Reflecting Upon God's Grace



When we think about God's grace, we must approach it with the splendor and complexity inherent in how God manifests and expresses Himself. God's grace is theologically defined as God's unmerited favor. I like to define grace in these terms: "Getting something good when I don't deserve it." But is there more to grace than this?

Since the time of the Reformation, theologians have defined grace in at least two categories: common grace and saving grace. The first category, God's common grace, refers to God's goodness that is enjoyed in everyday life by both the saved and the unsaved. Jesus hinted at this when He said "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 4:45 ESV). God is gracious even to the unsaved by providing order in the universe that allows one to carry out life without any need for saving faith. The crops of the righteous do not necessarily yield more than the unrighteous. God's common grace is experienced in common life by common human beings.

If you are a good Bible scholar, you may recognize that Jesus was using this illustration as concluding evidence for a primary point he was making in the Sermon on the Mount. His point was not to unpack the merits of common grace (this was assumed knowledge). His point was to bring out the amazing kindness of God which is to be seen in those who follow Him. The preceding verses read: "43You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Jesus was ushering in an outrageous value system that would

characterize those in the Kingdom of God, those who willingly bow their knee to the true King, Jesus the Messiah. [Note: This value system is expounded on in Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper/Collins 1998).]

The gift of saving grace was the prerequisite for being able to show common grace, which in my opinion is anything but common. Loving one's enemy, praying for those who persecute you is unnatural and untenable without the love of God Himself infusing one to die to self and live for another cause. This was not a warm and cozy fireside chat; it was a battle cry for all who would take up their cross, deny self and come follow Jesus. The only way a human being could live out this outrageous new code of honor was due to the radical relationship God offered through His Son. God's saving grace is so transformational for us who believe because we would finally experience an unconditional love that the world system cannot give. God Himself loves His enemy—namely us! (Col 1:21). In acknowledging saving grace, we get something good (love from God) which we don't deserve. That is the basis of grace, which is the basis of God's character.

So what does all of this have to do with us who believe? We're saved. Period. But that's not the end of the story. God uses us to be evidence of His transformational love to those who have yet to bow the knee to King Jesus. God uses us to be His walking billboards of who He is. We are supposed to make the watching world jealous of us (in a good way), so that they will see the source of all delight is really God Himself. The saving grace God gives us allows us to move toward others with an unnatural and untenable love. Without some supernatural explanation, our lives should not make any sense to unbelievers.

The question is: do we live in such a way that really causes the watching world to scratch their head and ponder what in the world motivates us to be such gracious people? Is that the reputation that God's people have among those who are in the world? Unfortunately, this does not tend to be the perception. So that means that we will have to be even more strategic about embracing opportunities God gives us to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" in all its many forms. That means we will need to depend on God's grace to flow through us when our flesh is crying out to be satisfied by being judgmental, vindictive or angry.

One counterintuitive way to grow in becoming more gracious is to ask God to help us become more aware of our ungracious ways. We can be broken over our internal lack of grace to someone who invades our space at the grocery store or to a friend who talks solely about her problems without overt concern over our own issues. When we treat people like annoyances, threats and problems to fix the clear message of God's grace gets muffled. This should grieve our hearts and lead us to a place that confesses: "I can't (fill in the blank with your own struggle: love, treat people like You do, forgive . . .), but You can." Our dependence on God to love through us becomes a lifeline of His grace to us. And maybe as we participate in showing His common grace, He will use that to lead hearts to trust in His saving grace.

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Questions for Reflection:

· What does God's grace reveal about His character and why should grace define our new identity in Christ?

· Why is common grace an implied assumption about Kingdom life?

· What difference does it make if I know about common grace and saving grace as theological constructs?

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