

What is Grace? by Ray Stedman

What is grace? Remember the small boy who was asked in Sunday school, "What is grace?" He thought the man said, grease, and replied, "It's what makes the face shine." He was right, because grace does make the face shine -- better than grease. Grace is a general term for all that God is, made available to us. It is God's character, God's virtue, all God's Being made available to us.

Another way of describing grace is to call it the life of Jesus Christ in us. Paul says, "For I bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus in order that the life of Jesus might be made visible in my mortal flesh," (2 Corinthians 4:10).

"To make the invisible Christ visible," that is God's grace. The life of Jesus Christ in us, supplied to us, living through us, ministering to our every need, that is grace, the glory of Christianity. If your Christianity does not have that note in it, it is a false Christianity. That is what Christian faith is all about. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27b), says the Apostle Paul to the Colossians. Jesus Christ proposes to clothe his life with your body, and live it again in this 20th century as he lived it in the 1st century. He will, in terms of your circumstances, be what he was 1900 years ago on the hills of Galilee, but he will be it where you are. That is Christianity, that is God's grace. As Paul says in Ephesians as he prays for the people of God (and these were ordinary people like you and me: bankers, lawyers, shopkeepers, housewives, and servants; all the motley array of people from an ordinary Roman city), "I pray that you may be a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself," (Ephesians 3:19b J. B. Philips). That is God's grace, and it is for every Christian. Grace means all that it takes to meet whatever pressures you are under. That is God's provision.

Grace has one peculiar mark about it. It is a gift. It cannot be purchased, it cannot be worked for. It is unmerited. That is the problem. That is why a great many Christians do not know anything about the power of God, because that power comes only through the channel of grace. They keep trying to bargain for God's power, but if you bargain for it, then it is no longer grace. To bargain with God is like turning off the tap. You cannot experience the power of God if you are trying to earn it. Paul, writing to the Romans, says, "It is either grace or works. And if it is works, then it is no more grace; if it is grace, then it is no more works," (Romans 11:6). One cancels out the other. This is why many Christians cannot get hold of the power of God because they say, "Lord, if I do this for you, will you do that for me? If I am faithful to teach Sunday school, or to attend church every Sunday, surely you ought to take care of me so that I won't get sick." But that cancels out grace. God's power cannot come by any other channel than God's grace.

This tendency to bargain is revealed in people's complaints. They say, "Why should this happen to me?" with the implication, "I've been living the kind of life that deserves more than this. God shouldn't do this kind of thing to me." That shows they have been trying to bargain for the grace of God but you cannot do it. You can have all God's power freely if you do not try to bargain for it. If you present yourself, and say, "Lord, I'm not much, but here I am, and all I am I put at your disposal," then he will take the greatness of his Being, displayed in many, many ways, and put it at your disposal, saying, "Whatever you need you can take." That is what grace does.

See how this is pictured in a dozen ways throughout the Scriptures: There is the manna in the wilderness. Every day it came, just enough for the people, but never too much, never enough for the next day (except on Friday, when there came enough for two days).

The bread and fishes that our Lord multiplied were enough for everyone and a little bit left over, but everyone had all they needed.

This is what God wants to teach us here. You do not need to expect a great surge of power coming through you so that you glow like a TV screen. No, as God said, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be," (Deuteronomy 33:25 KJV). Whatever the pressures, there will be adequate strength to meet it. "Always," he says, you may always have enough. No matter whether you are old or young or middle-aged, no matter whether it is day or night or in between, always. You shall have enough. No matter what the demand is, no matter how great the pressure is, you shall have enough of grace.

Then notice how he concludes with the great purpose of God. What is all this for, in your life? Well, it is that you "may provide in abundance for every good work." In other words, that you may be engaged in work that blesses, strengthens, and helps others. That is what God is doing in this world. In Ephesians Paul says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus [made new again in Christ Jesus] unto good works," (Ephesians 2:10a KJV). That is his ultimate purpose.

So many Christians fail to get this. They think that the blessings of the Christian life are designed to make them happy. They always want a good feeling. That is why some people come to church. They only want a good feeling, something that makes them feel a little better as they go out, and they are satisfied if it has done that for them. Some want a riot of emotionalism, to work up a sort of religious "jag" once a week, which will serve to carry them until the next week. But this is not what God is aiming at. It is that you may be involved in doing good works, as the Lord Jesus, who "went about doing good," (Acts 10:38b). That was his purpose. That will involve speaking the truth, and practicing love, self-denying love, toward another. There is the formula to change the world.

My question to you as we close is this: Is God obtaining his purpose with you? Is it all working out to good works in your life, works that help others, works that minister to the needs of others? That is what God is after. Or are you denying him his right to use your body for his purposes in the world?

Ray Stedman was one of the twentieth century's foremost pastors and biblical expositors. His message of authentic Christianity continues to shape the lives of countless individuals worldwide. For learn more of Ray please visit www.raystedman.org.