

LESSON 5

Grace Changes Everything

On the difference between grace that covers your past and grace that's at work in your present.

Grace is not permission to drift — it is power to change.

WATCH BEFORE YOU BEGIN



Scan to watch the Lesson 5 teaching video – a 12-minute companion to this lesson.

CORE SCRIPTURES

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!

—Ephesians 2:1, 4-5

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age.

—Titus 2:11-12

The Thing Underneath

We ended last week with a sentence I want you to hear again: *grace is the thing that changes everything underneath all of this*. I left it there on purpose. This week, we open it.

If you've been around church language for any length of time, you've heard the word *grace* so many times it may have quietly stopped meaning anything in particular. It's the word in the song. The word the preacher leans on when the verse is hard. The word the welcome card uses. Familiar enough to nod at, vague enough to keep walking.

So, before we go anywhere, let's slow down on it.

When Christians say *grace*, we don't mean that God is in a generally good mood about you. We don't mean he's overlooking what you did. We don't mean he's lowered the bar. We mean something specific. *Grace* is the word the New Testament uses for what God is actively, generously doing in you right now. It's a gift, yes. But it's a gift that does something. *It changes the person who receives it.*

That's the part most of us tend to miss.

A lot of new Christians arrive with a thinner picture. Grace, in that picture, is mostly God deciding not to be mad. The dropped charge. The cleared record. The bill marked *paid*. All of that is true. But, if that's all grace is, then once you're forgiven, the rest of the Christian life is mostly your job. Get cleaned up. Try harder. Keep up. Don't blow it.

That picture has grace doing one job: covering. Then, quietly the rest is handed back to you.

The New Testament doesn't talk about grace that way. It talks about grace as the thing that not only covered you but is now actively remaking you. The same gift that saved you in the first place is the gift that's walking with you into the person God has in mind. Covering *and* propulsion. Ground *and* engine. The reason you're here and the reason you keep moving.

That's a different kind of word than the one on the welcome card. And it's worth a closer look.

DISCUSSION: *When you've heard the word "grace" before this lesson, what picture did it usually bring up — something God did once, or something God is doing right now?*

Grace is the Ground

Paul opens Ephesians 2 with a sentence most people would rather skip.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked... (Ephesians. 2:1–2)

Dead. Not struggling. Not behind. Not low on motivation. *Dead*. That's the word he uses, and he isn't being dramatic. He's diagnosing the situation honestly. Before Christ, you were not a slightly worse version of yourself trying to do a little better. You were standing on nothing.

It's worth considering that, because everything that comes next depends on it.

Then comes the turn — two words wide.

But God...

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! (Ephesians. 2:4–5)

Notice who does the verbs in that sentence. *God* is rich in mercy. *God* loved us. *God* made us alive. You are the object of every active verb in the passage. You didn't reach up. You didn't pull yourself out. You were dead, and dead people don't lift themselves. He came down. He picked you up. He brought you over.

That is what grace is the ground of. Not your effort. Not your turnaround. Not your decision to finally take faith seriously. The fact that you can read these words and call God your Father at all is because grace got there first and did the impossible work.

Paul keeps going so we can't miss the point.

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift — not from works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

Not from yourselves. Not from works. *No one can boast.* He is closing the door on the version of Christianity where you sort of helped. Where you contributed a little something. Where your obedience or your sincerity or your spiritual sensitivity made up the gap. There is no gap-making-up here. Grace covered the whole gap. That's why it's grace.

DISCUSSION: *What part of you still believes — in practice, not in theory — that you're contributing something to your standing with God? Where does that show up?*

Now read the next line carefully, because it's the part most people quote and the part most people misread.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do. (Ephesians. 2:10)

For good works. Not *because of* good works. Not, *in order to earn* good works. *For* — meaning toward, into, on the way to. Good works are where this story is going, but they are not how you got in. You got in because he made you alive. You walk in good works because he made you for them and laid them out in front of you, like a path through a yard.

So here is the ground. You did not build it. You cannot unbuild it. You stand on a floor God put there, made of his mercy and his love and his decision to bring dead people back. The Christian life is not a tightrope you are trying not to fall off. It is a floor you cannot fall through.

That floor is what you stand on while everything else is happening.

Grace is the Engine

Here is where most Christian teaching stops short.

We tend to talk about grace as the thing that *got you in* — the rescue, the forgiveness, the moment Jesus paid what you couldn't. And that is true. But if you stop there, the rest of the Christian life looks something like this: God did his part, and now you do yours. He covered the past. The future is up to you. Try harder. Be holier. Get better.

That picture is exhausting, and it is not what Paul taught Titus.

Read this carefully.

For the grace of God has appeared, with salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age. (Titus 2:11–12)

Notice what grace is doing in that sentence. *Instructing us*. The same grace that brings salvation is the grace that is currently teaching you how to live. It is not handing you a textbook and walking off. It is the teacher, in the room with you, doing the slow work of forming a new kind of person.

That's the part most of us miss. We were told grace pardons. We were not told grace also *trains*.

But Paul says it plainly. The grace of God is doing two things at the same time. It is saving you, and it is teaching you to say no to what used to own you and yes to the kind of life you were remade for. Both verbs belong to grace. Neither one belongs to you.

Look at what he tells Titus a chapter later, in case the first time wasn't clear.

But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us — not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy — through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:4–6)

Read who is doing the work in that sentence. *He saved us. He did it through the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit. He poured the Spirit out — abundantly.* There is no scene here where God forgives you and then leaves you alone with your own willpower. He sends the Spirit *into* you to do the renewing.

That changes what the Christian life feels like from the inside.

DISCUSSION: *Have you been carrying a version of the Christian life where God did his part and now the rest is on you? Where does that show up in how you pray, read, or try to obey?*

A car analogy is going to be too neat, but it gets at the idea. You did not build the engine under the hood. You did not install the wiring. You can't even see it most days. But it is running. The same Spirit who

breathed Scripture into being is now living in you, gently and persistently remaking the way you want things.

That is what Paul means when he says, in another letter, *it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out his good purpose* (Philippians 2:13). God is the one who first changes what you *want*. Then he gives you the strength to *do* it. Want and do — both gifts. Both grace.

When a flash of anger that used to lock down your whole afternoon now fades before you've made dinner — that is the engine running. When you forgive someone you don't feel like forgiving, and a small surprise of peace shows up where bitterness used to be — that is the engine running.

You did not install it. You cannot make it run faster by trying harder. Your part is much smaller and much steadier — keep going down the road in front of you and let the engine do what it was put there to do.

This is the part of grace most new Christians have to be told about, because nobody mentions it on the welcome card. Grace is the ground you stand on, yes. It is also the engine that is moving you. Both are gifts. Both are God's work. Neither is something you generate.

You are not just forgiven. You are powered.

But Doesn't That Mean We Can Just Coast?

Read what we just covered again, and a question almost has to surface.

If grace is the ground I stand on and the engine that moves me, then the Christian life isn't really *my work* in any deep sense. Forgiveness is settled. Renewal is the Spirit's job. The good works I do were prepared in advance. So... does it really matter what I do? If grace handles it, can I just relax? Can I sin without it being a big deal, since grace will cover that too?

That's a fair question, and it isn't new. Paul anticipated it word for word. In fact, the chapter right after he finishes laying out the case for grace, he opens Romans 6 with this:

What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? (Romans 6:1)

He puts the question on the page. Then he answers it in two words.

Absolutely not! (Romans 6:2)

Read that as if Paul is saying it directly to you, because that's the energy. He's not embarrassed by the question — it's a fair question to ask after everything he just said about grace. But the answer is sharp and immediate. *Absolutely not*. Not because you'll get yelled at if you try. Because the question doesn't make sense once you understand what happened to you.

Here is the reason Paul gives.

How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:2)

Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say *"because God will be angry."* He doesn't say *"because heaven is on the line."* He doesn't say *"because the rules still apply."* He says something stranger and more freeing:

you *died* to sin. Going back to live in what you died to isn't immoral so much as it's incoherent. It doesn't fit who you are anymore.

DISCUSSION: *When you've felt the pull to coast on grace, what was the deeper desire underneath it — permission to indulge, rest from striving, not having to care anymore? Paul's answer points to a different question than the one you were asking.*

Paul keeps pressing the point.

Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

This is the picture: when you came to Christ, you didn't just sign a transaction. You got buried and raised. The you that lived for sin — the you that was bound to old patterns and old appetites — went under the water and stayed there. The you that came up was a new one. The whole reason Paul brings up baptism is to remind his readers what happened to them.

So, when he says at the end of the chapter, *sin will not rule over you, because you are not under the law but under grace* (Romans 6:14), he isn't saying grace removes consequences. He's saying grace removes *the master*. Sin used to be the boss. It told you what to do and you did it. **It held the keys to a cell you couldn't unlock.** Grace doesn't hand you a different rulebook; it gives you a different ruler. You answer to a Father now, not a slavedriver.

That is why Paul can say earlier in the chapter, *consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus* (Romans 6:11). The instruction isn't *try harder*. It is *remember what's true of you now*. You are not the person who needed to coast on grace. You are the person who was raised out of the thing you used to coast in.

So, the *can I just coast?* question dissolves once you really look at it. Grace isn't a more lenient warden or a shorter sentence. Grace unlocked the cell, swung the door wide, and called your name. The patterns that used to hold you — the routines you couldn't break, the appetites you couldn't refuse, the version of yourself you couldn't escape — those bars aren't there anymore. The cell has no occupant.

So, asking whether a freed prisoner can stay inside is a strange question. He can, technically. But why would he want to? And if he does — if he keeps sleeping on the cot when his name has already been called — something has not yet sunk in about what just happened to him.

Grace is not permission to drift. It is power to walk out the open door.

What Walking Out Looks Like

So here is the picture. You stand on a floor God put there. An engine is running under the hood that you didn't install. The door of the old cell is open. And now you're being told to walk.

What does that walk look like on a Tuesday morning?

This is where new Christians sometimes get discouraged. They were braced for fireworks — a transformed personality, a vanished struggle, a life that suddenly looked Christian from twelve angles. What they got was much quieter. They still snap at their kids. They still scroll past things they meant to scroll past. They still don't know how to pray for forty minutes straight. They look at themselves a month in and think *if grace is doing all this work, where is it?*

I'm telling you this now, so you don't lose heart later: the work is happening, and it almost always looks small.

Look at what Paul tells the Corinthians:

We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

From glory to glory. The transformation is one degree at a time. Not one floodlight. A long, slow walk toward a brighter version of yourself, in the company of the Spirit. Most days you won't be able to measure the difference. Some weeks you'll look back six months and realize someone you used to be is no longer the one in the chair.

DISCUSSION: *Have you been measuring your spiritual progress on a "fireworks" scale — looking for a dramatic before-and-after — instead of a "one degree" scale? What would change if you used the smaller measurement?*

Here is what the walk tends to look like.

You find that a sin that used to own you for hours now only owns you for minutes, and one day, for less than that. You catch yourself wanting to read your Bible instead of negotiating with yourself to do it. You forgive someone earlier than you used to. You apologize without an internal speech first. The thing you would have said five years ago doesn't come out of your mouth, and you didn't notice it skipped you until later. Your prayers start to sound less like requests for help with your projects and more like conversations with a person you know.

None of that is your willpower performing. That is grace operating from underneath.

And on the days when none of that is happening — when you read the Bible and nothing lands, when you can feel your old self showing up uninvited, when the engine seems quiet — that is part of the walk too. Paul wrote one of the most useful sentences in the New Testament for days like those:

I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

He started it. He carries it on. He finishes it. None of those verbs are yours. Your job is to keep walking — to show up at the next chapter, the next prayer, the next Sunday morning, the next conversation — and let the same grace that saved you keep doing what it has been doing all along.

Grace covered you. Grace is changing you. Grace will finish you.

That is what walking out looks like.

DON'T FORGET

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