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A Measure of Grace

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Honesty, a Building Block of Community

by Roger Jones

Why is it that so often we have difficulty being honest with one another, particularly with our Christian friends? I'm not talking about lying, although that can be a part of the problem. Mostly, I'm talking about how we use the "F" word. How are you doing? I'm "fine." We say this automatically, without much thought. But how often is it really the honest answer?

The word "fine" is fine when things *are* fine. But when they are not, we often gloss over our reality by slapping a happy face on it. And "fine" is usually the easy answer. "I had a bad day at work yesterday, and then I went home and had a fight with my wife. After she went to bed, I looked at porn on my computer until two o'clock in the morning, which made getting up at six o'clock really hard. I was late to work again today and my boss yelled at me. I feel like I'm failing everyone."

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See how much easier it is to be “fine?” Being honest isn’t fun, and I don’t want to burden other people with my problems. No one wants to be the complaining friend all the time. “Besides, people will think I’m not living the victorious Christian life if I am always talking about my problems.” These are a few of the ways we convince ourselves not to be honest with others.

So, why be honest? What are the benefits? There are several, some of which are good for us and some that are good for others too.

Honesty encourages honesty. When I am honest about a struggle I am facing or how I really feel about a situation, it often allows others the freedom to be honest as well. Before coming to WGA, I often felt more at ease with my non-Christian friends. They didn’t necessarily understand my faith in Christ, but there were not so many rules about how to behave either. It was okay to let my hair down every once in a while and laugh at an off-color joke (or maybe even tell one). My non-Christian friends weren’t living double lives. Some were drinking, having sex with whoever they wanted whenever they wanted, and doing drugs. True, they were often miserable, but they didn’t seem to feel the

need to be “fine” about it all the time. While I didn’t always agree with the choices, I was drawn to the openness with which they lived their lives.

Over the years, I have facilitated many small group discussions at WGA’s weekly support group. Some of those have been duds, because no one was willing to start things off with a little vulnerability. But, when someone comes to the group prepared to talk about the pain they are experiencing in a specific relationship or

confess that they’ve been viewing pornography, others respond to this honesty by sharing at a more deep level themselves.

When I share vulnerably in a safe place, confessing my sins to another person, something happens. I feel lighter, because the shame of my secret is out and no longer weighing me

down. I no longer feel alone, because someone else heard me and still loves me. He or she may be dealing with the same problems as me, and now I feel stronger knowing that we are working on this problem together.

Honesty creates a culture of transparency. Even though it is difficult, if we are committed to being honest and transparent, others around us will catch on too. When I first came to Where Grace Abounds in 1995, I was terrified. I was in desperate need of

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Gains, Not Just Losses

By E.N.

Friends challenge me not to dismiss good things quickly and shift to the bad. It's not that I don't want positive things to be true, but that I still have a "negative smoke-screen." How does this relate to gains during my time at WGA through God's grace? I desperately want to believe the best and reject the rest. I also am looking at Mary's concept of "necessary losses" while flipping it around – "necessary," since we cannot keep them while growing in the knowledge of Christ; "losses," because they formerly brought comfort and pleasure.

To paraphrase Saint Augustine, 'God wants to give us good things, but cannot because our hands are full (with what we've held onto, and don't need).' We can gain freedom, relationships, community support, and growth in understanding and love for people only when we leave who we thought we were and become who

we really are. We who choose to follow Christ commit to His commands to love God and neighbor completely, without losing care of our own body, soul and spirit.

Still, I grasp old things tightly, wondering if God will provide, or if He will condemn all that isn't

perfectly aligned with His will. But, I have found, He treats me gently, saying, "This is what I'm asking you to do now. Do that, and then we'll move to something else." I say this because people usually come to WGA believing, "I must give up homosexuality, or acting out, or some other problem."

God wants to redirect us rather than destroy us. He seems to want us to lose the things that drive our compulsive behaviors, not just the behaviors themselves. He also wants us to gain a different understanding of what can be enjoyed when our comforting anesthetics are finally abandoned. In my case, I had to drop insecurities, fears about other people and myself that

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came out in distorted attitudes (elevation of others, belittling of self), and subtle efforts to avoid: grief, pain, betrayal, rejection, loneliness, abandonment, etc.

God asks me to reevaluate my black-and-white thinking on issues that impact real people, not stick figures. He calls me to gain a new perspective, by facing myself and the worst and best of my feelings. He calls me to gain realistic hope based on learning to love God and others as He already loves me. Most of all, He wants me to see how my desires can be motivated by love, not self-interest.

Jesus' dealings with James and John make this point clearly. The two had been chastened for wanting Jesus to torch a town with heaven's fire for having rejected them, but after they asked Jesus to give them special places in His Kingdom, to everyone's surprise, Jesus did not rebuke the brothers. Instead, He showed them the way to greatness: "If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be everyone's slave. The Son of Man did not come to be a slave master, but a slave who will give His life to rescue many people" (Mark 10:43-45, CEV). The desire to be a great person is not sin; it is virtue.

Instead of opposing James and John's lust for greatness (as the ten disciples did), Jesus redirected it. *The way up is down, boys* (Morrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, p.101). I recognize now that even what appear to be the worst desires a person can have are usually just misdirected and can be put right.

After hearing me complain again about what I couldn't do because of my attractions, God interrupted and redirected me (as He likes doing): "Okay, what *can* you do that won't bother anyone?" So I thought, "I can smile, I can give a pat on the back or a high-five. I can simply pay attention, listen and try to be appreciative. I can rein in my thoughts before they wander in the wrong direction, look at people respectfully, but not as superiors or inferiors." In short, there's always some way to love someone without sexual or a boundary violations or doing something hurtful. And that's a big gain. ☆

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help, but I could not imagine anything more terrifying than sitting in a group of people and sharing my most shameful secrets. But I knew that *not* talking about these things wasn't working either. I had no better options, so I came anyway. It was *terrifying too*, but not as much as I feared. In fact, those who had come before me made it much easier for me. The culture was such that it was okay to be honest. After a little while, I found myself more and more at ease talking openly about my struggles. No one was shocked or rejected me. I felt more comfort and peace than I had in many years.

Honesty draws others to us. As we are committed to being honest with ourselves and others, those outside our immediate circle of influence take notice. Men and women are starving for real, intimate relationships. Honesty creates intimacy, and healthy intimacy is a magnet for those who are in need of friendship and love. This can be an awesome evangelism tool! Ever heard of someone leaving a church because everyone was fake? Or maybe they left because everyone seemed so perfect. No one seemed to be able to relate to them or their problems, because everyone was pretending to be "fine" all the time.

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I suppose the reverse of this is true as well. Honesty can drive away those who are committed to keeping secrets and being "fine." We may lose a few friends or a few fellow church members along the way, and this can be sad. But, in order to be able to receive love and acceptance, we must be fully known. If all anyone knows of me is the "put together" image that I present to the world, I cannot receive their affection. They love my "image" but not me. Being known and accepted can bring about the loss of relationships. But the benefits of being known are greater.

I should end with a word of caution. Honesty does not always come without negative consequences. There are some relationships where it may be best to say less than we would with others. We must use wisdom in what we share and with whom. Our words can be used against us at times, or we may unintentionally harm someone by sharing too much or at the wrong time.

Being honest gets easier the more we practice it. As we share more and more of our lives with others, the power of shame is destroyed. Living an open, transparent life is a better way to live, and it simply feels better than the alternative too. ☆



May

At a Glance

May 3rd: Men's event—Rockies Game

May 10th: WGA event—Game Night

Thursday Night Group

May 1st: 47 people

May 8th: 47 people

May 15th: 41 people

May 22nd: 48 people

May 29th: 49 people

Orientation meeting: 5 new people

June

And Beyond

June 8th: WGA will be at Christ Episcopal Church

June 17th: WGA will be at The Next Level Church

July 5th - Intercessory Prayer. Join us from 7:00 - 9:00 am at the WGA offices.

July 9-13th: Mary will be presenting at the Friends United Triennial

July 15-20th: Exodus International Freedom Conference in Asheville, NC

September 19-21st: Mary will be speaking at the New Hope Family and Friends Retreat in San Rafael

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Where Grace Abounds
exists to guide and support
men and women who seek to
understand sexuality and
relationship, and to inspire
all people to know and
personally appropriate
God's plan for their
sexuality and relationships.

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