

Incongruous Grace

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[0 : 00] Was that hymn familiar to you? Marvelous Grace. If you grew up in the church, a church like I grew up in, and you sang that a lot, and you probably also sang Amazing Grace, there's just a lot of hymns with the word grace in it, right?

And I wonder if we tend to forget what grace means, or I wonder if we've ever really understood it in the first place. So let me ask you, what does grace mean? Just in your minds right now, just define it, see if you can define it.

If you're struggling with that, let me help you by giving you a different word. So in Greek, we use, in English, there's two translations of one Greek word, charis.

We use the word grace, and we use the word gift. And oftentimes, they are interchangeable, and there's semantic overlap between those two words.

It's a simpler word, I think, one that we're more familiar with. So why don't we try defining the word gift? See if you can, in your mind, think what a gift really is.

[1 : 18] What's the definition of the word gift? Now, children, when you think of the word gift, what do you think of? You probably think of a box with shiny wrapping paper and a bow that you open up at Christmas or on your birthday.

Adults, how about you? I wonder if you defined it how I would probably define it, okay? This would have been my definition of gift up through this week.

I would have defined it. A gift is a thing given generously to someone without any expectation of return. That sounds about right, right? A gift is a thing given to someone generously without any expectation of getting something back.

Now, that's probably a similar definition that a lot of you had, that a lot of you had, but in studying Romans 5, it's made me question that definition. So we're gonna keep that attempt at a definition in mind as we look at Romans 5 together, the Romans 5 which Ellen read for us.

And we're gonna do an overview of this passage and then we'll home in on this word gift. And then we're going to explore the implications on our lives of God's grace to us.

[2 : 37] Before we do that, let's pray. Lord, we hear that word of grace all the time and perhaps it doesn't marvel us.

Perhaps it doesn't amaze us. Perhaps we have been marveled or amazed at your grace and it's not like that for us anymore. We've grown accustomed to it.

Lord, I would ask that for these next few minutes, you would amaze us, surprise us, particularly me, Lord.

Amaze me, astound me at your grace. Lord, I ask you would forgive the sins of the preacher and may your word be clearly heard as we look at Romans 5 together.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen. So before we dive in, I wanna first address the children. Children, you should have received packets as you checked in and perhaps you have hopefully pens and pencils.

[3 : 50] All right, there's lots of activities, but there's also three, there should be three blank sheets of paper. Is this sounding about right? Everyone has packets of paper? Kids, can you hold yours up for me? Show them to me.

There, oh, thank you. Thanks, Judd. Judd's gonna put it to good use. All right, so find something to draw because I have three things I need you to draw, right?

And the first is this. I want you to draw on one side of this piece of paper a mountain, okay? And on the other side, I want you to draw a molehill. I don't know if you've heard your parents say, you're making a mountain out of a molehill.

Well, hopefully this will help understand the difference. Draw a mountain is really big, all right? Include lots of details, snow caps, trees, bears, whatever you want. And on the other side, draw a molehill and you can have like a mole peeking out. But this is your challenge. You need to draw them to scale, okay? Mountain needs to be as big as it should be compared to the little tiny molehill. That's what you need to do, all right? [4 : 52] You ready? Go. And Judd, you can do that too. All right, so adults, let's explore chapter five, verses one through 11 really quick. Many of Paul's letters were written to churches that Paul helped to found.

But the church in Rome, he wasn't there for the founding. What we think happened, what is a likely explanation for why a church developed in Rome is after Pentecost, when the gospel was preached to people of all tribes and nations, Jews went home to Rome and founded a church there. And over time, Gentiles came into the church. But in 49 AD, the Jews in Rome were expelled. Over time, the Jewish Christians returned to this church probably to find that it had a distinctly Gentile flavor to it.

And so one could imagine the sharp differences between the attitudes and beliefs and practices of those Jewish Christians and those Gentile Christians. And so Paul's writing to both resolve these differences and also to address the suffering that they had probably endured and would undoubtedly face in the future.

So that's the letter to the Romans. Now in chapter five, Paul explains that their comfort, as they face troubles and trials and suffering, their comfort comes from having been justified.

[6 : 23] In other words, they are found right with God. Their justification comes with two benefits. One is in the present and one is in the future. The present benefit of justification is reconciliation.

As members of the human race, we find ourselves in rebellion against God. This rebellion has made us his enemies. But through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, we now have present peace and reconciliation.

We are reconciled to the Father. The other benefit comes in the future. If we're at peace with God now, then our future with him is secure.

Christians need not fear a future wrath. So Christians have reconciliation with God in the present and we have hope for the future. We access this reconciliation and this hope by faith.

In other words, we trust in God's promises that we are reconciled and saved by his grace. There's that word again, God's grace. We saw that in verse two of Romans chapter five.

[7 : 37] So before we talk about grace, I have another assignment for the children. How did the ocean and, no, how did the Mountain Mole Hill project work for you? Okay, I have another assignment on another sheet of paper.

I need you to do another drawing, kids. In the summer, if you weren't aware, we have the kids with us in the service. So on one side of the piece of paper, you need to draw an ocean.

Okay. You can include a lot of details in the ocean, fish, coral, mermaids that sing and obey their parents. And on the right side, on the right side of the piece of paper, you need to draw a puddle.

Okay. And again, it needs to be to scale. Okay. A really huge ocean and a really tiny puddle. Go. Go. All right. Back to the adults. Like I said earlier, one word in Greek is translated both grace and gifts.

So I'm gonna use those words interchangeably. But for now, I'm focusing on the word gift. I'm gonna ask, what makes a gift a gift?

[8 : 41] What makes a gift different than, say, a loan or a tax or a salary? What does Paul mean when he uses the word gift?

And does that differ from how everyone else in his day used the word? And do we use it the same way as Paul? We're gonna explore all that. But first we need to kind of figure out what gift is.

And so we're gonna turn to a scholar named John Barclay. He explored the meaning of the word gift in his book, Paul and the Gift. And he examines the word, excuse me, he examines the works of anthropologists who have studied this concept of gift across different ages and different cultures. And Barclay identifies six of what he calls perfections of gift. That is six different meanings of gift that are taken to their logical extreme.

So I think it'd be helpful to look at all six because it's gonna clarify some things later. So we're gonna look at this first one here. It's called superabundance. All right? This idea refers to the content of a gift.

[9 : 54] Excuse me, not the content of a gift, but to the scale of a gift. In ancient times, big men would prove their superior status by the overwhelming scale of their gifts to people.

All right? Superabundance. Next is singularity. This refers to the gift giver and not the gift. It's when the gift giver's sole and exclusive mode of operation is benevolence and generosity.

The third is priority. That is grace or a gift is especially gracious when the gift is given prior to the initiative of the recipient.

All right? We see this most clearly in the parent-child relationship. Parents give to you and provide for their children before the child has an awareness to ask for a gift or to give thanks for the gift.

Okay? The fourth is incongruity. Incongruity refers to a gift given without regard to the worth of the recipient. Fifth is efficacy.

[11 : 02] A perfect gift is one that does what it's designed to do. It achieves its purpose. An extreme example of this is if you were to show the gift of saving somebody's life, right?

Well, then, that life that's been saved is accomplishing its purpose because they're living. Sixth is non-circularity. Okay? This is the aspect of gift that my earlier definition incorporated.

Do you remember that? A gift given without any expectation of return. In other words, we are to expect a circularity of giving and that non-circularity is what makes a gift a gift.

Now, I was surprised to learn that this is actually a pretty modern notion of the understanding of what a gift is. From ancient times, when a gift was given, one was expected in return.

It didn't mean it wasn't a gift. A gift didn't make the recipient a debtor to the giver because gifts were understood to strengthen social bonds and relationships.

[12 : 13] For instance, a leader of a large clan would give a gift to the leader of a smaller clan. And that leader would want to strengthen the relationship to the larger clan so he would give a gift in return.

not as a debtor but as a member of a relationship. All right. Tracking all of those. I'm gonna put all six on the board here and then give the children one last assignment.

Okay? You need to draw the sun on one side and the light bulb on the other and it needs to be to scale. Okay? All right? Can you do that? The solar flares and the solar spots and all that stuff.

The sun and the light bulb. Okay. All right. So we have these six facets of gift or grace. Now I'm gonna read Romans 5 verses 6 to 8 again what Ellen read earlier and see if you can hear which of these facets Paul has in mind.

For while we were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

[13 : 27] But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. What did you hear? I heard two of these.

The last one I heard was priority, right? While we were still sinners Christ died for us. But the big one here is incongruity.

There's nothing about non-circularity here. For Paul grace is incongruous. It's the central feature of God's grace.

It doesn't exclude the others per se. But this understanding of God's grace would be both counter-cultural and scandalous to his contemporaries.

And this is why. In honor and shame cultures like we find in the ancient Greco-Roman world it would be not just morally acceptable but it would be morally good for the rich and noble to safeguard their worth.

[14 : 40] Does that make sense? Like when honor is the highest good to safeguard one's honor is a good thing. To us it looks like self-aggrandizement or selfishness but back then it was a virtue.

Therefore it would be virtuous for the noble to draw attention to and magnify their status. And therefore care had to be shown to whom the noble person gave their gifts.

in his Nicomachean ethics Aristotle observed that a generous person will give lavishly but certainly not indiscriminately.

In other words and I quote so he can give to the right people at the right time and where it is noble to do so. Okay. Aristotle also said that the person who wants to be magnificent will not waste money on objects of small importance.

In other words there was expected a certain congruity between the giver and the recipient that was virtuous. That was the virtuous thing to do. Therefore incongruity refers to a gift given without regard to the worth of the recipient.

[16:00] and that's what we find in Romans 5 and all throughout Paul's writings. What makes God's grace amazing is the difference in the worth between the giver and the recipient.

that difference is vaster than a mountain and a molehill it's wider than an ocean and a puddle it's more extreme between a star and a light bulb.

The giver the creator and sovereign over all perfect in purity in wisdom and justice and love and the recipients rebels.

slaves to sin and death. This is what made Paul's grace his preaching of God's grace sound so foolish to the Greeks and the Romans made it sound scandalous.

So let's bring this incongruity of God's grace into focus. Okay? Imagine that you're a slave in the Roman Empire you were born into slavery somewhere on the geographical fringes of the empire and you've been caught up in a rebellion and you're undoubtedly guilty of this crime so you've been sentenced to death and because you're a slave it's death by crucifixion that's the penalty that's been given to you.

[17:41] the purpose of crucifixion is threefold. First the death is unimaginably excruciating. You'll most likely be whipped with a cat of nine tails you'll carry your cross beam to the place of execution and there the executioners will fasten you to a pole either by impaling you by hanging you up with ropes or by nailing you to the post in a cross beam and this is the chance for Roman executioners to be especially creative with their cruelty and so your body could be twisted in knots turned upside down in all kinds of positions for the fun and amusement of the executioners.

The fleshy parts of your body will serve as a meal for swarming birds and there you'll hang constantly writhing in pain until you die. This could take days and the only mercy that you could hope for was the executioners to break your legs so that somehow you could suffocate and die ahead of schedule.

The second purpose of crucifixion is humiliation and in Roman society this was viewed as just as terrible as the physical suffering.

It's a death reserved for the lowest of the low in society. Your suffering and death would be elevated for people to gawk at. Onlookers would mercilessly jeer and insult and curse you and laugh at you. Archaeologists haven't discovered many physical remains of crucifixions but they have found one in Palestine and another in England. Interestingly the images that we think of a crucifixion the way the feet are transixed are different than what they found.

[19:44] We think of the feet in front of the victim with the legs crossed but evidence showed that the nails go through the heels and ankles on either side so that the legs are on either side of the post and the body is hanging out.

And remember the victim is completely naked. So imagine the humiliation. Imagine the humiliation. The suffering and humiliation serve the third purpose of crucifixion and that's to reinforce the social structures in Roman society.

This kind of execution would deter slaves from trying to rise above their rank. So let's bring it back to you. You're a condemned slave.

This is what you can expect as you languish in prison awaiting your execution. But then something happens. You get word that you've been pardoned. The jailer comes, opens the door, takes the chains off your wrists and your feet, and you're free to walk out.

Imagine the release of emotions. Along with the shackles, you've been set free from the fear and anxiety. And terror that you were feeling awaiting for a most terrible death.

[21:05] That would be an amazing gift, yes? But that's not the grace of God. You're fully pardoned, but you're still a slave. And as you walk out of jail, you're informed that the governor, he's granted you citizenship in the empire.

So now you're no longer a slave. You're completely free. You've been both unshackled physically and socially. That's an amazing gift, isn't it? But that's not the grace of God.

You might be a citizen, but you have nothing to your name. No possessions, no real status, no prospects. But then after learning you've been granted citizenship, you're escorted to a palace.

It's the palace of the governor. He welcomes you in and he gives you a ring. It's his ring. He's just adopted you. He had a son who died and he's given you that son's status.

So now you become the firstborn, you become his heir, you receive his son's name, you sleep in his bed, you even wear his clothes. Not only has your current status changed, but your future has changed.

[22 : 18] You will always be an heir to a fortune and you will always bear his name. That's an amazing gift, right? But that's not the grace of God. Because you know what justice is.

And you've gotten to learn how your father, your new governor father, is both merciful and he's just. So how was it then that you could just go free?

Did your just father not care about the law? did he think himself above the law? So you dig deeper and you learn the whole story.

You learn what happened to the governor's deceased son. While you were in jail, the father decided to save you and it's the son that made the way. Without you ever having met him, the son volunteered to receive the judgment and execution that belonged to you.

The heir to a fortune endured the lashings, the nails, the suffering, and the utter humiliation of a slave's death so that you could have a seat at the father's table. Now that's the grace of the father.

[23 : 29] That's amazing. Incongruous grace. So what now? What is your response?

If you were told you don't have to do anything in response, if you were told that gift is non-circular, what would you say? Like you're crazy. How can I not spend the rest of my days in gratitude and obedience to this most amazing person?

This father wouldn't want that for you. The father wants to be close to you and you to him. He wants you to thank him in response to him and to obey him in response.

And take the love he's shown you and to show it to others in response. His love for you does not depend on your response, but your connection to him does. You see, that sixth aspect of the gift, non-reciprocity, is a very new definition of the word gift.

Gifts have always been understood as reciprocal. Because one of the primary purposes of a gift is to strengthen and solidify the relationship between the two parties. Our gifts back to God are very incongruous with the gifts that he shows us.

[24 : 47] Of course they are. How could we ever repay God? But it's that incongruity between the worth of the giver and the recipient, between the worth of his gifts and what we could give back that serves as fuel for our obedience.

It fuels our response. The late Sim Keller wrote, you will love Christ and commit to him to the degree you see the depth of your own sin and the application of the cross to that sin being final.

Did you hear the incongruity there? And how it's the fuel for our obedience? Let me read it again. You will love Christ and commit to him to the degree you see the depth of your own sin, right?

And the application of the cross to that sin being final. So because incongruous grace is our fuel, we keep this incongruity at the center of our worshiping life together.

We proclaim God, at the beginning of the service, we proclaim God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We read his law and we ask him to show us mercy. We confess that we sin in thought, word, and deed.

[26 : 06] And remember that his incongruous grace grants us forgiveness and eternal life. We come to his table not trusting in our own righteousness but in your what? Abundant mercies.

We remember that we're not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under his table, but remember it's in God's character to always show mercy. And because of the circularity of grace, he sends us out in the power of his Holy Spirit to live and work for his praise and glory.

So incongruous grace has been the fuel for the church's obedience since the very beginning. It's been the fuel for caring for the poor, the refugee, the widow, the orphan, the unborn, and those in prison.

It's been the fuel for Christians to dismantle slavery and racism and to work for justice. Incongruous grace has been the fuel for men and women as they consider how to live out their vocations Monday through Friday with Jesus as their king.

More locally, incongruous grace has been the fuel for our people as we serve in the city working with DC 127, Little Lights, Antioch Ministry, Refugee Ministry.

[27 : 37] This summer we're seeing several of our families move away, families that have been part of the vibrancy of this church and its leadership. They've all played key roles in serving here and loving our city long term.

I'm thinking of Karina Asal, the Holbys, the Sayos, Daniel Hall and Brittany Netzel, the Grutzmachers, and there's others. And who is going to fill their shoes? Who is going to respond to God's incongruous grace by bringing the love of Jesus to this parish and to our city?

I'm going to close with a scene from one of my favorite films. It's Ben-Hur, the real one that was with Charles and Heston. I haven't seen the new one, forgive me. I'm sure it's fine. But in Ben-Hur, Ben-Hur is a Jewish noble.

He becomes a slave on a galley in a battle. He's set free from his chains. He sets free his fellow prisoners and then he sets free the guy in charge, Arius.

Arius is tempted to kill himself. Ben-Hur rescues him from that, saves his life, preserves his life. They get rescued and then Arius adopts Ben-Hur.

[29 : 01] And Ben-Hur goes from slave to son. And he's given a ring. He's given his father's ring. And this is what Ben-Hur says.

It's a strange destiny that brought me to a new life, a new home, a new father. It brought me here. It may take me away, but wherever I may be, I shall always try to wear this ring as a son of Arius should, with gratitude and affection and honor.

forever. So may we, as recipients of God's incongruous grace, always be aware of the vast distance God traveled to make us his heirs.

And may we bear his name with gratitude, affection, and honor. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, let's pray.

[30 : 11] Lord, we would respond to your grace with gratitude. We thank you. We thank you. We thank you for rescuing us, loving us, adopting us.

We thank you for the benefits of our justification of being reconciled with you and hope of eternal life. Lord Jesus, that is our prayer, that we would bear your name with gratitude, affection, and honor.

Amen.