

Understanding Grace

by Wayne Goff

What do you think of when you hear the word “*grace*”? Depending on your religious background, you may react differently. For example, if you grew up in the Lord’s church in recent decades, then your immediate response to the word “*grace*” is “unmerited favor.” This is a perfectly good definition, but it still falls short of proper understanding. If you grew up in an evangelical church, then you probably thought of “automatic forgiveness” or “free pass.” This is regrettable because God’s “*grace*” is never described as some unconditional, automatic salvation.

The word “*grace*” (Greek, *charis*) appears at least 119 times in the New Testament, and the context determines the meaning of the word. So while *grace* **does mean** unmerited favor, it still has a variety of applications.

Sometimes “*grace*” has reference to the work of apostleship, Rom. 1:5; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10; Eph. 3:8; Gal. 2:9; etc. Sometimes it has reference to spiritual gifts in the first century, Rom. 12:6; 2 Cor. 8:7. Very often it means the Gospel itself, or the Word of the Gospel, John 1:17; Acts 14:3; 20:24, 32; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 1:6; 5:4; Titus 2:11-12. Similarly, the word “*grace*” can have reference to the *results* of the Gospel, or one’s current salvation, Acts 11:23; 13:43; 15:11; 18:27; Rom. 5:15, 17; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 2:21; 5:4; etc.

But never do we see it used to refer to a “free pass” or a “get out of jail free” card! Yet, those who misunderstand Paul’s statements in Romans which contrast “*grace*” and “*law*,” have that exact idea: *grace* equals automatic forgiveness. In reality, Paul is contrasting the system of *grace* (Gospel) with the system of *law* (Mosaical), Rom. 4:4; 11:6; etc. The Gospel is often called “*grace*” because it is the predominant feature in God’s plan of salvation for mankind. Only by *grace* (undeserved favor) do we have hope of eternal life! But *undeserved* is not *unconditional*! The “*works*” to which Paul refers in Romans are meritorious works by which no man can be saved. But that does **not** rule out *works of obedience* in response to God’s generous scheme of redemption (Eph. 2:8)! Do realize that “*grace*” requires an obedient response to be saved.

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