

## WONDERFUL GRACE OF GOD

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I want to call your attention to the account of a gracious intervention of Jesus in a synagogue of Galilee, where he healed a man with a paralyzed hand, which meant, of course, that the man suffered a great disadvantage since he was unable to work and earn a living. Jesus' great compassion led him to reveal God's love and power in this man's life.

In the unfolding of Jesus' ministry, it will help to realize that prior to this occasion Jesus had already affirmed that he had authority to forgive sins (Luke 5:20–26), and that the Sabbath existed for the good of human beings (Luke 6:1–5), and not as an end in itself. Which means that Jesus was in open conflict with the more strict interpretation of the law affirmed by the Pharisees.

Following is the text that relates Jesus' action in the synagogue.

### **Mark 3:1–6**

<sup>1</sup>*Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.*

<sup>2</sup>*Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. <sup>3</sup>Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."*

<sup>4</sup>*Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.*

<sup>5</sup>*He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. <sup>6</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*

The way this incident is presented indicates that Jesus is questioning the traditional Jewish interpretation regarding rest which the law required on the Sabbath. Among the Pharisees, there were two prominent schools of interpretation of the law. The one known by the name of Rabbi Shammai was the more rigorous and that of Hillel more liberal. Shammai dictated that even a fractured bone should not be set until after the Sabbath, while Hillel understood that if life were endangered, an intervention was allowed. From the critical viewpoint of the Pharisees, the important matter here is that this man's life was not in danger. Therefore, even from the more liberal position, Jesus was guilty of challenging the religious tradition that determined that he should wait until after the Sabbath to heal the man.

However, Jesus understood that God's purpose transcends the simple rules of conduct for the observance of the obligatory Sabbath rest. Jesus insists that God is interested in man's welfare. God contemplates the human being as an object of his love, his care, his compassion and mercy. Many of the Jews, and especially the Pharisees, had lost sight of this focus, and emphasized more than anything else the norms that had to be kept. A transgression of the norms merited

censure, which the Pharisees wanted to see applied with rigor. This is the reason they were so displeased with Jesus.

The account we read indicates that what caught Jesus' attention when he entered the synagogue was the man with the withered hand. Obviously, some among those present fixed their attention on something else: they wanted to see whether Jesus would behave like any other respectful Jew, or whether he would continue with his scandalous custom of breaking the religious tradition. For Mark tells us: "*Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.*" They already had reason to believe that Jesus would again disdain Moses' law. Matthew points out the plot of the Pharisees' attempt to trap Jesus, by asking a question: "*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?*" Evidently, they had already suspected his intention to intervene in the case of the man with the withered hand, and wanted to provoke him to act.

As we read these accounts, we should try to understand as well as we can, what it is that motivates the protagonists. Why do they do what they do? What is behind their words and their actions? God's purpose in sending Jesus to the world is in question here, and we must not lose sight of the different elements, or of the persons whose intervention will determine the unfolding of the story. This is much more than the story of a poor disabled man that Jesus heals so that he can live a normal life.

If a physician had treated the man who was then healed, it would not have so captured the attention of the people. But in this situation Jesus is questioning the traditional way of interpreting the norms that God his Father had given to his people for their welfare, in order to assure them a life full of happiness and health. A tradition that, sadly, had twisted the law until it became an instrument to burden down the people, increasing their difficulties. How sad this reality that distorts something good so that it winds up being heavy and hard to bear! This situation weighed heavily on Jesus' heart. He understood that the Sabbath was for the purpose of rejoicing in God's presence, appreciating God's many favors toward his people. How much better to lift the heavy burden from a man, which for long years only served to weigh down his life and his family! In effect, Jesus wanted to say with this action: God is good! He is generous and kind. God is powerful and loves us intensely.

The "wet blankets" could not support that audacity. While censuring Jesus for his act of kindness on the Sabbath, they were making plans to trap and kill him. What a contradiction! What blindness! They censure Jesus, while planning to kill him, contrary to all that God's law teaches.

Even in this tense situation, Jesus moves forward. He called to the front the man with the shriveled hand. Then he said to all who were present in the synagogue (Matthew 12:11–13):

*"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

*Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was*

*completely restored, just as sound as the other.”*

The way Jesus presents the case is instructive. He does not say: *Is it forbidden to heal on the Sabbath?*, but rather, *Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good?*

From this wonderful story I want to underscore three lessons, the first two as questions and the third as a challenge.

## **LESSONS FROM THIS ACCOUNT**

**Why does God’s law exist?**

- 1) Because our disorder is endemic, habitual, and needs to be corrected.
- 2) Because order brings well being, happiness, contentment, a feeling of realization.
- 3) Because God’s favor toward us is shown in his government, his rule over us.

**Why does God reveal to us his grace?**

- 1) Because by our own merit we will never get anywhere.
- 2) Because God wants to offer us a new beginning, a new birth, a new opportunity.
- 3) Because it is the only way that we can experience his love, his kindness and his purpose.

**Let us exalt the power of love and compassion**

- 1) John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*
- 2) Many theologians affirm that love is God’s basic attribute, from which emanate the remaining attributes: *“God is love”* (1 John 4:8).
- 3) The apostle Paul tells us that without love, everything else loses its value (1 Corinthians 13). Love is the essential ingredient of Christ’s life.

**S**ome time ago and in another country, I was invited to the monthly meeting of the pastors of the city. As usual I arrived a little early. I found a small group of pastors conversing before the meeting began, so I approached the group.

One of them was telling about the recent conversion of a customs inspector that over the years had come to occupy a significant position in the national administration. He told us that he was known for his dishonesty through which, over the years, he had enriched himself, so that he lived in a nice home in one of the better neighborhoods of the city.

But he had come to feel rather unhappy with himself. His wife was also bothered by the situation. A Christian neighbor spoke to him about Jesus Christ and in time the man opened his heart and acknowledged Christ as his Savior and Lord; his wife did the same. He then decided to have a banquet in his home to celebrate turning his life over to Christ. He invited a number of his friends, many of them employees of the customs house like himself. At the conclusion of the dinner he told those he had invited his motive for the banquet: that he had embraced the gospel and decided to follow Christ. Beyond that, he had also made the decision to leave his profession,

for he wanted to serve the Lord and dedicate to him the rest of his life.

When the pastor concluded his story, another at his side told us of another case. For business reasons he had come to know a woman in a nearby town who had gained some notoriety for her loose morals. She had been married and divorced several times, and later became unhappy with her current companion. She had a strange mix of religious ideas, but seemed to be seriously searching for something genuine. The woman told him that she had recently found Christ and had given him her heart. Not only that, for she had also begun to share her new life in Christ with some of her neighbors, who were amazed at the change in her life and in her countenance, and several of them had also come to Christ. The pastor told us that she would soon be baptized.

At that, another pastor told of the conversion of another customs inspector who was evidently moved by the change he had observed in the first one mentioned. He had also turned to Christ, and because his conscience was burdened down due to his indiscrete actions, he had promised the Lord that he would settle his outstanding accounts and was in the process of returning to a significant number of people the money he had accepted for his favors.

As I listened to these stories, I thought of the great challenge for the church to integrate these people into the community and transform them into productive Christians.

Many of you will recognize these three cases as fictitious adaptations of the conversion of Levi, the Samaritan woman and Zacchaeus, all from the New Testament.

A true story comes to mind that I heard a number of years ago directly from a man who had come to Christ when Billy Graham held his first evangelistic campaign in Los Angeles, California, in 1948. This man told us that his father was a pastor but that he had completely abandoned the pathway that his father had taught him. He was an expert in electronic equipment and worked for the police, teaching them how to plant hidden microphones among the Mafia in the area. But, over time, the Mafia had persuaded him to work with them, so that he became a kind of double spy, employed by both the police and the Mafia. In that way he had amassed a small fortune and lived comfortably with his family in a suburb of Los Angeles.

In the midst of that double life, he had become miserable and decided to attend the Billy Graham campaign. To shorten the story, he turned to Christ and understood that he had to clarify his past, so he began to return things he had stolen and decided to confess to the police his double life. Later he went to talk with Mickey Cohen, who at the time was head of the Mafia in Los Angeles. He told him of his conversion to Christ and, therefore, could not continue living a false life. He then told us that he did not understand how he was able to leave Cohen's office just as he had entered.

But a few days later, a black car arrived in front of his house, out of which exited four men dressed in black, who called at his door. He said that his first impulse was to run out the back of the house and try to escape. Just at that moment, the text of Proverbs 16:7 came to mind:

*When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD,*

*he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.*

So, instead of trying to escape, he decided to open the door and let them in.

He didn't tell us what happened then in his living room, but he did say that an hour later they left just as they had entered, and it was the last time he ever saw them. When he finished his testimony, I think there was not a single dry eye among all of us who heard him in a hotel in Houston, Texas. I'm referring to Jim Vaus, whose testimony was later published in the book, *Why I Quit Syndicated Crime*.

Why does God go after those with such a rotten life, who have hurt so many others? Only God knows the answer to that question.

The reason I mention these cases is to underscore the GRACE OF GOD, so marvelous, so amazing, so extraordinary, that it has even reached us.

*<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup>This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”* (John 3:16–21, NIV)

This passage from the Gospel of John affirms that anyone who comes to Christ with faith will receive his forgiveness and eternal life, that is, God's life, the presence of Christ in his life. Then it tells us that God has no interest in condemning the world; rather he wants to save it. With such willingness on God's part to open the way into his presence, why don't more people respond? In the rest of the passage we are told why. Because they prefer darkness to light, *“for fear that [their] deeds will be exposed.”*

John makes it clear that their condemnation is NOT for the bad things they have done, but because they have *“not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”* They have not opened their heart to him who calls everyone to repent and trust in Christ. We have all done evil things, perverse things. That is why Jesus died in our place, to pay our debt to God's justice. He wants to free us from the darkness. Let us come to the light, and practice the truth, just as this passage tells us.

I remember the conversion of a man to whom I presented the gospel during my first pastorate in Galveston, Texas, another true story. He was visiting his sister, a member of our congregation. I had visited him once before and gave him the gospel, but he was not interested. On our second visit the Holy Spirit came upon him with such conviction that he fell to his knees and began to

cry bitterly. He told me that he had done every kind of evil, that the tales of his wickedness would fill a book the size of a telephone directory of a large city. He said that there were only two things he had not done: die, and become a Christian. He told me that he had even sold human bodies (in truth, I don't know what he meant by that, nor did I question him).

In the midst of his weeping, he called to his sister to help him. She responded that only Christ could help him. After weeping and repenting for a good while, he calmed down, raised his head and said that a great peace had come into his heart and that an enormous burden had been lifted. He later gave a public testimony in a meeting of our church.

At times we feel discouraged instead of speaking of Christ to those who have gone so far astray. But we cannot know how many are bothered and tired of their own life style. The only one who can set them free is Jesus Christ, who carried in his own body on Calvary the burden for all our sins and rebellion, our life without God.

Let's be encouraged, brothers and sisters, to share the gospel of God's amazing grace.

I have a pastor friend who lives nearby in Miami, with whom for over fifteen years we have been meeting on Monday mornings to chat and pray together. A couple years ago, when I entered his office I asked him a question:

Is the church a place for saints or for sinners?

Put another way, is it a home for those who love God, or a refuge for those who need God?

Why do so many object that there are too many hypocrites in the church? Where should the hypocrites be?

If a hypocrite is a person who pretends to be good when he has flaws, who qualifies as a good person? If you were a hypocrite, wouldn't you prefer to be with good people?

Some people see me as a good person, but my wife knows all my flaws. My children are also aware of my flaws. Many of my friends know my flaws. Where should I be if I recognize my flaws and the need to be better, to be a person of integrity?

Dare we classify people on the basis of their flaws? If we did that, where would we wind up?

Probably the best known and most beloved Christian hymn in the English language is John Newton's *Amazing Grace*. It is often played or sung on public occasions, whether or not they are distinctly Christian.

Years ago a very respected friend recommended to me a book by one of my favorite authors, Philip Yancey: *What's so Amazing about Grace?* It was one of the most challenging books I ever read. I had the privilege of doing the layout for the book in Spanish, later published by Editorial Vida. I suggested the title in Spanish could be *The scandal of grace*, but the publishers preferred a title that was less scandalous.

Why is the subject of God's grace always a challenge to us? How do you understand God's

grace? In what way can you affirm that you have experienced his grace? Have you ever been surprised by the marvelous grace of God?

## JESUS' ATTITUDE

Have you ever felt scandalized by some of the characters with whom Jesus hung out? I have. Would you feel comfortable with those people?

How about Zacchaeus and Levi, both of them hated tax collectors?

How about the Samaritan woman of John 4, who had gone through five husbands, and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married?

How about Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast several demons?

How about loud-mouthed Peter, who had trouble keeping his foot out of his mouth, and his sword in its scabbard?

Many years ago I heard a simple definition of grace and mercy that I have never forgotten: God's **grace** means that he gives us what we DO NOT deserve, and his **mercy** means that he does not give us what we DO deserve.

Most of us readily recognize that we are not all we should be or could be, but we are deeply grateful for God's grace and loving kindness that somehow reaches us and covers our need. That wonderful fact has changed our life. No longer do we think of God as a distant and threatening judge, but rather as one who loved the world so much that he gave his son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and redeem us from a rebellious and estranged way of life, wasted and without meaning. These facts we know, my brothers and sisters, simply by the revelation of God's grace.

Most books of theological orientation inform us that the simplest definition of grace is "God's unmerited favor, revealed to us in Jesus Christ." And the same texts also suggest that God's grace is revealed in two specific categories: one is known as **common grace** and the other as **special grace**.

Common or universal grace implies that his grace is revealed to all, simply because we have all been created by God. God loves his creation and takes care of it. On the other hand, special grace is that which we come to know through the work of Christ, specifically in his death and resurrection on our behalf. Let's look a little closer at each of these manifestations of God's grace.

## COMMON GRACE

Common grace is also known as **divine providence**, and refers to the care and attention that God as creator provides for all his creation.

In Hebrews 1:3, the Bible tells us that Christ, the Son of God, is the one who "*sustains all things by his powerful word*". In Matthew 5:45, Jesus said that God "*causes his sun to rise on*

*the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*” Apart from this divine providence—this common grace—we could not live.

Moreover, apart from his gracious provision for us all and the fact that he sustains all things, God also ***keeps a restraining hand on his creation*** so that it will not destroy itself. This is also due to the providence of his common grace. Without such grace, our society would fall apart or become impossible to govern. Yet by his grace, we are able to live relatively well in a society that is more or less ordered and at peace, even though the ones who govern do not always recognize these benefits as coming from God’s hand. This is obviously the reason that Paul states that civil government is essentially God’s way of keeping things in line.

There is another way in which common grace implies a great benefit for us. I refer to what we call our ***conscience***, the sense of responsibility that human beings have toward each other as well as toward God. This is a provision of common grace and evidence that we were created in God’s image as moral and responsible beings. For if we did not have a conscience that tells us from within what is good and what is evil, what is acceptable and what is not, we would live little better than brute beasts that are unable to anticipate the future nor the consequence of an act that is damaging or hurtful to another.

Our experience of these benefits does not depend on faith nor on the recognition of God as creator, even though without him none of these things would exist. Divine providence, the restraint of evil in society and human conscience are consequences of God’s common grace granted freely to us.

## **SPECIAL GRACE**

On the other hand, special grace is only known by those who recognize in Jesus Christ God’s immense favor shown us in redeeming and sanctifying us and promising us a glorious future. For example, Paul proclaimed this divine grace in 2 Corinthians 5:17–18:

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!  
All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*

Here is another text in which Paul exalts God’s grace, 1 Corinthians 15:10:

*By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

What the apostle underscores in this text is that none of the benefits that he knows as a result of being saved by Jesus Christ is due to any human effort. It is all the result of God’s grace, pure and simple.

God’s grace is, at the same time, marvelous, grand and mysterious. We shall never be able to plumb the depths of this great mystery in the heart of God. We will never understand how it is that God could have loved us so much in our rebellious and sinful state as to give his own son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us. Even though we cannot understand it, we know that it is true.

It seems that the best we can do is express with joy and gratitude the same thing that Paul said in Romans 11:33,36:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ...  
For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever!  
Amen.*

I close with the words of a hymn that aptly expresses our gratitude for God's wonderful grace:

Wonderful grace of Jesus, greater than all my sin.  
How shall my tongue describe it? Where shall its praise begin?  
Taking away my burden, setting my spirit free;  
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Wonderful grace of Jesus, reaching to all the lost.  
By it I have been pardoned, saved to the uttermost.  
Chains have been torn asunder, giving me liberty;  
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Wonderful grace of Jesus, reaching the most defiled.  
By its transforming power making him God's dear child.  
Purchasing peace and heaven for all eternity;  
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Chorus:

Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus;  
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea,  
Higher than the mountain, sparkling like a fountain,  
All sufficient grace for even me.  
Broader than the scope of my transgressions;  
Greater far than all my sin and shame.  
O magnify the precious name of Jesus;  
Praise His name!