Reigning Grace

## Understanding Grace

## By Steve Viars

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### Faith Church

5526 State Road 26 E

Lafayette, IN 47905

**Website:** <http://www.faithlafayette.org/church>

**Online Sermons:** <http://www.sermonaudio.com/faithlafayette>

If I asked you this morning on any given day, "What's reining in your life?" what would you say? In other words, what's defining and controlling you? What concepts are directing you and helping you organize and make sense of everything and everyone else around you? What's running the show? What's calling the shots? What's in charge of the program? You see, what's reining in your life? Now, I realize a question like that could take us or take you in hundreds of different directions so let me just kind of throw out some options to prime your mental pump this morning. You realize, for some persons the answer to that question is their bitterness. It really is. It's not long between when they open their eyes in the morning and when they are thinking about how somebody else did them wrong. It's a movie that they've watched in their minds a million times. They are reviewing the scenes as they are brushing their teeth. The fact of the matter is: bitterness reigns, well illustrated in the classic section of the Old Testament book of Ruth where her mother-in-law returns from Bethlehem or to Bethlehem, do you remember that? When the ladies of the town greet her she says, "Don't call me Naomi anymore," which was her given name. "Don't call me Naomi anymore, call me Mara," which is the Hebrew word for bitter. You might as well just hang a sign around her neck, huh? Because everybody she comes in contact with is going to know this: bitterness reigns. Bitterness reigns.

Now, for others, mammon reigns. Mammon. That's kind of a King James word for money and material possessions. But this kind of person wakes up and starts thinking about stuff. He's brushing his teeth and reviewing his bank balance. Or she's cooking breakfast and planning the next purchase. You see, he worried about money yesterday, he's worried about money today and he'll worry about money tomorrow. It's amazing how many of their conversations and arguments revolve around money; how many of either their joys or their disappointments come back to material things. You might as well just make up a sign and hang it around this kind of person's neck, "Money reigns. Mammon reigns. Material things reign."

So what's reigning in your life? What's reigning in your life? We could sketch it out in all sorts of ways. There is also those for whom anger reigns. This person wakes up with a low grade anger practically every morning. In fact, this person brushes his teeth angrily and I suppose that dentists are happy there's all this teeth brushing going on but honestly, that is actually a good way to determine what's reigning is what are you doing? What are you thinking about when you're going through one of those mindless tasks, one of those mundane tasks. But the person for whom anger reigns is just mad 28 days out of the month. It impacts the tone of his emails. It impacts the way she speaks to the clerk at the checkout line. Anger just reigns.

In fact, this might be an interesting experiment for everyone here to undertake today: think about it from the perspective of your family. If every person made a sign for their necks that said, "Blank reigns," and then you let the other members of the family decide what should really go in your blank, would you want to wear your sign the rest of the day? There are a lot of different options that could be put there. Success reigns, maybe your family would say for you. Or dissatisfaction reigns. Or the approval of others reigns. Or revenge reigns. Or entertainment reigns. Or laziness reigns. You see, what would your family members, what would your friends, what would your coworkers write in your blank? And before, by the way, you would say, "Well, it really ticked me off if they wrote that in there." Well, I guess we know what goes in your blank, Sugar Pie, now don't we? What's reigning?

Now, let's add another question on top of this: what would the God of heaven and earth want to see in that blank? Oh, there's a question and here's a hopeful and helpful corollary I think: what has he made possible. It's not just a matter of what he wants but what does he make possible for you more and more over time to have others around you genuinely want to write in your blank? And one of the great answers to that question we find in the word of God is that he wants grace to reign. You see, wouldn't that be a marvelous sign to be able to hang around your neck? Especially if it's progressively becoming truer all the time? "Let it be known that grace reigns here."

With that in mind, open your Bible, if you would, to Romans 5. That's on page 128 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. Our church's theme this year is "Finding Grace." Finding grace, taken from this marvelous passage in Hebrews 4 that is actually printed on the front of your bulletin all year long. It's a marvelous passage. Hebrews 4:14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest," and we do, huh? And he "passed through the heavens." He didn't have to go back over and over and over. He "passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." Then he goes on to say this, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

I know a number of you have written that great passage on index cards. A number of you have decided you're just going to review that every day when you wake up. Some of you are actually committing that to memory this year. No doubt a wonderful passage of Scripture, chock-full of tremendous truth about what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ and finding grace. Now, we decided if that's going to be our theme, for the first several Sundays of the year, we were just going to have what amounted to an introductory theology of grace so you say, "What exactly is it that we're all trying to find?" Some have suggested the acronym grace, g-r-a-c-e, standing for: God's riches at Christ's expense. That's not a bad starting point because ultimately grace is not about a thing, it's about a person. God's riches at Christ's expense. Others have suggested a definition that draws a distinction between the concepts of grace and mercy by teaching that in mercy God does not give us what we do deserve and in grace he gives us what we don't deserve. That's a good starting point as well.

Perhaps this quote from the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology will help us take this to the next level of understanding. We need this at some point this year. The writer says this, "The words most relevant to an understanding of the biblical concept of grace include the Hebrew words 'chen,'" and I'll spare you the attempt at Hebrew guttural here. So "the Hebrew words 'chen, chesed' and the Greek term 'charis.'" Now think about that for a minute. "'Chen' which appears some 200 times in the Old Testament connotes favor, usually by a superior to an inferior, including but not limited to care for the poor." That's grace. "Deliverance of those in distress," that's grace too. "And other acts of compassion. Such beneficence is given freely and thus can be requested, received and even withdrawn but never claimed, never coerced, never possessed. The term often appears in the idiom 'to find favor in someone eyes' so that the prayer that 'God, Yahweh, might make his face shine upon you' is tantamount to a request for him to extend his graciousness, chesed," crucial word in the Bible, "which appears some 245 times in the Old Testament and it refers to compassionate acts performed either as spontaneously or in response to an appeal by one in dire straits. Acts of chesed are not grounded in perceived obligation or contract, nor can they be coerced, rather they arise out of affection." Think about what we were singing earlier that God is holy and yet his grace would arise out of what for us? Out of affection and goodness. "Acts of chesed pertain to covenantal relations but God enters into covenant with human beings freely." Praise God for that, huh? "The establishment of the covenant is itself an act of chesed on God's part."

Now, the New Testament in Hellenistic Greek, "Charis connotes favor and friendship as well as beneficence. Gifts of benefactors are acts of charis in the latter sense. The vocabulary of grace thus connotes spontaneous kindness and acts of generosity grounded in dispositions of compassion toward those in need." Aren't you glad that's the kind of God that we serve and worship this morning? "Grace as a characteristic of God grounds divine human relations in God's generous initiative sustaining faithfulness, culminating in the powerful restorative activity of God on behalf of humanity." Amen. Amen. Amen. And amen. Then the writer says this, "Of course, the concept of grace can be present and often is even when these and related words are absent."

Now, I realize you might say, "What, are you trying to make like a bunch of theologians out of us?" You'd better believe I am, as fast as possible, otherwise you're going to waste your life in absolute frivolity. You'll sit around all Sunday afternoon drinking beer and watching football games that never end by teams that really don't matter and so the bottom line is...I'm sorry, that just squirted out. Just squirted out along with all the air from those footballs. Anyway, let's not even get into that. Tom Brady didn't know anything about that and I'm just here so I won't get fined. Back to the notes. Back to the notes.

Seriously, you realize you're already a theologian. Theology in its basic definition is the study of God and his word. You already have a concept of God and you are acting off of your perceived theology so the question before the house is not whether you're a theologian, the question is: are you a good theologian or a bad one? And my job is to help equip you to be a really good one, huh? Absolutely. Now, just think about everything we said: if that's what grace is and our Savior is seated on a throne with this as a central attribute and that we're invited to draw near over and over, day after day, to receive mercy, to find grace to help in our time of need, I'm for learning every last thing we can about how to take advantage of this process, how about you? We need a theology of grace.

So after our introduction to this theme from Hebrews 4 several weeks ago, the last 2 weeks have found us in Romans 5 where we've learned about standing grace at the beginning of the chapter and then abundant grace in the middle of the chapter. Well, the text ends with an emphasis on reigning grace. Now, this morning we're just going to focus on 2 verses which is a bit unusual for us. I'm going to back up and get a bit of a running start but we're talking this morning about grace that actually reigns and when we're done, although we're going to dig deep into the argument, the logic of this text, I think we'll be able to find 2 important perspectives on God's reigning grace. How can we get to the place where it could be accurately said on our sign, "Grace reigns here"? Grace reigns here.

Romans 5, beginning in verse 18,

18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One [Jesus] the many will be made righteous. [Now listen to this:] 20 The Law came in so that the transgression would increase;

What? Wouldn't you have expected that to say the exact opposite? What in the world does that possibly mean?

The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but, [we saw this last week] where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, [note the purpose] so that as sin reigned in death, even so [what?] grace would reign [but how?] grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reigning grace. Two important perspectives on exactly what that means this morning. First of all: be impacted by the action of God's grace. You see, this is not a static commodity. When you think about grace, don't think about a static commodity that just sits there and does nothing. It's not like when you drive up north of Delphi and see those huge piles of corncobs and think, "That's a huge pile. I have no idea what good that is." By the way, please don't send me emails later about, "Here's why those corncobs are there, blah, blah, blah, you city boy." I've got a bunch of that a couple weeks ago about the whole pigs in the mud thing. I had all these people thinking it was their responsibility to help the city boy understand pigs and mud. I really don't want to understand that and I don't really care about those corncobs either. I just know that it looks to me like a static pile of nothing. Well, that's not grace. Grace is intended to do something. That's the point of that, okay? Don't spend the rest of your time worried about corncobs and why I don't understand them. Grace is intended to do something; to accomplish something; to make a real and a practical difference in the way you and I live. And in this case, God designed grace to reign. To reign in your life and mine.

Well, what does that mean? What does this action of grace really mean? Well, Paul's readers would have had no trouble whatsoever with what he was trying to communicate here because they were so familiar with this kind of a person, somebody who reigned, or this kind of a position; this kind of action. It's the Greek word "basileuo" and it literally means "to exercise authority at a royal level; to be king; to rule," words used all over the Bible like that and all over secular culture. Or "to obtain power; to become the king." One lexicon went on to say, "to rule; to reign as king; to be in control in an absolute manner." Are you thinking about your sign? What reigns? To rule; to reign as king; to be in control in an absolute matter; to control completely. You see, that's why we started with the questions we did this morning. What's reigning in your life? And God's word would say that one of the primary answers the Lord would want to see written in your blank is that "Grace reigns here." That's the potential action of grace.

Now, there's something else that we need to observe here, I think, is just the construction of the sentence. Hear me now: this is a purpose clause. At the end and in many ways the climax of an entire argument has been tracing through this chapter so as we've been reading if you said, "Hey, where's all this going?" By the way, that's a great way to read your Bible, "Where is this going? Where is this going? Where is this going?" Well, look for the purpose clauses. Do you do that when you're reading your Bible? Look for the hina clauses, the "so that." That's what helps us understand the importance of this action of grace. "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase," I'm going to talk about that more in a minute, "but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Why? Here it is, hina, "so that, as sin reigned in death," here's a second one, "even so," why? "Grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." What I'm trying to suggest is: this isn't just a sideline issue. This is where this whole process that we've been tracing the last 3 weeks through Romans 5 leads: the possibility of a lifestyle where grace is reigning.

I want to suggest there is some real gold to be mined right here and what I want to try to do in order to help us mine it is to help you or ask you to think with me about 2 important questions and you're going to have to think hard right now. Did you come to church to work hard? Or did you want the ushers to just give you some crayons and a little sheet of paper to color so you wouldn't make trouble while the adults ordered off the menu? You want to work hard, don't you? Absolutely. Some of you are saying, "Where are those crayons?" Here are the 2 questions I want us to think about that I think will help us apply: what does it mean for grace to reign? The first question is this: where does the law fit into this discussion? Because what Paul said at the beginning of verse 20 is surprising so where does the law fit into this discussion? And then the question is, the second question is: what is the implication of this to parents talking to their children about the Gospel? And I realize some of you are right in the middle of that and you really need to know the answer to that. Some of you, you're not anywhere near it but understanding the answer to that question will help you apply this concept to grace reigning, trust me.

So first of all: where does the law fit into this whole discussion? You see, you may have wondered for the last 3 weeks why Paul says things like, "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase." You might say, "I would have expected that to say exactly the opposite." Well, here's why Paul had to say that: because so many of his readers and by the way, so many people in this culture including probably some people who will hear this message this morning, think that the reason God gave his law was so that we could keep it and therefore earn our way to heaven on the basis of, what? Our own merit and hopefully he'll grade on a curve because we all know we break it occasionally. In fact, some people even call themselves 10 Commandment Christians. Please don't ever use that phrase in my presence. Please don't ever use that phrase outside of anybody's presence. You would have to work hard to pack more bad theology in one phrase than that.

So Paul's been chipping away at this notion here and in other places, saying things that the law was given to reveal first of all, the holy character of God. That's why we sang that great hymn taken from Isaiah 6, "God is Holy, Holy, Holy." So why did God give us the law first? To reveal his holy character and then second, to reveal the sin that resided in our hearts. That was the point of verse 13 where Paul said earlier in this chapter, "for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law." You say, "What?" Well, in other words, men and women were doing things that were wrong but after the law was given, now they knew they were wrong. Now there's a standard. Now there's increased accountability. "I was sinning before the law, now the law has come, I actually know that it is wrong." So God did not give me the law so that I would keep it and save myself, God gave us the law to reveal his holy character, to reveal the sin that resides in our own hearts and it actually even goes one step further, to actually incite the sin in your heart and bring it to the surface. In fact, Paul's going to talk about that in the very next chapter, sorry, 2 chapters later, Romans 7 when he says, "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead." What does that mean? Well, you know what that means. "There were certain things I didn't even want to do until you told me they were wrong. Now I can't believe how much I want to do them," right? Every parent understands this principle, right? You tell your child...all this hard theology, it's not hard theology, go to the nursery. You tell your young child not to touch a glass object on the coffee table and what does that stir up in that child's heart? A tenfold desire to touch it because now they know they shouldn't. And how many parents have watched that child turn right around and see how close they could get their little sin-cursed finger to that item without actually touching it?

Now, you see, the legalist believes the law was good because you could keep it or some form of it along with all the other stuff they heaped up on top of it and gain merit before God on their own. And many people in our culture, many people in this community, believe the exact same thing. And what you would write, by the way, on their sign is, "Legalism reigns. My own righteousness reigns. My belief that I can keep the standard and earn my way to heaven on my own reigns. My belief that I'm better than you reigns." So such individuals would hear Paul and say, "Well, are you suggesting the law is bad?" and his response would be, "Absolutely not. The law is good but for an entirely different set of reasons than the ones you possess. The law is not an occasion for you to prove how good you are. It was given to reveal how bad we are, to even incite that rebellion to come to the surface so that we could finally and quickly come to an end in ourselves," which is why Paul told the legalistic Galatians, "Therefore the law has become our tutor to," what? Tell us how we need to buck it up so we can save ourselves? No, "the law has become our tutor to lead us to a Savior seated on a throne of grace so that we may be justified by faith." You see, it's not that the law is bad but it's good for a set of reasons the legalist and the moralist don't yet comprehend. That's why our text said, "The Law came in so that transgression would increase," in the sense that your awareness of your sin, your understanding that you can't control it in your own strength and knowledge is forced to come to the surface. You let the law do its work.

Well now, just think about that. I know you say, "I have to chew on that a little bit more." That's fine. That's fine. That's a good thing for you to do this afternoon. Now, let's make that practical and if it doesn't make sense yet perhaps it will now. What's the implication of that, the parents talking to their children about the Gospel? This is a very good test, I think, for what we're studying here and I realize you may not be facing that but if you understand the answer to that question, it's going to help you get "Grace reigns" on your sign. I understand, by the way, what it's like as a parent. You want nothing more than to know your child has placed his or her faith and trust in Christ. Right? You'd give your right arm for that. But a mom or dad has to be very careful theologically on this particular point. It's certainly not, "Would you like Jesus to come into your heart?" I mean, friends, who wouldn't want Jesus to come into their heart? Nor is it, "Don't you want to go to heaven to be with grandma?" Do you expect your child to say no? "No. No thanks." I mean, what do you expect? Where's the Gospel in any of that?

So here's the way it works: wise parents at the appropriate time and in the appropriate ways early on establish rules in their home. In other words, they begin teaching the law. To teach their child the importance of obedience; to teach their child the importance of honor of mom and dad; to teach their children the importance of self-control. I know I'm going to get some emails on this, my email address is on our website. Sometimes it's best to take the glass object off the coffee table and sometimes it's best to leave it there and teach Johnny he can't touch it. You see, if children are allowed to do whatever they want, the home becomes a child-centered place organized around their whims and their tantrums and their demands. There is no law and I promise you, that will exhaust and frustrate everybody else under that roof. You might as well just get a little sign, put it on that little child's little chest that says, "Lawlessness reigns. Junior-sized rebellion reigns. My parents are going to regret this some day reigns." You don't want to make, that's the dish on that side, you don't want to make the mistake of creating a lawless or an Antinomian. "Nomos" is the Greek word for "law." An Antinomian home. But on the other hand, think this through, on the other hand you don't want to simply parent by rule-making, you see, because you're bigger than them and with enough anger or enough even rewards or punishments, you can achieve raw behavior modification in many cases. The sign there might read, "External conformity reigns. Shallow adherence to a watered down law reigns. I'm sitting down on the outside but I'm standing up on the inside reigns." You don't want that either.

Here's what you're looking for as a parent: having the appropriate rules. You should but then looking for conversations where you can discuss with your children at a very early age why it's so hard to follow the rules and why disobedience is so delicious. At some point, the discussion goes beyond particular actions of sin to the existence of their sin nature. What I'm suggesting to you is: let the law be their, what? To be their tutor leading them to, what? Their need of grace. And ultimately to whom? To the Savior who is full of that very commodity. Friend listen, here's how you thread together the argument of Romans 5: after they've trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, now they can begin standing in the grace, that's their position. Now they can understand that they have abundant grace at their disposal. They can begin learning what it's like for grace to reign. And the day they can honestly wear the sign, "Grace reigns," that the time you and your honey will say with the Apostle John, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth, where praise God, grace is reigning in the way they live."

Now, what else can we learn from this great verse? Be focused on the product of grace. You see, how does the verse end? "So that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness," please don't forget that, "through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." That's another very, very important piece of this puzzle and let me try to explain why. A number of us grew up in a time in the American church history where there was such a strong emphasis on outreach and evangelism, very little emphasis on practical discipleship and if there was any at all, it was discipleship through rule-making, legalism. You can't go to movies. Your hair has to be a certain length. Remember the sideburn check days? You can't drink this. You can't go there. And perhaps many reacted against that kind of legalism and essentially went into the ditch on the other side of the road defining grace as what? Grace means, "I can do whatever I want." He who has the fewest rules wins. So now there isn't much measurable difference between those who say they know the Lord and those who don't because after all, we're just living under grace. And I want to be sure I said this morning that if you're supposed grace is not making a practical difference in your life every day, then it may be something other than the sanctifying grace of the Lord Jesus Christ which is clearly identified in this text. Reigning grace produces both positional righteousness, that's what we saw a couple of weeks ago. Praise God, it changes your identity. Praise God, it changes your stand. But reigning grace also produces practical righteousness. You see, grace doesn't just reign, it's intended to reign through a changed and changing life which is why the Apostle Peter said, "Grow in the," what? "Grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."

Theologian John Stott said this, "Nothing could sum up better the blessing of being in Christ than the expression 'the reign of grace.'" That's so true. "For grace forgives sin so the cross bestows on the sinner both righteousness and eternal life. Grace satisfies the thirsty soul." Is that true? "It fills the hungry with good things. Grace though sanctifies sinners, shaping them into the image of Christ." It doesn't just sit there. Grace is not "he who has the fewest rules wins." "Grace perseveres even with the recalcitrant, determining to complete what it has begun and one day grace will destroy death and consummate the kingdom. So when we're convinced that grace reigns, we will remember that God's throne is a throne of grace and will come to it boldly to receive mercy and find grace for every need and all of this is through Jesus Christ our Lord, that is, through his death and his resurrection. You see, reigning grace produces righteousness."

Let's try to make that practical. Think about it from the perspective of marriage. Here's an important quote I think from Paul Tripp in "Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands." He says, "One of the most significant problems in marriage is that there's no economy of grace." Think about that. Something else between that husband and wife is reigning. "One of the most significant problems in marriage is that there is no economy of grace. With all their obvious difficulties, what is most shocking is the profound gracelessness of their marriage and because they are not daily soaking in the fountain of God's grace, they do not extend it to one another." You see, I think that raises a very important question: what would change in practical ways if the sign "Grace reigns" was truer of the way you relate to those who are closest in your life? And would there be any value in simply asking them this afternoon or this week to answer that question for you?

Now, let me take a couple of minutes as we close and apply all of this grace reigning to this conference that's going to be starting a week from this Sunday evening. I know that many of you are planning to attend. I know many of you are providing housing. Many of you have taken an afternoon or a day off work to serve or many days to help serve. I hope if nothing else, every person who's part of our church family will decide you're going to set your alarm 5 minutes early and you're going to day-after-day during that week of the conference, go to the throne of grace on our behalf and ask God to help us to serve him and serve him well. So this is a church family effort for sure.

Well, what does it mean and what does it look like for us as a church if grace is reigning in the way we function during that conference? As far as I'm aware, there are 3 major biblical counseling conferences on the face of the globe on any given year. One is by the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Philadelphia where I received my doctorate. That conference moves around the country. Last year it was in California, in San Diego. They had about 1,200 persons there. The second one is hosted by the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, formerly known as NANC. Dr. Smith and I have served on the board of that organization for many, many years. That conference too, moves around the country. Last year it was in Los Angeles at Grace Community Church where John MacArthur pastors. They had about 1,600 persons there. The third one is right here in Lafayette and it stays right here in this local church and we're expecting 1,974 persons to join us starting next Sunday night.

Those are historic attendances for all of those groups. We're amazed at what the Lord is doing. We want him to be glorified. We want him to be glorified alone. But it's very important for everybody on our team, that includes you, it's very important for everybody on our team to understand why is ours in the same local church from both an historical and a theological perspective and why is it so crucial for all of us to be going to the throne of grace and asking the Lord to help all of us serve in a grace reigns kind of way. Here's the answer to that: when our former Pastor Bill Goode and Dr. Bob Smith received their training in biblical counseling all the way back in the 1970s, they were encouraged to begin immediately training others, with other pastors, other missionaries, other local churches. Why? Because for God to be most glorified in his church around the world, it wasn't just a matter of people placing their faith and trust in Christ but also learning principles from the word of God about how to grow in grace in practical areas of everyday life. So for over 30 years now we've had a training program here for 11 consecutive Mondays for people around the Midwest, pastors, missionaries, key lay persons, to come and receive that training. Also, the Goode's and the Smith's started traveling internationally because these same principles are desired around the world. So in those early years, they went to places like Haiti. They went to places like Liberia. They went to places like Brazil. Had a great impact on the missionaries in the national churches.

About 32 or 33 years ago before I was on staff, it was back when our church was over on South 18th Street. A mission's executive came and spoke on a Sunday morning. I wasn't here but I've heard this story many, many times from those who were. And that mission board executive essentially laid out our church family and said, "You need to let the Goode's and you need to let the Smith's travel internationally many more weeks than they currently are doing because this material is needed around the world." In other words, kind of giving the impression that the church family was being stingy with their pastors. Well, that didn't go over so well with Pastor Goode and let me explain why. He believed that both counseling and counseling training was best done in the context of the local church. That's what you need to understand. Because then you would see living examples of grace reigning. I cannot emphasize that principle too much that there's a big difference between talking about putting recipes in some impersonal conference center somewhere and letting people sample the pudding that's been made in the context of a vibrant local church.

So they started in 1985 what was called the Missionary Training Conference. It was here in Lafayette. It was for missionaries. The assumption was everybody else would come on Mondays but they would pack that training in one full lump for one week for missionaries who needed it and that's the way it started. And they believed it was better instead of going to all these mission fields all the time, not that that's wrong, but it was better for missionaries to rub shoulders with church members who had been saved and who were growing through counseling through biblical principles and they were practical examples of grace reigning.

Well now, advance the ball 30 years. More people from around the country wanted to come and here's the point: what we hear from our conference guests over and over is that what seals the training for them many times is seeing the effect of these principles informally in the lives of our church members. Of course, we want to pray that we would never be puffed up about that, right? God is opposed to the proud, James 4:6. We don't want to be puffed up about that. He gives grace to the humble. But I want to be sure that we have thanked you in advance that for so often living in a way where grace reigns. Some of you are giving up a bedroom in your house for a week. You might be getting a bit nervous about that. I don't know. Here's the bottom line: for many of our conference guests from small churches, free housing is what makes the difference between them being able to come or not. And I know it's not convenient but you made that decision by letting grace reign. Please don't worry about, "Oh no, now we're going to have to put on a front." Look, we're going to keep them really busy. You're not going to be spending a lot of time with them anyway. But don't try to give them the impression that you're all that and a bag of chips because what have we been studying? Our stand is not our own perfection, our stand is in the finished work of Christ. Sure, talk to them about the ways you're growing if that's appropriate to do so but feel free to talk about all the areas that you still need to work on because you understand reigning grace is a process.

Many of you are planning to serve and you might think that is a little deal. I'm telling you not to many of our guests, because they in their churches have to pull teeth in order to get people to serve. Now, you see, it's one thing for us in these teaching sessions to say that these principles work producing grace filled sanctification, grace filled righteousness. It's something entirely different for them to walk out for a break and see a group of teenagers joyfully gathering up the trash. Where grace is reigning. Or a group of men and women, some who are taking time off work joyfully serving food at one of the breaks or helping in one of the bookstores or cleaning the restrooms. By the way, when you get 2,000 people on the same campus, you realize in our registration process, we don't just let nice, rational people come. There might be a few interesting ones, do you know what I mean?

Well, let's be determined with the help of the Lord that we're going to serve in a way that you could hang a big sign around our entire church family that reads, "Grace reigns." Why do we do what we do personally? Why do we do what we do corporately? It's because God offers us standing grace. And God offers us abundant grace. And God offers us reigning grace.

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

*Father in heaven, please help us to think carefully about what's reigning. Lord, help us to think carefully about what we'd have to change in order for it to be more accurately said of us that grace is controlling, grace is ruling, grace is reigning. Lord, I pray that you would help that to be true of us as individuals and I pray that you would help that to be true of us as a church. We pray this in the name of the person who makes that possible, the gracious Lord Jesus Christ. In his name, amen.*