



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 8.1 – The Doctrine of Grace

### The Meaning of the Term “Grace”

Since the word “grace” has been given many different meanings in church history, it is important that we understand how the word “grace” is used in the New Testament. The apostle Paul has given us the basic understanding of grace in these words: **“If by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work”** (Romans 11:6). The Greek word that is translated “grace” is *charis* (χάρις). The same word is used by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: **“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In both of these passages the concept of grace is in contrast to works. Grace has to do with God’s love to us that is absolutely free. There is no work that we can do to deserve His love or favor. There is no way we can earn His love. There is no way that we can deserve or earn any blessing from God. If we add even the tiniest idea of deserved reward, then it is no longer grace. What we get from God is entirely a gift from Him to us; we cannot boast about any part we have played to gain such a favor. Thus, God’s grace is God’s favorable disposition towards us that originates entirely within God and cannot be deserved, earned, or merited in whole or in part by any of us through any action or inaction on our part. It is God’s grace that led Him to work out a plan of salvation for all of sinful mankind. It is by grace that He sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. It is because of Christ and His work that God freely forgives all humanity their sins. We have been saved **“by grace.”**

Notice how often the word “grace” is used in this sense in the New Testament. John writes: **“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”** (John 1:17). The law is a two-sided agreement, in which God promises us certain blessings *if* we fulfill His demands. But grace is entirely one-sided: in His love for us, God gives us what we need without first requiring us to fulfill certain requirements.

In the early church there was a dispute between the apostles and some teachers who claimed that obedience to certain Jewish laws was necessary for salvation. The apostle Peter responded by saying: **“We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they”** (Acts 15:11). There is only one way of salvation, and that is by grace, not works. God’s law was intended to show us how incapable we are of saving ourselves by our own obedience. The Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus is **“the gospel of the grace of God”** (Acts 20:24).

Why is it that God forgives the sins of mankind? Paul says: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). The first part of this sentence is God’s law that condemns us for our sin. But the second part is the Gospel: God declares us righteous and forgiven because in His grace (His undeserved love) God has sent Jesus as our Redeemer, who atoned for all human sin by His life, suffering, and death.

Paul emphasizes the contrast between grace and debt in these words: **“Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt”** (Romans 4:4). In other words, if you have a job and get paid for it, your pay is not a gift from your employer but a debt he owes you because of your work. You earned it. But that is not the way of salvation. You cannot work and earn your salvation by your work. Salvation is by grace, entirely by grace.

Just as grace is contrasted with works, so also faith is contrasted with works. Grace and faith go together. Since we are saved by grace, it is a free gift from God. The only way to receive a gift from God is by faith, that is, by believing in and trusting in what God is giving you. And, in fact, even the faith by which one trusts in God and in God's gift is a gift in itself. The Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ has in itself the power to create and sustain the faith by which the gift is accepted. Paul says: **"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace"** (Romans 4:16).

One of the most comforting sentences in the Bible is this statement of the apostle Paul: **"Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more"** (Romans 5:20). God's law shows us the abundance of our sin. But in His grace God has given us forgiveness in Jesus that more than covers all of our sin. God's grace is greater than the greatest of all sins. **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23).

If we could save ourselves by our own works, God would not have had to send His Son, and His Son would not have had to die. Paul says: **"I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain"** (Galatians 2:21). Jesus' death was altogether necessary for our salvation. **"In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace"** (Ephesians 1:7).

In spite of this frequent usage of the word "grace" in the New Testament, there have been teachers among Christians who have understood grace in a different way. In particular, Roman Catholic theologians have claimed that grace is a gift that God gives to mankind so that we can save ourselves by loving God and loving our neighbor according to God's law. According to this understanding, we are not saved by grace alone, but by God's grace combined with our keeping of God's law.

Notice the false understanding of grace in this decision of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent: "If anyone says that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost and is inherent in them; or even that the grace whereby we are justified is only the favor of God, let him be anathema" (*Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 11*). The Roman Catholic definition of "grace" is something that is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in us; this is generally called *infused grace*. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says: "By definition, grace is a gratuitous gift infused by God into the rational creature with reference to the end: eternal life." In other words, God gives us grace so that we can save ourselves by the works we do.

Sometimes the word "grace" does refer to a gift or gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Christian, that is, various good works that God works in Christians. But it is not by such gifts of grace that we are saved. In his letter to the Romans Paul mentions various gifts God has given to individual Christians for the benefit of His Church, saying: **"Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them"** (Romans 12:6). Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **"To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift"** (Ephesians 4:7). The apostle Peter spoke in the same way: **"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God"** (1 Peter 4:10).

Paul refers to the gift given to him for carrying out his ministry as **"the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God"** (Romans 15:15-16). In another place he says: **"According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it"** (1 Corinthians 3:10). By these words Paul was not saying that he earned his salvation by doing this work that God had given him. Paul said: **"By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me"** (1 Corinthians 15:10). To the Ephesians Paul wrote: **"I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"** (Ephesians 3:7-8).

On his third mission journey Paul was gathering a gift from his Gentile congregations to present to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from extreme poverty. He called this collection “grace” and the desire to give this offering “grace.” He wrote to the Corinthians: **“We urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. But as you abound in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us – see that you abound in this grace also”** (2 Corinthians 8:6-7).

### Questions

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1. Why does being saved by grace mean that we cannot save ourselves?
2. Prove from the Bible that grace is the opposite of works.
3. How many persons have been justified by grace? Prove your answer from the Bible.
4. Is the pay of a day laborer a gift or a debt? Explain your answer.
5. How much of our salvation can we attribute to ourselves?
6. What is the Roman Catholic definition of grace and why is it wrong?
7. How does the Bible sometimes use “grace” to refer to a gift from God?
8. What grace (or gift of grace) did God give to the apostle Paul?
9. What grace (or gift of grace) was Titus gathering from the Corinthians?