



# GRACE

*There's a wideness in God's mercy  
I cannot find in my own  
And He keeps His fire burning  
To melt this heart of stone  
Keeps me aching with a yearning  
Keeps me glad to have been caught  
In the reckless raging fury  
That they call the love of God*  
— Rich Mullins, "The Love of God"

**W**hat is grace? We say "grace" before dinner, we name our daughters "Grace," we remark that dancers or athletes are "graceful," and we sing "Amazing Grace." But what does it really mean? The word "grace" in the New Testament is actually one of a group of words, which mean "joy, rejoice, gift, give freely, thankfulness, gratitude." It was how first-century people started their letters to one another. And it may be the most important word in the Bible.

"The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church," says Gordon MacDonald. "You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace."

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## **Justification: Grace for Heaven**

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Let's rewind the clock about 500 years. The biggest issue in the early 1500's was the re-discovery of grace. Somehow, odd as it seems, the church had misplaced its most prized possession. The raw power of God's grace had been diluted by the medieval church's teaching that justification came by believing in Christ plus doing good works. Once the idea of performance is introduced to the equation, grace loses its distinctiveness. The word "grace" and the word for "gift" in the New Testament come from the same root. Grace is a gift; it's not something you earn or purchase. This concept has always been tough for us humans, who are used to a performance-based society and performance-based relationships. The idea that God would accept us for free seems too good to be true. Certainly we have to contribute something! After all, isn't religion our attempt to reach a holy God? How can we do that if we don't have anything to show for our efforts?

But Martin Luther and others began to see that the essence of the gospel was the radical, astonishing truth that God offers us an arrangement (a new covenant) that was dreamt up, planned, accomplished and paid for completely by Him without any help from us. Now that's good news! It stunned the first-century world, but by the Middle Ages it had become watered down. The Reformation's main contribution to the church was the re-discovery and articulation that a relationship with God through Christ was available to anyone, regardless of how pathetic or rebellious their life, and it was free for the asking. Their slogan was "sola gratia, sola fide, sola deo Gloria" — "by grace alone, by faith alone, God alone gets the glory."

***Grace is ... God's free gift of salvation through Christ.***

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## **Sanctification: Grace for Now**

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OK. Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today most Christians would say, "I know it's only by God's grace that I'm going to heaven." But what about now? How does this relationship with God operate between earth and heaven? I know that salvation is by grace, but what about the Christian life?

### **The Problem of Legalism**

"You are not under law, but under grace." (Romans 6:14)

Evangelical (the word evangelical means "focused on the good news") churches today understand and teach that getting to heaven is by God's grace alone. That is the great legacy of the Reformation. And yet sometimes a legalistic form of Christianity stills slips in. The idea goes something like this:

*I know I'm going to heaven by the grace of God, but until then, my relationship with Him is conditional, based on my performance. After all, look at all He did for me! Certainly He has the right to expect me to earn His love on a daily basis by being good.*

And so Christians develop a split spiritual personality: we're partly grateful to God for saving us, but we're also partly insecure, feeling a vague guiltiness that we somehow haven't done quite enough to make Him happy. We feel we don't pray enough, read the Bible enough, give enough - you name it - to earn His favor. We start each year vowing that this year will be different, that we'll set our sights high enough that He will smile upon us and bless us - because we've finally cleaned up our lives and done enough good deeds to meet His approval. That lasts until... maybe the Super Bowl, if we're lucky. And so we begin

looking around us and comparing ourselves with others. Yes, there are those super-saints in every church who we can't possibly compete against. But the average Christian, perhaps we can find several of them who don't measure up to our standards. We say to ourselves, "At least I show up on Sunday, and volunteer, and I joined a small group (OK, I missed the last three meetings but I'm still on the list) – and I know for sure there are tons of people who only show up on Christmas and Easter who don't do nearly as much as I do! I can rest assured I'm way ahead of them." And so it goes. Once we start comparing, then we start judging, and once we get on that performance treadmill, it never stops. And it's never enough.

Joseph Cooke, the author of [Celebration of Grace](#), grew up in a Christian environment and set out to do the most spiritual thing he thought possible: become a missionary. After a few years out in the field, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was forced to return home. As he began to heal, he discovered he had been living under a dark spiritual cloud of legalism:

*"I tried to keep what I thought were God's commandments, only to meet with repeated failure. And upon the heels of failure came self-hatred and despair. The worst of it was that I could not very well sort out God's attitude toward me from my own. This is where my religion was so deadly. I had a God who was the epitome of warmth, forgiveness, and understanding when I had been reduced to despair, hopelessness and raw need. But once I undertook to live for Him, there was no pleasing Him. I simply could not do well enough in my Christian life to maintain fellowship with Him. In other words, fellowship was not something that sprang from mutual love and acceptance; it was something earned. I had to perform up to a certain level before I could win the continuing sense of His love and acceptance. So even though I knew in my mind that God was gracious, yet at the heart-habit level I acted as if He were not. I was a legalist through and through."*

Is that really the type of relationship Jesus died to give us? What about "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free?" What about "come to me all who are heavy-burdened and I will give you rest?"

Under the law, God-followers tried their best to be righteous. Looking at God's perfect law was like looking at jewelry in a store window; you can appreciate it and want it but you can't quite get to it. It's beyond our grasp. And because the standard is perfection, any flaw is magnified. As James 2:10 put it, "...whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." If I do 100 good things, how do I know I don't need to do 101? The dangling "carrot" of God's approval is maddeningly just beyond our reach, because we are flawed people. As a friend of mine put it, the Old Covenant is like a wonderful toy in attractive packaging but with the familiar disclaimer "batteries not included." God knew it wouldn't work with us, because while we could appreciate righteousness, we lacked the spiritual ability to be righteous.

In Jesus' day, the Jewish leaders had re-defined righteousness as outward acts, behaviors that, though rigorous, were externally achievable. But in his Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus made the shocking claim that his followers needed a righteousness that "exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees." He called for an inside-out righteousness of the heart, not just external behaviors. Jesus' hearers were stunned; how can you be better than the religious experts? Their natural response was to cry out for help. They realized they needed grace. And that's exactly what Jesus intended to bring.

Ray Stedman wrote:

*"There is still one final misunderstanding. This is the idea that it is quite optional whether a Christian lives by Law or grace. That is, if grace is found too difficult or demanding, the Lord will accept sincere legalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Legalism is sin! If you discover it in your heart, you ought to be down on your face before God repenting and confessing the thing. It is corrupting; it is vile; it is disturbing; it destroys the unity of the Spirit and produces the works of the flesh in your life."*

**What is legalism? Legalism is the notion that God accepts me because of what I do. It is the idea that my relationship with Him depends upon my self-reliant performance.**

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## **New Covenant Grace: The Radical Message of the New Testament**

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The Apostle Paul has been called the "apostle of the heart set free." After meeting Jesus unexpectedly on the road to Damascus, he spent the rest of his life proclaiming the radical truth, so foreign to his Old-Covenant upbringing and culture, that an entirely new kind of relationship with God had been made available by Christ. The law, good as it was as an accurate representation of God's holiness, had been surpassed by a grace-based covenant, which sets us free not only for heaven but for right now.

"Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory... will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!" (2 Corinthians 3:7-9)

In Paul's day, the immediate response from legalists to this new teaching was that it must be wrong. Well-meaning Jewish Christians tried to bring novice Gentile believers back under the "protective custody" of the law. But Paul, in his fiery letter to the Galatians, fought for the freedom of the gospel:

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:1-3)

According to Paul, the Christian life was not supposed to be lived as a set of impersonal rules and regulations and formulas, but in the freedom of a personal relationship with a

personal God, the Holy Spirit. Paul's detractors wondered, "What will keep these new Christians in check if they don't have the Law? (Never mind that no one was ever able to keep the Law in the past.) Certainly they need the controls we impose upon them!" Paul's response was that these new Gentile Christians had been radically changed from the inside. They were not the same people they had been. They would no longer live like their old selves because their old selves were gone. They had been made new. Yes, they still had the flesh, that tendency and ability to sin. But they now had a new nature, and the indwelling Spirit who was committed to changing them. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6) "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Paul went further, as he wrote in Galatians 5: "It was for freedom that Christ set you free." Freedom from impossible standards, freedom from self-imposed guilt, freedom from a tentative standing before God. Christians are new creations, secure with a loving father we call "Abba", who live a new life not by the letter but by the Spirit, motivated by gratitude for all we've been given. (2 Corinthians 3:6, 5:17, Romans 8:15)

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## What's My Motivation?

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Jesus established a New Covenant that was fundamentally different. He introduced a new kind of spiritual motivation: gratitude versus guilt, inspiration versus fear, trust in God versus self-reliance. People are used to a shame-based "have-to" motivation. But God wants to motivate us by the sheer astonishing magnitude of His grace. He wants us to be so moved by the love of Jesus that our whole lives are a response to His goodness towards us. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul revealed what really made him tick: "the love of Christ controls and urges and compels us."

David Seamands, author of [Healing Grace](#), wrote:

*"A lifetime of counseling evangelical Christians has driven me to a disturbing conclusion: the basic cause of many of our most troubling emotional and spiritual problems is insufficient grace. Although we sing "Amazing Grace" and vigorously proclaim salvation by grace through faith alone, grace is largely head knowledge, a truth believed about God but not a living experience with God. Being restless achievers instead of resting believers causes a whole variety of personal problems. These range all the way from anxiety, guilt, and low self-esteem to severe emotional breakdown. I am convinced that the failure to receive and live out God's unconditional grace and the corresponding failure to offer grace to others are at the root of it all."*

**Grace is... the truth that, as a Christian, my relationship with God is based upon his free, unconditional love. I cannot do anything that will make Him love me any more or less than He does right now.**

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## Misunderstandings About Grace

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Sometimes people reject the idea of God's grace because they simply misunderstand it. Some common misconceptions are:

- *Grace means we don't need to encourage people to be righteous.*  
No one reading the Bible carefully would come away with the sense that Christianity doesn't care about ethics or morals. Every New Testament book talks about developing a holy, righteous life. The issue is motivation: law motivates by guilt and fear, grace motivates by love. Under law we attempt to be righteous so that God will accept us; under grace we desire to serve Him because of His unconditional love.
- *Grace means that sin has no consequences.*  
There is no sin that Christ did not pay for, and therefore there will be no future condemnation in heaven for believers. However, when we choose to sin there very well may be earthly consequences. If I steal something or murder someone, I will probably go to jail. If I have an affair it will affect my family life. God can bring healing and restoration to many situations, but we will reap what we sow.
- *Grace means God doesn't care about sin.*  
In Ephesians 4:30 it says that Christians can "grieve" the Holy Spirit. Like a good father, God desires the best for us, and He will even go so far as to discipline us if we get too far off the trail. But the punishment for our sins, the just wrath of God, was taken by Christ. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) If God didn't care about sin, He wouldn't have paid the ultimate price to get rid of it.

In his paper, "Doing What Comes Unnaturally," Ray Stedman dealt with several of these issues:

*"There is yet another misunderstanding: This is a very common one and a very serious one. It is the thinking that says the standards of grace are much lower than the standards of legalism. The argument goes something like this, in various forms: "True Christians," someone says, "never use tobacco, or dance, or go to the movies, or go to the theater, or gamble, or drink. And since you sometimes see those who say they are living by grace do some of these things, it therefore proves the standards of grace are lower than those of the Law." Actually, the reverse is true. In the light of the Word of God, which alone must set the standards for believers, these outward acts — smoking, drinking, dancing, movies, theater, gambling, etc. — are much less serious sin, if they are sin at all, than the inward, vicious sins of the spirit that legalists almost invariably permit in their own lives. Legal standards always concern themselves with outward acts. As long as you can keep the outward aspect of your life adjusted to a particular rule or standard, you can consider yourself spiritual. But grace does not stop there. Grace goes beyond the outward act into the heart,*

and says the heart must be right as well. The spirit must be righteous in God's sight. The standards of grace are concerned with those inward attitudes that create the outward act."

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## What Does a Grace-Based Church Look Like?

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- **Freedom**

Grace tends to set people free. Religion, while looking good on the outside, tends to produce bondage, unrealistic expectations, and phony relationships. Jesus said to his disciples: "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Gordon McDonald, author of [Rebuilding Your Broken World](#), wrote: "The freest person in the world is one with an open heart, a broken spirit, and a new direction in which to travel."

- **Messiness**

Grace does not produce perfect churches any more than it produces perfect people. In fact, a grace-based church may look messier than other churches, because its focus is not on looking good on the outside, but seeking and celebrating inner transformation in the lives of its people. A grace-based church is not a museum for perfect saints, but a hospital for healing sinners.

- **Authenticity**

A grace-based church is a safe place to be honest. What's the point of acting like we're more spiritual than we really are? When the church becomes a safe place – a place where we know we will not be judged if we are honest about our struggles — then people are willing to risk transparency. Jesus fully accepted and embraced people in their current spiritual condition, but He did not leave them there. Those who encountered Christ and responded to His invitation to follow Him began, slowly but surely, to change. And so a grace-centered church seeks to create an atmosphere of acceptance and love, lifting up Christ who alone can change us.

*"Freedom is being out in the open, having boldness, having nothing to hide. Those who are free are those who do not have any reputation to defend, no image to hide behind, nothing to preserve. They can be themselves."*  
— Ray Stedman, "Who is that Masked Man?"

- **Dependence on the Spirit Rather Than Formulas**

We believe that we're trying to get people to live the way they really want to live. When a person becomes a Christ-follower, the Holy Spirit indwells them; they are given a new nature, their deepest desire is to love God, and they are most fulfilled when they do. And while we have all these things in common, at the same time each person is unique. The New Testament tells us what functions a church should have (worship, teaching, fellowship, etc.) but it allows great freedom in the forms — the way we do those functions. And so the challenge is to be creative, to ask God what new thing He might want us to do, instead of simply relying on traditions.

*"A healthy church does not depend on methodology. The dynamic is Spirit-filled people meeting other people's needs in Jesus name, wherever they are. You can't reduce that to methodology. Concentrating on practices instead of principles is like building our houses on sand."* — Frank Tillapaugh, [The Church Unleashed](#)

- **A Place for Second Chances**

Where in life can we go and experience freedom to fail? Most of us fail more than we succeed, and if failure is met with immediate rejection, we won't take the risks that are necessary if we're going to grow. Failure doesn't necessarily mean sin — it may simply mean that we try something new — a new ministry, a crazy idea, a volunteer position, and it just doesn't work. What then? A grace-based church urges us to get up, dust ourselves off, and try again. It also means a willingness to look at a person as an individual, despite mistakes of their past. Where would David, Peter and Paul be if God had said, "Three strikes and you're out!"?

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## Conclusion

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The message of grace, then, is stunningly radical. There's nothing like it in the world, or in any other religion. Although it is free to us, it cost God the death of His Son. Inexplicably, it was worth it to Him to suffer so that we might have life. And that's why it's called... "amazing."

*"Grace is the central invitation to life and the final word. It's the beckoning nudge and the overwhelming, undeserved mercy that urges us to change and grow, and then gives us the power to pull it off."*  
— Tim Hansel

*"There is, however, one absolutely inescapable condition that must be met if grace is to change a person. Grace must be believed."* — Joseph Cooke

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## Grace-Related Books

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- *Abba's Child*, by Brennan Manning
- *Authentic Christianity*, by Ray Stedman
- *Celebration of Grace*, by Joseph Cooke
- *Free at Last*, by Ron Ritchie
- *Grace Walk*, by Steve McVey
- *Healing Grace*, by David Seamands
- *Messy Spirituality*, by Mike Yaconelli
- *The Grace Awakening*, by Chuck Swindoll
- *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Henri Nouwen
- *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, by Brennan Manning
- *Transforming Grace*, by Jerry Bridges
- *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, by Philip Yancey