



For by grace you have been saved through faith.
And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
Ephesians 2:8-9

Study #3 Reforming Grace

*“The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners,
contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit.”*
J.I.Packer

Background

So far in our reformation series we have seen how the recognition and availability of the Scriptures as the ultimate authority was instrumental in people understanding Jesus as the all-sufficient saviour. As we saw last week, salvation is wholly dependent upon Christ’s work, which means it is not in any part dependent on ours. What could motivate such generosity and drive such love? What would move God to act in such radical kindness to the hopelessly undeserving? The Bible’s answer - is grace.

The subtleties of Grace

Prior to the Reformation there wasn’t an argument about whether or not your salvation rested on God’s mercy. Luther himself had said in his younger days that salvation is given out of ‘pure mercy’ from God. So to suggest that Catholics were against grace is simply not true.

The key issue that arose in the reformation was about whether or not grace ‘alone’ was what motivated the mercy and love of God, or were we partly responsible for meriting it? If salvation was all Christ’s doing, not ours, then the question had to be asked, ‘was God’s *motivation and reason* for gifting us with his Son all of him, or do we in part contribute? The answer to that question makes a huge difference.

E.g. Luther prior to his conversion had said the following.

“...to a man who does what is in him, God gives grace without fail...”

And

“...God gives everything gratis and only on the basis of the promise of his mercy, although he wants us to be prepared for this as much as lies in us.”

You can see here that although God’s grace and kindness is honoured, it’s application and effect, is in some way dependent upon us. Reeves and Chester¹ helpfully point out that although grace is necessary for God to save, he effectively gives his grace to those who are ‘prepared’ for it.

Although the word grace means a gift or an unmerited kindness from God, the church effectively taught that receiving such a gift wasn’t *totally* unmerited. That is, there was still something needed from the individual to receive it and make it effective – you had to do your best if grace was to be effectively received, and you had to do your best if grace was to have ongoing effectiveness.

¹ Why the Reformation still matters, Reeves & Chester, 2016.

The substance of Grace

There was something else at play in regards to grace as well. Grace was seen as a kind of spiritual booster. Through the sacraments, especially baptism and the Mass, you were 'infused' with grace, which acted as an empowering substance. Rather like an energy drink, (which is meant to enhance your physical and mental performance), grace boosted your spiritual performance, making you more holy. Obviously if this were the case, the more grace you could get into your system, and the more cooperative you were with such grace, the better you would be.

The problem of Grace

This all sounds quite reasonable and even exciting: God gives his grace to those who really want it and pursue it, and such grace enables you to become more holy. The problem was (and is) that this is not what the New Testament teaches at all.

Correcting these long held views on the basis of 'Scripture alone', appreciating the work of salvation for us through 'Christ alone', led to the famous reformation slogan 'Grace alone'.

It's impossible to under-estimate how significant this is for it goes to the very core of who God is and on what basis he acts to save.

Some questions for your group

- There is nothing more surprising or amazing than God's grace towards sinners. Yet even grace can seem to lose its lustre for many Christians.
 - Have you at times found this to be your experience?
 - What happens to our relationship with God when we forget about his grace?
 - Why do you think this happens?
- Before the Reformation (as per the notes above), grace was seen as something essential for salvation, but given to those who pursued it.
 - Given what we've seen in our current series about the nature of human sin, what worries you about this approach? What does it presume about us?
- If God gives his grace to those who really pursue it and if such grace enables you to become more holy, on what basis would you know if you'd actually received God's grace?
 - What further questions does this raise for us?

The reformation way – all of Grace

Reflect on the following verses and consider what they reveal about the nature of God's grace. (divide them among your group if necessary)

Titus 3:3-7

Ephesians 2:1-10

Ephesians 1:3-8

- How might you use these passages to engage with someone who thinks God's grace is only available to the person who sincerely pursues it?
- How might you use these passages to engage with someone who believes God's grace once received, enables you to be more holy and therefore closer to attaining salvation?
- From these passages, what reason is given for God acting in grace towards us? Is there anything about us that moves God to be merciful?
- What do you notice about the effect of God's grace in each passage?

Two grace role-plays (maybe split group in two to feedback to each other).

- **#1** Imagine someone says to you that they are feeling quite underwhelmed by God at the moment – that is, they've lost sight of God's grace. In light of these passages, what explanation of God's grace could you give to them by way of encouragement?
 - *Work together on some dot points or a paragraph about how you'd encourage them. Share this with the rest of the group when you come back together. (Maybe set up a mock conversation between two group members)*
- **#2** Imagine someone says to you that they are feeling pretty lousy about how they are going as a Christian at the moment. 'Whatever I do, never seems to be good enough for God and I wonder at times why I bother', they say. Again, using these passages, how can you gently correct and encourage them with God's grace.
 - *Work together on some dot points or a paragraph about how you'd encourage them. Share this with the rest of the group when you come back together. (Maybe set up a mock conversation between two group members)*

Your ongoing reformation?

- Are you in a place where you struggle to accept God's grace to you apart from anything you've done? What might be driving this?
- What do you think is going to be personally helpful in keeping 'amazing' and 'grace' together far more in your life?
 - What do you know to be unhelpful?