

Grace & Truth
John 1:15 – 18
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
May 14, 2017

Introduction – On Unintended Consequences

Last Monday, May 8, 2017, Lois Ann and I celebrated thirty-five years of marriage. [Say “Amen!” Somebody!] Last weekend, we went away to celebrate, at the *Chestnut Hill Bed and Breakfast* in Milford, NJ. Chestnut Hill sits on the Delaware River. Interestingly, between the house and the river dock, runs a railroad track. It is a heavy gauge railroad line, originally installed in order to transport iron ore to the steel mill of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

The US standard railroad gauge, the distance between the rails, is *four feet, eight and one half inches*. That is an odd number. Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the first U.S. railroads. Why did the English build them like that? Because the first railroad lines were built by the people who built the pre-railroad lines, tramways, and that was the gauge they used. Why did the tramway folk use that gauge? The people who built tramways used the same jigs and tools they had used in building wagons -- which used that wheel spacing. Why did wagons have that odd wheel spacing? They were forced to use that spacing because, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance English roads. This was the spacing of the wheel ruts in the old stone roadways. So who built those old rutted roads? Imperial Rome built the first long distance roads in Europe and England. The roadways had been built primarily for the Roman armies, for the legionnaires and the roads had been used ever since. Why were the ruts in the roads at this distance? It happened that Roman war chariots formed the initial ruts. This meant that everyone else in the future had to match this width or run the risk of destroying their wagon wheels. Chariots were made for Imperial Rome, and were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing. Thus, in this manner, the U.S. standard railroad gauge of *four feet, eight and one half inches* derived from the original specs for an Imperial Roman war chariot. The war chariots were made this size in order to accommodate the back end of two Roman imperial war horses.

Further, when you look at NASA's **Space Shuttle** sitting on its launch pad, you will see that there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These solid rocket boosters were made by the corporation **Thiokol** at their **Utah** factory. The engineers would have preferred to make them a bit larger. However, the booster rockets had to be shipped by train from the factory in Utah, to the launch site in Florida. The railroad line from the factory ran through a mountain tunnel. The booster rockets had to be of a size permitting them to fit through that tunnel. The tunnel, of course, was slightly wider than the railroad track. The railroad track was about as wide as two horses' behinds. In this way, a major **Space Shuttle** design feature, of the world's most advanced

transportation system, was determined over 2,000 years ago by the width of a horse's rear-end. 😊

The Problem of God's Law

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses;

God in his wisdom is never surprised by a consequence and, for him; consequences are never unintended, for they flow from his plans and purposes. But for us, because we do not see all the contingencies and implications, some things of consequence may indeed surprise us. We see God's actions and assume or conclude that they are for one purpose, only to discover subsequently that in fact God's purposes were quite otherwise.

John reminds us that the Law of God was revealed through the mediation of Moses. For the law was given through Moses. The Law that John refers to is the collection of 612 specific instructions, requirements and prohibitions found in the **Torah**, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis through Deuteronomy. These 612 regulations are *summarized* in the **Ten Commandments**. The Law was also summed up in the words of Jesus, instructing that we are to *love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves*. In giving the Law to the Jewish people, God revealed his moral character to his people. It is through the Law that we see the wisdom, justice, holiness and righteousness of God.

Nonetheless, from our human perspective, the giving of the Law results in an unintended consequence. The Law tells us how to please God.

It Tells us How to Please God

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God

One person who fervently, consistently, and deliberately did try to please God in scrupulous adherence to the rules and regulations was Martin Luther. Luther would spend hours in confession, seeking to remember and admit every errant thought and inappropriate action, exhausting the endurance of his confessor. Luther was earnest in his desire to please God. He would leave confession feeling the weight of his sin having been lifted by the absolution he received. And then, a short time later, he would remember a sin he had forgotten to confess and his joy would vanish as he stood again under the crushing weight of the expectations of God's law.

What does God require of us? Most humans, unlike Martin Luther, tend to grade themselves on a curve. We compare ourselves with others. We think: "I'm a good person. I only cheat on my taxes a little;" or, "I only tell little fibs;" or, "Though I admit that I have been tempted, I have not, as yet, shot my mother-in-law." This is how we think. We look at our behavior and tell ourselves that God is satisfied.

Many assume that one of the purposes of the Law, indeed, perhaps its *primary* purpose, is to show us what we must do, or not do, in order to please God. The Law is understood as the instruction booklet on how to earn God's favor. The law lays down the regulations. It gives the rules. It sets the standard. It tells us what to do and then it leaves it in our hands to see to it that we obey. If we meet the standard and obey the rules, then we know that we are pleasing God and doing his will. This is, we think, is the purpose of the Law of God. But then we discover the unintended consequence: we discover that the law's requirements are too great. We cannot keep them. What is expected is beyond our capability. In our failure to obey we discover the truth that in our own power we are incapable of pleasing God. We want the Law laid out for us because we think that then we will be sure how to please God. The problem is that when we learn what God expects and requires, we realize that we fall so far short that we can never hope of meeting what is required of us.

But if our aim is to compare ourselves not with other humans, but according to what God expects of us, the resulting grade is quite different. Most people do not really try to please God.

The Law makes God's standard clear. Once we stop comparing ourselves to other humans, and begin instead to take our measurement against God's unchanging holy standard, we realize that we are in a pickle. What we learn from the standard is that there is no way we can begin to meet what is required of us. What we need is something else, something besides the law. Once we comprehend the weight of the law, we realize that the one thing we do not want is justice. We cannot bear the reality of justice before God's Law. What we need is God's grace.

What we need is that which the Word of God Gives: Grace

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth...¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

It had been a long and bitter trial. When the Russian spies, the Rosenberg's, were convicted of treason, their lawyer stood before the judge and demanded justice. His intent, apparently, was to suggest that they should be released from custody. The judge disagreed, telling the lawyer, "The court has given what you ask for—justice! What you really want is mercy. But that is something this court has no right to give." The Law gives justice. Justice is getting what you deserve. When facing the condemnation of the Law what we should ask for is mercy. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Mercy is a great thing, but in the message of the gospel there is something even greater still.

John tells us that the Word brings something new into our world. Moses gave the Law, but the Word gives grace and truth. The Greek word John uses makes it clear that the Word of God is the *source* of grace and truth. Grace is the good will of God toward us. Grace is also the good work of God in us. God's good

will works the good work. Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you *do not deserve*. The Word of God brings grace and truth into our world.

There are four observations I wish to make regarding the nature of the grace and truth the Word brings to us.

Grace and Truth are Joined in Christ

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

On the train into the city of Prague, I struck up a conversation with the young man seated across from me. We enjoyed a conversation on philosophy, biology, and the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. As the train neared the city I asked him for suggestions as to how we might best find our way to the place where we were staying. It was late, almost midnight. He looked at the address and told me that he would accompany me and the family and show us the way. I thanked him and told him that it was not necessary, but he insisted. In the end, the Atkinson's were very grateful he did accompany us, for our flat was located on an unmarked street in the Jewish quarter, and I doubt that we would have found it on our own in the dark. I asked this young man for information. He could have been a transfer agent of grace and truth by simply answering the question I asked and offering his advice. But he went a step further, embodying grace and truth by accompanying us on our journey until we located the place where we were staying. It is one thing to give grace and truth; it is another thing to embody it.

The first thing we note from John's words is that grace and truth are linked together in the person of Jesus Christ. They are joined in a very concrete manner. John tells us that Christ, the Word, is '*full of grace and truth.*' He does not say that Jesus Christ came to tell us about grace but rather that he brings grace. He is not simply a reporter giving news. He is grace and truth themselves. Jesus Christ embodies grace. Similarly, while some teach the truth, Jesus Christ is the truth.

This is one of the facets of our Lord that make him unique and unparalleled. This is what makes him different from all others. You go to others to hear of grace and to learn truth, but you go to Christ in order to see them embodied. Thankfully, because of the work of Christ in our world, there are those men and women today who are channels of grace and truth to our world. It is certainly our hope and prayer that by our lives we too would be such channels of grace and truth to others. But grace and truth flow through us in the same way that water flows through a pipe. We are simply the conduit. We give what we have received. In contrast, Jesus Christ is the fountain, the source of grace and truth. What we give to others we have first received from him. Grace and truth come to us through Christ but they are not in us in the manner in which they are in him. In him they dwell in depth and fullness. Jesus, our Lord, did not come into our world merely as a teacher; to tell us about grace and truth, but he came to embody them in his own life, work, and person. He came to pour out grace and truth abundantly.

Grace and truth are bonded in Jesus Christ. Secondly, grace and truth are blended in Jesus Christ.

Grace and Truth are Blended in Christ

¹⁶For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Jesus offers truthful grace and graceful truth. He offers the real thing, not an ersatz substitute. Some in our world wish for truth without grace. They prefer censure, condemnation, judgment and punishment. They look upon the world with an attitude of superiority and judgment. Like the police captain Javert in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, they demand their pound of flesh; forgiveness is not an option. They are convinced of the moral superiority of their cause, beliefs or convictions and they disdainfully look down upon those who disagree.

Others in our world want grace without truth. Truth is no longer valued today. Many do not even pretend to believe in truth. They believe in a God who is gentle, undemanding, and affirming of all we do. This is the thoughtless mindset that thinks that truth does not matter and that the belief that *'we're all going to heaven: we're just choosing different ways to get there'* is profound theology. It is not.

You cannot have one without the other. There are three great words repeated throughout John's gospel. They are: "Word," "Grace" and "Truth." Grace and truth are held firmly, they are blended together, in Jesus Christ, the Word of God. In the Word we find truth – gracious truth. It comes not from the judgment seat, but from the mercy seat. The truth Jesus brings may be a dark truth about ourselves, a truth we might otherwise wish we did not have to acknowledge, but it is a truth spoken not to lead us to despair but to lift us to salvation. Like a surgeon's knife, the hurt he inflicts is the necessary first step on the road to health and wholeness.

Similarly, the grace Jesus Christ offers is true grace: redemption which does redeem; pardon which does blot out sin; renewal which does bring new life, and salvation that is real. There are in our world many fads, philosophers; self help gurus, religions, healers, and politicians whose promises charm the ear while they cheat the soul. It is in the Word of God alone that grace and truth are blended.

A couple of years before he died, John Newton, author of the hymn "Amazing Grace" was sharing breakfast and a Bible study time with a friend. At this point in his life, Newton was blind. His friend would read out loud a passage from scripture and Newton would then make a few short remarks on it. On this particular day, Newton was silent after his friend read the words of Scripture "by the grace of God I am what I am."

Finally, after several minutes, Newton spoke, *"I am not what I ought to be! How imperfect and deficient I am! I am not what I wish to be, although I abhor that which*

is evil and would cleave to what is good! I am not what I hope to be, but soon I shall be out of mortality and with it all sin and imperfection. Though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor yet what I hope to be, I can truly say I am not what I once was: a slave to sin and Satan. I can heartily join with the apostle and acknowledge that by the grace of God I am what I am!"

Grace and truth are united in Christ. Grace and truth are blended in Christ. And, thirdly, grace and truth are balanced in Christ.

Grace and Truth are Balanced in Christ

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

When you buy a new set of tires for your car one thing you must do as part of the installation is to have them balanced. The weight of the tire is not evenly distributed so the technician adds weights at the proper points in order to correct the inequities. What is the corrective that is needed? Watch the crew of a world class racing yacht and you will see them moving about the yacht using their body weight to compensate for the power of the wind against the sails. When the wind is strong and the sail properly set you may see several of them literally hanging off the edge of the boat, over the water, their weight strategically placed to keep the boat from flipping while it runs at its fastest speed. The harder the wind blows, the farther they hang off the edge of the boat. Their response to the circumstances provides the necessary balance.

In this same way, in Christ's work and ministry we see grace and truth appropriately balanced. When he speaks to the hypocrites and Pharisees he gives them both barrels of truth (Matthew 23:13 – 15). "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. He does not hide God's wrath and anger at unrighteousness. The harshness of his words was necessary to break through the complacency and coldness of their hearts. Sometimes it takes being hit on the side of the head to bring about an attitude adjustment.

On the other hand, when presented with the woman who had been caught in adultery, the balance of grace and truth in our Lord's actions shifts significantly. He applies a rigorous truth to the crowd (John 87): 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' After her accusers have slipped away, Jesus, the one person present who could have cast that first stone, offers her grace and forgiveness (John 8:11). "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Some in our world know how to be affectionate, but not firm. Others are stern, but lack empathy. Jesus Christ has no defect either way. He has the grace which made him known as the friend of sinners. He speaks truth, in tenderness. We are drawn to him because we know that in his graciousness he will accept us

and in his truthfulness he will not lie to us. In him grace and truth are equally evident and properly balanced.

Grace and truth are united in Christ. Grace and truth are blended in Christ. Grace and truth are balanced in Christ. And, lastly, grace and truth are full in Christ.

Grace and Truth are Full in Christ

¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the immeasurable grace of God is fully revealed to us. All that God has done in and on our behalf finds its fullness and completion in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God has done more for us than we could ask or think. He is all truth. He is all grace. He is all that is right. He is all that is good. He is all that is beautiful. He is the fountainhead of grace and truth.

The main character of Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Misérables*, is a man named Jean Val Jean. At the beginning of the novel he is bitter and angry and hard. He is a convict, having spent nineteen years in prison for having stolen a loaf of bread. Hungry, alone, bitter and fearful he is taken in one night by a priest who gives him food and a bed. In the middle of the night, Val Jean steals the silverware of the household. Later, the next day, he is brought back to the priest's home in the custody of the police. Val Jean had lied, telling the police that the priest had given him the silverware. The police arrive to test the truth of his words.

When Val Jean is presented before the priest, the priest has several options available to him in response. He could choose the option of justice and accuse Val Jean of being the thief that he is. There would be nothing wrong in the priest acting in this manner. Val Jean is guilty and there is no question that justice is what he deserved. Or, the priest could choose the way of mercy. He could acknowledge the theft, but refuse to press charges. This crime would not be added to the sheet of Jean Val Jean's offenses. Or the priest could choose the way of grace. The way of justice would have given Jean Val Jean what he deserved. The way of mercy would have protected Jean Val Jean from the punishment he merited. The way of grace gave to Jean Val Jean that which he did not deserve.

When the priest sees Jean Val Jean, he says to him, 'My friend, why didn't you take my other gift as well?' And with these words the priest turns to the mantle piece, taking two silver candlesticks, to give to Jean Val Jean as well. The priest tells Val Jean, 'I have redeemed you.' And by this act of grace he has. Jean Val Jean did not deserve grace. He deserved justice, judgment, condemnation. But grace he is given, redeeming grace.

Les Misérables is a long story. Essentially it is the story of the spiritual dividends that result from the spiritual investment made by that priest in the life of Jean Val Jean. The grace of the priest pours through from his life into Jean Val

Jean. In turn, Jean Val Jean offers grace to others, even, in the end, to his great nemesis, Javert. Near the end of the musical, Jean Val Jean is near the end of his life. He has gone to live in a monastery. He enters his room and places his valise on the table. He opens the valise and pulls from it the two candlesticks the priest had given to him many years before. It is a powerful moment. Placing the candlesticks on the mantel, the audience comprehends that all the beauty and drama of the story has unfolded because of that act of grace by the priest so many years before.

Les Misérables, of course, is a fictional story. But it is a *true* fictional story. It tells the redeeming power of God's grace. We all know stories of those who have given grace to others at great cost to themselves. When we see such things, when we find that we have been given the ability to offer grace to others, what is the source of it all? The source is Jesus Christ. Whatever grace we give, it is because Jesus Christ's grace is flowing through us to them. It is not our power. It is not our strength. It is Christ, the Word of God, full of grace and truth. He is its source.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

John 1:14 – 18

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.