

Super-Abundant Grace

Intro. A well known American journalist wrote a story about his father. He wrote, “Years ago, my dad coached a team of eight-year-olds. He had a few excellent players, and some who just couldn't get the hang of the game. His team didn't win a single game all season. But in the last inning of the last game, his team was only down by a run. One boy on his team had never been able to hit the ball or catch it. With two outs, it was this boy's turn to bat. He surprised everyone and got a single!

The next batter was the team slugger. What do you know? Dad's team might win a game! The slugger connected. As the boy who hit the single ran to second, he saw the ball coming at him. Not so sure of the rules of the game, he caught it. Final out! Dad's team lost!

Before laughter and jeering broke out, my father told his team to cheer. The boy beamed. It never occurred to him that his catch cost the game. All he knew was that he had hit the ball and caught it; both for the first time! Later, his parents thanked my father. Their son had never even played in a game before that season. No one ever told the boy exactly what happened. They didn't want to ruin it for him. And to this day, I'm so proud of what my father did that afternoon.” He acted with grace.

Remember Mary Poppins? In that film Julie Andrews sings... "A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down". Last week we considered some verses that are strong medicine. In **Matt. 7:21** Jesus said, "**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.**" Jesus drew a line in the sand and said, on this side are those who may enter my kingdom. But on the other side are the self-deceived who only think they're in. In **vs.21-27** Jesus said saying and hearing are not the same as doing the will of God. Only faith that does the will of God is faith that saves. So these verses are strong medicine. Because self-deception is so dangerous and prevalent, Jesus made God's requirement plain. I realize the *medicine* has already gone down, but let's enjoy a *spoonful of sugar this morning*.

Two theological concepts help us understand and appreciate the wonder of salvation by grace through faith. The first declares God's verdict and establishes our need to be saved by Him. It's expressed in the phrase **total depravity**. **Depravity** describes our actual condition before the God who is holy and righteous. A **depraved** thing is crooked or perverted. Like warped lumber to a builder, none of us pass God's test or meet His approval. We don't make the grade. That's the effect sin has on us. We may not be as morally bad as we could be, but we are as bad off as we could be.

Depravity is **total** because it affects every person and every fiber of our being. To be **totally depraved** means we're beyond salvage or repair. That's why Jesus said, "**you must be born again**". Depravity is also **total** because no one is exempt. **Rom.3:23** says, **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. Again the Bible says, **All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away**. **Isa.64:6**. Depravity means there's nothing good in any of us that prompts God to show us favor. We have no credits or chips to bargain with.

That's the bad news, but its news every person needs to come to terms with. No one understands their need to be saved who doesn't first face God's verdict. By the way, that's why the OT came before the NT and why law came before grace. The law set the standard and defined what sin is. It raised the bar to a height no one can clear. Like the 35 mph. speed limit sign you blew past this morning on the way to church...the law sets the standard, but that's all it can do. When we come to terms with the inflexible demands of God's law, we realize how bad off we are. **Rom. 3:20** says, - **through the law we become conscious of sin**.

Again in **Gal.3:24** we read...**the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.** A great tragedy of our times is the way God's law is neglected and ignored. The Ten Commandments are so offensive most don't want them displayed publicly. They remind us of our sinfulness. Yet until we come to terms with sin, righteousness, and judgment, we won't sense our need to be saved. God's Holy Spirit works through the law to bring us to this realization. The law leads us to Christ for salvation because it condemns every person at every level. Yet this morning I want to focus on the sugar...the sweet basis of God's wonderful remedy for our depraved condition. The basis of God's remedy is expressed in one beautiful word...**grace.** What that fatherly coach did for his young inexperienced player was a gracious gesture, but God's grace has no equal. It's greater than our minds can conceive. **Rom. 5:20** says, **The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...** It's super-abundant!

Grace is God's response to how bad off we are without Him. Grace is Heaven's reaction to earth's crisis. You and I are totally depraved, but God is merciful and gracious! We are crooked and warped, but the God who is perfectly straight, loves us anyway. When we were unable to stand the test or make the grade, God devised a way to save us. In the greatest demonstration of undeserved favor the world will ever see, our guilt was placed on Jesus Christ who died in our place. That's grace...and that's what we want to consider in of all its wonderful sweetness! *Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...*

In the Hebrew language of the OT, the root word often translated grace is **chen.** **Chen** means to bend or to stoop down. Picture a grown man stooping low to pet a tiny puppy. Better yet, picture a mother who stoops down to lift a baby with a raunchy diaper! Are your senses activated to grasp the meaning of the analogy? Along with condescension, grace signifies **favor.** The man stoops down to caress the puppy and the mother stoops down to resolve a crisis. When verses are compared, displays of **chen** are always unexpected and uncalled for. They are spontaneous acts of love. They involve strength coming to the aid of the weak and helpless.

Another Hebrew word is **chesed.** **Chesed** corresponds closely to **charis** in the Greek language of the NT. **Chesed** and **charis** signify loving kindness which is steadfast / permanent / and displayed in acts of benevolence. **Chen, chesed,** and **charis** are the primary terms translated **grace** in our Bibles. The meaning of these terms converge in the Lord Jesus. John wrote, He is **full of grace and truth.** **II Cor.8:9** says, **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** Jesus left the glories of heaven and stooped down so He might lift us up. **John 1:16** adds, **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.** Jesus stooped down to bless us. From the abundant store-house of God's grace, those who trust Him receive one blessing after another. Amen? The grace of God finds its greatest expression in a person, the Lord Jesus.

Let me offer a theological definition of God's grace and then devote the rest of the message to explain / support / and illustrate this definition. **Grace is that intrinsic quality of God's being or essence by which He is spontaneously favorable in His disposition and actions.** There are three points here:

1. Grace is an INTRINSIC QUALITY OF GOD'S BEING.

This means grace is an inner characteristic or attribute of God. Sometimes we say a person is "*very sensitive and insecure*". We mean that sensitivity is characteristic of that person. They're the type who think the football team is talking about them when they huddle on the field. They worry about toys left on store shelves when the Christmas season ends. They toss and turn wondering if Lassy will find her way home. Sensitivity is a trait that distinguishes them from people like Bill O'Reilly or Simon Cowell of American Idol. Wouldn't you love to have him critique you?

Unlike those surly guys, some people have sensitivity woven into their DNA. They're helpless when somebody says, "*You really shouldn't be so sensitive!*" Sensitivity is so deeply engrained it's who they are not just how they occasionally react. That's how it is with God and His grace. Grace is an intrinsic and immutable quality of God's being. God can't help but be gracious. We learn this from the earliest chapters of the Bible. In **Exodus 34:6**, the Lord passed in front of Moses and declared who He is. The Scripture says, **And He (the Lord) passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...Notice, the Lord is compassionate and gracious. Compassion and grace distinguish Him from gods the pagans worship. Yet these characteristics define who our Lord is what He does.**

And because the Lord never changes, His attributes are always the same forever! God was always gracious in the past / He remains gracious today / and He will continue to be gracious throughout eternity. This is important! It assures us the God who once loved us in Christ will never change His mind or cease to love us! If God changed or was fickle like we are, He couldn't be trusted or relied on. But God isn't like us! He is the same yesterday, today and forever. The God who was gracious to Adam and Eve was gracious to Cain and Abel. The God who was gracious to Cain and Abel was gracious to Noah / Abraham / David / and Israel. Still today, the Lord is gracious and merciful to you and me and to every human being whether they realize it or not!

In **I Pet.5:10** Peter wrote, **And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.** Notice this name for God. Peter called Him the **God of all grace**. In other words, whatever grace exists in the Universe proceeds from the Lord Himself. God is the source of it all. Even the grace of a kind baseball coach can be traced to God who made us in His image and likeness.

So as we come to terms with the God of the Bible, we learn that grace proceeds from who He is. His intrinsic nature is to stoop down in loving-kindness so He might lift those who are broken and needy. It's God's nature to bless and do good to the undeserving. For this, we should be eternally grateful.

2. God's grace is SPONTANEOUSLY FAVORABLE - Having refused to believe the Bible, the world has many distorted views about who God is and what He is like! The gods of the ancients were often bound to their worshippers by self-interest. In other words, the ancients believed their gods depended on the service and gifts their worshippers offered them. These "small g" gods were needy...their well-being was in the hands of human beings. When pagans do what their gods require, their gods are expected to do good things for them. If the worshipper is good to the god, the god is good to them.

An example is the suicide bomber. Martyrs for the cause of Allah believe eternal life and all sorts of carnal pleasures await them when they detonate the explosive device strapped to their bodies. But like the bomber, many religious people think God needs something. They think certain religious behaviors obligate God. If they do for God, they believe God is obligated to do for them. Need proof of that? How many times have you heard someone complain their circumstances were not fair? How many times is disappointment voiced when God doesn't meet expectations and give someone what they felt they deserved? These complaints arise from an attitude which thinks God owes us.

But what does the Bible say? In **Acts 17:25**, Paul challenged this idea that was so prevalent among the religious thinkers of Athens. He said...**He (the true God) is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.** In other words, the true God is completely self-sufficient and self-sustaining. He doesn't need anything we have because everything we have we received from Him! In **Jn. 4:23** Jesus told the woman of Samaria that God the Father seeks worshippers...but nowhere does the Bible say God is in desperate need of worshippers and can't get along without them.

God's welfare doesn't depend on our coming to church this morning. We didn't do Him a favor. His person and purposes aren't diminished by those who stay home or play golf. And God's work in the world will somehow limp along without our contributions! Our relationship with Him isn't one of co-dependency. God is blessed by the praise and service and gifts we offer, but He doesn't need these things. His welfare isn't on the line!

The opposite is true...you and I are the needy ones. It's people who need the Lord not the Lord who needs people! The lyrics of a chorus we've sung here confess, "*God, we are desperate for you*". Our lives and the air we breathe are gifts of God's grace. How long could we survive if God turned off the oxygen generator He maintains? What would become of us if God unplugged that mysterious energy thing in our bodies, called "life"? Why is this important to the subject of grace? Because nothing outside of God's being obligates Him to show us favor or do us good. The goodness of His grace is spontaneous and unsolicited. The Lord gives and gives and gives again...Why?...Because God is a giver who finds great pleasure in giving.

The only thing we should expect from God is justice. It's what we deserve. We have violated His law! And justice for depraved people can have only one verdict...condemnation. God doesn't owe it to anyone to prevent justice from taking its course. Nothing we can do could force Him to pardon us. We have no leverage. Write this down...*God isn't obligated to show pity or pardon to anyone!*

Rom. 9:15, 16 explain that God's mercy or grace is free and completely independent of any human persuasion. **For He says to Moses, "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.** Like mercy, grace is free and independent because it is self-originated. Like a spring that gushes from the side of a mountain, grace issues from the heart God. It proceeds from the sovereign Lord who is free to be ungracious if He chooses to. We tend to think God is good when we are good, but that's incorrect! God is good all the time! **Matt. 5:45** says, **He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

So, why should God be gracious to people who violate His standards and offend His holiness everyday? Answer?...Because God is gracious and He has sovereignly determined to display His grace by extending loving-kindness to sinners. Like an artist, the Lord has chosen to put His grace on display. When the curtain is lifted and His work of art is revealed, the portrait is Jesus...the Son of God who died so sinners might live. Yielding to no outside pressure or coercion, the Lord spontaneously showed the world favor by offering salvation as a free gift.

3. Grace describes God's DISPOSITION AND ACTIONS

A familiar airline slogan urges us to, "*fly the friendly skies*". After 9/11 and measures applied to insure our safety, we're not so sure the skies are so friendly anymore. Yet God offers something far more substantial than slogans. **Eph. 2:2** calls Satan...**the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** The skies are his domain and the kingdom he rules is anything but friendly. One of the Devil's names is Apollyon, the destroyer. He wants to destroy as many lives as he can before Christ returns and his time is up. Though Satan's rule is completely hostile and unfriendly, the Bible declares the grace and goodness of God. When we trust Christ, God brings us into His kingdom and the skies above become friendly.

Our definition affirms that God is gracious in His **disposition**. This means God's attitude toward us is perpetually favorable. His thoughts about us are always for good, and not for evil. The Psalmist wrote, **How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! (Ps.139:7)**

God plans the best / hopes the best / expects the best / and earnestly desires the best for each of us. How awesome is that? Even when we've failed and blown it big time, the Lord has good plans for our future. We find this in **Jer.29:11** where the Lord said to His wayward people...**For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** While Israel was deciding whether they would serve the Lord or not, God's mind was already made up. He planned to bless them. His disposition hadn't changed, nor can it!

And the Lord is also gracious in His **actions**. Let me take you to an amazing promise. It's found in **Jer.32:37-41**. Now bear in mind, the Lord made this promise to people who were captives in Babylon because of a sin-debt accumulated over many generations. For 70 years, the nation was in the Lord's woodshed. And let me insert this...it's a huge mistake to think grace and discipline are opposites. Any parent who thinks it's more loving and gracious to withhold discipline, is not loving their child or being gracious to them. The Bible says God disciplines those He loves. As Lucado says, *"God loves us as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way!"* **Titus 2:11, 12** say, **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...** So grace and discipline are not opposites! They belong together as redemption partners.

But notice what the Lord said about His people in **v.30**. **"The people of Israel and Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; indeed, the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke Me with what their hands have made, declares the LORD."** Israel was a showcase of total depravity. They did nothing but evil in God's sight. Every thing they did provoked the God who is righteous and holy. If you or I were God, we would certainly write the nation off. We'd do what a carpenter does with lumber that's warped and twisted. We'd reject it and find something better to work with. But we are not God and God is not like us...God is gracious.

On the basis of gracious promises made to Abraham and David centuries earlier, listen to what the Lord promised to do. **vs.37-41- I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."**

Notice the grace and goodness of God declared in these promises. The Lord said, **I will gather / I will bring / I will be / I will give / I will make / I will never stop / I will inspire / I will rejoice / and I will assuredly plant them in this land.** Like John's description of the grace revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lord promised **one blessing after another**. The Lord said He will do all these things for His people for their own good and for the good of their children. The Lord will never stop doing them good. Even today as Hamas has launched nearly 4,000 rockets against Israel, only a few have struck targets on the ground. Though Israel hasn't yet come to life spiritually, God is gathering them in their homeland and preserving them for that day. Out of sheer delight, **v. 41** says the Lord will **rejoice** to do them good. And let me remind you again...because it's shocking to those who operate in a "get what you pay for world"...this promise of perpetual goodness wasn't made to good people...it was made to people who did nothing but evil. It wasn't made to people who earned God's favor by doing a few nice things...it was made to undeserving people who did nothing but provoke the Lord!

So let's reassemble our definition. **Grace is that intrinsic quality of God's being or essence by which He is spontaneously favorable in His disposition and actions.**

Grace is God's response to how bad off we are without Him. Grace is Heaven's reaction to earth's crisis. You and I are totally depraved and fatally flawed, but God is gracious! We are crooked and warped, but God loves us anyway. We often fail at bat and we catch the ball when we should stay away from it. When we couldn't stand the test or make the grade, God devised a way to save us in the greatest demonstration of undeserved favor the world will ever see. The prophet Isaiah said, **In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. (Isa. 38:17)** That's grace! That's what the fatherly coach did for his young player who didn't know any better. He didn't broadcast our failures and condemn us. Instead, He put them behind His back.

Yet we've only scratched the surface because grace is much more than a beautiful word and lofty definition. The fullness of God's grace is personified and manifest in a person. Listen to **Titus 3:5-7 - But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.** Jesus is both the manifestation and definition of grace. He is the gift that forever proves God's disposition toward us is favorable. The death of Jesus on the cross proves God's grace is expressed in real time displays of loving-kindness. **Rom. 8:32** says, **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**

Max Lucado artfully describes the grace of God in his book entitled, He chose the nails. *"Envision the moment. God on His throne. You on the earth. And between you and God, suspended between you and Heaven, is Christ on His cross. Your sins have been placed on Jesus. God, who punishes sin, releases His rightful wrath on your mistakes. Jesus receives the blow. Since Christ is between you and God, you don't. The sin is punished, but you are safe, safe in the shadow of the cross."* Grace found a way. Lucado continues...*"This is what God did, but why, why would He do it? Moral duty? Heavenly obligation? Paternal requirement? No! God is required to do nothing."* He did it for you because He loves you. Out of sheer grace, the Holy God stooped down to do you a favor you didn't deserve and could never repay. That's what grace does. And listen...because God is forever gracious, we can be sure the best is yet to come! Now that's what I call "sugar!" There's nothing sweeter than the grace of God.

Listen to the challenge Joshua gave the people of Israel in **Josh. 24:15 - But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...** There are times when the narrow way seems too narrow. There are times when our King's requirements seem like strong medicine. At times like these we need to remember the cross and thank the Lord for the grace that saves / secures / and sustains us. God's grace is super abundant! Kingdom people don't serve the Lord and do His will so He will save us. We serve the Lord because of the amazing grace by which we are saved! His grace fills our hearts with gratitude and His love demands our best.