

## REFLECTIONS

By Vince Antonucci



## Grace Wholesalers

**L**et's play a word-association game. I'll give a list of words, and you shout out the first thing that comes to mind when you read each of them. Ready? Here we go: Starbucks. McDonald's. IBM. Kinko's. Christians.

Here are my guesses for your answers: Coffee. Hamburgers. Computers. Copies. And . . . wait. That last one is tricky. What are Christians known for?

Here's a different question: What is Jesus known for? If you asked people who met and knew Him, I believe the thing you would hear most often mentioned and most passionately talked about is that Jesus was a man of unconditional love. That's why people, especially sinners, were drawn to Him.

We see this repeatedly in the Gospels. Jesus was a sinless man who attracted sinners like a magnet. Corrupt tax collectors, the physically unclean, betrayers, and prostitutes were all drawn to Jesus. But why?

Why were people who spent their lives avoiding the holier-than-thou crowd now seeking out the holy one? What was it about the despised, the friendless, and the scandalized that drew them to Jesus?

### Jesus' Example

In Jesus Christ people found a friend who loved them not only if they behaved correctly, but despite their incorrect behavior. He would not condemn them. He would give them a clean slate. In fact, it's interesting that Jesus never spoke a harsh word to any of these sinners; instead He offered compassion, love, grace, and healing. That's what Jesus is like, and that's what the church is supposed to be like today.

Jesus was a friend to the friendless, a man who offered safe haven for the outcasts and scandalized of the world. But isn't it sad that the church often has been known as just the opposite? The church

should have a reputation as a refuge for the down-and-out, the desperate, and the rejected. A place where people are neither judged nor condemned, but loved and appreciated. A place to get a clean slate and a chance to start over. A place for honest people to discover that, no matter who they are, no matter where they've been, no matter what they've done, if they turn to God they will find a friend who opens her arms. A place of unconditional love.

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey writes about a drug addict who went to see a counselor in Chicago. She was prostituting herself and her 2-year-old daughter to get money to

support her habit. She had hit rock bottom. The counselor finally asked her, "Have you thought of going to a church for help?"

He later remembered, "I'll never forget the look of shock on her face as she said, 'Church! Why

would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse!'" Unfortunately, that is a sentiment held by many today.

Yet that prostitute would have been drawn to Jesus. You can picture her in one of the stories from the Gospels. Why? Because Jesus wouldn't have made her feel worse; He would have made her feel loved.

### The People We Seek

When we started the church where I am privileged to pastor, we prayed that we would attract people like that prostitute and that we would make them feel loved, not make them feel worse. We prayed that, by offering them the grace of Jesus Christ, we would see their lives turned around.

We started by handing out fliers inviting people to a picnic where they would hear the vision for a new

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The church, like Jesus, can preach about sin and judgment and Hell, and still offer unconditional love.

church starting in their area. At the picnic everyone seemed to be listening with an open mind except for one guy. He was standing in the back, looking disgusted.

Afterwards I went to him and said, "Hey, my name is Vince."

He said, "Vince, I hate church." He went on to explain that he went to church as a young child, but his parents got divorced and the church asked his mother to stop attending. He next attended church years later when he and his wife had their first child. They went dressed in jeans and T-shirts. They sat down next to a family who looked them over, got up, and went to a different pew. He ended by saying again, "Vince, I hate church."

I said, "I don't blame you. But our church won't be like that. And I hope you'll give us a chance." He did. And Jesus has changed his life.

God has continued to give us the kind of people for which we prayed. At our church we have a man who was arrested for cocaine trafficking, a Hooter's waitress, and a guy who once managed a topless go-go bar. We have several crack addicts, including a young mother who sometimes prostitutes herself to get money to support her habit. We have people having affairs and parents who smoke marijuana with their kids. We have a bisexual couple who agreed with each other when they got married that they would still be able to have sex with people of the same sex outside their marriage. We have a woman . . . who used to be a man. And we've had so many homosexual people ask if they can come to our church that I now have a standard e-mail I use to answer them.

My guess is that you are asking, "Do they really preach the truth at churches that reach those people? Do they preach about sin and judgment and Hell?"

I'll answer that question, but first let me ask one of my own. Jesus attracted the worst sinners of society; did He preach about sin and judgment and Hell? Yes, of course. So why do we assume that if sinners are attracted to a church, that church must not preach the truth?

### We Preach the Truth

Yes, our church does preach about sin and judgment and Hell. So why do so many non-Christians—especially those considered "bad" sinners—keep coming? For the same reason they came to Jesus—because they find in us a place of unconditional love. And there is something incredibly attractive about that. There is something magnetic about it. Any honest person realizes that they've messed up in life, that they are not perfect, that they have done many things that make them not worthy of being loved. So honest people realize that unconditional love is the only real shot at love they have.

Reaching and offering grace to people like the lady in Yancey's story is not easy. It comes with a price, because they don't know how to dress or talk or act "right" in church. You will have people who wear halter tops and cut-offs in your sanctuary, curse in your lobby, and smoke on your church patio. But you love them anyway.

You will want them to see the light and repent and change their ways after one Sunday, but it just doesn't work that way. You will have to love them and accept them and be willing to overlook their offenses to lead them to love Jesus and accept the "offense of the cross" (Galatians 5:11, *New International Version*).

Is it worth it? Absolutely. Because the old cliché is true: "They do not care what you know until they know that you care."

One of our church's seven core values is, "We are grace wholesalers." I want Forefront to be the Costco or Sam's Club of grace in our community! That is what God has called us to be. That is the example Jesus has set for us. The same is true for your church. And the same is true for you personally. It's time for the church to become known as the place to get love in bulk.

Coffee, hamburgers, computers, copies . . . grace!

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