

Lesson 4

Matching My Sense of Responsibility with My Blessings in Christ

Grace demands the responsibility to respond

In our American religious context we are accustomed to hearing the term *grace*. We typically define it as "unmerited favor." It is associated with humans lost in sin, who are only deserving of punishment. In making grace available to us, God gives us what we do not deserve. *We deserve death, but are given life.* The biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is key teaching in helping us understand what is involved in salvation.

However, during the first century, as the early Christians began to use the term *grace* in their teaching, the background they would have understood it from was more secular than religious. It was often used to describe reciprocity between people as well as between mortals and the gods. For them, *grace* was used to refer to the willingness of a patron to grant some benefit to another person or to a group.¹ In this sense, it means "favor," in the sense of having a favorable disposition toward someone. Aristotle described it as "helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself but for that of the person helped."² Generosity was highly valued in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. Those who gave were taught not to give out of self-interest, but in the interest of the one (or those) who would receive the gift.

Those who received gifts of kindness were expected to return kindnesses, even if those gifts were vastly different from what they had received. For example, a person in a destitute situation who had received financial or material assistance might offer honor and service in return. It was seen as unjust if there was not some form of reciprocity. Roman philosopher Cicero insisted "gratitude for gifts or assistance once accepted was not optional for honorable people, but rather an absolute and pressing duty."³ Roman historian Seneca said "grace must answer grace, or else something beautiful will be defaced and turned into something ugly."⁴ Failure to show gratitude was seen as one of the worst things a person could do.

Ingratitude is something to be avoided in itself because there is nothing that so effectually disrupts and destroys the harmony of the human race as this vice. For how else do we live in security if it is not that we help each other by an exchange of good offices? It is only through the interchange of benefits that life becomes in some measure equipped and fortified against sudden disasters. Take us singly, and what are we? The prey of all creatures.⁵

How Grace Would Have Been Understood in a New Testament Context

By granting salvation, first century Christians would have been understood *grace* in the normal

perspective of their culture. Divine gifts necessitated a grateful response on the part of those who accepted them. This had long been a part of the Jewish religion. Upon coming out of Egypt, God expected the Hebrews to be loyal only to Him and obey all His commands, Exodus 20.2-3; Deuteronomy 5.6-7. The Psalmist summarized it this way:

How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done for me? I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. The death of his faithful ones is valuable in the Lord's sight. Lord, I am indeed your servant; I am your servant, the son of your female servant. You have loosened my bonds. I will offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord's house—within you, Jerusalem. Hallelujah! Psalm 116.12-19.

The Biblical record makes it clear that God has indebted all humans by virtue of being their creator, Acts 14.17; 17.24-28; 1 Corinthians 8.6; Revelation 4.9-11. From the moment of our birth we are bound to honor and revere God. By providing us with salvation, God is the ultimate benefactor. God has acted with immense generosity, and Jesus has bestowed incredible blessings upon us. These blessings weren't something we earned; in the ancient world, grace was never a reward. However, once such grace has been received, it is expected that the recipient will express gratitude, reciprocating the grace they've experienced. The concepts of redemption and discipleship in the New Testament are interconnected through this cycle of grace. *Our response should be as complete and abundant as the gifts God has given us.* Just as in relationships where one party is of a higher status than the other, the lesser party doesn't attempt to match the gifts they've received. Instead, they commit to offering the best they can, always aided by God's unending support.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe, Hebrews 12.28.

What Was Involved in a Gracious Response

Honor in Words and Deeds

Those who receive God's favor should openly acknowledge and promote it, bringing recognition to Him. This appreciation should be made known sharing of God's blessings and a declaration of our identification with Jesus. The essence of evangelism stems from a grateful heart that genuinely praises God for the blessings received. Effective evangelism doesn't necessarily require deep theological discussions but can start by openly sharing the positive impacts of God's gifts in one's life. Beyond this, living a life filled with good deeds enhances God's reputation. Jesus emphasized that we are shining lights that cause others to honor God, Matthew 5.14-16. By sharing stories of God's blessings and living a righteous life, we elevate God's standing, potentially drawing others closer to Him.

Loyalty

Expressing gratitude to a patron often meant showcasing loyalty, even if it led to personal sacrifice, especially when the patron had adversaries. Real gratitude meant prioritizing the

relationship over any immediate gains. There were times when the Early Christians had to decide between their loyalty to God and personal safety. Many scriptures emphasize the benefits of maintaining this commitment amidst adversity. 1 Peter 1:6–9, for instance, explains that challenges are opportunities for believers to prove their dedication to God. Keeping faith during hardships signifies a trust in the promises made by their divine patron.

Experiencing hardships due to one's association with Jesus is seen as a divine gift (Philippians 1:29–30; 1 Peter 2:18–21). This is because suffering aligns an individual with Christ, allowing them to become more like Him. The ultimate goal for believers is the honor and salvation God will provide, making any suffering endured for Christ's name a “gift” (1 Peter 3:14; 4:13, 19). Reflecting on Jesus' sacrifices should inspire us to exhibit similar loyalty, even if it means forsaking worldly comforts. The believer's primary focus should be gratitude towards God, rather than worldly gains (Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:8–9).

Trust

Trust is the counterpart to loyalty. As highlighted in 1 Peter 1:6–9, Christians withstand worldly challenges not just in appreciation of God's past blessings but also due to their unwavering belief in God's immeasurable kindness, especially the redemption to be unveiled during when Christ returns (1 Peter 1:5, 13). In Galatia, Paul was concerned about the church's faith in Jesus to obtain God's favor. Relying on the works of the Jewish Law for God's favor would essentially display distrust in Jesus, to whom they had earlier pledged loyalty. Such a shift would result in estrangement from Jesus and, eventually, God's grace (Galatians 2:20–21; 5:2–4). Strong faith in God anchors the believer, building consistency in their relationship with God and their brethren (Colossians 1:5). Jesus' unwavering nature—consistent across past, present, and future—serves as the foundation for this steadfast trust (Hebrews 13:7–8).

Service

Clients expressed their gratitude not just through honor and loyalty but also by rendering services to their patrons. This is where good deeds, obedience, and virtuous pursuits intertwine with the blessings and grace received from God. Living in accordance with Jesus' teachings and the guidance of the apostles is not a means to earn God's favor, but rather a heartfelt response to His benevolence. Denying this would be neglecting our duty to the ultimate benefactor who sacrificed immensely for us. Paul emphasizes the magnitude of our gratitude. He sees Christ's sacrifice as a call for believers to refocus their lives entirely in service: “He sacrificed for all so that the living would dedicate their lives not for themselves, but for Him” (2 Corinthians 5:15). Paul lived by this principle, dedicating his life to Christ and believing that Christ lived through him (Galatians 2:20). Paul urged all believers to express this same level of gratitude. Only by devoting our lives to Christ can we genuinely appreciate His ultimate sacrifice. This dedication to the relationship transforms us, aligning our lives with God's righteousness.

The Point We Must Understand

If we have come to understand grace as a one-way transaction that does not obligate us to offer to

God the return that His generous kindness and mercy merits from us, we have mishandled the gospel message. God's giving - from the gift of life to the gift of redemption - was always intended to initiate and sustain a relationship between Himself and us. He desires a relationship whereby we will reorient our lives toward Him in a manner that transforms us from those who are unworthy of His favor into those who are empowered by the Spirit and His generosity to live worthily of His invitation. See Ephesians 4.1; Philippians 1.27; Colossians 1.10; 1 Thessalonians 2.12.

Grace responds to grace. Accepting favor demands expressing gratitude; otherwise, the purity and honor of the bond are tarnished. As our understanding of God's gifts deepens, it drives us to strengthen our dedication and express our heartfelt appreciation to Him. Reflecting on the vastness of God's kindness ensures that our thoughts, words, and deeds are covered in gratitude.

Since God Has Blessed Us with Life and Salvation, How Seriously Will I Regard My Salvation?

Think of each of these responsibilities that we should respond wholeheartedly to:

1. **Faith and Belief:** Christians are called to continue in faith and belief in Jesus Christ, trusting in His redemptive work for salvation and daily living.
2. **Repentance:** Believers are encouraged to turn away from sin and seek forgiveness when they do sin, maintaining a repentant heart.
3. **Obedience to God's Word:** Christians are expected to obey the teachings and commands found in the Bible, striving to live a life in accordance with God's will.
4. **Love and Compassion:** Believers are called to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39). This includes showing compassion and care for others.
5. **Service and Ministry:** Christians are encouraged to use their spiritual gifts to serve others and build up the Church. This can include acts of service, evangelism, and missions.
6. **Holiness and Sanctification:** Believers are called to pursue holiness and strive to become more like Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
7. **Prayer and Worship:** Christians are expected to engage in regular prayer and worship, maintaining a personal relationship with God.
8. **Stewardship:** Believers are responsible for managing the resources and gifts that God has given them in a way that honors Him. This includes tithing, generosity, and responsible use of God's creation.
9. **Discipleship:** Christians are encouraged to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the faith and to make disciples by sharing the Gospel and teaching others.
10. **Forgiveness and Reconciliation:** Believers are called to forgive others as they have been forgiven by God and to seek reconciliation when conflicts arise.
11. **Humility and Selflessness:** Christians are urged to have a humble and selfless attitude, considering others as more important than themselves (Philippians 2:3-4).

12. **Perseverance:** Believers are encouraged to endure trials and challenges with patience and trust in God.
13. **Proclaiming the Good News:** Christians are tasked with sharing the Gospel message with those who have not yet heard it.
14. **Seeking Justice and Mercy:** Believers are called to seek justice and show mercy, particularly to the marginalized and oppressed.
15. **Community and Fellowship:** Christians are to actively participate in the life of the Church, supporting and encouraging one another in their faith journeys.
16. **Being a Light in the World:** Believers are expected to be a positive influence in the world, reflecting the love and character of Christ.

For Discussion:

1. How does the cultural understanding of grace in the first-century Greco-Roman world inform our understanding of grace in a modern context?
2. In what ways do the secular and religious meanings of grace overlap or diverge in the early Christian teachings?
3. Reflecting on the relationship between a patron and client in the ancient world, how does this dynamic parallel our relationship with God as the ultimate benefactor?
4. Based on Psalm 116.12-19, what does it reveal about the expected response to God's grace and salvation?
5. How might the modern church benefit from viewing salvation as not just a gift but an invitation to an ongoing reciprocal relationship with God?
6. Considering the understanding of grace in the New Testament context, how does it

redefine the concept of discipleship and redemption for believers today?

7. What challenges might modern believers face in maintaining loyalty and trust in God amidst external pressures, and how do these compare to the challenges faced by early Christians?
8. Earlier you read of the "gracious response" in terms of honor, loyalty, trust, and service. How can Christians today integrate these principles into their daily lives to truly reciprocate the grace they've received?
9. If grace initiates and sustains a relationship with God, how does our understanding of faith, repentance, obedience, and other responsibilities change?
10. Discuss the implications of viewing grace as more than just unmerited favor but as an invitation to a transformative, reciprocal relationship with God. How does this perspective challenge or reinforce your current beliefs and actions as a Christian?

¹ deSilva, David A. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2022, p. 107.

² Rhetoric 2.7.1 [1385a16–20]

³ Cicero, *De Offic.* 1.47–48; Seneca, *Ben* 1.4.3; Sir 35:2; Isocrates, *Ad Dem* 26.

⁴ Seneca, *Ben*. 5.11.5

⁵ *ibid.*, *Ben*. 4.18.1, LCL