



Problems the Church Should Talk About: #9 - Grace for Problem People by Gerald Cowan

*All Scriptures and comments are based on the **New King James Version**, unless otherwise noted.*

QUESTION: *Maybe people who cause problems do not deserve grace, but people who have problems need more grace and should receive it. Maybe we are too quick to just ignore them or refuse to accept them. Isn't grace a gift for everybody, according to God? We will be saved by grace, according to **Ephesians 2:5-9**. Not by discipline and punishment.*

I'm glad you admit the difference between those who have problems and those who are problems or cause problems for others – especially for the church. Both are problems the church needs to talk about and find solutions for (that's the theme of our intermittent series of essays, including the last one in the particular series, Number 630, problem number 8). We are not to handle the two conditions in the same way. God does not and we must not, cannot, treat them as the same. That will become clear when we see and accept the varied meanings of *grace* and the necessarily different applications of it in problem-solving.

Grace is not unconditional. "Unmerited favor" is the most common definition of grace but it is a flawed definition – ambiguous, oversimplified, incomplete, and therefore inaccurate. Grace is one of the most misunderstood and abused doctrines in Christianity. Undeserved does not mean unconditional. Nothing that pertains to salvation and approval of God is unconditional. Love is the only gift of God that can be called truly unconditional. But love does not necessarily imply approval and acceptance. God certainly loves sinners and desires to save them (**2 Peter 3:9**) and has made a way by which all can be saved and offers that remedy to all men (**Titus 2:11-12**). But notice in that scripture reference, grace includes and requires a certain obedient response to God's requirement: denying (and departing from) ungodliness and worldly lust and then living soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world. Grace does not remove or replace God's stipulated conditions. No sinner is saved without personal repentance and personal obedience (**Luke 13:3, 5**) which nobody else, not even God or Christ, can do for him – it must be done by the person himself. Forgiveness is not based upon God's love. It is based upon God's grace which, in turn, requires the person's proper response to it. Some will cite **Ephesians 2:5, 8-9** to claim that salvation is by grace, without conditions or works of man imposed: "*For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves but is the gift of God not of works.*" But something is left out in that understanding of the message. It is "*by grace through faith*" – faith is a work. It is a work – learning and believing – done by the person, but it is not of or from the person, it is a work of God, a work imposed by God. Notice **John 6:28-29**. "*What shall we do that we might work the works of God?*" The answer of Jesus is: "*This is the work of God that you believe in him whom God has sent.*" The works initiated by man's mind and will

(as in **Titus 2:3-7**) are powerless to save him, but the works imposed by God are essential for his salvation.

Grace is not transferrable. Some teach that Jesus has superabundant merit and therefore superabundant grace, more than enough to save everyone in the world, and that their priesthood has power of supererogation – ability to dispense more than is needed, according to their own will (also, coincidentally, power to withhold it from those they deem unworthy or undeserving of it and those with whom they are unwilling to share it). They also believe Mary, mother of Jesus, is the mediator and administrator of all grace. Don't miss the point: the doctrine of superabundant grace available through Jesus and his mother, and a man-made priesthood that has the power to save the world by its distribution of that grace is a false doctrine. Neither the church nor its ministers can forgive sins which are not repented, with correction at least attempted. Look, for example, at the case mentioned by Paul in

1 Corinthians 5:1-6. The incestuous fornicator was to be dismissed from fellowship, not hailed as deserving or receiving grace that allowed him to remain in fellowship with the church. If – actually when – he repented he should be allowed to return (**2 Corinthians 2:6-8**). The same apostle said that heretics, after one or two warnings should be rejected (**Titus 3:10**). The rebuke and the warning are acts of grace. Ignoring the problem or forgiving it without change is not grace, it is rejection of God and His word.

Grace does not mean leniency or refusal to impose penalties. The guilty may implore, "Cut me some slack, give me a pass, lighten up, don't be so hard on me, show me some mercy, be kind." That last part, mercy and kindness, may be ciphers in grace but mercy or leniency may sometimes be a dilution of grace, even a failure of true grace. Sometimes grace gives you exactly what you deserve. Partiality and refusal to apply the will of God based on prejudice or preference or when it will "hurt someone's feelings" is disobedience to God.

Grace does not lie or distort the truth or refuse to tell the truth. Lies cannot qualify as grace, no matter from whom they come or by whom they are told. The Lord does not and cannot lie (**Hebrews 6:18, Titus 1:2**). It is truth that makes one free (**John 8:31-32**) – Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (**John 14:6**). No lie is of the Lord or from the Lord, nor can it be. If the Lord held back the truth or said things that are not true in order to please and pacify people He would be untrue to himself, violating and profaning himself. He will not tell you something that is not true and valid, not even to make you "feel better about yourself and your condition." People claiming to be people of God, even claiming to speak for the Lord, do lie and tell things that are not true – saying, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace (**Jeremiah 6:14**).

Grace is not permission to contradict or supplant the Lord, or to alter His words. An oracle of the Lord is the message of the Lord and/or the messenger of the Lord (**1 Peter 4:11**), is one who speaks what the Lord speaks, delivers the message of the Lord accurately. The oracle is not an interpreter but an exegete; an oracle is not a negotiator but a deliverer of (generally non-negotiable) messages from the originating source. To tell people that God will not do to them what he threatens, that He will in fact not reject or punish the disobedient, etc is not grace, it is sabotage and insubordination by enemies of grace, enemies of God.

Offering what God does not offer is not grace. Offering salvation without faith, repentance, submission or obedience to God's terms and calling it grace is not only futile but foolish. Whatever you say to others or impose upon others as conditions for

salvation (there is no such thing as unconditional salvation!) had best be an accurate state from God's own words of what He will do if and when His words are accepted and obeyed. Do not promise others that God will do something He has not promised, unless you are able to do it for them if God refuses. You do not stand in the place of God offering something in the place of what He offers. You stand between God and others to tell them what God requires, and perhaps help them do it. You become an instrument of His grace, not a dispenser of it.

Refusing or preventing grace to others may deprive one of the grace of God for oneself. As unforgiveness and lack of mercy deprive one of forgiveness and mercy (**Matthew 6:14-15, James 2:13**), so a violation or interruption of grace for oneself or others can deprive one of grace and all its benefits for himself. Jesus warned hypocritical scribes and Pharisees and other teachers against making the kingdom of God inaccessible to themselves or others. "*You will not go in yourself and you hinder and prevent others who want to go in*" – effectively shutting up the kingdom of God (**Matthew 23:13**). Though they spared no energy or effort in doing so, by making converts and proselytes to their own doctrines and ways they only succeeded in making others more firmly and fully sons of hell than they themselves were (**Matthew 23:15**). By teaching their own opinions and doctrines rather than God's they made His words vain, empty and unproductive in salvation (**Matthew 15:3, 9**). He told them emphatically that by violating God's truth they not only rejected God's grace for themselves but also prevented others from receiving it.

Grace helps one obey the Lord and receive His grace – His salvation and blessings. For one who wants to be a channel and minister of God's grace to problem people – a hope that describes each and all of us – here's how to go about it. Admit and acknowledge the problem, the problem the person has or the problem the person is. Research the problem and find a proper remedy for it in God's word. Confront the person about the problem and offer to help him correct and resolve it, especially in finding forgiveness and restoration to God's favor – actually help him find and receive the grace of God. Those problem people who have fallen out of grace (**Galatians 5:4**) and remain uncorrected and unhelped may become a hindrance and danger to others, may have to be isolated and quarantined to protect others. But those brought into and preserved in grace become functioning stones, assets in the Lord's building, the church. Discipline and punishment and other efforts to correct and resolve problems for people is an act of grace, evidence of the grace of God.

<><> *Gerald Cowan*

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