

Teaching With Grace

by Leslie Collins, Covenant Academy

It's Monday morning. You have six lessons to teach, 100 papers to return, and a class of students to attend to. Your principal enters the room and makes a comment about the handwriting on your board. She'd like you to make sure that your letters are consistent with the handwriting standards in the curriculum. You're a little hurt because that's all she says.

A parent enters the room. The test that you carefully graded at midnight and returned the next morning is in her hand. She does not agree with your grading policy and begins to talk with you about this. You listen to her and ask to follow up the conversation with an email when you have time to respond. You begin the day. "Good morning boys and girls" is coming out of your mouth but there is an entirely different conversation going on in your head. Your mind is parked in a different location.

"Doesn't my principal know that I am doing the best I can with learning this new handwriting? Doesn't she understand how hard it is to manage all of these details along with everything else I am doing? Is she not happy with my work? Couldn't she have told me what I did well first?"

"Doesn't that mother understand how hard I'm working? Doesn't she see the way her son is developing bad habits and making excuses? Why doesn't she trust me and appreciate how hard I have worked to help him?"

You catch yourself thinking about this. You tell yourself to cut it out, but you find yourself continuing to think about it throughout the day. Your mind

is parked here. In fact, it seems you have a reserved spot. What can you do in this situation? How do you respond to being sinned against or at least misunderstood?

Later in the day the children have lunch and it's raining. Indoor

lesson, too. The students do a fine job singing and chanting and memorizing and learning new skills. You end the day and send them on their way. You make yourself a cup of tea and check your email. You have one email in

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recess! "Of course," you say, "now they will be loud inside during recess and fidgety all afternoon as well." You begin to teach your next lesson and realize that you forgot to run the copies off during your planning time because you were emailing that mother about her son's grade. Great! Now you have to run and make them while the children are chanting and the teacher across the hall keeps an eye on your class. You get to the copier and find out that it's jammed. You walk out of the office and nearly run into your principal. She tells you that she wants to see you after school in her office. Not only is your mind parked on what she thinks of you, your stomach is as well.

While you were out of the room two students disobeyed your clear instructions to remain seated while chanting their math facts. You correct them and then try to patch up the lesson that you started. You make it through the lesson somehow and the next

your inbox. The mom has replied to tell you how unfair you are, how insensitive you are being to her son, how many other parents agree with her and how she is going to speak to your principal tomorrow.

And then the words of James—"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly"—suddenly make a lot of sense to you.

These are the problems that we face daily in the classroom. We are seeking to repair the ruins, not of the American system of education, but the ruins of our father Adam. We are seeking to repair the damage of the Fall. In our quest to understand and apply the methods of Christian and classical education, we are seeking daily redemption from our suffering as sinners for we do indeed suffer. Sin alters the way we think, the way we feel, the way we teach. And grace changes that.

Not only do we suffer from our own sinful condition, we suffer from the sinful condition of others. We experience unkindness, rudeness, gossip, anger, and copier

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jams. As for our own culpability, we know the good we ought to do and we do not do it. I should overlook that comment. I should not wrap my identity in my perfect elementary school handwriting. I should not wrap my identity in what my boss thinks about my perfect elementary school handwriting. We do the things we hate. I hate how angry I am that the copier isn't working. I hate how flustered I am when parents are upset. I hate knowing that I am angry at this mother and her son.

We are living in a world of sin and suffering in the sin. In fact, we have suffered so much and so long that we are blind to the depths of our sinful nature. That is why Jesus came. We have a High Priest who came to redeem us from this suffering. He understands. He suffered with us and intercedes for us even now. He was made perfect through suffering. How is it that the perfect Son of God was made perfect through suffering?

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers (Hebrews 2:10-11).

In His temptation, His trial, His suffering, He completed the work that the first Adam failed to do. It actually wasn't enough that Jesus died for us . . . He lived for us first. And He is not ashamed to call us brothers. When you are in the midst of your greatest struggle against your own sin or someone else's, your Jesus is not

ashamed to call you brother, and He is praying for you so that you will remember that He's already navigated the success story behind this day. Your High Priest has endured temptation and never once fallen short so that when your Heavenly Father looks at you, He sees not your insecurity, not your short temper, not your grammar school teacher desire for order and control, He sees the righteousness of Christ and the perfect balance of truth and mercy, which is grace.

He offers you a covering of grace so that when you sin or are sinned against, you do not need to cover over your sin with your own righteousness, or your own identity; you can have His. When you are sinned against, you do not need to exact judgment and condemnation, because He is not ashamed to call them brother, either. When your boss makes a comment that causes you to feel insecure, instead of saying, "Oh no, she thinks I'm a horrible teacher. I'm doing everything wrong. My days are numbered!" you can say, "I am loved by my Heavenly Father in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without His permission. He has wrapped me in His identity. It doesn't matter if I have the worst handwriting in the entire community of classical and Christian schools, my identity is in Christ, not my handwriting." Our identity in Christ frees us from self-atonement, blame shifting, excuse making and other forms of fig leaves. These are rash attempts to cover our sin and shame but nothing but the blood of Jesus will completely remove them. Did you ever think how silly Adam and Eve looked when they put those fig leaves together? But that is exactly what we look like

when we immediately look for excuses when we are confronted. Remember what Adam said to God when God asked Him what he had done? He actually blamed God! How foolish that seems, but we do the same thing when we say, "I wouldn't have done that if you . . . but you make me so angry . . ." Sin blinds us to ourselves and it blinds us from extending the same forgiveness we have received to others. We suffer greatly in our sinful condition.

When I say that we are suffering I am not agreeing with the heresy that sin is just a sickness. We were dead in our sin, not sick in it. But it is a suffering as much as death and as much as cancer. It is a suffering as much as the pains of childbirth and as much as the pains of growing old. We suffer because of the father of lies. He hates us. He seeks to devour us, to ruin us, and cause our sufferings to multiply.

Thankfully, we are children of the Father of Light and we are made in His image. In His image, we possess the qualities of His character that make us like Him in our calling. He is good and what He does prospers. In this way, we seek to do good work and to be successful. We desire this. God is a God of order, so we seek to be orderly, especially if we are grammar school teachers. God is creative, so we seek to be creative. These are good things to desire. But have you ever noticed how our desires can turn so quickly into demands?

Teaching with grace means we fully embrace our struggles and our Savior and those who are offending us. We do not need to pretend that we are not struggling; the Savior came to save us because we needed saving and we need it every day.

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What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).

Fights and quarrels, struggles and conflicts come from desires that battle within us. When our desires turn into demands, they become sinful. To desire respect is a good thing. Our students should respect us. We work hard to establish biblical school culture, but we cringe when we read of the respect lessons taught to Oliver Twist and Jane Eyre because their teachers demanded respect for their own interests. We should desire our students to respect us, but only God can make that child's heart change, not our demands.

We should desire success; should we desire failure? Desires become demands when we grumble because success isn't attainable. The copy machine, that angry mother. We want success—that's okay, but the moment you can't have it—what's your response? Anger? Self-pity? Grumbling? Gossip? And then, when you catch yourself, what do you do next? Blame others? Make excuses?

According to James, desires have gone wrong when we have begun to serve another god. Johnny Tremain's initial success was for his own pleasure. His desire turned into a demand in his pride and anger and eventually he was able to see this, which is why this is such a great redemptive story.

Desiring comfort or appreciation isn't a bad thing. Jesus was ministered to by angels when He was hungry. Jesus wept. Comfort is a mercy of God. But what happens when you can't have your Starbucks? Or your classroom with windows? Or your 401(k)? When we begin to demand comfort, appreciation, and success we begin to turn our eyes on a different god because what was a good desire has now become a demand.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:4-6).

Demanding our desires is adulterous. We begin to serve another god: ourselves. God opposes this but gives grace to the humble. Grace is getting what we do not deserve. Contrary to popular belief you don't deserve a break today—you deserve hell. Grace is knowing that instead of a hot seat, you have been given a seat at the table of the King.

Grace is getting what we do not deserve. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Grace is knowing that we, who suffer from sin, have a faithful Savior who protects us so well that so much as a copier page can't get jammed without His permission. Indeed, even that email fits His purpose for our salvation. His Holy Spirit is living and working in us so that we

can wholeheartedly and willingly love that mother, that son, and submit to our principal, and teach our students because we live for Him, because He lived for us. Instead of holding on to our own righteousness, we can hold onto His.

We often talk in classical education about *in loco parentis*, in place of the parents, but Hebrews tells us that we are co-heirs with Christ, that we share in His inheritance, His calling to redeem the nations. We are co-redeemers. When we are in this process of repairing the ruins, of taking thoughts captive, we are co-redeemers with Christ, we stand *in loco Christus*. When we encounter unbelief and sin, we should not be surprised. We should not be afraid. We should not be offended or pretend that we have never made the same mistakes. "I would never . . .," "when I was your age . . .," "how dare she . . .?" We should be redemptive.

The Gospel gives us boldness to know that we are sinners and that we are set free. It gives us boldness to know that we are called to do good and to go forth boldly. Martin Luther admonished us to sin boldly, not to take lightly the offense of sin, but to boldly take the strength of the Gospel and redeem the situations that God has placed us in with confidence that He who began a good work will not stop until it is finished.

A day as I have described is pretty normal. It's easy to become discouraged. It's not wrong to desire respect, appreciation, control, comfort. It's when those desires turn into demands that we begin to enter into the gates of our own kingdom. And it can happen in a split second. How will you respond with grace?

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Fruits of the Spirit

Teaching with grace means that you can boldly love that mother who is not loving you, because you are dearly loved by your heavenly Father. Teaching with grace means that you can count it all joy when you experience various trials because your Father is working all things out for your good. Teaching with grace means that you can have peace when your principal corrects you because your Father has given you His identity. You can have patience when the copier jams because you have been dramatically rescued from the ravages of sin. Teaching with grace means that you can respond with kindness towards children who are foolishly disobeying because your Heavenly Father has displayed such kindness in calling you, who have so often disobeyed Him, His beloved child. By grace you do good and speak the truth boldly in gentle love where it needs to be spoken. By grace you can be faithful when you have been tempted to be faithless. By grace you can teach in such a way as to redeem what is lost and repair what is ruined.

Grace differs from self-righteousness in a very simple way. Both seek to do the right thing, but for different reasons. Grace accepts failure boldly and completely and claims the righteousness of God. Self-righteousness reduces failure to manageable levels and claims the righteousness of self. As saved sinners, we extend grace because we have received it. As a teacher, you are a servant, walking in the footsteps of the Son of God. You should consider yourself blessed to suffer and serve Him.

We are gifted by God for others

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship (Romans 12:1).

None of us deserves the gifts we have. It is an honor to have them, and we have a responsibility to improve upon what God has given to us.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline (2 Tim 1:6-7).

You have been given the gift of teaching and the task of repairing. It is our duty to seek to fan the flame of our gifts. Not that we can be perfect, for seeking perfection will actually stifle the excellence we want to cultivate, but we should seek constantly to improve and hone our craft. This means hard work. The person with the gift of teaching must study zealously to learn God's truth and must then labor diligently to communicate it in a clear and inspiring manner. The person with the gift of service must strive to become competent and proficient in his particular area of service in order to ensure that the results of his labor reflect a standard of excellence that glorifies God. We are fallen and sinful in our nature. Excellence does not come naturally or easily to a sinner. But excellence does not come by being afraid of failure. Fear of failure will cripple us and prevent us from teaching with grace. Perfectionism is a spirit of fear, not the spirit of love, confidence, and discipline

that Paul is speaking about.

Because we are human, do not be surprised by your humanity. Develop thin skin towards your weaknesses but thick skin towards others. In this way you put on grace and put off the sin that so easily entangles. Because I promise you this, you will fail. And I challenge you with this: sin boldly, love boldly, speak boldly, and teach with grace.