

Practicing Grace in Ministry

Grace is not only a theological term that helps us understand how God shares His unconditional love towards us, it is also a moral term that should influence our conduct, especially in ministry. All believers in Christ are called to minister (serve) the body of Christ, but that ministry is most effective when it reflects God's love and grace. As a starting point, we must understand that grace not only saves us, but gives us the privilege of and the ability to minister to others (Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 3:7; 1 Peter 4:10). Here are some ways to practice grace in various ministries.

In the church body. A ministry of grace should begin with the premier commandment to love God and one another (Matt. 22:37-39). We love God when we appreciate His love for us (1 John 4:19). Loving people in the church is not always easy, but grace gives us the ability. First Corinthians 13 describes the kind of love that reflects God's grace to others. The description begins with "Love suffers long" (v. 4). We must be patient with people to give them time and room to grow as the Holy Spirit changes them from within. External manipulation may get behavioral conformity, but not necessarily inner transformation. Love is also kind (v. 4) which means we should be considerate and generous toward others. When we disagree with other believers on issues that are not clearly mandated in the Scriptures, grace teaches us to show love and acceptance, not condescension and judgment (see Rom. 14:10-23). We can also practice grace by generously giving to the needs we see around us and to the church itself. We give to others as God has graciously given to us (2 Cor. 9:6-15). Honoring and respecting our church leaders also reflects God's gracious attitude towards all.

In pastoral ministry. Besides the love and patience required of all believers, shepherds have the special privilege of serving people by providing leadership, oversight, instruction, exhortation, and responding to needs. As a steward of God's grace, leaders reflect that grace by giving of themselves for the sake of others. This is a position of exemplary servanthood, not domination (1 Peter 5:2-3). Those in pastoral positions do not seek to control people with fear or rules, but free them to grow in grace. A grace-guided pastor (or elder) understands that the best motivation for change is God's love and grace. God's shepherds must also learn that the great demands of pastoral ministry can only be met by the sufficiency of God's grace (2 Cor. 3:5-6). Pastors who balance grace with truth will lovingly confront those who go astray and, if necessary, lovingly discipline them. Grace means there is no sin too great for God's and our forgiveness (Rom. 5:20). Rather than simply dismiss sinning believers as "never really saved," shepherds challenge them to live up to their position in Jesus Christ. Pastors often deal with pressure to perform and grow the church numerically. Under grace, pastors should get their sense of significance not from how they are doing but who they are in Christ.

In preaching and teaching. Anytime God's Word is communicated, the goal should be life transformation, not just impartation of information. The best motivation for change comes when people understand and appreciate what God has done for them by His grace. Good works are not a condition for God's saving grace, but an expected outcome for those who have appropriated it (Eph. 2:8-10). Consider how the apostle Paul motivated his readers in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and the prison epistles by teaching them how they are blessed by God's grace and given a new position before he tells them how they can please God by what they do (for example, see Rom. 12:1-2). Deserved guilt may motivate people to repent, confess their sin, and change, but evoking guilt unbiblically becomes spiritual abuse when people are told

constantly that they are not doing enough to please God. We violate God's grace by preaching that His acceptance is based on their performance instead of their position as His children. Grace means that we preach and teach humbly as forgiven sinners to others who are also forgiven.

In evangelism. Since the gospel has so often been perverted, the priority in grace-oriented evangelism should be keeping the gospel clear (Col. 4:3-4). This means that we communicate the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. In our evangelistic invitations, we must be careful not to use confusing terms, illustrations, and jargon so commonly heard. Our conduct as well as our words must be tempered by grace so that we are attracting people, not repelling them (Col. 4:6). The realization that our God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10) loves all people and wants them to hear the gospel and be saved should compel us to share the gospel message with everyone (2 Cor. 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 2:3-6). We should tell people that God has done all He could to make a way of salvation for them so that all they must do is receive the free gift He offers (John 3:16; 4:10; 14:6; 19:30; 1 John 2:2). When the message is clear, the methods can vary as long as we are not deceptive or manipulative but present the grace and truth of God's Word (2 Cor. 4:1-6). We also understand that salvation by grace means that God is also working to convince people of the truth through the Holy Spirit to bring them to faith (John 6:44; 16:8-11; 2 Cor. 4:1-6). This makes prayer for the unsaved paramount. Under grace, those evangelizing accept unbelievers as God does and allow God to change them after they believe. They do not preach that life change is necessary to receive salvation.

In missions. Those who minister in other cultures than their own, especially to those outside of American evangelicalism, will find a world confused with a gospel of works. There, our priority should be to ground people in the gospel of grace before we teach other subjects. The lack of assurance of salvation is pervasive around the world. By understanding the grace message, believers will have a secure foundation for growing in grace. We should try to learn their world view that is so often based in fear and performance. Ministering from a grace perspective will require patience and humility. Since cultures and worldviews vary, the emphasis of our message and ministry should be on the essential truths of God's Word. Other issues can be addressed when we learn to view them in the context of their different cultures and backgrounds. This requires patience as we learn cultural perspectives on leadership, money, worship, church rituals, etc..

Conclusion

Grace is important in ministry because it changes us and others. Everyone who serves others should take to heart Titus 2:12-14:

12 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

As God's love and grace permeate and change us, our Christlikeness will overflow to serve to others.