

What is Grace?

This article corresponds to the book

[Unlocking Grace](#)

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men... Titus 2:11
(NIV)*

Since grace brings salvation, it is crucial to understand what it means.

What would be the response if we asked a group of Christians if the following definition of grace were correct? “Grace is God’s gracious disposition to forgive repentant sinners.” It is likely many would agree.

Unfortunately, this is only half true. The above definition better describes *mercy*. Scripture sometimes uses *grace* as a near synonym for *mercy*. It would be a serious reductionism, however, to limit it to definition.¹ Like the weak foundation of a building, faulty definitions can have devastating consequences on vital doctrines.

Grace means “unmerited divine favor.” The Greek term in the original is “charis,” derived from the verb *charizomai*. This word means “to show favor.” It assumes the graciousness of the giver and the unworthiness of the recipient. When *charis* is used of God’s activity, it means “unmerited favor.”²

Grace and Mercy: What Is the Difference?

Grace and *mercy* have two important distinctions. First, mercy is universal, while grace is particular. Mercy is based on God’s universal command to repent.

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent. Acts 17:30

Inherent in this command is the assumption the repentant sinner will be forgiven. A divine offer of mercy to all mankind exists. For this reason, God may never be accused of unfairness merely because some receive special grace. God never rejects a repentant sinner.

Grace, on the other hand, has never been *offered* to anybody, not even the elect. Grace is not an offer. It is an unmerited bestowal. It is also particular in the sense God bestows favor on some, not on everyone. We see this most clearly in the interplay between grace and election. ...*there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Rom 11:5*

Thus, we see key distinctions between mercy and grace:

Mercy is universal, offered to all. Grace is particular, bestowed upon some.

Important aspects of grace

Grace is timeless

... who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began. 1 Timothy 1:9

Eternity is not linear time extended indefinitely but a timeless dimension God inhabits.³ Grace originated there, beyond human control. Nothing in our time and space continuum was the cause of God's grace, and nothing could change his mind now.

Grace is unmerited

Notice again that 1 Timothy 1:9 excludes "works" from God's "purpose and grace." Not only is grace disassociated from merits, it is the diametric opposite, as Paul clarifies in Romans 11:6.

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Likewise, grace is not dependent on obedience to the law either.

...for you are not under law but under grace. Romans 6:14

A sure way to demolish grace is to mix in any merit whatsoever.

Grace is a divine quality

It is a characteristic of each of the members of the Trinity.

Father: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:7*

Son: *Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Galatians 6:18*

Holy Spirit: *And I will pour on the house of David...the Spirit of grace. Zechariah 12:10 ... insulted the Spirit of grace. Hebrews 10:29*

Grace is sovereign

Paul expresses God's sovereignty in grace by associating it with his *good pleasure, which he purposed in Himself*. It seems he consulted with no one in his choice of recipients, nor waited for anyone's permission. See [Ephesians 1:7-9](#)

Grace is the only basis of our acceptance with God

...to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. Ephesians 1:6

Since this is so, any teaching that offers formulas or techniques for acceptance with God other than grace alone is false. By grace alone, God gives forgiveness of sins, redemption through Christ's blood, wisdom and understanding, and all spiritual blessings. Ephesians 1:1-5.

Grace is holy

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age. Titus 2:12

Even during the first century, there existed movements associating grace with libertinism. The apostles warned us about them in verses like Jude 4. Any insinuation that grace gives Christians freedom to act in carnal ways is heresy. Those who teach such things prove they have no grace whatsoever.

Grace is for the few, not the many

So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. Romans 11:5

A *remnant*, by definition, refers to the few among a larger group. The only reason a saved remnant exists at all is because of grace.

Grace is a mystery

Since grace has no basis in human merit, the question of why some receive it and others do not remains a mystery. The situation again appears unfair until we acknowledge God owes nothing to anyone. Ironically, attempts to remove the mystery from grace winds up in heresy.

Preaching the gospel means preaching grace

... I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. Acts 20:24

The minister of the gospel has no other message than the grace of God in Christ. If he is preaching something else, he is not preaching the gospel.

Key question: Is salvation a cooperative work between God and man?

Theologians discuss this point with two words: "synergism" and "monergism."

Synergism comes from two Greek words: syn, “together,” and ergos, “work.” It means salvation is a cooperative work between God and man. In this view, man contributes something to his salvation. However, his contribution is insufficient and needs to be supplemented by God.

If synergism is correct, then God is an assistant to man’s effort to save himself. God is the passive agent waiting for man to ask for help. God responds to man’s initiative.

Monergism comes from two Greek words, *mono*, “alone,” and ergos, “work.” It means salvation is a work of God alone. Man is unable to contribute. Therefore God is the active agent, and man responds to God’s initiative.⁴

Salvation comes by grace through faith. (Ephesians 2:8) Which is correct, synergism or monergism? It depends on whether saving faith itself is a work of God’s grace.

A few key texts settle the issue:

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 1:14

Here, grace brings the virtues of faith and love.

... those who by grace had believed. Acts 18:27

Grace was clearly the cause of their faith.

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. Philippians 1:29

The term *granted* here is "charizomai" in Greek, which means to give freely by grace. It means more than mere permission to believe. Belief was something God worked in them.

He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." John 6:65

If coming to Christ means believing in Him, then faith comes from God the Father as a gift.

Similar texts: [Acts 13:48](#); [John 6:44, 65](#); [Titus 1:1](#)

Once a person is saved, how do grace and faith work?

A sinner is dead in his sins and is unable to generate saving faith until God works powerfully in him by the Spirit through the gospel.

Once he is saved, however, faith actively conveys grace for Christian living. The faith is already there.

Grace, at this point, shows its multifaceted nature... *the manifold grace of God. (1 Peter 4:10)* Once a sinner has been *saved* by grace, he learns how to *live* by grace. The most significant mistake a Christian can make is to assume grace is no longer necessary.

The grace of God puts us to work

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. 1 Corinthians 15:10

Grace is active, not passive. Though we cannot obtain grace by our works, nevertheless, grace results in works. When Luke spoke about the Apostles and said, *much grace was upon them all*, he meant they were productive by God's power.

Grace, through faith, makes us stand firm in Christ

...through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Romans 5:2

Grace allows us to approach God boldly

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

Grace overcomes sin

Nothing else does.

...so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:21

People try all sorts of things to overcome sin: legalism, good works, and personal discipline. Grace does the job because nothing else can.

...they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Colossians 2:23

Means of grace

Though God's grace is sovereign in the life of the believer, he nevertheless provides us practical things to apply. These are the Word, prayer, and the ministries of the church. As we apply these, God continues to supply grace to walk with him. God is not dependent on these means, nor should we assume we have earned grace because we apply them. We depend on God alone for grace, yet recognize our responsibility to apply the means to the end he has provided.

...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Philippians 2:13

Summary

Saving grace is God's unmerited favor. It is sovereign, dependent solely on God's will. Grace is the opposite of merit. Though God offers mercy to all mankind, conditioned upon repentance, his grace is bestowed on an elect few. Grace is the sole cause of salvation, based on no human contribution.

Grace in the life of the believer is multifaceted. It makes it possible to walk with God and gives power to do his work. God alone is the cause of grace, though he requires Christians to apply faithfully the means he has put at our disposal to grow.

From this article we learned:

- Grace is unmerited divine favor. It is an eternal, holy, and powerful divine quality.
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- Grace and mercy are similar but not identical. Mercy is offered to all, but grace is bestowed on some.
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- Saving faith itself is a work of grace.
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- Believers depend on God alone for his sustaining grace while applying the means. These are the Word, prayer, and the ministries of the church.
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¹. Examples of “grace” used in this way are listed below. However, it could be argued that these texts mean mercy is a *component* of grace, rather than a synonym. [Eph 1:7](#); [2:4-5](#); [1Tim 1:13-14](#); [Heb 4:16](#)

2. Grace is used in various ways regarding Christians. For now, we are dealing only with saving grace.

3. *For thus says the High and Lofty One Who **inhabits eternity...*** Isaiah 57:15

4. The only branch of theology in Christendom holding to monergism is the reformed. All others are synergistic and differ only in the question of exactly what man contributes to attract the grace of God.