

What Was God Thinking: Grace and the Heart of God at Christmas

Titus 2:11-14 (NIV)

Sunday, December 18th, 2022 | Faith Evangelical Free Church

11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

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There is a story that is told about a group of British scholars sitting around having a debate about whether or not Christianity brings anything genuinely new or unique to the table when it comes to all that the religions of the world have to offer.

They start by considering some of the more well known and foundational doctrines of the faith – the incarnation, God’s ultimate power, the struggle between good and evil and right and wrong... and they decide that all those elements can be found in some fashion in other religions. So they continued to puzzle over whether or not Christianity offers anything new.

At this point, C.S. Lewis (famous Christian scholar and theologian, and most notably the author of the Chronicles of Narnia) stumbles upon the little group, listens for a moment, and then enters the debate, asking “*what’s all this rumpus about?*”

They put the question to Lewis – is there anything truly unique to the Christian faith? They expected him to be just as stumped as they were, but instead were surprised when he quickly answered: “Oh yes, that’s easy. It is grace.”

Grace is the strange and special distinctive of the Christian faith. The notion of God’s unconditional love given as a free gift – no strings attached, not as a reward or evidence of God’s approval, and with no discernable profit to God as the giver (and not just a lack of profit, but a profound and painful cost) – Lewis believed this was something unheard of and incredible when compared to the religions of the rest of the world. And I think he was probably right.

This morning we are going to ask ourselves *what was God thinking* when he offered us the gift of this unimaginable, amazing grace. What even is “grace”, and what difference might it make in our lives?

11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people

The “grace of God” is one of those indescribably precious and priceless biblical promises that all too often we don’t spend enough time seeking to understand. We assume we know what grace is and we tack it onto a lot of our daily habits.

We “say grace” over a meal. We compliment people who are kind and forgiving, or who approach things with such ease that we say, “oh, they are so graceful!” We tend to think of grace as something along the lines of courteousness, goodwill, or a willingness to simply let things go.

And all of those are good and true to an extent...but they barely scratch the surface of what Paul is talking about when he speaks of “grace” and its relation to God. This exact phrase, “the grace of God” appears 15 times throughout the New Testament, and every time it refers very specifically to God’s ***unmerited favor given to us. The “grace of God” is His unmerited favor given to us.***

It’s ***God’s loving intent toward us and His work for us.*** His plans to save us, His willingness to forgive us, His commitment to instruct us, the unearned and undeserved love, compassion, care, devotion, attention, and blessing that He has for each and every one of us. All of this is included in the boundless idea and truth of the grace of God.

Conceptually, a lot of us can probably accept this fairly easily. Grace is all the good stuff God does for us and gives us – sounds great! But the “*what we get*” of grace for many people isn’t the hard part. The difficult part is that all of the gifts wrapped up in grace are *unmerited, unearned, and undeserved*. And being in that place of receiving something so precious that we did nothing to earn (and in fact all too often do things that really ought to make us unworthy of such a gift)...that makes many of us uncomfortable.

In our pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps culture, where we venerate the self-made-man and self-made-woman, the surprising gift of grace can leave us shocked and even a little unsure of what to do or how to accept God’s unconditional love.

What we receive by grace is not what is due to us because of all the good we do, all rules we follow, or how hard we work at being a Christian. The grace of God comes first, before we even know what it might mean to live righteously. The mystery and majesty of the grace of God is that it is given to us even while we are enemies of God. His grace reaches us long before we ever search for Him, and it continues to shape us and change us even while we struggle to live a life worthy of it.

When I was in seminary one of my classes required us to read, “*What’s So Amazing About Grace?*”, by Philip Yancey. For those who might be unfamiliar, Yancey is a prolific author, a former editor for Christianity Today, and in my opinion one of the most insightful Christian literary voices of our age.

I remembered that I’d read this book as I was working on the sermon for today. So, I dug through my bookshelf, plucked it from its place in the very last row on the very last shelf (because yes, my bookshelf is alphabetized by author). I began to flip through it, wondering if past Sam was going to do present Sam a huge favor by having highlighted a dynamite quote or annotating a really great point that I could share with you today.

But my attention was quickly drawn not to Yancey’s words, but my own, messily scribbled in the margins. Over and over again I found some variation of this note: “*I don’t know how to do this*” – I don’t know how to accept the gift of grace.

Yancey is clear on the fact that you can’t earn God’s grace. You can’t make yourself eligible for that gift. It is free, and it is given in love. Within the first few pages Yancey makes the point that to be a Christian means you have to learn to accept this grace, to “*delight in the undeserved*.”

“*Delight in the underserved*” was not something I felt very often. And it was not something I was sure I wanted to experience. The problem was (and if I’m being honest still is) that I, perhaps like some of you, have a craving to earn favor. To be good enough that something is owed to me by someone – even God. To live my life in such a way that people want me around because I am useful, I bring something to the table, I prove that I am worthy to be given what I get.

But the grace of God doesn’t work like that. It’s not a reward or a wage. To receive it, you have to be willing to let go of your need to earn, to prove, or to demand. You have to humble yourself. You have to be willing to delight in receiving something so amazing even though you KNOW you have no business being blessed by so good.

Your first Christmas gift is wrapped up and waiting for you, right here in Titus 2. God cares about you. God loves you. God has made this grace available to you. Take hold of this gift of the grace of God, receive it, and be glad...***because it changes everything.***

But before we get to looking at what all grace might do in your life, we need to talk about the word “appeared in v11. Because that little word makes this gift of God’s grace into something – or rather, someone – greater than we could ever have hoped for or imagined.

The Greek word translated here as “appeared” has a very specific meaning and use in Greek literature. It was used to describe the arrival of a powerful hero or a god breaking into the story, showing up at just the right moment to save the helpless, rescue those in need, and bring about a happy ending.

Paul borrows this term “appeared” a few times in different letters, but his “help from above” is no mere fickle or finite god of the human imagination. The “*grace of God has appeared*” – definitively, at a specific moment in time and history, and when that grace appeared – **He** – triggered the offer of salvation to all people.

Who is this that has appeared? Who is the hero, bringing with him the fullness of God’s love and the undeserved gift of His grace toward us?

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Luke 2 (NIV)

The grace of God has appeared...and we know it to be Jesus Christ. Jesus is the love of God, the kindness of God, the forgiveness of God, the goodness of God, the provision of God, the glory of God, the ultimate gift of God that offers salvation to you, to me, and to everyone.

The grace of God has appeared, and He will change everything. The unearned favor He comes to give has the power to transform our lives. To reshape every last bit of our character, identity, hearts, souls, minds, and strength. **Everything.**

This week you are sure to be busy. Life will be hectic, there will be plans to make, houses to clean, last minute gifts to run all over town trying to find. In the midst of all the Christmas chaos, I challenge you to find five minutes. Five minutes when you can be alone, quiet, and calm your heart and mind to seek the Lord. And before you open a gift from under the tree or reach down inside a stocking, take the time to thank God for the gift of His grace. Thank him for the gift of Jesus, his Son, sent to bless and save us all.

The rest of the passage goes on to provide a few specific examples of just what grace does in our lives.

The grace of God has appeared...and offers salvation to all people. (v11)

I mentioned this above, but it is worth repeating: the unmerited favor of God is given to everyone. Salvation is an offer made to all people. No matter who you are, no matter your race, gender, class, position, authority, ability, health, or any other measure of status humanity can devise, the grace of God is extended to you. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is declared for you. Salvation is available to you.

This means that at your worst, Jesus offers forgiveness. This means that you can be utterly lost and caught up in the shabby and cheap junk this world tries to convince you is great, and Jesus still says “you, yes you – follow me!” You don’t have to change a single thing about yourself to convince God you’re worth His love. The ludicrously breathtaking thing about grace is that it is given and waiting to be received before you ever do a single thing to be a better person or repent from a single sin. Now, don’t get me wrong – this grace WILL demand you change your life (we’ll see how in just a moment) – but that change will be a transformation because of grace, not a qualification to receive grace.

I have two daughters (2 years old and nine months old). And I have found it incredibly difficult to stop buying gifts for them for Christmas. My wife and I have to sit down and decide which ones we'll actually give my oldest, Abigail, at Christmas and which ones we need to hide until her birthday in April. I'm so excited to give my girls gifts that will make them laugh and giggle and smile and feel loved. And it has nothing to do with what they earned. Again...2 years old and 9 months old. They are not constructively contributing much to our family that would bank them much credit toward getting gifts. No, I want to give them these things because I love them. I want to see them happy. Each present will be just a small token of the enormous heart for them.

If I have figured out how to give good gifts to my girls solely based on the fact that I love them...how much more will the gifts of God – who is Himself love – be given to us solely based on His love for us?

The Grace of God has appeared...and out of incredible love, grace offers salvation to all people. Including you. Accept it, and rejoice, and delight in the undeserved.

In v12, we learn that the Grace of God has appeared...and teaches us how to live. (v12)

12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...

The grace of God is a free gift, but it does make demands on how we live our lives. Not because that somehow qualifies us for the grace we've received, but because repentance, obedience, and transformation is the right-hearted response to such a gift as this.

Grace teaches us, it trains us to say "no" to anything that leads us to disobey the will of God. And it's not a casual "no thanks" or "that's not for me". The Greek word translated as "no" means to reject, denounce, renounce, and give up entirely. The verb tense in this passage would indicate both a decisive act, and an ongoing commitment saying "no" to the ungodliness of the world.

If you consider doing something that disobeys the commands of God, if it breaks the heart of God, if it demands your devotion be given to anything or anyone other than God...then you have to commit to learning how to say "no" and walking away. Recall the grace given to you and walk toward Christ instead.

If we're honest, 99% of the time it isn't hard to figure out what is ungodly or a worldly passion.

You know it is ungodly to lie, cheat, and steal.

You know it is ungodly to look down on others, to gossip, or to speak in such a way that is hurtful to another.

You know it is ungodly to be sexually immoral, relationally cruel, or abusive in any way.

You know it is ungodly to hold beliefs about others that lead to racism, cultural superiority, or political fanaticism.

You know the sins you most struggle to give up and get away from. You can hear your conscience cry out when you do things that are wrong. And if you are already a follower of Christ, you're probably at least a little familiar with the the voice (prompting, influence, etc) of the Holy Spirit saying, "don't do this thing, don't go that way...take the better road, follow after the will and way of Christ."

The Grace of God has appeared...and teaches us how to live. Not just what to reject, but what to take up, too.

- In relation to ourselves: we pursue self control.
- In relation to others: we pursue uprightness, making sure our actions are loving, kind, good, and fair.
- In relation to God: we pursue godly, right living, out of an obedience responding to the grace we've received.

Living this way, with self control, uprightness, and godliness – it's evidence that we're learning from and being transformed by grace.

A gift received in love still must be accepted, opened, and enjoyed. You don't get an ipad and then leave it in the box, expecting it to do all the fun things you want it to do while powered down and ignored. You have to accept it, open it up, and let it start showing you what it can do and how it can change what you do.

Grace won't change you if you refuse it. You have to be willing to let the grace of God – to let Jesus – teach you the best way to live your life, and then give it your best shot. (*Guess what : there will still be grace when you fail!*)

In v13 we are reminded that the **Grace of God has appeared...and reminds us of who we are and who we expectantly wait to return. (vv13-14)**

13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own...

Christians are people who wait expectantly for the return of Christ. We look for the coming of our blessed hope. This is not a wish or day dream or some wild fantasy. Biblical hope is our watchful anticipation of something we are SURE is going to happen. Just as we are sure the grace of God appeared on that silent night, in that little town of Bethlehem, our declaration is that He will appear again, and this time his coming will be in overwhelming glory.

The grace of God saved you. It made you a member of God's family. Grace will save you a spot in God's eternal Kingdom.

But until that day, we live in light of the truth that the **Grace of God has appeared...and it makes us eager to do what is good. (v14)**

Again, in v14:

*14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, **eager to do what is good.***

Take a moment to consider how radical this idea makes Christianity. We do not practice a faith that teaches us how to get the most out of a withholding God. We do not live a life that prioritizes our prosperity at the expense of others. We do not worship a Savior who demands we build an earthly empire with high walls that keep the unworthy people out and away, while all the right kind of people are safely cloistered within.

The grace of God has appeared and it makes us eager, excited, energized, and commissioned by the Holy God to go out into the world and do good. Be good. Create good.

Do you love to do what is good? Do you love to do what is kind? Do you love to serve others, with no expectation of having that service being returned? Do you love to give the gift of patience, to listen to others with compassion, to provide for needs, to tell others the reason you do all these things is because Jesus does them for you?

This is one of the things I love most about being a Christian and following Jesus. I am not made into a self righteous judge. I am not made into a religiously superior person. I don't have to spend a single moment of my time being hateful or cruel or unjust, or bitter, or worried about getting more or being better than the person next to me.

I get to be good. I get to do good things for others. And it's exactly what my God wants me to do.

I get to take God's grace, given freely to me, and share it freely with someone else.

The Grace of God has appeared, and thanks be to God, it changes everything.

May the grace of God change you in profound and beautiful ways this Christmas. May Jesus be near to you, and may your eagerness to do good grow and grow until the day He gloriously returns.

Father God, thank you for the blessing of your grace. Thank you for your son, Jesus, given to us humbly, lovingly, and sacrificially. Teach us to love your grace even when we don't understand how you could give us something so precious that we do not deserve and most certainly have not earned. Teach us to live our lives in joyous response to your love, eager to do what is good, forever changed for the better by your grace. Amen.