

Grace

Grace: it's a beautiful word describing something sweet and refreshing. God's grace: it's a delightful surprise in a dark and fallen world. In a world that lives by an-eye-for-an-eye and even returns evil for good, grace leaves us speechless as it returns good for evil.

Grace is God's character displayed: a kind and beautiful Person who loves people even in their rebellion to Him. It involves Him stooping down to extend a hand of reconciliation to men who ruined the relationship in the first place. He looks beyond our hatred for Him and love of self to see our highest good. He knows we are miserable because we live for self and fullness of joy will be in a restored relationship with Him. His incredible grace meant He did all that was necessary to ensure that: became a man, share our sorrows and weaknesses, and then go to Calvary to be beaten, humiliated, scorned and crucified. He lived to bear our sins before rising sinless – a victor over sin and death. What grace! Only the sinless God was willing to do this for a world that rejects Him! Romans 5: 6-8.

Today, we'll look at 4 things you can do to grace.

First, you can neglect grace.

God does not force salvation on anyone. He offers it. His standing invitation is whosoever will, let him come. God could force people to do it, but that would be a violation of love. Love respects the individual, and love wants to be desired- not pressured. There would be no glory for God if He overruled the will of man and forced him to choose Him. Like with Adam and Eve, He gives a free choice to all men.

Hebrews 2:3: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard *him*;"

Man can neglect grace. He can refuse grace and desire his own self-ruled life. God has prepared the gift of salvation, but if man wants to continue to run from God and live for self, he can reject God's gift. We are not denying the sovereignty of God in salvation, but man is given the choice to accept or reject what God is offering. C.S. Lewis said, "There are only two types of people: People who say to God, "Thy will be done" and those to whom God eventually says, "thy will be done". Romans 1 shows us how God gave people up to their sin. In Genesis 6, He said "My Spirit will not always strive with man." God offers salvation from sin, but how shall we escape if we reject it? What other alternative is there? In a universe created and controlled by God, what is the fate of creatures that reject their Creator? They will have the very separation from God eternally that they desired. He is light, so they will be in darkness. He is holy, they will be with sinners. He is the Living Water, so they will burn with thirst. He is joy, they will suffer. As Peter said, "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the Words of eternal life." Don't neglect grace. Receive it while it is available.

Second, you can insult grace.

Grace is a free gift. But let's define what this gift is. It's not just Heaven, though Heaven is part of the gift. It is a gift of forgiveness.

Salvation is when we seek pardon for rebelling against God. We realize how we have offended Him, we are convicted by His gracious display of love and ask Him for mercy through His Son and His atonement. Salvation is asking for reconciliation (John 17:3). This is what God's gift is. Now can you imagine offending a close friend and then when going to apologize, offering money to buy their pardon? How insulting! How offended your friend would be that you should think that forgiveness is something you could buy, that you should think so low of him that you could buy him off! What an insult even to your friendship that you could not humble yourself to ask forgiveness, taking the blame, but rather deflect attention from your offence and seek to use something to buy forgiveness: a kind of bartering. How we insult God often when we try to give Him reasons to save us. How insulting when we add to salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9) If salvation is anything more than humbly receiving the forgiveness of God and His Son, then some could boast, "I've performed such-and-such a work. I am more saved than you."

People who rely on some church ordinance, on their own good works, on how good their life is, or what church they belong to obtain salvation insult grace (Titus 3:5) Adding to faith in Christ insults God for a number of reasons.

1) It suggests that Christ's death or resurrection is not enough to save us. It claims that we must complete or consolidate the atonement by our obedience. It says we must undergo a certain ritual so that our salvation is sealed. Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished". If it is finished, then what saving use is there for added rituals, works or supposed channels of grace?

2) Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:18-19: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, *as* silver and gold, from your vain conversation *received* by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:" Doing some good work to ensure salvation is the equivalent of purchasing the world's most expensive diamond for millions of rands, offering it as a priceless gift to someone and have him take out ten rand and say, "Thanks". Such a person is not willing to humbly accept it; he is trying to defer the implications of thankful, humble appreciation by offering something in return and what he is offering is pathetic in comparison to the diamond. How much more if we think certain acts can be given to merit the precious blood of Christ. I say this not to take away from the profound importance of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and a life of fruit. I say it to emphasise for grace to be grace, we must humbly receive it, trusting him to forgive (Is 64:4).

3) It shows we are not submitting to God, but are still proud. Pride wants its own way, it does not wish to admit it has offended another. If we simply receive God's gift by faith, we have nothing to hold up before the world to say, "I did this, that's why I'm saved". All we can say is, "Praise God, He saved me". For as long as we hang on to outward human acts – we are proud, and insulting grace. God Has done it all- He asks us to respond in humble reliance.

Third, you can abuse grace.

The incredible thing about grace is that it is open to abuse. The nature of grace is that it is long suffering: not returning evil for evil, but good for evil. So, God's grace can be abused by our evil hearts. When God applies Calvary and the resurrection to us at the moment of salvation, He sets us free from living selfishly. We no longer are slaves to our lusts and our pride, but we can live Christ's life within and can serve Him. Galatians 5:13 and 1 Peter 2:16 warn us against using this grace to serve sin – that's abusing grace. Every time we return to selfish living, we are abusing grace. God's obedient new life in us is there to help enable us to fulfil the law of love: love God with all your heart, soul and mind, love your neighbour as yourself and love the brethren as Christ has loved us.

Every sin rooted in self walks on from the blood of Christ and essentially says, I want my way. We turn away from what we believe to serve self (Romans 14:23) God's kind mercy is taken for granted and refused when we live an unsundered, unyielded life. We selfishly use the forgiveness of God to gain eternal security and then go on to live selfishly. That is like Barabbas. Barabbas had Jesus take his place quite literally on the cross, but went on to live for himself.

The thief on the cross is a true picture of salvation: he died *with* Christ, trusting in Him for new life. He was saved. Grace is not freedom to live for self. It is the opposite: freedom from self to find fulfillment in serving God and others.

Fourth, you can receive grace.

Grace is a gift: the gift of God Himself. We shouldn't neglect it by refusing it, insult it by trying to work for it, or abuse it by living selfishly or trying to use God. We must receive grace. James tells us the state in which we can receive grace (James 4:6, 10). Grace comes to the humble. Humility is really being honest about self: I am not perfectly good or well, I am evil and I need God's righteousness. I can't earn salvation; I don't deserve it. I've earned no right to obtain it, I humbly fall on His mercy and request it. Humility is brokenness. I am nothing without God, in me dwelleth no good thing. I need God. This attitude continues after we are saved. Moment by moment we must check to see if sin has entered our lives. We humble ourselves, ask for forgiveness and for His filling, desiring His righteousness. Christ Himself is to be expressed through us. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Grace – what a matchless thing. What a surprise invasion into a world that believes in the opposite way. Don't insult it, neglect it or abuse it. Turn away from sinful, selfish living to the open arms of God, who will not only forgive you by the blood and death of His Son, but will crown you with His righteousness and His life and the plan by the resurrection of the Son.