

Grace

Kevin Crittenden

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 (Ephesians 2:8-9).

I have to admit that even though I've been an apolitical, Christ-centered Christian for well over a month now, I still struggle with the seemingly simple concept of grace. Grace, of course, is a fundamental cornerstone of the Christian faith – absolutely necessary to our salvation. But what IS it, exactly?

Here is one definition of grace:

Grace is God's making up the difference between the requirements of His righteous law, and what we lack in meeting those requirements. No one is good enough to earn salvation by himself, so God's grace simply makes up for what we lack. Some receive more grace than others; but all receive whatever they need to obtain salvation. No one ever needs be lost, because whatever grace they need is theirs for the taking.

I find myself living as if this were the true definition of grace. Which it isn't. I like to think of myself as a basically good person who sometimes acts in ways that hopefully are pleasing to God. So far, so good. But I also find myself pridefully thinking that I have a better chance of a Heavenly reward than others who — although they have accepted God's saving grace through baptism — have had difficulty changing their worldly lifestyle.

Essentially, I find myself tallying up good works as if those merited extra grace. But then I run into this: "*And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace*" (Romans 11:6). Grace and work are mutually exclusive. I know this intellectually but haven't integrated it fully yet.

Consider the following example.

The record for the longest jump in the sport of long-jump is held by Mike Powell at 8.95 meters (29 feet 4 1/4 inches). Now, I can jump as well – maybe as far as 2 or 3 feet with a strong tailwind. If Mike and I were to compete in jumping, he would be far more likely to win the prize.

Now suppose that to attain the prize, we had to jump clear across the Grand Canyon. Neither of us could succeed, so all of my competitor's athletic prowess, skill, and experience came to nothing. He is no better than I in that case. If grace were needed to pull us to the other side, then he and I would need the same amount.

All my good works, etc. etc. are not credited towards grace. In fact, look at what Isaiah says: "*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*" (Isaiah 64:6). A **better** understanding of grace is this:

Grace is God's free and unmerited favor shown to guilty sinners who deserve only judgment. It is the love of God shown to the unlovely. It is God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him.

And we **cannot think** that we need **less** grace than others – that is a prideful and judgmental thought and has no place in our Christian walk. We have all wandered this way and that way: "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way*" (Isaiah 53:6). This "turning our own way" pretty much sums up the definition of sin. And it affects "we all."

But we see God's favor and love in Isaiah as well: "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost*" (Isaiah 55:1). We have no money (our righteous acts do not count). And yet we are able, out of the grace of God, to have the good things in life, without money and without cost.

Before coming to Christ, we were spiritually destitute, blind, unclean, and dead. Our souls were in peril of everlasting punishment. This is the general backdrop showcasing our need for God's grace. Actually, the word "need" doesn't do justice to the concept. It's like saying of a drowning man, "I guess he needs a rope." Grace is something that saves us in a "life or death" situation.

But look what happens when we come to Christ. Through grace, God extends His favor to us. Grace is what saves us. It is the essence of the gospel. Grace gives us victory over sin and allows us to conquer death.

My challenge and continued pattern of growth is to learn to put away my worldly experiences and expectations of earned grace and grow into the awe of God's unmerited and undeserved grace.