

## GRACE CHANGES EVERYTHING

by

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**Theme:** The grace of God empowers and energizes us to produce happy, healthy marriages.

**Theme Text:** Ephesians 1-5

**Presentation Notes:** Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the section called *Sermon Illumination* that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

Seventh-day Adventists believe families are important. We see the family as the primary unit of society, the place where social behavior and spiritual values are constructed, interpreted and transmitted from one generation to the next. The emotional ties that bind families together create incredibly important bonds of attachment that influence us, often for the rest of our lives.

Social researchers consider marriage to be the cornerstone of the family. They believe it is difficult to develop a happy, secure family environment when the marriage relationship is not stable and vibrant. If a couple is not committed to their marriage, then this lack will inevitably sabotage their family and contribute to problems within it.

When God created and celebrated the first marriage (Genesis 1, 2), it was His intention that our ability to give and receive love would inspire us and enable us to build high quality interpersonal relationships with one another. Human beings all want love and intimacy. By giving and receiving love we grow in our understanding of one another and experience greater closeness and trust.

### **Marriage and Family Are Being Severely Tested**

As social climates rapidly change around the world, homes and marriages are being severely tested. Clear evidence reveals that the increase in family breakdown, the debilitating stress with which many families live, and the changes in contemporary family structure have left many couples and families confused and bewildered. Changes have brought about alterations in the pattern of the family life cycle, shifts in expectations of one another in the family, and the emergence of a wide variety of family forms.(1) Amid all these changes, many have wondered whether anybody still values or believes in family. Younger couples are often afraid to commit themselves to marriage and many choose other types of relationships instead.

### **A Message of Grace for Difficult Times**

We hunger for love and intimacy. We crave the assurance, the knowledge, the feeling that we are special and are understood by another human being, that someone else is committed to caring about us. With competing interests and conflicting values, however, many people find the

development of long term relationships in marriage a difficult and exacting enterprise. Misunderstandings are common. A failure to connect, to form and maintain healthy relationships, leaves many couples confused, disenchanted, and alienated. Few seem to have an adequate model for resolving anger and conflict; reconciliation and forgiveness are difficult. Many couples search for clues to revive a dying or stagnant relationship. For many, relationship issues have become their number one concern.

In this context Paul's letter to the Ephesians seems particularly appropriate. Ephesus was a church passing through difficult times. Arguing and fighting were rife among the "committed" faithful, deep divisions were beginning to appear in the congregation. The letter to the Ephesians follows a style of discourse typical of Paul. First, he emphasises the grace of God as the only basis for salvation and healing. Then he points out the behavioural implications, showing how grace is revealed in the life of the believer. Chapters 1-3 establish the basis for redemption and Christian unity. There the apostle argues that "in Christ" God has destined us to be His sons and daughters. As such we all receive special blessings (Ephesians 1:5-8) and are all made alive by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:4-10). Paul states that true peace and harmony within the community of faith are attainable only through Christ. He affirms that:

- Christ destroys the barriers that separate (2:14).
- Christ breaks down the walls of hostility (2:14).
- Christ creates unity out of diversity (2:15).
- Christ unites us all into one family (2:19).

Peace, harmony, and the development of a sense of unity and togetherness are all made possible and achievable through the grace of God. It is only as God, who is immense in mercy and love, embraces us with His incredible goodness and grace that we can become anything or achieve anything. Paul's emphasis on grace constitutes the cornerstone of his argument about how unity in the church can be achieved and effective relationships between members can be built.

Grace is Paul's favourite theme. For him, the grace of God was not merely a sedative for discomfort. It had transformed his life. God's grace is the dynamic that brings about reconciliation and inspires the development of responsible and satisfying relationships. And it is by grace and grace alone that Christian believers will be motivated as they come together in unity of purpose. As Charles Stanley says in his book *A Touch of His Peace* (1993), "Where grace abounds, peace thrives. Where grace is stunted, peace shrivels."

Having stated his case for grace in the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul now turns (chapters 4-6) to providing some practical suggestions on how grace works in the life—how to "live a life of love" (5:2), "a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1, 2).

### **Ways Grace Influences Marriage**

By the grace of God marriage can be transformed. When we learn how the Holy Spirit empowers us and we invite His presence in us, we discover the key to "grace-full" marriages and families. Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace* says, "The power of grace flows most fully when the human will chooses to act in harmony with divine will" (1988, p. 139). Here are a number of ways according to Paul that grace works in the life of the believer. They are vital for happy, healthy marriages. They are simple yet effective ways for us to maintain "the life of love."

**Accentuate the positive (Ephesians 4:1-3).** Grace leads us to choose to focus on the positive and not the negative. Paul mentions four personal values that will help "keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace" (vs. 3):

- *Humility* - humbly serving the needs of others (vs. 2).
- *Gentleness* - being gentle and respectful, showing that we care and are unwilling to take each other for granted (vs. 2).
- *Patience* - being slow to avenge wrong or retaliate when hurt by another person (vs. 2).
- *Forbearance* - bearing with one another in love. Mutual tolerance enables two human beings to live together in peace and love (vs. 2).

These four qualities are essential for both people in a marriage to have if they are to build bridges of understanding to each other, to take responsibility for their relationship, and to encourage each other's sense of self esteem.

**Communicate in love (Ephesians 4:15, 29).** Good relationships depend very much on open honest communication. The essence of honest communication is a willingness to be vulnerable—to share the fragile and tender parts of ourselves with another, to risk opening our fears and doubts, and to actively listen to another's thoughts and feelings. Self-disclosure on our part is an invitation to intimacy with another. It invites the other person to know and understand who we really are.

Many relationships flounder because people are simply not willing to trust themselves with another person. Fear drives them to hide parts of themselves from the other person or to engage in a variety of negative exchanges that inhibit understanding and prevent the growth of the relationship. God's grace motivates us to communicate love and acceptance rather than using defensive, self-serving, manipulative tactics. If, instead of the gracious communication of love and acceptance, there is invalidation, minimizing of the other person, indifference or criticism, such toxic exchanges will tend to destroy the relationship and lead to either an escalation of conflict and misunderstanding or to withdrawal and silence.

**Deal constructively with anger and conflict (Ephesians 4:25, 26, 31).** Paul counsels us to stop recycling our gripes and disagreements. Here he indicates that God's grace enables us to recognise the times when we are angry and to deal with these feelings constructively. Many people think that anger is a sin. They even quote Ephesians 4:26 as their proof text. But anger is a God-given emotion. It acts as a warning system to tell us when we have been hurt by another person. Paul is not condemning anger but pointing out that we need to deal with our hurts and disagreements and not let the days go by without resolving them amicably. Holding on to anger leads to bitterness, resentment, and a desire for revenge.

An inability to deal with anger and conflict is one of the common causes of distress and failure in marriage. "Getting rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (vs. 31), suggests that we must learn how to put the past behind us by getting rid of the ghosts of the past.

**Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32).** While we are called to forgive, in reality forgiveness is not that easy to do. Though forgiveness may not be able to eliminate the consequences of wrong done, true forgiveness means that we are willing to release another person from the full weight of our judgement and condemnation, especially when they have done nothing at all to deserve that release. Letting go of bitterness, resentment and pain is truly an act of grace, a gift from God. It maintains the vitality of relationships and ends any risk of alienation or rejection.(2) Forgiveness involves at least two distinct facets:

- One part of forgiveness is that unconditional forgiveness which we give to those who have hurt us because Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Such forgiveness is not natural for us and we must rely on God's Spirit to help us. It is to be given first within one's own heart—that is the hardest part— and then offered humbly, sincerely and with awareness that we as forgivers are not more righteous than the one we're forgiving. Such unconditional, grace-based forgiveness has a freeing effect upon the forgiver, and may create an environment where the offender is

drawn to repent, though it is not given for that reason.

- Another aspect of forgiveness has to do with a process which the two persons enter (Luke 17:3, 4). It can only be effective when the first aspect of forgiveness is present with the one who has been hurt and when humility, confession and repentance are present with the offender. If the process is to lead to reconciliation, there must be reciprocity which involves dialogue, a working through of issues that caused the hurt, and a commitment to communicate, handle anger, and solve problems more effectively so that the wounding and estrangement does not continue.

**Be mutually submissive (Ephesians 5:21).** The principle of equality and mutuality in Christ is clearly established by Paul in Ephesians 2:14-16. The grace of God enables us to submit to one another out of love rather than assuming a position of superiority, domination or control over another. Paul admonishes both men and women, husbands and wives to be "filled with the spirit" (5:18), in order that they might live a life of love and respect towards one another (5:33). Here in Ephesians 5:21 Paul is laying out a central principle which pertains to all Christian relationships, especially to the examples which follow—the marriage relationship (Eph. 5:22-33), the parent-child relationship (Eph. 6:1-4), and the master-slave (employer-employee) relationship (Eph. 6:5-9). Paul is telling us that we need to be willing to offer ourselves in the nurture and service of one another. To show that we accept, respect, and care for one another and have developed a sense of mutuality and accept each others gifts, we must avoid any kind of useless power struggles that result in one being dominant over the other.

**Be committed to loving one another (Ephesians 5:1, 2).** Paul invites us to "live a life of love." This is the epitome of the call of grace. Only in the context of grace do we find ourselves motivated to freely and graciously love each other in ways the apostle summons us to do. Love is a choice to behave towards another person in gracious ways that reflect how we feel about them. Paul's notion of love implies more than just a feeling of fondness and affection. For him, love involves *commitment* and *action*. Commitment is a vital ingredient of a long term relationship, an essential component of any love relationship. To make a commitment is to make a statement of loyalty, a pledge to remain faithful and true to the relationship and to the other person. It is a quality that contributes most to the growth, development, and stability of the marriage and family relationship.

Love is also an action word—an attitude that shows in our behaviour. Love is a *choice* to *behave* towards another person in loving ways that may reflect how we feel about them, or perhaps in some cases, *in spite of our feelings* toward them at the time.(3) Close relationships produce many feelings, but committed love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible a lasting relationship. This is the nature of love that we are urged to exhibit in harmony with the life we have been called to live.

## Conclusion

Just as the apostle Paul was focused on the grace of God, so we need to "re-vision" our lives with grace at the centre of our being. We, too, will become passionate about God's incredibly extravagant love for us when we embrace the grace with which He is embracing us. The good news of God's goodness and kindness towards us, when owned and integrated into our lives, will radically change our marriages. Grace opens the way for us to experience gracious interpersonal relationships that build confidence, trust, and respect in one another, and helps to relieve the stress and anxiety that can come from life together. Grace makes us gracious people!

## Sermon Illumination

**One (1):** Several significant changes serve to highlight the social transitions in marriage and family:

A. Changes in the family life cycle

- Marriage and childbirth are being delayed as men and women choose to remain single longer.
- The birth of the first child is occurring later in the family life cycle.
- Women are questioning their traditional role with the majority now working and fewer are economically dependent.

B. Changes in expectations about marriage

- Most couples today get married for emotional security and social status not for economic support.
- Many couples are confused about the meaning of love and find it hard to trust in the face of their own dysfunctional and abusive childhoods.
- When difficulties arise in the marriage, couples are more likely to consider the option of separation and divorce than in the past.

C. Changes in parenting styles and roles

- Traditional authoritarian styles have given way to a more democratic or permissive approach to child rearing.
- Many dual career or dual earning couples fail to sort out their family roles.

D. Changes in family structures

- The ease with which many relationships now end has helped to produce a variety of family structures (e.g. single parent families, step-families, remarried families).

E. Changes in our sense of community

- There has been a shift away from a community of shared values to a society that is fiercely individualistic. This often leaves marriage and family with a sense of alienation and isolation.

**Two (2):** In *Surprising Marriages* (1997, pp. 350-365) William J. Peterson tells the inside story of the married life of Billy and Ruth Graham. While God has mightily used these two, their marriage is a study in the blending of two strong wills, in making adjustments, and in learning to forgive. With forceful personalities, yet differing views on many things, their experience, especially in their first few years, has often been marked by conflict. "She admits, 'Life in the Billy Graham household is not a matter of uninterrupted sweetness and light'" (p. 351). Despite Billy's Baptist beliefs, for example, she has remained a staunch Presbyterian. His first parish eventually changed its name in order to have wider appeal when she remained unconvinced that she needed to be rebaptized by immersion. Although he has espoused religious views and biblical positions very different from hers, he acknowledges her as a better bible scholar than himself and admits that she has helped him to be more balanced in his views of other religious denominations.

"Once when Billy preached a sermon on the Christian home, he asked his wife (as he usually does) what she thought of it.

"She responded: 'It was good sermon except for one thing.'

"'What was that?'

"'The timing.'

"'The what?'

"'The timing. You spent eleven minutes on a wife's duty to her husband and only seven on a husband's duty to his wife'" (p. 351).

"They've come from two different worlds; they live in two different worlds, but together they have built a strong relationship that has brought blessing to the world" (p. 364). One of the key reasons for their happiness is a favorite saying of Ruth's: "A happy marriage is a union of two forgivers"(p. 352).

**Three (3):** Sometimes our choice to love may be in the midst of feelings of confusion, frustration, even anger and hate. The following love story illustrates how a commitment to love can confront and resolve difficulties and make possible lasting relationships. Robert Fulghum (1997) tells of advertising for love stories at one of his lectures and having a respectable, middle-aged businessman show him a pale blue perfumed envelope:  
He said, "Before you read this, you should know that I've had it for at least ten years, that it's from my wife, to whom I am still married." Inside the envelope was a matching sheet of stationery, with these words written with pen and ink:

My dearest Harry:

I hate you,  
I hate you,  
I hate you.

Respectfully, with all my love,

Edna.

I smiled and looked up, anticipating the rest of the story.  
He smiled as he refolded the note and put it back in the envelope.  
"That's it." he said, and walked away. (pp. 4, 5)

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