



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Amazing Grace!

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EPHESIANS 2:1-10

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IS CHRISTIANITY AN “ENTITLEMENT PROGRAM”?

Around the capitol, whether in Washington or Charleston, when the discussion turns to budgets and deficits you often here the term “entitlements” used a great deal. In politics the word refers to government programs which provide benefits to members of a specified group. In a broader sense “entitlement” speaks of the feeling or belief that you deserve to be given something. We are not going to discuss the political ramifications of entitlements. Rather we are going to see how many consider religion and the Christian faith to be an “entitlement program” rather than a “grace program”.

Certainly all of us are familiar with what is probably Christianity’s most popular and well known hymn – Amazing Grace. Many of you are familiar with the story of its author, John Newton as well. Before he came to Christ, Newton was a slave trader and an utterly reprobate scoundrel. Yet God worked in his heart so that he repented, trusted Christ, and became a faithful pastor. That is why he could write so powerfully of God’s “amazing grace”:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Newton never got over God’s amazing grace demonstrated in his life. That is why near the end of his life he would exclaim,

“My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things; that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”

This grace of which John Newton spoke is one of the central and most important words in the Christian faith, yet defining it succinctly can be difficult. Someone proposed defining grace by its acronym: **G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense. This might be a good description, but not really a definition. Most simply, “grace” can be defined as *God’s unmerited favor*.

The important part of this definition is “*unmerited*”. Grace means that we receive something that we do not deserve. It is not something we earn. It is not an “entitlement”. The problem is we often see religion and Christianity as an entitlement program. Because we try to be good people and do good for others, we feel or believe that we deserve or earn God’s favor. Yet the Bible makes it clear that we can never earn and will never deserve God’s favor. We are never entitled to His favor based on anything we do. As a matter of fact, “God’s unmerited favor” does not go far enough. God’s grace is not merely His unmerited favor. It is His favor given to those who are sinners who deserve nothing but His wrath and punishment. We can define grace as *the free and loving working of a holy God in the lives of undeserving sinners*.

Perhaps the best biblical description of grace is found in Ephesians 2:1-10. Let us see how this passage describes for us God’s Amazing Grace:

¹And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ²in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

BIBLE STUDIES

INTERIM BIBLE STUDY: **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22**, TREASURER’S CONFERENCE ROOM
(EB 54 LOCATED IN THE BASEMENT OF THE EAST WING)

West Virginia

Amazing Grace!

WE ARE UNDESERVING OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS AND FAVOR

We do not deserve and cannot earn God's favor in our lives. We actually deserve quite the opposite. Look at our passage's description of our lives apart from Jesus Christ. We are dead in our trespasses and sins (vs. 1). We walk sinfully in step with the world and the devil (vs. 2). We live in the lusts of our flesh (vs. 3). We are "children of wrath" (vs. 3). This means we are condemned and under God's just sentence of judgment upon us because of our sin.

Now we might look at John Newton's life and see how that was certainly true of him. But most of us were not rotten scoundrels like him. Most of us are basically good people. If that is our view, then God's grace might not seem so amazing. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged people who had this view of themselves. He challenged them that even though they never killed anyone, if they were angry with another they were guilty of murder in God's eyes (Matt. 5:21). They might not have committed an act of immorality but if they looked on another with lust they were guilty of adultery in God's sight (Matt. 5:27-28). He summed up His challenge with "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). If we compare ourselves with God's absolute standard of holiness, then we quickly realize how sinful we are.

GOD WILL FREELY FORGIVE US AND GRANT US FAVOR THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

Though we are undeserving, because of His great mercy and love, God will forgive us and save us through what Christ did for us on the cross (vs. 4-6). Paul writes of the "surpassing riches of God's grace" which were shown us in Christ Jesus. (vs. 7). Consider all the blessings which are given by grace. We are made alive with Christ (vs. 5). We are raised with Christ (vs. 6). We are seated with Christ in heavenly places (vs. 6).¹ We will continue to receive the blessings of His grace in ages to come (vs. 7).

WE ONLY GAIN GOD'S FAVOR AND BLESSING BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (vs. 8-9)

God makes it clear Christianity is indeed not an entitlement program. We are saved only by God's grace, not our own works or effort. We are right with God only through faith in Christ and His work for us on the cross. It is God's free gift to undeserving sinners because of what Christ did for us. But this grace is only experienced through faith in what Christ has done for us. He lived a perfect life and suffered and died on the cross so that that our sin can be forgiven and His goodness given to us. We must turn from our sin and believing we can earn this by our own efforts and place our faith alone in what He has done for us.

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE IS NOT JUST GIVEN AT OUR SALVATION BUT THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES

God will demonstrate His grace to us in the ages to come (vs. 7). In this life God is working in us and created us to do good works (vs. 10).² All the good things we seek to do as believers – our holy living, our care and service for others – are all a result of God's grace in our lives. Even as believers we are not earning God's favor or blessing by the things we do for Him.

Conclusion: Like John Newton, when we realize or remember how great sinners we are, then we truly realize how amazing God's grace is. We can say along with the songwriter, "Your grace still amazes me!"

- **HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED GOD'S AMAZING GRACE IN YOUR LIFE THROUGH FAITH IN WHAT CHRIST DID FOR YOU ON THE CROSS?**
- **IF YOU HAVE TRUSTED CHRIST, DO YOU STILL RECOGNIZE HOW AMAZING GOD'S GRACE IS IN YOUR LIFE?**

¹ These describe the spiritual blessings and position we have with Christ when we trust Him. We do not have time to even begin to consider what these mean for us but they certainly demonstrate how amazing is God's grace!

² We must note that these good works are a result of God's grace in lives, not things that are done to earn forgiveness and God's favor.