THE ART OF BEING NEIGHBORLY

Choose Love: Tolerance & Grace

KEY IDEA:

- To be a good neighbor, we must add tolerance and grace to our foundation of presence and compassion.

SUMMARY:

- A neighborhood contains all kinds of people—people very different from ourselves. So we won’t get very far with loving our neighbors if we don’t practice tolerance and grace, to both accept their differences and to actively love them even if we don’t think they deserve it. Jesus loved people very different from himself; he moved toward even sinners and the down-and-out with not just tolerance but grace. Luke 7 has important lessons to teach us about the connection between experiencing grace and extending it.

BASIC OUTLINE:

Opening: Build the Need

Text + 3 Points

1. Jesus showed tolerance
   - What is tolerance?
   - Why is it beneficial?
2. Jesus showed grace
   - What is grace?
   - Why show it?
3. What difference does it all make?
   - It improves the neighborhood
   - It improves our lives

CLOSING: Tips and Challenge
OPENING ILLUSTRATION

Share a recent memory related to a movie, book or TV series, especially one with a gripping plot. Share a moment where you wondered: “What is he/she going to do? What would I do in those circumstances?”

We’re all gripped by “stories.”
  o Whether a drama or mystery, we are fascinated by other people’s stories. We wonder, “What would it be like to be that person in that situation?”
  o We personally only get to experience one little slice of life. (Share your own demographic: American, 2016, white, male, etc.)
  o But through stories, I get to imagine life from a different angle: What would it be like to live in wartime? Or in a different country? How might I be different?

BUILDING THE NEED

1. Recap last week: Being a neighbor starts with presence and compassion.

2. But we won’t get very far if we don’t practice tolerance and grace, because our neighbors are going to be all kinds of people. We can only exercise compassion if we can tolerate and accept them with their differences.

3. We may not resonate as easily with people different from ourselves. (We tend to choose friends who have similar backgrounds or interests). But it helps us if we think of each person as having their own story. It is good to engage with stories different from our own.

TEXT: Set-Up

Jesus loved people very different from himself.

  o You’d think he would have more in common with other religious teachers, but he actually gravitated toward the down-and-out, toward tax-collectors and “sinners.”

  o Let’s read in Luke 7 about how Jesus showed tolerance and grace toward someone very different from himself, and what that teaches us.

TEXT: Read Luke 7:36-47 (NIV)

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.
When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

**POINT 1: What is tolerance?**

**Jesus showed tolerance.** Notice how he doesn’t shy away from interacting with someone very different from himself:

- of a different gender
- of a different lifestyle (v.37 a “sinful life” was code for “prostitute”)
- not from his own social circle
- not a religious teacher, not the same socio-economic status

**What is tolerance? Does it mean agreeing, even with sinful lifestyles?**

- No. Tolerance is the willingness to tolerate feelings, habits, or beliefs different from our own. It doesn’t mean we agree.
- It does mean that we respect the person. We see the person as valuable.

**Why did Jesus show tolerance and engage with the woman (not just call her out)?**

- While the Pharisee saw this woman as unworthy of interaction, Jesus saw her as “worthy,” as “worthwhile.”
- Each person has inherent “worth” because they bear God’s image
- Genesis 1:27 says we each bear the image of God, giving every person tremendous value.

**Through tolerance, you can learn more about a person’s story.** It may be that your preconception of them was wrong; perhaps you have more in common than you realized.
Illustration: Share a story about the early stages of a relationship where you didn’t think you had much in common with someone and felt some negative attitudes toward them. Share how you came to think of them differently (as not so different from yourself) and how that helped your attitude.

POINT 2: What is grace?

Jesus didn’t just tolerate the woman; he went beyond and showed grace.

- He showed love for the woman and declared that her sins were forgiven.

What is grace?

- Grace is a disposition of kindness and compassion, and an exercise of love, mercy, and favor. (Extending love even when we don’t think they deserve it.)

Illustration: Share a story of an object/person covered in mud or mess. (Was your child ever a huge mess? Did you ever find a vintage item covered in an unappealing finish?)

- We are willing to look past the “mud” and the “mess” when the thing underneath has great value.
- Jesus didn’t just see the mess of the woman’s life—he saw a person of tremendous value underneath.

What kinds of “mud” or differences get in the way of you knowing your neighbors?

- Their political affiliation, their faith or lack of faith, their ethnicity, whether they’re a Longhorn or an Aggie (or other light-hearted difference)
- If we looked at the essence of the person, instead of outward circumstances, our neighborhoods and world would be better places!

Text Tie-In: We have received SO much grace from God—forgiveness of all sins!—that we should certainly extend grace. “He who has been forgiven much loves [others] much.” If we have problems showing grace to others, it is because we don’t understand how much we’ve been forgiven (like the Pharisee). We should be willing to look under the mud of people’s lives for the masterpiece that is there—the image of God written on their hearts.

POINT 3: What difference does it all make?

Does showing tolerance and grace have any practical benefit? Yes, it benefits others (our whole neighborhood) and ourselves.
- **It improves the neighborhood**—It creates a kinder, healthier place. It breeds a healthy and supportive community, which improves the quality of life for us and others.
- **It improves our lives**—When we choose grace, we are more joyful and peaceful. We can let go of wanting to judge people or “straighten them out,” realizing that God is the one who changes hearts and lives. My job is to just connect people to HIM, through love.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Share a time when grace with a neighbor—whether you were more on the receiving or giving end—had a positive impact.

**CLOSING:**

**Tips for Engagement:**

- Don’t worry about “not knowing what to say.” You don’t have to do much talking!
- Focus on listening.
- Show genuine interest and curiosity about them as a person
- Ask questions simply to get to know them and their story
- Respond in a kind, loving way.
- You will often be given the chance to share your own story and perspective

**CHALLENGE:**

Think about a situation where you could show tolerance and grace to someone different from yourself.

- Remember that tolerance is an attitude of respect for the person
- Move beyond tolerance to extending grace, kindness and love.
- Don’t be discouraged if it doesn’t go well immediately—it takes time
- Start setting an example of a gracious attitude and they will often respond in kind.