

Love God, Love People, Serve Others
1 Timothy 1:5-7
(Grace – August 9, 2009)

I. Introduction

Before leaving on my sabbatical, my heart was set on seeking the Lord about how we can establish a culture here at Grace that promotes relationships that are genuine (both with God and with one another) and safe (where we are free to be honest and experience growth).

We began to use a term to describe this adventure – does anybody remember what that phrase is?

Transformational Community – a genuine, **safe** fellowship of people who are being transformed into the image of **Christ** as we encounter God in worship, prayer, the Scriptures and in each other.

One of my primary concerns is that genuine relationship with our Creator can so easily be replaced with a form of religion.

I will say more about this in the weeks ahead, but one of the major results of exchanging religion for a genuine relationship with God is that religion has no impact on how we actually live our lives on a day to day basis.

In other words, we practice our religion on Sundays, but our lives remain unchanged. Our love for God and neighbor is not growing and flourishing. Our heart to serve and bless our neighbors is non-existent. And we are still stuck in and controlled by our hurts, addictive behaviors and sin.

There is no freedom, no joy, no peace, no patience, etc.

Often, when we are stuck in the bondage of religious practices, we have learned how to look good on the outside, but inside we are still full of anger, bitterness, lust, etc.

I am also convinced, that many of the ways we “do church” actually encourage this. We tend to think that having more knowledge makes us better Christians. So we go to more Bible studies and meetings and learn how to be good church people – don’t smoke, don’t chew and don’t go out with those who do!

So, because you want to be a good Christian you change all the external behaviors, but on the inside you are not truly free. When you are not around the church, you do all that stuff anyway and you feel bad about it, but don’t know what to do. We will talk more about this in the weeks to come.

On top of all this, others hear you talk about your faith in Christ: how He has forgiven you of all your sins and that you are going to heaven when you die, but they do not see how Jesus has made any difference in your life *today*.

Because of this multitudes have turned away from even bothering with church because they do not see how church relates to the rest of their lives.

Some would even say they are still trying to follow Jesus, but did not find Jesus in the context of the church – this is extremely sad!

There is so much more I could say about all this, but let me say that I have returned from my sabbatical with an even deeper commitment to deconstruct anything that smacks of religion in our church culture and with God's help try to encourage all of us to become true followers of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

In fact, I do not even like calling myself a Christian anymore because the word hardly means anything in our culture today – all kinds of people call themselves Christian.

I want to be known as someone who is an authentic follower of the Jesus way of life. I want it to be evident in the way I live that I have **surrendered** my life completely to God and do my best to **humbly** follow Him in every area of my life.

I want to be like the Apostle Paul who said, *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 3:12-14, NIV)

So, in returning from my sabbatical, I do not have some form of new, secret teaching that I received from God. I do not come down from the mountain to establish some form of a new covenant.

If anything the message from God to my heart has been simplified and become more focused.

As I mentioned last week, as I read through all the books, visited other churches and ministries, and walked all those miles I sensed God affirming much of what we were already proclaiming and trying to do.

We need to be passionate in our **worship** (love for God), committed to building together a loving fellowship, intentional in our **outreach** to others, willing to experience true life change in the context of Christian community (strategic discipleship), and **joyful** in our service to God, the church and others.

We need to be a transformational community.

So if you were hoping that I would come back with a new message – you are going to be sorely disappointed.

What I have returned with is a renewed **passion** to be a true follower of Jesus and some ideas on how we as a congregation can grow together in our love for God and others.

Has the message changed? No. But I do think I have some thoughts and ideas on how to bring clarity to our purpose as a church, align our ministries to better accomplish the purpose, help people move from religion to genuine relationship with God, and stay focused as a church on the task God has called us to.

So if you are a leader in the church, heading up or deeply involved in a ministry, or concerned about where the church is heading over the next 20 years you need to be coming out to the Leadership Ministry Team meetings on the first Wednesday of each month.

I am not going to dictate the changes, but it is in those gatherings that we are going to look at how to bring greater clarity, alignment, movement and focus to the church.

I am not saying there are going to be wholesale changes around here, but if you are not in those meetings, I do not want to here you complain about whatever changes are made.

II. Love God, Love People, Serve Others

The simple message I bring back to you is this: love God, love people, serve others.

Everything else we teach or do here falls under this statement.

Tonie has been teaching about who we are in Christ and living in the heavenlies – you cannot genuinely love God, love people and serve others if you do not grow in your understanding of what she is trying to teach you about this.

Rose often teaches about holiness – true holiness is reflected in our love for God, our love for people and our service to others.

Building a loving community, experiencing freedom from hurts, habits and hang-ups, reaching out to others, knowing how to work for a difficult employer, being a good parent, applying yourself to your education, preparing yourself properly for marriage, handling your finances appropriately – whatever issue is of concern to you and your life will be addressed when you commit yourself to love the Lord your God with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself, and serve others.

Listen to Paul as he writes to Timothy: *“The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. 6 **But some people have missed this whole point.** They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions. 7 They want to be known as teachers of the law of Moses, but they don't know what they are talking about, even though they speak so confidently.”* (1 Timothy 1:5-7, NLT)

Let's not miss the point – some of the most knowledgeable people I know are also the most unloving people I know.

There are people who are “good church people.” When the doors are open they are here. They are involved in all kinds of service and ministry, but they are filled with anger, bitterness, lust – they have a form of godliness, but underneath they are not experiencing or giving the grace, love and peace that Jesus Christ has lavished upon us.

Are you one of those people?

1 Peter 4:8-10 says, “**Above all**, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others...” (NIV)

It seems that whenever the Scriptures say something like “above all,” it is followed by a call to love.

III. Application

David Becket wrote the following:

Wouldn't it be great if I won a million dollars? Well, maybe it wouldn't be so great. Not everyone has the same idea of a great time. One person's wish may be another's nightmare. Take, for example, the story of three men who were sailing together in the Pacific Ocean. Their vessel was wrecked and they found themselves on an island. They had plenty of food, but their existence was in every way different from what their lives had been in the past. The men were walking by the seashore one day after they had been there for some months and found an ancient lantern. One man picked it up. As he began to rub it and clean it, a genie popped out and said, "Well, since you have been good enough to release me, I will give each of you one wish."

The first man said, "Oh, that's perfectly marvelous. I'm a cattleman from Wyoming and I wish I were back on my ranch." Poof! He was back on his ranch.

The second man said, "Well, I'm a stockbroker from New York, and I wish that I were back in Manhattan." Poof! He was back in Manhattan with his papers, his telephones, his clients and his computers.

The third fellow was somewhat more relaxed about life and actually had rather enjoyed life there on the island. He said, "Well, I am quite happy here. I just wish my two friends were back." Poof! Poof! Everybody's idea of a "great time" isn't the same!

So is it true? Are many Americans sitting around wishing, "Now wouldn't it be great ...if I won the lottery...if I had my dream house...if I was famous...." As Christians...as the people of God...what if instead of wishing for money or fame or success or more "things," we could just as earnestly wish with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength that we could love the Lord our God and love our neighbor as ourselves?

I am not here to help you become good church people or teach you how to practice the religion known as Christianity.

My heart is to help us all grow together as true followers of Jesus Christ. In doing this we need to **fully** commit ourselves to loving God, loving people, and serving others, but it all begins with surrendering our lives to God through Jesus Christ.

There are some of you in this room who have been trained in how to be a good church person, but inside you are still full of rage, unforgiveness, and hurt. There is a huge disconnect with what you know of God through the Scriptures and how that is applied to your work, families and day to day life.

I pray that God opens your eyes today and you lay down your commitment to religion and open your heart once again to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

This can be pretty scary as religion can be quite comfortable, but a true relationship with God and others can be messy.

In genuine relationship there is potential for hurt, we become accountable to one another (most of us do not want anyone trying to speak into our lives, even when they do so because they love us), but we will never truly grow and find freedom without entering into a relationship with God and others.

If you are here today and have never given your life to Christ – you can do so today and *begin* an incredible journey into a relationship with God that can bring freedom from your hurts, life controlling habits and emotions.

Over time you will learn of God's love for you and then how to love Him, become comfortable with yourself, and genuinely love and serve others.

Listen again to 1 Timothy 1:5-7 as presented in the Message translation: *“The whole point of what we're urging is simply love — love uncontaminated by self-interest and counterfeit faith, a life open to God. Those who fail to keep to this point soon wander off into cul-de-sacs of gossip. They set themselves up as experts on religious issues, but haven't the remotest idea of what they're holding forth with such imposing eloquence.”*

I will ask one last time – are you missing the point?