

## Saving by Grace

Complete these common American phrases for me: If it sounds too good to be true... it is. There's no such thing as a free ... lunch. There is no gain without ... pain. God helps those who ... help themselves.

Everything about the American way of life teaches us that you get what you earn in life. We're very aware of the values of competition and winning and we talk a lot about working hard and using elbow grease. We value effort and sweat. We tell people, "You get what you deserve in life" and "If you want to make something of your life it's up to you" and "If it is to be, it's up to me".

This is the American work ethic, and it's worked well for our culture and built up our economy. Lots of us base our lives on it. The only problem with centering your life on that work ethic is God's kingdom doesn't operate that way. God doesn't conduct business on that basis. That can make relating to God and understanding God's motives difficult for us because we've been raised with that mentality.

God doesn't deal with us on the basis of what we earn. Psalm 145:8 says, *"The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love."* That's grace. God loves to be gracious; to give you chances you don't deserve. That's God's nature. And if you're honest with yourself and about yourself, aren't you glad about that?

The thing is, you really can't begin to understand the Christian life at all unless you have a basic understanding of grace. It's the heart; the core; the main point of our faith. It's the basis of our relationship with God. The more you understand grace the closer you'll feel to God, be drawn to God, love God and be grateful to God.

A while ago we had a series called "The Amazing Grace." Today, we're beginning a new series I'm calling "More of The Amazing Grace". There are many aspects to Grace and no single message or message series can really describe it. Many Christians assume that they understand grace. They know that the Bible says they are saved by grace. You know that. But even though many believers know intellectually that they're saved by grace, they actually spend most of their life thinking and acting as if we're saved by works. For many of us, even though we know we're saved by grace and know that we don't get into heaven by doing good, our faith life is built on pleasing God by trying to be good enough. We're paying lip service to being saved by grace but we're actually living like we're saved by works and treating others like they're saved by works as well.

One definition of grace is, God giving me what I need, not what I deserve. Mercy is when God doesn't give us what we do deserve. Grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve. When you begin to really understand grace it brings joy to life. It's the most liberating thing in the world. You can be a Christian for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years and never really learn to live by grace. So we're going to do another series on grace and we'll do others in the future. It's really the main thing. My goal is that you'll not just understand grace but experience it, feel it, enjoy the grace of God in your life.

Grace isn't divided up, but there are many expressions of grace. In the weeks to come we're going to look at Sustaining by Grace - How God gives you the power to keep on going when you want to give up. Healing and Grace - How does God do miracles in your life. We'll look at Growing Thru Grace and Restoring in Grace as well. Next year - in July I think, I'll do another series on grace and we'll cover grace in several other aspects.

Today I want us to start with the foundation, which is Saving by Grace. In many ways this will be review. If you're a believer, you understand being saved by grace to some extent. But you can't build a structure without a foundation and this is foundational. And, if nothing else, it's good to remind ourselves what a good deal we get when we receive the grace of God. It makes us appreciate it more and give God glory.

So the first thing about grace is, **1. God's Grace to Me Is Unearned.** It's undeserved, unmerited, unwarranted it is, indeed, unfair and in a very real sense unjust - it's certainly not fair to God, who deserves better and it doesn't punish us for wrongs as we justly deserve. Romans 3:23-24 says, *"...everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins."* It's a free gift. Many people think they're saved by being good enough so that that God can say, "OK, you did more good than bad" and if you were to ask a hundred people on the street, "How do you get to heaven?" you'd get a lot of different answers. Let's hear a few of them: [Play Video]

What most people say can be summed up as, "I don't know" or - the most frequent answer when they have any answer at all - something like, "You've got to earn your way to heaven - you try to be good and do your best."

But the truth of the matter is, God's grace is a free gift. You don't work for a gift. It's free or it's not a gift. Linda and I were staying at a vacation resort in Florida a few years ago on vacation. They had hotel spaces and time-share

places and they offered a free breakfast and some free gifts if you would take the tour and hear their pitch. Let me tell you, that stupid breakfast wasn't free - it cost us a lot of aggravation!

But with God, salvation is free. You can't earn it, you can't deserve it, you can't be worthy of it, you can't buy it, you can't work for it. This is a fundamental difference between Christianity and other religions. Christianity is the only one built on grace. In every other religion there are certain things you do in order to gain God's approval. Each system is different and what you have to do varies. One says do "these" things, another "those" things. But you do certain things to gain bliss, peace, approval, a holy state, paradise, whatever.

In Christianity, what needs doing has already been done by Jesus. What can you do to be saved? Nothing! What needed to be done was already done about 2000 years ago. You're too late! The only thing you can do is accept God's free gift of grace. You'll never get a better deal. If you really understand grace, you'll accept it. It's both free and priceless.

That grace is available to everyone. Regardless of background, status or sin, whether you grew up in a religious family or don't have any religious background at all. Romans 14:16 says, "*...the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith...*"

The people who live according to the law of Moses are, of course, the Jewish people, who were given the law of Moses. They were called God's chosen people because they were chosen for a purpose. They were chosen to show the world that there is one true God. Now God has given that task to the church which includes Gentiles, Jews and everyone else who puts their faith in Christ. God says it's available to anyone who opens up their heart in faith. Romans 10:13 says, "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" There are no quotas. It doesn't say only really good people, or really religious people, or really smart people. It says everyone. Everyone who has faith in the grace of God will be saved.

You may have done some really nifty things in life, but if you think they're going to get you into heaven, forget it. The only way you're going to get in is by receiving God's gift.

**2. God's Grace to Me Is Accepted through Faith.** God's gift is received by faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 says "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*" Faith isn't something I do to deserve grace. Faith is the key that unlocks the door. It's the way grace becomes real to me and evident in my life.

Because salvation is a gift, you can't brag about it. You can only accept it and be grateful. Too many people seem inordinately proud of being Christian. They seem to think it makes them personally superior in some way. I've heard people say things like we shouldn't bother with outsiders. We should focus on the people we have, not on those people "out there" who we don't know. That's one of the arguments people make against community ministries and outreach.

But if salvation is an undeserved gift, we're not more special or more valuable than other people. It's not us who are superior. Only God is superior; only God has true value; only God is worthy. We're no better than anyone out there and if we act like we're more valuable, worthy, deserving or better in some way, we're playing at being God – and that's something God's brought down entire nations for.

God has provided us with grace, but it's not just for our own sake. You can't really accept God's grace without grace changing you and making you a participant in God's desire to give that grace to others. If you think you can, you're fooling yourself. God expects us to show the power of grace in life.

Even in the Old Testament, the Bible is full of stories of the people God calls treating others with grace. In 2 Samuel 9 there's an account about a disabled boy named Mephibosheth who was the son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul.

If you remember the story of David and Saul, Saul was the king and was jealous of David. So Saul was trying to kill David and chased him all over. David spent most of his time hiding from Saul, but never retaliated. In fact, Saul's son, Jonathan was his best friend. They made a secret covenant that if one of them died the other would take care of their family. Later, Saul and Jonathan both died in battle and David became king. Saul's relatives were afraid David would kill them because of what Saul had tried to do to David. So they tried to escape and hide.

As a nurse was carrying the young boy Mephibosheth out, she dropped him. His legs were broken and he became a paraplegic. So this young disabled boy had to stay there, living in fear, frightened that the man who was now king would retaliate against him.

But one day David asked, "Is there anybody still alive in Saul's household that I can show kindness to?" They said, "Yes, there's a disabled boy who can't walk." David said, "Bring him to me." You can imagine the fear the boy felt. He's thinking, "I'm going to be executed. It's over." But to his surprise, David said, "I'm going to take you in and make you a part of my family. I want you to live here in the palace. I'm going to pay your bills and meet your needs. You'll sit at my table each night and dine with me and I'm going to treat you just like one of my own sons." See, that's grace. That's the kind of grace God shows by making us his children. God comes to us even though we're broken and undeserving and says, "I'm going to bring you into my family. I want you to sit at my table. I'm going to treat you like one of my own."

Remember the story Jesus told of the prodigal son? A man had two sons. One was an independent spirit. He said, "Dad, I want you to give me my half of the inheritance now." The dad split the future inheritance and gave half to the son and the kid took off. He skipped out, went to the big town and started partying. He's having a great time - wine, women and song, living it up, blowing all the money. One day he runs out of money and he hits bottom in every way possible. In fact, he ended up having to work feeding pigs and was so hungry that he'd eat the pig food.

You know Jewish people don't eat pork so living with pigs and eating pig food. was as low as you could go. Culturally, he couldn't get more degraded. One day, the light finally goes on and he says, "What am I doing!?! My father's servants are treated better than this. I'm going home. I'll be a servant, but I'll be better off than anything I'll get here! I'll go back and say, 'Dad, I've blown it. I've made a mistake. I don't deserve to be called your son any more. Just make me a hired servant and I'll work for you as a servant, not as a son, because your servants are treated better than I was out in the world.'"

Then as the son was coming home the father saw him from a long way off. He ran out to greet him. He didn't wait for him to get cleaned up, to get the smell of pigs and the road off him. He hugs him and says, "Bring out the best robes. Give him the official family ring. Let's party! My son has come home." The kid deserved condemnation; deserved to be judged and rejected. But instead, he's received with unconditional love. That's the grace of God received by faith.

**3. God's Grace to Me Comes Only Through Christ.** John 1:17 says, "*... the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" Why is Jesus the only way? Why not Buddha? He was a good guy. He had wisdom and was a great teacher. Why not Mohammad? He did pretty good for himself. A lot of people followed his teachings and lots still do. Why not someone else? Why Jesus Christ?

Because he's the only one who has the qualifications to know the truth and he's the one who paid the price for the truth. All those other guys were only human. They didn't deserve grace any more than any of us. Jesus was human, yes, but he was more than human as well. He is the source of grace and the source of truth as well as being the channel for grace and truth - our way of experiencing and embracing grace and truth. And he paid the price for your salvation. Accepted the penalties you deserved. Nobody else has done that. Grace is free, no doubt about that. But it is not cheap. It cost Jesus everything.

The law is good and powerful - it helps me know when I do wrong. It tells me, "You blew it!" But grace is even more powerful. It says, "You're forgiven. Here's how to get back on track. Let's get going in the right direction. I'll guide you." The law points out our sin, and we need to realize how bad things are for us. But God's grace in Christ overcomes everything else. Romans 5:15 says, "*...there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ.*"

In my life there are things I've done wrong; things that would disqualify me from being a part of God's family. There are things that have damaged me; things I'm ashamed of; things I wouldn't like for anyone to know; things I wish I could do over. There are thoughts I've thought I shouldn't have. There are times I've made a mess of my life.

But the Bible says that when I come to Jesus Christ and I say, "Jesus, I open my life up to you and accept your free gift of grace" Jesus takes my life with all the wrongs, all the mistakes, all the guilt and accepts me and I become part of his Body. Then God looks at me with eyes of grace and God only sees the perfection of Jesus Christ, not my imperfections.

In Galatians 2:20-21 Paul says, "*My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.*" If you could be saved and could get to heaven on your own merits, the cross was a travesty, a tragedy and a waste. If you could have saved yourself by obeying the rules and doing the right things, Jesus

wouldn't have come and died on the cross for you. But there was no other way. You're either going to be saved by Christ, or you're not going to be saved.

It's a free gift. You just accept it in faith. Grace is all that God does for me because of what Jesus Christ did for me on the cross.

**4. God's Grace to Me Never Ends** - Romans 6:23 says, "*... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*" "eternal life". The results of God's grace are going to go on forever. Eternal life is one of the benefits of God saving us by grace. You could say that grace is the gift that keeps on giving. With Jesus Christ it just keeps getting better and better.

That eternity will be a time where we are reunited with other loved ones who have accepted the grace of God and every believer of every time and place who has accepted that grace.

That eternity will be a place where we enjoy those treasures we've stored in heaven - a reward we shouldn't expect here on earth for the character we developed and the way we served other people, that reward will be greater than anyone can imagine in eternity.

That eternity will be a place where we find new work based on how God has gifted us; we'll be given new assignments that we will love to do and never tire of.

That eternity will be a place where we're free from all pain, suffering, sadness, sorrow, grief, depression, loneliness, etc... It's going to be a wonderful place. And it is the gift of God provided by God's saving grace.

The only catch is, you have to accept it and live in it. If you get a gift and you don't unwrap it, it's a worthless gift. You need to realize that Jesus Christ makes this grace gift available to everyone but it's also customized specifically for your life, because God knows exactly what you need.

You're never going to get a better deal than what we've talked about today. But the thing is, it matters what you trust in, what you focus on and what you count on. People say they're counting on God's grace but they're actually counting on lots of other things.

People think that they're better than most of the world because of what they know and how they act. Jesus said, "I didn't come to condemn the world. I came to save it." If you think you can be saved by Christ and be filled with condemnation, you missed the boat. You don't understand grace.

People think that being saved means they can lord it over others socially or politically or relationally. On Mothers' Day it's appropriate to hear what Jesus' mother said about God and about what God was going to do through her child: "He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble." Grace is powerful, but it's not offered to us so we can be powerful in the sense that the world uses power.

People think that being prosperous or living well means they're experiencing God's saving grace. Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" If you think prosperity is a sign that you are saved or blessed by God or that it means God favors our culture because we're rich - think again. You don't understand grace. Mary said of Jesus. "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands." Some people think that being a believer gives them certain rights in the church. Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." The more you count on God's grace, the fewer rights you have. The more committed you are the less you can have your own way or have things as you like them.

God's saving grace isn't a one-time choice followed by a life of privilege and comfort - God's saving grace is part of your life every day, guiding your choices, influencing your thoughts, developing your character, drawing you onward toward what God means for you to be.

God wants to be gracious to you. It is God's nature to bless undeserving people. God's waiting for you to accept grace - both when you first accept faith and every day of your life. God enjoys being gracious.

Ask yourself: How will I Respond to God's Saving Grace today? How WILL you respond to God's grace? Wherever you are right now in your spiritual life, God's grace is available to you and ready to take you further. The person who THINKS they need grace the least is without a doubt the one who needs grace the most. How will you respond to God's grace?

God's amazing grace is available right here and right now. Today. That's why God brought you here. That's why God brought ALL of us here. You're not here by accident. God brought you here to hear that God loves you; to hear that God forgives you; to hear that God has something better and more meaningful for you. What are you waiting for? Let's pray.