

What's So Amazing about Grace?

Grace is a familiar word.¹ I can think of at least seven expressions that include it or variations of it. *Let's say grace before we eat. That person is lacking in social grace. There but for the grace of God go I. Look at how graceful he is. She's a gracious hostess. We'll give you a 30-day grace period. Notice the grace notes in the musical score. Good morning, Your Grace, your throne awaits.*

Other words in common use are related to *grace*. Examples include *grateful, gratified, gratuity, congratulations.*

These expressions and related words are ones that would be understood by most people. But, of course, the word *grace* is especially important to Christians. Some would say that grace is the church's great distinctive. It's the essence of the gospel.² It's the one thing the church can offer that the world cannot.³

Grace must be a very important word for the church because when I looked it up in my dictionary of theological terms, I found twenty-four entries.⁴ These include actual grace, cheap grace, common grace, irresistible grace, justifying grace, prevenient grace, saving grace, sufficient grace, and universal grace. (I won't list the other fifteen entries.)

How could we define the basic word *grace*? Returning to my trusty theological dictionary, I find a two-word definition: *unmerited favor*. And then it expands on those two words with this sentence: *God's grace is extended to sinful humanity in providing salvation and forgiveness through Jesus Christ that is not deserved, and withholding the judgment that is deserved.* The three scripture references listed in the definition are from Romans, Ephesians, and Titus.⁵

Statements about grace bookend the passage from Romans 6 that we heard Paul (or should I say the two Pauls) read earlier. *So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? So then, don't let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. Sin will have no power over you, because you aren't under Law but under grace.*⁶

Paul talks a lot about sin and grace throughout his letter to the churches in Rome. Listen to what he writes in Romans 3. *God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of*

¹ Sources consulted include Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, Zondervan, 1997; Spill the Beans: Worship and Learning Resources for All Ages, Issue 15, [Past Issues | Spill The Beans](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 145: Hope of Resurrection — Pulpit Fiction](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 444 Baptized into Death \(Romans 6:1-14\) | BibleWorm \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, [Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary: Narrative Lectionary 541: Hope of Resurrection - May 21, 2023 \(libsyn.com\)](#).

² Yancey, p. 13.

³ Yancey, p. 15.

⁴ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, pp. 120-121.

⁵ Romans 3:24, Ephesians 1:7, Titus 2:11.

⁶ Romans 6:1-2, 12, 14, *Common English Bible*.

*God's glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus.*⁷

There's no distinction. To understand what Paul is talking about here, remember his thesis statement we read two weeks ago. *That's why I'm ready to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. I'm not ashamed of the gospel: it is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, from faithfulness for faith, as it is written, "The righteous person will live by faith."*⁸

Because the churches in Rome included both Jewish and Gentile (or Greek) Christians, Paul spends a lot of time comparing the experiences of the two groups. Chapter 3 begins with these words: *So what's the advantage of being a Jew? Or what's the benefit of circumcision? Plenty in every way.*⁹

However, after listing some advantages, he concludes with these words: *So what are we saying? Are we better off? Not at all. We have already stated the charge: both Jews and Greeks are all under the power of sin.*¹⁰

Are the Jews any better off than the Gentiles? Yes, because they were chosen by God to be entrusted with the promises of God. They were chosen by God so that all nations would be blessed through them.

Are the Jews any better off than the Gentiles? No, because both Jews and Greeks – both Jews and Gentiles – are under the power of sin.

Recall the circumstances under which this letter to the Roman Christians was written. Even though Paul didn't write to the Roman churches in response to a crisis in the community, he is aware that these churches are quite diverse. Later in the letter, he uses the metaphor of a body to describe how diverse the individuals in the churches are, how unified they are in Christ, and how interdependent they need to be.¹¹ The churches in Rome included life-long Jews who became followers of Christ. The churches in Rome included non-Jewish people who converted to Judaism and became followers of Christ. The churches in Rome also included people who were followers of Christ but never became Jews.

We can relate to this. We're familiar with diversity within groups of Christians. Looking at the Christian church as a whole, or the churches in any town or within any one denomination, or at any particular congregation, it's easy to list two or three, ten or twenty, or maybe even hundreds of groupings within them. It's not difficult for people to find – or even to create – differences within a group and then to attempt to rank people based on those differences.

In this letter to the churches in Rome, Paul is walking a tightrope. He argues very carefully, demonstrating that God is both trustworthy and impartial. God is trustworthy. God is faithful to the covenant promises made to Israel and through them to the rest of the nations. The law and the prophets are still important. At the same time, God is impartial. God imparts both salvation and judgment to everyone regardless of any difference one might consider. It doesn't matter if they're Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, men or women. All are one in Christ Jesus.¹²

⁷ Romans 3:22-24, *Common English Bible*.

⁸ Romans 1:15-17, *Common English Bible*

⁹ Romans 3:1-2a, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁰ Romans 3:9, *Common English Bible*.

¹¹ Romans 12:3-31.

¹² Galatians 3:28

In his letter to the Romans, Paul shows that grace is needed by everyone and is offered to everyone. Returning to Romans 3: *There's no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory.*¹³

It wouldn't be hard for the Jewish Christians to believe that the Gentiles had fallen short of God's intentions. However, Paul anticipated some objections from the life-long Jews who could honestly say that they had been faithful and had done their best to follow the law all of their lives. He quotes from their holy scriptures – what we now call the Old Testament – to show them that even though they did their best, they still fell short. In Romans 3, Paul quotes from Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and at least six different Psalms to show that everyone is guilty under the law.

Most of us can easily identify with this. We're aware of the many ways we fall short in living the way we think God wants us to live. We know what it's like to feel guilty. We readily acknowledge the power of sin in our lives. It's been helpful to me to think of this as SIN with a capital S, a capital I, and a capital N. All caps SIN is a basic disposition, or orientation, of turning away from God. When we express remorse for this turning away and admit our inability to make things right on our own, we can then accept God's gift of forgiveness. We also acknowledge that we continue to deal with sins – in lower case letters. Lower-case sins are the acts and thoughts that hinder our relationship with God and with each other.

Sometimes it's easier for us to see those hindering acts in others than it is to see them in ourselves. We know when the words and actions of other people hurt and anger us. We wonder if it was deliberate or inadvertent. We can notice and wonder about the same things in ourselves.

But Paul is telling the Romans – and telling us – that there is no distinction. We have all fallen short. We all continue to fall short. But ... there is good news.

*But all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus.*¹⁴ Grace is available through the faithfulness of Jesus. It's because of what Jesus did – through his life, death, and resurrection – that it's possible for all those who have sinned – that would be everyone, no distinction – to be made right before God. We could spend hours, days, even years debating how exactly this happened. I've talked about theories of the atonement several times over the years. The simplest explanation I have is that Jesus did something for us that we couldn't do for ourselves.

Grace – unmerited favor. It comes at God's initiative. It's a gift that's available because of the faithfulness of Jesus. We receive it through faith in Jesus.

It's time for me to make a confession. I stole the title of my sermon from a book written by Philip Yancey in 1997. This book was pivotal in my understanding of grace and of sin.

This is what Yancey writes about grace: ***Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more – no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries and divinity schools, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes. And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less – no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.***¹⁵

¹³ Romans 3:22b-23, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁴ Romans 3:24, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁵ Yancey, p. 70.

Sometimes it isn't so easy for us to accept this gift. We focus on our shortcomings and don't open our hearts to God's grace. As Yancey puts it: *What blocks forgiveness is not God's reticence...but ours. God's arms are always extended; we are the ones who turn away.*¹⁶

Paraphrasing another author, Louis Smedes, who draws connections between shame and grace: *Guilt isn't always the problem. What we feel most is a glob of unworthiness that we can't tie down to any concrete sins we are guilty of. We don't believe that God accepts us, owns us, holds us, affirms us, and will never let go of us even if sometimes God is not too much impressed with us.*¹⁷

Grace is unmerited favor. It is a gift. Grace is needed by everyone and is offered to everyone. Therefore, we need to be humble before God – and before each other. Paul is explicit on that point. *What happens to our bragging? It's thrown out.*¹⁸

We can't brag about receiving grace because we could never be perfect enough to earn it. Grace isn't an achievement. Grace doesn't allow room for self-righteousness. We have no right to withhold grace from each other. There is no distinction. We accept the gift of forgiveness from God. We offer the gift of forgiveness to each other. As Yancey states, *Jesus plainly links our forgiven-ness by the Father with our forgiving-ness of fellow human beings.*¹⁹ We're reminded of that fact every Sunday morning when we pray together: *Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*

Are we then free to do anything we want to do knowing that God will forgive us? No, of course not. Returning to where we began: *So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? So then, don't let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. Sin will have no power over you, because you aren't under Law but under grace.*²⁰

I think Paul is talking about both all caps SIN and lower-case sins. Should we continue lower-case sinning so we can receive a lot of grace? No! Grace doesn't excuse the sin, but it does treasure the sinner.

Don't let all caps SIN rule you. All caps SIN won't have power over you because you are living under grace. In Romans 6, Paul is thinking of conflicting worlds – one that is dominated by the power of sin and one that is under the sway of God, where love and grace abound. According to Paul, we're born into the world under the power of sin. Baptism symbolizes our movement from that world into God's world. We used to live in sin world, but now we live in grace world. Of course, in reality, we are influenced by and feel the effects of both worlds.

As much as possible, we live in right relationship with God and with each other. The one who has faith in Jesus and can accept the gift of grace will also follow the example of Jesus and live by what Jesus taught.

What's so amazing about grace? God, the giver of grace, is both trustworthy and impartial. Grace is unmerited favor. It is a gift. Grace is needed by everyone and is offered to everyone. Grace is amazing indeed! Thanks be to God!

¹⁶ Yancey, p. 52.

¹⁷ Yancey, p. 36, from Louis Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve*, HarperOne, 2009.

¹⁸ Romans 3:27a, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁹ Yancey, p. 87.

²⁰ Romans 6:1-2, 12, 14, *Common English Bible*.