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Volume 3 – 2011

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**“How Does an Understanding of the Grace of God  
Cultivate Gratitude in the Christian Life?”**

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**Introduction**

One of the most important doctrines of the church is concerning the grace of God. The grace of God is both a spiritual and psychological benefit to the regenerated. God’s grace serves as a testament to His benevolence. His grace towards humanity serves as the foundation of His mighty works.

It is my belief that having a Biblical understanding of God’s grace cultivates gratitude in the life of the Christian. In order to buttress this point, it is necessary for us to define the terms. In the Hebrew tongue there are actually three words which are translated as

grace. The first Hebrew word is *Khane*, ( חָנָן ) which means favor, pleasant, gracious, elegant, and pleased (e.g. Esther 2:17). The second word is *Tachanuwn*. *Tachanuwn* ( תַּחֲנוּן ) is used when seeking supplication from God or man (e.g. Psalms 86:6). Finally, the last word for grace is *Towb* ( טוֹב + חָנָן ). *Towb* is used to signify a state of goodness, pleasant, glad, agreeable, and prosperity (e.g. Nahum 3:4). These are the three Hebraic references to grace found in the Old Testament. The usage of these words are intended to further illustrate God's love and the need for an appropriate response through gratitude. This theme also crosses over to modern Christians as indicated in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, the word *Charis* (χαρις) is translated as grace. This word is found one hundred and twenty four times. According to contemporary Biblical scholars, “nearly two-thirds of the New Testament occurrences of *Charis* is translated as grace.”<sup>1</sup> The Greek definition conveys the idea of altruism. In other words, charis is often used when someone has become a benefactor of unmerited kindness. In short, grace is God's unmerited favor. Everything God has done, is doing now, and will do is rooted in His grace. When we consider all of the things God has done for us, we can't help but to be grateful. Charles Ryrie writes:

God's creation reveals His eternal powers and divine nature (Romans 1:20). These aspects of God can be clearly seen by all people who will not suppress the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18). The glory of God can also be seen and felt by all who live under the heavens (which is everybody; Psalm 19:1-6). This revelation of God continues day and night and touches all mankind. This is the largest, all-encompassing circle of God's general grace.<sup>2</sup>

In order to better understand how grace fosters gratitude in the life of the Believer, it is vitally important to ascertain what the Scriptures say regarding this issue. In order to learn about the affect of grace in a believer's life, one must learn how the concept of grace is used through the Bible.

The Bible teaches us about being grateful. When someone does something for us, we must respond with gratitude. All of humanity is indebted to God for their existence. The Christian, however, has

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<sup>1</sup>Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 372.

<sup>2</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 75.

more of an obligation to display their satisfaction for what God has done for them. It should be natural for a Christian to display gratitude due to the benevolence of grace shown them by God. This fact is highlighted in Luke Chapter 11. The chapter begins with Jesus instructing His disciples about temptation, sin, forgiveness and faith (vv. 1-4). He then teaches them how to increase their faith (vv. 5-6). Lastly, there is a lesson involving duty and gratitude. The story of the ten lepers teaches us that those who are servants of God have an obligation to exhibit their gratitude (vv. 7-10). Christ was attempting to show His disciples that displaying gratefulness toward God is deontological (duty centered). The Christian displays their pleasure because it is the right thing to do. This fact is evident by the subsequent story involving the ten lepers. Jesus healed ten lepers but only one came back to thank him. The point of this narrative is clear. It is the obligation of those who have experienced God's grace to thank him. It should become habitual for the Christian to always thank God and display the same gratitude by serving others. In other words, God's grace bestowed upon us should foster change in attitude and mission.

### **I. The Theological Dimension of God's Grace**

The Apostle Paul personally understood the nature of God's grace. He received something from God that the works of the law could not merit. Paul writes, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:21)." It is due to God's unmerited favor that Saul became Paul. Paul in return displayed his gratitude by committing the rest of his life to serving God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul became a great asset to the church. Moreover, it is through his lens that we are able to learn more about God's grace and how believers should respond to it. It is my contention that Paul's writing concerning the grace of God was also intended to foster an attitude of gratitude. Consider the following passages as it relates to grace.

#### **Christians Have Received Grace**

In Romans 1:5, Paul shares with the Christians in Rome that through Jesus Christ we have received grace. This means God has given us grace (unmerited favor) and we (his children) are the beneficiary of his overture. Knowing that a loving God has extended

his love, kindness, and mercy to us should produce gratitude in the life of the believer. Due to God's example, Christians are left without an excuse in extending mercy and compassion toward others. Doing so is an act of gratitude rooted in God's divine grace.

### **Greeting of Grace**

We find the use of the Greek word *charis* often in Pauline epistolary (Col. 4:18; 1 Tim. 1:2). The word grace is often found in Paul's introductions. In Romans 1:7, the noun *grace* is used as a nominative, singular, feminine. In this case it is translated as kindness, good will, and gift. In short, Paul in his introduction was greeting the Roman Christians with kindness, hoping for their good will and gifting them with encouragement. God's grace is an act of His altruistic kindness and good will, which should be emulated by all Christians. This act of displaying grace should promote gratitude. This act of gratefulness will be displayed through our worship and service toward others.

### **Justified by His Grace**

Paul links the grace of God to Jesus Christ. Romans 3:24 informs us that believers are justified by the grace of Jesus Christ. The story of atonement is emblematic of God's grace. For God so loved the world that He gave His only unique Son to die on the cross for all of humanity. This is a perfect example of grace. Wayne House describes grace as "*goodness toward those who deserve only punishment.*"<sup>3</sup> God's justice demanded punishment. However, through His Son we have received clemency. Christians are now in good standings with God (Titus 3:7). When believers reflect upon this sacrifice, they are compelled to extend themselves to assist others. If God can give of Himself to save us then it is not impossible for those who have received his grace to display gratitude by being obedient to His precepts. Justice demanded that we be punished by God for our sins. His grace saved us from eternal separation from the true and living God. As a result, the Christian conveys how thankful they are through sanctification as well as evangelism.

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<sup>3</sup>Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 200.

### **The Promise Rests on Grace**

In Romans 4:16, Paul informs the church that the promise given to Abraham actually rests on grace. The Christian inheritance is shared with the promise given to Abraham and all of the blessings received from God are built upon this concept of grace. God's unmerited favor was the impetus of him choosing Abraham while he was in Ur (Gen. 11-12). Abraham displayed his gratefulness by leaving the comforts of his home and moving to a place that had not been revealed to him. Moreover, the narrative concerning the sacrifice of Isaac further demonstrates Abraham's gratitude. Because he trusted God and had experienced His grace, Abraham was willing to sacrifice His only son (Gen. 22:5-8). This is an example of how grace triggers gratefulness.

### **Standing in Grace**

Christians should stand in grace through faith (Rom. 5:2). Paul writes, "through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." The verb *stand* in this text is used in the perfect, active, indicative, first person plural sense. This passage should be translated "We have also obtained access by faith into this unmerited favor in which we all are caused to stand firm. Christians must stand firm in God's grace. We must not waste any time on inane things. As Christians we must show our gratitude by standing in grace through using our time wisely (Eph. 5:16). How do we redeem the time? Paul indicates this is done by being wise (v. 17), thinking soberly (v. 18), singing spiritual songs (v. 19), and finally giving thanks to God the Father in the name of Jesus (v. 20). This passage is a perfect illustration of gratitude based on an understanding of grace.

### **The Abundance of Grace**

Grace is also abundant (Rom. 5:17). There is plenty of it because God has no limitations. His essence is grace. God does not have grace, He is grace. As a consequence, Christians will never be without the grace of God (2 Cor. 4:15). The profession of Christ would not be possible without God first sending His son (John 3:16). In addition, the more sin that exists, the more grace is accessible to overcome it (Rom. 5:20). Christians have the unique access to power that allows them to overcome addictions, emotional pain, and various

other psychosis (2 Cor. 12:9). The reality of this privilege should usher in thankfulness. What Christians have is a special relationship to the authentic God which yields supernatural powers so they may conquer all of life's issues (Rom. 6:14).

### **Chosen by Grace**

The Bible tells the believer that God had predestined us to experience God's everlasting love (Rom. 8:29). While we were yet in our sins, Christ had already died for us (Rom. 5:8). This act of God sending a Savior for all of humanity is built on grace. Christians have been called by His grace (Gal. 1:15). This type of grace is so grand that it promotes a response of gratitude. God loved us so much that he extended the overture to join Him in a loving relationship.

### **Strengthened in Grace**

The strength of the Christian is rooted in grace (2 Tim. 2:1). Without God's favor, the Christian would have no strength. They would be spiritually impotent and vulnerable against the wiles of the Devil. The believer has strength to tame their tongues, abstain from fornication, refrain from gossip, and to do the work of the Lord. This type of strength comes from God due to His grace. He has released the Christian from surrendering to sinful ways. Reflecting upon the power given by God compels all Christians to say "Thank you!" to the Master. Tony Evans, Pastor of Oak Cliff Bible College writes:

With God's grace, He also supplies whatever you lack in order to get you where He wants you to go. God has already taken your limitations and humanity into account in supplying you with His grace. He knows your weakness and has already calculated that in. You can discipline yourself.<sup>4</sup>

## **II. Gratitude of God's Grace through Service**

There is no better example of a Christian displaying gratefulness in light of God's grace than the story of William and Catherine Booth. The husband and wife team started the East London Christian Mission in 1865. Their objective was to show how grateful they were to God by ministering to the disenfranchised. Their motto was to administer soap, soup, and salvation. Today we know this organization as the Salvation Army. The Booths fully understood the concept of God's

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<sup>4</sup>Tony Evans, *The Kingdom Agenda: What a Way to Live* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 91.

unmerited favor. As a result, it impacted their life. This effect of experiencing God's grace taught them how to be grateful. This gratefulness was shown by their response to help those who needed assistance. In addition, it cost them something. Grace came at the cost of Jesus having to shed blood. Likewise, for the Christian to show their gratitude it will come at a cost. Personal sacrifices have to be made when one attempts to duplicate the grace of God. These sacrifices may come in the form of time, sleep, and material riches. Despite this reality the Christian is assured that God will take care of them if they follow Him (Matt. 6:30-34).

The next person who truly embodied gratefulness due to God's grace is the servant of Calcutta. Many know her as Mother Theresa. While on a train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling, she received inspiration which would change her life as well as those she served. The story is told that on that particular train ride she was able to better understand the love of Jesus and His desire to assist lost souls. She developed a thirst for pleasing Jesus by helping others. According to her biography God instructed her to establish a religious community, dedicated to serving the poorest of the poor. On October 7, 1950 the Missionaries of Charity was officially established. She responded to God's grace by helping others. The Christian cannot only be hearers of God's words. Thinking about his grace should force the servant of God to participate in those things that are important to God.

### **III. The Gift of God Through Grace**

Paul constantly reminds us that there would be no grace without God. Grace has God as its subject. God is grace. Due to His loving nature, God's expression of His love is an exhibition of His grace. God expressed His love by gifting the world with Christ by His grace (1 Pet. 4:10).

When one looks at the life of Christ, grace is evident. His arrival in Bethlehem is an example of grace. His ability to share the kingdom agenda with the religious leaders is an example of His grace. His compassion for the lost, sick, and downcast is also an example of His grace. Everything Jesus did was an example of God's unmerited favor. We cannot work for this kind of blessings. Grace is a supernatural gift that extends out of God's nature.

Concerning the topic of grace, Christian author Hebert Lockyer writes "Grace is the characteristic of the Christian gospel (Acts 20:24;

32). Through the gospel of grace manifold blessings are brought to the soul. This gospel does not say, try to reach these blessings. That is the teaching of the law. Grace comes down to the lost one with God's best. The gospel declares to all believers that grace is free, the gift of God."<sup>5</sup>

It is due to this showering of multiple blessings that the believer responds. When someone does something nice for you, the right thing to do is to demonstrate gratefulness. God has done so much for us that we ought to be grateful. The question may be how does one demonstrate gratefulness toward God? The answer is simple. Jesus himself stated that those who do the will of the Father are his brothers and sisters (Matt. 12:50). God's desire for his children (Christians) is for them to demonstrate their gratefulness by following the ordinances prescribed in the Bible. When we see Christians displaying love through good works, it is their way of showing gratitude. Gratefulness is a character trait that ought to be displayed by all of those who have been washed in the blood of Christ. Gratefulness is a gift that cannot be repaid through human efforts. It can be shown through obedience toward good works empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is the Christian distinctive to both articulate and exercise God's goodness.

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert Lockyer, *All the Doctrines of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), 165.



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