

THE LIMITS OF GRACE

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” [Rom. 6:1-2]

Before passing sentence on a young man who had been found guilty of murder, the trial judge asked him if he had anything to say. The young man burst into tears and asked the judge to be lenient with him because he was an orphan. In a society that treats orphans with sympathy, love and generosity, that was a compelling plea. However, the judge was not moved because this orphan was a convicted murderer who had actually been tried for killing his parents! He was therefore not considered entitled to the judge’s grace.

Grace features prominently in our daily living. Students, the poor and the unemployed, for example, enjoy social amenities and welfare benefits provided by the state with funds to which they have not contributed. The colour of our skin, the families into which we were born, and the intellectual and spiritual endowments that we parade, God gave them all to us without our asking. It is all by His grace.

Christianity is the only religion that teaches that we are saved by grace [an unmerited gift of God –Eph. 2:8] and not by works [Acts 15:11; Eph. 2:9]. This grace comes through Jesus [Jn 1:17] for “God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” [Rom. 5:8]. In other religions, which have rejected Jesus Christ as the Son of God, they rely on human effort to get to heaven. They believe that God keeps a record of good and evil deeds, and that they will go to heaven on their death if on balance their good outweighs their bad! In reality, this is impossible because “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3:23]. The Good Thief, a criminal all his life, was the first saint of the New Covenant to enter Paradise when he confessed Jesus on the cross at the point of death [Lk 23:40-43]. In other religions, such a feat is considered impossible.

Unfortunately, grace has made believers careless in their relationship with God. When we were made orphans by the spiritual death of our first parents, Adam and Eve, God adopted us as His sons through our faith in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ [Jn 1:12]. We are the only worshippers who can call Him “Father!” But how elastic is this grace? Does it have any limits? Are there certain conditions that we must continue to meet? Let us find out in today’s lesson.

1. The concept of grace

If you were to examine parts of your body, you might find scars. A scar is a mark remaining after a wound or ulcer is healed. The scars might remind you of certain wounds or operations that you might have had when you were younger. Although they may no longer be painful, they may still have painful memories for you, such as accidents, battle wounds, robbery attacks, domestic violence, etc. With plastic surgery, it is possible these days to make ugly scars and keloids look smooth and beautiful. However, cosmetic surgery is quite expensive, and scars may not be completely eliminated.

Every sin we commit is a stab wound on our souls. You can then imagine how many scars we could be carrying there! But nothing defiled can enter the kingdom of heaven [Rev. 21:27]. So, “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins; *and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world*” [1 Jn 2:1-2]. What the blood of Jesus does is to completely remove any scar marks on our souls. Where there are no scars, there is no memory. That is why God says, “I am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and *I will not remember thy sins*” [Is. 43:25]. That unmerited favour which the blood of Jesus has won for us is called *grace*.

Remember that Jesus Christ is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” [Rev. 13:8], and that He died for us while we were yet sinners. Therefore, grace has been with man right from the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden [Gen. 3:15, 21].

2. The significance of grace

Through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we have become sons of God by adoption to the Father, thereby making us joint-heirs (with Christ) to the kingdom [Rom. 8:14-17]. Consequently, grace is all abundant [Rom. 5:15-20], all sufficient [2 Cor. 12:9], manifold [1 Pet. 4:10] and rich [Eph. 2:4-5]. The following benefits/manifestations of grace should be noted:

a) *Salvation*

Heaven belongs to God and He alone has the prerogative to determine who is qualified to spend eternity in His kingdom. As we had noted earlier, we cannot enter therein by human effort because we can *never* meet His standards of holiness. Therefore, He has given us His only begotten Son “that the world through Him might be saved” [Jn 3:17]. So, “through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved” [Acts 15:11].

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, has laid down His life for His flock. He is also the door of the sheepfold and “by Me if *any man* enter in, he shall be saved” [Jn 10: 9,11]. Therefore, salvation is unmerited. It is by God’s grace.

b) *Election/Call of God*

If access to God's calling or election were based on means or influence, the rich and the famous would corner everything. The poor and the minorities would have no chance. Happily, it is not so. Moses told the people of Israel, "the Lord did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people; but *because the Lord loved you*" [Deut. 7:7-8].

Jesus told His disciples, "ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" [Jn 15:16]. Saul was looking for his father's lost donkeys when God asked the prophet Samuel to anoint him the first king of Israel. Saul himself never had the ambition or dreamt of becoming king. "Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?" [1 Sam. 9:21]. Since the Lord does not look at man's appearance or at his physical stature [1 Sam. 16:7], nothing else but God's grace could have qualified Saul for the exalted position of the king of Israel. So it is with us. Whatever service we are called to render [cf: Eph. 4:11] is by His calling, not our brilliance or determination. That is why Paul who was called on the road to Damascus has said, "but when it pleased God who separated me from my mother's womb, [He] called me by His grace" [Gal. 1:15].

c) *Faith*

Faith is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit [Gal. 5:22], and without it we cannot please God, in that He rewards those who diligently seek Him [Heb. 11:6]. In other words, it is by God's grace that we are able to uphold "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" [Heb. 11:1].

The group of Jews that Apollos met in Achaia "had believed through grace" even though they knew nothing yet about the doctrines of justification through the blood of Christ and sanctification through the Holy Spirit [Acts 18:27]. Simeon and Anna received the grace to believe that the Messiah would in deed be born and they were there in the temple when the baby Jesus was presented [Lk 2:25-38].

d) *Blessings*

All blessings, physical, material and spiritual, come from God for He "is able to make *all grace* abound toward you; that ye, always having *all sufficiency in all things*, may abound to every good work" [2 Cor. 9:8]. Solomon asked for wisdom and he was blessed with material wealth and honour as well [1 Kgs 3:12-13]. Moses reminded his people, "thou shalt remember the Lord thy God; for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth" [Deut. 8:18].

e) *Forgiveness and Justification*

In a human court, when we plead guilty, we are sure to be punished. At best, the sentence may be reduced when we plead for leniency. When we plead not guilty, we have to prove our innocence to be set free. Otherwise, we still face punishment. It is not so with God because, even when we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

We can use an interesting event during the trial of Jesus to demonstrate God's forgiveness. Barabbas was on trial for sedition and murder and held in custody by the Roman authorities. After Pilate had tried Jesus, he told the people, "I, having examined Him before you, have found no fault in this man" [**Lk 23: 13-22**]. The people insisted on His crucifixion and clamoured for the criminal, Barabbas, to be set free. That was what Pilate did! [**v. 18**] Now, let us look at the story from Barabbas' perspective. He was guilty and faced instant death in the hands of the Romans. Yet, he was completely set free even when he did not deserve it. How does that apply to us? Jesus who was without sin died for us on the cross while we were yet sinners [**Rom. 5:8**].

Like Barabbas, we have been "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" [**Rom. 3:23-24**], i.e., pronounced free from guilt or blame. So, if we confess our sins *each time we fall*, God "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from *all unrighteousness*" [**1 Jn 1:9**].

f) *Consolation*

God in His excellence has made provision through grace that sustains believers through earthly tribulations, difficulties and temptations, thereby giving them consolation and establishing their hope for the ultimate. That is why Paul prayed, "now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting *consolation* and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work" [**2 Thess. 2:16-17**].

Mary and her sister, Martha, were consoled after their brother's death by their faith in Jesus and the resurrection of the dead, that is, by God's grace [**Jn 11:20-27**]. Referring to the restoration of Israel, Jeremiah wrote, "thus saith the Lord, the people which were left of the sword *found grace* in the wilderness; even Israel, *when I went to cause him to rest*" [**Jer. 31:2**]. When a "thorn in the flesh" buffeted Paul, he prayed for healing and each time the Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Consequently, Paul took "pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake" [**2 Cor. 12:8-10**].

g) *Talents*

Look at top talents and stars in every walk of human endeavour. It is the Lord's doing. For example, after God had given Moses an elaborate

description of how to build the Tabernacle, the Lord said, “see, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in *all manner of workmanship. To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass*” [Ex. 31:1-4]. Similarly, it was Hiram (or Hiram) with similar endowments that co-coordinated the building of Solomon’s temple [1 Kgs 7:13-23]. Therefore, whether you are a top scientist, golf player, prophet, general or beauty queen, you are enjoying the grace of God.

3. Limits of grace

In the Parable of the Marriage Feast, Jesus narrates the story of a king who had invited certain guests to his son’s wedding. Apart from refusing his invitation, they molested his messengers. So, he then instructed his servants to go into the highways and bring in as many guests as they could find, “both good and bad,” because “*they which were bidden were not worthy*” [Matt. 22:1-14].

In like manner, the king’s invitation to his son’s wedding is like God’s grace extended to us to benefit from His Son’s sacrificial death on the cross. When we reject that invitation, God will turn the grace to others that we consider less worthy than we are because we “*which were bidden were not worthy.*” We place ourselves in that situation under the following circumstances:

a) *When we refuse to repent*

God may not forgive us if we refuse to confess our sins but when we do confess, He will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness [1 Jn 1:9]. Judas Iscariot committed suicide instead of repenting for betraying Jesus [Matt. 27:3-5], whereas Peter who had denied Him thrice repented [Lk 22:62] and was later restored by Jesus to feed His flock [Jn 21:15-17].

b) *When we disobey God’s order*

Believers are supposed to walk by faith, not by sight. In other words, we should go as God directs. If we obey partially or disobey completely, we are on our own. Moses was asked to speak to the rock and he struck it. For that, God did not allow him to enter the Promised Land [Num. 20:7-12]. Saul was ordered to kill all the people of Amalek and destroy all their belongings. Instead, he spared their king and the best flock, claiming that he planned to use them for sacrifice to God. His action was considered rebellion, which “is as the sin of witchcraft”, and stubbornness which “is as iniquity and idolatry” [read the full story in 1 Sam. 15:1-23]. For that, he lost the throne, which he had obtained by God’s grace.

c) *Sins against the Holy Spirit*

While God is ready to forgive all unrighteousness *if we confess our sins*, Jesus has warned that sins against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this world or hereafter [**Matt. 12:31-32**]. Hananiah had a conflict with Jeremiah over which of them spoke the true prophecy from God. Since God had not sent Hananiah “but thou makest this people to trust in a lie,” his action was considered by God “rebellion against the Lord.” He died soon after in accordance with God’s word, “I will cast thee off from the face of the earth this year” [**Jer. 28: 1-17**]. Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, lied about the value of the property that they had sold to give to the church. For lying against the Holy Spirit, both of them were struck dead instantly [**Acts 5:1-10**]. However, Paul was forgiven the sins that he had committed in ignorance before he was called [**1 Tim. 1:12-14**].

d) *Restitution is inevitable*

Confession is usually not enough. If we did a wrong and confessed it, we could still be punished for it before the grace of God could be restored to us. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband. Although he repented [Psalm 51] and God forgave him, the restitution was still applied: “the sword shall *never* depart from thine house” and “because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die” [**2 Sam. 12:10-14**].

e) *Apostasy*

When we fall away from God’s truth, we also fall away from His grace. We risk this danger when we pervert Scripture [**2 Tim. 4:3-4**], resist the truth [**2 Tim. 3:7-8**], resort to deception [**2 Cor. 11:13-15**], or revert to immorality [**2 Pet. 2: 14, 19-22**]. Lucifer rebelled against God and even lined up some of the angels to wage war against God. For that, he lost his pride of place in heaven as “son of the morning” and was thrown out of heaven forever [**Rev. 12:7-9; Is. 14:12**].

4. Conclusion

Grace is free but not cheap. It has been bought with the precious blood of Jesus. Therefore, we should not take it for granted. Otherwise, we could lose it. So, we need to be conscious of this all the time and, therefore, hold dearly to this prized gift of God.