

The Grace of God

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Date: 18 July 2010

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[0:00] Well, Pastor Aaron's on vacation and so we're welcoming the high school class with us this morning. When I first prepared this lesson, I didn't realize how apropos it would be because I'm talking to parents about children.

And young people, you can pitch right in. Have you noticed how children at times can take things for granted? Not our children, but other people's children.

What are the kinds of things that children take for granted? This is for your response. And you can say yourself if you're a child. Jim?

All right. Meals on the table and the mother who puts them there, right? What else? Always be there in time to be.

Always having parents, you mean? Well, of course, children take things. Well, I get in trouble. Don't be honest. All right. So always having parents there in their time of need?

[1:11] Yes. The fact that they've got ways to get around when they're old enough. The fact that they've many times given a car to drive? Gas in that car?

There's going to be a tomorrow. Taking for granted that there's a tomorrow. Just always assuming because they're young that, well, we'll have tomorrow. Well, do you think that God's children ever take things for granted?

Like what kinds of things? Well, all the same things that our children take for granted. Our wives and husbands and health and jobs and all that.

But do you think that we could ever get to the place where we take for granted the biggest things?

Like the grace of God? That's the study that we have before us this morning.

And J.I. Packer's Knowing God. It's the chapter 13 on the grace of God. The Apostle Paul was amazed at the grace of God.

[2:21] Just listen to him talk. It's a constant theme with him. He's never far from it. It fills his letters. Grace and peace.

It fills his prayers. His preaching. He's a man who was much taken up with the grace of God. He's astonished that the Son of God loved him and gave himself for him.

And such grace was so overwhelmingly wonderful that he never got over it. Now, do any of you have trouble with being amazed at God's grace?

Staying amazed at God's grace to you? Living with a sense of it? Now, we know the right answer. We ought to always be amazed at his grace.

But do we continue to know that? When we were first saved, when we first received that kiss of forgiveness from the Lord Jesus Christ, it was so glorious that we pinched ourselves each morning to say, Is it true?

[3:32] Can this really be? All my sins are forgiven. All my guilt's removed. Heaven is secured forever for me. We couldn't believe that he would choose to save us and that he would do it at such a price of his Son.

How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed, we sing. But haven't we found that if we're not careful, the thrill of it begins to wear off?

There's Jonah. Did he ever take things for granted? Did he ever take grace for granted? Well, he warned Nineveh of the coming judgment of God.

And he went out east of the city and built a box seat, a shelter in which to sit and to watch what God was going to do to Nineveh. But the shelter wasn't enough shade and the sun beat on him and it made him miserable.

Remember what the Lord in grace did? He provided a vine to grow up and to shelter him from the heat. And the Bible says Jonah was very happy about the vine.

[4:48] Now that was grace. He didn't plant the vine. He didn't water it. He didn't make it grow. God did. And he did it just to shade his prophet's head.

For his comfort. His recent behavior had forfeited any right to God's goodness.

It's amazing that God would have done that for Jonah. He ran the wrong way when God told him to go to Nineveh. And so there was nothing in him that would merit this vine to give him comfort.

It was a free gift. Well, dawn the next day, God provides a worm. He provided the plant. Now he provides a worm to gnaw on the plant and to chew the vine so that it is withered.

So God took away what he had freely given. And then the sun rose and with it God provided a scorching east wind and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint.

[5:56] He got angry over the withered vine and he wanted to die. So God gave the comfort. Jonah enjoyed it and came to think that he deserved it.

And came to demand it and think that he must have it if he's to be happy. So that when God took away his comfort, he was angry.

Has that ever happened with you? Or with me? With God-given comforts? God gave them to us. They were free gifts. They were mercy. They were graces. We didn't deserve them.

Maybe it was our health. Maybe it was someone close to us. Maybe it was our job. And somewhere along the line, Jonah got over the grace of God to him.

Those things God gave us were taken away from us and then we got embittered. Well, that's how it was with Jonah. And somewhere along the line, I say, he got over the grace of God to him.

[6:59] He had just received the big package of God's grace in the form of a whale that's a great fish that swallowed him up when he should have drowned. And now here he is, one grace after another, and yet something of that initial wonderful feeling of, it's amazing, I was going down, I was as good as dead and he saved me, has worn off.

And now he's bitter. Well, we sense something different with the Apostle Paul. Not that he had a different heart than Jonah. But we sense that grace was active in the Apostle Paul, at least in a way that we do not see it active in Jonah chapter 4.

And Jonah chapter 4 is not the only chapters that Jonah lived in. We find Paul's latest writings, the very end of his life, he's still throbbing with amazement at the grace of God.

First and second Timothy and Titus especially. And so we come to learn that Paul went to the grave, still stunned that God had saved him.

We can think of a John Newton who was a slave trader and never got over the grace of God.

[8:21] When God saved him, a blaspheming, cursing, filthy-mouthed, drunken man, he sat down and wrote a hymn to commemorate what God had done to him.

It was all about the grace of God, remember? What does he call that grace? Amazing grace. All right? And it was John Newton who said, When I get to heaven, I'll behold three wonders, three amazing things.

Seeing some there that I didn't expect to see. Missing some there that I did expect to see. And finding that I myself am there.

That is the greatest wonder of them all. God would save me. Now, that's the kind of awareness of God's grace that I want to live in.

Some years ago, Michael Horton sensed a problem in the evangelical church on this very point.

And he wrote a book called Putting Amazing Back Into Grace.

[9:29] He sensed that the amazement and wonder had gone out of grace for the people of God. Putting amazing back into grace. And that's really what Packer is doing for us here in chapter 13 of Knowing God.

He senses that grace is not being rightly understood or appreciated. Even in the church, it has become something less than amazing. It's the problem then of taking grace for granted.

So here's his effort to put amazing back into grace. Showing why it's so amazing. Why we should never get over it for time or eternity. Now, the cure for taking grace for granted is to understand reality.

In other words, if we're not amazed at God's grace, we're twisted in our view of reality. We're not seeing things straight. And so Packer's just saying, we need to put things right.

We need to start thinking right again. And grace will become marvelous. So there are four truths that we need to call to mind. These are truths found in the Bible.

[10:40] They tell us the way it is. Four crucial truths which the doctrine of grace presupposes. And Packer says, if they are not acknowledged and felt in one's heart, then amazement at God's grace becomes impossible.

Now, two of the truths are about man and two of the truths are about God. They're nothing new. But again, Packer is saying, when we let these get out of focus and we don't think about them enough, grace becomes ho-hum.

And at the outset, Packer would warn us that these truths are not popular truths. They're not pleasant things. And perhaps that's why they're not thought on very often. Maybe that's why we don't meditate upon them.

They're not the kind of truths that itching ears are hankering after. He says, unhappily, the spirit of our age is as directly opposed to them as it could be.

So the very ethos of the world we live in is allergic to these truths. So you don't find the world telling you these things. But it's not just the world that's allergic to them.

[11:53] Our very sinful nature is allergic to these truths, doesn't like them, has a reaction against them. Our flesh is programmed to think that we deserve God's grace.

When I first heard that statement, I said, that explains a lot with me, with my life, my heart. Our flesh is programmed to think that we deserve God's grace.

So that's what makes it a fight to continue being amazed at God's grace. We're fighting against the flesh that remains within us. So it's no surprise, then, that God's grace is a rarity today.

Now, there's a principle in the Bible, and it's this, that the good news is only as good as the bad news is bad. If I announce to you that I have in my hand a newly discovered cure for some very rare kind of cancer, well, you would yawn and nod with half interest.

But if the doctor told you last Friday that you had that disease, and I told you now that I have the cure for it, you would take a greater interest in the cure.

[13:15] Why the difference? Because the good news is irrelevant unless you understand the bad news about you. The good news of the grace of God suffers today from a denial or forgetfulness of the bad news.

And so without these four discomforting truths being embraced and internalized and gripping us, we'll not be amazed at God's grace.

The first truth, Packer says, is the moral ill desert of man. The moral ill desert of man. I don't know if that's just British or what, but that's a little difficult to understand.

I trust it will become clearer as we go. The moral ill desert of man. By nature, man has a high view of himself. He knows he's not perfect. Nobody is.

But his sins are little things, insignificant things, that are more than made up for by the good things that he does. He's convinced that despite his shortcomings here and there, at heart he's a thoroughly good guy.

[14:24] Just ask his mother. Well, his guilty conscience tells him otherwise from time to time, but he can dismiss it as an unhealthy psychological feeling, a complex, a hangover from a religious upbringing.

You know, if I hadn't been raised in that Bible home, my conscience wouldn't be condemning me now. I could enjoy this without guilt. It's just some religious influence.

No, this person thinks if there's any favor to be given out by God, I'm a good candidate for it. Now, to read our Bibles is to discover that God has a different view of things.

His first aim, the very first aim in the Holy Spirit in salvation, is to bring the sinner to see himself as he really is, one who's in rebellion against God.

God says do, and we say no. He says don't, and we say yes. Rebellion. To show us that we are all idolaters, that we've turned away from him who deserves to be loved with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we have gone after other lovers.

[15:43] To show us that we're filthy, we're vile in God's sight, that we're children of God's wrath, we deserve wrath by the nature that we have, that we're guilty and fully deserving of God's judgment.

I say that's the first thing that the Holy Spirit does is he brings a person to salvation. He gets them to own and feel that if I got what I've got coming, I'd be damned forever.

I told you, I warned you, these aren't popular truths, but grace will never appear amazing until the soul grips that. Now, how does John Newton start that hymn on amazing grace?

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch, a wretch like me.

That's not a kind word. You haven't greeted your neighbor with that word. You haven't called your wife that name. But John Newton called himself a wretch.

[16:53] And every one of us, if we're in touch with the scripture, ought to be able to say the same thing. Saved a wretch like me.

The language is strong. It's too strong for many today. You know, they've edited that hymn in many hymnals to read, Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a man like me.

Well, it's one thing to save a man. It's another thing to save a wretch. And if you downgrade from wretch to man, don't be surprised that grace is downgraded from amazing grace to ho-hum grace. That's precisely why Newton is amazed at grace. It saved a wretch like him. And if you take the wretchedness out of a man, you take much of the amazement out of grace.

Or we sing that hymn, one of my favorites, by Haldor Lilinus. Wonderful grace of Jesus.

[18:07] What kind of grace is it? Haldor? Well, it's wonderful grace. And why is it wonderful grace? Because it's greater than all my sin.

All my sin. And it reaches the most defiled. And it reaches me. So these hymns strike a chord in the heart of all God's true people.

And what gives them such punch and power and why we love to sing them over and over again is the truth expressed in us. They don't back away from the bad news in telling us the good news.

The two are ever held together. And that's the way we get it in our Bibles. We get bad news on one page and good news on the next page. We get bad news in one verse and good news in the next verse.

We get bad news in the first half of the verse and good news in the second half of the verse. He's ever bringing them together for us. So the book of Romans. It doesn't run right away to Jesus.

[19:13] And say, isn't Jesus wonderful who saves us by His grace? It spends three chapters doing what? Showing us our sinfulness, our wretchedness.

Man's rebellion and wickedness. Then the wonders of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The book of Ephesians keeps these two together. Chapter 2, verses 1 to 3.

Man's sin. 4 to 10. God's grace. Titus 3.3. Man's sin. Titus 3.4 to 7. God's grace. What about Hosea?

We've just spent 14 weeks in Hosea. Did He say anything to us about Israel's sin? Before He talked to us about God's wonderful grace and the hope that there is in Him and His Redeemer?

We see it constantly in Scripture. Bad news, good news. Bad news, good news. And that's how grace remains amazing. It's against the backdrop, the dark backdrop of our sin and deserving of judgment that the beauty of grace shines.

[20:17] Jerry Bridges has illustrated grace from a chapter in American history many years ago when hobos used to travel around and beg a meal off of a stranger.

Vance, did you ever have such a man come to your door? No? Christine? Okay. Any of you younger ones? Older ones?

Well, it was a part of our history. These guys would just travel around and it was supper time and you may have a knock at the door. You have any food for us. And so, Jerry Bridges says, such a beggar comes to your door asking for a handout.

He's done nothing to earn or deserve your favor and kindness. So, you give him a good meal and send him on his way with his belly full. That's grace.

He didn't deserve it. But you gave it to him anyway. But that doesn't even come close to illustrating the grace of God that he's shown to us in saving us through Jesus Christ.

[21:27] Something far different is needed to illustrate the grace of God. We have to add a whole new element to that illustration. And it is the ill desert of man.

There's that old way of speaking. The ill desert, the moral ill desert of man. So, what we mean is this. The beggar who comes knocking at your door for a handout is the same guy that ten years ago kidnapped and brutally murdered your son, spent time in prison, is now out on early release.

And you recognize him. And he wants a meal from you. Now, if you give him a meal and send him on his way with his belly full, that would be amazing grace.

Because it introduces the ill desert of man. Not only does he not deserve a meal from you, he deserves your wrath. He deserves your anger. He deserves the opposite.

And yet, you give him grace. And such it is with the living God. We have not only done nothing to deserve his kindness, we have done everything to deserve his wrath.

[22 : 48] Our Christ-hating nature has crucified the Son of God. What Pontius Pilate did, I did. What the Jews did, I did.

That was my nature. That was me. Read Romans 3 and see that you're the very same. There's none that seek after him. We're all enemies. And we hate God, Romans 8, verse 7.

And we show it by not obeying his laws. So, that's the way we were. While we were yet sinners, while we were enemies, Christ died for us.

Amazing. Favor where wrath is deserved. So, that's the first truth. We have got to be gripped with the fact that we deserve God's wrath forever and ever.

That we're wretches if we would have grace be amazing. Secondly, the retributive justice of God. The retributive justice of God. Retribution just means payback.

[23 : 55] And I think we talk about that, don't we? No paybacks, we say. No revenge. Well, this is the retributive justice of God. We need to be clear that there is such a thing in God.

Retribution is not popular today in our thoughts of the justice system. Rehabilitation is in. We want to rehabilitate criminals. We don't want to punish them.

Retribution. Payback. So, parents hesitate to correct their children. Teachers are slow to punish their students. Society puts up with shoplifting and all sorts of crimes.

The politically correct thinking is that as long as evil can be ignored, it should be. Being tolerant of evil is seen as a virtue while holding others to a fixed, unmovable standard of right and wrong is seen as a vice.

So, how does that affect man's view of God? Well, it's just a half step from treating each other like that to thinking God treats us that way. That God's retributive justice doesn't fit with our popular idea of God's love.

[25 : 06] God is highly tolerant of sin. It's no big deal with Him. He gets over it. He'll let it slide. He's not the judge of the earth. And again, men are lying to themselves and God is laughing in the heavens.

Is there any evidence in the world today that God pays back the sinner? Well, there was a flood once, wasn't there? There are fossils all over the earth as witnesses to the fact that God pays back. God pays back. There's an area of scorched earth that used to be great cities of the plain that God paid back with fire and brimstone.

Still places on the planet. History is full of examples that God does have retributive justice. And so, the Word of God tells us over and over, He does not leave the guilty unpunished.

Be sure your sins will find you out. Packer says, God is the judge of this world and retribution is as basic a fact as breathing.

[26 : 21] It happens in this world. There is a moral governor. Now, why is it in our personal relationships that you and I are not allowed to pay back evil?

Evil for evil. Someone does you evil and why is it that you are forbidden from seeking revenge and getting them back for what they did to you? Okay, we have a court system to appeal to.

Why is it wrong for you to do it? Dale? Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Paybacks are mine, God says. All right, so, sometimes I think that Americans and perhaps even American Christians get the idea to think that revenge is wrong, morally wrong, period.

It's not. It's a virtue for the right person doing it. And God says, vengeance is mine.

I will repay. This business of paying back the evil is so important that no one dare do it but me. I'm the only one who knows how to do it right and to be sure that they get exactly what they've got coming back to them.

[27 : 34] No more but no less. So that's why it's wrong for you and I to take vengeance because it's God's prerogative and he will do it, he says.

It's Jesus who speaks to us more in the Bible about hell than any other writer. Hell is God's payback for sinners' rebellion against him.

And he assures man that his day is coming. We just reviewed it. His day is coming. It's appointed unto man once to die, then the judgment. You must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

So, God's justice, retributive justice, means that he pays back for our sins.

And he's not true to himself unless he punishes sins. he would have to deny himself if he let one sin go without being paid back.

[28 : 45] So, I've got to come to that grip, to grips with this reality. Not only that I am a sinner, a wretch, But that I deserve the payback of God forever, which is hell.

God. And again, unless we see that, we'll lose the amazing aspect of God's grace. The third truth is the spiritual impotence of man.

First, our ill deserts, we deserve punishment, we're going to get punishment. Now, the spiritual impotence of man, powerlessness of man.

At the bottom of natural religion is the faulty idea that we can repair what has gone wrong. So, we have a fender bender and we think, well, we can fix that.

Ourselves, we can take care of that. We have a problem and we think we can handle that problem. Do myself is the mantra of fallen man. I got myself into this mess and by my own ingenuity, prowess, wisdom, strength, I'll get myself out of it.

[29 : 58] As if we have it in ourselves to fix the problem. As if the problem of my sin before a holy God is not so big, but that I can fix it. And so, some seek to do it with gifts and sacrifices, others with religious deeds and good works and morality, but it's always something that I can do to win back the favor of God and fix the problem.

But this third point is saying that reality is that we're a total rack. We're totaled. We can't fix ourselves.

It's beyond fixing. By anything that we can do, there's no way for us to repair our own relationship with God. No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.

God. So there's nothing we can do to remedy this problem that we find ourselves in. Not only does God have this retributive justice that he must pay back for us, but there's nothing in us.

There's no heart in us. There's no will in us. There's no mind in us to turn around and to trust in Christ, to walk in his ways, to turn away from rebelling against him.

[31 : 23] We must know how spiritually helpless we are if we would appreciate grace. So grace is not God's favor given as a reward merited by something the sinner does.

It's not God's response to the sinner who takes the first step. Grace is God's favor given to helpless sinners who cannot take the first step, the second step, or any step afterwards.

They can do nothing toward their own salvation. So that's the third truth. We're absolutely helpless to fix the problem. And then lastly, the fourth truth that puts amazing back into grace is the sovereign freedom of God.

Somehow men feel that God is obliged to love them, to forgive them, to show favor to them, to save them. Of course he will. What is God for?

If not that. Well, that's the idea that Bertrand Russell, the French philosopher, voiced when he died muttering, God will forgive.

[32 : 28] That's his job. What's he taking for granted? God will forgive. God will forgive. And why? Because that's just, he owes it to us.

That's his job. It's his duty. Well, that man soon discovered after saying that how mistaken he was, God is not bound to show any sinner salvation.

He is absolutely free. He is sovereign. He doesn't owe us anything but wrath. He didn't have to forgive us, and we need to think on that.

He didn't have to forgive us. Packer says, God doesn't owe it to anyone to stop justice from taking its course.

So I am a wretch. God pays back wretches with eternal judgment. I can do nothing to fix the problem, and this last truth says that God doesn't owe it to me to fix it either.

[33 : 35] He was free. sovereign freedom. In other words, if he shows favor to anyone, if he saves anyone, if he forgives anyone, it is because of no outside pressure upon him to do so.

He is absolutely free to do what he pleases. If he chooses to have mercy, it is of his own free will that he does so. Romans chapter 9 and verses 15 and 16, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. And I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. He's absolutely sovereign and free and owes forgiveness to no man.

He dispenses it as he wills. That means he was free to not be gracious to you. He could be gracious to the one sitting beside you, and he's still free to not be gracious to you.

That's everywhere, shown in the scriptures. He can be free to, you worked for ten hours, and somebody's worked for one hour, and he's absolutely free to dispense with his, he can pay you both the same, because it's his grace, and no one can complain.

[35:02] And so, we all deserve wrath. And so, if the guy beside me gets mercy, I can't complain, because I deserve wrath. And he, in his sovereign freedom, has chosen to be gracious to my neighbor.

So, in other words, grace is sovereign grace, if it is grace at all. You know, we sometimes speak of the sovereignty of grace. Well, there is no other kind of grace. There's no unsovereign grace. If it's grace, it's God's decision to show kindness to people, just on his own, out of his own good will. Grace leaves us then wondering, why me? Why me? That's why grace is amazing. Why was I made to hear thy voice, and enter while there's room?

When thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come. Why was I made to see? Why were my eyes opened up? And all my high school buddies, they're on that road that's going to destruction.

[36:16] I was one of them. Why am I any different? And it's that why that leads to worship and amazement and wonder at the grace of God.

God? You know, he raised up Pharaoh for the purpose of displaying his grace and power to his people. And so he punished Pharaoh, and he damned Pharaoh.

He sent ten plagues on Pharaoh to demonstrate the wonders of his mercy and grace to his people. Why wasn't I made a Pharaoh that he shows his wrath and power upon?

Why am I one that he's decided to show just how gracious he is, how merciful he is? It's God's sovereign will. He chose to show his wrath in the one and to show his mercy in the other.

Romans 9, 22 to 24. To make us objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, to show the riches of his glory and his mercies to me.

[37:31] Packer says, only when it is seen that what decides each man's destiny is whether or not God resolves to save him from his sins, and that this is a decision which God need not make in any single case, can one begin to grasp the biblical view of grace.

God So those are the four truths. They're uncomfortable truths, but they're God exalting, man humbling truths, and they're the kind of truths that put grace, amazing, back into grace.

I remind you of them again, to think upon them, to marvel in them. you were raised in a Christian home like I was, you may need to do a little work, a little thinking, in order to be able to sing Amazing Grace that saved a wretch like me.

You weren't the drunken sailor like John Newton. You can understand why he would say, saved a wretch like me. But you grew up in a moral family, and you were moral yourself.

So how do I, as a moral, with an immoral upbringing, come to sing Amazing Grace that saved a wretch like me? Somebody help me. What do I need to work through?

[39:00] How do I get from moral good little boy John to be able to sing a wretch like me? Roger? I'm a raised in a moral family.

Amen. Good. Good point.

That moves me closer. Somebody help me get there. How high the standard is not my little, my little obedience.

I fall far short of the standard. I'm getting closer. Dave? I'm not as good as I think I am. Yeah, I'm not as good as I think I am, as good as mom may think I am.

I'm a lot worse at the core than what people see. Yes? The law of God must kill you. You must die before you can live. All right.

[40:02] All right. I've got to see what it is God requires in his law. And that slays all this self confidence in my own goodness. All right? Anybody want to shove me over? One more?

Dennis? Dennis? I was born. I was conceived in sin.

All right? Okay, so I'm a good little boy that's heard the gospel all my life. And for week after week after week, I thumb my nose at Jesus.

There's no greater sin than not believing the gospel. The greatest torments, Jesus said, are for those who have heard and rejected him. Show something at the depth of my sin.

Good. And Eileen? So asking the Lord to open my eyes to show me myself. And what I see is that there's no difference between me and John Newton that is not grace.

[40:59] That I have all the seeds of sin in me that John Newton bore fruit in his life. As someone said, I've seen enough selfishness in me to know that if it had its way, it would live this way.

And so to appreciate the grace of God. Mark? We missed the very end for which we were made and without that our works are nothing but splendid sins, as Augustine said.

Well, we're dismissed. May the Lord lead us all into worshiping him with a sense of how amazing his grace is to us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.