

Cultivating Graciousness in Community

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Date: 03 April 2022

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm thankful for the little book, Graciousness, Tempering Truth with Love, by John Kratz. And I found it to be eminently biblical, practically applied, and addressing a most pressing need to be speaking the truth with love.

You don't have to have lived real long to acknowledge and to see that graciousness is something that was once far more a part of what was expected in social etiquette.

That people just were expected to treat one another with a certain element of grace. But so much of that respect for one another has gone right out the window.

According to James, true religion exists in a bridled tongue coming from a good heart. The Bible is always connecting mouth and heart, isn't it?

And true religion is bridling our tongue from a good heart. But with the rejection of true religion of the heart, in the culture has come the loss of the ability and even the desire to bridle the tongue.

[1 : 16] Giving people a piece of our mind, that's the new in thing, isn't it? And no matter how harsh, in fact, the more cutting the better.

And we've seen this spreading throughout the whole of society. The political discourse of our leaders in the highest offices, Republicans and Democrats alike, the last two State of the Union addresses by two presidents were marred by unbecoming behavior of our leaders.

The news and the commentators on the news, the sharper the barbs, the better, the more audience, the more likes. Facebook, Instagram, other social media platforms.

We see it in athletics, the trash talking that goes on. Even the fist fights on the basketball field or the court and all that happens there.

The little league parents, even, and the way that dads get involved in the way they speak. School boards. It's everywhere.

[2 : 28] And sadly, we've seen it in the churches of Jesus Christ, especially in the last couple of years over the whole COVID epidemic. And the warning of Scripture and the struggle of the Christian and the church is to be in the world, but not of it.

To be in the world, but not like it. To be distinctly different. To be deliciously different. Different in a good way.

To not let it squeeze us into its mold, which is its ever constant pressure upon us. And so, I think John Kratz has done us a service by taking us back to the Bible to find our help in God himself in this prevailing climate of ungraciousness.

Of hating and being hated. That's the world. It's always been the world, but I think we're seeing it just in a more bald and in-your-face reality in our culture in a way that we haven't before.

And so, it gives us, who are believers, a great opportunity to demonstrate that we can hold strong convictions and yet dialogue with those who have differences from us in a climate of love and respect for the other person.

[3 : 50] So, there's a great opportunity for us to adorn the gospel of Christ. The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. And so, as we see our culture just awash in this nasty speech, what an opportunity for our mouths to be seen as trees of healing and blessing and fruitfulness rather than that of destruction.

I was just reading yesterday in World Magazine of all the organizations that have arisen after the contentious 2016 election. And they sought to get the most liberal and the most conservative folks to sit down around a table and just to talk.

And if they found conservatives and liberals that both like the Braves, the Atlanta Braves, as long as they're talking about the Braves, everything was fine. But as soon as they went into the political discourse, it was hatred and barbs flying at each other.

And so, the aim of these groups, there's some that are Christian-based. Most that I read of were just nothing to do with Christianity. But they're just wanting to try to get folks to sit down and to talk without hating each other.

That was the goal. Well, what an opportunity for us to shine. So, last year at the General Assembly of the RB Net down in Mississippi, I wasn't there, but I heard a report that during the business meeting, there was a clear difference of opinion on some matter that was being discussed.

[5 : 35] One visiting pastor watched and listened, and he saw men conducting themselves with such graciousness and mutual respect that on the spot, his mind was made up that this is the group of churches that I want our church to join.

What was it? It was just people talking about something that was a clear difference of opinion, but doing so with respect and love for each other. There is grace in Jesus Christ to disagree graciously. Now, last week we saw that it has a lot to do with cultivating a gracious mindset, the way we think. There were four points.

A mindset where we properly appraise the other person's value, whether we're talking to a lost person or a saved person. They're made in the image of God. We treat them accordingly.

Secondly, we're to think what we owe them. According to Scripture, we owe them love. We owe them to be treated like we would want to be treated, the golden rule.

[6 : 43] Thirdly, we were told to make charitable judgments, assuming the best in the other until facts prove otherwise. And then, lastly, to consider the outcomes, to actually think of the outcomes of the different behaviors, our words.

What outcome would this word produce in the other? What outcome would this tone produce? We're either throwing gas on the fire or a wet blanket.

And so to think. So much of it has to do with our mindset, and that's what we saw last week. We come to our concluding chapter in this study, and it's called cultivating graciousness in community, together as the body of Christ.

Christianity is a team sport, like volleyball or football or basketball. It's not like tennis or golf, where the outcome of the game depends upon one person alone, but upon the performance of the whole team and their ability to work together.

Now, to be sure, even in team sports, there's a lot that a person can do on their own to hone their skills, improve their fitness, but ultimately the success of the whole team depends upon their ability to work well together.

[8 : 08] Another, the Phoenix Suns are having a good year, as my son-in-law loves to tell me, out in Mesa. But no small part of their good year has to do with the way that they assist one another.

The one thing they do extremely well is to pass the ball to a more open player. And it is a beautiful thing to behold. While I was out there, we watched a game, and what it is is one player is giving up the shot to someone that might be a little bit more open than he is with a better chance of scoring than him.

And so he sacrifices his shot to give it to somebody else who's in a better position. And in the end, the team together does better. Maybe he doesn't get as many points, but you see the concern is for the team, for the team.

And that's the essence of what this chapter is all about. Sanctification, growing in graciousness, is a team endeavor. And though there are things that we can do individually to grow in grace and this graciousness, as this whole book has challenged us, we dare not miss the context into which God has wisely placed us.

So where does Jesus put believers? When they're converted, he puts them into the church, doesn't he? That's his plan.

[9 : 39] That's his plan for growth into Christlikeness. They're baptized upon conversion. That's a church ordinance. You're baptized into a local church family where they grow up in grace and for the rest of their lives are to be taught to obey everything that Jesus has commanded, graciousness being but one of many.

So according to the Lord Jesus, the Christian life is not to be done in isolation, but in the context of the local church. And that's seen in the very makeup of our New Testament. Most of the epistles are letters to what?

Not to individual Christians, but to churches. That's where God's instruction is given. And that's where we are to grow in this grace of graciousness.

But it's also the Christ-chosen context for this growth in grace to take place where our graciousness will be tested as we're in a body.

You know, if you're just hanging out at home all by yourself and maybe even watching it on the internet, if there's anything that rubs you wrong, you just push the button and it's over, right?

[10 : 54] But when we get together, our sins splash on each other. And that's the context in which graciousness is to be tested, exercised, and grown in.

That's where Jesus has put us. And 1 Corinthians chapter 12 compares the church to a body. Let me just read this rather lengthy section and think of the physical body and how it pictures the reality of the spiritual body of the church, the local church.

The body is a unit, though made up of many parts. And though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one spirit to drink.

This is chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, verse 14. Now the body is not made up of one part, but of many. And if the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body, it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body. It would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?

[12 : 20] If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has arranged all the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. So then, the eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you.

And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And the parts that we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor.

And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty. While our presentable parts need no special treatment, but God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it.

So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.

[13 : 22] If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ. Christ. And each one of you is a part of it.

Well, how is the church compared here to a body? Well, it's clear, isn't it, that each part has its own contribution to make to the body.

That's true in the physical body, and God is telling us it's no less true in the spiritual body of Christ. Christ. No one part fulfills all the functions needed for life.

If everyone was an I, where would the hearing be and so forth? And so God has so defined or designed the body of Christ that we're dependent on each other.

You've got some of the things that I need, and I've got some of the things that you need. And that's on purpose to make us see that we can't survive over here isolated from the body.

[14 : 25] We need to be immersed in body life because God has grace and life flowing from you to me and from me to you. And so he's made us intentionally interdependent upon each other for optimum spiritual health.

There's three differences within the body of Christ that John Kratz points out. First, providential experiences. We've not all had the same human experiences in this life, and that's meant to enhance the body.

You've gone through some things that I haven't. I've gone through some things that you haven't. And as we share, we're all the better for having gone through those providential personal experiences.

So Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 1, 3, and 4, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

So it's a joy to see this operating in the body of Christ. the trials that some of you have gone through have equipped you to minister to others.

[15 : 49] And I've seen you doing that. The sorrows that you have experienced have made you more tender and aware of other people in sorrow, and so you've moved toward them in seeking to help them.

So that's what, that's one of the ways that our differences, you see, enhance the body. Different providences that God has brought us through, and to know that he's brought us through those things that we might enhance our brothers and sisters.

The second difference is the knowledge of the scriptures. We don't all have the same knowledge of scripture. Some have greater knowledge of some scriptures than other scriptures. If you've had a real struggle in an area and you've sought the Lord and searched the scriptures on that area and have found overcoming power in that area, you are now armed with the word of God maybe in a way that others aren't armed to help others who need to hear those scriptures and profit from your knowledge of the word of God.

And then the third is spiritual giftedness. We each have been given part of the grace of God, manifold grace of God sovereignly dispensed by his spirit to each person in the body.

We all have some spiritual gift whereby to edify others for the good of the whole. Let me just, he just has a paragraph here that I think is just, hits this right home.

[17 : 24] For example, Samuel may not be an effective teacher, but he has excellent knowledge of and skills for setting up the meeting place for church gatherings. And this is how he serves others.

Stephen may not have much time to offer but he earns a large amount of money in his job and his 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 their children with God's word. A depression had Richard down for many months but now that he is through the trial he reaches out to his discouraged friends, Boyd and Nicholas with the hope he found in the scriptures.

Experiences in life and with the Lord, knowledge of the scripture and spiritual gifts make each person in the church different from the others.

But you see, it's in that way that we help one another to grow in grace. So that's the general picture of sanctification, the Christian life.

[18 : 36] It's a team effort and God has designed it that way. So it is in this area of cultivating graciousness.

It's to be done in community. the God-appointed context of the local church. So he has a few points, maybe four of them here.

How does this work out in the area of graciousness? The first is spend time with gracious people. That just is the, he builds that upon the scriptural principle that there's a direct link between your closest companions and your behavior.

Proverbs 22, 24 and 25. Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man. Do not associate with one easily angered. Why not? Because you might learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.

This imitation principle works both ways though. Not just negatively. Don't hang out with people who will pull you down. But positively as well.

[19 : 51] Proverbs 13, 20. He who walks with the wise grows wise. But a companion of fools suffers harm. Suffers harm.

So it's just a biblical principle that those that we have as companions, our closest people that we are hanging out with, we tend to assimilate their behavior.

And that is, can work for our good or evil. Well, that applies here to this gracious principle. You remember when the religious rulers of the Jews threw John and Peter into prison and Acts 4, 13 says when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were just unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished.

And they took note of them that they had been with, with Jesus. Jesus. What's the connection with Jesus? Well, there's something about him that I see in you.

We saw something of Jesus' courage and wisdom. And now we're seeing something of the same courage and wisdom in these men. And they took note of them that they had been with Jesus as the disciple, as the master, so the disciple.

[21 : 07] And in the church, as we are hanging out with gracious people, it's a way of, a means of grace whereby we learn to grow in graciousness.

Now, in ways that we don't realize many times, we pick up the traits then of those we spend lots of time with. And that imitation principle that God has put into the soul is to be put to good use.

It's to be put to good use in your homes. Parents, your kids are looking at you and imitating you. It's to be put into good use here in the church. Remember how Paul put it to the Corinthians and those in Philippi, follow my example as I am following the example of Christ.

No small part of the ministry is to set an example for others. And that's the same imitation principle. But it's not just for ministers.

It's for the whole body. So he encourages us that if graciousness is something you want to grow in, look around the church and ask this, who are some of the most gracious Christians I know?

[22 : 15] Look around and ask this, who would I want to be confronted by if I was wrong about something? He's trying to help us figure out who are really growing and eminent in graciousness.

And then once you've identified some good examples of graciousness, become intentional about spending time with them. If they're truly gracious, they will be open to that, Mr. Crott says.

So that's right. Approach them. Ask them if you can spend time together and then think together about possible times to be together, both inside and outside of church, before and after the services.

We have opportunities to spend some time together. But then also outside of the church, eating out together, offering to help in an outdoor work project together, to go to a ball game, to get spending time with gracious people, to notice their graciousness, and to imitate it.

So that's the first practical way that we as a body can help one another grow in graciousness. The second is then ask for help. It's building on the first.

[23 : 28] This person that you've identified you want to spend some time with, invite that person to point out any lack of graciousness that they see in you. Often ungracious people are unaware of their critical spirit or their harsh tone.

I just heard recently of a pastor who had a little eight-year-old boy come up to him and said, why are you always angry when you preach? Well, he didn't know he was angry, but that's how it was coming across.

Well, it's good to have an eight-year-old son that will tell you something that you need to hear, or an eight-year-old boy. In the same way, we're not always aware of the cutting nature of our words or of our attitude or of our body language.

So ask, am I being dogmatic and opinionated, blunt, harsh, abrupt in any way? Would you point it out? Am I intimidating or dominating others by sheer force of my personality?

Do people feel ill at ease in my presence because of a lack of graciousness? Please help me identify ungraciousness in my behavior. So you want someone who's faithful.

[24 : 41] Proverbs 27, 6. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. So you've asked for help, pointing out the lack of graciousness, and then asked for help in how could have I shown more grace and kindness in that situation?

So we're wanting to identify both negative and positive. It's the principle of Scripture. We want to put off all that does not look like Christ and put on Jesus Christ in every area of our life.

So we're asking not only what do I need to put off, but what could have I put on that would have been more gracious in that situation? Again, you see why you need to spend time together or you'll never, your friend will never be able to help you in these ways.

And then make this matter a matter of prayer together and asking God to grow in graciousness. All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. Brethren, pray and holy manna will be showered all around.

When Paul couldn't go visit a church, he tells them he's praying for them. We need the Holy Spirit to be bearing the fruits, the fruit of the Spirit, which is graciousness.

[26 : 04] So this is the culture of discipleship that we're wanting to see developed in our church more and more among us. Men, if you've not taken that six-week class with Roger Crian, I'd encourage you the next time that is offered to do so.

We're studying Mark Dever's book and he defines discipleship as disciples helping disciples follow Jesus. And that's the culture that we're seeking to grow in as a body.

It's this community culture that's wanting to help each other follow the Savior. And then, when your faithful friend does correct you, Crott says, remember, number one, yes, this is painful to pride. After all, they are called wounds of a friend. Wounds hurt. But remember that. It's for our good. Second, remember that you asked for it, literally.

And thirdly, remember that only fools refuse correction. Proverbs 9, 7 to 9, whoever corrects a mocker invites insult. Whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.

[27 : 18] Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you. Rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still. Teach a righteous man and he'll add to his learning.

And then lastly, thank your faithful friend. It's not easy pointing out a fault. Even if you've been asked, it's hard work. Thank that faithful friend and then thank God for them.

It's a precious gift. So that's the second one. Ask for help. We're inviting input. If God has put the whole body out there for my good and I'm just cushioning myself from everyone else, then I'm the poor for it.

But if I'm opening myself up to brothers and sisters, then I'm the better for it. That's the way Christ wants it to be. So the third thing, take the initiative to be gracious at church gatherings.

Before and after church, prayer meetings, small groups, as you're intermingling with people, these are opportunities to take the initiative and graciousness.

[28 : 27] It's a sign of a healthy church, Krotz says, when after the service is over, members hang around and spend time together. And those are opportunities to be practicing graciousness.

Let me just read what he says here in one place about this. Well, it might seem artificial for you to intentionally manufacture a gracious comment.

In other words, if you're saying, oh, I'm going to try to work at being gracious. And you're conscious about that. He's saying, it might seem artificial for you to intentionally manufacture gracious comment to make to another person, as opposed to gentle sweetness naturally just oozing and flowing from your grace-filled heart.

But sometimes, discipline requires you to do what you know is right in spite of what is happening in your heart. God. So he's just saying, if you've grown up with this idea that if it doesn't just flow out by the Spirit and it just oozes out of me, then I shouldn't be trying to do something.

Trying is wrong. You've got a bad principle you picked up somewhere along the way. No, we are to discipline ourselves to godliness. That means we're to discipline ourselves, to train ourselves to be gracious with each other.

[29 : 52] And so, there's no disconnect between the Holy Spirit working in us and us working out that salvation in fear and trembling.

There's no conflict between trusting in the Holy Spirit to make me more gracious and looking at opportunities where I can practice being gracious.

The two actually go hand in hand. While it's important to depend on the Spirit for spiritual progress, you must take responsibility and do what is right in spite of your feelings, trusting that the Holy Spirit will inspire your heart to follow, you should immediately seek to say kind words in kind ways to your fellow Christians when your church meets.

Well, you see the wisdom of that because if you only say kind things when you feel like it, I guarantee you when somebody chews you out and ridicules you, you're not going to feel like it. You're going to feel like giving it back to them and that's when you most need to pour a blanket on the fire. A gentle answer turns away wrath whereas a harsh word just stirs it up all the more.

[31 : 02] So, that's a helpful thing to hear. So, have a plan. Maybe your plan this Lord's Day is to be a better listener so ask one or two questions and then concentrate on listening to the other person.

That's graciousness, isn't it? Not just to be airing your opinion but to be listening well. Maybe your plan is to show gratitude and to thank people for ways that they are benefiting you.

Maybe it's a Sunday school teacher. Maybe it's just someone who's in some way serving in the body to show gratitude and you're working on that. You're saying, now who has benefited me that I haven't thanked recently and so you're growing in graciousness or maybe it's to encourage.

Who could I encourage? Who's down? Who's hurting? Could I come alongside and comfort? Krott says, engaging with fellow church members ought to be a major arena for your graciousness to be cultivated.

So that's the third one. Take advantage of our times together to practice and grow in graciousness. Then fourth, make use of the many tools available and discuss them together with this partner of yours that you're seeking to help each other grow in grace.

[32 : 28] There are tools. There's books on certain topics. Read them. Discuss them together. Sermons heard. Stuff on the internet.

Pray together about these things. He talks about biographies of gracious people can become excellent, winsome examples to imitate. And honest biographies will also give some bad examples and things to avoid in this area.

We can learn well from both gracious and harsh people in biography. He mentions Johnny Erickson Tata as one who God has given such a sweet, gracious disposition though she's suffering immensely.

Learn from her. Read some of the stuff she writes and you'll see where's this graciousness coming from. It's not from Johnny. But she's learned something from her Savior and she's reflecting that.

Well, you'll learn by reading her. John Newton's another man from past history. You remember he was a wicked slave owning ship, the owner of a ship, captain of a ship of slave trade and God had sovereign grace upon him and he wrote that hymn we all love to sing, amazing grace.

[33 : 50] And he was amazed at the grace of God the rest of his life and it came out in graciousness. Just his book on the letters of John Newton. He's dealing with people who have questions and he answers so graciously.

Well, we can read biographies and learn. There are scriptures about God's grace to stir up desires to show the same to others.

It is by spending time in fellowship with a gracious God that we learn to imitate him. Even as Ephesians 5.1 says that we're to live a life of love and imitate our father and live that life of love.

So these are some examples. Walk with Christ in the Gospels. Watch him. Watch his graciousness with the down and out sinner, with those that are seeking to trip him up.

Pray through the scriptures related to graciousness. So make use of the many tools available. And then lastly, a final way to cultivate graciousness and community is to worship with the church.

[35 : 02] And I want you to think about that as we close on that point. Krotz makes the statement that every part of church life and its worship can make us more gentle and kind.

So why is that? When we come and worship, we hear the word of God read and taught and preached. What is there about the word of God to increase our gentleness and graciousness? What is it about the word of God? What does it do? Well, it sets before us a big God, doesn't it? And little man, little me. Holy God, sinful me.

In other words, it puts God in his right place. The word of God, it's a self-revelation book. He's telling us about himself and what we see there. He's high and lofty and lifted up.

And when we see ourselves in light of him, we're put in our place and we're humbled. And Krotz's whole point in this last point is that humility is the soil out of which graciousness grows.

[36 : 13] You look it up, Ephesians 4. Where does graciousness grow from? It's from a low view of self, a high view of God.

And you see, the Bible is doing that for us. It's like the soil that has been resting now for four, five, six months and you're itching to get out there and put seeds in it.

And the nutrients have been building up in the soil. Maybe you've even amended it yourself and that soil is now ready for the seeds so that when it hits it, it sprouts and it comes up and it bears fruit a hundred, sixty, thirtyfold.

Well, humility is the soil in which graciousness grows. And there's nothing like the word of God read and preached to build humility.

What is it about our singing of the praises of God? What is praise focused on? It's God again, isn't it? And as we see God for who he is and we see the gospel again for what it is, him stooping down to lift us up.

[37 : 22] That's grace, that's graciousness. And so just worshipping together and praising God together, our prayers, if our prayers are anything like Jesus taught us to pray, we're praying for God's name to be exalted, hallowed, his kingdom to come, his will to be done, and we're praying that God would forgive our sins and not lead us into temptation for fear that we will fall and deliver us from the evil one.

Well, you see, again, it's God and it's man, and that's the soil in which graciousness grows. What about the Lord's Supper? We hope to do this on Good Friday in a couple weeks, and we will come and what will we do?

We will take the symbols of Christ's body that was broken for us, and the cup that symbolizes his blood that was shed for us. What does that do?

That humbles us, doesn't it? It fills us with gratitude and humility. humility. And so, all the worship of the church life, you see, is the soil.

It's amending the soil with humility, out of which then springs up this graciousness. So may the Lord help us to grow as a body in graciousness.

[38 : 35] We didn't speak of the fellowship, the fellowship luncheons. What is that meant to do? It's meant to focus on the other person and to enjoy togetherness. it's out of that nutritional soil that graciousness grows.

Well, the time is gone. Next week we'll begin, I think, just a two-week study before we get into something longer.

But may the Lord bless you with the grace of God and the grace of graciousness. Amen. We're dismissed.