apparently, the Ephesian church got the message.

People sometimes ask what Jesus thinks about their church? Revelation 2 and 3 record seven letters from Jesus to seven first-century churches. These letters offer many wonderful insights into what Jesus approves and disapproves about churches. As has been said, everyone can find a little bit of each of these first-century churches in their

church—Jesus’ words are relevant. The first letter is addressed to the church in the biggest city in that part of the world, Ephesus.

Our Lord Jesus begins his letter to this church by commending them for their love for the truth. Can you imagine the feeling that would sweep over you if Jesus personally applauded your passion for his truth? He did just that for these believers. In Revelation 2:2, Jesus wrote, “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.” Later in the letter Jesus added, “Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans which I also hate” (Rev 2:6).

The Nicolaitans, about whom little is known, were false teachers. They show up again in Jesus’ letter to the church at Pergamum. There, in Revelation 2:15-16, Jesus writes, “So also you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” Previously, in that letter, the teaching of Balaam, who caused God’s people to stumble through sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols, is condemned. Those errors may be related to the Nicolaitan teaching. The point for this discussion is the Nicolaitan teaching was against Scripture. The Ephesians loved the truth; therefore, they hated the false teaching of the Nicolaitans. Note as well, Jesus encouraged the Ephesians by telling them that he also hated the false teaching of the Nicolaitans too. Christians in a politically correct culture, where very few draw sharp moral lines, must hear the Lord Jesus saying, “I hate the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” The truth is more important than many Christians today believe. The Ephesians church is commended for hating false teaching, opposing it and removing those falsely claiming to be apostles.

One cannot read Jesus' letter to the truth-loving Ephesians, however, and come away encouraged on their behalf. Loving people is also more important than many Christians today think.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Rev 2:3-5)

While the first love that church left refers to their love for the Lord, the Lord's charge must also concern their love for other people. The Ephesian believers were truth-lovers who were harsh. Their love for the truth brought out an edge in the way they dealt with others, probably without and especially within the church. The sharp sword of God was rightly being used to cut the truth from error, but it seems that they were using it to cut each other up as well. Jesus charges them to return to *the deeds* that they had done at first, which would refer to loving good works towards those around them. That is an important reason why this seems to refer to their first love for other people and not just their love for the Lord.

Why does the Ephesian church case study show us the importance of loving people? With all of their truth-loving track record on full display before the eyes of Jesus, he tells them to repent. They were not ambiguous about their theology or the doctrinal content of those who taught within their church gatherings. The Lord Jesus highly commended these things about the church, but he did not minimize their sinfulness in this situation either. He follows the call to repentance with a strong warning—if people do not repent, he will come and remove their lampstand. Revelation 1 reveals that the lampstands represent the churches itself (Rev 1:20). Churches are the Lord's lights shining out in the dark world. Jesus is saying it would be better to have no church in the massive, thriving city of Ephesus than to have an *unloving* church even if it preaches the truth and opposes people that oppose the truth. Being gracious in the way one speaks

truth to others forms a vital part of what Jesus requires from his people. One might think Jesus would be accommodating to a church committed to so many right things. He is not. He says that he is going to personally come and snuff out their candle. Their church would be eliminated; it would not shine out in Ephesus any longer. Speaking God's truth in a loving and gracious way is that important.

A beautiful new sports car parked in front of a crowded restaurant grabs the attention of many people who eat or walk anywhere close to it. Silent admiration and longings bubble up into all kinds of excited exclamations. Many spectators would be tempted to compare the beautiful machine before them to their adequate but less impressive vehicle. But what if the hood of the sports car suddenly opened up to reveal an empty shell. The engine and everything else is completely absent. After the initial surprise wears off, a different comparison between the sports car that requires a tow truck to move and the spectators' vehicles might happen again, only with completely different results. Without the guts of the sports car, it cannot even be called a car. In the same way, a church may look like a church on the surface, even being passionately committed to God's truth, but if it has no love for people, it cannot rightly be called a church. The Lord Jesus said love is such a vital part of a church that he would eliminate such loveless churches from existence if they would not repent.

CHAPTER 5
BIBLICAL GRACIOUSNESS CULTIVATED
PERSONALLY, PART 1

In a children's art class the teacher moves the students from theory to practice. In the beginning of the section on the Impressionists, for example, the teacher describes the characteristics of impressionism, highlighting examples of the best paintings. The imaginations of the children are then sparked by some of the stories of the artists themselves. As they travel about Paris in the nineteenth century discovering the backgrounds of men like Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, their understanding of the works of art broadens. Finally, paper and colorful paints are set upon their desks. The students are challenged to imitate the masters of impressionism.

While Christians must depend upon the Holy Spirit to effect change in their lives, clearly God expects them to also put forth disciplined efforts using the means the Holy Spirit has provided to grow in godliness (1 Tim 4:7-8). To this point, this thesis has considered the importance of graciousness for truth-zealots by examining its biblical meaning and by studying real life examples in action. Now, the study becomes practical. Just as the paper and paints are, at last, placed before the students, this thesis will consider the manifold ways truth-loving Christians can cultivate graciousness in their lives.

Two broad categories of spiritual disciplines help Christians grow in graciousness: personal and corporate; in other words, the disciplines one pursues individually and those pursued within the context of a church family. This chapter and the next will examine ways a Christian can develop tenderhearted communication on his or her own, first focusing on Godward practices and then looking at practices directed

toward other people. The following chapter will offer ways to cultivate graciousness in a community context.

Rooting Out Harshness

Before a man tries on a new sports coat, he should remove the one that he is wearing. In the same way, the Bible compares spiritual growth to changing clothes. Paul charges the Ephesians “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). Before a believer can put on the virtue of graciousness, he or she must begin by taking off the vice of harshness. There are several components of rooting out harshness. While some overlap among these components is inevitable, Christians must thoroughly eradicate their wrong ways of communication in order to cultivate kindness.

Identify the Source of All Speech

Why do people use harsh words, accented with harsh tones, spraying out of harsh faces? Without careful thought common popular excuses prevail, such as foul weather, difficulties of the day at work or with children at home, physical ailments like pains or sickness, and the humorous summary justification that the person is having “a bad hair day.” Factors such as these may explain some of the circumstances surrounding angry verbal eruptions, but they do not address the true source of the problem. Like doctors striving to cure the problem and not merely treat the symptoms, Christians desiring to root out harshness must locate the source of the problem.

The source of harsh speech is a harsh heart. All speech comes out of the heart. In the anatomy of the Bible, the heart is the control center of a person. The heart is where a person thinks, feels, and makes decisions. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 12:34, “You

brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Wise King Solomon advises his son “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23). Guarding the heart is urgent because the heart is the headwaters of a person’s entire life.

Although the Lord has renewed the hearts of Christians, they have remaining sin inside of them. They are not, however, ruled by that sin. The bondage to sin has been broken but remaining sin continues on, and what is in the heart will come out of the mouth. Why is a person ultimately harsh or critical, according to the Bible? While external triggers are situational factors, ultimately the source of harshness is inside the person’s heart. Stray sparks do little damage without fuel, but if a spark lands on gunpowder, a great explosion will occur. It is the gunpowder stored up in the heart that reacts to the bad condition of one’s heart. Without the gunpowder, the external trigger harmlessly passes by undetected. In order to begin to put off harshness, a person must cut through the situations of their life and examine the sins of their mind, will, and emotions.

Realize the Evil of Ungraciousness

The beginning of repentance is the sight of sin. In other words, a person must see their own sin in its ugliness before there will be a turning from it in their heart and lifestyle. Puritan Thomas Watson soberly observed, “A man must first recognize and consider what his sin is, and know the plague of his heart before he can be duly humbled for it.... The eye is made both for seeing and weeping. Sin must be first seen before it can be wept for.”¹ Recognizing that the heart of a harsh speech problem is the human heart is a good beginning. Now, one must consider the sorts of things contained within a harsh heart. In other words, what kinds of heart thoughts and attitudes form the chemical components of that gunpowder from which ungraciousness explodes? Far deeper and

¹Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 18-19.

darker are the sources of sin than the sinful words and tones themselves. The recognition of the special ugliness of a person's particular source sins is a first step in repentance and change. Consider some of the possibilities:

Anger. What is it that gives words their attacking edge? Why was there a sarcastic twist on the answer? One possibility is anger towards the other individual. Anger in a heart finds its way out of a mouth in ungracious speech.

Manipulation. Sinfully strong words and tones can be used to make a point and win the argument, commandeering the entire discussion. When discussing the Scriptures, whether right or wrong about the interpretation of a portion of the Bible, one can still "win" by intimidation. The Lord Jesus does not smile at his children who sin to win.

Revenge. Critical attitudes in communication can be to make the person feel badly for the way they were speaking or acting towards the individual. Determination to hurt someone back says, "I'm going to use my tone and my words to punish you and to get back at you." The Bible clearly teaches that Christians are never to seek their own revenge, whether physically or verbally. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:19, 21).

A lack of love and compassion. First Corinthians 13 is the famous love chapter in the Bible. Love's virtues are described as being patient and kind and not being arrogant, rude, or irritable. The opposite of loving others is selfishness, or the love of self. So if people hear words funneling out of their mouths that are unkind, ungracious, and condemning, they can know they are not showing love to the person they are speaking to. They should stop and consider whom they are loving at that moment.

Thoughtlessness. How often does a person react emotionally to a situation instead of responding thoughtfully? If Jim is in a hurry walking to the elevator to be at his meeting on time, and Sharon steps in front of him, Jim may lash out critically against Sharon. While there could be several reasonable explanations for Sharon's action, or even if Sharon was at fault for being in the wrong lane of office traffic, Jim did not pause to consider a response that would encourage Sharon; he just reacted. A lack of carefully guarding not only one's hearts, but also one's tongues is a hidden cause of sinful styles of speaking. Being thoughtless mixes in nicely with some of the other root causes in the harvest of harshness.

Impatience. Behind harshness impatience often hides. Thoughts like, "The other person should've grasped the point by now," or "They *deserved* my strong word to help them understand," inspire agitation. Not waiting sweetly for someone can be the source of verbal and nonverbal cruelty.

Pride. The mother of every source sin is pride. If someone is being harsh and critical, they think they are right. In fact, they *are certain* they're right. Fools are filled with pride. "I don't really care about you and what you think," the fool says, "It's my view or no view!" As the Proverbs put it, "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (Prov 18:2).

These sins below the surface are not pretty. It is easier to be harsh with others when one doesn't allow himself to consider the ugly source from which his critical edge is flowing. Because Christians, however, want to overcome such wickedness, they must go below the surface of their lips into their hearts. They must identify the foul sources of their sinful speech and call them what they are.

Recognize God's Commands

A person who loves the Lord desires to do the things that God wants them to

do. God doesn't just think being gracious is incidental for mature Christian living, he clearly commands all Christians to be gracious. True believers are motivated to obey such commands as they recognize them in the Bible. As has been noted, Ephesians 4:29 forbids corrupting talk from coming out of our mouths and calls believers to speak only words that build others up according to the need of the moment, giving grace to those who hear. But just after Ephesians 4:29 come Ephesians 4:30-32 which say, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice represent all kinds of words that accompany *ungracious* speech. They are forbidden vices that grieve the Holy Spirit. God has a personal concern that his children use their speech in kind and merciful ways and not, at all, in ways that are harmful. "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36). Being gracious in the way that you interact with people inside and outside of your church family is not an elite level of Christianity. It is fundamental. It is basic. Christians' words are to be God's instruments of grace to others.

Appreciate that God Is Monitoring One's Mouth

Everyone will be judged by his or her words. The Lord Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt 12:36-37). God is not merely a God of generalities, unconcerned about the details of his creatures' lives. He is sovereign over the hairs of every person's head and over the tiniest

sparrow falling from a tree in the woods—he is concerned about details. Many harsh critical words would be filtered by a greater awareness of God.

There are many reasons the Bible gives to help people obey God’s commands for sexual purity. One of those motives is that God sees in the dark. “For a man’s ways are before the Lord, and he ponders all his paths” (Prov 5:21). In the case of communication, if a man knew that God was listening to every word that he was saying, instantaneously aware of the slightest inflections in his voice, and that God would hold him accountable according to the highest standards of God’s holiness, would the man not speak to others with utmost of care? Just as the warm waves of the sun’s heat come through the earth’s atmosphere before reaching the earth’s surface, every one of the waves of sound emitting from a person’s mouth passes through God’s active awareness, being stored for accountability on judgment day even before reaching the earthly hearer’s ears. God watches with concern every detail of each of his creature’s daily interactions. Cultivating a heightened awareness of God’s continual attentiveness to one’s communication adds urgency to the seriousness of graciousness and the danger of all rudeness.

Repent of a Harsh Heart

True repentance begins by seeing sin for what it is. But true repentance doesn’t end there. Once a man or a woman has seen the depths of the evil roots of harshness within their hearts, he or she must turn their hearts from those things to the Lord. As the Lord Jesus Christ declared his displeasure with the church at Ephesus’s lack of love, he did not think it enough for them to know about it, or even think sorrowful thoughts about their condition. He did not ask them to merely remember the early days when they used to be loving. He wasn’t looking for their possible rationalizations, like all of the false teachers they had had to deal with. He commanded the unloving church to repent. “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at

first” (Rev 2:5). Repentance is a change of mindset that leads to a change of lifestyle. For the Ephesians true repentance would result in reengaging with their initial works of love.

Repentance is not a trivial matter; the lack of graciousness is a not small issue. Every heart sin originating and sustaining the sinful words and tones coming from a person’s mouth must be dealt with. Instead of following the instinct to justify an angry outburst because of outward circumstances (including the actions and attitudes of the other participants in the discussion), the Christian desiring to become like Christ must acknowledge their anger, lack of love, and pride. While others in the room may have committed other sins, the Lord holds each Christian responsible for his or her own sins.

The oft-quoted words of Jesus, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt 7:1) prohibit hypocritical judging, not all judgments. In just a few verses, Jesus calls his followers to make a judgment when he says, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye’ (Matt 7:5). Instead of allowing their minds to spin with faultfinding in others and excuse making in themselves, Jesus calls Christians to examine their own hearts first. Confess the discovered sins to the Lord. Turn from them with the intention of never returning to them again. Seek to replace those vices with corresponding godly virtue. When sinful roots of harshness are repented of, righteous fruits of graciousness begin to appear.

Discover Grace to be Gracious

When selfishness and pride are understood to be root causes of harshness, what hope could there be to turn back the epidemic of unkind expressions of communication? Because of remaining sin, even maturing Christians could be repenting of rude speech every day of their lives. The wonderful message of the gospel is that God is gracious to undeserving sinners. Because of the work of Christ, God forgives his children for their lack of grace, and then he melts their hearts and continually forms them into more gracious men and women. His transforming grace works in several ways, perhaps none

more important than a personal appreciation of the gospel.

Appreciate God's Graciousness

How difficult is it for a Christian to think of reasons that God could be extremely harsh with him or her? If they are honest and observant they should be able to come up with a list of sins they have committed in their minds or with their mouths or activities even over that very week that ought to earn a full measure of God's righteous wrath. Now consider the reasons why God *has not* acted in justice toward that Christian. The only reason that he did not punish him or her is that he crushed his Son for the exact sins that they committed that very week.

In addition to the fact that God did not blast the sinful Christian into the lake of fire, God actually responded even more graciously toward him or her. Instead of wrath they received blessings. It is good to meditate deeply about the reality of one's amazing relationship with such a God. Hebrews 12:29 reminds even professing believers that, "our God is a consuming fire." Reflection upon one's own offenses against such a God and his mercies to them in Christ Jesus produces powerful waves of thankfulness to God for his repeated abundant grace.

The parable of the Prodigal Son wonderfully conveys God's gracious heart towards his children. Luke 15:1 discloses that the story was one of three told to religious leaders who were grumbling because Jesus was being so kind to known sinners. The parable is designed to show God's kind affection for such people. The younger son takes his inheritance and wastes it on scandalous living. When the famine strikes, the son becomes impoverished and begins to starve. He is brought low enough to feed unclean pigs and even crave their feed. Eventually, he is broken enough to return home to beg his father for food. The father, representing God, would have had every right to vent his wrath on his foolish son. Instead the father runs to the son, wraps him with a robe, puts shoes on his callused feet and a ring of honor on his dirty finger; beyond all of that, he

also prepares a feast for him. Christians should consider the similarities with God’s kind dealings with themselves.

Believers must not go many days without purposefully thanking God for the gracious ways he deals with them. Certainly, they should be thankful for their initial forgiveness when they first came to Christ, but they must also regularly reflect upon the days, months, and years since trusting in Christ. The recent sins of heart, hands, and mouth are far worse than those committed before coming to Christ. The child of God knows more and has experienced more mercy, and yet, has kept sinning. Has God ever said to his child, “Enough!”? Has he ever cast them away crying out, “No more!”? No, he has not. The reason is because God’s entire furious wrath toward that person was poured out upon Jesus on the cross. When one stops and gives thanks to God repeatedly for his grace to them, it is very hard to be harsh with others soon afterwards.

The subtitle to Ken Sande’s outstanding book *The Peacemaker is A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*.² In seeking to resolve conflicts, Sande wisely notes the vital place of graciousness, which he says originates from a continual recognition of the grace received from God.

Peacemakers are people who breath grace to others in the midst of conflict. Since we cannot breathe out what we have not breathed in, this process hinges on our moment-to-moment relationship with God. We must continually “breathe in” God’s grace by studying and meditating on his Word, praying to him, thanking him for his mercy and rejoicing in our salvation, worshipping him, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, and enjoying the fellowship of other believers. As we are filled with his grace, we can then breathe it out to others by confessing our wrongs, bringing them hope through the gospel, lovingly showing others their faults, forgiving them as God has forgiven us, and manifesting in our words and actions the fruit of the Holy Spirit. . . . When even one person in a conflict is faithfully breathing out this kind of grace, others will often receive God’s grace through us. As they do, they are less likely to be defensive and more inclined to listen to our concerns.³

²Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

³Ibid., 170.

Jesus also illustrates the importance of being gracious out of the overflow of grace personally received. In Matthew 18:21-22, the author provides the occasion of the account, “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” Then Jesus tells the story of the unforgiving servant. The king mercifully forgives the debt of the servant owing him a huge amount of money, but then that same servant throws a fellow servant into debtor’s prison until he can repay the first servant a much less amount. Everything is fine until the king finds out what happened.

Then his master summoned him and said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. (Matt 18:32-35)

The forgiven servant had a legitimate issue with the man who owed him money. It wasn’t just an imaginary issue. The amount Jesus said that was owed was a hundred denarii. Certainly it was far less than the first servant had owed the master, but a denarius was one day’s wage—so the total amount was wages from 100 days of work. Our Lord Jesus, however, clearly expects his followers to treat other people out of the overflow of super-abundant grace that they have received from him. The forgiven servant should have been gracious and should have forgiven the man who owed him the money. As Christians contemplate the cross of Christ, they should be overwhelmed with the oceans of grace they have received from the Lord. Even when others commit pools or even lakes full of sins against them, they should still be gracious to them because of those oceans of grace they have received. “Be kind to them,” Jesus would say, “not because they deserve it, but because I have been so kind to you.”

Joshua Harris, in his book *Humble Orthodoxy*, which seeks to balance passion for biblical truth with humility and love, observes, “Genuine orthodoxy—the heart of

which is the death of God’s Son for undeserving sinners—is the most humbling, human-pride-smashing message in the world. And if we truly know the gospel of grace, it will create in us a heart of humility and grace toward others.”⁴ Because of the significance of appreciating God’s gospel grace in the cultivation of graciousness, it is recommended to continually seek after fresh ways to grow in understanding the depth and breadth and height and width of the love of God for sinners. Reading books, listening to sermons, and memorizing targeted verses can all lead to a more profound appreciation and personalization of the grace of God towards the individual, which will in turn result in a greater ability to breathe out God’s grace towards others.

Be Thankful for Everything Else

Beyond gratitude for the cross, those seeking to cultivate graciousness in their hearts should be thankful for everything else in their lives. James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” God has given his creatures every good thing that they enjoy in life. The right response from creature to Creator is gratitude. Paul reiterates the humbling truth in a question, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7). Being thankful helps keep that perspective in the forefront of the mind.

Saying thanks to the Lord for everything in life provides needed perspective. No one has anything to boast about. During interaction with others, consistently grateful hearts recognize that harsh, critical heart attitudes are out of place. One of the reasons why people use unkind tones and words in their interactions is the assumption of correctness about the issue, whether about the Bible, a political matter, or a practical

⁴Joshua Harris, *Humble Orthodoxy: Holding the Truth High without Putting People Down* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2013), 30.

opinion. Absolute certainty on an opinion tempts a person to quickly move beyond loving dialogue to confident assertions. Being thankful for everything good about life can inject graciousness into the discussion.

Let's suppose Samuel is the potentially ungracious man in a theological controversy. In this case Samuel happens to be right about the biblical opinion being discussed. But every single element of his being right about that point comes from God not from inside of Samuel. There is no room for Samuel's heart to be arrogant when he actively acknowledges that God is responsible for everything. Samuel's functioning brain, which ably forms the basis of his true opinions, comes from God. His experiences with people and books that have shaped his understanding have all been ordained within God's providence. Even the fact that Samuel has the Bible in his own language is no small gift from God. Why can he read and understand it? Is it not the mercy of the Lord? It is the Holy Spirit of God that illuminates his mind to even understand anything about the Bible (1 Cor 2:14-16). Absolutely none of these elements are because Samuel is so great. They are all the mercy of the Lord. Therefore, Samuel should be humbled by those facts and filled with gratitude to the Lord, acknowledging his grace. When he speaks to anyone else, his grateful heart should season his discussion with graciousness.

Recognize that God is at Work

In every possible situation that a man or a woman could be tempted to be ungracious, God is at work. As John Piper has remarked, "God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them."⁵ Consider the benefits of such recognition in the promotion of graciousness. When someone is aware that God is working in a tempting situation even when it is in specific ways that they do not realize, it

⁵This quote was one of John Piper's most widely spread posts on Twitter in 2012 according to his Desiring God website, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/every-moment-in-2013-god-will-be-doing-10-000-things-in-your-life>.

fosters graciousness in a couple of ways. First, it cultivates humility. While humans know they are not omniscient, it is good that they acknowledge it periodically. Not knowing all that the Creator is accomplishing in a situation helps to keep the creature humble. As pride fuels harshness, humility drives it away. But second, it reminds us that there really is more going on in a situation than a person can know about. So even times when he or she is 100 percent sure that they are right about what they are saying, they ought to consider the fact that God could be working in ways that they do not know about. Thoughts like that encourage confident people to tone the rhetoric down a little bit.

Consider two examples from the Bible. First, remember Job's counselors. While they are often viewed as complete failures as friends, Job's counselors are surprisingly right in much of their counsel. Yet, in spite of their accurate ideals, they were unfaithful friends—God clearly declares that at the end of the book. But why were they such bad guys when they said so many good things? The answer is that they hadn't read Job 1 and 2. In the first two chapters of Job, God and the devil are disputing. God asks Satan, if he has considered his servant Job? God holds Job up before his greatest enemy as an example of faithfulness. When Satan protests that Job is only righteous because of God's blessings, God permits the devil to rip Job's life to pieces in order to prove that Job's faith will not fail. The devil, of course, did just that within the boundaries that God established. Job's life disintegrates almost instantly, and then his friends come to sit with him. They mourn with him for a week before they started talking. They say things to Job such as righteousness is better than sin, sin has consequences, and nobody has such a miserable life like Job's. If God were not working in special behind the scenes ways, how much of what they said would have been bad? What made their counsel so foolish and wrong was that they arrogantly assumed that they knew all that was happening. They did not, and therefore, their mostly accurate words were *completely inappropriate*. They lacked the spiritual big picture; therefore, they discouraged Job instead of encouraging

him in the midst of the epic spiritual battle.

The second example from the Bible is from a strange time in Israel's history, the time of the Judges. In Judges 14, the future super-strong Judge of Israel, Samson, is introduced all grown up. Troubles with the opposite sex would follow this leader throughout his career. Samson's parents didn't know, however, that God was using their son's earliest wicked desires to marry a Philistine girl in order to lead to a mighty victory over the Philistines, who were oppressing Israel at the time. Judges 14:1-4 describe the details, including the behind the scenes insight:

Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. Then he came up and told his father and mother, "I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife." But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

Without considering Samson's or his parents' questionable wisdom, or what they all did, notice the small detail of background given to the readers. "His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines." God is always at work in every situation. No matter how certain an individual may be that they are right, they can be helped towards graciousness as they humbly realize that God may be doing more than anyone knows.

Biblical counselors Tim Lane and Paul Tripp rightly observe that God is sovereignly working in people's relationships in many more ways than just for each other's enjoyment.

Remember, your relationships have not been designed by God as vehicles for human happiness but as instruments of redemption. It isn't enough to ask for the character you need to survive the difficulties of life and the weaknesses of the other person. We have been called to minister to the people that God, in his wisdom, has placed in our lives. He wants to use us as instruments of grace in their lives. To live

this way takes character.⁶

The single insight that God is working in many more ways than a person can ever know can transform a person's communication about the situation. Instead of indignation flowing from pseudo-omniscience, the one thinking about God at work responds with gentleness, making much room for the wise dealings of a sovereign God.

Remember that God Changes Hearts

Christian communicators can confidently be gracious because God is the one who produces the results of the conversations. We have seen God's heart changing sovereign work in 2 Timothy 2:24-26, which says, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. *God may perhaps grant them repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (emphasis added). One time, a professing Christian foreman was heard to say that a certain construction workers would not ever receive correction if the foreman did not use profanity to make his point. But, it is not the corrector's job to make the other person get the point. Instead, it is the corrector's job to speak the truth, and to speak it in love. God is always the ultimate one who will make the other person get the point, if they are to get it at all.

God granting people repentance is a wonderful application of the sovereignty of God. The doctrine of God's sovereign hand controlling everything in the universe is not ivory-tower theology; it has some very practical applications. God is the one who works change in the hearts of one's hearers. God may grant them repentance. In his book *Encouragement: How Words Change Lives*, Gordon Cheng compared God's work in someone else's heart to God's work with farmers in a harvest:

⁶Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2006), 110.

We are planting and watering, but God through his Holy Spirit is giving the growth. Unless God's Holy Spirit opens the heart of the person to hear and receive the message, our words will be useless—no matter how true they are, or how cleverly we express them. We can't reach inside a person and change their heart for them. God's Spirit can. As he does so, the word can take root and grow and lead to changed lives. We are fellow workers with God.⁷

Another phrase from the Bible strengthens believers to hope in God as they offer correction gently. “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you” (Phil 3:15). The dynamic that God will ultimately reveal right ways to think to immature Christians is encouraging to those feeling burdened to fix everyone else. While this in no way excuses Christians from confronting a fellow Christian in sin or even challenging someone to grow in an area of weakness, it does remove the burden of change from the speaker. It is okay to do your best to graciously help your hearer, and then leave the results with the Lord. It is not the strength of voice or the strength of a harsh tone that fixes people. God takes care of it. Believers can leave the results to him.

Think about the Ultimate Goal

Consider the goals people pursue in the conversations with others. Sometimes people just want to win the point of contention. While a motivation for the other person to have a more accurate view of theology, for example, could be mixed into the conversation, but sometimes it is more about victory. Just as an athlete passionately wants to win the game, some Christians passionately want to win the argument. Another related motive in arguments is to try to look smart in front of the opponent or others present. Never minding the potential spiritual dangers of the other person's biblical or theological errors, these ungracious truth-zealots just want to be seen advocating right positions. Precious lambs of the Lord have been badly bloodied by theological bruisers

⁷Gordon Cheng, *Encouragement: How Words Change Lives* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2006), 50.

on a mission to triumph. The goal of every conversation ought to be the glory of God, not winning a point. “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

When an area of the Bible is being debated, it ought to be a helpful experience for both parties even if it becomes intense like iron sharpening iron. But if the ultimate aim of God’s glory is lost upon the participants, the temptation to escalate the passions can become too great. A voice is raised. Someone goes for the kill. Even if one side concedes the point in such a conversation, if the process does not please God what will he think about the outcome? Since God is always the one who produces change within others, he always wants his people to speak to one another in ways that honor him and demonstrate belief that he is in control of all things.

A mind full of God is the most powerful change force within the heart of God’s creatures. When an individual apprehends the true character of God, his or her perspective of life changes dramatically. The sinfulness of sin becomes apparent as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Word of God in the person’s mind. Sharp conviction occurs as reminders of his or her sinful attitudes and conversations seem to be almost spotlighted on stage before the audience of God. As painful as such discoveries may be, obtaining a Godward perspective is where change begins. Depending upon the Holy Spirit, the Christian faces God and utilizes personal spiritual disciplines between themselves and God, rooting out their harshness and discovering God’s grace. The path to spiritual transformation continues as the individual now pursues spiritual disciplines that are directed toward other people.

CHAPTER 6
BIBLICAL GRACIOUSNESS CULTIVATED
PERSONALLY, PART 2

A bull does not belong in the aisles of a china shop. The beauty and value of the objects surrounding the beast become inconsequential. The bull will simply do what bulls do. While some bulls may not buck and thrash about rodeo style, no bull will be as delicate and careful as the situation requires. A few of the precious objects may elude the long pointy horns of the awkward bull, but his lumbering body will smash most of the china, shattering it into pieces. While bulls lack the poise to walk through china shops, most people are capable of looking without destroying, hence the continued existence of china shops. But even so, places with expensive china on the shelves do require customers to maintain a heightened awareness of their surroundings. No one wants to be compared to the china shop bull. From God's vantage point people are much more precious than fine china.

In addition to the individual spiritual disciplines Christians practice between themselves and the Lord that were considered in the last chapter, there are many other helpful ways for God's people to individually cultivate graciousness in their dealings with other people.

Have a Proper Perspective of Other People

A great beginning for Christians seeking to become kind is to have a heightened awareness of the valuable people with which they interact. People's perspective about themselves and one other can dramatically differ from God's evaluation of those special creatures made in his own image.

Properly Appraise the Value of People

One time I had the opportunity to meet Sonny Perdue, who at that time was the governor of the State of Georgia. Although the meeting was brief and informal, I was on my best behavior. Usually, when someone has the opportunity to interact with a man or woman that they highly respect, they become very thoughtful. Care goes into exactly what is said and the way in which it is said. Sometimes, though, people do not value others as highly as they ought to in such cases. They are not as thoughtful as they should be; their words and tones become careless, even spewing wildly like a fire hose pumping at full strength without anyone controlling it. A man or a woman's tones and words can become more gracious, however, as they begin to value *all* people in the ways the Lord has revealed.

In two separate sections where the Bible addresses causing a fellow Christian to stumble as a result of one's example, the Bible uses a phrase revealing the target value that we should place upon other Christians. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:11, "And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, *the brother for whom Christ died*" (emphasis added). And in another section of the New Testament about stumbling blocks, in Romans 14:15, Paul uses the exact same expression—"the brother for whom Christ died." How precious is the weakest Christian in the body of Christ? What does Jesus think about their value?

Jesus himself taught about stumbling blocks and the people who cause them. He said, "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin"—he is probably not speaking literally of children per se, but of the child-like faith of believers—"it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt 18:6). Notice three observations about Jesus' words. First, a millstone was a big and heavy object—it crushed grains while it rolled in a circle upon another heavy stone. Second, if someone wore a millstone as a necklace and went for a swim, they would sink extremely. Third, Jesus says it would be *better* to sink

in the sea than to cause one of his children to sin. The reason Jesus makes such an extreme comparison is because people are extremely precious to our Lord.

Jose is a follower of Jesus but sometimes struggles with sweetness when he speaks to others, especially if he considers them to be below his status in life. If Jose's heart could generate new, elevated price tags for the people around him, reflecting the perspective of Jesus, he would tend to interact with those people with elevated concern. The least, weakest, little brother or sister in Christ is incredibly precious and valuable to Jesus, and should be to Jose, as well. Appreciating the value of others will immediately affect Jose's tones and word choices. When a person like Jose talks with a fellow Christian, he or she should realize they are talking to a Very Important Person and adjust their actions accordingly.

On the other hand, what if the person is not a Christian? Could Jose then justify raising his voice, speaking to them harshly, and treating the unbeliever as if he or she wasn't so valuable? After all, the thinking goes, the Bible doesn't describe unbelievers as being as precious to the Lord as believers. Perhaps non-Christians don't deserve to be communicated with graciously. But, if a person is not a Christian, what is their spiritual state? They are spiritually dead sinners in need of the exact same grace in Christ that believers have found. Yes, they deserve God's punishment. But no, Christians should never give them a foretaste of that condemnation through their harsh, judgmental attitudes. Apart from the grace of God in Christ, Christians deserve the same hell as every non-Christian on the planet. Gracious, loving words flow from the mouths of ones who have received grace from the Lord. Maybe the extension of the Lord's grace through the Christian to the non-Christian in their communication will become the exact means that the Lord will use to bring his saving grace to the unbeliever as well.

In a context of Christian suffering, Peter called upon his readers to stand strong and honor Jesus Christ while being treated unjustly. He suggested that sometimes the

godly reactions of believers in the midst of trials will arrest the attention of the nearby non-Christians and provoke them to inquire about the reason for the Christians' hope. At these times the Christians ought to speak up for Christ, but even then to do so with grace. As the apostle put it in 1 Peter 3:14-16, "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Check One's Posture

What posture should Christians assume in relating to other people? This relates to the Christian's attitude or disposition toward those around him or her. Is the other person a friend or an enemy—is he or she a teammate or a competitor? Competing in a conversation with an adversarial attitude increases the potential for hostility. Consider the impact of these assumptions as they relate to discussions.

Suppose two fierce competitors send salesmen to attempt to get a company to buy their products. The company representative, however, only has time to meet with both salesmen at the same time. Would one think the salesmen likely to be marked by love and graciousness towards each other during the meeting? Will the rivals go the extra mile to assume the best about the motives behind each other's statements? Will all of the hearts involved be on guard against vices that could come out in sarcasm or severe tones of voice?

How would the conversation be changed if all the three participants were great friends that co-owned one company and were comparing research on the products they needed? In both of these scenarios there will be different products discussed with various strengths and weaknesses. Each of the people will make valid points based on their perspectives—often bringing passion to the table. But, which of the two conversations is most likely to be marked by kindness and consideration? Obviously, when everyone is on

the same team, or perceives himself or herself to be on the same team, the potential for a gracious and effective conversation multiplies exponentially. Consider the contrast between newlyweds sweetly working through their barebones budget, and then years later, that same couple on the brink of divorce wrestling about the division of assets. All of the sweetness dissolves when their posture changes from love and friendship to that of bitter enemies.

If two people are having a theological discussion, should they seek to posture themselves as enemies or friends? Are they on the same team working it out together? Or, are they sitting on opposite sides of the table, mixing in verbal jabs and insults alongside of their biblical insights? Why not rather strive to stay on the same side of the table working together to solve the issue? If two people recognize that they have a common goal, they will be greatly helped in using warm and gentle tones as they communicate with each other.

Sometimes Christians are forced into adversarial situations. Moreover, Jesus acknowledges the potential for enemies in the Sermon on the Mount when he says we should love them and pray for our persecutors (Matt 5:44). But Paul reminds us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18). While there is often more people can do to promote peace in a given conflict, this sentence leaves room for life in a fallen world—sometimes it will not be possible to be at peace with a person. In any situation, however, it would help to cultivate gracious speech if believers endeavor to avoid an adversarial posture so far as possible. When it comes to fellow church members and fellow brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, they should not be opposed to each other. All believers should approach theological and personal issues together with the gracious posture of those on the Lord’s team.

Christian mediator Ken Sande applies this principle to the context of dealing with another person’s sins. He says:

When you need to show others their faults, do not talk down to them as though you are faultless and they are inferior to you. Instead, talk with them as though you are standing side by side at the foot of the cross. Acknowledge your present, ongoing need for the Savior. Admit ways that you have wrestled with the same or other sins or weaknesses, and give hope by describing how God has forgiven you and is currently working in you to help you change. . . . When people sense this kind of humility and common bond, they will be less inclined to react to correction with pride and defensiveness.¹

Remember the Golden Rule

Contrary to the well-worn pun, the Golden Rule is *not* “He who has the gold makes the rules.” The Golden Rule, which is to treat others as you would like to be treated, actually comes from our Lord Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7:12 says, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Ponder the Golden Rule’s application to the discussion about gracious speech. Those seeking to cultivate kindness must think about the ways they like to be treated. How do they wish others would speak to them? Do they like it when other people speak in harsh and condemning tones to them, even when they are saying true things? Do they think it is personally helpful when somebody has a bit of important truth for them to hear, but they communicate it like a carpenter attacks wood with his nail gun? Not many hearers appreciate that kind of delivery. Jesus says to his followers, if they don’t like such an approach, they should not use it with others. Remembering the Golden Rule is an effective means of cultivating graciousness.

Reformed theologian Roger Nicole wrote an article called “How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us” about discussions with those with different theological perspectives. Using Jesus’ Golden Rule, Nicole asserted that before trying to win arguments, believers must consider their *obligations* to those with whom they differ.

This does not involve agreeing with them. We have an obligation to the truth that has priority over agreement with any particular person; if someone is not in the

¹Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 172.

truth, we have no right to agree. We have no right even to minimize the importance of the difference; and therefore, we do not owe consent, and we do not own indifference. But what we owe that person who differs from us, whoever that may be, is what we owe every human being—we owe them to love them. And we owe them to deal with them as we ourselves would like to be dealt with or treated (Matthew 7:12).²

Become a Better Listener

The Lord gave clear instructions about the connection between the heart and the mouth, but there is also a connection between the ear and the mouth. Being a better listener helps individuals become more gracious in several ways. First, *listening well shows respect* for the person in the conversation. The brother for whom Christ died or the sinner in need of the grace Christians have received deserves a respectful ear. Listening itself shows respect, but it also puts the hearer in a mindset of respect. Good listeners also express that they put value on the contents coming from the one talking. As has been seen, a high value placed upon the other person and what they are saying directly impacts the level of care in choosing gracious responses. In dealing with a person in a ministry context who talks incessantly, David Powlison counsels counselors:

The first part of the process looks easy. You have little choice in the matter. You listen. Here's the hard part: you do have a choice about *how* you listen. Listen well. Don't go numb; don't just go along; don't get irritated; don't run for the exit. Listen so you'll understand. Understand so you'll be able to talk with well-aimed words of life, so you'll know how to love.³

Second, listening also *helps to understand people better*. Knowing the backgrounds, concerns, and questions behind the question or comment helps one temper his or her tone. For example, if conversing with someone who believes that a person can lose his or her salvation, one should first listen between the lines, discern their real

²David Bailey, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Life & Legacy of Roger Nicole* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006), 184. The article appears as the first appendix of Bailey's excellent biography of Nicole.

³David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2005), 85.

concerns, and listen to what they mean more than just what they say, before attempting to present biblical evidence to prove that true believers cannot lose their salvation. In other words, it helps to discover the reasons he or she is so passionate about this issue. If one merely matches passion and volume for passion and volume, coupled with verses against verses, what will be accomplished? Will God be glorified? Will this conversation communicate the love of Christ to the other person?

If, on the other hand, there is true listening before speaking, one may hear between the lines, for example, a deep concern that a person who believes in eternal security would lack motivation to live for God. Their distress is not so much with a set of verses as it is a positive concern for personal holiness. As long as the person assumes that the one believes—“Do whatever you want; once saved, always saved”—the conversation will not likely be fruitful no matter how strong the arguments. So many times in theological debates, one can become overbearing instead of a careful listener. A good listener can become a more gracious speaker by addressing the concerns behind the questions, which will often diffuse the tension and lead right back to a better conversation about the original question. After affirming the Bible’s mandate for personal holiness and that holiness is a fruit of true salvation, the other person will likely be much more open to discuss the verses about eternal security.

Listening also provides *time to pause and consider the conversation*. Another way to cultivate graciousness was to stop and think before speaking. Listening well helps the hearer to slow down to answer questions such as, “What is the person really saying?,” “How should I best respond to their point?,” “What would God have me to say?,” “Is this the best time to respond?,” and “How would God want me to say it?” Nicole cautions, “Rather than preparing ourselves to pounce on that person the moment he or she stops

talking, we should concentrate on apprehending precisely what the other person holds.”⁴

Another way listening helps to be more gracious is by *helping one to express the other person’s point of view*. It is a good goal to understand the other person so well that one can give their perspective and the other person will be pleased with the presentation. Many hearers disregard what a man or a woman says if the hearer doesn’t think the speaker has correctly understood them. Nicole expressed this goal in the midst of a theological disagreement.

Then my aim was to represent the view faithfully and fully without mingling the criticism with factual statements; in fact, so faithfully and fully that an adherent to that position might comment, ‘This man certainly does understand our view!’ It would be a special boon if one could say, ‘I never heard it stated better!’ This then could earn me the right to criticize.⁵

Most appreciate it when the person being addressed carefully listens, can accurately express the speaker’s perspective, *and then* interacts with it. Communications professor Tim Muehlhoff conveys urgency over this point as he cautions, “We need to avoid pretending to understand a person’s perspective if we really don’t.”⁶ He calls such an approach “pseudo-listening.” Muehlhoff offers the experienced advice of asking clarifying questions with a gracious tone and attitude, and then offering a summary statement of the other person’s narrative, giving them the opportunity to further clarify their position if needed.⁷

Listening well helps people get to the place of effective communication. It also shows love to the other person. Nicole encourages participants in biblical debates to demonstrate that they have a real interest in one another—an eagerness to learn from each

⁴Bailey, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 185.

⁵*Ibid.*, 188.

⁶Tim Muehlhoff, *I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Truth and Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 95.

⁷*Ibid.*, 95-96.

other as well as help each other.⁸ The Bible says, “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion (Prov 18:2). In other words, a fool never listens well, because he or she doesn’t love others. Instead, he or she spouts off their own ideas and assumptions, because fools are obsessed with themselves.

Make Charitable Judgments

If a person loves someone, they discipline their minds to assume the best about the other’s words or actions until they have the facts to prove otherwise.⁹ While such mental discipline may not seem to fit modern sentimental concepts of love, according to the Bible love means sacrificing one’s own wants to meet the needs of another (John 15:12-14). The real opposite of love is not hate, but selfishness. Instead of selfishly assuming that one knows everything about the other person’s thoughts and motivations behind his or her words or actions, in love Christians should selflessly assume the best interpretation of what the other person has said or done. The idea flows from Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7, which says, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Because Christians are called by God to love their fellow Christians, family members, neighbors, and even their enemies, they should begin by assuming the best about everyone.

In times of conflict, the participants’ presuppositions will become evident, for good or bad, leading to better or worse outcomes. When one person in the conversation looks at the other through sunglasses, everything will be tinted darker. Ken Sande observes, “If people sense that you have jumped to conclusions about them and enjoy finding fault in them, they are likely to resist correction. If, on the other hand, they sense that you are trying to believe the best about them, they will be more inclined to listen to

⁸Bailey, *Speaking The Truth In Love*, 188.

⁹Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 171.

your concerns.”¹⁰

Think about the Practical Outcomes

Think about the ways that different styles of speaking during a conversation can make things worse or better. If a group of normal co-workers discusses where to have lunch, everyone might quickly settle on a pizza place. But if that group includes self-appointed pizza aficionados, more dialogue may be required to ensure you are eating the right kind of pizza for the mood and moment. While a variety of positive considerations could be offered moving towards a good decision, what would happen when one of the passionate pizza experts becomes emotional and unkind? It could add fuel to the fire. If another co-worker insults the first expert’s favorite place, they could become vexed with one another. Suddenly, pizza is not the issue anymore as they are thinking about the ways that their pizza was disparaged. They now fire back about the first’s lack of taste. Instead of getting closer to satisfying everyone’s appetite, the second now begins thinking of zingers to put the first in his place. Soon the other co-workers slip away and eat Chinese food.

When discussing any issue from pizza to parenting, from movies to money, graciousness helps the participants to concentrate on the issues at hand instead of clouding over with emotional reactions toward one another. In addition to avoiding the hindrances that harshness can cause, gracious answers smoothly direct the conversation toward solutions. Once again the Proverbs offer wise insights on the matter. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov 15:1); “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit” (Prov 15:4); “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention” (Prov 15:18); and “The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Prov

¹⁰Ibid., 170.

16:21). The letter of James has been called the Proverbs of the New Testament. In it, James also acknowledges the power of the tongue to produce powerful outcomes.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (Jas 3:5-10)

Outcomes are better when graciousness seasons the means. In order to experience the best possible results of conversations, participants should use “sweetness of speech.” Intentionally considering the outcome one desires in an interaction will help the person cultivate the means of getting to the goal. If the person is ungracious, mean, and harsh, the talk will generally end badly. To quote Sande again, “Strong words are more likely to evoke defensiveness and antagonism, and once a conversation takes on this tone, it is difficult to move to a friendlier plane.”¹¹ A tone of voice can turn a routine conversation into a fight. But if he or she uses soft, sweet, and kind tones, expressions, and words, a routine conversation generally will bless all involved.

Cultivate Gracious Practices

A farmer first prepares the land before planting the seeds in preparation for the harvest of fruits and vegetables. Most of the kindness-producing practices identified so far could be compared to preparing the land and sowing hidden seeds—heart-shifts that replace wrong patterns of thinking and reacting with ones that will inspire graciousness. After the seeds have been scattered, the faithful farmer will also use means to help the sprouts to grow strong and fruitful: applying fertilizers, removing weeds and bugs, and even using stakes to support the tender shoots. In addition to the various heart-shifts that

¹¹Ibid., 171.

have been considered that must take place to cultivate and seed the soil, those desiring to become kind and gentle must also use practical means of supporting and strengthening gracious practices. The farmer happily utilizes practical outward helps to get the most out of the harvest. There are also helpful practical means for the one pursuing graciousness that will be considered now.

Think Before Speaking

My wife once made this simple, but profound, observation: “If I would just think about what I want to say before I say it, I would sin less.” Certainly, this maxim applies to the manner of one’s words as much as to their content. A Christian ought not issue his or her words in a thoughtless manner; they should stop and think before speaking. They should briefly ask questions like, “Who is being addressed?” Paul Tripp, in his consideration of Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:29, which says that all of our speech should be helpful for building others up, recommends a series of questions to consider about the person being addressed, each of which could affect the way one proceeds with the conversation.

To whom we are speaking? Is it a man, woman, boy, or girl? Is it someone our own age, younger, or older? Is it a long-time friend, a casual acquaintance, or a virtual stranger? Is it a family member, a distant relative, or a neighbor? Is the person a believer, a seeker, or lost? What is his or her knowledge and experience of the truths of Scripture? How receptive is this person to my ministry? How do the answers to these questions guide me in what to say?¹²

“What needs to be said?” is another important question to consider. Take the time to consider the person and their situation, and the content that needs to be communicated. The more a man or woman learns about the person they are addressing, including their background and life situation, the better chance the speaker has at offering targeted, helpful, upbuilding words. Paul recognized that different people in different

¹²Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 237.

situations require different communication. He told the Thessalonians, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess 5:14). Paul advises three different medicines for people in three different conditions, with patience applied to everyone. The more thought one gives to the one being addressed the more complex the person becomes, filled with different attitudes and assumptions. A more complex understanding of the person being addressed also creates empathy in the one communicating, which also adds to the graciousness in the communication.¹³

Closely related to the matters of background and contents is the timing of the discussion. Stop and think about the question, “Are there any factors that affect the timing of the conversation?” As Sande says,

Timing is an essential ingredient of effective communication. If possible, do not discuss sensitive matters with someone who is tired, worried about other things, or in a bad mood. Nor should you approach someone about an important concern unless you will have enough time to discuss the matter thoroughly.¹⁴

In addition to these timing concerns, Sande also advises thoughtfulness about the place of the conversation. He cautions about others being present, loud distracting noises, and the feelings of security of the one being addressed.¹⁵ Any of these timing issues can dramatically impact a discussion, and yet, with a small amount of forethought, they are not difficult to anticipate and accommodate.

“Am I thinking about God?” In the midst of navigating difficult discussions keeping God in the forefront of one’s thoughts could be the single most helpful words of wisdom in this regard. When God is personally considered, it follows that his Word will also be contemplated. These kinds of Godward thoughts inspire graciousness by

¹³Muehlhoff, *I Beg to Differ*, 114.

¹⁴Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 173.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

reminding the person about God’s graciousness, his commands to be loving and gentle, and God’s promises to help believers to become gracious.

If the wisdom of such a verbal pause isn’t apparent, listen to the wisdom of the Proverbs. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov 10:19); “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Prov 17:27); and, “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov 29:20). A wise heart waits before pushing words out of the mouth.

Because of that pipeline between a fallen heart and a person’s mouth, the fact that any words flow from mouths guarantees that some of them will be sinful. My wise wife was exactly right, though. Stopping to think provides a much better chance of responding in a gracious, sweet, and wise way than when one merely reacts emotionally and begins to speak with harsh tones and critical attitudes.

Use a Journal

Writing in a journal can be a wonderful means of cultivating spiritual growth in a Christian’s life. In addition to the help of slowing down to express the ways the Lord is working in one’s life, reviewing the entries can reveal larger patterns of thinking and behavior.¹⁶ But additionally, a journal can be used in a more focused way to work on specific struggles such as worry, depression, or in this case unkindness.

When an episode of harshness occurs, it is helpful to write down the details of the episode as soon as possible (while it is fresh in one’s thinking). The person should write down a few lines about the situation of the outburst, but most importantly, he or she should write down what they were thinking and wanting as the events unfolded. Later,

¹⁶See Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 249–70. Whitney devotes an entire chapter to the spiritual discipline of journaling, including its value and benefits.

when the emotional reactions have settled, like when the clouds of sediment settle in a pond, the person should review his records, possibly including a wise friend in the process. The goal at this point is to compare the thoughts of the person's heart with the ways the Scriptures enjoin believers to think and act in such situations. With the emotions quieted, it is easier to become objective in the analysis.

For example, if Lisa and Jennifer argue in the church parking lot after the church meeting about involving a new visitor in the ladies' ministry, they might be so filled with emotions such as anger, embarrassment, and even shame about fighting right after church that they have difficulty remembering what led to the conflict. At lunch, however, Jennifer could take a few minutes to write down some of her thoughts in bullet points even before she gets home. Later that afternoon, perhaps after a nap, she might pull out her notes. She could then see more clearly that she had not been thinking according to the Scriptures. Now she would realize that her thoughts seemed proud. "Lisa doesn't like me or the people that I want to recruit for the ladies' ministry," "I want my new friend included right away," and "I'm going to really let Lisa have it." Now that the emotional dust has settled she could compare her former thoughts with thoughts that correspond to biblical graciousness.

In Ephesians 4, Paul appeals to the church at Ephesus to be united on the basis of the gospel truths he had taught them in chapters 1-3. He commends gracious virtues as a vital means of maintaining Christian unity. Paul charges the church to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3). The unity charge to the church along with the means to maintain that unity has clear applications to those struggling with each other within the church. As Jennifer compares her thoughts to the inspired words of Paul, she can repent, and literally write out new humble thoughts to think for the next time she

interacts with Lisa. She might write out thoughts like, “I must love Lisa far more than I want to get my way in this ministry,” or “Even though I am eager to see my friend become more involved, I should be patient with the process and the people making the decisions,” or “However, this works out, I need to honor the Lord and pursue unity with my sisters in Christ.” Humble biblical thoughts in a heart produce gracious communication with others. Using a journal in this way can help a Christian to identify and replace unkind ways of thinking and acting with thoughts and deeds that please the Lord.

Use Gracious Helper Words

In order to create habits of gracious speaking, believers should incorporate words and phrases into their dialogue designed to remind themselves of the need to be more gracious and to be a conduit of kindness. Expressions such as: “I think,” “It seems,” or “From my perspective,” acknowledge the speaker’s awareness of their lack of omniscience. While everyone else knows that the speaker doesn’t know everything, it can be good for the others being addressed to hear the speaker affirm that he or she doesn’t know everything. A major reason why people are harsh, critical, and severe is that they sincerely believe they are right—in fact, they are certain they are right. Because they are so confident in their opinions, they feel no need or desire to say, “It seems this way;” instead, they say, “It is this way!”

Regardless of how often a given Christian is right about issues, no one is always right. Although there are biblical truths believers can know with certainty, even when discussing these biblical issues, using humble phrases can genuinely help the believers to remain humble and further the conversation. Since no human being has all of the information in the universe it is generally a helpful habit to express opinions by opining with some deference to the listener or reader—for example, “It *seems* like this is the way it is”; “It *seems* like this is what this verse is saying”; “I *think* that this verse

connects with that verse in this way to give us this doctrine”; “*From my perspective that seems to be the direction to go.*”

Humility gives a little more space. Acknowledging your limitations, and then softening your expressions with your words, tones, and manner will help to be better received. So, for example, if a Christian dialogues about a challenging teaching from the Bible, like God’s sovereignty in salvation, he or she could say true things in different ways often leading to different results with the hearer. They *could* go right to some of the plainest statements in Romans 9 and Ephesians 1, and then make dogmatic declarations about God choosing some for salvation from eternity past and passing over others. In this style of conversation, the Christian is not too concerned about my hearer, their background, their concerns, their questions—they just take aim with their Bible gun and fire away—after all God is sovereign, so he will handle the results anyway. Muehlhoff describes this dynamic as having a position-centered, as opposed to a person-centered orientation in communication.¹⁷ If, on the other hand, the believer first acknowledges his or her lack of omniscience by expressing the *same thoughts and opinions* in a softer way, the conversation may become much more beneficial to both parties. If he or she says, “*As I read this verse in Romans 9, I think it is teaching that there is a distinction between God’s attitude and actions from eternity past toward Jacob and Esau. His eternal plan for dealing with these two individuals seems to come from his sovereign plan rather than what either of them would do or believe later in their lives.*”

Notice that there is no necessary alteration or softening of the truths being expressed because of communicating in more humble words and tones. There also seems to be a connection between the use of softer words and tones and moving the conversation forward in a positive, interactive way. But when people are critical, harsh,

¹⁷Muehlhoff, *I Beg to Differ*, 147.

offensive in their wording or unnecessarily dogmatic, hearers shut them off, shut the door to further input from them, and their relationships suffers. If a conversation style causes relationships to suffer, are those involved being loving and Christ-like? If a Christian is not being loving and Christ-like, Jesus Christ has something to say about his child and the way he or she represents the Lord's truth. Softer words are an acknowledgement, a humble acknowledgement, that people do not know every fact in the universe. Gracious helper words provide a good reminder to speakers and a good help to their hearers to hear the intended message—aiding the conversation to progress in the more beneficial directions.

Remember that Everything Communicates

Even when a mouth is not moving, the person is communicating. Husbands who grunt over glowing iPads as their wives try to sort through a discipline issue with one of the children are accused of not being good communicators. But, in fact, those husbands are excellent communicators. Although a few words acknowledgment do make it across his lips, if everything else about his expression, mannerism, and eye gaze communicates disinterest, the message of unengagement will be sent effectively and received loudly and clearly. In order to cultivate graciousness, a person needs to be conscious of the significance of non-verbal communication and to make use of it to enhance the communication of kindness.

Sam Crabtree offers a list of benefits of good tones of voice in a letter to a mother of several children who was trying to promote pleasantness in her busy home. “It wins friends. It builds confidence in the minds of others that they can trust you. It demonstrates maturity (read James 3:3-12). It sweetens the ambiance, the atmosphere, the

environment; it makes you easier to be around.”¹⁸ Long time pastor’s wife Mary Beeke adds more detail to the simple yet significant effects of non-verbal communication:

Tone of voice and facial expression are huge factors. They express patience, tolerance, kindness, and happiness—or a lack thereof. When Mom says, “Come here, Brian,” her tone can convey either irritation or cheerfulness. When I am around a person with indomitable cheerfulness, I am uplifted; I feel safe, accepted, and comfortable in his or her presence. Wouldn't it be great if we all had that effect on each other? If we wish to improve her communication skills, this is the area to begin with that will make the most impact. By simply being aware of how we sound and our impact on others, we can take steps to change. It might involve dealing with underlying issues, but that is another subject. If we shore up the self-discipline it takes to be cheerful, our emotions may just follow along.¹⁹

If an individual’s non-verbal communication contradicts their verbal communication, which one cancels out the other? If a husband tells his wife she is beautiful and sweetly gives her a bouquet of flowers with a warm smile as he tells her of his undying love, the effect of his message multiplies. If he mopes in the door, rolls his eyes, and yawns as he mumbles about his undying love while picking up the newspaper before finishing the sentence, all of the refreshing romance of his words will evaporate. Corresponding non-verbal communication always strengthens a person’s words, but contradictory non-verbal communication always neutralizes, and even nullifies a person’s words. In order to cultivate graciousness, a person must be aware of the power of non-verbal communications. Many humorous stories have been told about things people said without realizing that a microphone was still on. In the same way, continuous messages are being broadcast from everyone through their tones, facial expressions, and other non-verbal means whether they realize their “mic” is live or not. Those seeking to become tenderhearted should intentionally utilize those gentle manners and tones to multiply the impact of gracious words.

¹⁸Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 166.

¹⁹Mary Beeke, *The Law of Kindness: Serving with Heart and Hands* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 180-81.

Beg God for Grace to be Gracious

If God wills for his children to become gracious, believers have a wonderful resource at their disposal to grow in graciousness—prayer. Whenever anyone prays according to God’s will, God promises to answer those requests positively. “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (1 John 5:14, 15). Asking God to make a Christian more gracious is a prayer according to God’s will. Therefore, God guarantees that he will answer such a prayer to make the person more gracious.

I worked for a time with a fellow Christian marked by an organizational style very different from my own. The time in my life that we interacted was extremely busy. As I assisted him, he regularly did things that in my view did not seem like the best use of our time. Temptation to be impatient and frustrated loomed large over my heart. Frustration, irritation, and impatience in hearts are like the electricity building within dark storm clouds—lightning will soon strike. I recognized this charge within my own heart. In order to escape the potential lightning bolts I was anticipating, I began praying for my relationship with this man. Every day during that time I prayed that God would knit my heart together in love with this fellow believer. That language was drawn from Colossians 2:2, where Paul is praying for believers he had never met, “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love.” What prayer request could be more in line with God’s will than to love another Christian from my heart?

After a month or so, I forgot about those prayers in my business. I didn’t think about my urgent request to God until the day this person unleashed another, in my mind, organizational mess up. What reminded me about my prayer request was my response to the situation. I didn’t mind his new plan one bit. There was no impatience or irritation. There was no choking back harsh thunderous tones in my reply. What made the difference? I was filled with a divinely born love for the man; I loved him so much that I

didn't care about the specific way he wanted to plan compared to what I would have done. We became much better friends after that. God never supernaturally changed this man's organizational style, but he supernaturally changed my heart. God answered my prayers, which were according to his will.

As a spider's web connects and strengthens itself at many different points, there are many connections between gracious speech and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23). Paul itemized these virtues to help the Galatian churches identify true believers and false teachers. The fruit of the Spirit is a cluster of ripe fruit that the Holy Spirit works into the hearts and lives of believers. Obviously, every part of the Holy Spirit's fruit will have a sweetening effect on a Christian's speech. New *love* for a fellow Christian made it much easier for me to speak to him kindly, even as we discussed organizational differences. How can a person be mean if he or she is filled with God's *joy*? *Patience* is always an antidote to an angry edge in a conversation. *Kindness*, *goodness*, and *gentleness* are parallel terms for being gracious. The Holy Spirit will help God's children *faithfully* follow our Lord's example in using *self-control* with their tongues. If the Holy Spirit already specializes in working these kinds of virtues into the hearts of believers in general ways, there is great reason to hope that God is ready, willing, and able to quickly answer prayers for a more gracious mouth.

King David prayed in Psalm 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." In Psalm 141:3, he prayed, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!" These kinds of prayers are not a novel practice; God's people have been saying them for a long time. God has heard these requests before. He has answered them before, and he will answer them again. Perhaps some people will pray about their tones

and words for a while and then forget that they had done it. Later, they will remember their prayer as someone remarks about how much more gracious they have become. Christians who experience answers to their prayers should remember to thank God for making the changes.

Thoroughly Use the Bible

The Scriptures are the chief means that the Holy Spirit uses to transform God's children into greater conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. The inspired Scriptures cut the pathways for Christians to renew their minds in order to live in all the ways that please the Lord (Rom 12:1-2). While most Christians are aware of the importance of reading the Bible regularly, they often fall short of appreciating and utilizing the full array of resources God's Word provides. To make significant progress in heart-level transformation in the area of graciousness, believers must maximize their Bible intake. In addition to consistently reading the Bible, there are several other helpful personal disciplines that will exponentially elevate the transforming benefits of the Bible.²⁰

Meditate on the Scriptures. Overcoming the sin that remains in hearts that consistently finds ways to slip out between lips requires more help than mere human means. Bad attitudes in hearts are patterns of sinful thoughts clustered together. In order to change the sinful thoughts that merge into the bad attitudes that season our speech, believers need to conform their thinking to the transforming Scriptures. As Joshua was preparing for the battles of leading God's people and warring against God's enemies, the chief weapon for success that God gave to Joshua was a mind full of the Bible. "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and

²⁰See Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 21–78. Whitney's two chapters on the spiritual discipline of Bible Intake offer a wide array of benefits and methods for believers to be transformed by God's Word.

night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Josh 1:8). The godly man of the first Psalm enjoyed the blessings of perpetual fruitfulness because of his prior commitment to perpetually meditate upon the Word of God: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1-2).

Taking time to ponder the meaning and applications of any portion of the Bible will be fruitful for spiritual progress, but identifying sections of the Bible that specifically relate to godly communication will aggressively target the heart in the areas of gentleness, kindness, and sweetness. Christians should list the key verses that directly address the particular heart issues and temptations they are fighting against. One person is tempted to be harsh, critical, or too sharp in ways differently than others are. Each should know the personal buttons that open their faucet for harsh speech. Then they must think deeply about the specific Scriptures that are most helpful in addressing and changing those specific heart issues.

For example, if someone believed that sinfully passionate assertions are the best way to change other people’s behavior, an excellent biblical remedy would be Paul’s instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 about correcting in gentleness and patience because it is God who grants repentance. To experience more profound levels of transformation the believer must not be content with a surface reading of the verses. Just as a colorful piece of hard candy changes the color of the tongue as the candy slowly dissolves, so these verse will color the heart of the one that spends time thinking about, appreciating, and applying them. Writing down the meditation insights would add even more to the impact and would allow the person to build upon the treasures in the future.

Pray through Scripture. This spiritual discipline can go hand in hand with meditation. As God reveals himself and his ways to his child through meditation on his Word, the Christian can respond in prayer. There are many profitable directions a Christian could go in prayer in response to a portion of Scripture. As suggested in the example above, meditating upon 2 Timothy 2:24-26 could prompt several possible avenues of prayer. The person could be convicted about his lack of gentleness or patience in correcting another person, leading him to confess his sins to the Lord. Specific cases of others in need of correction could inspire prayers of intercession to the God who grants repentance. Petitions could arise based on a renewed desire to handle the cases graciously. The recognition of God's sovereign power in changing others could lead to praise and thanksgiving. Prayers affirming trust in God could rise from those reminded of the spiritual war taking place as the devil holds sinners captive. Communing with Christ based upon his Word is an excellent means of driving the truth deeper into one's heart. The Holy Spirit loves to use the tool of truth and the prayers of God's people as means of spiritual growth and change.

Listen to sermons about graciousness. The best sermons identify the point of a passage or passages of Scripture and teach and apply those truths. In every age the Lord has raised up gifted men to proclaim his Word to congregations of Christians. Unlike past generations, however, many Christians living in the twenty-first century have unprecedented, free access to expository sermons from all over the world through the Internet. Many websites, smart phone applications, and search engines can direct hearers to messages on specific passages or topics from the Bible. After someone has meditated upon a passage, imagine the fruitfulness of hearing the insights of gifted preachers teaching out of the same text. The inspired Scriptures can be rightly considered and applied in many directions. Therefore, listening to sermons can add depth and breadth of one's understanding of the Bible's teachings upon graciousness, as well as providing

more ways to apply the lessons that have already been learned.

Memorize key passages of the Bible. Memorizing the Bible provides a tool for continual meditation because the person can reflect upon the passage any time and any place. In addition to the Scriptures that directly relate to graciousness, other general biblical promises can be a vital help in spiritual transformation as well. Because of remaining sin, even those believers who fully intend to cultivate loving-kindness in their relationships will experience setbacks. There will be occasions when triggers to harsh reactions will be pulled, and the sincere believer will respond sinfully. At such times, in addition to being thoroughly aware of the Bible's teachings about graciousness, fallen Christians will appreciate immediate access to the spiritual encouragement of some of God's promises.

For example, if a man or woman memorized 1 John 1:9 they could be assured that if they confess their bad attitudes and harsh communication God will cleanse them from all unrighteousness. Knowing 1 Corinthians 10:13 by heart provides assurance that one will never be overwhelmed by any future temptation and that God will supply all of the grace needed to endure them. The promise of God's abiding presence in Hebrews 13:5 comforts believers in all kinds of situations. There are many times when the urge to react with an angry retort could be averted by remembering that God is present in the situation. Romans 8:28-30 has comforted Christians from the first century on that God is always working out his plan in the lives of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. God's plan is for his glory and the ultimate good of his people. Having promises like these at the ready through advanced memorization will help encourage Christians in the battle to be like Jesus Christ, who is full of grace and truth.

Conclusion

While a bull has no hope of successfully navigating through the narrow aisles

of a china shop—no matter how much training he receives—Christians, on the other hand, can make real progress in becoming gracious. Just as farmers work for a harvest, first below the soil, preparing the land and sowing the seeds, and then above the soil, helping the plants to become fruitful, so Christians can work for a harvest of graciousness, first below the surface of their hearts, changing their thoughts and attitudes, and then out of their hearts, changing their behaviors. The Lord Jesus does not simply forgive his unkind children; through the Holy Spirit he also changes them into kind children. By utilizing the personal strategies for cultivating graciousness considered in this chapter, the believer can anticipate genuine change.

CHAPTER 7
BIBLICAL GRACIOUSNESS CULTIVATED
CORPORATELY

Christianity is more like a team sport like basketball, football, or soccer than an individual sport such as golf, bowling, or tennis. Certainly team sports require individual efforts from each part of the team; the more outstanding the individuals perform the better the results the team will achieve. Individual sports can also have team components with coaches and others striving to help the participants to do their best, but success or failure in individual sports rests upon the execution of the single player. Some individual Christians wrongly act as if the results of their Christian character and ministry rest completely upon themselves. While the Holy Spirit is God's agent of spiritual growth and Christians are called to take responsibility to work out the implications of their salvation (Phil 2:12-13), individual Christians are not called by God to do these things in isolation. Christians are called to live, grow, and serve within a believing community—a church. Like a body, each part makes contributions to the health and effectiveness of the whole (1 Cor 12:14-27; Rom 12:4-8). Like a team, each player has a specialized role to play to help the team win the game. Not everyone on a basketball team is small, fast, and can shoot a basket from a long way from the goal. Not everyone is tall and strong to get rebounds and make shots through defenders right under the rim. But when each player utilizes their abilities, it compensates for the others' deficiencies. An outstanding team of men or women, each performing their roles well and precisely working together for the common goal, performs like one great person.

The Bible speaks of the mutual ministry of the members of local churches towards one another for the spiritual benefits of the whole body of Christ (Eph 4:11-16).

The gifts and spiritual experience of the various members of the church show forth differently. One believer within a church can strengthen the weaknesses of another Christian. The Christian limited in one area makes wonderful contributions to the rest of the body in another area. The church team works together to accomplish far more than any individual could accomplish alone. For example, Samuel may not be an effective public teacher, but he has excellent knowledge and skills in serving others in setting up the meeting place for the church gatherings. Steven may not have much time to offer, but he makes a large amount of money in his job and has tremendous faith, which shows itself in the way he gives generously to the work of the church. George has fought hard to overcome battles with pornography and has the desire and ability to help other men with similar struggles. Holly makes difficult biblical truths simple for children, helping parents equip them with God's truth. Depression had Dave down for many months, but now that he is through the trial, Dave reaches out to his discouraged friends, Boyd and Nicholas, with hope he found from the Scriptures. A Christian's experiences in life and with the Lord, knowledge of the Scriptures, and spiritual giftedness make each person in the church different from the others, but the Lord has assembled diverse churches to help each other. In addition to the many individual means the Lord can use to help Christians grow in graciousness, every Christian should look around at the others within his or her church. There are also important corporate means of cultivating graciousness.

Spend Time with Gracious People

According to the Bible, there is a direct link between one's closest companions and one's behavior. Proverbs 13:20 says, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." Another Proverb says, "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare" (Prov 22:24-25). The imitation dynamic revealed in the Bible goes both ways. As believers spend time with wise or gracious people, they will

literally become wiser and more gracious. If, on the other hand, they spend time with foolish or angry people, known for explosive rash outbursts, they will become foolish, angry people who shoot their mouths off as well. Without recognizing the process, people's instincts and reactions become shaped by those who surround them. Some naively assume that they are the exception to the Bible's rule, but everyone eventually discovers that they have become like the people with whom they have spent the most time.

The New Testament echoes the imitation dynamic throughout its pages. Paul plainly calls his readers to *imitate* or *mimic* his example as he follows Christ in both Philippians 4:9 and 1 Corinthians 11:1. In 2 Corinthians 8, he holds up the *example* of the sacrificial giving of the Macedonian churches for the Corinthians to follow. His readers are commended in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-8 for following Paul's *example* and for *being an example* themselves to other churches by joyfully receiving God's Word amidst persecution. To another church under threat of severe persecution came these words, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of live, and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). A godly example so powerfully influences churches that the chief qualification for church leaders is godly character (see 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Peter notes that the primary means of an elder's leadership is his life example (1 Pet 5:1-4). Imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery; God built it into the fabric of men's souls.

Cultivating graciousness in community occurs as Christians spend time with gracious Christians. There are ways to do this even in an excessively busy Western culture. First, Christians should specifically identify people in their church marked by gentleness, loving interactions, and kind communications. They might ask, "Who would I want to be confronted by if I was in the wrong about an issue?," or "Who seems the most patient with their children when they are acting up?," or "Who would my spiritual leaders

recommend that I learn graciousness from?” After some tenderhearted models have been identified, the Christian should become intentional about spending time with them. If they are truly kindhearted, they will not be too difficult to engage.

Then those desiring to learn graciousness should think about possible times to be together both inside and outside of the church gatherings. Instead of rushing home to lunch after church, they should seek out the people they want to learn from. Even a few moments before and after church with some consistency add up to help to establish and build a friendship. Then they ought to invest time with the people outside of church meetings, such as a meal together in a home or restaurant, playing a sport or practicing a hobby together, or offering to work on a project with them. Any time spent with gracious people will be beneficial to the one wanting to grow in graciousness.

Becoming intentional during these meetings will amplify the benefits, as one seeks to learn what makes the person gracious, observes patterns of kindness unfold in various circumstances, and even asks questions to learn about the thought patterns behind the sweetness of the words and deeds. The Bible states that everyone will imitate those they spend time with whether they are conscious of it or not, but those wanting to become gracious ought to look for caring leaders to follow and seek to mimic their models.

Ask for Help

Real friends help each other become more gracious while managing to remain friends. How can a person know when to repent of an angry tone of voice? How can they identify patterns of severity, if they don't have anyone who loves them enough to point it out? While there are times a pugnacious person can figure out that they have been completely obnoxious, there are more subtle times when sarcasm or roughness make smaller displays. Without help from others, it is easy to miss. It is hard to point out faults to people—especially the sins that so clearly spring from a heart of pride. Growing in graciousness, however, requires true Christian friends who are willing to give one another

wounding truths spoken in love, as Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

Because of the challenges associated with giving and receiving correction, those Christians desiring to become gracious should specifically charge their faithful friends to be on the lookout. He or she should ask the friend to take note of the Christian’s words, tones, and facial expressions in their conversations. Then they should ask the friends to boldly point out any time that it seems like the Christian is being less than gracious (the mere absence of harshness is not a high enough goal). Jerry Bridges suggested a series of pointed questions to literally ask friends who know the person best about ways they come across to others.

Are we dogmatic and opinionated, blunt and abrupt? Do we seek to intimidate or dominate others by the sheer force of our personality? Do people feel ill at ease in our presence because they think we are silently judging their weaknesses and correcting their faults? If any of these traits are characteristic of us, we must face them honestly and humbly.¹

It requires humility to open oneself even to a faithful friend, but if the seasoning of harshness consistently manifests itself in one’s communication, being gently exposed is exactly what is needed. As has been noted, a person cannot repent of what they do not first see. Although Christians see some of their own faults, godly friends can often see more of their faults. Obviously, no one wants the doctor to just cut out the big obvious cancer and leave all of the smaller tumors in place, even if it means more pain for the patient and a longer recovery time.

In addition to asking for help identifying examples of one’s severity, Christians should ask their friend for specific advice or personalized strategies to cultivate kindness in case the same situation recurs. General medicine can offer some help to a group of sick people, but a specific prescription given by someone who knows the details of the

¹Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1983), 228.

person's symptoms will prove to be a much more effective remedy. When Paul wanted to help the young church at Thessalonica, he wrote them a letter. While that was good, his deeper desire was to be personally present to adapt his counsel to their specific needs.

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face... Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. (1 Thess 2:17, 3:1-3)

Another benefit of having these difficult, but good, conversations with Christian friends about loving communication is that the friends involved can then pray for each other about the specific matters discussed. While no man or woman can change the heart of another man or woman, God can change any heart. Friends may plead on behalf of one another before the transforming God. Previously, the personal discipline of begging for grace to become gracious was considered. Here those good petitions are intensified by the intercessions of Christian friends. Whenever Paul desperately desired to be present with and help a needy group of Christians (like the Thessalonian church), but could not be, he could always pray for them.

Examples of Paul's prayers for the church abound in 1 Thessalonians: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers" (1 Thess 1:2); "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2:13); "For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?" (1 Thess 3:9-10); "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may

establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:11-13).

When Christian friends make the effort to help a fellow believer see their sin, he or she may not want to hear it; after all, they are rightly called “faithful wounds” (Prov 27:6). The believer longing to cultivate graciousness should remind himself or herself of several things to be receptive to reproof. First, he or she asked for it—literally. Second, the Bible is so clear that fools don’t receive correction, but wise men and women do. One example of many in Proverbs says, “Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning” (Proverbs 9:7-9). In spite of how being reproved feels emotionally, remembering this truth can strengthen the heart of the hearer. Finally, they should remind themselves that confrontation is the means the Lord has established to help people see and repent of their sin. They should thank God for sending them a faithful friend. They should thank their friend for his or her love and courage to be God’s instrument to help them grow in their graciousness.

Take Initiative to be Gracious in Group Contexts

Far too many Westerners think of church gatherings as spectator sports instead of participatory events. Consequently, within minutes of being dismissed, most of the people have dispersed. Members who spend time with one another, on the other hand, mark healthy churches. The gathering of a local church ought to be a respite for God’s people who are being barraged by the world the rest of the week. These precious times together ought to be cherished and utilized by capturing as much time as possible to build relationships with others in the church family, not truncated and neglected.

Because healthy churches have godly men and women seeking to reach out and minister to one another, church gatherings are wonderful occasions for Christians to practice being gracious. While it could seem artificial to intentionally manufacture a gracious comment to another person (as opposed to gentle sweetness naturally flowing from a grace-filled heart), sometimes discipline requires Christians to do what they know is right in spite of what is happening within their hearts (1 Tim 4:7-8). A Christian heart never ceases to battle its remaining sin (Gal 5:17). While it is important to depend upon the Holy Spirit for spiritual progress, Christians must take responsibility and do what is right in spite of their feelings trusting that the Holy Spirit will inspire the heart to follow (Phil 2:12-13). In this case, Christians should intentionally seek to say kind words in kind ways to fellow Christians when the church meets.

Sunday morning church gatherings require the least amount of discipline to attend for most Christians, but they often prove the most difficult times to have meaningful conversations. The discipline to be intentional about kind conversations, thus, requires even more discipline to create the opportunity. They should be disciplined to faithfully attend the meeting, but they could also schedule extra time before and especially after the meeting to interact with fellow church members. Certainly, if the church offers less formal gatherings, such as Sunday School, a prayer meeting, or small group ministries, the one seeking to have even more practice in graciousness ought to attend those meetings as well.

Instead of waiting to be spoken to, this intentional, disciplined Christian should seek out someone with whom to start the conversation. It is not a bad idea to have a plan in mind for the encounter. They could use one of the means to cultivate graciousness already discussed to form the basis of their plan. Perhaps they want to try to listen better. They could initiate the conversation, but then focus primarily on asking one or two questions and carefully listening to the answers. The next week, gracious helper words

and phrases may be the goal. They should try to include the phrases, “it seems” and “from my perspective” one time each in their conversation. Other times the aims could be expressing gratitude or making an effort to communicate grace non-verbally. Of course, these methods for cultivating graciousness have already been expounded. The present point of consideration is making the disciplined effort to attend church gatherings in order to take initiative in putting the various practices into practice. Engaging with fellow church members ought to be the arena for believers’ graciousness to be cultivated.

Establish a Reading Group

God’s most spectacular natural creations are best admired from multiple perspectives. If someone takes the time and expense to see the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, he or she ought not to be content to jump out of the vehicle at the first possible sighting, enjoy the view, take a few pictures, and then return home. Instead, the amazed traveler should move around to drink in the picture from different perspectives. Walking down a trail, driving to the next vista, crossing into New Mexico or Canada, boarding a donkey or a boat all provide opportunities for even more astonishment and appreciation of those two masterpieces of God. Sermons and books that beautifully capture and apply the meaning of the Bible from different perspectives can be masterpieces for people’s souls as well. The Lord raises up gifted men and women in every generation to teach and apply biblical truths to the issues of life. Reading their books or hearing the sermons of godly men can provide wonderful encouragement and instruction for growing Christians. Creating opportunities to discuss those books or sermons with others can multiply the benefits of the material. Another way to cultivate graciousness in the context of the church community is to begin a reading group.²

²While the focus of this section is about discussing books, with the accessibility of sermons on the Internet, having a group discussion about sermons can be another fruitful application of this practice. Many small groups in churches discuss and apply the sermons preached by the pastor. This same concept

Reading good books offers Christians the chance to think carefully about a subject. The best Christian authors have studied the Scriptures, read the best literature on the matter, thought deeply about it, and carefully prepared their findings in books. Taking the time to read these books offers believers the opportunity to directly benefit from the labor of the author. But the same book will strike different people differently. As individuals compare the contents of the book with what they know about the Bible's teaching and their own life-experiences, insights will spark in a variety of directions. Reading a book about God's providential superintending the details of life, for example, might bring to someone's mind a recent Bible Study about the story of Esther, in which although God's name is not mentioned, his powerful orchestration of the salvation of the Jews and the destruction of their enemies cannot be easily missed. The same book on divine providence, however, could be considered differently by people who have had distinctive personal experiences, like an adopted woman who had discovered her biological parents in a way that could only be explained by God's hands, or by a lady like Joni Eareckson Tada, who had a tragic diving accident which left her paralyzed, but found that God worked through her circumstances to create an international ministry to the disabled. A reading group can multiply the benefits of a good book through the participants' contributions to the conversation of their various perspectives, insights, knowledge of other Scriptures, and ideas for applications. In the course of such a conversation, layers of insights and applications build upon each other as new contributions spark fresh ideas from the participants.

In addition to reading books specifically about gentleness, kindness, or godly communication, believers can cultivate graciousness in reading groups using other kinds of books. Even bad books can provide good help. If a reading group intentionally selected

could work with Bible-based sermons preached elsewhere, where a link to the website is sent through an email, each one downloads the message separately, and then meets to discuss and apply the message.

a popular book from a different side of the theological spectrum, for example, they could literally practice interacting with the book graciously. Instead of rolling their eyes, discussing only the worst points of the book, using biting sarcasm, insulting the author, judging his or her motives throughout the conversation, and stirring up one another's self-righteousness with hearty agreements and laughter, they could simply share their perspectives with Christian kindness. If the book is popular, others in their local context will likely be talking about it, and Christians often struggle for kind words to say when they find themselves unexpectedly in such conversations. Practicing graciousness with fellow church members can be helpful. While the errors of the book will not be overlooked in the reading group, other positive points could also be made. Where is there common ground between the group and this book? Is there a burden that this author is reacting against? Did the author expose any valid weaknesses in the theological position of the reading group? What are ways to help others who may have been helped by this book to discover the dangers without becoming offended by the ones pointing them out? To be kind when discussing a book that contains biblical errors does not mean that one affirms the errors. Like taking a practice test before the real exam, practicing kindness in the environment of a discerning reading group can assist in the performance of kindness when an unexpected question about one's opinion of the book comes up in a coffee shop.

Books about God and his grace to his children also can aid groups of believers seeking to become more gracious. As the members of the group celebrate God's greatness as they read books like J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*³ or R. C. Sproul's *Chosen by God*⁴ the lessons will be reinforced in the hearts of the other participants. Feelings of amazement and love for the Lord intensify as Christians think deeply about the

³J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993).

⁴R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994).

implications of the grace of God. Discussing D. A. Carson's *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*⁵, John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*⁶, or Jerry Bridges's *Transforming Grace*⁷ can add to the knowledge and appreciation of those in the conversation. As the fires in the hearts of those in the group glow warm about God's grace to them, the people will breath out more graciousness to those around them.

Just as spending time with gracious people cultivates graciousness, so also reading biographies of gracious people provides examples for imitation. Theoretical kindness provides instruction, but lived kindness adds authenticity and tangibility to the principles. Even figures who are known for their sweet spirits often struggled to live consistently in a fallen world. Tracking with the subject's hard-learned lessons of tenderness and from the aftermaths of sinful outbursts can be valuable to those facing similar ups and downs. Biographies provide both positive and negative examples. Reading biographies with other Christian friends offers the additional helps of other eyes to see details that an individual reader may miss, as well as more interpretive lenses to translate the stories into real life patterns to follow.

The author of the famous hymn "Amazing Grace" was first spiritually blind before he could see. Biographies of John Newton show his journey from bold blasphemy to becoming an Anglican pastor who was so kind he canceled church just to be able to join the Baptists across town for their special speaker. Newton never got over God's grace to him, and that translated to gracious ministries in Olney, London, and all over the world through his books and letters.⁸ Francis and Edith Schaeffer emerged from

⁵D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999).

⁶John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

⁷Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008).

⁸Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007). Aitken's biography is a wonderful place to begin getting to know John Newton. Newton's

Fundamentalism to reach out to questioning students in Switzerland in a ministry called L'Abri. While he did not compromise his convictions about God's truth, God seemed to shape Schaeffer into a winsome man who listened to and interacted with troubled young people's deepest spiritual questions and sought to give gracious, thoughtful answers from the Scriptures. All of this happened in a communal family context as opposed to a stuffy formal one, adding to the spirit of hospitality that marked the Schaeffers.⁹

Joni Eareckson Tada has suffered greatly ever since her diving accident. She recounts stories of wrestling with God and the peace that he provided through strong instruction about his sovereignty. Joni has grown in godly contentment, and the Lord has given her a tender heart to serve others with disabilities. Reading about these virtues lived out in one who has suffered so much inspires graciousness in those who have suffered so little.¹⁰ Among theologians, Roger Nicole stands out as a man marked by graciousness. While some academicians seem to work in an ivory tower, researching, writing, and lecturing, Nicole understood his role as equipping his students for ministry, and providing help for churches to fight against spiritual errors. He was unafraid to take strong stands on controversial issues about the Bible and its teachings, even writing and debating against those he believed were wrong. But all the while, God gave Nicole both the heart of a theological warrior and the tender heart of Christian graciousness. Reading his story

sweet letters are the place to go next; they provide examples of graciousness in action to people in a wide variety of situations. Evangelical Press has published a series called Bitesize Biographies, providing brief introductions to notable men and women in church history, including John Newton and other gracious believers mentioned here.

⁹Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). Duriez's biography describes the Schaeffers journey in graciousness and their journey in ministry. Francis and Edith wrote many books, letters, and articles marked by speaking God's truth in love.

¹⁰Joni Eareckson Tada, *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Joni Eareckson Tada, *The God I Love: A Lifetime of Walking with Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). *Joni* is the autobiography of her early years. Later Tada wrote about her continuing challenges and ministry opportunities. Her other books provide also a consistent model of God's sweetness through one of his daughters.

provides a marvelous model for Christians today with great zeal for God's truth about speaking that truth in love.¹¹

For the arrow to hit its mark the target must be visible. Good Christian books read in the company of faithful Christians can provide a clear target of grace. Reading controversial books provides practice for interacting in gracious ways. Reading about God and his grace provides fuel for graciousness. Reading biographies of kind Christian men and women provides models of graciousness to follow.

Worship Together with the Church

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10: 24-25). The final way to cultivate graciousness within community is simply to heartily participate in the corporate means that God has give churches to grow. Each part of the church gatherings can help the participants become more gentle and kind.

As a healthy church worships in song and prays together, the hearts of the people are lifted up as they talk to God, and sing about the his greatness and the smallness of themselves. People are grumpy, harsh, and calloused because they assume the greatness of themselves and the smallness of God and everyone else. Worshipping side by side with Christian brothers and sisters wonderfully reorients one's perspective about the truly great one. Corporate prayers join the hearts and minds of a church family as they praise and thank God for who he is and what he has done, confess their sins, and humbly seek him with their petitions. Praying puts people in their place: creatures dependent upon their Creator.

¹¹David Bailey, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Life & Legacy of Roger Nicole* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006).

Another part of corporate worship is the hearing of the Scriptures, both read and proclaimed. The preaching of the Word of God ought to have the same reorienting impact as the other parts of the church meeting. Even if the Bible-based sermon is not directly about graciousness, it will always indirectly cultivate graciousness in the hearts of the hearers as God reveals himself and his glorious ways through the Word. Biblical preaching puts God in his place and puts the hearers in their places. These heart attitudes are foundations for those pursuing godly communication with those around them.

The gospel will regularly be proclaimed as the Word is faithfully preached, but the gospel is also portrayed as God's people participate in communion. The Lord's Supper reminds believers about the bloody cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the church member humbly contemplates his or her own sins for which Jesus was bearing God's wrath on the cross, he or she is filled with gratitude, joy, and hope. Those struggling with the sins of their mouths (such as a lack of gracious words) discover both conviction and encouragement as the gospel is proclaimed in preaching or portrayed in communion. All sins are extremely serious, but all the sins of believers are completely paid for. Raw conviction without gospel-hope produces despair. Partaking of the Lord's Supper also puts believers in their places—desperate for God's mercy and grace, and recipients of God's mercy and grace through the work of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper also reminds believers that they are not alone. Surrounding them as they partake of the elements of communion are their fellow believers who also desperately need God's grace and have freely received it from God.

Coming to church meetings faithfully also cultivates graciousness as the members seek to serve and encourage one another for the Lord's sake. Again, the gaze is moved off of the individual and fixed upon the Lord and his people. This is the adjustment of humility. Humility is the most important heart attitude to develop as one pursues kind communication.

Conclusion

In the off seasons, professional athletes who play in team sports often work out alone, trying to improve their skills for their role on the team. While those efforts usually pay dividends for the team, the greatest benefits for the team's preparation comes as all of the individuals comes together before the season for training camp. Intense group drills, meetings, and workouts under expert coaches and trainers help each member of the team work in harmony with the others. The result will be better than any individual could accomplish on his or her own. In the same way, God blesses believers as they take responsibility to grow and change on their own, but their fruitfulness will multiply as they work on changing side by side with their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The eighteenth century slave trader turned gracious pastor, John Newton, once wrote a letter to a friend who was contending for God's truth, which was later published under the title *On Controversy*.¹ The old sea captain, who referred to himself as a wretch saved by God's amazing grace, highly esteemed his friend's zeal for God's truth. He declared:

It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defences were seasonable and expedient, they appear to be so in our day, when errors abound on all sides, and every truth of the Gospel is either directly denied, or grossly misrepresented.²

As laudable as Newton was convinced that earnestly declaring God's truth was, however, he joined his encouragement with strong warnings. "If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service to the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit."³ He warned that, "Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines, as well as upon works; and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions of the unworthiness of the creature and the riches of free grace."⁴

When doing the essential task of taking a stand for the Scriptures, John Newton called upon his reader to pray for his own heart and the one with whom he would

¹John Newton, *Works of John Newton*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 268.

²Ibid., 273.

³Ibid., 271.

⁴Ibid., 272.

be communicating, to have the Lord's compassion for his adversary, and to remember that it is always God who changes hearts. Newton counseled his friend that although defending God's truth is honorable, it is also spiritually dangerous. "What will it profit a man if he gains his cause, and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, and to which the promise of his presence is made!"⁵ In the present day, John Newton's concern for the vital combination of zeal for God's truth and Christlike tenderness is as relevant as when he penned his letter.

While the Spirit of God faithfully creates the kind of gentle character within the hearts of true believers in Christ that the Word of God requires, believers are also responsible to use every means available to cultivate the gracious heart attitudes that lead to consistently gracious interactions with others. These means have been presented in this thesis beginning with the Bible's commands for Christians to be gracious. We have seen where the examples of the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul painted portraits of graciousness, while the case of the church at Ephesus illustrated the spiritual danger of zeal for truth apart from love. The thesis identified personal and corporate ways for God's people to nurture graciousness. The chapters on personal methods divided into Godward methods and methods aimed toward other men and women. The section concluded with corporate methods concentrated on cultivating graciousness utilizing the help of others within a church family.

When Christians within a church make progress in practicing biblical graciousness there are many benefits. In their dealings with one another, the individual Christians will grow stronger as God's truth is spoken in love. The context for Paul's command to speak the truth in love is the mutual ministry of one member to another

⁵Ibid., 273.

producing spiritual maturity of the parts, which results in the maturity of the whole. Paul summarizes the process and the outcome, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:15-16). The Lord uses loving attitudes, tones, and words like oil to smooth the way for the penetration and transformation from God’s Word as it is applied one to another. Gracious words from God spoken in gracious ways from God’s people provide comfort, encouragement, exhortation, conviction, instruction, training, hope, wisdom for decisions, counsel, and discernment for his people to live in his world. As God’s Word is profitable for comprehensive Christian maturity (2 Tim 3:16-17), gracious communication of that Word to one another ought to be a hallmark of churches.

In addition to the maturity within, churches filled with graciousness and truth will be well-suited to interact beneficially with other churches. Within the limited timeframe in the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament, there are several examples of churches working together. Local churches coordinated offerings of money to supply the needs of the poor church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:16-24), gathered together to work on doctrinal matter related to the gospel and the Gentiles (Acts 15), and gave money to help further the work of the gospel (Phil 4:15; 3 John 5-8). As individual Christians are strengthened to spiritual maturity through kind interactions with other believers, so also entire churches are aided by gracious dealings in their cooperative efforts with sister churches to honor God and accomplish his work together.

As a church reaches out to its community with the gospel, the characteristic of love often creates a platform for Christians to proclaim the gospel. The Lord Jesus described love as the distinctive mark of his followers. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that the good works which express Christian love point the observers to God: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Loving heart attitudes produce not only good works, but also speech seasoned with grace. Such distinct salty living and speaking creates gospel opportunities for churches. Thus, the Apostle Paul instructed, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col 4:5-6). A gracious church will impact a community.

John Newton concluded his letter *On Controversy* with a wonderful charge and benediction that Christians of all ages would do well to follow. “Go forth, therefore, in the name and strength of the Lord of Hosts, speaking the truth in love; and may he give you a witness in many hearts, that you are taught of God, and favoured with the unction of his Holy Spirit.”⁶

⁶Ibid., 274.

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ABSTRACT

CULTIVATING GRACIOUSNESS IN THE HEARTS
OF TRUTH-ZEALOTS

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This thesis addresses the trend of Christians elevating their zeal for truth at the expense of Christian love. Chapter 1 tracks the revival of theological pursuit at the turn of the twenty-first century. Chapter 2 argues that according to the Bible, instead of diminishing their passion for God's truth, zealous Christians must elevate the corresponding virtue of graciousness. In chapter 3, this thesis demonstrates the importance of graciousness in the lives of Christians by surveying the biblical data to explain the meanings of the term graciousness and its parallels.

The virtue is further illustrated in chapter 4 through an examination of gracious examples in the Bible. The positive examples are the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul, while the church at Ephesus exemplifies the danger of a church that loved the truth but was also directly challenged by the Lord Jesus for its lack of love (Rev 2:4).

With the importance of the virtue demonstrated, the thesis provides numerous practical ways for Christians to cultivate graciousness individually in chapters 5 and 6, and then corporately in chapter 7. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis utilizing John Newton's eighteenth-century letter calling for graciousness in theological controversy.

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PUBLICATIONS

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