

## **Rethinking Religion: *Love in Spiritual Growth***

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - July 4, 2021

We're looking at the book of Galatians again this Sunday, because it's amazing how the issues, questions and even conflicts we have today are not that much different than people had two thousand years ago when this book was written. Considering areas of conflict, failure and sin, I want to draw our attention to God's call for grace for each other.

In the book of Galatians after our freedom in Christ is reaffirmed in 5:1, then the fruitlessness of a legalistic faith is addressed, there is a warning about self-sabotaging behavior, and a description of what we are shooting for: the good life as described by the fruit of the Spirit. Then this book gets intensely practical and challenging.

We read, **Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.**  
Galatians 6:1 (NIV)

Some of you are possibly thinking, *"OK, but who am I am to help other people when I have my own struggles,"* or you might say, *"That's great as long as their sin wasn't against me, because then that is quite big thing to ask."*

Both of those can be true, we may not feel like we are qualified to help or we may not to be part of this restoration process. Yet, if we have received forgiveness

from God through the Cross and if we have decided to follow Jesus' Way, then we understand the need for grace.

I think that most of us get this, we probably wouldn't argue against it. Having received grace from God, we see we're also called to extend it to others. Jesus even illustrates this in a parable about an unforgiving servant, which ends with the question. **Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?** Luke 18:23-33 (NIV)

We know the answer is "yes." This isn't a hard question to answer correctly, but it can be a difficult one to live out. Love in spiritual growth can be difficult when the loving thing to do is to forgive, so I want to look practically at four problems that make it hard for us to live out this "extend grace for others" message.

## **WHY THIS CAN BE DIFFICULT**

### **1. Underdeveloped Faith**

One of the best ways to determine where you are in your faith is the amount of grace you give to other people. Galatians 6:2 says, **Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.**

This is about extending grace, because I understand God's grace, His unmerited favor, for me. That takes mature faith.

So how to we get a mature faith? By listening to God and doing what He says. Anything else? You can be inspired by the examples of others, but at the end of the day, it still requires you listen to God and do what He says to develop your faith.

Now one big barrier in that can be...

## **2. Comparison and Jealousy**

Or maybe another way to put this is comparison that leads to jealousy. It's hard to have grace for those of whom we are jealous. If we aren't careful we will secretly root for their misfortune. Galatians 6:4 states, **Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.**

Here is the problem - Something in me whispers: *"I need some of what they have to make me whole: acceptable, loveable, respectable."* I know that sounds kinda Junior High-ish, but maybe it's what you watch on TV and you hear the whisper, *"I need that, I need to be like them in order to be acceptable, loveable, respectable."* We know advertising plays on this whisper. But then often what can happen is you can get to a place where you never feel like you are ok.

Christianity offers an explanation for that whisper. It's where my value is defined primarily by my relationship with God, rather than a status I've achieved. For those of

us who like to accomplish things, this can actually be harder for us.

Now another reason extending grace and restoration can be difficult for us, is if we are trying to cover over our own actions or misdeeds. That's number 3....

### **3. Sin Justification**

You see this with the very first brothers in the Bible. We read, **Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.**

Now this is bad, but consider next not only the evil that Cain does, but the callousness of his heart. **Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"** Genesis 2:8-9 (NIV)

He is saying, "It's not my responsibility to look out for my brother," but not because he is trying to tell God what God's supposed to do, but because he has already done something wrong and he is trying to shift the blame and deflect it. Cain didn't want to feel worse, so he deflected. That kind of sin justification can make it difficult to live out of grace.

Until God gets to the shame in our lives and sets us free to be His child on the earth, we're going to try to justify

ourselves to avoid shame. And if we live behind fig leaves of shame, we're not going to be able to live Jesus' Way.

You and I and everyone who follows Jesus needs to get with God, sit quietly or go for a hike, and we've got to get to God and say, *"God, I want to know what Jesus accomplished on the Cross for me."* There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. You are His Body, the Body of Christ, He doesn't condemn and shame Himself. Galatians 5:1 says, **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**

Until we have heard God say to us personally, *"You're forgiven. You're free. No condemnation. No guilt. No shame. No burden. You're loved by your Heavenly Father,"* then we may go on trying to justify ourselves by our actions, even by putting others down. We need to hear God's heart in this. He sets us free to live and love.

There is also, number 4.... Another real reason why it's difficult to extend grace to others is...

#### **4. Compassion Fatigue**

Sometimes we run out of grace for extending grace by saying, *"Yes to grace, but not this time. Yes to grace, but not right now."* Here is the problem it's in the most inconvenient times when we're called to proactively love: *When we're busy, when we have been hurt, when we just*

*don't know what to do.* Paul writes, **Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.** Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

You know our church family can be just the boost we need in those times. Remembering what people have done for us can be encouraging. Tell me a story of the good someone here has done for you. The inspiration you've gained from someone here. And as we celebrate 149 years of First Presbyterian Church next Sunday, we know there is a long history of wisdom and grace here to inspire us.

Let's be intentional to live loved and inspire grace for each other. We can then offer...

## **1. Proactive Love**

Now this is Graduate level Christianity. This is where we actively seek the best for other people. Now this is hard enough for those we love, but think about what Jesus did to put your actions in perspective. When He was on the cross, He actually prayed, **Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.** You might say, "But I can't do that." Well, we aren't asked to start there. Look at what it says in Galatians 6:10, **Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**

I can tell you this isn't natural, but it works. What we see is the calling to actively benefit another person. Choosing to do that, can begin a course correction that leads to extending grace when it's difficult. This course correction then necessitates keeping...

## **2. JESUS IN FOCUS**

The more I view other people, through what Jesus has done for me, the more grace I show. It's remembering that when I was at my worst, Jesus is at His best with love and grace. As the Bible reminds us **“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”**

What's my response this? We read Paul's in Galatians 6:14, **May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.** Galatians 6:14

What I want to do today is to end, with Jesus in focus, His grace in focus and there is probably no better way to do that, than by receiving the Lord's Supper together. Communion is a physical reminder of the historical, personal, and practical reality that it was at a great price Jesus died to extend His grace to us, but His grace is complete. We can live free grow in grace.