

# The Grand Canyon of God's Grace

In college we were asked to give two major presentations in front of the faculty and staff. They were called "portfolios" in which each student was expected to look back over the past 6 months of education and explain three specific moments in which they had a powerful experience with the new things they were learning. These, so called, "ah-ha moments" consisted of any number of things. Some people were introduced to new artists or writers that had a powerful impact in their lives. For me many of my "ah-ha" moments centered around writing and how much I learned and grew in my this skill.

Over the past year I've learned much about grace. Tonight I am going to give you a sort of portfolio on two "ah-ha" moments on grace.

*Q: How many of you have been to the Grand Canyon? What was it like?*

*I've been told that looking over the edge of the Grand Canyon takes the air from your lungs. It's an awesome wonder.*

*At the same time Grace is a subject so rich, deep, breath-taking that we cannot take it in at once. Grace is so marvelous that the Christian life requires that we frequently step back from the edge and take notes on our growth in grace.*

*Hopefully tonight we are going to walk to the edge together...*

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*Purpose: God's grace takes our breath away. It fills the world with evidences of God's sovereignty, it humbles the Christian for service, and it reminds us of God's joy in the redeemed.*

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Grace is the unmerited (or de-merited) favor of God and is the very heart of the Christian message! This little word explains how God saves unworthy sinners who deserve an eternal punishment as a just reward for their sinfulness.

## 1. The scope of Grace in the world

a. *This is to step to the edge of the Grand Canyon and taking in the depth and breadth and width and height of God's powerful grace at work in the world.*

### i. Grace at work in unbelievers (common grace; not from Cross)

1. **NAU Luke 6:27-36** "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 "Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes

away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. 30 "Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. 31 "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 "If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 35 "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for **He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.** 36 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

2. Grace is *unmerited kindness*. This is *common grace*. Its **not connected** to the work of Christ on the Cross.
3. When I look at the world, I see sinfulness, I see an ignorance of God, I see spiritual laziness as souls move ever closer to an eternity – things are black and dark.
  - a. But also, as I look at the world I begin to see people who have been given great measures of God’s grace. The world has a color to it that comes from God’s grace. When I work or shop or simply talk with people I meet those who are not Christians who still yet display a level of humility and kindness. He allows His enemies to enjoy life in many ways like He allows everyone to enjoy things like marriage, kids, etc!
  - b. Wayne Grudem: “When we walk down a street and see houses and gardens and families dwelling in security, or when we do business in the marketplace and see the abundant results of technological progress, or when we walk through the woods and see the beauty of nature, or when we are protected by government, or when we are educated from the vast storehouse of human knowledge, we should realize not only that God in his sovereignty is ultimately responsible for all of these blessings, but also that God has granted them all to sinners who are *totally undeserving* of any of them! ... The realization of this fact should cause our hearts to swell with thanksgiving to God in every activity of life” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 665).
4. *God is kind to ungrateful and evil men*. This is what makes the Grand Canyon of God’s grace so huge – His grace floods everything – the world is filled with sin – YES – but it’s also filled with artistic talent, architectural beauty, faithful

marriages, the joy of children, friendships, an amazing display of humility and morality in others.

5. *God's grace is most evident in His patience with sinners.* If there was no common grace at work in the world, God would judge all sinners immediately. Yet, "As I live!" declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live...' (Ezek. 33:11). God grace is most evident in His patience with judging sinners.

- a. *The first character of God's grand grace is its breathtaking scope in the world!*

## ii. Grace at work in believers (special grace; from Cross)

1. Again, **we get into trouble when we take our eyes off grace.** This is the case within the church. When we begin to take our eyes off God's gracious work in the lives of others we ourselves will fall into sinful attitudes.
  - a. I think the most-gross sin that I have seen in my heart is jealousy and envy of other Christians.
  - b. *They* have achieved what I want to achieve, or others are better than I am in something. *Naturally jealousy and envy are present in the heart that is not focused upon Grace!*
2. Galatians 5:16-21 "19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, **enmities, strife, jealousy**, outbursts of anger, **disputes, dissensions, factions**, 21 **envying**, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."
  - a. First, notice the seriousness of these disruptive sins.
  - b. Secondly, if you have *jealousy* of other Christians, you have failed to watch divine grace at work in others. You think their success rests within themselves rather than God's grace. My heart condemns me here.
  - c. *Let me ask you:* Tonight are you jealous with other Christians for any reason? Does someone sing better than you and that makes you angry? Is someone smarter than you? Is someone more gifted than you? Has someone wronged you and you hold that against them? Are there Christians you believe you are too cool to talk with?

- d. Do you think *God has gifted you and called you into* something that makes you superior to other Christians?
  - i. We must beware of the critical heart. *We often criticize other Christians because we are blinded by self-righteousness to the working of God's grace.*
    1. God justifies sinners – meaning He takes away all our sinful guilt. Yet, we don't view others this way. We look for faults, trying to find flaws and failures. How un-God-ly!
    2. I love having friends who recognize God's grace at work in my heart. When they come to me with an exhortation about sin in my heart they have my ear. Seek these rare and priceless Christian friends that will do both.
  - ii. Favoritism and all the disruption sins of Galatians 5 ignite because of a failure to rejoice in the grace of God in the lives of others!!
- e. *Grace is at work all over the place ... look for it!*

## 2. Grace and legalism in the Christian life (Gal. 5:2-4 with 3:3)

- a. *Legalism is a spiritual battle all Christians face. We are pulled back from looking over the edge at God's tremendous grace and we sit in the dust and look more at our own hands, our own feet and our own skills than in the providential work of God.*
- b. **NAU Galatians 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?
  - i. Legalism is more than a misunderstanding of justification (how we become righteous before God) but also distorts our sanctification (of God's maturing process in the Christian life).
- c. **Jerry Bridges:** "We are all legalistic by nature; that is, we innately think so much performance by us earns so much blessing from God." (*Transforming Grace*, p. 17). This is great definition of legalism.
  - i. We naturally think that beginning by grace leads to merit my works! No!! Every gift, success, calling of the Christian is based upon the merits of Christ!

- ii. Specifically, what does this look like specifically in the heart of the Christian? None has explained this better than C.J. Mahaney in his book *The Cross-Centered Life*...

“Meet Stuart. He’s a brand-new believer who has a lot to learn about the Christian life, but he has a genuine love for Jesus Christ. One Sunday morning during the church service, his friend Mike notices that Stuart has a little trouble finding the book of Romans. After the meeting, he asks Stuart if he’s regularly reading his Bible.

‘Uh, sure,’ Stuart replies. ‘There’s so much there, I just look at different things.’

Mike raises his eyebrows ‘You’re reading at random? That’s really not the best way. You need to read the Word seriously! Listen, I have this schedule that tells you how to read the whole Bible in a year, a little every day. I’ll make you a copy.’

‘Wow!’ Stuart replies. ‘You mean by this time next year I could have read the entire Bible? That would be great!’

And so, just a few days later, Stuart places a single flexible rod onto the stage of his Christian life, lifts up a plate called Bible Reading, and spins it hard. And it stays in place!

Now let’s fast-forward about six months. Stuart is now much, much busier than ever before in his life. After Mike told him about the importance of Bible reading, Jimmy encouraged him to meditate on Scripture. A few days later, Andrew extolled the glories of attending a weekly accountability meeting with guys from the church. In a sermon, his pastor emphasized the importance of church prayer meetings.

Then Stuart attended a conference on evangelism. He needed to be witnessing every day. Then he heard a radio program about fasting, and another about personal holiness.

One by one, Stuart added more and more spiritual activities to his life. Each was good. Some were vital. Yet without realizing it, Stuart allowed a dangerous shift to take place in his mind and heart. What God had intended to be a means of experiencing grace, Stuart had changed into a means of earning grace. Instead of being a further expression of his confidence in God’s saving work in his life, his spiritual activities became spinning plates to maintain.

The shift is plainly seen on Sunday mornings. On one Sunday, Stuart sings and praises God with evident sincerity and zeal. Why? Because he’s just had a really good week. Not a single plate has wobbled.

But on another Sunday, following a week in which several plates fell, Stuart is hesitant to approach God. He finds it difficult to worship freely because he feels that God disapproves of him. *His confidence is no longer in the gospel*; it’s in his own performance, which hasn’t been so great lately.

Can you relate to Stuart’s mistake? Do you see signs of legalism in your own life? [A] Do you often find that you’re more aware of your sin than of what Jesus accomplished at the cross? [B] When you picture God’s attitude toward you, do you think of God as disappointed with you rather than delighting over you?”

- C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross-Centered Life* (Multnomah; 2002), pp. 27-29.

*Two questions to detect legalism in your heart...*

**First question:** Do you think more about sin or Cross?

*If you think of sin more than the Cross you are thinking about your own sin apart from the Cross. And nothing will more disrupt your Christian life than forgetting the Cross when you think of your own sin. **God always views the believer's sin with the Cross in view!***

**Second question:** How does God view you as a believer in Christ?

**ESV Psalm 5:12** For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover him with favor as with a shield.

**ESV Isaiah 62:4** You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called **My Delight Is in Her**, and your land Married; for **the LORD delights in you**, and your land shall be married.

**ESV Luke 2:14** "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

**Psalm 149:1-4** <sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! <sup>2</sup> Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! <sup>3</sup> Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! <sup>4</sup> For **the LORD takes pleasure in his people**; he adorns the humble with salvation [temporal salvation a sovereign gift from God]" (ESV).

**Zephaniah 3:14-17** <sup>14</sup> Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! <sup>15</sup> The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. <sup>16</sup> On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: 'Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. <sup>17</sup> The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing'" (ESV).

1. As a Christian, how do these passages make you feel? A little uncomfortable? There are two sinful responses to this question: *First*, 'Yes, God should be pleased with me because I am nice hardworking and sacrifice a lot...' and we have fallen into the ditch of arrogance. Or *secondly* we answer, 'No, these passages cannot be about me personally because I have failed to be faithful in my ...' and that is to fall in the ditch of legalism.
  - a. **Why does God view us in this awesome light? Because He has taken away His judgments! The judgments against us are gone in Christ!!**
    - i. *At its heart, legalism is a failure to see the sufficiency of the Cross!*
    - ii. *God's acceptance of us, His joy in us, His loud singing over us - is not, has not and never will be - contingent upon our sinlessness!*
      1. *If God can rejoice over my sorry sinful soul I can rejoice in God's grace at work in your life!*
2. We are His children. I don't love my son because of what I get from him. I love him because he is my son. When the Bible calls us to come to the Lord as daddy because

we are His adopted children – He purchased us. This is why I can rejoice despite my own sinfulness!

- a. The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is the great illustration of this (Luke 15:11-32)!
  - b. We are sinful and rebellious, broken over our own sin! We walk to God humbled in our sinfulness, but God comes running towards us, wraps us in the robe of Christ's righteousness and celebrates with rejoicing and dancing!
    - i. Both our righteousness before Him and His joy over us comes from the sufficiency of Grace!
    - ii. "I can understand a minister rejoicing over a soul that he has brought to Christ; I can also understand believers rejoicing to see others saved from sin and hell; but what shall I say of the infinitely happy and eternally-blessed God finding, as it were, a new joy in souls redeemed? **This is another of those great wonders that cluster around the work of divine grace!** ... The Lord takes pleasure in them that fear him, imperfect though they be. He sees them as they are to be, and so he rejoices over them, even when they cannot rejoice in themselves. When your face is blurred with tears, your eyes red with weeping, and your heart heavy with sorrow for sin, the great Father is rejoicing over you. The prodigal son wept in his Father's bosom, but the Father rejoiced over his son. We are questioning, doubting, sorrowing, trembling; and all the while he who sees the end from the beginning knows what will come out of the present disquietude, and therefore rejoices. **Let us rise in faith to share the joy of God.**" (Spurgeon, 1837, #1990)
    - iii. What a shame! God sings over the redeemed and the redeemed are too blinded by self-righteousness to share the same joy or to rejoice in God's work in others!?!
3. *Every step towards godliness, every answer to prayer, every truth learned through study, every edifying conversation is a result of Cross-purchased Grace!* God pours His grace freely into our lives and then takes joy in that grace!
  4. It is under the shadow of a God singing over us that we are motivated to godliness and service. We don't become lazy. We become free from the entanglements of legalism to run with greater freedom the race set before us.

**Conclusion:** One of the most nervous feelings I get is when I am driving and I have to take my eyes off the road to look at a map or my cell phone or something else in the car. (The smart thing to do would be to stop on the side of the road). I start looking back and forth from the road to what I am looking at. *I get nervous because I know how dangerous it is to take my eyes off the road. It is equally dangerous to take your eyes off grace! Never live a day without gazing into the depths of God's grace!*

**Summary:** Like peering into the Grand Canyon, the full display of God's grace takes our breath away. It *fills the world with evidences of God's sovereignty*, it *humbles the Christian for service*, and it *reminds us of God's joy in the redeemed*.

*Knowing more of grace tonight, let live each day under the shadow God singing over us and let us rise in faith and share the joy of God with the grace-filled believers around us!*

#### **Group questions:**

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- What plates are you trying to keep spinning? What are the signs of legalism in your own heart?
- In legalistic thinking what happens to joy? The Cross?
- How does it make you feel to learn that God takes pleasure over and rejoices in His people? We all stumble in many ways (James 3:2). Are we worth that praise right now? What does the Cross of Christ play in this?
- What most strikes you about grace tonight?

#### **Personal reflection:**

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- List the ways God's general grace has been displayed for you in the life of unbelievers in your life. A kind boss, faithful parents, loving siblings, creative friends?
- Read Acts 11:19-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (especially v. 4). Write out a prayer in which you thank God for the specific ways God's grace is apparent in the lives of those Christians you envy, neglect or otherwise think down upon.
- Reflect on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 and especially verse 9. If God's grace is sufficient what do we bring that is an insufficient substitution for grace?
- Read 1 Corinthians 4:5, that God praises His faithful followers. Interpret this from the perspective of the legalist and then from the perspective of grace. Which is most motivating and joyful?
- Read and meditate upon Zephaniah 3 and Psalm 149. Praise God for His pleasure in His people. Enjoy the benefits of the Cross and watch joy overflow in your own heart.