

Tempering Truth with Love

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 0 0] So yes, as Pastor Jason said, we are continuing our study of the book Graciousness by John Kratz. And I'll remind you of the subtitle of this book, which is Tempering Truth with Love.

Tempering Truth with Love. Now, as we learned last week, we never have to make a choice between speaking the truth or speaking in love. Love rejoices in the truth, according to 1 Corinthians 13. So the truth is the only loving thing we can ever offer someone. If we are not speaking the truth, we cannot be speaking in love. Of course, as Pastor Jason showed us last week, it is possible to speak the truth without love. So that may be our primary challenge. We need to have the courage to always speak the truth, but also have the wisdom and the discipline to speak that truth in love.

Again, as the subtitle of the book says, we need to learn to temper the truth with love. Admittedly, speaking the truth in love can be a very difficult balance to strike. And again, I don't mean that we are balancing truth and love as though these two things are at odds with one another. I simply mean that as we speak truth, it can be challenging to know how much sugar to sprinkle on it, if you will. The problem is we sometimes sugarcoat the truth so much that it no longer resembles the truth or the truth does not come out clearly to the person we are speaking to. People may not even recognize the truth that we are speaking because we are frankly too indirect about it.

For example, a gay woman visited my church several years ago and she very bluntly asked me, do you believe homosexuality is a sin? Now keep in mind, I already knew she was gay.

I also knew she was searching for a church. So obviously you can see my dilemma. I wanted to answer her question with the truth, but I didn't want to scare her away in that very moment. I wanted her to give the church an opportunity. I wanted her to stay. And so I was, if I'm being candid with you, at least tempted to do what every politician on television does, which is evade the question.

[2 : 3 5] You know, find some way to appease her without giving a direct answer. I'm not sure how I might have done that, but we can actually be quite clever when we're put under pressure. But as I thought about it during the brief moment I had, I decided to answer her question directly. Do you believe homosexuality is a sin? Yes, I do. And here's why. And I chose to answer her question directly because she asked me a direct question. And I thought that was the simplest solution. Did I temper the truth with love? Well, I tried. I certainly tried. I spoke as calmly and gently as I possibly could.

And I also tried my best to understand where she was coming from. We were in the southern part of the Bible Belt. And she had probably become accustomed to a lot of very conservative churches in the Bible Belt talking about homosexuality as though it is the most heinous sin one can commit. And we could probably have a very long discussion about that. But what I wanted her to understand, in addition to the fact that homosexuality is a sin, is that we are all sinners. We all deserve the wrath of God. There is no one righteous. No, not one. And thankfully, she received what I said very well. She continued to come to the church for quite a while anyway. But that's the kind of situation where it can be very difficult and challenging to know just how much sugar to sprinkle on it. You don't want to lose the truth.

But you want to be very loving at the same time. Just imagine the same conversation if I had not plainly stated, yes, homosexuality is a sin. What if I had merely said what would have been a little bit more comfortable to say, which is, oh, we're all sinners. That's true. But do you suppose she would have had an opportunity to walk away feeling any kind of conviction over the particular sin she is engaged in?

Probably not. She probably would have thought, well, yeah, that's true. We're all sinners. So the person who's not engaged in homosexuality is really no different than me. We're all the same.

Yes and no. As we learn to temper the truth with love, we never, ever want to sacrifice the truth for love because that's really an oxymoron. It can't be. If we lose the truth, love is no longer an option.

[5 : 21] With that in mind, let's consider some biblical examples of tempering the truth with love. Go with me, first of all, to Mark chapter 10. Mark chapter 10. Now, perhaps it goes without saying, but we have no better teacher than Jesus Christ himself. So let's examine some of the interactions he had with people. Mark chapter 10, starting at verse 17, we read, and I'm reading from the CSB here.

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him and asked, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And let's pause right there for a moment.

How would you answer this man's question? I'm guessing you've probably thought about that a time or two when you've come to this text. Most of us would probably feel a little giddy because it's not every day that somebody comes to you and blatantly invites you to share the gospel with him.

But where do we begin? Do we talk about God's love? Do we jump right to the sacrifice Christ made on the cross? He died for us. He died for our sins. Do we begin with an exhortation to have faith in Christ?

A lot of ways we could answer that question. And all of these things are true, of course, and they're necessary to talk about. But there's also that underlying issue that we sometimes don't want to talk about. But we have to address. God's love, Christ's atoning work on the cross, putting our trust in him for salvation, as true as these things are, they don't mean much to a person who doesn't yet recognize and feel his or her sinfulness, right? In Romans 6, Paul writes, for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And we love to proclaim the gift of God in Christ Jesus. And that announcement, however, has little significance apart from the first half of Paul's statement. For the wages of sin is death. So the contrast Paul presents in that chapter is important. It's like seeing a commercial for a weight loss program. If they merely guarantee you'll lose weight, you'll think, okay, how much weight and what exactly do I have to do? So what they typically do is they show you a nice before and after picture, gives you some vivid illustration of how much weight you could lose. And they'll say something like, lose X number of pounds in only 30 minutes a day. It's great to tell people about salvation. But it stands to reason that at some point, we have to tell them why and from what they need saved.

[8 : 35] At some point, we have to talk about sin. We have to talk about hell. We have to talk about God's wrath. The question is, how do we speak those kinds of truth with graciousness? Well, look what Jesus does here. I'll skip to verse 19. Jesus says, you know the commandments. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother. Now, remember the man's original question. If we didn't know any better, it would certainly sound to us as though Jesus is suggesting this man can save himself by keeping the commandments, by following the Decalogue. And if that's not what he's doing, what is he doing? Well, let's continue to quietly sit back and watch the master at work. The man said to him, teacher, I have kept all these commandments from my youth. Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, you lack one thing. Go sell all you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. But he was dismayed by this demand and he went away grieving because he had many possessions. What is Jesus doing here?

He's actually leading this man to a point of conviction and repentance by exposing his sinfulness. Unless the young man recognizes his desperate need for the Savior, there would be no use in following Jesus. What would be the point? So what Jesus does here is he probes the most sensitive part of this man's heart. He loved his earthly possessions and his reluctance to sacrifice them for treasure in heaven. It reveals his heart maybe is not as pure and his devotion to God is not as sincere as he once believed it was. So what is Jesus doing? He's confronting a self-righteous man with his own sin. More to the point, he does so in a remarkably gracious way. He doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't shout, you liar. He was. You depraved wretch. He was.

He doesn't even correct the man's ignorance regarding his supposedly perfect record of keeping God's moral law. Instead, he gently leads this man to see it for himself.

Now granted, Jesus is the God-man, so we may think, of course Jesus can do that. Of course he can. But you know, I don't have the ability to see into someone's heart, to see into their mind, to read his thoughts.

[11 : 54] No, we don't have that ability. But that's actually what makes Jesus's graciousness in this story all the more remarkable. Think about this. He knows just how sinful this man is.

He can't even relate to that kind of sinfulness because he's never committed sin. But he knows how sinful this man is. He knows the depths of this man's depravity. And furthermore, I would argue his anger against sin is inevitably more zealous than our own. Yet he displays incredible patience here. The text says Jesus loved him. And everything Jesus says or doesn't say here is an expression of that love intended to draw this man to himself as slowly as it may have been.

Though he is leading this man to a point of guilt, a point of conviction, Jesus isn't trying to destroy him. He's not trying to tear him down. In the grand scheme, he's actually building this man up by confronting him with his own sin, but doing so in a very, very gracious way.

I read these conversations Christ had with people and I am just in awe of the Lord. I can't help but pray, Lord, teach me that kind of graciousness. Teach me that kind of wisdom and discipline. Sadly, my impatience, my pride, sometimes my anger, and certainly my careless tongue get in the way far too often for me to be as effective as I should be and would like to be, which actually leads us to an important point in this discussion. Turn back with me, if you will, to Isaiah 42.

While you make your way there, I'll remind you of something Jesus taught. He said, the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. In other words, the kind of speech that comes most naturally to us is an accurate reflection of our character.

[14 : 24] We can study many examples of Jesus speaking to various people, but we should understand that he is not just speaking the right words at the right time in the right way. If we look a little deeper, we see that his ability to temper the truth with love comes naturally because of his character, because of his heart. Here is what Isaiah prophesied about Christ, Isaiah 42.

Now commenting on this text, Sinclair Ferguson writes, Here we find reference to Christ's meek and gracious spirit in the pursuit of righteousness.

He does not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick. He does not draw attention to himself or parade his own abilities. This is the consequence of the divine gift. I will put my spirit on him, verse 1. What Paul will describe as walking in the spirit and bearing the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5, finds its prototype in Jesus himself, as does Paul's rich description of love as the first and most essential mark of the spirit.

Jesus is not a model of graciousness because he read and memorized how to win friends and influence people. That's not what's happening in these conversations. He very naturally spoke the truth in love because both truth and love flowed from his heart.

His very character was marked by this graciousness. Once again, however, we may argue that Jesus is the God man. He's divine. He's deity.

[16 : 37] As wonderful as his example is, we're not God. How can we mere mortals with sinful natures be expected to have hearts and tongues overflowing with graciousness?

And the answer is the same way Jesus did. Notice again what God says about his son here in Isaiah. This is my servant, he says.

I strengthen him. I put my spirit on him. Does that sound familiar? Ezekiel 36, you don't have to turn there.

God makes a similar promise. Only he's not speaking about what he will do for his son. He's describing what he will do for all of his elect people under the new covenant.

And here's what he promised. I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit within you. I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

[17 : 36] I will place my spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances. Do you see some similarities there?

We, too, have the spirit of God. We, too, have the fruit of the spirit, which, again, in Galatians 5 is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And I would argue that all of these things are needed to treat others with graciousness. But we do not supply them ourselves. We do not conjure them up ourselves.

We are equipped by none other than God himself. Yes, the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. But, according to Scripture, God has given believers a new heart that is capable of following his son's example of graciousness.

And if you want proof of that, let me give you an example. I cannot think of a more gracious instance ever among anyone than when Jesus hung on the cross and he prayed, Father, forgive them.

[19 : 00] They do not know what they're doing. After these people falsely accused him, falsely convicted him, they mocked him, they spit on him, they tortured him, and they literally, physically nailed him to a cross, the first words out of his mouth, our Father, forgive them.

I'd love to pause here for about 30 minutes or so, if I had the time, because that kind of graciousness deserves a moment of reflection, doesn't it?

You know, I was watching a movie with my daughter the other day. And she's at a stage in life where she asked the question, why a lot?

And as we were watching this movie, keep in mind, this is a movie I've never seen before. I don't know what's going to happen. She averaged about one why question per 30 to 60 seconds.

And it came to a point, about 10 minutes in the movie, I couldn't answer her questions anymore because I had no idea what was going on in the movie. Why did she do that? Why is he wearing that? Why is she going that way?

[20 : 19] I don't know. I don't know. And to be candid, that can be a little frustrating after a while. Well, later that night, I was sitting at my desk and I was thinking about this subject of graciousness and I turned in my Bible to Luke chapter 23 where I read, Father, forgive them.

And I thought back to earlier in the evening about how I was slightly annoyed at my three-year-old daughter's ignorance. So at the time, I encouraged her, well, just sit quietly and watch.

Maybe we'll find out. Jesus is crucified and his response is to pray for God's forgiveness of the ignorant. You can imagine how petty and ashamed I can feel not only in that moment but in so many moments of life when I compare myself to the Savior.

That's an example of graciousness Jesus provides. Now, Peter, in turn, he says to believers, I'm reading from 1 Peter 2, when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favor with God.

For you were called to this because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. He did not commit sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

[21 : 49] When he was insulted, he did not insult in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

Now, notice that Peter does not believe following Christ's example is out of reach for us. To the contrary, he says, Jesus has left us an example by what he did and did not do, what he said and did not say, specifically while he was suffering on the cross.

In the most fantastic display of graciousness, Jesus prays for the men who are crucifying him and Peter then, in turn, tells us to follow in his steps.

Now, lastly, this is what I was leading up to with this. We read the story of a man by the name of Stephen in Acts chapter 7.

And if you know the story, you know where I'm going with this. Starting at verse 54, the story goes, when some of the Jews heard what Stephen had said in defense of the faith, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him.

[23 : 03] Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, look, I see the heavens open to the Son of Man and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears and together rushed against him. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And after saying this, he fell asleep. Now, despite all appearances, Stephen is not a superhuman.

As you know, he's not the God-man. He's immortal just like us. He's a sinner. But, full of the Holy Spirit, he expresses the same incredible graciousness as our Lord on the cross.

[24 : 18] As Peter taught, he followed Christ's example. His heart was full of truth, so he spoke the truth. Even in the face of peer pressure to do otherwise, he knew his life was at stake.

And his heart was also full of love, full of abundant love. So in this moment of severe testing, gracious speech is what flowed most naturally from his lips.

That's character. Blaise Pascal once remarked, kind words soothe and quiet and comfort the hearer. They shame him out of his sour, morose, unkind feeling.

We have not yet begun to use kind words in such abundance as they ought to be used. Now, can you imagine what Stephen's final words might have done to the souls of those men who are standing around watching him die?

We can only speculate, but at least one man in the crowd that day likely never forgot what Stephen said. his name was Saul.

[25 : 32] Now, to be clear, Stephen's graciousness did not have an immediate impact on Saul. As we discover in Acts 9, Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

He continued to be a tenacious, violent, angry persecutor of the church, finding men and women who belonged to the way. That's an early reference to Christianity.

So he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Evidently, he, you know, murdered or oversaw his fair share of murders, which the death of Stephen alone proves.

Saul, who would later become the apostle Paul, he would confess in Acts 26, in all the synagogues, I often punished believers and tried to make them blaspheme since I was terribly enraged at them.

I pursued them even to foreign cities. In other words, Paul was anything but gracious. He refused to listen. He was impulsive.

[26 : 41] He thought he was defending the truth. But as it happened, he was utterly blind to the truth. But even if he had been defending the truth, he never made the slightest effort to temper that truth with love, did he?

He was quick to punish anyone who disagreed. Perhaps that version of Paul is a very extreme example but I still believe he's one to whom we can all relate, can't we?

Maybe we're not throwing our opponents into prison but how many times have we shown our impatience? How many times have we shown our anger? Maybe our spite to someone during a disagreement.

How many times have we treated our Bible not as a light but as a weapon? how many times have our words or our tone or our demeanor in a conversation accomplished the exact opposite of what we intended?

I'm sure it's happened more times than we care to admit. Now Paul, he was an unregenerate unbeliever at that time. We wouldn't expect him necessarily to speak the truth let alone speak the truth in love so perhaps the more relevant question for us is what can we learn from Paul after his conversion?

[28 : 09] Well, first of all, we need to realize that it can take time to shed our reputations. It takes time to shed our reputations. For example, let's say you have the reputation of being ungracious.

Let's say people think of you as somewhat of a Pharisee at least in the religious context. In any other context they just think of you as an unloving person. Furthermore, let's say you have developed a heart to change that aspect of yourself.

God has opened your eyes to see yourself as others do and you don't like it about yourself and you don't want to be that person any longer. Now, by the grace of God you may change the way you speak and the way that you act but you may also find yourself running into stumbling blocks.

You may find that some people in your life refuse to believe that you've changed despite any evidence. Why? Well, you've had this reputation of being ungracious so people still think of you as ungracious despite any progress you've made to the contrary.

And I make this point because those stumbling blocks may very well discourage you from continuing to follow Christ's example. You may think to yourself, well, if everyone believes I'm ungracious I might as well be ungracious.

[29 : 36] You know, Paul faced the same dilemma. He had the same problem. After his conversion, we're told in Acts 9.20, he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues.

He went from murdering people who preached Jesus to boldly preaching Jesus himself. Was that enough to convince people he had changed?

I'm afraid not. According to Acts 9, all who heard him were astounded and said, isn't this the man in Jerusalem who was causing havoc for those who called on this name and came here for the purpose of taking them as prisoners?

Then, even after Paul joins them as a hated man among the Jews, as a Christian, he arrives in Jerusalem. He tries to join the disciples there, but they were all afraid of him since they did not believe he was a disciple.

They thought he was a Trojan horse of sorts, something fishy was going on here because he had a reputation. It took Paul some time and some help from friends like Barnabas to escape his own reputation, but that didn't stop him from pressing on.

[30 : 58] He was going to follow Christ. Now, the second lesson we can learn from Paul is that old habits die hard.

I think we all understand that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, but that does not mean we lose all temptations of the flesh.

That does not mean we instantly become perfectly holy Christians. We still struggle against our flesh. We still have to fight against our old nature.

Our former habits may still rear their ugly heads from time to time, which was true for Paul. Do you remember the argument between Paul and Barnabas at the end of Acts 15?

As they prepared to set out on a missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John Mark as they had previously as a kind of a ministry help or companion, but Paul did not.

[31 : 59] We're told in Acts 15, 38, Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them and had not gone on with them to the work. This was in the past.

We're told they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. That they parted company. The argument became so intense that Paul and Barnabas would not even travel together any longer.

People have speculated about who was right in this moment, but I don't know that that hardly matters because the truth was spoken without love somewhere in this conversation. That's my presumption.

I don't know who was right about John Mark, but there's a decent chance they were both very wrong in how they handled the situation. Two friends serving together in Christian ministry do not suddenly refuse to even travel together unless they have allowed a disagreement to continue while also failing to love one another.

Something along those lines happened here. And if you study Paul's words and his life carefully, you will notice hints that he probably had a temper. He probably had a temper.

[33 : 18] That was certainly true before his conversion, but I think we see even glimpses of it after his conversion. Look at Acts 26, for example. In Acts 26, Paul is standing trial, if you will, before the Sanhedrin.

And seemingly out of nowhere, Acts 26, 2, the high priest, Ananias, ordered those who were standing next to him to strike Paul on the mouth.

Now, granted, Paul's response here is pain induced. He's just been hit in the face, but as we know, the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart, right? So, Paul says to Ananias, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall.

Paul, you are sitting there judging me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law, are you ordering me to be struck? Now, to be clear, Paul, he wasn't wrong.

He's not wrong here. He spoke the truth. But even he quickly realized that he had not tempered that truth with any semblance of love.

[34 : 24] he then confesses he did wrong, and he quotes Exodus 22, saying, you must not speak evil of a ruler of your people. I didn't realize.

In short, Paul displays some inconsistency in his life in regards to graciousness, which is probably true for all of us. Thankfully, we have the sanctifying presence of the Spirit to slowly but surely conform us into the image of Christ, who was a perfect model of graciousness.

Now, lastly, before we run out of time, let's consider a positive example from Paul. In the time remaining, go with me to Acts chapter 20, if you will.

Acts 20. Now, as far as we know, Paul spent more time with the church in Ephesus than he did any other church. He was in Ephesus approximately three, years.

And in Acts 20, he's passing by Ephesus once again, and he calls for the Ephesian elders so he can see them one last time. And starting at verse 18, we read what is his final address to them.

[35 : 40] I'm going to skip down to verse 25 where Paul says, And now I know that none of you among whom I went about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Therefore, I declare to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, because I did not avoid declaring to you the whole plan of God.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. Therefore, be on alert, remembering that night and day for three years, I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

With tears. I love this passage. first, we see very clearly that Paul spoke the truth. Over the course of three years, he never avoided declaring the whole plan of God.

[36 : 57] Even in this moment, he is speaking the truth, though this truth is kind of hard. He loves these men. He loves this church. He has to look at these men whom he does love, whom he has ministered among, whom he cares so deeply about and he says to them, men will rise up, even from among your own number, and distort the truth.

That's not an easy thing to say to someone. Second, we see that Paul spoke the truth in love.

He says, night and day for three years, I never stopped warning each one of you with tears. And I think those last two words seem to capture the very essence of graciousness.

True graciousness begins with God. His grace changes our hearts. It changes us from the inside out. Our new hearts then transform the way we treat others and communicate with them.

true graciousness is not exclusively about saying the right words or even speaking the truth. True graciousness actually runs deeper than words.

[38 : 17] It is a byproduct of genuine concern for others. It's the kind of concern that brings us to tears as we strive to lead them to the truth.

It is desperate to find a humble way to ultimately build others up. It is patient.

It is kind. It does not envy. It is not boastful. It is not arrogant. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not irritable. If we are gracious, we will never hesitate to speak the truth.

Never. But when we do speak that truth, we will do so out of sincere love for both the truth and for the people to whom we're speaking.

We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed.