

WEEK 5

WHAT IS GRACE?

BEFORE THE TALK

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to explain God's grace and its implications.

Please turn with me to Mark chapter 1, verse 1. "The beginning of the gospel [the good news] about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We've started to explore exactly why Mark describes Jesus as "good news." We've seen who Jesus is: that he has the power and authority of God himself. We've seen what he came to do: to rescue sinners like you and me by dying for us on the cross.

This week let me begin by asking you to jot down your answer to the following question. It's similar to the question the man asks Jesus in the passage we've just looked at in our **GROUP DISCUSSION**.

Display the following question and read it aloud.

- If you were to die tonight and God asked, "Why should I let you into heaven?" what would you say?

Take 2 minutes to jot down your answer.

Allow two minutes for participants to write down their answers.

Sorry to be morbid, but if you *were* to die tonight and you found yourself standing before God and he asked, "Why should I let you into heaven?" what would you say? According to the Bible, answers to this question always fall neatly into one of two categories: "the right answer," or "the wrong answer."

Let's look at the wrong answers first. The wrong answer is one that places confidence in what *I am*, or what *I have done*. So if you've written, "God, you should let me in to heaven *because I ...*," I'm afraid you're on the wrong track.

You will need to have each of the following wrong answers written out in big letters on separate pieces of paper. Hold each of them up as you read them.

Perhaps you've written something like, "Let me in God because I've been pretty good on the whole ...

- I'm a good person
- I don't steal
- I don't lie

(well, not unless I absolutely have to)

- I give to charity
- I've certainly never killed anyone.

(Actually, there are *lots* of people worse than I am)

- I pay my taxes
- I don't drive through red lights

... Other people like having me around, God, so I imagine you will too."

They sound like reasonable answers. But I can assure you that none of these things are of any use at all when it comes to entering heaven.

Another wrong answer is the religious one. You may be relying on your religious habits to get you into heaven. So perhaps you've written something like this: "God, you should let me in because...

- I go to church
 - I never take your name in vain
- (and when others do, I strongly disapprove)

- I do good things in the community
- I've been baptized
- I go to communion
- I sing in the choir
- I pray *and* read the Bible

... And there aren't many people you can say that about in this day and age."

You're correct that you're in a minority. But the religious answers are still wrong. If you have written something like that, then let me say to you categorically that doing these religious things will *not* enable you to enter heaven. Again and again, Jesus taught that religious observance has no power to save people. If you are putting your confidence here, then please don't because you've been misled.

In fact, *any* answer which places confidence in what *I am*, or *what I have done* is absolutely useless. Answers that begin "God, you should let me into heaven because *I ...*" will do you no good at all.

Gather all the pieces of paper with the wrong answers together and rip them up.

Now, there's nothing wrong with those things in themselves. It's good when people try to live honest, selfless lives. But the good things *we do* won't get us into heaven. Why? Because they can't solve the problem of our sin.

Remember what Jesus said in Mark chapter 7, verses 20–23. Let’s read them again.

Read aloud Mark 7:20–23.

The good things we do count for nothing before God, because our key problem lies deep down in our hearts. When Jesus talks about the heart he’s not simply talking about the pump that sends blood around the body. He’s referring to the very core of your being – the source of all your urges and instincts, desires and dreams.

Jesus says we are to “Love the Lord our God with *all our heart* and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength.” But that’s not the way we live, that’s not our heartbeat. So our good deeds, whatever they may be, are fine in themselves – but they’re no good at solving the problem that keeps us from God: our sin.

According to Jesus, our biggest problem is what we *are*, deep down in our hearts. We are sinful. And nothing *we do* can change that. Our good deeds are like Band-Aids or sticking plasters: they might cover up what we’re really like, but they are powerless to actually *cure* us.

Again, I want to stress that there is nothing wrong with good deeds. They only become dangerous when, like the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Mark, I delude myself into thinking that God will accept me because of them. You see, these religious authorities had already decided the criteria by which God would accept them. They kept their own rules and traditions. Getting God to accept them meant attending to *external* details: for example, they were to wash in special ways and avoid eating certain things. It was all about outward ritual, and nothing to do with our inner problem: the selfishness of the human heart. That’s why Jesus says this about them: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” It is so much easier to concentrate on the outside appearance, to stick on a few Band-Aids, rather than face up to what is within, and Jesus insists that no amount of religious tradition or morality or Bible-reading or “turning over of new leaves” can bring our hearts any closer to God.

Because out of our hearts come “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.” Let’s be honest about our own hearts here, and try to apply the words on this list to ourselves. Let me ask you this:

- What would it be like never ever to have lied?
- What would it be like never to have nurtured bitterness and hatred?
- What would it be like never to have gossiped?
- What would it be like never to have been selfish or greedy?
- What would it be like never to have entered into a conversation in which our whole purpose was to promote ourselves before others, even if we do it very subtly?
- What would it be like never to have nurtured dirty thoughts?
- What would it be like never to feel vindictive or a little jealous when you hear of another person’s success? As the author Gore Vidal admitted: “Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.”

And what would it be like – on the positive side – to have always loved God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? What would it be like to have always loved other people as ourselves?

Even Paul, one of the most effective Christian workers in history, lamented the state of his heart when he wrote in Romans chapter 7, verse 19: “For what I do is not the good I want to do: no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” Jesus’ words about the evil of the human heart are as true for Paul as they are for us. Can we, with the Pharisees, hope that the good things we do will cover over the evil in our hearts? No, according to Jesus, that is the wrong answer. *There is in fact nothing I can do to save myself.*

But thankfully, that’s not the end of the story. There is a right answer to God’s question, “Why should I let you into heaven?” According to the Bible, the right answer has to do with God’s *grace*. The right answer is something like this: “God, you should let me into heaven, not because of anything I’ve done, but because of what Christ has done.” In other words, it’s not about the good things *we’ve* done for God, but rather it’s about the good thing *Christ* has done for us. He died on the cross so that we could be forgiven our sin. He was abandoned so that we could be accepted.

Please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9:

Read aloud Ephesians 2:8–9.

So we are saved by *faith*, by placing our trust in what Jesus did for us on the cross. We’re not saved by anything we do, by being nice people, by paying our bills on time, or by going to church or reading the Bible. No, we are saved from eternal punishment by Jesus’ death on the cross, and it’s a gift. You can’t earn it “by works.” You can’t boast about it. “It is the gift of God.”

The only forgiveness available to us is the forgiveness earned by what *Christ* did. Because only Christ’s death deals with the problem of the human heart.

Les Misérables tells the story of a criminal, Jean Valjean. A tough, bitter man, he has spent nineteen years in prison. When he is finally released, he finds it impossible to find work or shelter because no-one wants anything to do with him. But finally he is taken in by a kindly bishop, who gives him food and a place to stay. However, in the middle of the night, Valjean creeps downstairs and steals the bishop’s silver. He is quickly caught by three constables and brought back to the bishop’s house. Things look desperate for Valjean. The bishop has the opportunity to incriminate him for his act of betrayal and have him imprisoned for the rest of his life. But instead, the bishop says this: “So here you are! I’m delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They’re silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?” So the constables let Valjean go.

After they've gone, the bishop insists that he keep the silver *and the candlesticks*, and tells him: "Do not forget, do not ever forget that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man." So a stunned Valjean is released and given the silver candlesticks as well. Valjean stutters, "Why? Why are you doing this?" The bishop replies, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver I have bought your soul and now I am giving you back to God."

Now the bishop could have treated Valjean in one of three ways.

Firstly, he could have treated Valjean with *justice*. Given him exactly what his deeds deserved. He could have said, "Give me back my silver," got the constables to arrest him, and have him packed off back to prison. That would be justice, simply giving him what he deserves – no more, no less.

Alternatively, he could have treated Valjean with *leniency*. He could have said, "I want my silver back, but I won't press charges." That would be leniency – giving him a little bit less than he deserves.

The last option open to the bishop is the option he actually takes: he treats Valjean with *grace*. He says, "I know what you've done, how you've abused my generosity, but look, keep the silver and take these candlesticks as well. You can go free. The only thing I ask is that you use the money to change your life for the better." He gives the criminal standing before him a very expensive gift – one that is totally undeserved. That is grace, treating him with undeserved love and generosity.

We will never understand Christianity until we see ourselves in exactly the same position as Valjean. All of us stand before God as Valjean stood before the bishop: utterly guilty, deserving judgement for the way we've abused his love for us, and with no way of putting the situation right. But rather than treating us as we deserve, God in his amazing grace and generosity offers us forgiveness – forgiveness that is made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. And remember that this forgiveness is "the gift of God." There's nothing I can do to earn it.

The right answer, again, is: "I trust in what Jesus did for me on the cross: *that's* why I should be allowed into heaven." Of course, we can only give that answer when we realize that we are powerless to save ourselves. We turn to God in utter dependence and weakness, realizing that nothing *we do* will be enough to cure the problem of the human heart.

Not surprisingly, some people find this very hard. It is difficult not only to admit how weak and dependent they are, but also to accept that anything so costly could be given to them for free. It *is* hard to accept this gift from God when all our lives we've been taught that we have to earn our supper, earn our praise, earn our salary. But the truth is that the Christian life is not about duty. It's about receiving a gift I don't deserve, and then living a life of thanks for that gift. In fact "*charis*," the Greek word for grace, also means "rejoice."

And we know that as soon as we accept that gift, we will have eternal life in heaven. We are accepted by God. But what happens in the meantime?

Victor Hugo wrote, “Life’s greatest happiness is to be convinced we are loved.” And in *Les Misérables* we see that the undeserved forgiveness and generosity that Valjean receives from the bishop change his life. It unlocks his heart and unleashes his potential. He is ransomed from fear and hatred and becomes a human being of remarkable generosity and mercy, touching numerous lives. It all stems from the new identity he found when the bishop treated him with grace.

You see, God’s grace allows me to find my identity, my ultimate worth as a human being, because God knows exactly what I’m like, and yet he loves me anyway. And that is such a relief! Grace means God knows all about my sin and yet he loves me unconditionally. The cross makes that very clear, because even though he knows what I’m like, Christ still died on my behalf. The very person who will ultimately judge the world loves me completely and unalterably. What greater proof of love could there be than to die for someone? Although we are more sinful than we ever realized, we are more loved than we ever dreamed.

This unconditional love means three things:

Display the following headings and read them aloud.

There are no masks to wear.
There is nothing to prove.
There are no grudges to bear.

THERE ARE NO MASKS TO WEAR

First, there are no masks to wear. As Philip Yancey says in his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, there is “nothing I can do to make God love me more, and there is nothing I can do to make him love me less.” God knows exactly what I’m like, and yet he still loves me. *That means I don’t have to pretend with God.* There’s no hiding behind masks. Have you ever been worried that your friends would think badly of you for something? Perhaps you’ve been concerned about being misunderstood or about your reputation being harmed, so you’ve kept things quiet. But God knows the absolute truth about us – and it’s much worse than our friends think. God knows the truth, and yet he still loves me. So I don’t have to wear a mask because I’m loved unconditionally. It’s an extraordinary relief to no longer have to hide the truth about ourselves.

THERE IS NOTHING TO PROVE

Second, there is nothing to prove. The diver Greg Louganis was once asked how he performed so well under pressure. He replied: “Even if I blow this dive, my mother will still love me.” You see, he reminds himself of the one relationship that will remain the same, whatever his performance. Louganis has nothing to prove to his mother. She loves him anyway.

And in the same way, if you’ve put your trust in Christ, you’ve got nothing to prove to God. Now, that is a great truth because we live in a culture of conditional love. At school, we’re told over and over again, “If you get the right grades, we’ll affirm you and make you feel loved. But if you don’t, we’ll withdraw that love.” As we get older, love always seems to come with a price tag: “I’ll love you if you are young enough, successful enough, beautiful enough, talented enough, thin enough ...” and so it goes on. People’s whole lives can be conditioned by the sense that, unless they constantly prove themselves, they won’t be loved. But the Christian life isn’t like that. The Christian life is motivated not by *conditional* love, but by *unconditional* love. It’s not about duty or proving yourself. It’s about receiving a gift you don’t deserve and can’t earn, and then living a life of thanks for that gift.

THERE ARE NO GRUDGES TO BEAR

Third, there are no grudges to bear. You see, God’s grace effects every other relationship we have. Jesus taught his followers to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” Now, as you know, forgiving people who wrong you is an extremely difficult thing to do! But it’s so much easier to forgive others when we remember how much God has forgiven *us* in the first place.

So this is grace: God sending Christ to die on the cross so that I can be forgiven, even though I’ve done nothing to earn it, even though I deserve punishment. In the light of that, there is no need to pretend we’re something we’re not or boast about what we’ve achieved, and there is every reason to freely forgive those who wrong us.

I hope you can see that although you are more sinful than you ever realized, you are more loved than you ever dreamed.

AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- If you were in the bishop's place, would you have given Valjean the candlesticks as well?
- Has grace made a difference to your view of God?
- What do people generally do to be accepted by God, if they bother at all?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

Before next time, use the HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide* to help you as you continue to read through Mark.

Remind participants about the weekend or day away, and hand out invitations and schedules.