

“CONNECT-OLOGY”

Mark 2:13-17

INTRODUCTION

1. Would you agree we live in a world where connections are crucial?

If you work in an office, you know what happens when your internet connection goes down. Chances are, your computer is connected to others in your office through a common server.

2. Connections are critical when you travel. All it takes is for a flight to be delayed and your personal schedule is thrown into turmoil.

Airlines proudly display for their customers their connections to various cities around the world.

3. If you know much about the human body you know our bodies are designed by the Creator with muscles, nerves and blood vessels wonderfully connected so we are able to function.

4. But most of all, today, we hear about interpersonal connections. You used to be connected with others if you had a telephone in your house. Not any more.

Now young adults are hungry for any way to connect with each other through technology. That's one reason for the excitement surrounding Apple's new I-pad.

The most popular way for students to connect with each other today is by texting. If you're not texting, you're probably not connecting with many students.

5. The truth is... all this emphasis on connection can actually lead to confusion. Some people think they're connecting when they're actually escaping reality.

Eg. The British Daily Telegraph recently told about a South Korean couple that let their 3-month old baby starve to death while they spent all their time at an internet café raising a virtual child. The article said:

“Leaving their real daughter at home in a suburb of Seoul to fend for herself, the unemployed pair spent hours role playing in a virtual reality game...

...which allows users to choose a career and friends, granting them offspring as a reward for passing a certain level.

Once a day they would give their real baby powdered milk, and then go back to lavish care and attention on their on-line child.

The virtual daughter was named Anima; the real daughter was never given a name.”

Finally, they came home one day after a 12-hour session to find their baby had died. They were arrested after an autopsy showed that the unnamed little girl had died of prolonged malnutrition.

If you're like me, you're probably feeling a little sick and even outraged. Why would any parent do such a thing?

It's tempting to write them off as just plain crazy or internet addicts.

Eg. William Saletan wrote in the on-line magazine, *Slate*:

"Look in the mirror. Every time you...squander your work day on You Tube, text a colleague during dinner, or turn on the TV to escape your kids, you're leaving this world."

Saletan explains that when real life gets to be too much, we connect to a world where everything goes smoothly and circumstances are easy to control. We've become more and more susceptible to being lured out of the real world into artificial ones.

6. We really do live in an age where there is a war between the worlds - the real world and the virtual world. Do you understand that virtual community is no substitute for real community? That's why God established the Church. He wants us to experience the kinds of relationships that will produce encouragement, help and support during difficult times.

This morning, we want to talk about the value of healthy connections in the church.

In many ways, real connections start here. The Church of Jesus Christ is all about helping people get connected with God and connected with each other.

We've been involved in this wonderful series (we've been learning about crucial values of the Christian life) over the last several weeks called, "Grace Anatomy." We've

learned how grace impacts our desire to **grow** in our relationship with God.

We've learned how grace impacts our commitment to **reach out** to others around us.

Last week, we learned that grace motivates us to **act** on behalf of others. And today, we want to discover how grace impacts how we connect with God and our connection with others.

If you have a copy of the Scriptures, why don't you turn with me to Mark, chapter 2?

This morning, we want to uncover 3 principles that will help us discover how grace impacts our relationships with God and with others.

First, we discover that...

1. **GRACE IMPACTS OUR ACCESS TO GOD**

Now, I know this is dangerous before lunch, but let me ask you a question: "How many of you like pork?" Wouldn't you just love a stuffed pork chop for lunch?

How about shrimp? Shrimp cocktail is considered a real delicacy, isn't it?

Or, what about lobster?

If you've ever been to a nice restaurant, you know lobster is just about the most expensive thing on

the menu! And, lobster bisque is... wonderful in my book!

Let me ask you a question: *"What do all three of those foods have in common?"* They were all unclean/forbidden by God in the dietary laws for His people in the Old Testament. For one reason or another, God did not want the Israelites to eat pork, shellfish and certain other animals.

One Jewish writer said the English word, *"fit,"* is the best equivalent for the Hebrew word, *"kosher."* Kosher laws still common today...can't mix milk and meat products. In other words, according to the dietary laws in the Book of Leviticus, some animals were **fit** to eat and others were not.

The same thing was true with sacrifices. God clearly outlined that certain animals were appropriate for sacrifices and others were not. Furthermore, no worshipper could bring a maimed or defective lamb to the Temple as a sacrifice. God wanted only those that were unblemished.

Eg. These divisions even applied to people. Imagine that this room represented Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Then, the lobby would be for the Gentiles. The Gentiles wouldn't even be allowed in this main room. Then, the women had a special area for them. In this room, it could be designated in the areas to the side. The Jewish men were given the best seats in the house.

But, only one priest was able to enter the area called, *"the most holy place."* Imagine a foot-thick curtain walling off the stage from the rest of the room. Only one priest went inside "the most holy place" in the Temple on just one day of the year – Yom Kippur, or the *"Day of Atonement."* When he went into *"the most holy place,"* he had to wear a rope around his ankle. If he did something wrong and died inside, the other priests would pull him out with the rope.

Not even the holiest person would ever think of barging into *"the most holy place"* because death would be certain. The whole Temple system reminded the Israelites that God was **holy** and **set apart** from human beings.

The Bible even prevented some people who had deformities from approaching the Temple who had any kind of deformities. Look at these words from Leviticus 21:

"For the generations to come none of your descendants who have a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed..." (Lev. 21:17-20a).

About this time, you're thinking, *"What did this have to do with connecting to God?"* Here's the answer: When Jesus came to this earth, He cancelled this idea that somehow we're separated because of our background, our sex, our qualifications or our deformities.

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey said it like this:

“Rung by rung, Jesus dismantled the ladder of hierarchy that had marked the approach to God. He invited defectives, sinners, aliens and Gentiles – the unclean – to God’s banquet table!”

On Friday this week, Christians all over the world will celebrate the death of Jesus Christ. The Bible says when He died on the cross, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. In His death, Jesus broke down the barriers and dismantled dividing walls that separated people from God.

I love these words of Paul to the Colossians:

“But now He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in His sight without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:22).

There may be no more powerful message in the Gospel than this... The wall that separated us from a perfect and holy God has been demolished through the death of Jesus, who fully satisfied the justice of God! God is still Holy but...You and I have the access to the presence of God any time...because Jesus accomplished the perfect sacrifice for us. I love these words from the writer of the Book of Hebrews:

“Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4: 14,16).

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain,

that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...” (Hebrews 10: 19-22a).

Any of us can enter “the most holy place” today because God, in His grace, fully satisfied His requirements through the death of Jesus Christ. God invites us to CONNECT with Him through faith in Jesus! We can connect with God today because of what Jesus has done for us! Grace impacts our access to God! Because that’s true,

2. GRACE IMPACTS OUR ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS

Do you know this is tax time? April 15 is rapidly approaching. Some of you just thought, “Uh oh!” We’ve heard a lot in the news recently about the possibility of increased taxes.

As unpopular as the IRS is in our culture, tax collectors were hated by the Jews in the 1st century. They were considered traitors by the Jewish people.

The Romans actually recruited Jews who would collect whatever they could above the amount that Rome assessed for taxes. The Romans had poll taxes that had to be paid by everyone between 14 and 65 just for being alive. They had income taxes and taxes on grains, wine and fish. There were taxes for using the roads and the harbors built by Rome. Carts were taxed by the number of wheels.

If you did any business from one state to the next, you paid a tax. Tax collectors could stop you on the road, make you unpack your cargo, and charge you whatever they thought they could get from you. They were the most despised men in all society. They were hated because they collaborated with the enemy at the expense of their Jewish neighbors.

With all that in mind, we come to the Gospels and discover that Jesus actually called a tax collector as one of His followers. Let's pick up the story in Mark, chapter 2 in your copy of the Bible.

"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with Him and His disciples, for there were many who followed Him.

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw Him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked His disciples: 'Why does He eat with tax collectors and 'sinners?'

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Mark 2:15-17).

The trademark of Jesus' ministry was to reach out to those who were outcast, despised and marginalized. Tax collectors were the equivalent of social lepers. They were considered enemies of Israel. To be a friend of a tax collector was unthinkable! You could not make a worse decision. If you were a tax collector, you were considered helpless and hopeless.

Jesus reached out to those who were the tax collectors of His day. He even invited them to be His friends.

Here's the deal: Because of grace, Jesus can see in us what no one else can see. He can produce in us what no one else can produce.

Eg. Many centuries ago, workers dragged a marble block into the city of Florence, Italy. It was supposed to be carved into a statue of some great Old Testament prophet.

As the sculptors examined the block of marble, they discovered it contained some imperfections. Donatello, the great sculptor, saw the stone and rejected it. So did Leonardo da Vinci. And others did the same thing.

But one day, an artist saw incredible beauty in that block of marble. On January 25, 1504, Michelangelo unveiled his work. He'd taken a flawed piece of marble that everyone had rejected and created a statue of David, which is considered one of the greatest works of art of all history.

Do you understand that when Jesus looks at us He sees what no one else could see because of His grace? He can produce in us what no one else can produce.

Eg. An old song says, *“He looked beyond my faults and saw my needs.”*

When you feel that you can't amount to anything significant, and all you see are flaws and failures, remember Jesus called Levi, “Matthew,” one of His followers.

In one chapter, Dr. Luke tells us about an encounter Jesus had with a Gentile, a sick woman, and the body of a little girl who had died. Again-Jesus broke the code that kept people separated. In each case, Jesus reached out and touched every one of them with His grace.

It's no wonder the call of Scripture is that Christ followers are to accept each other in grace. Paul writes to the Romans:

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7).

Grace impacts our access to God. Grace impacts our acceptance of others and...

3. **GRACE IMPACTS OUR ABILITY TO EXPRESS UNITY** (experience)

Here's the deal: Because of Jesus Christ, we're all invited to be on His ship, only it's not called a cruise ship or a battle ship. Max Lucado called it the *“Fellow-ship.”*

The old King James Version calls fellowship, *“communion”* or *“community of the saints.”*

Even though we are very different, we're on the same boat if we have a relationship with Jesus Christ. We're

invited to experience genuine community with each other. Look at what Jesus said in John 17:

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me through their message.

I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one - as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in us so that the world will believe You sent Me” (John 17:20-21, NLT).

The only way I know to do that is to experience life together as Christ-followers. Where else can you find people who will demonstrate the *“one another's”* of the Bible where we are to *“love one another”* and *“serve one another”* and *“accept one another”* and *“care for one another”* and *“bear one another's burdens”* and *“comfort one another”* and *“encourage one another”* and *“build up one another.”* The list is almost endless! You certainly won't find that in the virtual world!

That's one of the reasons we offer ABF communities and small groups here at Grace. We need each other! You can find a list of ABF communities in your bulletin and the Connection table in the lobby. You are missing what God has for you-if you're not connected with ABF's or small groups.

In fact, Jesus even said it like this: people are going to know that you know Me because of how you love each other. John 13 says it like this:

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

CONCLUSION

1. Will Campbell was a white pastor in the South, who was deeply concerned about racism, during the days of the civil rights movement. He and a close friend did everything possible to bring equal treatment to blacks and whites in a racially-divided culture.

Will Campbell's friend was arrested for picketing outside a segregated drug store. When he was released from jail, a deputy sheriff walked up to him, put a shotgun in his stomach and pulled the trigger. Will Campbell's friend died because of the gunshot of a man named, Thomas Coleman.

A newspaper reporter asked Will Campbell, "*Who do you think God loves the most, your friend or the man who pulled the trigger?*"

Campbell said everything suddenly became clear. It was a revelation.

"I agree with the notion that a man could go to a store where a group of unarmed human beings are drinking soda pop...fire a shotgun blast at one of them, tearing his lungs and heart from his body...and that God would set him free. It is almost more than I could stand.

...But unless that is precisely the case then there is no Gospel, there is no Good News. Unless that is the truth, we only have bad news..."

2. What Will Campbell learned that night was a new insight into grace. The free offer of grace extends not just to the undeserving, but to those who deserve just the opposite of grace. justice-when I understand grace it

impacts my access to God, acceptance of others and ability to experience unity.

The more I understand the grace of God, the more it will impact how I see others, and the more it impacts my relationships with others.

- How is grace demonstrated in my relationships?

maybe you need to connect with God
maybe you're afraid of other