

## The Power of the Gospel

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## The Dynamic of Grace

If one word could be found to define the whole flavor of the Gospel it would be the word “grace.” In **Acts 20:24**, Paul summarizes his whole ambition in ministry:

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given me – the task of testifying to *the gospel of God’s grace.*”

We read in **Romans 6:14** that the whole reason that we have been set free from slavery to sin is because we are not “under law” but “under grace.”

What exactly is this grace? Why is it so important to the Gospel? And what does it mean practically for me as I face the issues of life today?

### The Meaning of Grace

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To understand how grace works, we must first understand what grace is. Grace, as it is used in the Bible, has many shades of meaning. But there are two principal meanings that bear directly on our walk with God:

#### ***Undeserved favor***

##### **Read Ephesians 2:4-5**

Grace is God’s mercy in action. He extended salvation to us, not because we were in anyway deserving, but simply because he loved us. Grace is a characteristic of God’s love, not a characteristic of anything within ourselves.

But the impact of God’s grace on our lives is profound. Because of God’s grace, we switched from being “objects of wrath” (**Ephesians 2:3**) to being “objects of mercy” (**Ephesians 2:4-5; Romans 9:23**).

#### ***Enabling power***

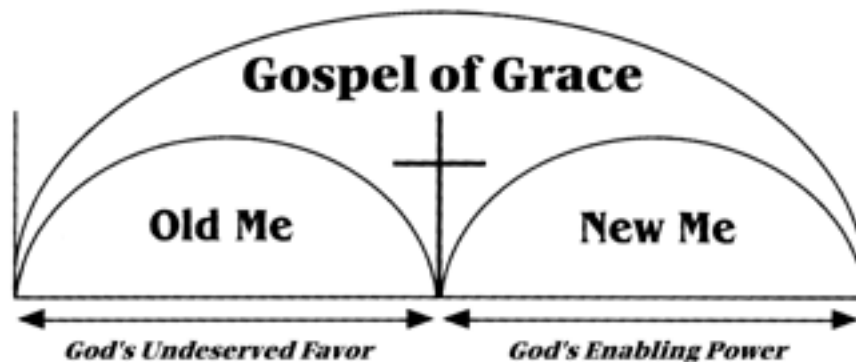
##### **Read Acts 4:33**

Grace is not just God’s undeserved favor, saving us from the consequences of sin. It is also God’s enabling power, causing us to live a Spirit-led life.

Grace is the enabling power of God in action. It is the action of God's Spirit in our lives, empowering us to do what we cannot do ourselves.

Combining these two meanings, grace can be defined as:

- God doing what we did not deserve
- God doing what we were incapable of doing ourselves



- The first meaning of grace – *God's undeserved favor* – is encapsulated in the first half of the Gospel, the part that deals with the Old Me. In this usage, the opposite of grace is *debt*.
- The second meaning of grace – *God's enabling power* – is encapsulated in the second half of the Gospel, the part that deals with the New Me. In this usage, the opposite of grace is *self-effort*.

Sometimes the Bible uses the word grace to embrace both these meanings and thus represent the entirety of the New Covenant. In this usage, the opposite of grace is *law*.

Throughout the New Testament, you will see these three opposites – debt, self-effort (or works) and law – constantly used in contrast to the way of grace. One is called “worldly wisdom,” while the other is called “the wisdom of God” (**1 Corinthians 2:6-15**). One is called “the old way of the written code,” while the other is called “the new way of the Spirit” (**Romans 7:6**).

### Read Romans 11:6

It takes a revelation from God for us to realize that we are no longer in debt to God,\* that we are not required to attain the standard of God's holiness through our own effort, and that the entire nature of our relationship with God is now on the basis of a covenant of grace.

Understanding the grace of God is vital to understanding how the Gospel has

\* You had a debt to God that you could never possibly pay, so Christ paid the debt in full upon the Cross. Now there is no longer any debt hanging over your head. Your Christian life is no longer debt-motivated but grace-motivated. This is the wonder of the Gospel. You now have only *one* remaining debt outstanding: to love those around you in the same way that God loved you (**Romans 13:8; Ephesians 4:32**).

been designed to work in your life. Paul and other leaders of the first century Church constantly battled with those who thought that God's grace was an excuse to sin (**Jude 4; Romans 6:1-2,15**). This was because they misunderstood the nature of grace. They thought God's grace simply meant he turned a blind eye to sin. Far from it, however, grace is God actively dealing with sin in your life.

Grace defines the Christian life and energizes your walk in the Spirit. Grace means God at work in you, not you trying to work for God. Grace doesn't mean trying to draw upon your limited resources of strength and wisdom to live a life pleasing to God. Rather, grace is you drawing on the unlimited resources of the Spirit of God to live as God intended for you to live.

## Plumbing the Depths of God's Grace

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### Read Colossians 1:6

The Colossian Christians had grasped from the beginning "God's grace in all its truth." They understood these three basic elements:

- ➔ God's grace as undeserved favor – the first half of the Gospel
- ➔ God's grace as enabling power – the second half of the Gospel
- ➔ God's grace as the New Covenant – the entirety of the Gospel

But even once these basic concepts in grace are understood, this does not mean you have exhausted the revelation of God's grace. There is so, so much more yet to be discovered about the richness that can be found in the grace of God.

### Read Ephesians 2:7

God's grace is described as being rich. It has depths which will require the whole of eternity to plumb. This grace has not just been given to us, it has been *lavished* upon us in abundance.

### Read Ephesians 1:7-8

The way of self-effort can never compare with the way of God's grace. The way of self-effort is an impoverished way. The righteousness it produces is sub-standard and its ability to transform your life is deficient.

In comparison, the grace of God is like a dazzling treasure which exceeds all expectations. Its resources are limitless and its effectiveness to transform your life is unmatched.

### Read 2 Corinthians 9:8,14

## Under Grace

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### Read Romans 5:1-2

Grace is now the basis of your entire life in God. It is not just a doorway into salvation. It is a state in which you breathe and live and stand.

J. B. Phillips translates **verse 2** in this way:

“Through him we have confidently entered into this new relationship of grace, and here we take our stand, in happy certainty of the glorious things he has for us in the future.”<sup>1</sup>

### Read Romans 6:14

In this verse, Paul makes a very bold statement. Sin, he says, is no longer your master, and the reason it is no longer your master is because the dynamic of your life has changed. You are no longer “under law,” he says, but “under grace.”

Notice how **Romans 6:14** closely matches **Romans 7:6**. Both verses present two clear and diametrically opposed ways of living:

- Law (or the “old way of the written code”)
- Grace (or the “new way of the Spirit”)

And in both these verses, Paul states very clearly that only one way – the way of the Spirit – produces fruit that is pleasing to God. Only one way – the way of grace – results in a life where sin “is no longer your master” (NLT\*).

So how can we truly experience this day to day victory over sin, that Paul alludes to in **Romans 6:14**? How does this grace dynamic really work?

## Walking in Grace

### Read 1 Peter 5:5-6

### Read James 4:6

Both Peter and James divide the whole of humanity into two camps: the proud and the humble. God’s response to these two kinds of people is very clear:

- God *opposes* the proud
- God *gives grace* to the humble

Now what does God mean by the terms “the proud” and “the humble”? He is not using human standards to measure people. What we call “humility” can sometimes be what the Bible calls “false humility” (**Colossians 2:18,23**). Let’s have a quick look at what false humility is and what true humility is:

- **False humility** is a belittling of yourself in the eyes of others. But the focus is still very strongly on yourself. You are still the center of attention. This false humility in fact masks a religious pride.
- **True humility** is an attitude toward God, not just toward yourself. It acknowledges that only God can save and empower a person to live a holy life. The focus has shifted from yourself to God. You are not the center of attention; God is.

At the core of self-effort you will always find pride. Pride is a self-centeredness. It

may come in the form of pure egotism or, more subtly, as a poor self-image, which is a wounded pride. It may express itself either as outright arrogance, or as a false humility. Pride, by its very nature, draws attention to itself. This multi-faceted pride lies at the root of the old self, and it is this root that the Gospel targets so ruthlessly.

On the other hand, at the core of a grace-empowered life you will find humility. Not the self-centered humility of the self-righteous person, but the God-centered humility of one who has had a genuine revelation of the grace of God. The Bible says that people who have unresolved pride attract God's opposition, while people who have discovered the humility of reliance upon God attract his grace.

The Gospel is based upon genuine humility. That humility is expressed in a recognition that I cannot save myself or change myself. I am incapable of pleasing God in my own strength. I can only please God through the power of his Spirit. This is true humility results in grace being infused into the Christian life.

### Read 2 Corinthians 6:1

Paul warns us “not to receive God's grace in vain.” This grace is a resource made available to you in the Gospel (note **Hebrews 4:16**; **2 Corinthians 9:8**). There is a sufficiency in this grace to meet any and every situation you may face (see **2 Corinthians 12:9**). When you walk in the Spirit, you are drawing upon this reserve of grace set aside for you.

## The Discipline of Grace

Understanding how the dynamic of grace works is vital if we are to learn how to walk in the Spirit. Some Christians think that grace means that we are now just to sit back and let God do all the work. But this could not be farther from the truth.

### Read Titus 2:11-12

Notice what Paul says in the above two verses. Who is it that says “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions? It's you! Who is it that lives a self-controlled life? It's you! What makes the difference, however, is God's grace.

God has designed his grace – his enabling power – to empower you to live in accordance with his will for your life. There is still an active response on your part, but the difference is that now it is “God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (**Philippians 2:13**).

### Read Ephesians 2:10

There are good works which God has *prepared* for you to do. These works, however, are not works of self-effort but works of grace!

God's standard of holiness for your life has not changed. In fact, if anything, the standard of holiness expressed under grace is *higher* than that expressed under law! (note **Matthew 5:20-48**). What has changed, however, is the dynamic by

which that standard of holiness is attained.

### Read 2 Timothy 2:1

We are called to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Note that Paul instructs *Timothy* to be strong in God’s grace. This involved an active decision on Timothy’s part. It was Timothy’s responsibility to be strong in the grace of God.

This is what we mean by “the discipline of grace.” Grace is not a wishy-washy let-God-do-it-all attitude to life. It is an acknowledgement that I *cannot* live the Christian life without God’s enabling, but it is also a recognition that I must avail myself of the grace afforded by the Gospel. God is the one who crucifies the old self (**Romans 6:6**), but I am the one who puts it off (**Ephesians 4:22**). God is the one who creates the new self, but I am the one who puts it on (**Ephesians 4:24**).

Grace is a framework for living. When you submit to God’s grace, you step into a “disciplined” lifestyle. Your daily life is disciplined by grace. This discipline involves an “effort” that is applied by you within the boundaries of that grace. Note the following scriptures and their emphasis upon the effort of the Christian life.

### Read Romans 14:19

### Read Ephesians 4:3

### Read Hebrews 4:11

### Read Hebrews 12:14

### Read 2 Peter 1:5-8

### Read 2 Peter 3:14

The Christian life *does* involve effort. The question at issue is the *direction* to which that effort is applied. Think of it this way:

Imagine you are trying to push your car out of the mud. You have heaved and shoved, and just when it seemed to budge a little, it settles back into its original groove. It seems hopeless.

But then along comes a muscular friend. He tells you that he will push the car out of the mud with you. Greatly relieved, you begin pushing, but still the car doesn’t seem to budge. You look up and see your friend standing on the other side the car, his arms folded, his eyes watching you.

“What’s wrong?” you say. “Why aren’t you helping me push the car out of the mud?”

“You’re pushing in the wrong direction,” says your friend. “If you want to get the car out of the mud, you must work with me, not against me.”

He beckons you over to his side. “This is the way you must push,” he says, pointing in a totally different direction from the direction you were pushing before. “Now, push *with* me.”

Now you are next to him. Together, you lean into the car. As he begins to push, you also begin to push, but this time, *in the same direction*. Your effort

is now “in one accord.” The car budes, then begins to slide out of the mud. Together, you have moved the car.

This is the kind of effort that God has called you to. You are not a spectator in your own life. You are an active participant *together with the Holy Spirit*.

### Read again Philippians 2:12-13

Can you see the clear balance of responsibility between you and the Holy Spirit? You are instructed to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” but it is on the basis of the grace of God which “works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

J. B. Phillips’ *The New Testament in Modern English* captures this distinct partnership between your will and God’s will:

“...be keener than ever to work out the salvation that God has given you with a proper sense of awe and responsibility. For it is God who is at work within you, giving you the will and the power to achieve his purpose.”

*The Message* also describes vividly this instruction to actively participate in God’s grace:

“Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God’s energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.”

The Christian life works on the basis of your cooperation with God. Instead of working *against* the grace of God, you now work *in line with* the grace of God. You are pushing in the same direction with the Lord. You have aligned our daily walk with the grace of God.

## The Experience of Paul

### Read again Romans 6:14

Paul’s description of being “under law” and “under grace” was drawn directly from his personal experience. As we have already seen, in **Romans 7** Paul describes the condition of being “under law,” which had been an intensely personal experience for him (note the number of times he uses the word “I” and “me” in this chapter). Likewise, in **Romans 8** Paul describes the condition of being “under grace.”

Let’s take a closer look at Paul’s personal experience of being “under grace.”

### Read 1 Corinthians 15:10

This is a remarkable description of the power of God’s grace at work in a person’s life. Paul’s revelation of the grace of God had been preceded by a revelation of his own depravity and inability to meet God’s righteous requirements.

### Read 1 Timothy 1:12-14

Notice how, in **1 Corinthians 15:10**, Paul declares that he “worked harder than all of them” but then qualifies this with “yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” His “work[ing] hard” was not tainted with any vestige of self-effort. It was God’s grace, pure and simple, energizing him and propelling him forward in his ministry. It was grace-effort, not self-effort.

### Read Colossians 1:29

No wonder Paul ends many of his letters with the phrase:

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (**2 Thessalonians 3:18**).

## Boasting in God’s Grace

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### Read Romans 3:27-28

The Gospel totally excludes all possibility for human boasting (note **Ephesians 2:9; Romans 4:2**). This is so intrinsic to the nature of the Gospel that it cannot be over-emphasized.

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Here Paul makes a bold statement: God has created the Gospel in such a way “so that no one may boast before him.” But then Paul goes on to say an unusual thing.

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:31

Paul says that there is a kind of boasting which is allowed – boasting in the Lord!

### Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Paul gladly boasted, not about his own strength, but about his own weakness, for it was the sole sufficiency of God’s grace that enabled him to live for God.

### Read Galatians 6:14

### Read 2 Corinthians 1:12

You cannot have a revelation of the grace of God without gaining a burning desire to boast in that grace. When our boasting is before God, we call this “praising God” (**Ephesians 1:6**). When our boasting is to other Christians, we call it “encouraging.” And when our boasting is to those who have not yet discovered the grace of God, it is called “witnessing.”

God’s grace is moving toward a goal in your life – and that goal is the full likeness of God’s Son (**Romans 8:29; Philippians 1:6**). As long as you continue to walk in God’s grace, that grace will enable you to overcome sin and will ultimately present you faultless before the presence of God (**Jude 24**).

### Read 2 Peter 3:18

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966).