

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Some important biblical couplets: Grace and Truth

Today's pair of words is taken from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, and they are two of the loveliest, and most significant words, in the whole of the Bible: Grace and Truth.

We find them first in John 1:14 where John says *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."* They are found again three verses later in John 1:17: *"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* Those are the only two times the words occur together in our bibles. They immediately strike us as balanced pair. Grace suggests generous giving to the undeserving. It has suggestions of mercy, forgiveness and blessing, and suggests that the person so described is well disposed towards us. Truth stops us from presuming that the mercy and forgiveness will be without any connection to justice and fairness. It implies some kind of hard foundation to the grace, perhaps even, some limits.

But we should not think that John invented the expression. In fact, it seems to be John's interpretation of a common pair of words from the Old Testament. I do not speak any Hebrew, so with apologies for the pronunciation, the words are checed (pronounced *kheh' sed*) and 'emeth (pronounced *eh' meth*). They occur many times in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and are translated into English in various ways. Checed is translated by words such as goodness, kindness, loving kindness and mercy. 'Emeth becomes truth, trustworthiness, right, sure, faithful or true. In Exodus 34:6 God declares Himself to Moses saying *"The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth."* The phrase 'goodness and truth' is a translation of checed 'emeth, in fact some English translation actually render the phrase 'grace and truth'.

This common phrase is systematically applied to God, either by the prophets or, as in Exodus 34, by God Himself. So, when John uses the expression he is not just combining two positive sounding words, or trying to show us that Jesus had a balance of two contrasting characteristics. John means us to understand that he is describing somebody who has the essential characteristics of God.

This is most obvious in his first use of the phrase in John 1:14, *"We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"*, implies that, for the first time in history, it was possible for human beings to look at God and live (see Exodus 33:20). The disciples had looked at Jesus and seen all the glory of God the Father, revealed in the Father's only begotten Son, and the key characteristics of God's character, grace and truth, were seen to the full in Him.

### What do the words mean?

Perhaps it is time to make an attempt at defining what the two words mean.

#### Grace

Grace is a word that most Christians learn quite early. We are often told that grace is undeserved favour. If mercy means not getting what we deserve, then grace means getting what we do not deserve. Those who like acronyms define grace as, **God's Riches At Christ's Expense** - the first letters of each word spelling out the word 'grace'! According to Vine's *'Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words'*, (ISBN: 978-0785260202) grace is "the disposition from which kindly acts proceed" and, according to Vine, when the word is applied to God it emphasises the "freeness, universality and spontaneous character" of God's mercy and goodness. In the Bible, grace is often the opposite of law or debt. The law makes demands; grace gives freely. Debt tells us what we owe and can't repay; grace tells us that God is ready to give what we can never earn.

#### Truth

At first glance, truth seems to be a rather less comforting word. We are apt to think of truth as being rather cold and hard. Truth suggests a set of doctrines or laws, a high standard that we can never attain. But these are not ways the bible uses the word. In God's word, truth is never just a set of propositions that are logically correct. Truth is strongly connected to trustworthiness and faithfulness. We have already said that the Old Testament word for truth can be translated in these

ways. In English, we sometimes talk about a 'true friend' and mean, not just a real friend, but one who has proved themselves faithful and reliable, often in difficult circumstances. In John 8:32 Jesus says "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" In John 14:6, Jesus says "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" So, truth is associated with life and freedom.

It's not hard to see then how these two words together so well describe the character of God. They unite the loving, free giving nature of God with His truth and righteousness, but also His faithfulness and deep dependability. Of course, John insists that these characteristics were fully and perfectly displayed in the life of Jesus Christ here in this world.

This morning, I would like us to gain two things from our consideration of this beautiful pair of words. I want us to understand a little better what they show us about our God and Saviour, so that we can appreciate Him and worship Him with an ever deepening understanding. I also want us to think about how we ourselves can live in ways that demonstrate these characteristics. After all, the Spirit works, not just to help us see God more clearly, but to reproduce the life of Christ in His followers.

So let's consider these things under the following four headings:

- Grace shown by God;
- Grace shown by us;
- Truth demonstrated by God; and
- Truth demonstrated by us

And then I will try and draw things back together with some closing remarks.

### **Grace shown by God**

Grace is one of the most beautiful concepts in the bible, and one of the things that make Christianity unique. Religions, in general, teach people how to earn God's blessings. Those religions that don't acknowledge a personal God, cannot, by definition, have a gracious God. Those that do teach a personal God, or gods, also teach ways to please that God by a series of things that we should, and should not, do. There may be some concept of justice, perhaps some element of mercy, but the basic message is that we will, at some fundamental level, get what we deserve. The good news of Christianity is precisely that we do **not** have to get what we deserve. That Christ took the punishment that we deserve, in order that we might receive, as a gift of God's grace, forgiveness that we could, and will, **never** deserve.

### **Essential Grace**

Grace isn't just a way that God chose to deal with us, selected from several options that He had available to Him. It isn't just the way that God chose because He is so wonderfully generous - though, of course, He **is** wonderfully generous. If one single human being was ever going to be saved, grace was absolutely essential. Paul teaches very clearly in, Romans 7:12 and Romans 3:20, that although the law was perfect in itself, there was never any possibility of our being saved by keeping it. We were utterly, hopelessly lost and, without the grace of God, we would have stayed lost forever. There is no hint of exaggeration when we describe God's grace as essential.

It is also essential in the daily life of a Christian. If we are even modestly honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that our lives fall a long way short of what God's word requires. Even those of us who have been following Christ for decades recognise that we never get past the need expressed in 1 John 1:9 for God to be "*faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" We are completely dependent on God's grace to us every day that we live.

### **Beautiful Grace**

Some things in life are functional rather than attractive. Multi storey car parks and rubbish dumps are pretty essential to modern life, but nobody writes poetry about them or puts photos of them on calendars! But God has a way of designing essential things that are also lovely to look at. Trees and clouds have very important roles in the world that God has designed, but God wasn't satisfied with making them purely functional, He also made them wonderfully varied and sometimes strikingly beautiful. Grace is more like a tree than a car park! Grace isn't just essential, it's beautiful. Indeed, beautiful is far too small a word for how marvellous God's grace is.

We too often think about the cross of the Lord Jesus as God's response to human sinfulness and the desperate need that sin introduced. I think that is really to put things back to front, as if sin was the first element, and the cross was designed as a counter measure. The bible is explicit that the cross of Christ was planned by God long before the world was created. I like to think about the cross as God's audacious plan to display the full extent of His love and grace in a way that nothing else could. What else could have shown just how much God was prepared to give and how unfathomably deep His compassion is? From this perspective, sin and death only serve as means to highlight God's greatness.

They become the dark background that the beautiful picture of God's grace is painted on, and there has never been a more beautiful picture.

### Costly Grace

We sometimes use the expression 'cheap grace' to describe a watering down of the gospel message that reduces salvation to little more than a wish to be rescued and the repetition of a brief prayer. The true grace of God is the very opposite of cheap. The cost of grace was the life of God's own Son, and who can calculate what that is worth? When we sing about free grace, free salvation or a free gift; 'free' refers to the fact that I am not paying. When thoughtful people talk about the 'free' healthcare provided in the UK by the NHS, they use the expression 'free at the point of delivery'. This means that you don't have to pay the doctor or hospital when you receive treatment. In that sense, the treatment is free. However, the NHS costs around £100 billion a year to operate. That is hardly free, and we all pay for it via our taxes! What makes salvation available at no cost to me is the fact that God bore the cost Himself. The cost of the cross makes £100 billion look like the tiniest amount of small change!

### Grace shown by us

It only struck me very recently, that although God is the outstanding giver of grace, He can never be the recipient! You and I can never act in grace toward God. Nobody can. It is, by definition, impossible. Grace is to give somebody what they cannot deserve or earn. There is nothing that can be given to God in that way. We can't give Him anything material, because everything is His already. We can't give Him any title or honour that He doesn't fully deserve. Even if we praise and worship Him with our whole being, it is no more than what He is due, and will never be counted as grace. Grace goes from the greater, or richer to the lesser, or poorer, and nobody is greater or richer than God!

None of that means we do not need to show grace ourselves. Far from it! We cannot show grace to God, but He insists that we must show it to each other. In Matthew 18:23-35 Jesus tells a parable about two men who had run up debts. One owed his king an amount that runs into millions of pounds in today's money (Matthew 18:24), and the king decreed that the man, his wife and children and all his goods, be sold to repay whatever tiny fraction of the debt that this would cover, and that the man should then be thrown into jail for the rest of his life (Matthew 18:25). Although he asked his master for time, promising "*Have patience with me, and I will pay you all*", (Matthew 18:26) there was no realistic chance that he could do so. In a stunning change of attitude, the king then shows incredible grace, and cancels the complete debt, setting the man free (Matthew 18:27). The next action of this hugely fortunate man is to go and find a fellow servant that owes him the equivalent of a few thousand pounds, and grab him by the throat, demanding full payment (Matthew 18:28). This second man begs for mercy, using almost identical words to those used by the forgiven man earlier that day (Matthew 18:29), but he refuses to forgive, and throws the man into prison (Matthew 18:30). Other servants of the king are shocked by this man's actions and tell the king (Matthew 18:31). The king is furious saying "*You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?*" Matthew 18:32-33. Jesus makes it plain that is a very serious matter if we, who have been shown so much grace by God, refuse to show grace to each other.

There may be no possibility of showing grace to God, but there are limitless opportunities of showing grace to other people. Just think how generously God provides you with chances to be gracious in your church and in your family! All those people whom you find irritating. Every time you are overlooked, or treated with less respect than you deserve. Dozens of times, hundreds, when you have to bite your tongue and not make that cutting remark that is richly deserved. Actually, God doesn't just provide chances; He **insists** that we show grace and forgiveness.

I must have read that parable in Matthew 18 hundreds of times over the years, but every time I read it I find the man's ingratitude shocking. What on earth was he thinking of? How could anybody treated **that** generously be **that** mean? Then I realise, again, that Jesus has pinpointed exactly what my heart is like when I accept God's 'multi-million pound' grace to me, yet refuse to show 'thousand pound' grace to my fellow servants.

### Truth demonstrated by God

Truth is one of John's favourite words; he uses it more than twice as many times as the other three gospel writers added together! In John's gospel, Jesus says that "*the truth will set you free*" (John 8:32) and describes Himself as "*a Man that has told you the truth*" (John 8:40). He declares "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" (John 14:6) and describes the Holy Spirit as "*the Spirit of truth*" (John 16:13) saying He will guide the disciples into "all truth" (John 16:13). He says that "*[God's] word is truth*" (John 17:17), and that He Himself had come to "*bear witness to the truth*" (John 18:37). These are a fraction of the times John uses this word, and notice how often Jesus is linking the word to Himself.

When Jesus says that He is "*the truth*" (John 14:6), He clearly means much more than that He tells the truth, or even that all His teachings are true. Truth is being used to describe a defining characteristic of God Himself. Whether we are

thinking of the truth as meaning: without error, logically correct and verifiable, righteous, trustworthy or any other content the word might have, these things are all applicable to God absolutely. They are almost part of the definition of what God is; and Jesus came to teach, demonstrate and **be** the truth. God cannot tell lies (see Titus 1:2, Hebrews 6:18) and Jesus was a man that told the truth, even though most people did not want to hear it, and finally crucified Him for doing so. God's statements are totally consistent and trustworthy. When Jesus was challenged as to who He was, He could reply "*Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning*", John 8:25.

God is righteous in both a negative and a positive sense. He is righteous because He has never done what is wrong, and He is righteous because He has always done what is right and just. Throughout Jesus' years of ministry, and especially at His trial, His enemies constantly tried to bring accusations against Him. They all failed because He had never done anything wrong and, in John's gospel, Pilate keeps finding Jesus innocent of all charges (Luke 23:4, 14; John 18:38; 19:4, 6). Jesus' righteousness is not just defined negatively. All the gospels present Jesus' actions as being unfailingly right and just; exactly what we would expect God incarnated as a man to be.

### **Truth demonstrated by us**

It is usually less challenging for us to think about what God is than to consider what we are, and what we ought to be, but let's face up to the challenge! Jesus clearly thought that His disciples (including ourselves) needed to be closely associated with truth. In John 16:13 Jesus says "[the Spirit of truth] will *guide you into all truth*". In John 17:17 Jesus asks the Father to "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.*" So, we are to be instructed by the Spirit in order that we know the truth, and sanctified by the Father by His word of truth. Of course, we can never be so thoroughly characterised by the truth as the Father and Son are, but we should be constantly growing in these things. From the passages I have just quoted, it is clear that the Bible, the word of God, has a central role to play. God has placed His truth on record in His Bible. It is possible to read the Bible without the guidance of the Spirit and remain ignorant, but it is not possible for the Spirit to bring us to knowledge of God's truth without the Bible. There may be some parts of the world where the Bible is not available in written form, but we do not live in those places, and God reveals Himself to us, by His Spirit, as we read His word.

The word of truth is also necessary to sanctify, or set us apart as suitable for God's use. This describes the vital 'cleansing' ability of God's word. It reminds us of Psalm 119:9 "*How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.*" God's word challenges us by pointing out the many ways we fail to live as God requires, but also reforms and renews our minds so that we begin to think like God does, and desire the things that He does.

So how do I measure up to Jesus' standards on truth? Do I always tell the truth? Am I always consistent and trustworthy? Do I always avoid wrong and actively do what is right and just? If you've just answered no to all of those questions, at least you are telling the truth now! For the Christian, truth is not just something to be admired; it is something to be pursued. That pursuit will be a lifelong work, and it will always involve failure, repentance and renewal, but Christ promises to strengthen us for it.

### **Grace and Truth Together**

Hopefully, we have seen that these two words fit beautifully together. They do not describe two conflicting elements in the character of Christ. Grace did not battle truth for supremacy in the life of Jesus, as if there was constant tension between wanting to act in grace, and wanting to maintain the truth. Jesus always lived out both grace and truth together. An understanding of the cross is necessary to see how these two attributes can fit together without tension. The work of the cross allows God to act in the most striking grace, while adhering to the most exacting standards of truth. We will be forever finding fresh things to wonder at in the grace and truth that so characterise Jesus Christ.

We also need to perpetually challenge ourselves about how much we demonstrate these two things in our own lives. Here too, they ought to fit together comfortably. We can tell the truth with a gracious attitude. We can forgive a hurtful thing said to us, while gently assisting the culprit to grow in his understanding of God's word, so that he won't do the same thing to others. We can be a faithful friend to somebody, always trying to show them a small fraction of the grace God has shown us.

*God and Father teach us to increase in our appreciation of the grace and truth we can see in Your Son and, at the same time, to find new ways of living grace and truth out in our own lives. Amen.*

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