

Graciousness in Actions

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Preacher: Mark Aikins

[0 : 00] We are continuing in John Kratz's excellent book, *Graciousness, Tempering Truth with Love*. And we're skipping ahead to chapter 8 this week, which is titled *Cultivating Graciousness Through Your Actions, or Our Actions*.

In my lifetime, I've taken on some pretty practical jobs. Washed dishes, and I've parked cars, cleaned carpets, and checking people into hotels, things like that.

And one thing I've learned, or discovered, that the more practical a job is, the more distasteful it is sometimes.

One job that stands out in my memory is shoveling manure. My mom and I were working together teaching a Bible club one summer, and she had the great idea of volunteering my help to this homeowner shoveling out, mucking out his barn.

And that is an experience I will never forget, and one I would hesitate to repeat. But that manure was destined to serve a very practical purpose.

[1 : 32] It is very good in helping a garden to flourish and produce a better harvest, as you gardeners will likely testify.

Well, in addition to preparing our heart soil to produce a harvest of graciousness, there are some very practical ways that John Kratz gives us in this chapter.

Practical methods and suggestions, hopefully you won't find all of them distasteful, that fertilize and support the growth of graciousness, kindness, mercy, and love.

Even as we seek to share the truth with others, hopefully in the way that Christ would share. So let's start by listening to some encouragement and wisdom from the Word of God.

I gave someone Ephesians 4.29. Would you read that, please, nice and loud? Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

[2 : 46] Okay, so a verse that talks about the manner of speech and the type of speech we are to use.

1 Thessalonians 5.14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Okay, and again, this highlights the manner in which we are to speak and share God's truth. And then we have three Proverbs I've asked someone to read.

He who winks maliciously causes grief, and a chattering fool comes to ruin. A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.

Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him. So if you think about it, all these different passages put us in mind of Brother Kratz's first suggestion, first practical help, which is this.

[4 : 01] Think before you speak. Thinking before speaking. During World War II, there was a famous phrase that got very popular, especially in areas where there was munitions work going on, or shipyards where naval ships were being built.

And I wonder how many of you can complete that phrase, loose lips, sink ships. You know it. Okay. Meaning that enemy spies might be listening to casual talk and picking up strategic information that they can then use against us as enemy combatants.

Causing them to have an advantage over our own military. So people were cautioned against a careless word about what our side was up to.

Well, you know, loose lips can also give our enemies an advantage over us if we are too hasty to speak. And thinking before speaking is a very practical way for supporting gracious communication.

[5 : 26] Although it's not very popular. It's much more common to bump into people who are ready to shoot from the hip.

To just say what they mean and mean what they say and want to take over a conversation as soon as possible. And only give up control of that conversation when a wittier person or a more quick and witty tongue comes along.

So the more eager I am to share what I know, even if it's good, the more, the wiser it is for me to hold my tongue until I have time to think.

Because what we say, how we say it, the thoughtful speaker is much more likely to be a gracious speaker than one who shoots from the hip without thinking.

So I'm going to ask for your help. What is it I should be thinking about before I speak? What would be helpful for me to think about?

[6 : 41] I have some written down here. Shout out your suggestions. Okay. Will it benefit the person I'm speaking to?

Is it helpful? Good. Good. Is God in my thinking? Am I expressing his ideas or just my opinions? Good. Some other things I should consider or think about. Okay.

What are my own feelings? What are my own motivations for sharing this? Am I doing it out of anger or impatience? What about the timing of what I'm saying?

Is this the right time? Have I prepared the groundwork for sharing this truth? Do I know the person well enough? Who is this person? Is it a male, a female?

[7 : 48] Is it an older person, a younger person, a friend, an acquaintance, a stranger? A believer? And somebody shared what needs to be said?

What's their situation? What's their maturity level? Their background? Their mood? All of these things are helpful for us to consider because all of these questions I might ask myself are similar in that they produce more considerate speech.

And if we're more considerate, it's usually inconsiderate speech, which is ungracious. The passage we heard from 1 Thessalonians mentions three types of people.

Paul was concerned about people not just as people generally, but as types of people. And he prescribed three different kinds of medicine to meet the needs of these people.

The unruly, we are to warn. Okay? The faint-hearted, we are to encourage or comfort.

[9 : 07] The weak, we are to uphold. And all three, we are to be patient with. So these are not specifically talking about a specific truth, but it's talking about the manner in which we deliver that truth.

Do we deliver it as a warning? Do we deliver it as encouragement, as upholding, supporting? And all the time we should have this virtue of patience as we share it.

It's not always easy to diagnose somebody's needs. Discernment usually doesn't happen in a moment. And that's probably why Paul adds that phrase, be patient with all.

Thinking before I speak allows me to have time to wisely discern what my listener needs. Gives me my time to sift my thoughts.

And filter out things that are unhelpful or unnecessary or unkind. And as you shared, filtering out hostile emotions toward this person.

[10 : 39] Taking time to relax, to think before we speak. I know I need to do that. We've been learning about how our heart attitudes must change in order to become more gracious truth bearers.

And even if we're working on those attitudes and praying about them, trusting God to change us, there's still remaining sin within us that might be triggered by an over hasty tongue.

Remember how James describes the tongue as being a fire, set on fire by hell. And remember too, that Jesus' most faithful disciple, Simon Peter, was famous for overconfident speech without thinking.

And Jesus actually had to rebuke him as being the mouthpiece of Satan at one point. So we should be careful and thoughtful when we speak.

Another practical idea Kratz gives us is to use a journal. Now this might be a surprise to some of you or a real challenge for many of us, especially if we're not used to admitting our bad behaviors, let alone writing them down on a piece of paper that somebody might look at someday.

[12 : 13] But using a journal can be a very practical, excellent tool for stimulating and tracking our spiritual growth. Kratz suggests using your journal in a focused way to work on specific struggles

with unkind language and harsh language.

If you look back on a verbal exchange, you add with another person that didn't go so well, that where harsh words prevailed, what could be more productive than to take time later to write down your thoughts about that conversation?

What was said? What was my tone of voice? What was the other person's reaction? In what ways it failed to reflect Christ's likeness?

What I was after in the exchange? What was my goal? Whether my goal was honorable? And ways I could plan ahead to improve my kindness factor the next time we talk.

This is called learning from our mistakes and failures. And that's something we should all be ready to do. Maybe you and I should dust off that old journal we always meant to write things down in and put it to some practical uses.

[13:44] Having some written records of where we've come from and how we've progressed in our spiritual life can be very encouraging as we look back on those things.

As we review the records, we can thank the Lord for the progress that he has helped us to make. It can also make our goal setting much more practical and realistic as we look ahead.

I want to share an excerpt from Kratz's book on this topic. He says, For example, If Lisa and Jennifer argue in the parking lot after a church meeting about involving a new visitor in the ladies' ministry, they might be so filled with emotions like anger, embarrassment, and even shame that they have difficulty remembering what led to the conflict.

At lunch, however, Jennifer takes a few minutes to write down some of her thoughts in bullet points. Later that afternoon, perhaps after a nap, she pulls out her notes.

She can then see more clearly that she's not been thinking according to the scriptures. Now she realizes that her thoughts were prideful. Lisa doesn't like me or the people I want to recruit for the ladies' ministry.

[15:09] I want my new friend included right away. And I'm really going to let Lisa have it. Now that the emotional dust has settled, she can contrast her earlier thoughts with thoughts that correspond to biblical graciousness.

And he talks about how she looks up Ephesians 4 and how Paul commends gracious virtues as a vital means of maintaining Christian unity.

So she comes to see that maintaining unity with Lisa, rather than opposing her or arguing with her, should have paramount importance.

And she writes down later, I must love Lisa far more than I want to get my way in this ministry. And even though I'm eager to see my friend become more involved, I should be patient with the process and the people making the decisions.

And however this works out, I need to honor the Lord and pursue unity with my sister in Christ. You see how she's using her written notes to challenge herself to think and speak in a more Christ-like way.

[16:30] So using a journal in this way can be very helpful. The process of sanctification begins when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart of the believer.

We cooperate with that process as we face our weaknesses and learn from the scriptures and from the wisdom of other believers.

So Kratz has so far recommended thinking before we speak and using a journal as two ways we can take action to cultivate this virtue of graciousness.

In order to illustrate his third suggestion, I want to let us imagine that we're about to engage in a discussion with a fellow Christian about some heady spiritual topic like God's sovereignty in salvation, which honest believers disagree about.

And as a reformed Baptist and a card-carrying Calvinist, you probably have all the biblical references at your command to impress your Arminian semi-Pelagian friend and thus winning them over to the point of view you're convinced is the right one.

[17:55] So you've been studious, you've been diligent, and you've examined the various positions and arrived at the position you think is correct.

So you have the truth on your side. And that's good, that's fine. But now you are going to share that truth with another person other than yourself.

If your motivation is truly to glorify God and have your friend embrace the truth with joy and confidence, the words you use to share the truth can make a great difference.

And so the third idea Kratz gives us is to use gracious helper words. Gracious helper words. Words that serve to soften the tone of the important points you are going to make.

expressions like, this seems to suggest, and I think, and from my perspective, words like that are helper words that keep the conversation moving forward openly and in a friendly way.

[19 : 18] What are some opposites of those kind of phrases that jump to your mind? This seems to suggest rather than what?

Obviously, this is what it's saying. What about I think? Okay.

Instead of, this is it. I know this is right. Or from my perspective, rather than... The Bible clearly says.

Right. Okay. Yeah. We have to admit to ourselves at the front of the game that we are not omniscient.

And we need that to come across in our speech. We're speaking for the Lord. Yes, we're speaking for the Lord's truth, which is absolute truth. But we ourselves don't have all the truth.

[20 : 19] And if you're interested in the person you're talking to and not just the position that you're taking, if you're interested in the person, you will want to keep the person engaged and feeling welcome in the conversation and not just a target you're aiming at with your Bible gun.

This is something that that Kratz emphasizes. Knowledge is power, but power can be dangerous. For one thing, the fact that you are in on a truth that not everybody believes and people disagree about, this can give you a feeling of knowingness in yourself that comes across to others as being a know-it-all.

And so, sharing this kind of knowledge with another person, it's wise to use expressions that assure him or her that you're not omniscient and you know it.

They know it already. Okay, but as you come across to someone, it's good to use these helpful words that keep the discussion open rather than coming across like, this is the way it is, accept it.

A gracious speaker might say, the scripture seems to be saying that God chose to do it this way. Let's recognize that in using these helpful words, you're not deluding or altering the truth in any way.

[22 : 00] What you're doing is softening the tone and the style of the conversation. So the speaker and the hearer are both welcome to continue it with no harshness or harmful impressions getting in the way.

This serves the truth by making it more receivable. And it also preserves and deepens the relationship because it comes across as being loving and considerate.

So our word choices can tell our hearer a lot about us and about our ideas of them, our attitudes towards them.

Do we feel open to their opinions and input? Do we trust our own authority or are we relying on God's authority? The next area of action Kratz tells about is nonverbal communication.

If I speak to my child and say, come here, it's got a much different tone than when I look at my wife and I say, come here.

[23 : 19] You know, there's a lot involved in facial expression, in our gestures, in our tone of voice.

Okay? To say, come here, we can say it as a command, lovingly, amorously, angrily, sleepily, bored, interested, you name it.

And our body language can communicate in ways that emphasize our words or they might tend to contradict what we're saying. A mom who tries to engage her husband by talking about little Billy and her problems disciplining him and only gets a grunt in return from Billy's dad, she might complain that dad isn't a good communicator.

But you know what? Dad is communicating very well by laying back in his lazy boy, turning on the TV, just giving a grunt in response, turning on his computer or his iPad or whatever.

He is communicating something loud and clear that he is totally disinterested in what his wife is saying and she gets that message, doesn't she? So, we need to keep in mind everything communicates, not just our words.

[24 : 56] We don't want to just depend on our words for communication, but how are we expressing them? What's our facial cues saying about our message?

My daughter can tell very clearly if I'm tuned into what she's saying to her on the phone when we're talking. If I'm scanning something that I'm reading or sorting through some email or something like that, she'll always catch me on it.

You're not listening to me! And she can tell right away just by my tone of voice how interested I sound. Everything communicates.

If we neglect the power of nonverbal communication and merely rely on the words themselves, it's likely we'll dilute the message or even decrease the power of our message.

Take your tone of voice as an example. Sam Crabtree in the book we studied *Practicing Affirmation* says that a positive cheerful voice wins friends, builds confidence that others can trust you, sweetens the environment, and makes you easier to be around.

[26 : 15] Not just your choice of helpful words but also your manner of speaking can disarm and endear you to your audience so the talk can be more pleasant and fruitful.

So, we need to take time to think, perhaps even writing down some ideas in our journal, plan to use gracious helper words, make an effort to keep our expression open and cheerful.

If we do these things, the graciousness I want to show to my listener will come across and hopefully will move the conversation forward. Well, the apostle of love, the apostle John, writes in his first letter, chapter 5, verse 14 and 15, and this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

And if we know he hears us, whatever we ask, we know we have the petitions that we have asked of him. how does he begin that verse?

We are confident, we are confident of what we're praying about because it's in accordance with his will. So, how confident are your prayers?

[27 : 40] How confident am I that what I'm asking the Lord for is according to his will? We've already seen clearly that God's will for us is to be gracious as our Savior is gracious.

So, praying earnestly for the grace to be gracious is certainly a petition that our Father will be pleased to grant, isn't it?

We can confidently pray as we enter into a discussion that may tend toward harshness. Lord, grant me that grace to be gracious that you've promised.

People we want to share the truth with are not always receptive, agreeable, pleasant people. And dealing with difficult people can be challenging, it can be tempting to get off the track of these gracious steps, these gracious approaches to speech, even with our close friends and relatives, it's a continual source of grace, to be gracious is the source of prayer.

Prayer is our ally, our lifeline, our continual source of graciousness, both in preparation for a future discussion or right there in the moment as we're discussing and just tempted to let it fly, we can send up a prayer.

[29 : 23] Well, maybe there is a brother or sister in Christ you have had to deal with in some ministry or on the job that you find it hard to deal with. You find things that they say and the way they go about things as being annoying or unwise.

In Colossians 2.2, the Apostle Paul says he is praying that the believers hearts may be encouraged, knit together in love for the in the knowledge of Christ.

You and I can certainly pray such a prayer and have confidence that God will answer in regard to that relationship as we pray that our hearts are knit together in love.

When the time comes for that discussion, God's love will supernaturally supply a graciousness that wasn't there before. God is pleased to answer prayers that are in his will.

The fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control, all those qualities have obvious connections with our gracious speech like many threads of a spider's web or the spokes of a wheel.

[30 : 53] Every one of them, the fruit of the Spirit, Kratz writes, has a sweetening effect on our speech. And these fruits of the Spirit are already distinguishing marks that set Christians apart.

And so they're already being worked into our life by the process of sanctification. So God will surely be willing to supply that sweetening flavor of the fruit of the Spirit to our message if we but ask him.

Praying for gracious speech, you know, is a practice that's been around for thousands of years.

King David prayed, let the words of my and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Keep watch over the door of my lips.

Our gracious God has answered the prayers like that for ages past and he will surely answer them for us. So let's pray expectantly and thank him when he adds that grace to make us more gracious.

[32 : 16] Finally, Kratz urges us to maximize our Bible intake. Maximize our Bible intake. Christians still deal with remaining sin in our hearts and minds.

Patterns of thinking and feeling and desiring that remain conformed to this world and need to be rooted out and replaced.

Paul teaches in Romans 12 that this happens as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. Only by establishing new, sanctified patterns of thinking and desire can we truly be Christ-like in our speech and prevent the sinful impulses to come leaking out of us.

Meditating on the word of God is a transforming activity. The more serious I am about reflecting the graciousness of Jesus in my speech, the more I will saturate my heart and mind with his thoughts, words, and desires.

Blessed is the man, the psalmist says, who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly nor stands in the path of sinners nor sits in the seat of the scornful, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and in that law he meditates day and night.

[33 : 49] so how is the enemy targeting your heart and mind when you're tempted to be ungracious in your conversations?

Is it pride in my own knowledge that the devil is trying to stimulate or impatience for others to agree or anger or harshness or a critical spirit?

Whatever those weak areas are, Krott suggests, I target the scriptures that address those areas and let my heart and mind dwell on them, praying for the Holy Spirit to transform me in those specific areas.

He writes, for example, if someone believed that sinfully passionate assertions are the best way to change other people's behavior, an excellent biblical remedy would be Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 24-26 about correcting in gentleness and patience because it is God who grants repentance.

To experience more profound levels of transformation, the believer must not be content with a surface reading of the verses. Just as a colorful piece of hard candy changes the color of the tongue as it slowly dissolves, so these verses will color the heart of one who spends time thinking about them, appreciating them, and applying them.

[35 : 38] Then he adds, writing down meditation insights adds even more impact and allows you in the future to build on the treasures you've discovered.

And then he says in a footnote, for more ideas about meditating on scripture, see David W. Saxton's God's Battle Plan for the Mind, the Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation.

It would be a good book to refer to, God's Battle Plan for the Mind by Saxton. And here are some additional ways to maximize our Bible intake.

These would include using your discoveries as a basis for earnest prayer and for journal entries, as he mentioned. Praying not only for myself, but for others I know who are in need of correction. thanking and praising God for the truths he has impressed on our hearts. If we are thanking and praising him, making that part of our worship, that will make it stand out as something positive, something we see he's doing in our hearts.

[36 : 57] Look for sermons on the internet that address the same passages you are working on and meditating on. and then memorizing God's promises to give renewed grace as well as forgiveness when you have setbacks.

Verses like 1 John 1 9 about confessing our sin and he being faithful to cleanse us. 1 Corinthians 10 13, the promise that there will not be any temptation overtaking us except what is common to man.

And God will provide that way of escape so that we can bear up with it. Hebrews 13 5, a promise about God's continual presence with us.

Memorizing these promises and of course, Romans 8 28 and following can be a way that our Bible intake can be maximized.

Christ. So in our battle for the truth of God, let's never forget that Christians' chief battle is the battle to be more like Jesus.

[38 : 11] This is the will of God for you, even your sanctification, Paul writes to the Thessalonians. We all need the graciousness of Christ to temper the truth as we share it with others, especially with one another in Christ's body.

So I'm praying that our church will not only be known as one that stands for the unchanging truth of God, but one that clearly reflects the love of Christ, who was full of grace and truth.
Let's pray together. Father, these suggestions are certainly areas I need to work on, and I pray, Lord, that you would use this practical chapter in our book to stimulate us all to a deeper appreciation of the graciousness that is required as we share your truth, the graciousness you expect us to develop in our lives as we look deeply into the scriptures, as we face our weaknesses, and as we perhaps begin to write down some things that need to be addressed.
Lord, help us to have wisdom as we look into these matters, as we just try to implement these practical suggestions, and we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. tôi■■■■■ tôi