

Romans 3:22-24 God's amazing grace

Introduction

In the middle of the twentieth century there was apparently a conference held in the United Kingdom that sought to examine what it was that was unique about Christianity compared to other faiths. Experts in comparative religions raised all kinds of ideas only to find examples with varying degrees of similarities in other religions. Some of them claimed, for example that a god had appeared in human form; others also had accounts of people coming back to life after death. C.S. Lewis was asked for his opinion about what distinguished the Christian faith from all others. He replied: 'Oh, that's easy. It's grace'. Delegates thought about this answer and after reflecting on the 'Buddhist-eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Orthodox Jewish approach to covenants and the Muslim code of law, agreed that each approach was attempting to find a way to win God's approval. However, only Christianity dares to make God's love to us (in Christ) unconditional (Philip Yancy, *What's so amazing about grace?* p.45). Accepting the truth of this claim do people outside of the Christian Church who have lived what might be called a 'colourful life' think about grace when they reflect for a moment on this congregation or any other near to where they live? Or do they react like a desperate woman in Chicago some years ago who sought help at a refuge in that city staffed by Christians. The woman in question was described as a prostitute in wretched straits, homeless with no money to buy food for her two year-old daughter. For some time she had 'rented' out her daughter to men who had inappropriate interests in young children, but eventually even this individual with a serious drug habit recognised she and her daughter needed help. After an hour or so of hearing the sordid details of her tragic story the Christian staff member asked the woman if she had ever thought of going to a church and asking for assistance. 'I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face'. 'Church', she cried, 'Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.' (Philip Yancy, *What's so amazing about grace*, p.11). This story came from an earlier decade in another country, but the question still arises for us? Would a person whose life had taken some wrong turns or who had messed up in some way feel able to approach you or me and be confident we wouldn't turn them away? Would they be welcome to come into this church and be accepted by us? How we treat other people and view their shortcomings (and probably our own as well because all of us make mistakes) depends on how we understand the biblical teaching on grace. It is radical and shocking and counter-cultural. It is also deeply challenging to the prevailing in-house culture of a fair number of churches. At the heart of the matter is a personal challenge –am I a person who exhibits grace in my attitudes and relationships? Would the kind of people who felt welcome in the presence of Jesus feel welcomed by me? If you find the biblical teaching on grace straightforward and the living out of it in daily life easy, then I need to suggest that you have probably misunderstood what God is saying in the Bible about grace. If you have never struggled in a real-life situation over the practice of this biblical principle as a Christian, then it is probable that you have lived an incredibly sheltered life, because the real world is a messy, complicated place.

Christian Counsellor David Seamands made these challenging remarks as he reflected on a lifetime of counselling Christian men and women. 'Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among Evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people. We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.' (Philip Yancy, *What's so amazing about grace*, p.15). Let's refresh our minds of what Paul had to say about the good news of the Gospel of Jesus in Romans 3:20-24:²⁰ *Therefore no one*

will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and **all are justified freely by His grace** through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. We need to stop and reflect this morning on what the apostle is seeking to communicate to us about 'grace'.

1. **We all need God's grace** (Romans 3:22b-23)

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3:22b-23). Paul has taken a large chunk of this letter to highlight the fact that all of us without exception are sinners and that we can never be good enough to earn God's favour by ourselves. He had to spend so long going through this because so many people are quick to view a particular section of society as 'sinners' but exclude themselves from that category. What is remarkable here says the apostle, is that God has intervened in our predicament and provided what we could not obtain for ourselves- a right standing before Him. How could you and I as sinners be credited with *the righteousness of God*? Paul in Romans 3:21-31 informs us (i) that God is the giver of this righteousness to us. (ii) It has been given to us by *grace*; (iii) it has been obtained for us through the death of Jesus in our place on the cross, taking the punishment for our sins. (iv) This incredible gift becomes ours the moment by faith we accept this gift for ourselves. In this message I am focussing on the second part of this series of statements the fact that God's incredible gift to us is not something we purchased or were entitled to but is credited to us on the basis of His *grace*. So what is grace? What does this word mean? It is God's choice of looking upon us with a degree of favour and love that is totally unmerited. We have had in the Western world a few examples of wealthy people who have gone out into the streets of a major city and given bundles of bank notes to random strangers. The looks of surprise and the concern about what the catch might be has turned to pleasure when some of the individuals realised they had become the recipients of a random act of kindness. Now there is clearly an element of grace here as the recipients had done nothing to deserve such a gift. Yet it is theoretically possible that those chosen might have been as wealthy as the giver and have no need of that blessing – however unlikely that might be in practice. Yet with respect to God's grace to us all the recipients of His unmerited favour are in need of it without exception. Have you received this gift of grace from God?

2. **No-one deserves grace** (Romans 3:22b-23)

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3:22b-23) Paul has to place such a strong emphasis here on this point because our sinful human nature wants to wriggle out of acknowledging our need of God's grace. The concept is wonderful and just about everyone thinks it is good that needy people could be assisted and rescued from their troubles. However, the assumption is that the person who needs assistance is someone else not me. It is deeply humbling to have to come to this point in our lives at some time to accept that the apostle is including me in this predicament. I need God's grace for myself. Charles Spurgeon, the great Nineteenth Century London Baptist Minister, in his book *All of Grace* told the story of a church-leader who went to visit an older lady in the church who was very poor –in financial terms. The purpose of the private visit was to make a gift from the church fellowship fund to provide some assistance for her. On the day in question he went to the tiny attic flat where she lived up four flights of stairs and knocked on her door. There was no answer. He continued knocking, mindful of the distance

he had travelled –and four flights of stairs! Yet despite persistent knocking there was no response and so reluctantly he went away. On the following Sunday he spotted the woman in church and mentioned that he had tried to visit her. She enquired about the time of his visit and confirmed that she had been at home. However, she was afraid that it was the rent-man coming for her monthly payment –but having no money to pay the bill was pretending not to be at home. The gift from the church in question more than covered the sum required, but her reception of it was delayed by the best part of a week out of an understandable but misplaced fear. How sad that presumably for a few more days the woman lived in fear of a knock at her door when the resources had been provided for her need. This is exactly the same with God’s grace. So many people miss out on what God has provided for them in His love and mercy, because they have a wrong view of our heavenly Father. As a minister I have had the experience of hearing a number of people say to me, ‘I’m not good enough to come to church’. These individuals were not behind bars or guilty of serious criminal offences, rather to the best of my knowledge decent and valued neighbours and citizens who were well aware of their own short-comings but thought you had to be close to perfect to come to church. We can smile at such a misunderstanding but it is extremely sad that there are those who miss out on the blessings of God’s salvation because they have thought the Gospel and salvation was based on being good enough to please God first, before they could enter His family. When the reality is that it is the other way round God sent Jesus to die in our place because none of us was good enough and as a result of His free gift to the undeserving in salvation we are welcomed into His family. This is why we are all on the same level in the local church because all of us equally entered by God’s grace to us. However, this is not just a problem for people who have never trusted Jesus. As Christians we live by His grace day by day our service for Him is a response of love to Him because we are secure in His family. We don’t attend church or serve in ministries or be good neighbours or conscientious workers in our workplace out of fear that He will stop loving us, rather because He loves us unconditionally in Jesus we are set free to be the best we can be for Him and for the benefit of other people around us. In practice the lifestyle of a Christian may be very similar whether we live under law in fear of displeasing God or by grace in response to His eternal love for us –but our quality of life must surely be better if we grasp the basis on which He has called us into His family. If as human parents we do not demand our children prove they deserve to belong to our family each day –surely we can grasp that our loving heavenly Father is even more gracious to us in His embrace and encouragement for us?

3. **The reception of grace** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

We need to underline that from beginning to end in salvation the initiative belongs to God. Paul’s words to the Church in the Turkish city of Ephesus puts this subject in its wider context:⁸*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*⁹*not by works, so that no one can boast.* ¹⁰*For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:8-10). It is our perfectly holy heavenly Father who planned for your salvation before you were conceived in your mother’s womb; it was He who asked the Lord Jesus to offer Himself as the substitute for sinful humanity to die in our place on the cross because none of us could ever be good enough to earn our way into God’s kingdom or to merit eternal life. It was the free act of Jesus in willingly coming to show us how to live and then equally graciously accepting His Father’s plan in dying as our Saviour to pay in full the penalty your sins and mine deserved that we might be saved. In Hebrews chapter ten there are some encouraging words about the accomplishments of the Lord for us. That chapter began with an explanation of the significance of the Old Testament sacrifices: *The law is only a shadow of the good things*

that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4). Jesus is then cited as declaring: *Here I am, I have come to do Your will* (Hebrews 10:9a), prior to these words explaining the significance of His death on the cross. ¹⁰ *And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* ¹¹ *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.* ¹² *But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God,* ¹³ *and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool.* ¹⁴ **For by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy** (Hebrews 10:10-14). This did not happen because you and I are outstandingly meritorious - compared to other people who have yet to come to faith. It is the extraordinary gift of our amazing God, an expression of His absolutely free and utterly underserved favour. Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense. It is the greatest demonstration of love to us.

An American theologian in the first half of the previous century wrote these words about grace: God cannot propose to do less in grace for one who is sinful than he would have done had that one been less sinful. Grace is never exercised by Him making up what may be lacking in the life and character of a sinner. In such a case, much sinfulness would call for much grace, and little sinfulness would call for little grace. [Instead] the sin question has been set aside forever, and equal exercise of grace is extended to all who believe. It never falls short of being the measureless saving grace of God. Thus, grace could not be increased, for it is the expression of His infinite love; it could not be diminished, for every limitation that human sin might impose on the action of a righteous God has, through the propitiation of the cross, been dismissed forever (Lewis S. Chafer, *Grace*, p.5.). Hallelujah! What a glorious subject is grace. When we truly grasp this biblical truth we are then equally responsive in giving our lives in service to God. Our desire to attend worship services or engage in acts of ministry or service is a privilege and a joy not something grudgingly offered—in the light of all God has done for us in Christ. Therefore we can celebrate what blessings are ours in Him through the way that we live for Him.

4. **The amazing grace of God** (Romans 3:24a) *and all are justified freely by His grace*

What does it feel like to be the recipient of grace? The *Boston Globe* (USA) newspaper in June 1990 carried a story of a good example of this action. The story began with a wealthy couple who had got engaged and were planning their wedding reception. The Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston was agreed as the venue. The two of them went to the hotel and prepared the menu, the china and silver and the flower arrangements that would be featured on the day. The total bill for the day would come to \$13,000. The hotel policy was that 50% of the cost was upfront and the balance at the time of the function. The first \$6,500 was paid and they went away with only the wedding invitations left to attend to. However, on the week on which the wedding invitations were due to go out the potential groom decided to call off the wedding. He decided it was too soon in the relationship to make such a commitment. His angry fiancée went off to the hotel to cancel the reception. The events manager could not have been more sympathetic, because she too had experienced the same disappointment. However, despite the sympathy more bad news was to follow as the hotel policy was that contracts were binding and that no refunds would be paid. Therefore, whatever happened \$6,500 had been forfeited—unless she agreed to go ahead with the banquet! A short amount of time was spent in reflection as the young woman thought about the decision to be made. It dawned on her that at the very time she was in the hotel ten years had passed since she had been homeless and living in a shelter for people with no fixed abode. Now she had a good job, a home and a sizable balance in her bank account. What if the hotel agreed to host a party for homeless people in Boston? The menu was changed slightly to include 'boneless

chicken' in 'honour of the groom'. However, invitations were sent out to the shelters for the homeless in the city to come for one evening to one of the most upmarket hotels for dinner. What a sight it was of people used to searching through dustbins or begging on the streets for food being waited on by immaculately attired waiters and waitresses. Young and old alike dining on the finest food and drink, and those that wished dancing into the night to big-band melodies (Philip Yancy, *What's so amazing about grace* pp. 48-49). Now this is grace for the guests that evening. The hostess who had paid \$13,000 for their feast did not know the individuals who attended that night. They had done nothing to merit this invitation –it was an act of extravagant grace. This is a glimpse of the graciousness of God in Christ in His provision of salvation for us. Paul in Romans 3:24a declares: *and all are justified freely by His grace*. Yet there is one element of this story that is not quite the same. The lady in question had no prior knowledge of the people she was helping. It may be that some of the ones that she helped had been lovely good-living people who had faced extraordinarily bad fortune and been in no way a contributor to their own misfortunes. The causes of misfortune at times can be incredibly complex and we may sometimes be led to think "...but for the grace of God go I".

Most of us will be very familiar with the biblical story Jesus told to illustrate the heart of His heavenly Father to a congregation of Jewish people who were lacking the grace exhibited and modelled by our Lord. It is in Luke 15:11-32: ¹¹ *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. ²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"* The reason Jesus told this story was to address a serious issue that had arisen in the minds of some of the most dedicated synagogue leaders and workers. Luke 15:1-2 states: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* In other words they were saying Jesus is too generous in welcoming people in to His meetings who have failed in the past. They have made some wrong choices and faced the consequences of those choices. That should be that –they 'made their beds and so they ought to lie on them' to use an expression from our own day. In the story Jesus told these people are represented by the older brother, and God is represented by the Father. He told the story to exhibit God's view of grace to the

undeserving and how at times good believing people struggle to forgive those who have made mistakes in the past –that can be most if not all of us at one time or another. Paul in Romans 3:24a has declared that: *all are justified freely by His grace*. None of us are treated by God as we deserve.

I finish with a modern day story from Traverse City, Michigan, despite the name it has a population similar to that of Broughty Ferry. It is a very brief account of a girl brought up in an Evangelical Christian family who are committed members of a good local church in that city. She finds her parents too old fashioned. Now aged 15 she has had rows with her dad about her nose ring, the type of music she listens to and the length of her skirts. She decided to runaway and start a new life. Detroit the nearest city with its violent inner-city neighbourhoods, drugs and gangs, was an unlikely place for her parents to find her. Day two in the big city wandering the streets wondering what to do next –a huge expensive car stops beside her and a man offers to buy her lunch, show her the city and help her settle in. He even provided her with a nice flat free of charge for a few weeks or a few months. Her lovely friend then asked her to do a few favours for friends of his who needed somewhere to go for the night and who she ought to suitably ‘entertain’. He explained because she was underage they would pay more for the experience and that the money would be split between them. Without her boring parents to decide for her, she could buy all sorts of clothes and became really into body-piercing. Along with other girls engaged in similar work she experimented with various drugs and drinks which seemed a daring thing to do. For the first year or so life was good she had never had so much money. However, her unhealthy lifestyle turned her complexion sallow. Increasingly her male visitors told her good friend that she must have caught something and they asked for other girls to visit. Cutting the story short Jenny was turned out onto the streets alone with no place to stay. One morning cold and hungry after sleeping rough on the pavement she sobbed thinking of life back home in May with the cherry blossoms out on her street. ‘My dog back home has a better life than this!’ she thought. I want to go home but would my parents take me back? Three attempts to call home yielded the answering machine –the third time she left a message: ‘Dad, mom its me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way, and it’ll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, well I guess I’ll just stay on the bus till it hits Canada.’ Her mind was a blur of thoughts and emotions –what if they’re away with work or on holiday? Or don’t look at messages in time or... After the seven hour trip the driver announces a 15 minute stop at Traverse City. She glances in the mirror as she gets off the bus –yes she looked a mess with her nicotine-stained fingers and wonders what her parents would think. In the plain bus station with its concrete walls and plastic chairs she walked into the main hall wondering if anyone had come. There stood a group of forty brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, a grandmother –even a great-grandmother visible. They are all wearing goofy party-hats and blowing silly whistles and behind them stuck on the wall is a large computer generated banner that read: ‘Welcome home!’ Out of the crowd rushed her dad towards her. She began her well-rehearsed speech but only got out the ‘I’m sorry dad’... before he interrupted her and said: ‘No time for apologies you’ll be late for the party. A banquet is waiting for you at home... (Philip Yancy, *What’s so amazing about grace*, pp.49-50). That is grace! Have you received God’s gift of grace? If not please do so today. Do you / Do I exhibit God’s grace in the way we relate to others? I trust so, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.