

A Big-Hearted Gospel – CCRC – Kitchener, July 27, 2025

Prayer for Illumination:

Living God,
 help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand;
 that, understanding, we may believe
 and believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience,
 seeking your honor and glory in all that we do;
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

² Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
 he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
 and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

Text: Philippians 4:5: “Let your gentleness be evident to all or practice big-heartedness or grace.”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Edmonton Journal reported that in a recent podcast, Edmonton Oilers goaltender Stuart Skinner’s wife, Chloe, revealed that she and her family have been getting death threats.

“My DMs (or Direct Messages) can be filled with death threats towards the kids, to myself,” she explained on the podcast.

She would add that the accounts are often anonymous and those individuals are “hiding behind their screens.”

“It can get really ugly,” she continued. “People wanting, threatening to come if they ever see us, they’re gonna, you know, take us out or whatever.” (Edmonton Journal report June 12, 2025)

These sorts of stories are repeated time and again whenever rabid fans are disappointed by the team of their choice not making it as far as they think the team ought to go. The facelessness of the internet makes it easy for people to blast away and be ungracious and not at all empathetic to the reality of life.

What a graceless world we live in! Chill hockey fans...it’s just a game. But gracelessness is not only found in the world among nations or neighbours or sports fans.

The May issue of the Christian Courier carried an article by Rev. Bob De Moor, former editor of The Banner. He wrote an article in which he told a story about a woman who was showing minimal signs of consciousness after a serious accident. Her boyfriend wanted her to be taken off life support. Her parents did not. After the situation really went south, the courts had to intervene and ultimately decide.

De Moor wrote, *“My reason for raising this issue was not to add my own personal opinion to the myriads of those who had already weighed in one way or another. It was something quite different. I wanted to point out how important it is for all of us adults to have a living will that tells our loved*

ones what we would wish to happen if such a situation suddenly overtook us. That would go a long way to preventing such a horrible situation.

He continued: I received a letter from a Banner reader who had expected me to forcefully come out swinging for protecting human life. I didn't. That made him mad enough to begin his letter, "You pusillanimous b_____, may you rot in hell." The letter ended: "P.S. I want you to come to my hometown so I can personally spit in your face."

I sent him a letter back inviting him to send me a follow-up letter stating his concern in language that might make it easier for me to respond appropriately.

He did and he did a fine job of it. In response, I sent him my reasons for not doing what he had expected.

I received a letter back which began: "Dear Brother in Christ, please forgive me from the heart."

It ended: "I do want you to come to my hometown so that I can treat you to dinner at my favourite Thai restaurant." (Christian Courier, May 9, 2025)

What a graceless reader – a Christian reader, even! Many a Banner editor has told such stories on the part of CRC readers. Praise the Lord, that in this case, there was repentance and good ending. But chill readers...it is an article with a perspective that you may or may not agree with. But such a venomous response, really?

In Philip Yancy's book, *"What's So Amazing About Grace"* he recounts a story about Actor Robin Williams, who once said that he walked past a Christian protest populated by purple-faced screamers, one of whom carried a sign that said *"You Will Not Enter the Kingdom of God."* Williams concluded that if people like this were included in the Kingdom, it didn't sound like the kind of place he'd care to be in anyway.

Or consider this: *A divorced woman told the story of what happened one Sunday in the church she attended with her 15-year-old daughter. Someone approached her and said, "I hear you are divorcing. What I can't understand is that if you love Jesus and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?" That is an example of ungrace, to use Yancey's word. The words stunned the divorcing woman. She said, "The pain of it was that my*

husband and I both did love Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. If she had just put her arms around me and said, 'I am so sorry...'" (What's So Amazing About Grace? Pg. 31) Indeed.

It is these sorts of stories that got Yancey thinking about the Church and about the public's perception of the church, a perception that is often one of ungrace, as he calls it, and a non-welcoming atmosphere. It is not unlike what Angela Bick Rietsma and Peter Schuurman discovered in their book "Blessed are the Undone".

Yancey writes that he made it a point to ask strangers, for example, people who sit next to him on an airplane, as to what comes to their mind when he says the words 'evangelical Christian.' In reply, he writes, *"mostly I hear political descriptions: of strident pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents or proposals for censoring the Internet.* (The present ongoing story of singer Sean Feucht, described as a "MAGA superstar" is a case in point.) Yancey continues: *Not once – not once – have I heard a description of redolent grace."* Yancey draws the conclusion that *"While, as the apostle Paul writes, we are to be the aroma of Christ to those around us, apparently that is not the aroma Christians give off in the world."* (What's So Amazing About Grace? Pg.31)

How many stories could be repeated from our *own* church's history as judgments are made about one's political leanings or one's approach to how to handle COVID or vaccinations, or style of worship, or whatever. In the CRC the seemingly endless women in office debate and now the latest decisions and ongoing discussions concerning the Human Sexuality Report have resulted in all sorts of judgments about people on both sides of the matter and has resulted in much ungracious behaviour and rhetoric from all sides.

History tells us time and again that those who challenge the status quo, those who ask the questions, those who simply don't accept things as they are, those who wonder about things, are often misunderstood and often judged much too quickly. We really ought to chill and not be so quick to jump in with our thoughts and judgments.

Throughout the years I have witnessed much ungrace on the part of parents, councils and congregations when they are faced with challenges to the established order or when they were faced with the brokenness of life.

May God forgive me if there was ever some ungrace on my part that caused someone to leave church or to leave the faith. It is a terrible indictment, but in spite of the fact that there are many gracious people within the church, yet says Yancey, *“somehow throughout history the church has managed to gain a reputation for ungrace. As a little English girl prayed, “O God, make the bad people good, and the good people nice.”* (What’s So Amazing About Grace? Pg. 32)

Yancy reported that once during a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Resurrection? But those were found in other religions too. Anyway, the debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh that’s easy. It’s grace.” Indeed. Certainly, that is what we read from Philippians 2: Jesus made himself nothing, being made in human likeness; he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross! Writes Yancy: *“The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law – each of these offer a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.”* (Yancey, pg. 45) In that sense only Christianity is gracious! Therefore, the injunction in Philippians 4:5: *“Let your gentleness be evident to all or practice big-heartedness or grace.”*

A note about that word translated by the NIV as “gentleness.” It is one of those words found in a language that is very difficult to translate into English. The Dutch language has a word like that, the word, “gezelig” that some of us who have never even lived in Holland still use because it was a word our grandparents or parents used to describe a certain situation. While we may be tempted to use the word “cozy” in translation that really does not do justice to the word. In much the same way the Greek word translated as “gentleness” by the NIV can mean any number of things such as: patience, softness, modesty, forbearance, kindness, gentleness, sweet reasonableness, considerateness, mildness, magnanimity, generosity, or perhaps to sum it all up: big-heartedness. No matter what word we use from the English it really does not seem to do justice to the original meaning.

Certainly, it would appear from this passage that the Christian is someone for who ungrace is to be a foreign idea. Being a big-hearted person means that one is courteous and loving as opposed to running rough shod over other people. Being big-hearted or gentle means that we don't always insist on our own way, but the joy of generosity ought to flood our souls and lives. Christians ought to be the opposite of stubborn and thoughtless. We are part of an upside-down Kingdom. Things have to be different among God's people. Gentleness or big-heartedness means that one is not always roughly challenging everything that is different from how we understand things ought to be. Big-heartedness is open to listening and to explore other people's ways of doing things. Big-heartedness is being humble and being a servant, even as Jesus did not come to be served but to serve. It is the opposite of being severe. If wronged by someone, gentleness does not demand that payment be made, but may at times just let it go for the sake of peace. As Scott Hoezee put it, *"the non-gentle person is arrogant, defiant, a shouter more than a listener, a rigid conversation partner unwilling to let others have their say."* (Hoezee) Big-heartedness reserves judgment until the facts are known and there is a genuine understanding of what is happening in the other person's life. Big-heartedness includes invitations, embraces, love, caring and carrying one another's burdens and so on.

This whole virtue of gentleness or big-heartedness was embodied in the Lord Jesus. (2 Co 10:1) Jesus was the gentle one who attracted children, the one with whom outcasts dined, the gentle shepherd who talks about himself as gathering up lost sheep in his arms. It was Jesus who gently restored Peter to his position after Peter had denied him 3 times. Jesus said to Peter, *"Feed my lambs,"* and *"tend my sheep."* It is Jesus who invites us to the table of the Lord on a regular basis and who says to us, "this is my body, this is my blood, given for you sinner!" Paul writes (Romans 5:8):⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." John 3;16, 17: ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Imagine that, the Lord Jesus giving His all for the likes of you and me! Surely, that is big-heartedness! Surely, this is good news! Surely, this is something to get excited about and to celebrate. The father welcomed the prodigal son back with open arms and embraced him. That is big-heartedness! Psalm 103:

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in love.
⁹ He will not always accuse,
 nor will he harbor his anger forever;
¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
 or repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
 so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

Dear elders, as you take up your position among us, “*may your gentleness, your big-heartedness, be evident to all.*” It is a key to ministry; it is a unique characteristic of the very faith we profess. Don’t practice ungrace, but instead be welcoming, gracious and gentle with all those who are entrusted to your care. Severity, rigidity, demanding back from those to whom you give and so on will not bring you any sort of blessing, but will instead only drive folks away from the Lord Jesus. Paul writing to his young protege, Timothy, about church leaders writes: *Now the overseer is to be (among other things) not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome...* I Timothy 3:3 would seem to suggest that this big-heartedness is something that ought to characterize each of the elders, but even beyond that, actually all Christians.

Please note that this big-heartedness does not mean that you/we ought to be a pushover simply allowing everything just to happen. Jesus did not function that way. Scott Hoezee again, “*Despite the fact that Jesus saw what he regarded as intolerable examples of sin everywhere he looked, he did not respond with a steady stream of harsh judgments, cutting words, or brusque turnings-away from sinners.*” (Hoezee)

“*Instead, Jesus let his parables, the Holy Spirit and his commitment to the truth and the grace and the forgiving mercy that leaked out of his every pore do the gospel work for him. But you would hardly call Jesus soft, ineffective, fluffy or passive. Nor could you accuse Jesus of failing to live out his convictions. Instead, precisely because he operated from a position of strength, Jesus was able to be gentle.*” (Hoezee) The Bible would never equate gentleness with being a pushover, on the contrary.

Let your gentleness, your big-heartedness be evident to all, why? Because the Lord is near; or the Lord is at hand. This could mean that he is nearby, or it could mean that he who is our Judge is ever watchful, ever aware of our conduct and treatment of others or it could mean that we ought to be careful because one day we will have to answer to this Judge!

We live in a world filled with ungrace, as Chloe Skinner experienced first-hand. We are part of a church that is often viewed by the public as being a place of ungrace, as Robin Williams and so many others have experienced. But the testimony of the gospel, which you as elders and all of us are called upon to represent and advance, is not one of ungrace, but one of big-heartedness, clearly demonstrated by our Lord who gave Himself for us! The church is to be a place of healing, not hurt. As you take up your offices and as others of you go on to serve, may you do so in humble big-heartedness. To God be the glory! Amen

Prayer: Lord, make us big-hearted people and thereby reflect your big-heartedness to us. Make us a people filled with thankfulness for your love in Christ Jesus. Help us to indeed be the aroma of Christ to all we are in contact with so that the world may come to know You. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.