

GRACE

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[0:00] Morning everyone. If you'd like to grab your Bibles, have them ready. We're going to be jumping all over the place this morning. So if you get a chance, stick your finger in Ephesians, we'll be there in a little while. Matthew and a bunch of other passages as well.

Let's pray. Father God, I pray that you would again amaze us by your grace, a truth that potentially we have taken for granted, maybe do not live by. Father, we just pray that you would delve into the depths of our hearts to see ourselves and to see our deep need for you and again astound us by your movement towards us in the Lord Jesus, a movement of love.

And we thank you for it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. We sing it. We've sung grace this morning. We preach grace. We talk about grace. We pray about grace. We suggest that some people need to grow in grace. We encourage others to be gracious. Grace is often not far from our lips in the Christian church. And that is because that the message of Christianity is that we are saved by grace. Of all the religions in the world, it is only Christianity that dares to speak of God's love being unconditional. We don't earn it. It's not ours by right. We don't deserve it. Grace is a personal activity. It is God operating in love towards people. The word for grace in the Greek New Testament, *charis*, is holy Christian word. That is, it was unknown before Christianity in Greek or Roman ethics and theology. And the stable diet of Sunday school classes is that grace means God's riches at Christ's expense. And so why do I need to spend three weeks looking at the foundational truth of God's grace?

Well, because I need it. We all need it. And why? Why do it? Again, in the lead up to Christmas? Because as Jim Packer says in his classic book, *Knowing God*, there do not seem to be many in our churches who believe in grace. Now, that's a pretty bold statement. In fact, I think he even suggested that many might not appreciate the statement coming from him. But when one of the most respected theologians of the past 100 years says it, I think we do well to listen to it. And he gives four reasons, and I'll go through them very quickly, four reasons why so many in our churches do not believe in grace.

The first reason he gives is what he calls the moral ill desert of man. That is, people have a high view of themselves. We tend to treat small virtues as compensation for great vices.

[3:08] We tend to think that we are basically good. We tend to play down the suggestion that we are fallen from God's image, rebels against God's rule, guilty and unclean in God's sight, and fit only for God's condemnation. You only need to receive a bit of criticism from someone, and you automatically think, no, I'm not, I'm not like that. That's because we have a high view of ourselves. The second reason he suggests is we don't believe grace is what he calls the retributive justice of God. We have a tendency to turn a blind eye to all wrongdoing that we can. Willingness to tolerate and indulge evil up to a point is in fact seen as a virtue. And so we make excuses after excuse for our sin. We even justify it. Well, I was provoked, you see. Or have you seen how evil they are? They have had a bad life. It's just the way they are. We just got used to that sort of behavior around here. We even conclude that God is the same towards us. And that God's grace, in fact, becomes a doctrine of leniency.

Divine retribution against all level of sin is not taken seriously. We tend to have a hierarchy of the really serious ones, and the rest, which we all will just tolerate amongst us.

The third reason why we struggle to believe grace is what he calls the spiritual impotence of people. That is the belief that we are actually in a position to be able to repair our own relationship with God. And while we might conclude that we are not perfect, we all do that, we still have no doubt that our respectability will account for something.

The fourth reason he gives is the ancient notion that God, in fact, needs us. He actually needs my worship. That is, he's relying upon our worship for his good. And so God is gracious to us in order to buy that worship. I think of everything that I've read recently about grace, it is just so against every way that we think and we operate. And so therefore, it is a truth that we need to keep coming back to. So let's do an exercise. Everyone stand.

This is a university class. I'm your lecturer. You can call me professor if you like.

[5:51] The university class is the short life expectancy of feral pigs. And we are about to have an exam. And in fact, we've just had the exam. I want you to grade yourself now, depending on what sort of a student you are. You're either a conscientious student or you're not a conscientious student.

So if you are a conscientious student, I want you to stand over this side of the building. If you are not a conscientious student, I want you to stand on this side of the building. So if you're not sure about, I don't care about life expectancy of feral pigs, think about your own student life. Okay? So over here, you are shooting for 100%.

You are gunning for it. I'm studying for it. I'm working hard to get the best result in this course. Over here, it's like, well, this course is really a dead end. It's for credits, really.

And so 50%, if I get 51%, in fact, I've worked just a little bit too hard. And so I've got a life to live. There's parties to be had. There's people to fellowship with, all that sort of stuff. So away you go. I'll give you two minutes to place yourself in the building.

Conscientious, not conscientious. Okay. So there's a lot of people in the middle.

[7:39] It's because we don't want to be down there and we don't want to be down here with these sinful people either. Let me tell you, my general principle is that pass is a pass. And so I'm certainly down this end of the area.

So, okay. So here we go. I'm the lecturer. You've just done your exam. And I've just posted the results up here on the wall for your auto lookout. And I've given everyone in the room an A+. How do you feel, Candida?

Yeah. Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo! How do you feel over this end? Not fair. Not fair. Not fair. How dare you do that to us?

You've learned as much as you can. Okay. All right. Feral pigs. Sorry? It's only feral pigs. Okay. It's only feral pigs. Exactly. I knew I was going to get it anyway. I didn't have to work hard. Anyway. Okay. So back to your seats.

Oh, no. I'll come back to that in a minute. Okay. So let's begin on unpacking some of Packer's reasons why we so miss grace.

[9:12] If you go to a doctor, you want an accurate diagnosis so you can embark on the right treatment for the illness. When I, 2003, I think it was, when I was diagnosed with hypothyroidism and diabetes, I wanted the doctor to give me a correct diagnosis.

Of course, for 18 months up to that point, I hadn't had a correct diagnosis and it was antibiotics, Panadol, take a rest, go on a holiday.

And the problems are still there. You need an accurate diagnosis if you're going to get the right treatment. And that is the same as we approach this doctor to grace. So let's deal with the negative, the right diagnosis.

First of all, Ephesians chapter 2, if you'd like to turn to there. This is the human condition. You don't need to look anywhere further than yourself.

So don't think, ah, yes, I know who this is referring to. As for you, you, me, speaking to me, first person here, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

[10:32] All of us, all of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires

and thoughts. And like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

That is God's anger. And we also see the diagnosis in Romans chapter 3, verse 10 to 12. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. No one righteous, no one who seeks God. Worthless, dead.

And left to our own devices. That is the human condition. We are dead in our sins. We are spiritually dead. So the core of our nature is not that we are basically good.

It is fundamentally bad. We are spiritually bankrupt. Even in our morally lapsed society, the aura of bankruptcy which is attached to a person is still a very negative aura.

[11:43] And here we are saying we are spiritually bankrupt. We are spiritually dead. We cannot buy our way out of this scenario. We cannot trade our way out of it.

In fact, we are dead. And dead people don't do anything. They don't have any power. No capability. Now this is not that we are all as bad as that we can be, but that sin has totally marred every aspect of our being.

And the only reason we are not as bad as we are, can be, is because God has still got his gracious hand on us, restraining evil. Unfortunately, however, some people understand grace as God making up the difference between our good and the amount of good that he requires.

It's like, you know, we've all got different amounts of good. A nice middle class person living in Chatswood does a little bit more than a convicted criminal. And then what God does is he makes up the differences of our good, of what he requires.

So imagine I buy a car that costs \$100,000, but I've only got \$50,000. And so this view of grace is that what God does is he chips in the extra 50 to make up the 100.

[13:08] And so the difference between people is the amount of moral credit that we have in our accounts. And God has to chip in more for some than he does for others.

It sounds nice, but it is a grave misunderstanding, both of grace and of our righteousness. We've got nothing to offer, nothing to contribute.

Not only do we not have righteousness in our account, we've actually got debt. And so we need God's grace not to make up for our deficiencies.

We need his grace to provide a remedy for our guilt and our rebellion, our pollution and our sin and our offenses against God. We need his grace to provide a satisfaction of his justice to cancel a debt that we cannot pay.

It is absolutely crucial that we understand our plight before God if we are going to understand grace, let alone be amazed by grace.

[14:17] Because those who have been forgiven little, that is forgiven little in their minds, actually don't love God or love others much.

This is how one person has put it. The first and possibly most fundamental characteristic of divine grace is that it presupposes sin and guilt.

Grace has meaning only when people are seen as fallen, unworthy of salvation and liable to eternal wrath. Grace does not contemplate sinners merely as undeserving, but as ill-deserving.

It is not simply that we do not deserve grace, but that we actually do deserve hell. And that is the bleak pronouncement of our natural state before God.

But it's the very next verse in Ephesians where we have the hope of grace in verses 4 and 5 of Ephesians 2. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

[15:27] It is by grace that you have been saved. We were dead in transgressions, but God intervened. We were in bondage to sin, but God intervened. We were objects of wrath, but God intervened.

God, who is rich in mercy, intervened. And our condition was hopeless, but he intervenes in grace. And the grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners contrary to their merit and, in fact, in defiance of their demerit.

Let me say that again. The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners contrary to their merit and, in fact, in defiance of their demerit. So, we get a wonderful glimpse of the way God treats us in that parable that Adam read out to us in Matthew chapter 20 of the workers in the vineyard.

Let's have a look there. Matthew chapter 20. This is not a story about Jewish agribusiness. Having a farming background and having read my Bible for many years before I became a Christian, I thought, this is nuts.

Who'd run a farm like that? You'd go broke in no time. Of course, it wasn't about farming. I didn't know it at the time. It's about God's grace. The background to Matthew 20 is Jesus telling the story about his encounter with the rich young ruler in Matthew 19.

[16:54] You might remember this man comes up to Jesus with a very important question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? It's a good question, but as we know, he's coming at it from the wrong angle. Notice the word consistently in that encounter, the word I, I, I.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? It's all about him, his effort to get eternal life. And as you read the encounter, it seems that he thinks that maybe he's done enough already. Jesus rattles off a few commandments and he's ticking the box in his mind thinking, yeah, I don't stack up too badly.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. Jesus says to him, but he needs to do just one more thing. That's all. Sell up and follow me. It's a call to trust Jesus, to stop being reliant upon himself and to put his trust in Jesus.

Unfortunately, he's unwilling to sell everything and follow Jesus. And so he walks away sad. And as that encounter's happening, Peter, James, John and the boys are standing there around. They're watching it.

They're listening to it. And Peter chimes in, as he often does, and says, who then can be saved? And Jesus says, with man, this is impossible.

[17:57] But with God, all things are possible. You get the point? That man is incapable of saving himself. Salvation comes from God.

But notice the very next question that Peter asked. Do you notice the very sort of strong whiff of merit-based thinking in that question?

He's pointing out to Jesus that we're not like that guy, Jesus, who's just walked away. He did not leave everything and follow you. But we've done that.

We left our fishing nets and our family. We've come and followed you, just like you told. And so, do we get it?

Eternal life, that is. Have we done enough to be saved? Jesus offers a very gentle response and he follows it up with this parable.

[19:04] That's the context of this parable. It's pretty straightforward. A farmer hires men at different times during the day. We're told he hired them early in the morning, the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and right at the eleventh hour.

Those who began work early in the morning agreed to do a day's work for denarius. And a denarius was considered what was needed to provide well for a family.

Notice that. They all received not what they had earned, but what they needed to provide for their family.

That is, they were paid according to grace, not according to debt. The twist comes at the end of the day when the owner lines them all up and pays them all the same.

He gives them all an A+. So to speak. And the ones who had worked the longest and the hardest, who had been the most diligent, started to grumble.

[20:10] This isn't fair. They're the ones who want to talk about what is fair and what isn't fair. I deserve more because I've done more. You see, the natural human tendency is not to like everyone getting an A grade regardless of effort.

Unless, of course, you place yourself right down the end of that line. And that is why we struggle so much with grace.

And this is the point that Jim Packer's making. Our natural moral default position is to count ourselves amongst the 12-hour workers.

We all have a higher view of ourselves morally than what God does. And so we always place ourselves at that end of the line.

And we always can look down the line and find someone who is more wicked, less moral, less diligent than I am.

[21:23] And it doesn't matter where you are in society, that will be the case. I know a guy who was serving two consecutive life sentences in Long Bay Jail for the murder of a mother and her baby.

In the early days of his imprisonment, he was put in the wing, the same wing as the Milpera Bikie Massacre guys.

They beat him up. They poured boiling water all over him. Why? Because he was so wicked to kill a baby. Of course, the ones themselves convicted of killing a seven-year-old, but you killed a baby. And that's worse than what we've done. It doesn't matter where you are in society, you can always find someone less than you. And so, in a sense, in fact, in reality, this parable is about God's grace. He's exceeding generosity. Every worker got what he needed to provide well for his family. And in a sense, they were right. It's not fair about what this boss is doing.

[22:37] But that is the point. Grace isn't about being fair. It's about God giving us what we don't deserve and saving us from what we do deserve.

The Bible speaks about the amazing extent of God's grace in a number of ways. There's wonderful images right throughout the Bible. Psalm 103.12 says that our transgressions against God have been removed as far as the east is from the west.

That is a glorious picture. You see, if you were to start here right now and you headed north, you would eventually reach the North Pole. Sometime, you'd reach the North Pole.

And at every point from there, you would then start moving in a place called south. You'd be heading south. But if we get in a plane and we headed west, we would always head west and we would never meet east.

That is the point of this parable. God has removed our sins an infinite distance, an immeasurable distance from us. Isaiah 38.17, the prophet Isaiah says of God, You have put all my sins behind your back.

[23:48] They are out of sight for the Christian. God no longer sees our deliberate disobedience or our marred performance. An emphasis on the completeness of God's forgiveness occurs in Micah 7.19.

Micah says of God, You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. They haven't been lost overboard.

They have been thrown into the depths of the sea where little submarines can't go. They are gone, forgotten. They cannot be dredged up. You cannot get a rope down there and pull them back up again.

Again, Isaiah 43.25 emphasizes the completeness of God's forgiveness. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more.

God not only blots out our sins, he remembers them no more. It's not that God has somehow forgotten them like we might have forgotten where I put my car keys.

[24:48] He actively chooses not to remember the sins that we have sinned against him. That is, he has decided never again to bring up those offenses in the future.

And so the blotting them out is in fact a legal act. It is an official pardon from the Supreme Governor. And the remembering no more of the sins is a relational act.

It is where the injured party, God, in this case, it is where the injured party has no sense of wanting to bring up being wronged again.

It is both a legal and a relational act. And so the outcome of God's gracious action towards us is in Colossians chapter 1, where it says that we are free from accusation.

The evil one and other people want to put you in the dock and persecute you. And when the prosecution comes out, brings out the files, opens the filing cabinet, there is no evidence.

[25:57] It cannot be found. It's as far as the east is from the west. It's in the depths of the sea. And God goes, I don't remember. God's astounding grace is not just the truth that applies when you become a Christian.

Christianity is not just about getting saved. It's the very foundation of how Jesus deals with us day by day. God wants us to renounce all confidence in our moral or religious efforts.

He wants us not only to be saved by grace, but to live day by day in grace as well. Earlier I mentioned an inadequate, I would suggest, even fatal view of grace.

It is where God makes up the deficiency of our efforts. And I suspect that many of us would have said, well, I don't believe that. I know that's wrong. That's not grace.

And yet, I want to push a little further. It is how many Christians actually live the Christian life. We act as if God's grace only makes up what our good works lack.

[27:11] We at least have a subconscious belief that God's blessings are at least partially earned by our obedience and spiritual disciplines.

Take, for instance, the good works of reformed evangelicalism, Bible reading and prayer. When you don't do your Bible reading and prayer and something bad happens, do you go, oh, my devotional life's been rubbish lately.

Maybe that's it. Maybe that's it.

Maybe that's it. I don't. We all need the same grace. The sinner doesn't need more grace than the saint, nor does the immature and undisciplined believer need more than the godly, zealous missionary.

We all need the same amount of grace because the currency of our good works is worthless before God. Neither our merits nor our demerits determine how much grace we need because grace does not supplement merits or make up for demerits.

[28:56] Grace doesn't take into account merits or demerits at all. Grace considers all people totally undeserving and unable to do anything to earn the blessing of God.

As one author has written, grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to bestow it in the presence of human merit. Grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to withdraw it in the presence of human demerit.

Grace is treating the person without the slightest reference to desert whatsoever, but solely according to the infinite goodness and the sovereign purposes of God.

If you sometimes feel that you deserve an answer to a prayer or a blessing from God because of your diligence, hard work or longevity as a Christian, then you are living by works and not by grace. But it is just as true that if you sometimes despair of experiencing God's blessing because of your demerits, you are also casting aside the grace of God.

[30:02] John Newton, the low-life slave trader, wrote the hymn Amazing Grace after his conversion.

And having read a book on Newton recently, it struck me that he never tired of contemplating with awe and amazement the wonder of grace that would extend even to him.

And what is astounding is that how much that grace and appreciation of that grace transformed his relationships with people.

Not everyone, but certainly transformed his relationships with people. It was the sign that he'd actually understood grace because grace was worked out in his relationships with others.

But the person who grew up in a godly Christian family, who trusted Christ at a very early age, and who has never indulged in the so-called big bad sins, needs grace just as much as John Newton, the absolute debauched low-life needed.

[31:16] And should be just as amazed that God and grace extends to even them. To the extent that we are clinging to any self-righteousness or are putting any confidence in our own spiritual attainments, to that degree, we are not living by grace.

And so, friends, may we believe and live what we sing. Guilty, vile, and helpless we.

Spotless Lamb of God was he. Full atonement. Can it be? Hallelujah. What a saviour. Or nothing in my hand I bring.

Only to the cross I cling. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. We deserve nothing, we were owed nothing, and yet we have it all through Christ.

Let's stand and sing.