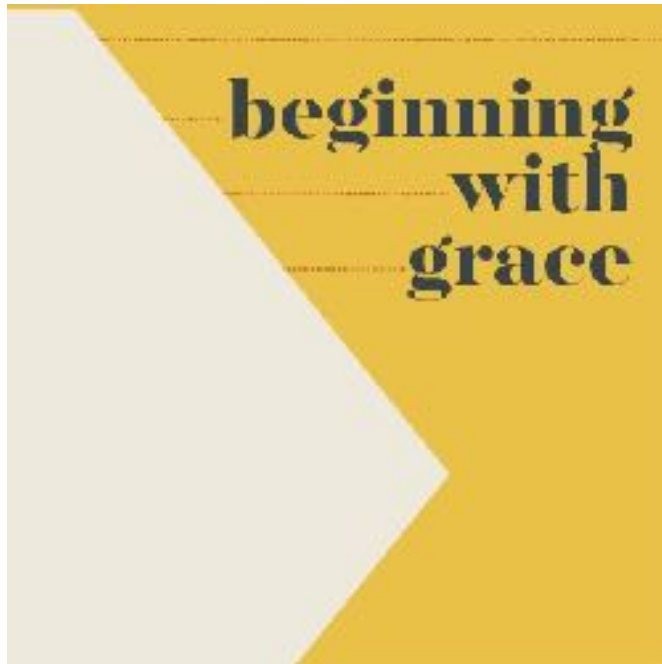




the narrative of grace

#1 Beginning with Grace



The Narrative of Grace
“Beginning with Grace”
Jacob Bender
November 15, 2015

The Apostle Paul, in his second letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16-17) says that ALL scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching... for training, for reproof and correction... In fact it says that ALL scripture is needed so that the man of God may be complete and EQUIPPED to do good work.

But there are just certain parts of the bible that for years and years I have browsed over or skipped completely, so I can get to “the good stuff.”

One of those things are the genealogies. When I get to the very beginning of the New Testament, I open Matthew 1, and I read the first line or two and then skip to verse 18 when it starts talking about the birth of Christ. And in the times that I have suffered through the names that I can’t pronounce, its only been to check them off of my list of reading so I can say “I have read the entire thing.” But finding value in a list of names you have never heard of can be rather difficult. Until you look closely and you begin to realize, “hey, I recognize some of the names on this list...”

“I know some of these stories.”

“Some of these stories are important to history.”

“Wait, that guy is related to Jesus?”

and when you start putting the pieces together, you start to wonder about the stories in between the ones that you know well.

But the genealogies are important!

There is a true story about how missionaries took bibles to the Philippines. The translators who prepared the books here in America didn't think that the genealogies in Matthew were important for someone who had not yet even heard about Christ, so they left them out and went straight to the birth of Christ... the way most of us read it every Christmas. The story circulated among the people and was told over and over again.

There was a bible study there, who had studied all of Matthew (starting with verse 18 of chapter 1) and on the very last day, the leader, who knew the part that was left out, essentially said "we are completely done with Matthew, we only have to read the first 17 verses which were skipped... and he read them not thinking much of it, but having completed the whole rest of the book, we should read this together at least once." - which sounds like me most of the time I read things like genealogies. I have to read them just so I can say "I have read the entire bible.

But after the reading, one of the people there asked the missionary if he could come over that night... and the man invited all of his friends to his house as well, the place was packed, and the man asked the missionary "Read us what you read me this morning."

And as he read it, the room was silent. All eyes were locked on him. When he finished, the man asked the missionary this question:

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

The missionary didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to respond. In fact he was fearful that perhaps some of the names were offensive to the people and he didn't know it.

And then finally the man who invited him over broke the silence and said to him "No-one bothers to write down the ancestors of spirit beings, only real people... Jesus must be a real person!"

In their culture, believing this Jesus character to have not come from anywhere, the story was read as a fable. A great story of a great hero but it had to be fiction because he didn't actually come from anywhere.

When a later translation started circling the Philippines that included the genealogy in Matthew, that became a standard response... “wait... so this is actually a real person? This is not just a myth?”

When suddenly there was a line to trace him back to, they believed.

C.S. Lewis describes Christmas like this: “The Myth became fact.”

Because all of these stories of what was coming that were traced back hundreds of years and written in all of the texts suddenly had flesh and blood to it. What once seemed like a myth, suddenly became real.

And that is what the genealogy did for the people in the Philippines.

The genealogies validate the lives of the ones who have come before us, and we will talk a great deal over the next several weeks about why they are so important in so many cultures... but from the American perspective that most of us were raised in... as people who already believe in Jesus, as people who claim to believe the bible... we have to take Paul’s words to Timothy seriously...

because if ALL words are profitable... then the question is, what do THESE WORDS profit us? The obviously proved profitable to the people in the Philippines, but what do they mean to us, here and now in Detroit, MI?

What do we need to get out of this list of names, that will EQUIP US to do good work?

Lets start by looking at the words in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ, found in Matthew 1:1-17.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the

father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.”

On Monday, we headed to Dearborn because we were meeting some friends for dinner there, and we went a little early to stop at the mall because my birthday had just passed and Dawn wanted to get me some new pants from H&M.

When we got into the mall, I remembered that there was a Cinnabon there, so immediately we walked right past H&M, to the total other side of the mall and enjoyed some Cinnamon rolls as a family.

Half way between H&M and Cinnabon, we took a detour when we realized that there was a Christmas Winter Wonderland all set up, already. Its the beginning of November. It seemed too soon, but we were curious so we went in there. An elf lady told us we can see Santa for free as long as we don't take any pictures, and there were only like 4 kids ahead of us. So we went into this snow world with fake snow and the girls made snow angels

and played and had a blast until it was time to see Santa. (we aren't those parents that refuse to let our kids see Santa Claus because he is a fictional character. We are more of the "let kids have kid moments sometimes" parents.)

Santa even gave them each a little Santa plate. We then went to Cinnabon and put the Cinnamon rolls on them.

The kids were happy, I was happy, it was time to go buy some pants.

But as we left Cinnabon and had turned to begin walking to H&M, a police officer somewhat aggressively told Dawn to go the other way.

Neither of us were thinking quick enough on our toes to comprehend what he was saying, until he stopped and turn around and said "No, really, the exit is that way."

And as we turned to head to the door unsure about what was going on, we saw a bunch of officers with enormous guns out running toward us.

I looked around briefly as all of the gates to all of the stores were closing.

At that point we knew, we need to get out of there. I grabbed Brooklyn, and Dawn kept saying "Grab Fiona!" But I had already put Fiona in the stroller.

"No! Grab Fiona she is not in the stroller!"

Fiona, our two year old, had seen the officers, jumped out of the stroller and for whatever reason was following them. She wanted to go where the action was. Or more likely she was very confused. I had to run and grab her, and we got out of the mall as quickly as we could... It was super cold, and Brooklyn had taken off a bunch of her layers and left them in the van because she is on this dresses with no pants kick, and we had to walk around the entire outside of the mall. Its a pretty big mall, we walked for around 20-30 minutes with the kids to get back to the van.

Apparently, there were two men in the mall shooting at each other. Thankfully nobody was killed, but for an unknown amount of time there was

uncertainty in the air, and gunmen on the loose. They closed the nearby college. There were lockdowns. We made it out of the mall moments before we would have been locked in.

Later that evening on the ride home, the kids began asking questions, and we had to, using as much caution as we could, try and explain to our kids that sometimes people do really bad things.

What happened in France on Friday... Was absolutely tragic. I sat in bed Friday night reading article after article just devastated. Those things unfortunately are a reality in our dark and fallen world, but we do our best as parents to keep our children's minds safe for those realities at their tender ages but when they saw that in person at the mall... they felt the fear in the air, and they communicated that to us as we drove home.

and they asked questions about guns. And about what they do. And about why people use them.

I wondered if this was going to be something that we would need to address further, so I mentioned it to the kids teacher at the school to warn them that possibly the girls may talk about this a little.

But the next day, all my kids could talk about, was how they saw Santa. Margie stopped by our house the next day while we were digging staples out of the floor so the sanders could come in the next day, and what did Brooklyn want to talk about?

How she saw Santa.

And something about that just gave me a little bit of needed hope for our fallen world this week as I thought about Paris in my bed that Friday night, the heart break and the tragedy... and I thought about what happened in the mall, what could have happened... What at the time, I wondered was happening as we were running out of there.

Because those kids saw, for a brief moment, first hand pandemonia like most people never experience, and the only thing they remembered the

next day was the good. Was the time with Santa and the Christmas plates he gave them.

So Friday night I went to bed, devastated over France, but with a full heart thinking about the Joy of my children in the midst of a pretty rough week. But I woke up around 3:30am to the sounds of loud sirens, beeps and bright lights flashing in our window. I ran downstairs to see what was going on, and realized it was a fire truck, and was I scared that the loft building was on fire so I shouted to Dawn to get up, looked out again, and realized our van was on fire. It was completely engulfed in flames. So I ran outside as fast as I could, and the rest of the family gathered in the window and watched as the firefighters worked to put out the fire.

Two men came up to me and one of the firefighters as we were talking, and they said that they saw two cars pull up to the van, look it over, then pull away. A minute later one of them circled back around, passed the van briefly, and suddenly the whole thing went up in flames.

These witnesses were positive that it was arson. There was not really any other explanations.

It was completely torched, nothing left. We were planning on moving with it this week a little each day, so we had some moving boxes in it, and had just that day bought two new windows for the house that were in it. But it was parked only a sidewalk away from the window where all three of my kids were sleeping.

The fire department finished putting out the fire, put me in touch with the arson department, and left.

I couldn't figure it out, so I barely slept. then I woke up a couple hours later and realized, "it's Friday the 13th." That's the only thing I could think of. We assume it was random. We pray it was random.

The next morning, the van was gone. I took this picture from inside my apartment.

And in our home, on the other side of the window, all we felt was gratitude. All we felt was Thanksgiving... Eucharisteo.... That amazing word unlike any other word we talked about this summer that combines the Greek word for Grace with Greek word for Joy.

Charis.
Chara.

Because by the grace of God all we lost was some Windows, and a chandelier, and an old van with some car seats in it. All we lost was a machine that took us places.

Twice in one week my kids were exposed to darker realities than any child should have to see.

And after the first, all they remembered was Santa.
And after the second, all they talked about was how great fire trucks are.

they kept asking to see the pictures, not because of the van, but because of the fire trucks. Fiona would shout "FIRE TRUCK!" with excitement.

and that is grace.

Because people do some really bad things.
But but grace is better. Grace doesn't even see it.

And as you read the genealogy of Jesus Christ, you don't have to get very into it to realize that some of the names on this list are pretty screwed up. They are people that have done some really bad things.

But what happened at the end of that genealogy?

A child is born.

And suddenly, the screwed up stuff didn't seem to matter anymore.

And people from near and far began talking about it. Dreaming about the day they could meet this child. People set off on long journeys in an effort

to find Him. Kings got nervous of the grip they had on their power... as if this baby could actually turn their empire on its head.

As if this baby could be raised in the corrupt system they had created, and then overthrow it.

There was something about this child from the very beginning that made some rejoice, and others tremble.

But even a simple reading of the New Testament will show you that in Jesus' culture, one of the main reasons for people not accepting Jesus as the King of the Jews was because of where he came from. He was a carpenter's kid. His mom had a tainted reputation because she became pregnant before she was married.

Yes He was a descendent of David (which the old testament prophesied), but there had to be another.

They were a "nothing family." There had not been a King in his family line for the last 14 generations.

This family line was totally mockable. No King could possibly come from it at this point.

We all know what happened. Grace infiltrated brokenness and washed it all away.

And at the end of the day, in the midst of our brokenness, if all we see is Jesus then we are in the only place we need to be. Grace has been with us from the beginning as we stumble into it more and more even now.

But for many of us, we are willing to accept the grace of God that covers our sins, because we understand grace in the context of eternity.

But we don't understand grace in the context of today.

We have a hard time letting it empower us, therefore we have a hard time demonstrating it to others. We are still controlled by our pasts. By the

things that we have done that maybe make us feel like we are not qualified to share the gospel... we are not qualified to help people. We aren't deserving of such and such... We are ruled out. There are countless days that I have sat back in my insecurity and thought, "God, how can I help anybody with all that I have done? How can I help anybody else?"

Or we get so consumed by our own world, whether it be success or it be failure, that we just don't think about anybody else.

David Seamands put it this way after years and years of counseling people:

"Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions."

So let me ask you this:

Do you ever find yourself keeping score of failures? Or do you tend to assign a guilt you have to some current life circumstance?

I am alone because _____

I can't go home because _____

I'll never do that because _____

I don't deserve grace because _____

But what if I were to tell you that the because doesn't matter?

In fact, the only BECAUSE that does matter is That Jesus loves you BECAUSE you are his child. I try to tell my daughters that, as often as I can... Milly I love you...

"I know" she'll say.

And I don't do this every time, but sometimes, when I am at the top of my parenting game, I will ask her "Do you know why I love you?"

"No"

Because you are my daughter. You are my daughter...

I love her because she is my child.

Well you are children of God. And nothing can change that. The bible says that nothing separates us from the love of God. Not death nor life..

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39 NIV)

The because does not matter. Because nothing can not separate us from the love of God any more than anything else.

You think you are jacked up? That God can't use you anymore?

Look no further than the first of names on the list we read at the beginning... the names of those in JESUS' family line...

Mathew one... The lineage... A genealogy was something that told people who you were... There was a sense of pride in where you came from, and the fact that God chose this particular family to be the one to birth Jesus into has great significance.

These people weren't just jacked up like sometimes I think I am jacked up. These people were JACKED UP.

Abraham, Father Abraham, later *known* for his faith, later written in Hebrews about for his FAITH... doubted his faith so much and doubted the promise of God so much that he slept with his maidservant to give himself a son.

Like God needed a hand in fulfilling that promise.

Before that happened, he was a liar and a coward. When he and Sarai entered Egypt, He lied about his wife (Genesis 12) and said she was his sister because he was afraid that they would kill him and take her... He was willing to give her up rather than defend her. In fact the text says that because Pharaoh didn't know that Sarai was Abrahams wife, that he took her into his house (Genesis 12:15). Abraham let it happen.

Then his son Isaac did the exact same thing. (Genesis 26) Its incredible if you compare their stories, its like, the next generation refused to learn from the last and he did the same thing with his wife. He said to the men at Gerar "She is my sister" because he thought that because she is so beautiful, if they knew they were married then they would kill Isaac. Its the same story 14 chapters and one generation later.

Jacob stole Esaus blessing. His very name meant holder of the heel or trickster. He deceived his father to steal his brothers birthright. He was a punk.

Tamar was Judah's daughter in law, and he slept with her when he mistook her for being a prostitute.. WHICH BY THE WAY SHE WAS PRETENDING TO BE TO TRICK HIM! (Genesis 38)

And Rahab was actually a prostitute. (Joshua 2). But God still used her.

Matthew doesn't even give Bathshedba a name... He just calls her "the wife of Uriah" because she is an adulterer who together with David committed an awful act that lead to another awful act, a web of lies and deception that should have gotten her name and his blotted out of history but instead Matthew goes out of the way to put her in there... but he also goes out of his way to emphasis that she is in there BECAUSE of sin.

The text says "David was the Father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah" Matthew goes out of the way to show this. He lists women in his genealogy which was unheard of at the time, especially since every one of them would have been considered unclean.

Matthew went out of his way to show the imperfections and sins on this list!

Jesus lived a perfect life.
But he was born into a most imperfect family.

And for whatever reason, the way that Matthew wrote this genealogy literally goes out of the way to demonstrate how screwed up it is.

Its full of misfits, outcasts, sinners, slaves, sexual immorality, adultery, incest, betrayal, lies, greed... the list goes on and on.

Its filled with people who would never in that society been chosen to carry on the family name, yet God used them.

And at the end of the garbage list there is a light, and it shines brighter than any of them could possibly imagine illuminating hope on their darkest day. And God looked at that family line, and dropped Jesus right at the forefront of it despite everything being wrong.

Because this is a narrative of grace.

Grace is woven from the beginning to the end and into the very fabric of every moment throughout. Grace for those who did it wrong. Grace for those who had opportunities to do the right thing, and they blew it.

Fallen people that God used to lead to the most significant act in the history of the world.

We think of Jesus as gracious because everywhere he went he showed grace. He met people in their worlds, but where he came from and the fact that the savior of the world would be born into *that* family is the very essence of grace.

And the church needs to understand this going into Christmas.

Because it should destroy snobbery.

It should destroy any thoughts of superiority in any of our hearts.

Who are we? We are people who have completely ruined our lives if not for Jesus.

Think about when Jesus called Matthew. (Matthew 9:9)

He came across this tax collector who was extorting people... robbing people... he had betrayed his very nation and had purchased from Rome a right to tax his own people... and Jesus says to him "Come, Follow Me."

It doesn't matter that you did all of those things... what matters is that I love you. What matters is that I want you to be my disciple.

That is grace.

But then what happens?

Matthew throws a party for Jesus. Jesus goes and has dinner with Matthew.

Immediately the Pharisees get upset, and they ask the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Now you have to understand this: Eating a meal with someone meant something very different in Jesus' day. To sit and have a meal with someone was something reserved only for the closest of friends... inviting someone to dinner was essentially like inviting them into your life.

And the Pharisees were mad, because Jesus was saying to Matthew, "I want to be in your life."

and so Jesus responds and says "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those we are sick. Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

I used to read this and think this was just saying, “I am eating with the ones who need me. So they can join all of us in the place we are going. You guys don’t need me like they do. They are the sick ones.”

But what is he really saying? He is actually saying, “I don’t eat with people who think that they don’t need me. I only come into the lives of the ones who know that without me, they are lost.”

But the reality is, everyone is lost. So Jesus came for everyone... but he can’t do any work on the heart of a person who doesn’t think that they need it. Which makes the religious person more far gone from the gospel than the sinner.

The thing that really brings this home is what he sandwiches in the middle of all the sick people/sinner stuff. He starts by saying “Go and learn what this means...” He is saying, I am about to blow your minds, and you better give whatever time it takes to figure out this principle. And then he gives it to them:

He says “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

He is quoting Hosea 6:6. He is telling them to study it.

Have you ever noticed this?

Jesus is not interested in what you give up.

The Pharisees were really good at giving stuff up. But for the wrong reasons. They would fast for weeks but they never treated people like they had value unless that person had something to offer them. And he is telling them, “until you can take your eyes off of what you have given up and put your eyes on me, you will never find me.”

He cares about mercy.

He cares about how you receive the mercy that He has given you, that has met you in your mess just as you are.

He cares about how you respond when someone comes to you saying “You know what, I am really jacked up... I really blew it.”

Do you snuff your self righteous nose in their face or do you meet them where they are at in that moment? That is the tell all of if you are living in sacrifice, or in mercy.

How I respond if I ever were to find myself face to face with whoever set our van on fire and made my wife and I feel more vulnerable than we ever have before is the tell all sign if I am living in sacrifice, or in mercy.

It is not about what you give up. It is about what you give.

and none of us have any business as a part of the body of Christ giving anything short of grace, in every narrative.

Brennan Manning says something very bold at the end of his book “The Ragamuffin Gospel”:

“No greater sinners exist than those so-called Christians who disfigure the face of God, mutilate the gospel of grace, and intimidate others through fear...

The North American Church is at a critical juncture. The gospel of grace is being confused and compromised by silence, seduction, and outright subversion. The vitality of faith is jeopardized. The lying slogans of the fixers who carry religion as a sword of judgment pile up with impurity. Let Ragamuffins everywhere gather as a confessing church to cry out in protest. Revoke the licenses of religious leaders who falsify the idea of God. Sentence them to three years in solitude with the Bible as their only companion.”

Because its impossible to read the bible and not see that the entire thing is about one thing and one thing only. What Jesus did. And where any gospel other than that is being preached, people are being lied to. And we need to shut them down. I love that thought. Lock them in a room with just the bible.

Because those who manipulate the word for their own way have no business teaching the word. Its like when there is a national tragedy of a

natural disaster, and people start saying that it is God's judgment on a city... Because of mardi- gras in New Orleans or because of the corruption in New York City...

are we reading the same bible? Is it too much to ask that people read the word of God before they teach it? God couldn't find ten righteous in Sodom. That is a far stretch from New York where I personally know about 200 righteous. God petitioned with Jonah saying "Why should I not pity Nineveh? That great city with so many people and so much livestock?"

and thats before we even see a single red letter.

This whole red cup deal at Starbucks this week has been absolutely ridiculous to me. Mostly because I can close my fist and count on one hand the amount of people I know who are actually offended by a red cup.

Nobody.

That is what makes the whole thing so frustrating. Because Christians are getting this reputation that we have to work against, and nobody can figure out where it is coming from.

All we can find is this one guy looking for his 15 minutes of fame, who felt it appropriate to speak on behalf of Christians everywhere and has now given us yet another obstacle to overcome that stands between grace and those who need it.

Because those who need it are becoming more and more closed off to it because those who supposedly have it are projecting something very different on them.

Its been great seeing the way Christians have responded. Because nobody actually cares that the cups are red.

But what sucks is that a few "christians", with a lot of help from the media (in fact, as of this writing google reports that there have been 9.2 million news articles published about this cup controversy)... but a FEW have

made us all look like those are the things that are important to us. I can't speak for everybody... but red cups are not important to me.

The church needs to see this as an opportunity. Our love must be louder than the cries of the few who want to pretend like they are martyrs because of a cup.

All it means for us is that we need to LOVE MORE this Christmas season. We have to show people what it actually means to live in grace this Christmas season.

We are entering a season of compassion. In the next 6 weeks, you will get more donation forms in your mailbox, more emails in your inbox, more requests on Facebook, to give, than any other time all year. Giving Tuesday will fill your news feeds, and you will have to sort out what causes are worthy of your money, and who to stay away from. You should pray about what you are going to do this Christmas season to help others.

We at Courage are ramping up our efforts as well, and have ways we can corporately make a difference, and we encourage you to individually look for ways to make a difference in the lives of others this season.

Its starting to get cold out.

And sometimes Jesus just may look like a hot chocolate.

Sometimes Jesus just may look like a red cup of something warm to drink that you buy for someone who is cold.

Wouldn't that turn the red cup controversy on its head? If Christians everywhere went out, looked for people who were cold, and alone, and broken, and warmed them up with a Starbucks pumpkin spice latte in the biggest red cup that they offer?

If Christians everywhere actually walked those people who need it into the coffee shop and had a cup of coffee with them. And we can actually take some time with them, and share with them the narrative of grace... the

narrative that says no matter how jacked up you think you are... no matter how jacked up you think your family is... that Jesus loves you.

He loves you exactly where you are. Exactly the way you are. In your messes. In your disasters. He would love to bring you the relief that you need if you want Him too, but he is also content just sitting with you. Setting up a warm fire on a cold day just to warm you up if that's what you need.

Because grace meets us right where we are, as we are, and it changes us, as we need it.

We are a church that has been given amazing grace. We have been met in our messes and loved through them. It has been the narrative of my entire life, of my family, and in my relationships.

We need to be a church of grace.

That meets people right where they are, and *loves them that way*. Whether they want to stay in their messes or they want to get out...

because eventually, everybody wants to get out.

And we will be there when that day comes.

and the narrative of their life culminates at grace.

Next Sunday, we are going to be hosting an amazing Thanksgiving Dinner right here at church. We have asked Matt and Emily to reach out to all of the people they reach on their homeless outreach, and bring them in for a meal. We are reaching out to our neighbors, and inviting them to the meal. Take some of the invitations on your way out today, and invite the lady who checks you out at the grocery store, or the guy laying down in front of the church. Invite your family, or the guy holding a sign at the street corner. Give him a couple dollars and an invitation, and tell him there are people who love him. Who want to help him in any way that we can.

and come.

Because you look like Jesus. And that is what our community needs.

This is the largest family dinner that we have ever hosted! We will have a shortened service from 11-12 and around noon we will begin the dinner. There are so many ways to get involved in this, from helping cook, to helping clean, to helping serve food, to inviting any and everybody you know. It costs you nothing. It costs the community nothing, but it could be worth everything to someone in need. You can sign up in the lobby or on our website.

There will be turkey, and there will be tamales...

and there will be grace.

That is next Sunday.

Today we are also launching our annual "Joy to the D" campaign.

Courage has done this for a while now. Each year we get the opportunity to help others at Christmas time. We've chosen a handful of families, all who are in need of some extra help this season. We will provide them with **household essentials, gifts, clothing and winter outerwear**. Many of these families are single moms who need to know that they are not alone this Christmas. Some are part of the Angel Tree program which helps to bring gifts to children who have a parent in prison. Guys, your generosity will go a long way to encourage parents who are working to provide for their children, to help children feel loved and to share the message of Jesus. This is a fantastic opportunity for each of us to remember others and to get outside ourselves this Christmas season.

So let's get our families and friends together and make a difference. I believe with all of my heart that this could be and WILL BE the difference maker in many peoples holidays this year.

Its also a great way to get others involved in Courage this Christmas. A lot of people this time of year, they just want to help. They want to do something outside of themselves.

Invite friends to be involved. Talk to your coworkers. Talk to your aunts and uncles. Invite them to be involved in next weeks Thanksgiving event... invite them to be a part of Joy to the D.

Everybody, take a card. Commit to doing something. Buy a gift, be a part of wrapping gifts... be a part of delivering gifts...More information is available in the back, but do something this Christmas season.

One of my favorite verses in the bible is 1 John 3:18 and it says:

“Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth.” (ESV)

another version says it this way (NLT) “let us show the truth by our actions.”

We have an incredible opportunity to be the hands of feet of Jesus. But blink and it will pass you by. Blink, and it will be January. And you will be cold seemingly for no reason, waiting for spring to come, and wondering, “where did the holidays go?”

Help someone. Help as many people as you can.

Don't let Christmas be only about your little world and your world alone.

The very essence of the day is God giving us Jesus as the greatest gift you can ever imagine.

I know family is important. I am so excited for the family memories we will create this Christmas. It will be our first Christmas in Detroit. Our first Christmas in a home that is actually our own that we won't have to move out of at the end of our lease. Family matters.

But you can be a part of giving families a Christmas memory that they literally would not have had if it was not for you.

At the Four Days backpack giveaway, there were hundreds and hundreds of people in the park and we were serving them and loving them, and Pastor Chilly came up to me as we starred out at what looked like a never ending sea of people, and He said to me, “This is your church.”

Because this building is awesome, and coming together on Sunday is awesome. Our time together studying the word and building community is valuable... but the people out there are priceless. They are why we are here, and they need us.

Help us engage in our community... realizing that these people... the ones in our community, the ones who your life can touch... that will be an amazing part of your legacy.

Guys, that is your genealogy.

It will read like this... "These are the generations of Courage Church..."

Matt Brown reached Butch... with grace.

Chris Hooten reached Randall... with love and tips money.

Cindy reached the single mom, with a candle and some make up that gave her the confidence to face the next day.

Mohan and Freddie reached that boy whose Father is serving life in prison... with LEGOS.

Because sometimes grace looks like legos.

No matter how bad their narrative may have been so far, the job of the church has to be to make sure that it ends with grace.

Because just like my daughter, who saw something scary yet remembered something great... we can learn from the genealogy.. because of what it lead to. But all we need is where it ends. Jesus died for his own family. He died for the corruption that can be traced all the way back to Adam. He died for the red cup guy, and he died for the guy who made the decision to switch the cups to red in the first place. He died for the guy who just needs a cup of coffee, and for the guy who just needs a bed. He died for the little boy whose Father is serving life in prison, and he died for the boys mother, who is working two jobs and still has to collect welfare just to put food on the table, while trying desperately to find time to raise that child by herself.

He died for the guys who set our van on fire. He died for the men who were shooting at each other in the mall on Monday, and for every person running and looking for cover and for every officer running into that place trying to help.

He died for everyone in France.

He died for me. And He died for you.

We are all sinners....

We are all stuck in a mall as the doors are going down...

But grace wants to get us out.

We are all staring through the window of our loft, watching as what we think we value burns...

But grace wants to give you something better.

It wants to drop you into a better story, with a much better ending. But for all the grace that we have been shown, maybe it is time that we show.

Help us drop some children into the middle of a better story this Christmas.

Help us feed some people this Thanksgiving. Help our church be a vessel that meets people right where they are, and drops them right in the middle of the narrative of grace, Because who would ever want to be anywhere else?