

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive *with us*, nor will He keep *His anger* forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” —Psalm 103:8–10 (NASB)

There are two pervasive attitudes that stand diametrically opposed to the notion of grace: *entitlement* and *self-sufficiency*. The first considers anything good as *owed* to the individual, regardless of his merit. In broad terms, the attitude of entitlement is responsible for some of the greatest atrocities ever committed. Millions of lives were taken in the twentieth century under the banner of “what’s yours is mine.” In terms of religion, entitlement generates the dogma that God *must* reward a sinner with eternal life, regardless of his preference for sin. God is *obliged* to give the sinner whatever he decides he wants.

The second attitude is antithetical to the first but is equally corrosive. Self-sufficiency is the belief that whatever is needed can be found *within oneself*. No outside help is necessary for personal reform or for success in life. But even if external assistance becomes necessary, it is either earned or it is granted to make one worthy of it in the end—a kind of *quid pro quo*. In terms of religion, such an attitude is evident in all the religions of the world except biblical Christianity. It manifests itself in the belief that the sinner can either improve himself by his own effort, or that he can cooperate with God in a process wherein he will be enabled to get his act together and become worthy of eternal life.

Both of these attitudes have no place for grace, and therefore, no place for the God of grace.

I. Definition of “Divine Grace”

A. What grace means.

The grace of God refers to His disposition to show favor and bring wellbeing to those who deserve the opposite.

The grace of God is **a special expression of His goodness**. God’s *goodness* is that quality of His essence that makes Him profoundly generous to His creatures (see lesson #13). However, fundamental to God’s *graciousness* is His disposition to display **His favor specifically to those who are unworthy**. In fact, what makes grace so remarkable is not that it is given to those who merely *lack merit*—who have nothing with which they can pay. God’s grace is so remarkable because it is given to those who possess *demerit*—an *inherent unworthiness* that deserve only judgment.

GRACE:
undeserved, unmerited,
unearned favor

Whereas God’s goodness is His generous disposition toward all He has made, God’s grace is directed **purposely toward His image-bearers for the purpose of salvation**. Theologians sometimes speak of God’s *common grace* as that which is displayed to all mankind and God’s *special grace* to those He saves. But it is better to recognize that while God’s *goodness* is displayed to all (Matt 5:45; Acts 14:17), His *grace* is displayed to *select recipients*. God’s grace is always personal in nature; anyone who experiences it is unworthy of it; and it always brings the unworthy recipient into good standing with God.

At the center of grace is the concept of **undeserved favor**. Grace is *never* bestowed in response to merit, and God is *never* obligated to give it. The one who receives it has *no rightful claim* on it. Grace is *never* a payment made by God in response to something worthy of it in man. Grace is *never* a form of compensation for some form of obedience. As John Feinberg states, “If God or anyone else were obligated to give grace, it would no longer be grace—blessing would simply be a matter of justice” (*No One Like Him*, 354).

Rather, **grace is a gift**—but in a sense wholly different from how we typically understand gifts. Sometimes we give gifts *out of a sense of duty or appreciation* (a student to his teacher for meeting after class for extra tutoring). Sometimes we give gifts *to obtain favor* (a man courting a lady). Sometimes we give gifts freely, but *to those who are deserving* (a husband to his wife on their anniversary). Sometimes we give gifts even to those who are not deserving, but who are nonetheless *part of a common relationship* (a father to his not-so-obedient children).

But God’s grace is unlike any of these scenarios. There is nothing outside of God which morally or logically compels God to give this gift. There is nothing outside of God that forces His hand. When He decides to give grace, it is completely undeserved. His grace is motivated only by God’s good pleasure.

B. What God’s grace does not mean.

In a culture permeated by the sense of entitlement, it is commonly assumed that God must show the same grace to all if He is truly the perfect God of all grace. **But if God is obliged to give every sinner grace, grace would no longer be a gift. It would be owed.** To the contrary, when God does not pour favor upon a sinner, the sinner is still a recipient of God’s manifold generosity (Matt 5:45; Acts 14:17), and apart from grace God acts toward the sinner always in accordance with perfect justice. So, to assume that God must be gracious to all men equally not only minimizes the nature of a sinner’s inherent unworthiness, but it destroys God’s grace by reducing it to demand, obligation, and payment.

Those who don’t receive a particular expression of grace have no right to be angry at God for passing them by. Their anger shows that they are expecting God to do something he has never obligated himself to do, for to do it would be grace, and grace is never owed. So, even though it is human nature to complain and be angry at God when others receive a blessing that we do not receive, such attitudes are totally inappropriate. (*No One Like Him*, 354)

Moreover, that God is gracious toward some and just toward others does not imply that God experiences inner tension between these perfections. **There is never a time when God suppresses part of Himself (such as His righteousness) in order to express another part (such as His grace).** Such thinking is wholly antithetical to how God has revealed Himself to be. He is not made up of parts (e.g., one part justice, and one part grace), but is one perfect, indivisible essence—the great I AM (Exodus 3:14). In His glorious existence, He is always all of Himself perfectly, and His demonstrations of grace are in complete harmony with His righteous character. That there is no inner conflict between grace and justice is vividly observed in one of the most important descriptions of God’s character in Scripture, Exodus 34:6–7. Without devoting any effort to reconcile these perfections, Yahweh proclaims Himself to be simultaneous gracious and just:

<p>Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave <i>the guilty</i> unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”</p>	<div style="font-size: 3em; line-height: 1;">}</div>	<p>God’s graciousness (34:6–7a)</p>
	<div style="font-size: 3em; line-height: 1;">}</div>	<p>God’s justice (34:7b)</p>

This harmony between grace and justice is also reflected in the Apostle Paul’s reminder to the Romans: “Behold then **the kindness and severity of God**; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness . . .” (Romans 11:22). Clearly, Paul himself saw no contradiction between these perfections.

II. Biblical Testimony to God’s Grace

There is an abundance of texts in Scripture that testify to the graciousness of God. In fact, it is safe to say that the grace of God ranks at the top of Scripture’s dominant themes. Out of all this testimony, **Exodus 34:6-7** occupies a key place. Of this passage Ross Blackburn states, “It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the above verses [Exodus 34:6–7]. They are the longest and most complete description of the Lord’s character

to be found in the Scriptures, and canonically later Scriptures frequently return to them” (*The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 34). So definitional is this text that it is cited later in Scripture in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8, 17; 145:8; Jeremiah 32:18–19; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2. Echoes of it also appear in Deuteronomy 5:9–10; 1 Kings 3:6; Lamentations 3:32; Daniel 9:4; and Nahum 1:3.

A selection of some of the other references to the gracious character of the Triune God include John 1:14 (the incarnate Christ is “full of grace”); Hebrews 10:29 (“the Spirit of grace”); and 1 Peter 5:10 (“the God of all grace”). The following categories are particularly helpful in understanding the testimony of God’s revelation to His gracious character.

A. God’s grace is underserved by its recipient. The Bible is not ambiguous about the nature of grace. It is never earned but always received as a gift.

- Romans 3:23–24; 4:4–8; 6:23; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9

Grace “is completely unmerited and unsought, and is altogether unattracted by anything in or from or by the objects upon which it is bestowed.” —A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 90

B. God’s grace is sovereign in its exercise. God’s grace is always extended as an act of His free and sovereign will. He never extends grace under compulsion or obligation from anything outside of Himself. Rather, He extends favor *as He pleases*—according to the motivations of His own intent.

- Exodus 33:19; Ephesians 1:5–8; 2 Timothy 1:9

C. God’s grace is centered in Jesus Christ. Either by looking forward to the first advent of Christ (the Old Testament authors) or by looking backward to the historical realization of that advent (the New Testament authors), the biblical writers testify that God’s grace reaches its ultimate expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, a simple definition of “grace” can be found in the acronym, **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense** (G-R-A-C-E).

- John 1:14, 16–17; Acts 15:11; Romans 5:15; 2 Corinthians 8:9; 1 Peter 1:10–12

D. God’s grace is necessary for salvation. Because of man’s enmity toward God, he is unworthy to receive the special favor of God. Only the grace of God extended to the sinner can save him from the fate he deserves.

- Acts 11:23; 15:11; Romans 3:24; 5:17, 20–21; 6:23; Ephesians 2:5, 8–9; Titus 2:11–14; 3:5–7; 2 Timothy 1:9

But grace is not only needed for the *entrance into* salvation. It is equally needed for the *preservation* of salvation and for its *culmination* in glory. In other words, it is not only needed for *regeneration*, but also for *sanctification* and *glorification*. **From start to finish, the Christian life is wholly dependent upon grace.**

- Romans 5:1–2; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; James 4:6 – 7; Hebrews 4:6 – 7, 16; 13:9; 1 Peter 1:13; 5:5; 2 Peter 3:18

III. What God’s Grace Demands from Us

Obviously, God’s grace demands *nothing* of us. It is a free gift. It always will be. To it is never attached any *quid pro quo*! However, several responses on our part are appropriate.

A. Remember that you were saved *by* grace. Regular reminders that you were saved *solely because of the grace of God, and not because of any inherent worthiness*, provide much encouragement to the soul in moments of discouragement and much ammunition against temptations toward pride. John Bunyan, in his classic work *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, stated it well:

It is profitable for Christians to be often calling to mind the very beginnings of grace with their souls. . . . Oh the remembrance of my great sins, of my great temptations, and of my great fear of perishing forever! They bring afresh into my mind the remembrance of my great help, my great supports from Heaven, and the great grace that God extended to such a wretch as I. (4–5)

B. Acknowledge that you need grace just as much today as ever. As Christians grow in the faith they face a distinct threat—to think they are becoming increasingly *worthy* of God’s grace, or that they *no longer even need it*. As Packer writes of such Christians, “the longer they have lived without it the surer they are that at their stage of life they do not really need it” (*Knowing God*, 129). But consider these texts:

- Romans 5:1–2; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; James 4:6 – 7; Hebrews 4:6 – 7, 16; 13:9; 1 Peter 1:13; 5:5; 2 Peter 3:18

Charles Spurgeon’s words help us with this acknowledgement:

“When we put our foot upon the threshold of glory, and pass through the gates of pearl to the golden pavement of the heavenly city, the last step will be as much taken through the grace of God, as was the first step when we turned unto our great Father in our rags and misery. Left by the grace of God for a single moment, we would perish. We are dependent as much upon grace for spiritual life as we are upon the air we breathe for this natural life. (“A Testimony to Free and Sovereign Grace”)

C. Magnify God for His grace. As J. I. Packer has observed, “Once a person is convinced that his state and need are as described, the New Testament gospel of grace cannot but sweep him off his feet with wonder and joy” (*Knowing God*, 132). As we are increasingly captivated by this great theme of Scripture, it will lead us increasingly to adoration and exaltation.

- Ephesians 1:5–6

D. Extend grace toward others. The graciousness of God is a communicable attribute. God has designed us to magnify Him through an analogous display in our lives of grace toward others. Those who have received God’s grace are transformed by it into reflectors of it into the lives of others.

- Proverbs 24:29; Matthew 18:21–35; Romans 12:17–21; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6

For Further Study

Memorize: Psalm 103:8–10; Ephesians 3:8–9

Sing: “Amazing Grace” (Hymns of Grace #89)

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God’s “grace.”
- 2) In what ways have you been prone to think that salvation, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and peace with God is something merited? What are the assumptions behind such thinking?
- 3) Are you prone to think that maintaining your salvation is somehow based on merit? If so, explain where this thinking creeps up and what you are doing to mortify it.
- 4) How would you respond in the following scenarios: (a) a friend who gives this response to your gospel presentation: “I am too sinful to be forgiven by God”; (b) a friend who gives this response to your gospel presentation: “I obey the law and follow the golden rule. How could God not let someone like me into heaven?”; (c) a Christian who doubts his salvation: “I have committed this sin again! Surely I am not good enough for God to keep as His child!”
- 5) Spend time this week meditating upon Matthew 18:21–35. Record your observations about the thrust of Jesus’ instructions and how it convicts you. Consider whether there are some to whom you have failed to show the grace of forgiveness, and go to those people this week and display this grace.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: 7pm, April 26, “Immutability” (livestreaming begins at 8pm)