How a Situation Occurs

On Filters, Buffers of Grace, and Beating Swords Into Plowshares

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 4: The Multitude No One Could Number, Chapter 3

Sermon preached August 3, 2025

The Filter We Cannot See

Almost every experience we have as individuals is going to pass through a filter of interpretation, and that filter is our own. It is the things we have read and studied. It is where we grew up. It is our parents. The filter is *there*, whether we admit it or not, and you cannot do anything about it until you first notice it is there. Once you notice it, you can be intentional about which filters you want to keep and which you want to attend to.

So a situation comes at us and *occurs to* one of us as bad, and to another as great. You can pick almost anything in human experience and see this at work. I heard not long ago that my nephew jumped off a sixty-foot cliff yesterday and lost his watch and his phone on the way down. To him, that occurred as *life lived abundantly*. To me, that occurs as *bone-rattling fear*: I don't care if I'm dropping into a cloud of cotton, I am not jumping off a sixty-foot anything. Same act. Different filters. Completely different occurrences.

Consider how this works when we read the Bible. When someone who lost a father at the age of three reads "Lord, show us the Father" in John 14, his ears are formed by his own experience of fatherlessness. He brings that to the verse, and the verse meets him in the place where the wound still lives. That is not a flaw. That is how reading actually happens. The text and the reader meet, and meaning emerges in the meeting. This is the work of the Spirit. You're

not just receiving the Word as it comes to you. You're *coming to* it, and you are bringing yourself with you.

"You're Getting off That Bus"

Years ago a brother in a congregation I once attended was at a difficult point in his life. He had been struggling with his faith for years. Eventually he just decided he was leaving: leaving the church, leaving his family, getting on a bus to go somewhere else. He stood there with his bags packed, and his father gave him one piece of advice as he walked out the door. *Well, son, just remember; you're getting off that bus.*

That is the whole point. You think you are leaving all your baggage behind. *Mom. Dad. School. Work. Old hurts. Old habits. The grass is greener over there.* But you're getting off the bus on the other end with all of it still in your hands. There is no destination at which the filter does not arrive with you.

So there ought to be an abundant reservoir of *grace* in this room for one another. We are all fairly alike in this room. We were mostly born in America. We have similar background jobs. We have a similar enough culture that I can say *Winnie the Pooh* and everyone here will know what I mean. We are not pulling people in from the Amazon basin who have never heard the name. We have ground to communicate. And yet even in our deep cultural sameness, situations *occur differently* to each of us. You have been there. You have sat next to your spouse and thought, *I don't understand why they can't see this. It's so obvious.* It is so obvious from your vantage point, and not at all obvious from theirs.

Our actions and our attitudes are a direct result of how a situation *occurs* to us. If I feel threatened, my amygdala hijacks the wheel and I go into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. That is

how primitive the engine of behavior is. So when we see somebody else's manifestation of how a situation occurs to them, *carefulness* is the only honest response.

There is a story I have heard told many times: about a father who got on a subway with his four young children, and the children were chaotic. They were running up and down the car, climbing on seats, getting into things, and the father was sitting motionless, doing nothing. Finally one of the passengers had enough and said, with some heat, *Sir, can you do something about your kids? They're bothering everyone in this car.* The father looked up, startled, as if he had been called back from a long way off, and said quietly, *I'm so sorry. We just came from the hospital. Their mother just passed away an hour ago. They don't know how to manage this. Neither do I.* And in an instant, the entire subway car *re-occurred*. The same children. The same father. The same noise. But now everyone in the car was watching a family in shock instead of an irresponsible father.

Let us go into this world with a *buffer of grace* for how the world might be occurring to the people around us. That will inform the way we speak. It will inform the way we hear. If we are sons of the Father, if we are daughters of the King, doesn't that call us to a level of maturity to step out of our own filter long enough to ask what someone else's situation looks like from inside their own life?

Grace in the Household, Grace in the World

This is going to happen with your children. They were raised by somebody different than you were raised by. My father did not raise my kids. *I* did. And so they have to deal with what I gave them, the way I had to deal with what I was given. Everyone has to deal with *something*. We just figure out how to work it out: together, with grace.

And if there has to be grace inside our own households, *how much more* with people who are a little further out, people who are not American, people who are not from our region, people who are not from our background? Pick the category. How do those people occur to *you*?

When I talk about the cosmic scale (*nations, kindreds, tongues, tribes*) and how God is doing something that gathers all of those threads, this is what I am talking about practically. The promises of God were originally made to Jews. None of us in this room are Jews, and yet something has cascaded out from those original promises and landed on us. So when we begin to work through life, even the most extreme global situations are part of this same fabric. Don't we figure out ways to split hairs? *Well, I'm for the Ukrainians. Well, I'm for the Russians.* The Chinese, the Taiwanese. North Korea, South Korea. There is a hair's breadth between us, and yet we find ways to align with one side and make the other wrong.

I am not saying that some cultures don't lead to bigger problems than other cultures. They do. I'm not saying the Massey family doesn't have the best culture on earth; let's lay that out there. (That's a joke. You all think *your* family does too.) What I am saying is this: when we are not willing to live for a minute inside someone else's world, we will not love them enough to share with them the Father we have come to know. We will simply not love them enough to spend that kind of time. They will be too odd. Too different. And we will have made them *wrong* before we ever made them *known*.

Apparently, globally, this is a problem. We watch it every night on the news. Nobody is yet willing to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. No one would be entirely happy if a sitting president stood up and said, in some flamboyant style, Here's the great idea; we're going to sink every ship to the bottom of the sea. We're going to tax every

gun manufacturer until they can't sell another gun. The United States will become defenseless to the rest of the world. Everyone listening would say, *Ooh, that doesn't seem like the best move.*

And yet, the kingdom of God calls us into exactly that kind of space. I am a pragmatic man. I know we live in the nasty now-and-now. But I don't want to *live* in a world of swords and spears. I want to live in a world where people hear the Word of God and are so transformed by it that they are *compelled* to move in that direction, compelled to change their way of being, so they walk into every situation with open hands. *Show me your hands. Do you have a weapon?* That is the universal greeting, built into us across every culture. The handshake itself is just *I am unarmed. I am not a threat. There is nothing in my hand.* It is wired into the human animal.

The Pattern of Separation and Recovery

Let me give you a place to stand. The entire arc of Scripture is about one subject, *how God is bringing people together in him through blessing*. Watch the pattern.

When God split Adam and made Eve, he then brought them back together. *It is not good for man to be alone.* He brought them together, and out of that bringing-together came fruit: children. Then the children separated, *that was not good*, and he brought them back together in tribes. The tribes separated. Then God brought them together in *one nation*, when he blessed Abraham and said, *In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (cf. Genesis 12:3). At every level (couple, family, tribe, nation) the same pattern repeats. Separation, then recovery in a deeper unity, then fruit. And the New Testament finishes the pattern: out of the one nation, blessing flows back to all the seventy nations of Genesis 10, and we who were once outsiders are gathered in.

There is no other topic in this book. There is no other thread. Everything else is the working out of this one story.

The Mountain to Which the Nations Flow

Listen to Isaiah's vision of where this is all going:

> Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:2–4)

Notice, *the nations shall flow to it*. This is not coercion. We are not out there begging people to come into the kingdom of God. There is something so compelling about the mountain of the Lord that the nations flow to it the way water flows downhill. You have seen this spring's rainwater come off a hillside; there is no stopping it. That is the gravity God has built into his kingdom.

"He shall judge between the nations." But do not hear *judge* the way we tend to hear it. Do not picture God as a judge who loves America and hates somewhere else, so this group gets the fire and that group gets the verdict. The picture is of a *benevolent* judge whose wisdom is being shared. The nations come and bring their cases, and the judge gives wisdom. *He shall judge between the nations* in the sense that a wise father judges between two children who have come to him with a disagreement: listening to each, refining each, sending each away with more wisdom than they brought.

And let's bring it practical. Some of you are *the nations* to me. And I am *the nations* to you. We sometimes have language barriers. I say black, you say white, and we both leave wondering how the other could possibly have gotten there. But when we bring our differences to the God of Jacob, when we open ourselves to learn from him *and from each other,* something gets exchanged. Have you ever gone into a conversation with strong views and found that your original thought was not fully informed, and that the other person's original thought was not fully informed either, but when you created enough space to *love your enemy and sit with them*, wisdom was exchanged on both sides? You left knowing more than when you came. So did they. *That* is what "the Lord shall judge between the nations" looks like at scale. It comes through humble exchanges, one conversation at a time, in which both sides agree to be rebuked and refined.

Swords Into Plowshares

And the result of that exchange is that *the swords get hammered into plowshares*. The defensive resources get converted into productive ones. Think about how much human resource gets spent at the national level on building weapons to defend against other nations. Then bring it home. How much human resource do *you* spend on a grievance between you and a brother or sister at work, or someone in your family, or a friend who hurt you?

You sit at home and talk about it. *Well, I'll tell you what, if they would just do this, blah, blah, blah.* The person isn't there to defend themselves. We invest enormous resources on being *right*. We spend hours justifying ourselves to people who already agree with us, to our *amen* corner, about all the people over there who have treated us poorly. The swords stay swords. The fields go untilled.

Jesus addressed this directly:

> Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23–24)

That is how imperative it is. Gossip, backstabbing, holding a grudge; that is like drinking poison and expecting the other guy to die. Let it go. *Most* of the things that peeve us (most of them, in any week, in any room) we should simply let go. There is tons of stuff in this world that will peeve you. The kingdom does not require us to engage every offense.

But if there is a real existential conflict between you and a parent, between you and a child, between you and a sibling or coworker or friend, clear the space. Do it with grace. Say something like: This is how this occurred to me. This is how I'm interpreting the situation. Can you help me? Because I don't want to let one more minute go by where I think there's tension between us.

The Imagination Is the Biggest Nation

Let me confess something. There was a Sunday once when I thought a brother in this assembly was deeply opposed to something I had preached. I could read it in his face. *Clairvoyance*, at least I thought I had it. I went home grieving. I told my wife: *I can read their faces, they were upset at what I said.* I spent the whole afternoon turning it over in my mind.

That evening I got a text message from the brother in question. It said something like, *That was really amazing today. It really ministered to me.*

And I sat there in my kitchen and thought, *Rob, you're an idiot.* All those hours of resources spent on a conflict that *never existed anywhere except in my own imagination*.

Our imagination is the biggest nation on the planet. And all kinds of rebellion live inside it. The amount of chaos and noise our own minds generate, about people who are not in fact opposing us at all, is staggering. The swords in there are forged out of phantoms.

Have you ever had one of those quick conversations (the kind where you finally just ask the question, *Is there something wrong between us?*) and the answer comes back, *No, of course not. Why would you think that?* And everything just gets quiet inside? The whole imagined nation collapses in a single sentence of reality.

There is an old story a mentor of mine used to tell. He and his father were both in ministry together. His father had been peeved at him because he had been down somewhere doing a revival when his father had wanted him at a different gathering. They had words. He went to bed that night still upset, and lay awake for hours wrestling with it. His wife, in the middle of the night, told him plainly: *You need to go and make this right.* In the morning he walked outside and found his father down by a tree, looking in a small mirror and shaving. He came up and said, *Pop, I want to apologize for the way I acted about that conversation last night.* His father looked at him and said, *Aww, son: that's okay.*

And as my mentor told the story years later, he began to sing right there in front of the congregation:

"Peace, peace, wonderful peace, / coming down from the Father above. / Sweep over my spirit forever, I pray, / in fathomless billows of love." (W. D. Cornell, "Wonderful Peace")

And as he sang, you could feel the Spirit come across the room. The conflict that had been in the air, the imagined conflicts that several of us in that assembly were carrying, *melted away*. That is what reconciliation feels like. Not just for the two who are reconciled. For everyone watching.

Let's be real with one another, but the right kind of real. Not the blah, blah, blah, get your act together kind of real. Not the I have to be real with you about how everyone else has wronged me kind. The real that says, I bring a lot to this. Help me understand where your head is. And then create space, actual space, to hear them. Find out.

The Children at the Edge of the Map

When the nations come to the mountain and beat their swords into plowshares, this is the world I want to live in. Have you ever seen one of those *Time Magazine* features from the Congo: a photograph of a village where ten- and eleven-year-old boys have been pressed into militias, walking around with machine guns slung across their thin shoulders? Does anyone look at that picture and say, *That's a model society. Children at war is what God intended for the world*? Of course not.

Now picture those same children in the same village, but in a field of wheat instead of a field of fire. Picture them in a grove of lemons and apples. Picture them healthy and laughing, working with their families, gathering bushels and handing them off. Picture a stranger walking up needing Google Translate to ask what they are growing, and the children laughing while they figure it out. *That* is what the prophet saw when he saw the swords beaten into plowshares. The same human beings, with the same hands, doing the work the hands were always meant to do. The true *shalom* of God being produced.

"My Hour Has Come"

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus keeps saying *My hour has not yet come*. Second chapter at the wedding. Seventh chapter when men try to seize him. Eighth chapter at the treasury. *Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.* And then, in the twelfth chapter, the hour comes. And do you

remember what the catalyst was? It was when certain Greeks came up to Jerusalem to worship at the feast and asked Philip:

> "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21).

Greeks. Coming to Jerusalem not to sack and burn the temple, the way Antiochus Epiphanes had once done. Coming to *worship the God of Jacob*. And who had they found at the center of his worship? The Messiah. The Word of God. The Wisdom. And what does Jesus say the moment he hears that Gentiles are at the gate looking for him?

> The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. (John 12:23–24)

"Not yet, not yet, not yet: *now*." *Now* the seed must fall and die. *Now* the multinational, multilingual, multicultural fruit of that one grain begins to be produced. Look at what has been produced from that one grain's willingness *not* to use his power to control, to manipulate, to dominate, which was exactly Satan's temptation of him in the wilderness: *Be Caesar. Take the kingdoms.* Instead of taking the sword or the spear, he chose to die, and the fruit produced by that death is every Gentile reader of this book, sitting at the foot of a mountain that Greeks are now climbing to find.

Jesus said to his disciples: *Take up your cross and follow Me*. Look at what is possible. The peace of God awaits us when we are willing to open up to the possibility that we are not always right, that we can learn something from the other, that *it is not good for us to be alone*.

Homework

If you want to follow these threads through the week, here is the set of passages I have been working with:

Genesis 12:1–3 (the blessing of Abraham and all the families of the earth); Psalm 22 (with attention to verses 1 and 27: the cry of dereliction and the turning of the nations); Isaiah 2:2–4 (the mountain and the swords into plowshares); Daniel 7:13–14 along with the rest of the chapter (the Son of Man and the suffering of the saints); John 12:20–32 (the Greeks at the feast and the grain of wheat); Philippians 2:5–11 (Christ's humility and exaltation); Revelation 7:9 to the end of the chapter (the great multitude from every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue).

Read them. Study them. Pray about them. Let them work on you. That is the context for everything I have said this morning, and they go together to create the incredible space God has called us into. The name of that space is *love*.