

VALUES FOR OUR  
LIFE TOGETHER



## Part One: Grace

*A Chat for Faith Teams  
Accompanying the Devotional Series  
“G.R.A.C.E. Values for our life together”*

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

**NOTE to Faith Team Leaders:** This Faith Chat is the first in a series of five that feature Christ-centered values for living with others in community. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

## **Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)**

### **Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)**

*Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.*

*Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.*

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

### **Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)**

More than ever, we find ourselves needing to come together. Fierce partisanship, civil unrest, wild conspiracies, and an unrelenting deadly virus continue to drive folks apart. Communities, friends, families, and churches have suffered isolation, unfriending, and division.

Relationships are strained and dissolving as feelings are hurt and folks retreat into the echo chambers of guarded opinions and self-righteousness. Shouting past one another, we misunderstand and fail to recognize our shared humanity.

This is not the first time that the Christian community was threatened by division. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in the middle of the first century, Christians struggled with serious differences of opinion about who could be included in the community and what were

the terms of their inclusion. Centered in the grace of God, Paul encouraged folks on both sides of the great divide between Jewish and Gentile Christians to embrace Christ-centered values for their life together.

In this Faith Team Chat, and the others in this series, we will seek to renew, restore, and rebuild relationships as we live out Christ-centered values. Grounded in and emerging from the expansive love of God, come the values of Grace, Respect, Appreciation, Compassion, and Encouragement. As we employ these values in our words and actions, we participate in God's creative and restorative work in the world. Though not easy, these values connect us with others (believers and non-believers alike, building a community that is life-giving.

We begin, in Part-One, with grace.

## **Engaging God's Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)**

### **Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)**

#### **Romans 1:23-26 (NRSV)**

“since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

*For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to guide your reflection upon each of these sayings of Jesus.*

- “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his

righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.” Romans 3:21-25 (NRSV)

- “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.” Romans 4:4-5 (NRSV)
- “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” Romans 8:14-17 (NRSV)

## **Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)**

What stands out for you in these words from Paul to the Christians in Rome?

What initial questions emerge? What is confusing or hard to grasp?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you?

What do these words teach you about God’s grace?

## **Exploring Connection (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)**

*Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Bible stories in Option A for each session.*

### **Option A: Grace Abounds in Jesus-Stories**

*Choose one of the following stories from the gospels in which Jesus exhibits the value of grace. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.*

#### **I. Let Them Come to Me.**

At the time of Jesus, children were not considered to be of much importance. Sadly, this is still true in many areas of the globe where children are still vulnerable to exploitation. The

disciples voice objections to the children being brought to Jesus. From their perspective, it was a waste of time spending time and effort with such a group of inconsequential folks.

In Jesus's welcome of children, we learn something about the grace-filled nature of God's reign. First, we see that old boundaries of worth are shattered. Even children are included by God as a critical part of the community that Jesus forms. Second, Jesus lifts up the innocence of children as a prerequisite for admittance. The wisdom and knowledge that adults possess is actually a hindrance to participation in the realm of God.

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

-Mark 10: 13-16

### ***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you see grace displayed in this Jesus-story? How does grace challenge traditional and “common sense” understandings? Does grace open new possibilities or shut down accepted conventions?

In what ways might grace reshape and reform our understanding of God's reign (kingdom)?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1:23-26** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

## **II. Breaking Chains and Setting Free**

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is engaged in a cosmic struggle with the forces of evil. Though it might seem strange to talk about a “devil” or the forces of evil, there is little argument over the reality of evil in our world. Regardless of the source, it doesn't take much for us to recognize the things that destroy, limit, and devalue life. Whether we look at the nightly news or the newsfeed on our handheld devices, we have plenty of examples of evil in our midst.

In the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus encounters a man who is possessed by a demon. He lives physically and symbolically in a graveyard and is out of his mind. The villagers - either out of fear or compassion - try to restrain him from hurting himself or others. He breaks the chains and resists all attempts at healing.

When Jesus encounters this troubled soul, the demon-possessed man's question is revealing, "what have you to do with me?" What does Jesus have to do with lives tormented by evil? Isn't God concerned with all things holy, clean, and unblemished?

Jesus's healing ministry demonstrates God's concern for those whose lives are torn apart by demonic forces beyond control. Though some might say that "those people" don't desire such attention, the grace of God says otherwise. All who are in need, regardless of circumstances and past infractions, are recipients of God's attention, grace, and love.

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

"They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. "

***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you see grace displayed in this Jesus-story? How does grace challenge traditional and “common sense” understandings? Does grace open new possibilities or shut down accepted conventions?

In what ways might grace reshape and reform our understanding of God’s reign (kingdom)?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1:23-26** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

**III. Even the Dogs...**

Within the early church, there was a great division between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. Both groups insisted that they were faithful followers of Jesus’s teaching and that the others were misguided. It was a conflict that was well underway when the Gospels were written by the next generation of Christians. The Gospel writer Mark, includes a few fringe interactions between Jesus (a Jew) and the Gentile world.

Perhaps most striking of Jesus’s encounters with Gentile is the story of the Syrophenician woman. The verbal exchange between Jesus and this Gentile woman highlights the negative prejudices and biases of the time. Did Jesus really call her a dog? Was he merely expressing the sentiment of his disciples and of other Jewish males at the time? This is a matter for discussion and debate.

The story, however, ends with a healing that demonstrates God’s love for all people - Jews and Gentiles. Mark follows the exorcism with another healing in which Jesus speaks the words “be opened” and gives the ability to hear and speak to a deaf mute. Are we to understand this sequence as one that has extra meaning? Jesus displays grace to an outsider Gentile and then opens ears and voice... should that early church (and us) pay attention to the inclusive nature of the gospel that goes beyond boundaries and brings restoration to all?

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little

daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)

### ***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you see grace displayed in this Jesus-story? How does grace challenge traditional and "common sense" understandings? Does grace open new possibilities or shut down accepted conventions?

In what ways might grace reshape and reform our understanding of God's reign (kingdom)?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1:23-26** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

## **IV. When Money Doesn't Buy**

The disciples are shocked when a God-fearing, well-mannered, law-following, and wealthy man is turned away from following Jesus. If that guy can't be a disciple, then who can? And that is the point - no matter how hard you try, you can't earn the grace and love of God. Communion with Christ comes not as an accomplishment of our words or actions but by the grace and action of God.

Wealth, from the perspective of the Gospel writers, can be a hindrance to faith because it distorts the relationship between God and humans. We think that wealth is a sign of blessing and divine favor. We might even say "look at how richly God has blessed!" Those with wealth



and privilege often think that they have earned all that they have. As a result, it can be hard to share resources with others, especially those who are deemed “unworthy.” It can be hard to follow Jesus’s call to generosity, self-sacrifice, and humility.

*Read the story of Jesus’s teaching moment with his disciples about prayer. Use the questions below to discuss.*

“As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’ ” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Mark 10:17-27

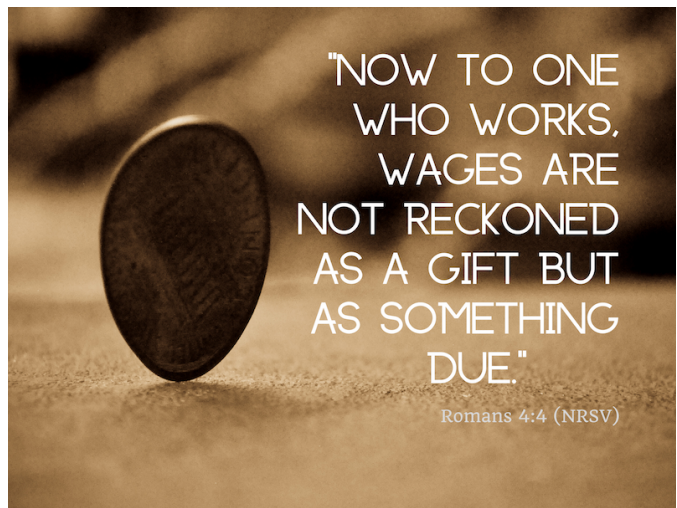
### ***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you see grace displayed in this Jesus-story? How does grace challenge traditional and “common sense” understandings? Does grace open new possibilities or shut down accepted conventions?

In what ways might grace reshape and reform our understanding of God’s reign (kingdom)?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1:23-26** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

## Option B: Inspirational Images



“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

Romans 8:14 (NRSV)



*Discuss the Inspirational Images above.*

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways do the images convey grace?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

## **Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:**

*Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.*

Where do you find yourself when it comes to grace? Do you apply this value easily? What situations or persons make being “grace-full” easier or more difficult?

What does it mean to you that God loves you without restriction or preconditions? In a consumer-based culture, what wisdom does grace offer? If we can’t earn God’s love, then how do we place value upon it in a culture where a variety of currencies reign (such as money, wealth, status, education, racial privilege, etc.)

What does being a disciple of Jesus mean for you? How does this identity shape and influence the ways you relate to others as you share grace?

## **Option D: “Romans and countrymen, lend me your ears”**

*Throughout this Faith Chat series on Christian values, Paul’s letter to the Romans will be used as our biblical foundation. This epistle, which is the longest of all the correspondence attributed to Paul, has long been read as a theological treatise on matters of faith that were of critical importance to the reformers (including Luther) of the sixteenth century. Recently, scholars such as Douglas Moo, have suggested other lenses through which we might access the wisdom and import of this letter.*

The book of Romans is actually a letter. The dense language, complex rhetoric, and arcane references might sidetrack us into thinking otherwise. For many years, thanks to Christian Reformers such as Martin Luther, Romans was touted and treated as the great summa of Paul’s theology. Written in the later years of his ministry, it certainly contains universal truths about God, faith, and Christian community. Since at the time he wrote, Paul had not been to Rome (therefore, he didn’t establish the church there as he did in Corinth, Galatia, or Thessalonica), the epistle lacks some of the personal interactions and relationship that we see elsewhere in Paul’s other letters.

Although Paul writes as an outsider, he is still writing a letter that addresses a particular people at a specific point in history. There is also a reason Paul writes. This is not an abstract book of theology

but a practical application of Paul's thoughts about God (his "theology") to real people, struggling with real issues of faith and struggles within community.

Biblical scholar, Douglas Moo, and others suggest that the Roman community to which Paul addresses is undergoing great turmoil. Among the Christians in the first century, there was no greater struggle than the divide between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. Elsewhere, Paul encountered this conflict between Jewish Christians who grounded their discipleship in the observance of Torah and the Gentile Christians who did not.

In Rome, there appear to be both factions - Jewish and Gentile Christians. Each insisted that they alone were faithful and that the other wasn't. Paul, aware of the divisions that this controversy has created, writes in a way that seeks reconciliation. He wishes to visit Rome and possibly use it as a base of operations for a missionary outreach to Spain. When the church is caught up in internal swabble, energy and resources are sapped out. Paul will need the partnership of a united church if he is going to extend the gospel.

And so, Paul takes the bulk of this long letter, to link both Jewish and Gentile Christians to the grace of God and the love of Jesus. God's relationship, established through the faith of Jesus, is secure with both groups because God made it so. Living in Christian community involves embracing Christ-centered values. Paul seeks to teach the Christians in Rome what these values look like. Reading his words almost two thousand years later, we still benefit from his grace-filled wisdom.

### ***Questions for discussion:***

What are the great struggles within the church today? Within our community? Our nation? How might the value of grace help us navigate choppy waters? What import does the fact that God's love accepts us, without restrictions or preconditions, hold for us amid divisions?

## **Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)**

### **Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)**

*Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

### **Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)**

**Salt, Light, and Prayer:** Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

**The Lord's Prayer:** Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.