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# When Grace Becomes Grace

*“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:6).*

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9).*

*“And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1).*

The subject of grace, expressed in various ways, is present in every major discussion of salvation in the New Testament. If we examine the text carefully, we will find grace within the concepts of “election” (Ephesians 1:4), the church (Ephesians 3:8–10), the new covenant (Hebrews 8:7–13), and with every other topic which relates to God’s great plan of redemption.

As Christians, we entered God’s grace through our obedience to the gospel. “Therefore, having been justified by faith,” Paul said, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:1, 2a). Not only have we entered God’s grace, according to Paul, but we also live in it continually. In addition to being something that saves us, grace sustains us; it is a blessing “in which we stand.” Because we are saved by it and stand in divine grace, we can now “. . . exult in [the] hope of the glory of God” that we have (Romans 5:2b). The Christian’s life is a living, earthly testimony to the glory of God’s grace.

Every Christian, therefore, can say with Paul, “. . . by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10a). In the great doxology that begins his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exclaimed, “In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:4c–6). As we live in the grace that is “freely bestowed on us in the Beloved”—that

is in Jesus—we reflect the great love and divine planning of our loving Father.

Perhaps the best definition of “grace” is “God’s offer of salvation to sinful man through the cross of Jesus.” God is the God of all grace, and His gospel is the gospel of peace and grace. How wonderful it is to realize that everyone can be saved! God is the Father of every person. He loves everyone with His eternal love and reaches out in mercy to provide salvation to every member of His family, the human race. His great plan of salvation rests upon His unfathomable grace.

One of the unique passages about God’s amazing grace is Romans 11:6. As Paul discussed election, he said, “But if it [His salvation] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise *grace is no longer grace*” (emphasis mine). In this statement, we are confronted with the phrase “grace is no longer grace.” Is there a time when grace is no longer grace? Is there a time when God’s offer of salvation is voided, when divine grace no longer functions as grace? Paul said there is.

Let us turn the phrase around and examine it from a positive viewpoint. Let us ask, “When does grace become grace?”

*First, “grace becomes grace” when the imperfect—those who have sinned—receive it.* The gospel of grace is a gospel for sinners only. If one could be perfect, if he could keep God’s laws without a single mistake, then the grace of the gospel would not be grace to him and he would have no need of it.

The laws of God approve those who keep them, but those who do not measure up to these

laws are condemned by them. A standard can only accomplish two things. First, it can tell us if we have reached it. Second, when we do not reach it, the standard can condemn us. When that happens, the standard curses us, in the sense that it says we have failed to live by it. If we are to be justified by laws or by works, we must perfectly keep them.

Here is an illustration. A shirt can only be clean in one of two ways: It can be clean because it has never been soiled; or it can be clean because, even though it has become dirty, it has been washed from its uncleanness. The same is true of our souls: We can have the cleanness of perfection, never having sinned and been stained by guilt; or our souls can have the cleanness of forgiveness or justification, so that even though we have sinned, God has washed us through His grace and made us clean again.

*Second, "grace becomes grace" when the incapable—those who cannot merit God's favor—receive it.* If one could actually earn salvation after having sinned, the grace of the gospel would not be grace to him. In such a case, that person would merit eternal life. He would not need the sacrifice of Christ, for he would have procured his own salvation. Of course, this is impossible.

Paul labored to convey this truth to us in Romans:

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (Romans 4:5, 6).

Anyone able to earn salvation would be able to glory in what he had done. However, since all those who are saved are saved by grace, "Where . . . is boasting? It is excluded . . ." (Romans 3:27).

Grace becomes grace when a person receives God's gift of salvation with the understanding that he cannot earn it. The law of faith—the plan of God that provides salvation on the basis of obedient faith—excludes all glorying in what we have done, for we have received salvation as a gift, not as a payment for anything we have done.

R. L. Whiteside wrote,

No amount of works can blot out sins already committed. Forgiveness is a matter of grace, no matter how many conditions one must fulfill in order to be forgiven. If a man's works had always been perfect, he would have no sins to be forgiven; he would stand justified on his own merit. There is no grace when a man merits justification. Works by which a man merits justification, and commands which one must obey to be saved, are distinct matters. It is unfortunate that many religionists cannot, or will not, see this distinction, which should be plainly seen by any Bible reader.<sup>1</sup>

*Third, "grace becomes grace" when the interested—those who want it—receive it.* A gift is not a gift unless it is accepted. God's grace can be as high as the heavens and as deep as the ocean, but it is not grace to the person who ignores it or to the one who is not interested in it.

Jesus was the embodiment of God's grace to the world. On one of the crosses next to Him, a thief died in the chains of sin (Luke 23:39). This man was only a few feet away from the very grace of God, yet he missed it. The wondrous grace of salvation was not grace to him because he did not open his heart to it. A fellow thief on the other side of Jesus died in the hope of eternal life because he received God's grace (Luke 23:43). He saw the grace of God, and his heart reached out to it. One dying criminal received God's grace, while the other did not. One sought God's gift, while the other spurned it. To one man the death of Jesus meant everything; to the other man the death of Jesus meant nothing but judgment. No man has ever been as close to God's grace as the rebellious thief was; still, he died as if Jesus had never come to this earth.

Many centuries earlier, God had said, in effect, to Noah, "I am offering My grace to you. I will help you build a boat, put you in it, and sustain you in it as you ride safely through this storm of destruction" (see Genesis 6:13–18). Noah followed God's instruction and was saved by grace. Had Noah disobeyed and refused God's offer, God's grace would not have been grace to him. Instead, he would have gone into a watery grave even though grace had at one time been within his reach.

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Manney Co., 1969), 225.

Perhaps the greatest truth in the Bible is that God, through His grace, offers salvation to sinful man through the cross of Christ. No greater gift was ever offered to anyone. However, the highest of all blessings becomes nothing but an event in history to those who reject it. The redeemed of all the ages, gathered around the throne of God, will sing of one truth. That heavenly host will say to each other, "I remember when God's grace became grace to me. Had that day not come, I would not be here." Above all else, in this time and place, let us make sure that God's grace becomes grace to us!

Eddie Cloer



*"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:11-14).*

*"It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all" (1 Timothy 1:15).*