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Misunderstandings of Grace

Tom Wells

I have sometimes wished we didn't use the word "grace." Isn't that heresy? Consider for a moment what I mean.

We desperately need the content of the word grace, of course. The word stands for an idea that we cannot live without. I have no quarrel with that. But the word "grace" creates a problem for us. The problem is this: the use to which Christians put the word "grace" is not the use the word has in daily English. Our everyday English use of "grace" suggests a human virtue or quality of attractiveness. That leads to constant misunderstanding. For most believers, I think, grace is a rather hazy idea. That will be true even for those who have learned the little acrostic: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The acrostic tells us what grace gives us, but not what grace is.

Now someone may say, quite rightly, that we have lots of theological words of which this is true. They are used in everyday English in a somewhat different way than they are used in the Bible and in our theological systems. Why then single out the word "grace"?

The answer is this: in many of those cases there is no plain synonym that one might use for the biblical or theological idea. We don't have that problem with "grace." A clear and easy synonym for "grace" is "favor." Simply put, God's grace is God's favor. When Paul, for example, describes himself as called by God's grace in Galatians 1:15, he means that it was by God's favor that he was called. It was a favor from God that Paul became both a Christian and an apostle.

Let's bring this closer home. If you have been saved by God's grace, then you have been saved by His favor. Salvation is yours because He favored you. The gift of salvation is one of His favors to you. This is what the Bible means when it speaks of salvation by grace. It means that you and I and all other believers are saved because God favored us over others. We have often heard that God has no favorites,

but that is not true. He has millions of favorites, and the phrase “God has no favorites” would never have arisen if our English translators had given us the word “favor” where they have substituted the word “grace.” It is important to add, however, that God does not practice “favoritism,” a word that carries the idea of injustice with it in English usage. God is just. God gives every man and woman what that person deserves, or God treats him better than he deserves.

This article, however, is not intended to be a comment on the quality of our English translations of the Bible. I’m sure that whatever faults they may have, I could not have done as well. My point is quite different. It is this: there are many misunderstandings of the idea contained in the word “grace,” and some of them can be traced to our unfamiliarity with the way the word is used in Scripture.

A Theological Misunderstanding

Let’s start with a theological misunderstanding. This misconception is a bit difficult to explain, but widespread. It treats grace as a kind of substance that God pours into us. This may inspire the prayer, “Lord, give me Your grace.” That prayer should mean, “Lord, give me Your favor,” or perhaps, “Lord, show me Your favor.” In actual practice, however, the person praying the prayer may think of himself as lacking some spiritual substance within that makes him ineffectual in his Christian life. If he just had more of this stuff called “grace,” he could do a much better job.

What is missing in this understanding? The missing element is the fact that grace or favor is not primarily something that is passed over to us from God. Grace is an attitude in God Himself, an attitude of favor that reassures and strengthens the Christian. To paraphrase Romans 8:31: “If God favors us, who can be against us?”

Some theologians have traced this misconception of

grace to the influence of the Latin word *gratia* which began by meaning “favor” but which, over time, came to convey the idea of a spiritual power that makes for right living. We can illustrate this change in the way the Roman Catholic Church has understood the Virgin Mary. The King James Version refers to her as “full of grace” (Luke 1:28). At first this meant “highly favored” (NIV). But in the course of centuries Mary came to be looked on as a repository or storehouse of spiritual power. She had “graces” that she could distribute to others. What at first was a description of God’s attitude toward Mary became a description of Mary’s qualities as a mediator between God and man. Of course Protestants never adopted this view of Mary, but many have come to look upon grace, not as an attitude of God but as a spiritual substance or power which He gives.

Practical Misunderstandings

In this article, however, I am interested in what we might call practical misunderstandings of grace. I hope to discuss two: (1) the misunderstanding that causes men to presume on God’s favor or grace, and (2) the misunderstanding that causes men to fear or to despair of God’s favor or grace.

Let’s begin with the misunderstanding that leads men to presume on God’s favor. Men misunderstand God’s favor or grace when they think of it as unconnected with good works.

Through the years there have been men and women who have claimed to know God’s saving favor and who have thought that salvation had nothing to do with good works. In the second century a religion arose that is called Gnosticism, one branch of which claimed to be Christian. Some Gnostics treated morality very lightly. They reasoned that God will destroy this mortal body we live in, and what we had done with it would prove to be a matter of indifference to Him.

Ideas of this kind were already afloat when John wrote his first Epistle. He may have had this attitude in mind when he wrote, "If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (1:6). People who held this view would profess to be "without sin" (1:8). Against such people John wrote, "The man who says, 'I know Him,' but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (2:4).

Many today seem to think that grace is unconnected with good works. A man once said from my pulpit, "My religion has nothing to do with good works." At the time I took him to mean that his justification did not depend on good works. If that is what he meant he certainly was right, as I hope to show shortly. Later, however, I saw reason to think that he meant exactly what he said, though I hope I misjudged him.

The doctrine of the security of the believer is sometimes preached in a way that leaves a godly life as an option for the Christian. It is looked upon as a desirable option, to be sure, but an option nevertheless. No doubt many pastors who hold this idea do so to protect the freeness of justification. Many of them also are zealous to see their people become more holy, and they preach with that in mind.

But the effect of such preaching is often to harden people in their sins. Pulpits where this misunderstanding exists never ring with the words, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). They do not often sound the note of Peter, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). If a godly life does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with God's salvation by grace, these texts are robbed of their force. After giving a long list of virtues that the Christian must eagerly pursue, Peter says, "Make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (1:10b-

11). The man who believes he has received the grace of God and yet does not pursue godliness deceives himself. He is not a characteristically carnal Christian; he is lost. His profession of faith is mere presumption.

Some preachers do not grasp this fact. I know this well, since I was once one of them. They are ready to reassure such a fellow that he need not have "a rich welcome" into God's kingdom; he may have a poor welcome, a welcome in which he will lose his rewards but gain his soul. To bolster this view they may cite Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15. Paul wrote there, "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." Clearly these verses picture some men losing rewards and making it to heaven.

Oddly enough, however, these verses do not apply to the man who professes to have received the grace of God and yet lives an ungodly life. In a marvelous bit of irony, they apply to the preacher or teacher who reassures such a man that he is a Christian!

The passage in First Corinthians is not about any and every work. It is about one thing: the quality of our teaching. Paul wrote these words of those who sought to build up the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, he said, is the foundation of the church (3:11). Those who preach and teach are adding others to this foundation. As teachers they must be careful that they are adding true converts to the church. If they are careless in this matter, their work (their converts) will be destroyed, though they themselves will be saved.¹

Once more: those who think that the grace of God is unconnected with good works are deceived. Further than that, they may be presuming on the grace or favor of God. If their lives are characterized by ungodliness, they are lost. They have misunderstood the grace of God.

Let's come finally to the other misunderstanding of the

grace of God, the misconception that leads men to fear or despair of God's grace. Men misunderstand God's favor or grace when they think of it as dependent upon good works.

"Now wait a minute," someone may object. "Haven't you just told us that grace depends on good works? Are you reversing fields?"

No, I am not reversing fields. Grace does not depend on good works in any way. What I have insisted on is this: Good works always accompany saving grace. But that does not tell us which depends on which. Grace does not depend on good works, but good works depend on grace.

Let's put it another way: Salvation is not by works, but works are by salvation. Or again, grace does not wait for works, but works come from grace. I repeat: Men misunderstand God's favor or grace when they think of it as dependent upon good works. Good works arise from grace, not the other way around.

The view that God's favor toward us depends on our works (or lack of works) takes various forms. Here are a few:²

1) Christians misunderstand God's grace when they "live with a vague sense of God's disapproval." The operative words here are "a vague sense." If we know we have sinned a specific sin we must confess, and, God being our helper, determine to forsake it. But a vague sense of God's disapproval probably arises from not understanding grace.

The truth is: God does not withdraw His favor because we sin. That, of course, does not mean that He approves of sin. Not at all! It simply means that He knew all about your sin and took it into consideration before He ever extended His grace or favor to you. To live with a sense that the Lord disapproves of you is to misunderstand grace. God receives you as He receives His Son. He receives you in Christ. This is true of every believer. To be sure, believers vary. But God's acceptance of believers does not vary; His favor rests

on each of them all the time.

Someone may ask, however, "If that were true, He wouldn't punish us, would He? Doesn't punishment show that we are no longer in His favor?" If we understand the word "punishment" properly, we will see the fallacy in this argument.

God has punished all the Christian's sins in Christ. There is no punishment left for us to suffer. All has been borne by Jesus. Notice this, however: here I am using "punishment" in its primary meaning, "A penalty imposed for violating law." None of this falls on the believer; all of it fell on Christ.

But God does discipline His children. Sometimes His discipline is painful. We may also call that punishment. What we must not do is think of it as God no longer favoring us. Just the opposite is the case! "The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons" (Heb. 12:6-7). See the argument? God's discipline is an evidence of God's love!

2) Christians misunderstand God's grace when they "feel sheepish bringing their needs before the Lord when they have just failed Him." Here is a common problem that I suppose none of us escapes. We need to pray for something and we have just failed the Lord badly. Better postpone that prayer!

Do our failures make it less likely that the Lord will hear our prayers? Perhaps, if we are trying to hide our failure or sin from God. In that case we may need to be disciplined by having the heavens seem as brass. Even then, however, it only seems so. The Lord is as attentive to prayer after sin and failure as He is to any other prayer. He does with that prayer what He does with every prayer offered by a believer: He answers it as seems best to Him.

Grace and the Forgiveness of Sin

Why then do we have the impulse to avoid praying after

sin? This gets to the heart of the issue. We feel that a certain amount of suffering and remorse must take place to restore us to God's favor or grace. It just doesn't seem right that He simply forgives our sin! It doesn't seem right to us; it does seem right to Him.

This raises a larger question too. When does God forgive our sin? Did He forgive the sin of all His people when Christ died for that sin? Does He forgive all our sin, past, present and future, when we first come to Christ? Does He forgive our sin when we commit it? Or does forgiveness wait on our confession of sin? Which is it? This is a hard question, but I want to give you my judgment.

It seems clear to me that God forgives our sins as we commit them. Of course He forgave all our past sins when we came to Christ. That much seems beyond controversy.³ Beyond that, however, the question becomes more difficult. Let me show you why I believe as I do, and then let's look at the difficulties connected with my position.

It seems to me clear that justification, which includes the forgiveness of sins, is a present possession of believers. It is possible to think of justification as future only, something God will do for us on the judgment day. But that does not seem to me to agree with Scripture. We will, of course, be justified at the judgment, but justification is also a present possession of Christians. Yet if we had even one sin unforgiven, we would not be justified; we would be condemned before God.

The only way to have all our sins forgiven at any given moment is for God to forgive them as we commit them. This would be true if sin consisted only of outward acts that we shortly confessed. There would still be a time lapse in which we were not justified, not forgiven. The upshot would be that we would be justified part of each day and condemned part of each day.

But the problem is more serious than that. Sin extends

beyond the outward acts that are obviously sinful. It is a heart condition. It dwells especially in our motives and intentions. It is sometimes hidden from us as it propels us toward a wicked act. It may be working for days or weeks before it bears its outward fruit. The result? Given this fact, we would never be justified. We would always have sin that needed to be forgiven. Only if our sin is forgiven as we commit it can we be really just in the eyes of God.

That's my understanding. Let's look at the difficulties.

Two verses in the New testament spring to mind immediately. The first is 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." This verse seems to say as plainly as possible that forgiveness awaits our confession. Isn't that what it teaches?

Not quite.

It teaches that those whose sins are forgiven are people who confess their sins. That is what characterizes those who are forgiven. If a man is not in the habit of confessing his sins, he is a lost man; his sins are not forgiven. The verse does not, however, tell us when his sins are forgiven—whether when he commits them, or later.

This point seems to me to be immensely important. Every one of my sins is forgiven or I am lost. But, whatever my intention, I will never confess all my sins in this life. Yet I remain justified. The Lord does not impute my sin to me. As Paul said, quoting Psalm 32, "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Rom. 4:7-8).

Does this seem to be too good to be true? It is the teaching of God's Word. It is for every believer. It applies to you.

Someone may object, however, that the Lord Jesus has told us in the Lord's Prayer to pray that our sins will be forgiven. Doesn't that imply that God doesn't forgive us

until we ask Him?

No, it doesn't.

You can see the truth of this if you compare the request for forgiveness with the other requests. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are praying for a future event. When we ask for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, that is, perfectly, we are again looking to the future. When we ask for our daily bread, we mean for the day or days in front of us. The prayer for forgiveness, then, may be a prayer for the pardon of our future sins. And that, I think, is what it is.

But let's listen to one further objection. Someone may say, "If it's certain that God forgives our sins when we commit them, why pray about it at all? Why ask God to do what He is certain to do anyway?" The answer is this: God delights to be asked to do things He has already made up His mind to do. The Lord's Prayer bears witness to this fact throughout. Review its requests once more. What do you find? You find that the prayer is largely about things God is sure to do. His kingdom will come, for example. It is not in doubt at all.

Why ask God to do such things? What better prayer could a Christian pray? It amounts to "Your will be done!" It is like cheering our team on to victory. If eternal wisdom has decided to do something, a wise child will say, "Go for it, Lord!" And a wise child will say that about the forgiveness of his own future sins. Knowing his sins are forgiven, he will not hesitate to bring his needs before God even when he has sinned.

Let's look back for a moment. We have seen how it is possible to misunderstand the word "grace." We may think of grace in salvation as a kind of substance or energy poured into us by God. But in this context the word itself means "God's favor."

Once we have grasped the meaning of the word, we may

still have one of two misconceptions. We may think of grace, or God's favor, as unconnected with godly works, allowing us to live in sin. But those whose lives are characterized by sin are not Christians. They do not truly believe in Christ.

On the other hand, we may despair of God's grace and fear Him if we think of grace as dependent on works. That too is both false and dangerous. God gives us His grace freely. He forgives believers' sins freely. All of their sins! No amount of works can make us right with God.

The truth lies between these two extremes. Believers' sins are forgiven. There is no need for servile fear when we come into God's presence, not even if we have just sinned. The man or woman, however, who refuses to confess his or her sin has another problem. Even that person's sin is forgiven, if his lack of confession is the exception and not the rule. Otherwise he has a problem greater than a single unforgiven sin. If his life is not characterized by confession, he is not a Christian at all!

Grace means favor. Every believer has God's favor already; it is not something he somehow has to find. Yet by God's favor every Christian's life is a life of good works. They may not be remarkable works, either in the sight of the world or in the esteem of the Christian himself. That's not necessary at all!

Our Lord Jesus spoke of a cup of cold water given in His name. That doesn't sound like much, but the operative phrase is "in His name." What the Christian does He seeks to do for the glory of God and of Christ. That is what makes his works good in the sight of God.

A Christian is not a perfect man, or a man on the verge of perfection. But take his average act and you will find a godly act, an act done to please his Lord. The Christian life, the life of grace or favor from God, is a life characterized by righteousness and marred by sin. If it's not that, it's not the Christian life.

Endnotes:

1 This passage may be understood in a slightly different way that gives the same result. The foundation may be taken as the teaching concerning Christ, rather than as Christ Himself. In that case the preacher or teacher will be adding further truths to the foundation, or what appear to him to be truths. Then, to the extent that what he has taught is false, to that extent his work will be burned up, though he will be saved.

Either understanding is possible. Both preserve the clear intent of Paul here to describe the work of teaching that he and Apollos engaged in, in raising “God’s building” (3:9). What is plain in either case is that Paul is not endorsing the idea that men may lead ungodly lives and still be saved.

2 I have an unidentified clipping from *Sound of Grace*, edited by John Reisinger, to thank for the way this and the following misunderstanding are worded.

3 But nothing is beyond controversy. History shows that some few theologians have held to what is called “eternal justification,” the view that God never held His elect guilty, even before He created them.

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