

Identity Crisis:

Two Non-Negotiables for the Christian Brand.

WEEK THREE:

Let's say you have a company. Let's say that company is the Four Seasons, one of the hotels consistently on the top 100 list of companies to work for. How do you go about hiring an employee? You have a job that needs doing, and you need to hire someone who can do it. But, you also want the right kind of person that fits in with your company and can represent it well. So, it's a little bit of a science, because you have a job description and need to hire someone who fits it, and it's also a little bit of an art, because you also need someone who fits in.

In other words, you need to be somewhat structured and go by the rules, and also somewhat open to opportunities that might break some of the rules. In fact, the Four Seasons is notorious for hiring for attitude rather than simply aptitude. Isadore Sharp, the founder of the hotel chain, said, "*Competence we can teach; attitude is ingrained.*"

When we think of the source of the Christian identity - the guide for how we are supposed to be and how we are expected to treat each other, and how we are meant to figure it all out - it's a little bit science and a little bit art. Or, to use more religious terms, it's a little bit of truth and grace. It's not one or the other.

For us in the church, this is an ongoing tension. Some lean one way, some the other. There are some of us who aren't good at playing in the sandbox with those who lean the opposite way. But, as Christians, we are called to embrace both. And when we do, we truly represent the reality of life in Christ.

Truth helps us to know the way we are to live, what is righteous or not, what will bring us into right relationship with God. Grace is that somehow God loves us and forgives us even when we have messed up and gotten that relationship wrong. We are called to live in the truth, to follow the path Jesus has laid before us. But we also celebrate God's love for us, even to the point that Jesus lived, died and was resurrected to restore us to right relationship with God, when we found ourselves way off that path.

In Jesus's time, the religious authorities were good at truth. They had their rules and knew how to follow them. Their job was also to get everyone else to follow the truth. The problem was they had forgotten about grace and how much grace God shows to God's people. They looked down on those they considered unclean or unrighteous. They used what they saw as the truth to limit, exclude, and control who was in and who was out.

One time, they scoffed at Jesus when they witnessed him heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day of rest. You weren't supposed to heal, which would have been considered work. Jesus reminded them that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. In other words, Sabbath is good and true, but only as long as it gives life to people. It shouldn't be used to prevent people from living. Jesus offered the man with a withered hand grace, in spite of the Sabbath, and Jesus calls us to do the same. (Mark 2:27-3:5)

Another time, Jesus tells a story about two men, one a Pharisee, or a religious ruler, and the other a tax collector, one of the most unclean and despised characters of the time. They were both praying in the temple. The Pharisee looked up to heaven and said, *“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”* In contrast Jesus explained that the tax collector was standing far off and would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* In a surprising turn of events, Jesus says the tax collector is the one who leaves justified, not the Pharisee. (Luke 18:9-14)

But the reality is that we need to be like both! We should not steal or commit adultery, and we should fast and be generous with our income, just like the Pharisee. Those are things that followers of Christ should do; those are righteous acts that should reveal the truth of a relationship with God. AND we should also recognize that we are all still in need of God’s grace, just like the tax collector. We should acknowledge that it is by God’s grace that we can even know truth in the first place.

How are we supposed to figure out what we do? We look to the truth of what Christ calls us to do, and recognize that there will be grace along the way. We are called to help others see the truth AND ALSO offer them grace.

It would certainly be easier if it were one or the other. It would be easy if we could relax and not worry about anything and just do what we want because God’s grace covered it all. This is a critique of Christians who seem to only focus on God’s grace, forgetting about the truth that Christ also preaches. On the other hand, it would be easy if we could have a list, nice and neat, with little check boxes that would tell us without a doubt what was right, and we could just check each one off the list, until they added all up to a right relationship with God. This is a critique of those Christians who make it more about the rules. But it’s not easy. It’s not one or the other.

In the beginning of the gospel of John, we are told that the Word became flesh and through him, we not only have received grace upon grace, but he also helps us to know the Father’s heart. Grace and truth. Truth is tidy, grace is messy. Truth is definite, grace is infinite. Truth is black and white, grace is all sorts of gray. Truth points us to Jesus, and grace is a gift from Jesus.

Both grace and truth come with Jesus Christ. We need both to understand how to truly be Christians.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- With which are you more comfortable, truth or grace?
- Is it better to follow the rules or to go with the flow?
- Do you have trouble balancing the two?
- How do you approach the Sabbath?
- Do you identify more with the Pharisee or tax collector?
- What makes you most uncomfortable with truth? With grace?
- How can you hold both as a Christian?