

GRACE—UNDERSTANDING IT

PART 1

DEFINING GRACE & UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 NKJV



Review of Study 11

We can be compared to an onion, with many layers, and each layer going deeper into our essential being. God is interested primarily in the most important areas of our existence: our spirits and the deeper parts of our souls. God works from the deepest recesses of our being, working outward, transforming our minds and lives in the process. When the deeper core areas (inner-self) are renewed, our lives are transformed. The matters of the spirit (God-consciousness, faith, conscience) are primarily addressed by salvation. Matters of the mind are addressed by transformation, and the deeper areas of the mind contain the core issues of life. Starting in the deepest areas of our inner-self and going outward, the order of transformation seems somewhat like this: conscience, character, value system, will, desires, and so forth. The spirit works to remove the scars in our minds, often created in our youth, and develops within us a mind that is not only conformed to the mind of Christ, but also bears godly fruit.

INTRODUCTION

Adult Studies 12 and 13 are an adult version of Teen Lessons 22 and 23. The topic of grace is so important, it had to be repeated in a revised, adult format.

Grace is a common topic in Christian circles because it is one of the most important biblical topics that exists. Grace is important because the Bible says, **"For by Grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"** (Eph. 2:8-9). The main topic of these verses is being saved; thus, it is Salvation that is

the gift of God. Faith is not the free gift (as explained in Adult Study 3). We have the choice to believe in Christ; if we do, God's grace saves us. God is gracious when He saves us, and that graciousness is based upon His character and nature. If He were a transcendent God, far above concern of us mere mortals, He would have no reason to be so kind and generous. There are no more important topics than salvation and God's grace, so we must clearly understand them.

We are conditioned to believe we get what we deserve in life—sort of a merit system. If we work hard, we get paid; if we study hard, we get good grades; and if we do wrong, we get punished. Many religions make the mistake of teaching that the merit system applies to salvation. In the past, the biblical law seemed to be merit based, but Christ taught the law could never make a person accepted in God's eyes. The laws could only bring death: **"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin"** (Rom. 3:20). The merit-based aspect of the law was so incredibly lofty and righteous that no one could ever measure up (teaching us that we can never get to Heaven based upon merit). In addition to being unattainable, the law could only point out sin, but it could not do anything about the sin. The law was like a thermometer: it could tell a person if he or she were sick, but it could do nothing about the illness. Thus, even when people were living under the law, they needed

God's grace in order to be saved. (He dispensed it a little differently then, as we will see.)

Today, in the Age of Grace, the Bible clearly teaches that salvation and God's grace are given to us in a different way than in the past, **"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed..."** (Rom. 3:21a). God saves us by His grace, totally independent of our merit; He can do so because salvation is based upon Christ's merit. This concept that God would act on our behalf (favors us) out of the goodness of His heart is foreign to our thinking. Here is the good news for us all: God already knows each of us, already loves us, already has a plan for each of our lives, already is on our side and wants to bless us abundantly. All He asks is faith in Jesus Christ. The faith He seeks, in order for us to be saved, is a simple faith (that we are sinners and Christ died for our sins). When we have simple faith, God will save us by His grace.

BIBLE TRUTH

Defining God's Grace

Grace in the Old Testament basically had the meaning of "favor" (e.g., loving kindness, Ruth 2:10). The New Testament adds more insights into what grace means, but favor is still the basic idea. God has always acted in grace, since it is a part of His nature. If we were to list the attributes of God, we would think of love, truth, knowledge, power, and so forth, and very high on that list would be *graciousness*.

Discuss: Once we are saved, should we do good works to help pay God back?

The Bible indicates grace refers to *undeserved* love and kindness. No human can ever deserve God's love and kindness; thus, we can never merit His grace. If we are to receive His grace, it has to be out of His desire to dispense it (give it to us). The good news is God's is willing to dispense His grace based upon His love for us

when we believe in Christ; but not based upon anything we do or could possibly do to deserve it. That same grace has a divine influence upon our hearts and lives, changing us from within. Our definition of grace is:

In reference to God, grace is His free favor and kindness to us, which is not merited or repayable. It has a divine influence upon our heart (our spirit) and lives.

Understanding God's Grace

To understand this definition, the essential terms are discussed below.

- **free:** there is no way of earning His grace, so God gives it free-of-charge based upon His goodness and love for us. If we could earn it, then we would deserve it

(merit it). If we pay for something at a store, we deserve it because we earned the right to own it. Similarly, a gift is something we get for free; if not free, then it is not a gift. We all have sinned, "**...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Rom. 3:23). Thus, what we truly deserve is death (that is what we earn based upon a merit system), "**For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Rom. 6:23).

Our sins take away all the merit we may think we have (like going to church). Thankfully, the Lord has a better way, "**...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...**" (Rom. 3:23-24). This is good news from the heart of the Lord. Grace is freely given upon faith in Him; He asks for nothing in return.

- **favor and kindness:** God's grace is independent of who we are and what we do; it is totally dependent upon Who His is. His grace is holy and cannot be altered in any way. We receive His grace solely upon God's goodness to us, not our actions. God can give the benefits of His grace to anyone, in any way He wants. Thankfully, the way He has chosen to offer His grace is based upon faith in Christ. "**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**" (John 3:16). "**But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us**" (Rom. 5:8).

- **unmerited:** no one deserves God's grace: it is not our right, and it has nothing to do with our merit or being worthy. If grace had anything to do with our merit, then God would have to withdraw it when we sin (which we all do). His grace is not dispensed based upon our work or merit; if so, it would be based upon debt. "**Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness**" (Rom. 4:4-5). In fact, our lack of merit makes us cry out for God's grace to save us.

Grace cannot be expressed where the slightest degree of human merit is recognized.

Discussion: Many organizations or youth programs have merit badges; if we do all that is required, we earn our badge. Our actions prove we are worthy and deserve praise and the badge. A human can never merit God's grace, since we are all sinners and thus "unmerited." If we are to receive His grace, it has to be in some way other. Discuss merit as it relates to Christ, our substitute.

- **not repayable:** any thought of repaying God for His grace is unthinkable. An act is not gracious if any debt occurs. There is no service, doing good, or offerings that can repay God. If we could pay God back it would not be His free gift, and we would be instrumental in paying for our sins. Grace cannot require any debt or cause any thoughts of repayment; God's grace cannot be recompensed. It is given to us by His pure kindness, not out of obligation to us. "**Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace...**" (Rom. 4:16a). "**And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work**" (Rom. 11:6).

- **Divine influence:** Once we receive God's grace, the Holy Spirit indwells us. The Spirit begins to influence our heart (spirit) and mind (soul), teaching us His truth. This inner working of the Spirit is called transformation (Studies 9-11). When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, there are no miraculous powers, gifts, or experiences. No visions, voices, tongues, and so forth, accompany His quiet entrance into the heart. During Christ's life and shortly thereafter, miraculous powers did occur, but the Bible makes it clear this is not how the Lord works in the Age of Grace. He does not display His presence in an outward, observable manner. What He does provide is the Holy Spirit, working in the core of our being, producing a quiet but profound change in our lives.

...the believer, when empowered by the Spirit, will be conscious only of the exercise of his own faculties. The Spirit does not disclose His presence directly; His ministry is to reveal and glorify Christ. His presence will be evidenced, however, by the victory that is wrought, which victory could be wrought only by the Spirit.¹

Discussion: It has been said that a Christian is a person in whom Christ is happening. What does that mean? (Answer: Christ, in the person of the Holy Spirit, lives within the believer and is actively changing thoughts, behavior, attitudes, desires, etc. This ongoing process "is happening.")

¹ Chafer, Lewis Sperry; *Grace—The Glorious Theme*; Zondervan Publishing House; Grand Rapids, Michigan; 1979; pg. 208.

LIFE APPLICATIONS

Based upon what has been discussed, we will try to ensure a common understanding—a unity—by the use of five questions. The correct answers and a discussion will be presented after the questions. These are true-false questions. If part of a question is true and part false, then mark the entire question as false.

1. I believe Christ died for my sins and in His grace, so I deserve to be saved (Eph. 2:8). ____
2. God's grace saved me through faith, it is my duty to repay Him the best I can by service and good works (Eph. 2:10). ____
3. Salvation is God's reward for loving and serving Him. ____
4. I am not worthy of salvation, but I believe Christ's death paid for my sins; thus I am saved. ____
5. I am a sinner, but I am not all bad; Christ knows my desire is to be a good person, so He will save me by His grace. ____

Discussion of Questions

Question 1 (Answer: false): Belief in Christ is all one has to have in order to be saved, so this person is saved. However, the question is still not entirely true because no one ever deserves, or has a right to, God's grace. Even

The Cross forever disposes of the condemnation of sin (guilt and punishment); all questions of merit have been forever settled because of Christ death. We merit nothing, but the merit of He Who was slain can be transferred to us (imputation). God has stated that Christ's righteousness can become ours by faith. Faith makes us one with Christ and the penalty of all our sins is paid in full (past, present, and even all future sins). **"For He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (2 Cor. 5:21, parentheses added). **"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit"** (Rom. 8:1).

when you believe in Christ you do not deserve Salvation. You will receive salvation upon belief, but that is totally due to His grace, not your right to have it given to you. God has saved this person because he or she believed in Him, but he or she is mistaken about deserving salvation. The biblical reference was put there so that you can see how false teaching can seem very biblical.

Question 2 (Answer: false): This person is saved if he or she truly believes in Christ's death for his or her sins. But the idea of ever paying God back (even in part) is totally against Scripture. If it could be paid back, then salvation would not be a free gift by God's grace. To think of paying God back is to diminish His gift to you, bringing His glorious gift down to the meager level of mankind. The good works that spring from our salvation are a means of showing our love and devotion to Him, not to pay Him back. **"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"** (Eph. 2:10).

Question 3 (Answer: false): salvation is never a reward for anything a person does. Loving and serving Him are good things, but they cannot earn even a portion of what God has done. You love and serve Him out of respect

and a desire to honor Him, not to gain a reward. If salvation were a reward, then your works gained your salvation, but this belief certainly does not agree with the Bible. Instead, salvation is a gift of God's grace without any merit on our part. **"...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit"** (Tit. 3:5). (Note: "washing of regeneration" is not referring to water baptism but to the cleansing from sin we get when we are regenerated [saved].)

Question 4 (Answer: true): The plain and simple truth of salvation is stated. This is all that is required (no more, no less). God gives us salvation (new birth, regeneration) by His grace through faith.

Question 5 (Answer: false): Being good has nothing to do with salvation. Being better than average or being really great are of no value. No one can ever be good enough; just one sin is all that is needed to send a person to Hell. When it comes to Heaven or Hell, God judges us for our sins, not how good we were. The believer's sins are forgiven and totally taken away. God declares the believer to be righteous (without sin, because the blood of Christ removes all sin). Do not ever think the issue is whether your good outweighs your bad; that is the Devil's lie. Again, one sin makes you a sinner, and all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Sin earns you something you do not want: **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Rom. 6:23). Being good should result from your salvation, but it has nothing to do with receiving salvation.

TAKE TO HEART

Summary

God's grace is His free favor and kindness to us; it is not merited or repayable. His grace has a God-directed influence upon our hearts and lives. He dispenses His grace based upon His love and kindness toward us, not because of something we do to earn it. All God asks in order to receive His grace is faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. God's grace is what saves us when we believe in Christ. The good news is no one is so bad that He will deny him or her salvation, because His desire is to save everyone (1 Tim. 2:4).

Gospel

Upon simple faith, God will save you by His grace. If you have faith (believe) in Christ's death for your sins, that is all that you must believe. **"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"** (I Cor. 15:3). When we believe, all our sins are forgiven (otherwise, we could not have Christ's righteousness).

Encouragement

If you believe in Christ's death for your sins, God has already saved you. As His Spirit influences your life, there will be wonderful changes. His grace will produce a gracious heart in you, a heart that desires to be kind and compassionate toward others. As His grace changes you from within, you will experience a new freedom in life you did not know exists. Please do not be impatient; His influence upon your life may be slower or faster than you thought. The main thing is to be willing to obey the Word and allow Him to direct your life. As you cooperate with the working of the Spirit in your life, you will see how you are changing into His image, and new-found choices and opportunities await you. Thank you for your love for the Lord Jesus Christ and your desire to grow in grace.