

FOUNDATIONS: What Christians Should Believe

10 November 2011

SALVATION: How God Makes Rebels His Children

Part 3

Bible Reading: Luke 15:11-32

Context: In our ongoing study through our church's confession of faith,¹ we are currently discussing the doctrine of salvation.² Thus far we have learned why salvation is an important concept, what it means to be saved, and how salvation is divinely initiated. Tonight we will consider the phrase from our doctrinal statement, "We believe that the salvation of sinners is...wholly of grace."

***Salvation:** We believe that the salvation of sinners is divinely initiated and wholly of grace through the mediatorial offices of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who, by appointment of the Father, voluntarily took upon Himself our nature, yet without sin, and honored the divine law by His obedience, thus qualifying Himself to be our Savior; that by the shedding of His blood in His death He fully satisfied the just demands of a holy and righteous God regarding sin; that His sacrifice consisted not in setting us an example by his death as a martyr, but was a voluntary substitution of Himself in the sinner's place, the Just dying for the unjust, Christ bearing our sins in His own body on the tree; that having risen from the dead He is now enthroned in Heaven; He is in every way qualified to be a suitable, compassionate and all-sufficient Savior. We believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition of salvation. Repentance is a change of mind and purpose toward God prompted by the Holy Spirit and is an integral part of saving faith.*

Discussion:

- I. Just by way of review, Christians often ask people the question, "Have you been saved?" From what are we saved? Why do we need to be saved?
- II. How is salvation divinely initiated? What did the Father initiate? The Son? The Spirit?
- III. A few questions on Luke 15:
 - A. Someone summarize the story in this passage.
 - B. Who is the real hero of the parable of The Prodigal Son? Is it the son, or someone else? Whom does this person represent? What might be a better name for this parable?
 - C. Is the father's reaction to his son's return in this account natural? I.e., is this how humans naturally respond in our flesh?
 - D. What lessons ought Christians to draw from this parable? What lessons ought Christian parents to draw from this parable?
 - E. Would the parable of The Prodigal Son make sense if Christianity were a religion of merit? To put it another way, if sinners needed to earn the love of God, or make partial amends before God would accept them, how would this parable differ?³
- IV. Have you ever seen evangelical Christians portrayed as angry, judgmental, and spiteful? If so, where? Is this characterization deserved? Why or why not? Is this behavior consistent with our convictions? Why or why not?

¹ For a complete copy of our church's confession of faith, visit our website (www.trinitybaptistmuncie.org) and look under the "We Believe" category. We will attempt to put all the previous notes from this series on the church website in the not too distant future.

² If you would like to go deeper in the study of the doctrine of salvation, we recommend the following resources: For an introductory study, see *What is the Gospel?* by Greg Gilbert (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); for a more intermediate consideration, consider *The Truth of the Cross* by RC Sproul (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2007); for a challenging yet rewarding study, check out *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

³ For a wonderful Gospel-centered meditation on the parable of The Prodigal Son, see *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* by Timothy Keller (New York: Dutton, 2008).

Study:

I. What is "Grace"?

- A. The term "grace" is commonly used in the English language in a variety of different ways. Some define grace as a desirable virtue (e.g., "that lady is a gracious hostess"), others as an artistic quality (e.g., "that ballerina performs with grace"), others as some sort of religious substance (e.g., "my priest dispenses grace"), others as overlooking faults (e.g., "my electric company's grace period"), and others as personal charm (e.g., "she's an attractive, graceful woman"). Still others define "grace" as a brief prayer before meals or even as somebody's first name (e.g., Grace Kelly). In what other ways is the term "grace" used in English?
- B. The Bible uses the term "grace" in a very specific way. Understanding the Bible's definition of "grace" is absolutely essential to know what it means that salvation is wholly of grace. Discuss the following verses⁴ and attempt to derive a biblical definition of grace:
1. Exodus 34:6-7 – The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."⁵
 2. 2 Kings 13:23 – But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now.
 3. Psalm 103:8-13 – The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
 4. Romans 6:23-24 – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.
 5. Romans 11:6 – But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.
 6. Ephesians 2:8-9 – 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.
- C. We could define "grace" according to the Bible as simply *undeserved kindness*. As sinners, we positively deserve God's wrath. However, in countless ways, God shows humans kindness and favor they do not deserve. This completely undeserved benevolence is what the Bible calls "grace." Theologian Wayne Grudem defines "grace" this way:
- "God's 'grace' means his 'unmerited favor.' Because we are completely unable to earn favor with God, the only way we could be declared righteous is if God freely provides salvation for us by grace, totally apart from our work."⁶
- D. Common Grace and Saving Grace:
1. Christian theologians often distinguish between common grace and saving grace. Common grace refers to the kindness God shows to all people regardless of their relationship to Him. Things

⁴ The terms "grace", "gracious", and their synonyms are used hundreds of times throughout the Bible. The following are only a small sampling of relevant verses that help us define grace.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁶ *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 729.

such as rain from heaven, abundant crops, healthy children, good friends, etc. are all expressions of common grace. Saving grace, on the other hand, refers to those special blessings only believers in Christ experience. Expressions of saving grace would include things such as justification, adoption, the forgiveness of sins, the indwelling Holy Spirit, etc.

2. Common grace is not pointless but is intended by God to grab the attention of non-Christians and to ultimately point them to Christ (Acts 17:24-31). Keep this in mind in evangelism. If someone says, "I'm so thankful that God gave me this job," you might ask, "Would you like to know that God personally?" or something to that effect.
3. While common grace is a wonderful gift from God, and seems to be grace purchased by Jesus' cross, the remainder of this lesson will focus on saving grace.

II. What Does it Mean that Salvation "Wholly of Grace"?

A. It is important to notice that our church confession of faith does not say that salvation is "somewhat of grace" or "partially of grace" or "mostly of grace" but "wholly of grace." What does this mean and why is it significant? More importantly, is this what the Bible teaches?

B. The Radical Nature of Biblical Grace:

1. The Bible defines grace in such a way that it cannot be earned or supplemented with our efforts in any way. If we attempt to earn grace, we by default reject grace. If we attempt to contribute any of our own effort or deeds to grace, grace is automatically deactivated. Biblical grace is radical in that it can only be received freely as a gift (Romans 6:24).
2. To help us understand the radical nature of grace of the Bible, contrast the Bible's definition of grace with other religions. In all other world religions, and even in some forms of so-called Christianity, God's grace is either fully or partially earned. I earn God's favor through performing rituals, through giving money to the poor, through austere living, through going on pilgrimages, through the repetition of prayers, through church attendance, etc. If I am to receive grace, I must do something to earn it. Only the Bible teaches a God who shows people favor as a free gift. Note the emphasis in the following verses on the free nature of grace, especially as it is contrasted with our behavior (i.e. "works"):
 - a. Isaiah 55:1-2 – Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
 - b. Romans 4:4-5 – Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness
 - c. 2 Timothy 1:9 – [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.
 - d. Titus 3:5 – He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.
3. Moreover, the Bible teaches that God shows us grace "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). The God of the Bible exercises His grace as He "justifies the ungodly" (Romans 4:5). He is the God who saved the thief on the cross; He is the gracious father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. If salvation were partially or even mostly of grace (i.e., Jesus does 95% and we do 5%), these passages lose any meaning. Salvation must be wholly of grace or there is no salvation.

C. What Enables God to Exercise Radical Grace?

1. The thoughtful Bible-reader at this point may see an ethical dilemma. If humans deserve hell, how then can God then show them grace? If God is holy and good, and humans are deserving of His wrath, how can he pass by our sins and give us favor we do not deserve? Any judge who released a guilty murderer back into society without any punishment would be considered unjust and thrown off the bench. How is God any different?
2. Herein is another way in which Christianity differs from all other religions. Jesus' cross solves this riddle of how God can be both holy and gracious. It is only by dying in our place that Jesus bears our punishment so that God can remain righteous while showing grace to sinners.

Romans 3:23-26 – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

D. The Necessity of Radical Grace to Salvation:

1. With this biblical understanding of grace, we are forced to a huge conclusion. If we remove grace from the Gospel, the Gospel is no longer the Gospel. If we remove radical grace from salvation, there is no salvation. If you attempt to supplement Jesus' work with your own effort or merit, the resulting payoff is always zero. Ponder the implications of the following verses:
 - a. Romans 11:6 – But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.
 - b. Galatians 1:6-8 – I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.
 - c. Galatians 5:2 – Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.
2. What does this mean practically? This means is that even if you say, "I believe in Jesus, I trust in Jesus," but if you are still relying partially on your baptism or your obedience or your rituals or your contribution of any kind, you have nullified grace; you have nullified the Gospel. And a nullified Gospel cannot save you.
3. The reason God takes radical grace so seriously is because anything less dishonors Jesus and His cross. To say that salvation is 95% grace and 5% merit is to say that Jesus only suffered for 95% of my sins, which diminishes what Jesus did. Furthermore, if salvation is only partially of grace, I have room for boasting in my salvation, something God cannot tolerate. Consider the implications of the following verses:
 - a. Galatians 2:21 – I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.
 - b. Romans 3:27-28 – Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

III. How a Salvation that is Wholly by Grace Revolutionizes Our Thinking and Behavior:

- A. This truth that salvation is wholly by grace, if rightly understood and appreciated, has the power to completely transform the way you look at life. Because you always stand before God and relate to God on the basis of grace, nothing can ever be the same. For example:
1. Because of grace, I never obey God in order to be loved by Him; instead I obey God because I am loved by him.
 2. Because of grace I am never motivated to obey out of fear and insecurity; instead I obey out of gratitude and joy.
 3. Because of grace I never obey God in order to earn things from God. Instead I obey God to delight in God and to become more like God.
 4. Because of grace my self-worth and self-identity is no longer rooted in myself – how hard I work or how moral I am or how smart I am. Instead my self-worth is rooted entirely in Jesus. On my best day God treats me as if I had lived Jesus life. And on my worst day, God still treats me as if I had lived Jesus life. Regardless of my shortcomings or sins or mistakes, I always and only relate to God on the basis of sheer grace.
 5. For more reflection on the worldview-shaping implications of a salvation that is wholly by grace, go to page 8.
- B. Drawing out this connection between grace and our way of looking at all of life, Pastor Tim Keller writes:

“The solution to stinginess is a reorientation to the generosity of Christ in the gospel, where he poured out his wealth for you [2 Cor. 8:9]. You don’t have to worry about money, for the cross proves God’s care for you and gives you all the security you need. Jesus’s love and salvation confers on you a remarkable status—one that money cannot give you. The solution to a bad marriage is a reorientation to the radical spousal love of Christ in the gospel. ‘Thou shall not commit adultery’ makes sense in the context of the spousal love of Jesus, especially in the cross, where he was completely faithful to you. Only when you know the spousal love of Christ will you have real fortitude against lust. His love is fulfilling—which keeps you from looking to sexuality to give you what only Jesus can give.

“What’s the point? What makes you faithful or generous is not just a redoubled effort to follow moral rules. Rather, all change comes from deepening your understanding of the salvation of Christ and living out of the changes that understanding creates in your heart. Faith in the gospel restructures our motivations, our self-understanding, our identity, and our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without heart-change will be superficial and fleeting.

“The gospel is therefore not just the ABCs of the Christian life, but the A to Z of the Christian life.”

—Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*, 118-19

- C. In addition to changing the way we think about ourselves, a salvation that is wholly of grace should transform the way we interact with other people. In a nutshell, just as God has loved us freely apart from our deservedness, so then we are to love others apart from their deservedness. Note this connection in the following verses:
1. John 13:34-35 – A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
 2. Ephesians 4:31-32 – Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
 3. Ephesians 5:25 – Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

4. 1 John 3:16 – By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.
- D. If we believe salvation is wholly of grace, we should be the most loving, forgiving, compassionate people on the planet. Here are a few examples to help you imagine how we should reflect radical grace to others:
1. *How might we reflect grace toward non-Christians?* At heart, we are no different from unbelievers (Titus 3:3ff.). The only difference is that God has opened our eyes by grace and forgiven us by grace. As a result of this perspective, we are nothing more than beggars simply telling other beggars where the bread is.
 2. *How might we reflect God's grace toward the highly immoral?* Christians believe the seeds of every form of immorality dwell within every human heart (Romans 3:10ff.). Therefore, the reason I am less immoral than someone else has nothing to do with the quality of my heart, but only because of God's grace (1 Corinthians 10:12; 15:15). Furthermore, we will be eager to point immoral people to God's grace, the only hope that can transform their lives.
 3. *How might we reflect God's grace to those of other races than our own?* All men are equally made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28), all men are equally sinners in Adam (Romans 5:12ff.), and all men are equally in need of God's saving grace (Romans 3:23ff.). Therefore, no one race is more or less superior to another. We all must rely on the gracious Savior who died for people from "every tribe, tongue, people and nation," (Revelation 5:9). I am a brother in Adam with all men, regardless of their race. I am a brother in Christ with all other Christians, regardless of their race. Racial differences become superficial and trivial.
 4. *How might we reflect God's grace to Christians who have fallen into sin?* While sin is never excusable, it will characterize life this side of heaven. Moreover, true Christians, including myself, will possess the ability to sin and will not reach perfection in this life (Romans 7). This realization results in a gracious, sympathetic attitude toward those who have fallen into sin (Hebrews 4:15). Furthermore, if someone is truly saved, falling into sin does not result in that person losing his salvation (since Jesus has paid for all their past, present, and future sins). Therefore, I will continue to love that person as God continues to love that person. If a brother has stumbled, I will seek to assist him out of that sin (Galatians 6:1-5), all the while recognizing that if not for the grace of God, I could fall in the very same manner (1 Corinthians 10:12-13). I will be conscious of and hate my own sin more than the sin of others.
 5. *How might we reflect God's grace to those who have sinned against us?* I begin with the assumption that no matter what sin is committed against me, it pales in comparison to the sin I have already committed against God and have been completely forgiven of by grace. This realization moves me to show this same grace to others (Matthew 18:21ff.). Furthermore, if the individual who has sinned against me is a Christian, Jesus has already paid for all their sins on the cross, including that one committed against me. Therefore, there is no punishment left to deal out (Romans 8:1). While there may be consequences to behavior and while retribution may be appropriate, these are not punitive (Hebrews 12:1ff.). If the brother who has sinned against me repents and seeks forgiveness, thought it may be incredibly difficult, I must be willing to forgive that brother, "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). And what frees me to do this is the constant realization that God has forgiven me, not seventy times seven, but of infinitely evil sin an infinite number of times, only through the blood of the cross (Colossians 2:14).⁷

⁷ For more on the critical topic of forgiveness, we recommend *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* by John MacArthur (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009); *From Forgiven to Forgiving* by Jay Adams (Carlisle: Calvary Press, 1994); *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

Application:

- I. In what ways has this lesson enabled you to appreciate your salvation more than you did before? Has it moved your heart to worship God for what He did to save you?
- II. Evangelical Christians claim that people are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Why then does this not lead to immorality and licentiousness? If I am not motivated to obey out of fear or hell, what other motivation(s) exist for obedience?
- III. What attitude should we take toward those who claim to be Christians but maintain a gospel of salvation by some degree of merit?
- IV. Why do religions of morality and merit cause people to swing from pride to despair?
- V. Can you think of additional ways in which grace shapes our worldview? Our relationships to others?
- VI. What point from tonight's lesson most stood out to you and why?

RELIGION VS. GRACE⁸

Religion	Grace
"I obey; therefore I'm accepted."	"I'm accepted; therefore, I obey."
Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.	Motivation is based on grateful joy.
I obey God in order to get things from God.	I obey God to get God—to delight in and resemble him.
When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life.	When circumstances in my life go wrong, I struggle, but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus and that while God may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.
When I am criticized, I am furious or devastated, because it is critical that I think of myself as a "good person." Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs.	When I am criticized, I struggle, but it is not essential for me to think of myself as a "good person." My identity is not built on my record or my performance but on God's love for me in Christ.
My prayer life consists largely of petitions, and it only heats up when I am in a time of need. My main purpose in prayer is control of the environment.	My prayer life consists of generous stretches of praise and adoration. My main purpose is fellowship with God.
My self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards, I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. If and when I am not living up to standards, I feel humble, but not confident—I feel like a failure.	My self-view is not based on my moral achievement. In Christ I am <i>sumul iustus et peccator</i> —simultaneously sinful and lost, yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad that he had to die for me, and I am so loved that he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deep humility and confidence at the same time.
My identity and self-worth are based mainly on how hard I work, or how moral I am—and so I must look down on those I perceive as lazy or immoral.	My identity and self-worth are centered on the one who died for me. I am saved by sheer grace, so I can't look down on those who believe or practice something different

⁸ This chart was compiled by Justin Buzzard from Tim Keller's highly recommended *Gospel in Life* curriculum. It was borrowed with slight modifications from http://www.buzzardblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/religion_gospel.pdf, accessed 6/15/10.

	from me. Only by grace am I what I am.
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