

Grace Centered Leadership

What is Grace?

The Bible is a book about grace. Each page of Scripture tells the story of God's unending love for His people. As God's loved ones created in "His image" we were meant to live in a loving relationship with God. Our own sin and rebelliousness broke that relationship with God and we made ourselves enemies of God. We chose to live life according to our own ways instead of God's ways. This broken relationship has both immediate and eternal consequences. The results of sin cause us pain and suffering, heartache and misery in our everyday lives but this will continue on through eternity when we are separated from God forever. Fortunately, God has not left us alone in our miserable state. He has provided a way out.

Here is what the Scriptures say about God's redemptive love:

"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

"For Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit." I Peter 3:18

*"For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is His love for those who fear Him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."* Psalm 103:1-13

*"We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."* Isaiah 53:6

Each one of these verses, along with the rest of the Bible, describes a God who is rich in mercy and love toward a people who have been stubborn and rebellious. Grace is God's unmerited love towards us through the death of Christ. We do nothing to earn grace. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have earned this love for us. Grace is God's provision for our salvation.

But why? Why does God shower us with grace when we have been bad and scorned His ways for our own evil desires? For two reasons; He loves us and to protect His own glory. God showers His love on us simply because we are His children and He loves us. When my children disobey me, talk back to me and stomp off in anger I do not forsake them. I don't say, "O.K you ungrateful little beast, you're on your own. Don't come back and don't expect me to forgive you." That would be ridiculous. I love my kids even when they hate me. God's love is so much more powerful and forgiving than mine. God sent His own Son to die so that I might live. The apostle John puts it this way, *"For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."* John 3:16

Along with God's love comes His glory. We were created for God's glory,
*"...bring my sons from afar, my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone
 who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and
 made."* Isaiah 43:6b-7

Our sin has marred the glory of God. *"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory
 of God."* (Romans 3:23) God vindicates His glory by sending Jesus to die for sins. The
 death of Christ displays God's love for sinners and protects His glory.

John Piper has an excellent definition of grace,

"Grace is the pleasure of God
 to magnify the worth of God
 by giving sinners the right and power to delight in God
 without obscuring the glory of God."

What Grace is not

The popular mind, including the common Christian, believes grace is the permission
 to do as you please. This is called licentiousness and is defined as "pursuing desires
 aggressively and selfishly, unchecked by morality..." When we say that "God will
 love me no matter what because Jesus died for my sins," we could interpret that to
 mean God does not care what I do. But nothing could be farther from the truth. God
 cares so much about what we do that He sacrificed His own Son so that we might
 live for His glory. Grace gives us the permission and power to do as God pleases.

What is Leadership?

Numerous definitions abound for the term "leadership." However, simply stated,
leadership is influencing other people in a particular direction. The greatest leader is
 Jesus Christ who leads believers into a loving relationship with God the Father.
 Jesus' earthly ministry perfectly exemplified how to lead others. Jesus utilized His
 supernatural gifts and abilities to lead the people God had given Him. Jesus knew
 His true identity and lead from it. Jesus' true identity of course, was that He was
 fully God and fully man. His mission was to redeem a fallen and sinful world by
 living a perfect life, dying on the cross and being raised from the dead to sit at the
 right hand of God the Father. Jesus now, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit,
 continues to lead His people toward a closer relationship with God.

All true believers in Jesus Christ are commanded to be leaders. Jesus has called us in
 many places to lead others toward Him.

We are the light of the world. Matthew 5:14

We are personal witnesses for Christ. Acts 1:8

We are disciple makers. Matthew 28:18-20

We are to show Christ to the world by loving one another. John 13:34

We are leaders in our families, in our jobs, in our communities and in our church.
 Everywhere we go we should be leading people to Christ either in word, action,
 attitude or in modeling a godly life to those around us. For some of us, God has
 called us to a very specific leadership role.

The big question is, "How do we bring "grace" and "leadership" together?"

Grace Centered Leadership

Leadership is a function of grace. A Biblical theology of grace gives the leader a foundation to build his entire life upon. Biblical grace helps us understand our true identity in Christ. Understanding our true identity in Christ will lead us to an inner spiritual depth in our relationship with Christ. This inner life will express itself outwardly in our daily living including relationships, habits and leadership capacities. If I could illustrate it with a picture it would look like the diagram at the end of this paper.

I have already outlined a Biblical theology of grace. Let's look at the next block; understanding our identity in Christ. The apostle Paul makes it very clear that as believers in Christ we have become united with Christ.

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Galatians 2:20

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Romans 6:5

As true believers we no longer have a "self image" we have a "Christ image". Our identity is now in Christ who we have been united to in His life, death and resurrection.

"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Romans 5:19

This new identity will bring about new affections. Biblical grace should have such an impact on us that we really begin to desire to do what God wants us to do. We live out obedient lives not grudgingly but with joy. We no longer say, "O.K. I'll do what God wants me to do." We say, "Wow, I can't wait to do what God wants me to do!" Our union with Christ, our identity in Christ, will bring about these new affections that will affect our inner life of motivations and desires. Some new affections may be that we gladly desire to serve others. We may desire godly relationships. We may feel a strong sense towards repentance of sin. We may desire to read and study our Bibles. When I became a new believer in high school I became so hungry for the Word. I had no desire to read the Bible before, but now that I was a Christian I loved reading my Bible, memorizing Scripture and hearing God's Word preached. I even started taking notes during the sermons! There is no other explanation for these new affections than the fact that we have truly been regenerated and united with Christ and that the Holy Spirit is living in our hearts directing and causing these new affections.

As the Holy Spirit fills us and new affections set in, affections for sin are driven out. Our sensitivity towards sin becomes greater and our desire to glorify God becomes greater as well. All of this happens because God has showered us with His grace.

We are being renewed from the inside out.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” 2 Corinthians 4:16

We have been given new hearts:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” Ezekiel 36:26

This is a new life we have in Christ:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come!” 2 Corinthians 5:17

This new life begins with God’s redemptive power through uniting us to Christ. This leads us to understanding our true identity from a Biblical perspective. We then begin to have “new affections” beginning in the inner life of the believer. These new affections and desires will ultimately be expressed outwardly. The next block is called the “outer life” and gives expression to the things we actually do.

Jesus puts it this way:

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” Luke 6:44-4

Our words, actions, attitudes, works of service, the fruits of the Spirit and our leadership are all outward expressions of what is actually in our hearts. When I became a Christian I began to be sensitive about my speech and slowly felt the Lord cleansing my tongue to be more glorifying to Him. I also met other Christians and became involved in a Young Life group where deep relationships were made. I had friends before but none that seemed to care for me as much as these new friends. As I mentioned before, my desire to read and study the Bible became quite a force in my life. I was now involved in weekly Bible studies and daily prayer groups. I felt my mission in life was to share the love of God to those around me. My last two years in high school were focused on reaching others with the Gospel. I do not say these things arrogantly. There is no explanation for them except that Christ was in me and pushing me to do these things. I take no credit for my change in behavior and attitude, it was all Christ’s Spirit living in me.

Since this paper is about grace centered leadership let me explain how Christ led me into a greater understanding of my role as a leader. It started in high school and led into college. I felt a strong calling to lead others to Christ. Since Young Life was how I met Christ it was natural for me to want to use this ministry to reach others. Young Life is a very effective ministry to unchurched adolescents. While in college I was a volunteer leader at a particular high school campus. I felt so strongly about my calling that I made sure my class and work schedule allowed me time to be a leader. During college I continued to feel a strong calling into the ministry so my

wife and I decided to come to Covenant seminary. After seminary I went on Young Life staff full time where I continued to lead for fourteen years. Here is the odd thing. I never wanted to be a leader and still to this day find being a leader extremely difficult. My introverted personality did not always fit with the typical fun loving Young Life personality. Dealing with conflict is extremely difficult for me and drains me emotionally, mentally and spiritually. I do not naturally want to be the “up front” person. I do not always like being in charge. I would rather be the assistant to the president rather than the president. However, I feel constrained to be the leader God has called me to be. God has called me to lead lots of people and the only way I can do it is to rely on His strength and resources. When I get discouraged and feel the weight of leadership I have to dig deep into Biblical grace theology. I have to constantly go over the Scriptures reminding myself that I cannot do this on my own, I have to rely on the grace of God. Without the foundation of grace theology my life would be wrecked.

Hearing the message of grace in seminary changed my life forever. I had not understood Biblical grace before and it was like I became a new Christian again when I really began to understand it. I made it my mission to learn as much as I could about grace since then and to teach it to others. I feel that God has renewed my spirit and given me a greater desire to help others, especially leaders, understand grace theology.

All leaders must lead out of a grace washed life. The only other option is to lead out of a self-centered life. Most leadership material pushes leaders to think that they can do it on their own. It all seems to be about “self help”. Many people live according to Ben Franklin’s motto: “God helps those who help themselves.” But the truth is that God helps those who *can’t* help themselves. And this is what leaders must understand. This is where grace and leadership intersect. Leaders lead out of grace. They lead out of the truth that Christ lives in them and by His grace He enables us to lead His people. We are simply Christ’s agents whom He works through. Christ uses us to achieve His purposes, we don’t use Christ to achieve our purposes. The problem is that we often turn this around. And when we do, our leadership crumbles.

Communicating the Message of Grace to Others

As we communicate the message of grace to others, especially our leaders, we must make sure it is communicated in what we *say*, what we *do* and what we *expect*.

Making the message of grace clear in what we say

The message of grace comes from the message of the Bible. If the Bible is utterly trustworthy then its message will be trustworthy as well. The Bible comes under intense scrutiny and criticism with many people, including Christians, not believing in its infallibility. But the truth is that the integrity of the Bible rests on the integrity of God and nothing else. So we go with God and His character to be utterly truthful and reliable.

Another danger in misunderstanding the Bible and its message is believing that the Bible is just a good moral book. The Bible is not about morals but about God redeeming us through His Son Jesus Christ. The message of grace rests upon the life and work of Christ. The entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reveals God's love to His people through Jesus. This Christocentric message is not always taught. As a matter of fact it is rarely taught that Jesus is the source of power to cause us to live obedient God-honoring lives. Many teachers teach us to "be like Jesus" or "be like David" without giving us the power to do anything. Bryan Chapell makes this statement about moralistic teaching:

"...any exhortation to good behavior *by itself* – without explanation of its redemptive context – is damaging to the Gospel because such bare moralism implies that our standing with God is determined by our performance rather than underscoring that we love Him and obey His commands because He first loved us while we were yet His enemies and He continues to love us despite our failures."

Therefore, what we say in our teaching of the Bible must always be put in its redemptive context. Biblical grace is the motive and empowerment of living the Christian life.

Making the message of grace clear in what we as leaders do.

Grace promotes Courage

The security that we as believers have in Christ can have a tremendous impact on our confidence and courage. Since I know that God's love and acceptance of me depends on Christ's merit and not my own I am able to face up to the challenges of leadership.

"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love." 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Many failures in leadership are due to feelings of inadequacy. But if I know that God loves me in spite of my inadequacies and failures then I can courageously face difficult challenges. I know that God has called me to this leadership role and the challenges that come with it. He will not abandon me but instead will empower me to lead through the challenges. I also know that what God thinks of me is more important than what man thinks of me. Grace in leadership replaces the fear of man with the fear of God. And since God loves me unconditionally the only fear of Him I need is a reverent and holy fear, not a fear that He will disown me or punish me for my failures.

Grace promotes integrity

Leadership brings great pressure. Pressure to succeed, pressure to look good to others and pressure to make the right decisions. This pressure can lead to the

breakdown of a leader. Sexual temptation, fear of men, greed all begin to attack the leader and when coupled with all the pressure a leader can break and compromise his integrity. Grace comes in and again shows us that God will take all the pressure off of us because even if we fail He will still love us.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matt 11:28-30

If we make a bad decision or disappoint someone we know that God is still there and He will guide us through the troubled times. If we really believe in this unconditional grace then it should push out the temptations of sex, fear and greed. We can know that God will provide what is best for me financially, sexually and otherwise.

Grace promotes compassion

If I truly believe in grace then I must have compassion on those around me. Since I am loved by God for what Christ has done and not what I have done then others who are followers of Christ have received this same grace. I must be treating others with the same grace that God has treated me.

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Phil 2:1-4

In this passage Paul makes it clear that our union with Christ is the motive for our love and concern for other's needs and interests. Grace motivates us to forgive others as we have been forgiven (Colossians 3:13). Grace motivates us to build up others and value them not according to what they do but according to who they are in Christ. Grace even motivates us to love our enemies.

Grace promotes humility and perseverance

Grace humbles us because we know we do not deserve it. We also know that we constantly need grace to survive our sin prone life. Constantly failing but constantly being forgiven should push us towards a humble reliance on Christ. It should also push us towards living obedient lives through the power we receive from Christ.

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6

Grace gives us the energy to persevere. For me, perseverance is a key to me staying in a ministry leadership position. Too often I find myself wanting to give up, do something else easier or just quit. Leadership is difficult and stressful but grace

gives us the hope and power to endure. The Scriptures talk a lot about perseverance. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians writes to encourage them in their ministry.

“May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.”
2 Thessalonians 3:5

Notice Paul says, “Christ’s perseverance”. Again, we can not persevere on our own strength or just by having a more positive attitude. We must rely upon the perseverance that only comes from Christ Himself. Trusting in this grace will allow us to weather the storms of leadership and continue on when we have been sapped of our own resources.

Making the message of grace clear in what we as leaders expect

As leaders we expect certain things from our followers who are normally leaders themselves. We expect ministries to grow, people to mature and finances to be raised. The truth is that we really have no control over these things. We cannot cause ministries or people to grow and we cannot move in people’s hearts to give. So what can we expect? We can expect our followers to carry out the responsibilities we have given them. Bryan Chapell writes,

“We should hold people accountable for responsibilities fulfilled more than results achieved. Grace teaches us that while we are responsible to honor God in our actions, we trust God for the results.”

These are wise words and should give Biblical motivation to those we lead as they fulfill their ministry responsibilities.

Concluding Thoughts

Biblical grace theology leads us to understand our true identity in Christ which leads to a deep inner spiritual life which reveals itself in an outer life of relationships, godly habits, the fruits of the Spirit, a sense of mission and of course God honoring leadership. Grace gives us the power to lead. God has designed His leaders to lead from the identity that He has given them. When we step out of our true identity in Christ and attempt to lead God’s people we will not honor Him. We may succeed from a worldly perspective but God’s perspective is the only one that counts.