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CALLED TO INFLUENCE

Living in God's Grace

Unconditional love,
unequivocal obedience.



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Living in God's Grace

Unconditional love,
unequivocal obedience.



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Introduction

More than an Acronym

By Kelli B. Trujillo



Extravagant. Amazing. Cheap.

No, I'm not talking about a great sale at my favorite department store. I'm talking about *grace*. In Christian circles, we talk about extravagant grace, we sing about amazing grace, we bemoan the problem of "cheap grace." We "say grace" at dinnertime; we sum up its meaning with acronyms (like "God's Riches At Christ's Expense"). We even name our daughters Grace. But what—really—is grace?





Living in God's Grace

More than an Acronym

In my world—and in the simplest of terms—grace is the overwhelming idea that God mercifully forgives and deeply loves me, even in the face of wrongs I've done. I remember the first time I really "got" grace; to be frank, it wasn't until after I'd really screwed up and felt tremendous guilt about something that I started to meaningfully experience grace. I'd talked about it plenty—but I didn't "get it" until I realized I desperately *needed* it.

Grace tells us that no matter what we do—even the worst of the worst—God's love is bigger and deeper and stronger than our sin. He won't give up on us, ever. He'll forgive us and love us and make us new again.

Hence the need for another descriptor: *dangerous* grace.

Grace is dangerous because, as Dieterich Bonhoeffer challenged us, we Jesus-followers can easily begin to treat it cheaply. "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance," writes Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "[W]hat has cost God much cannot be cheap for us." We shouldn't embrace God's grace to the extent that we forget God's expectations of us: rules for us to live by, kingdom values that challenge us to forego our selfish impulses and live in selfless obedience. Grace is dangerous because it can make us too comfortable—we sit on our laurels and coast through life without a proper "fear" of God. Grace is meant to bring us a sense of peace and security, but not at the cost of our obedience





Living in God's Grace

More than an Acronym

In the following pages, join us in an exploration of God's grace and what it means to your view of yourself, to your spiritual walk, and to your relationships with others. My hope is that as you set aside this time to reflect on God's grace, he will speak to you with comfort and love and will also challenge you—as he has *me*—to see the tremendous cost of his grace and respond to it with greater obedience.

Grace and peace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Living in God's Grace" for a group study



"Living in God's Grace" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the "Reflect" questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**



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Guilt vs. Grace

Experiencing God's
unconditional love.

By Karen Morerod



Gee, *I haven't done much today*, I thought, throwing a load of laundry into the washer. That catnap now seemed like a bad idea considering my to-do list. For a second I wilted in guilt. *Am I just lazy? Will I ever get my life together?*

Then I recalled the previous weeks. I'd pushed nonstop physically and mentally through a hectic schedule. *I probably needed that extra sleep!* I thought, snapping out of my shame. As I shut the washer lid, I acquitted myself and celebrated. *Yes! I'm making progress toward overcoming guilt's grip!* It's been a long journey—and it's one I'm still on.





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Guilt vs. Grace

Guilt has been an ever-present plague in my life. *Am I friendly enough to the parents at the Little League game? Am I spending enough time with my kids? Am I being a good witness to the store clerk, the UPS delivery man, the waitress, and every other breathing person with whom I come in contact? My list never ends.*

On the outside, I appear outgoing and am reasonably confident in my abilities. But inwardly I can feel like a true failure at who I am. Disappointment looms as I picture where I long to be spiritually. *I'm such a failure* is my private pain.

Recently though, my small group began a new study. For weeks we zeroed in on how God loves us—no matter what. I always knew God loved me, but the *unconditional* aspect of his love started becoming more real. Then sermons on the radio and church signs everywhere suddenly seemed to shout the message of God's grace and mercy. The more I realized there was nothing I could do to make God love me less, the freer I felt within.

Now I work at owning that truth. I give myself a break and allow my girlfriends to encourage me to ease up on myself. While they still help push me toward accomplishing my goals, they remind me that no one's perfect. I'm God's child, and I can celebrate being me—quirks included!

But while friends are important, God's Word is the surest source of truth and encouragement when guilt rears its ugly head. For example, I remember a time of snacking mindlessly and eating too much at meals. When I braved the





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scales, the numbers reflected my bad choices. My thoughts accused me, *You're overweight, and you'll always be that way.* Then I recalled, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

I needed to change my dietary habits, but condemnation wasn't the answer. I learned the distinction between reaping what I'd sowed and rising above self-incrimination. God's Word brings life, and key Scriptures develop life-giving attitudes that conquer guilt.

Not all my guilt has been caused by actions as benign as sleeping or eating too much. Many of us experience guilt over serious issues, too. Whether it's an unwed pregnancy, financial dishonesty, harboring bitterness, or betraying a friend through gossip or jealousy—the truth is, God forgives. His grace covers my deepest guilt. And he's powerful enough to work through my simple inadequacies.

Will I ever get my life together? Some days I wonder what that really means. But as I nurture my relationship with God, I'm learning to ditch the guilt and embrace his unconditional love. As God said in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Karen Morerod lives with her family in Kansas. This article, originally titled "What I'm Learning About . . . Guilt," was published in the July/August 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Living in God's Grace

Guilt vs. Grace

Reflect

- *How have you struggled with guilt? How have you experienced God's grace in those guilt-laden areas of your life?*
- *Read **Romans 8:1**. How would you explain the difference between conviction of sin and condemnation for sin or failings?*
- *Reflect on **2 Corinthians 12:9**. This is an oft-quoted passage—we can easily become jaded and miss its power. What does it really mean to you? When have you experienced its truth? Describe a specific situation.*



A Stone's Throw from Grace



Jesus' encounter with the adulteress
in John 8:1-11.

By Liz Curtis Higgs

Her story is scandalous, first word to last. And glorious.

At dawn, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees tarried by a nameless woman's door, itching to drag her out of bed and into the temple, where Jesus was teaching. Moments later, half-dressed at best, the woman was forced to "stand before the group" (John 8:3), like Hester Prynne wearing her scarlet letter, cheeks stained with shame.



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The words of the Pharisees were harsh, accusatory: "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery" (8:4). This *woman*? Look, she wasn't alone in that bed. Where was her partner in crime? Sleeping in? Reading the *Mount Olives Times*? Since Mosaic Law insisted "both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10), how come they weren't both hauled into the temple?

Sting Operation

Listen, the Pharisees weren't interested in punishing the man or the woman. They were after Jesus. And so they threw words at him, sharper than any rocks: "In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (John 8:5).

Oh, great. If Jesus told them, "Stick to the Law: Stone her," his grace-filled teachings went out the window. But if he said, "No! Don't stone her," he opposed the Law of Moses, a dangerous move for a rabbi. The Pharisees thought they had him nailed.

Breathless with anticipation, the crowd watched as "Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger" (8:6). This is the only place in Scripture where Jesus wrote something, and we don't know what it was. Talk about frustrating! Did he list the Ten Commandments to prove he knew the Law? Write out the many sins of the Pharisees? Or scribble, "Don't go away mad, just go away"?

Written in Stone

Most scholars think the Lord was doodling. Yup, just drawing lines in the shifting sands of the temple floor, sparing the accused woman from his holy gaze, waiting until the crowd





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was ready to hear his answer. Finally he stood and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7).

None in the temple that day qualified, and they knew it. None of us do either.

Only one person in recorded history "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Only one person could have rightfully condemned her. Only one person could have thrown that first rock.

But he didn't. That's not why he came. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Jesus came to save an adulteress that day in the temple, and he came to save you, beloved.

He bent down again to draw in the sand, giving his words time to sink in. Sure enough, "those who heard began to go away one at a time" (John 8:9). How like Jesus, gently whispering the truth into each ear, convicting each heart, one by one.

The Last One Standing

I'm surprised the woman, who surely was aware of her sins, didn't head for the temple door after her detractors made their exit. Instead, she stood there as if pinned to the ground with hope. Sinner though she was, could she possibly be forgiven? Jesus straightened up and met her gaze, then asked, "Has no one condemned you?" (8:10). Yes, they'd accused her, but they'd not condemned her. Only this innocent man could sentence her to die, yet he held no stones in his hand. Did he plan to punish her with words?





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No, he didn't.

Brave soul that she was, she managed to answer his question. "No one, sir" (8:11). She gets extra credit for resisting the urge to deny her guilt or blame her bed partner.

"Then, neither do I condemn you," Jesus assured her (8:11).

She was a free woman. *Free!* Still a sinner, but forgiven. Still guilty of adultery, but her death sentence had been quietly lifted, then placed on Jesus' shoulders.

Grace came to the temple that morning.

A Fond Farewell

The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees missed the Lord's final benediction, but you can bet those who remained didn't. They hung on every word. "Go now," Jesus told her—a gentle release, not a harsh rebuke—"and leave your life of sin" (8:11).

We hear you, Lord. What a relief to know that because of your grace, we can leave behind the past, as this woman did, and walk in a whole new direction.

Liz Curtis Higgs is the author of 25 books, including Embrace Grace (WaterBrook Press). She lives with her husband and their two teenagers in Kentucky. Visit her website: www.LizCurtisHiggs.com. This article, originally titled "The Adulteress: A Stone's Throw from Grace," was first published in the July/August 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Reflect

- *Read **John 8:1–11**; as you do, imagine yourself into the scene. Picture each part of this story as if you're present while it happens. Then reflect on these questions: What expression did you imagine on Jesus' face? What was his tone of voice like? What expression was on the woman's face?*
- *Jesus said, "If any one of you is without sin" (**John 8:7**). Is anyone ever "without sin," even for a moment? Read **Proverbs 20:9** and **1 John 1:8**, and then **2 Corinthians 5:21**. How would you put the main idea of these passages into your own words?*
- *If the Pharisees had also dragged the man into the temple, do you think Jesus would have extended grace to him too? How might **Luke 5:32**, **Romans 3:22–24**, and **2 Peter 3:9** help answer that question?*
- *Does Jesus' challenge in **John 8:7** mean that no one can "judge" sin—that only perfect people (who don't exist!) can call sin sin? Does grace mean that we're to turn a blind eye or ignore wrongdoing? Explain your perspective.*
- *What if the story ended halfway through verse 11, with Jesus' comforting words "Then neither do I condemn you"? How important is what he says next: "go now and leave your life of sin"? How does Jesus' challenge for the woman inform your understanding of grace?*



Grace as a License for Sin



Why obedience isn't
just for legalists.

*Stan Guthrie interviews Robert
Jeffress*

*Robert Jeffress, minister at First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas, looks at the relationship between beliefs and behavior in his book *Grace Gone Wild: Getting a Grip on God's Amazing Gift* (WaterBrook, 2005). Stan Guthrie of CHRISTIANITY TODAY sat down to talk with him.*

Why did you write the book?

There is little to no discernable lifestyle difference between Christians and non-Christians. I believe we're using grace as a cover, as a license for sin.



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Grace as a License for Sin

How does this work out?

There's great confusion on the relationship between grace and works. In the 1990s, Chuck Swindoll and Philip Yancey and others wrote some wonderful books on grace—*The Grace Awakening*, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*—and they did a valuable service rescuing the doctrine of grace from the legalists who say that we must earn our salvation. But the pendulum has gone in the other direction, and we've unwittingly taken grace out of the hands of the legalists and delivered it into the hands of the libertarians.

Have you seen this issue at work in your church?

Absolutely. There are probably more unsaved people in my pews than I want to acknowledge. And as a Southern Baptist, as an evangelical, as a Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, certainly I have preached all of my life the eternal security of the believer or, as Baptists have popularized it, *Once saved, always saved*. But of course, the key part in that phrase is *once saved*.

In the past, I've made the mistake as a pastor of trying to assure people of their salvation when they never possessed it to begin with. Here are people who profess to be Christians, but they have no interest in God's Word, they never pray, they don't want to be in church, there is absolutely no fruit in their life. Why should we give false security to people like that? The Bible certainly gives no assurance of salvation for such people.





What do you say to someone who fears you are just trying to reinstitute legalism?

It comes down to the question, *What place does obedience have in the life of a Christian? What does grace say is my responsibility in marriage, in friendships, in the church?* I don't believe that obedience earns God's salvation of our souls. But it certainly earns God's favor in our lives.

But many Christians who are faithful, who try to obey God, and who try to be true Christian disciples don't experience God's favor. The Christians in Sudan are an obvious example.

I believe there is a payoff for obeying God. I think the mistake is determining when that payoff is going to come.

How does church discipline fit?

Jesus told a parable about a man who was ambushed and beaten and left for dead. Only one person stopped to render aid. The most loving thing we can do when we see a fellow Christian who's being mugged and left for dead by sin is to stop and render aid. That requires a judgment, but it also requires a restoration procedure.

We've got to delineate what sins actually require discipline. For example, there are personal offenses. If somebody hurts me, the Bible says I'm to forgive. If I see you involved in a harmful addiction, there's nothing that requires me to take you before the church to be disciplined. Galatians 6:1 says that those who are spiritual are to come alongside such a person.

But there are some sins against the body of Christ that require church actions: sins that threaten the doctrinal health of the church, sins that threaten the emotional health of the church,





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or sins that threaten the witness of the church. Matthew 18 gives us a procedure. We ought to deal as privately as possible with sins unless they require the church to take action.

This article was first published in the March 2006 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Reflect

- *Read Romans 6:1–4. How would you explain the relationship between grace and obedience to a new believer? If we're under grace (and we know we'll be forgiven when we sin), then is obedience "optional"? Why or why not?*
- *Different protestant denominations have different takes on the question of eternal security: once a person is saved, is she always saved? Jeffress, a Southern Baptist pastor, believes in the doctrine of eternal security; other denominations believe that a Christian can forfeit her salvation through a sinful lifestyle or through an intentional rejection of the faith she once professed. How does a person's view of "security" relate to her understanding of grace? What potential pitfalls are there for Christians on each side of this theological question?*
- *Jeffress writes, "I believe we're using grace as a cover, as a license for sin." How have you seen this problem in the church? Has this been a struggle in your own life? If so, how?*



Daily Graces

Growing through spiritual habits.

By Frederica Mathewes-Green



As we gradually gain more insight into ourselves, we are able, with God's grace, to find ways to resist habitual sin and grow in self-control. We gain strength bit by bit, like an athlete striving for the prize, as Paul said (1 Corinthians 9). Gradually we reclaim more and more of ourselves and offer it to God's transforming light. Thus the Holy Spirit works within us, sanctifying us from the inside out.



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Daily Graces

From the earliest centuries, Christians have identified certain practices that have been helpful to the "athlete in training." Here are some of them:

Fasting. People are beset by different temptations, but everybody eats. Restricting foods—not necessarily a total fast, but simply declining favorites for a time—can be a way of strengthening the "willpower muscle" to be ready when needed to handle a bigger temptation. An athlete doesn't lift weights just so he can lift more weights. Those healthy muscles are ready for any situation he meets. Turn down a doughnut today, and tomorrow you might be able to resist calling the driver in front of you an idiot.

Bite your tongue. Yes, not calling someone an idiot is a frequent theme in Scripture and early Christian writings. Both place great emphasis on controlling anger, perhaps as much as on sexual continence. Jesus said the penalty for calling your brother a fool was "the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). That includes people who can't hear you, like politicians on TV. It's not the harm to them that's at stake so much as the surging, disorienting pride in your own heart.

Mind your thoughts. Jesus said that to commit adultery in the imagination is the equivalent of committing it in fact. Nearly all sins begin with thinking about sin. Control the thoughts and you have a good head start on behavior. You may not be able to keep thoughts from appearing, but you can decline to entertain them; birds fly overhead, but you don't have to let them nest in your hair. Paul counsels that we think about things that are true, lovely, gracious, excellent, and praiseworthy, so you might want to read some Dickens tonight instead of watching that sleazy sitcom.





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Daily Graces

Practice humility. Humility is not the same as resisting the urge to show off (which is modesty) or denying that you have gifts and talents (which is lying). Humility is remembering that you have a beam in your eye (Matthew 7). In every situation remember what God knows about you, and how much you have been forgiven. You might think you can fool people, but no matter how charming you appear, spiritually you have spinach in your teeth. Account yourself the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15) and be gracious toward the failings of others. Overlook insults and be kind to those who misuse you. Be swift to admit when you're wrong. Ask others to forgive you, and forgive them without asking if you want God to forgive you.

Pray constantly. Try always to recall that God is with you, dwelling in you. (This helps a great deal in controlling thoughts.) For more than 1,500 years, some Christians have tried to form the habit of praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" all the time, a kind of background music to other thoughts. It not only helps one resist more turbulent thoughts and deeds, but also creates a kind of mental foyer in which thoughts and impulses can be examined before they're allowed inside.





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Ask God to help you repent. We really don't want to do this and we find a million excuses to change the subject. Read stories about repentant saints, like John Newton, the slave dealer who wrote "Amazing Grace," or the once promiscuous Mary of Egypt. Those are reasonable models for you, not ivory-tower saints. Keep thinking of yourself as the Prodigal Son. Think over your deeds and conversations each evening and look for areas to improve. Read Psalm 51 before bed every night. Someday you may actually believe it.

*Frederica Matthewes-Green is an author and speaker; her latest book is *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God*. You can read more of her thoughts at <http://www.frederica.com/>. This article, originally titled "A Daily Repentance Workout," was published in the February 2002 issue of *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*.*

Reflect

- *God's grace not only forgives us, but it also challenges us to grow. Spiritual disciplines, also called "means of grace" or simply "graces" by leaders from church history, are avenues through which God forms and shapes us. Think of one specific spiritual growth practice that's a part of your life. How has it been a conduit of God's grace for you?*
- *Which of the exercises Matthewes-Green mentions jumps out to you? Which convicts or inspires you?*





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- *God's grace is not just about forgiveness for persistent sins; it's also about power to overcome them. Matthewes-Green puts it this way: "[Over time,] we are able, with God's grace, to find ways to resist habitual sin and grow in self-control." What's one specific habitual sin or personal weakness you've had victory over in your life? How did God's grace enable you to do that?*



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Grace and Peace

How a simple salutation points us toward a new society.

By Al Hsu



I'm a book geek, so one of my hobbies is collecting autographed books. Some I acquire through my work in book publishing; others I find at bookshops. I now have more than 500 signed volumes, comprising authors from Sue Grafton and Walter Wangerin to Anne Lamott and John Stott.

Authors sign their books in myriad ways. Jimmy Carter's signature is a modest "J Carter." Max Lucado's is barely recognizable—what might be an "ML__." Calvin Miller used calligraphy. Eugene Peterson signed off with "the peace of the Lord." J. I. Packer rotated through Bible verses, from 2 Timothy 3:14–17 for a book about Scripture to Psalm 46 for *Knowing God*. Chuck Colson chose Romans 12:2, but more baffling was his inscription, which looked vaguely like "Burm gd."



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I especially treasure signatures from those who are no longer with us. My former Wheaton professor Bob Webber signed several books to me with *Dominus Vobiscum* ("the Lord be with you"). Spencer Perkins wrote, "In the hope of racial healing." Rich Mullins autographed CDs with "Be God's!" Stanley Grenz inscribed a theology text with "May our Lord guide your steps." And one of my most memorable dedications came from Madeleine L'Engle, who signed my copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* with "Tesser well."

But my favorite phrase was inscribed by Michael Card, who borrowed the apostle Paul's signature expression: "Grace and peace." This greeting is found in some form at the opening of all of Paul's epistles, most commonly, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

What many don't realize is that Paul coined a new phrase. "Grace" or "Grace to you" sounded like the standard Greek greeting, but was infused with theological meaning. On the other hand, "Peace" was a Jewish blessing that sounds weightier in the Hebrew: "Shalom."

Paul knew that many of his congregations were torn by factional strife. But he didn't say, "Grace to you Gentiles, and shalom to you Jews." Grace is not just for Greeks, and peace is not just for Jews. God's desire was for the whole community to receive his grace and experience his shalom—not merely the absence of conflict, but the fullness of well being, harmony, wholeness, and life.

So Paul said, "Grace and peace to you." Paul addressed Gentile and Jewish believers *together*, as members of one body. He wrote in continuity with their cultural and ethnic





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backgrounds, yet pointed to a new, countercultural reality. He combined a Greek greeting and a Hebrew greeting to create a distinctively *Christian* greeting.

Paul did not neuter the cultural particulars of the church's constituents. Nor did he emphasize identity politics or pit categories against each other. Instead, he affirmed the communities' distinct identities, then transcended them to forge a new identity in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. He modeled unity amid cultural diversity, as experienced in the church's birth at Pentecost. If Paul were writing today, he might choose other vocabulary and language to bridge contemporary divides: "Hola and howdy, y'all, in the name of Jesus." Or, "Salaam and shalom to you."

As Brenda Salter McNeil points out in *A Credible Witness*, the gospel is both vertical and horizontal. Jesus reconciles us to God and to each other. Paul's greeting reminded the church of the new society it was supposed to be—one that had received grace, forgiveness, and salvation from God and also would extend peace, shalom, and goodwill to one another.

The church embodies a radically peculiar social order that incorporates vastly dissimilar people. In Paul's day, the world was divided between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. But he dared to imagine a Christian community that not only included all of these, but also enjoyed interdependent relationships. The power of the church's witness was due, at least in part, to the compelling alternative this new society offered to the world around it.





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Grace and Peace

Today our culture continues to be divided by race, class, gender, and politics. Within the church, we are split between Calvinists and Arminians, complementarians and egalitarians, evangelicals and mainliners. Yet Paul would argue that our common identity transcends our differences. He would plead with us to treat one another charitably, to extend grace, and to make peace with one another. Indeed, our congregations should be some of the few places in society where conservatives and liberals can break bread together and make common cause.

When signing books, letters, and e-mails, "Grace and peace" has become my customary benediction. It has also become my prayer for the church, that we would truly bestow grace and peace on one another and, in so doing, offer a prophetic witness to our world. May it be so.

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Reflect

- *Think for a moment about your home congregation. Is it characterized by grace and peace? Who are some strong examples of grace and peace in your church family? How do those people exemplify grace and peace?*
- *Are there Christians in your life who are difficult to love—who annoy you, frustrate you, or make you downright angry? Hsu explains that Paul believed "our common identity transcends our differences." How does this challenge you? Name the aspects of common identity that you share with those believers you find difficult to love (or even like!).*
- *Read **Colossians 3:13**. How does God's grace toward you influence your attitude toward those who've harmed you or who are difficult to get along with? How well does your mind-set and behavior line up with the principle of this passage?*



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Extravagant Grace

Loving . . . when we
don't want to.

By Marilyn Meberg



“**M**amma's boiling mad,” my three-year-old grandson, Ian, told me when I met him, his one-year-old brother, Alec, and their mother, Beth, at the park recently. When Ian told me the reason—he'd pushed Alec into the mud—I understood why my daughter, whom I'd seen “boiling mad” many times as she was growing up, was angry. Later that night before little Ian went to bed, he pulled me aside and said, “I'm going to start being nice to Alec. But mostly I don't want to.”





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I understand that! There are times I don't want to "play nice," either—such as the time I pulled into a crowded parking lot in search of an empty spot. When I finally followed a woman to her car and waited patiently for her to vacate her space, a man in a truck stole it out of the blue. I didn't feel gracious; instead, I had a number of things I wanted to say to him!

I'm a therapist, and I remember a session in which a young wife poured out her heart. She'd thought her family—complete with three kids—was solid; she was totally stunned when her husband told her he was leaving her for another woman. She didn't even have to say the words for me to know she didn't want to be gracious to this man, either.

We all struggle with these feelings at some point, because we've all been on the receiving end of unjust, hurtful behavior. In those moments, we ask the tough question: Do we have to forgive all actions?

God knew we'd question this because there are countless examples in the Bible of him forgiving people who betrayed him. One of the most startling examples of this is the Old Testament prophet Hosea, who married Gomer, a prostitute, at God's command. Though Gomer wandered back into her unrighteous ways, Hosea sought her out, paid off her pimp, brought her home, and loved her. God uses Hosea's love as an illustration of the way he feels for us, his disobedient children.





Living in God's Grace

Extravagant Grace

There are people such as Gomer in each of our lives. While Gomer didn't seem to deserve grace, Hosea forgave her. And God forgives us—to the point that he, too, searches for us, brings us back home, and loves us intensely and unconditionally.

The Bible tells us to love others as God loves us. That means we need to forgive and extend grace in every situation. But when we do, we're the ones who are freed from bitterness and anger. And when we make a conscious choice to "play nice"—as my grandson Ian did—God's there to help us extend grace to others ... even when we "mostly don't want to."

Marilyn Meberg is a counselor, an author of several books, and a speaker for Women of Faith. This article was first published in the January/February 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- Read **Hosea 1–2** (or **Hosea 1:2, 2:19–20**). What's your gut reaction to the idea that God's love for his people is like a husband loving his adulterous wife?
- This wasn't just an idea God talked to Hosea about—God asked Hosea to do the seemingly impossible and extend God-sized grace to his own unfaithful wife. Move the metaphor into your world: who are the toughest people for you to love or offer God-sized grace and forgiveness?





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- Some of us have been hurt severely by others (such as situations of abuse, rape, crime, adultery, divorce, and so on.) Do you think God really calls us to forgive and offer grace in situations like that? Is it even possible? Isn't that asking too much? Go deeper than a surface "yes" answer to this question—explore it.
- Who did God bring to mind for you as you read this article? Who does he want you to extend grace to? What will you do to help you get to a point at which you're honestly able to forgive or extend grace?



Additional Resources

Books, Bible studies, and articles to help you further.



Books

The Discipline of Grace by Jerry Bridges (NavPress 2006; 256 pages). From the best-selling author of *The Pursuit of Holiness* comes a thought-provoking look at legalism, discipleship, and spiritual freedom. Learn how grace and holiness are linked—and how the same mercy that leads believers to Christ also develops us spiritually in the areas of commitment, conviction, choices, watchfulness, and adversity.

The Grace Awakening by Charles R. Swindoll (Thomas Nelson, 2006; 304 pages). In this best-selling classic, Charles Swindoll urges you not to miss out on living a grace-filled life. Freedom and joy, not demands and duties, await all who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. For a growing number of people who feel that there should be something more to their walk with God than the sometimes grim face of religion, *The Grace Awakening* offers a glorious alternative: the truth that sets us free.



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Additional Resources

Grace Gone Wild: Getting a Grip on God's Amazing Gift by Robert Jeffress (WaterBrook, 2005; 240 pages). Grace has become part of the basic vocabulary of every Christian. Unfortunately, many believers are abusing God's amazing gift of grace. They have perverted God's undeserved gift of forgiveness, making it a license for immorality, self-indulgence and minimal involvement in God's kingdom. In the process they are robbing themselves of the joy that comes from obedience to God. In this book, Jeffress challenges you to gain a biblical understanding of grace, and reveals how "good grace" can protect your marriage, church and relationships from confusion and even abuse.

What's So Amazing About Grace? by Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 2002; 304 pages). Award-winning author Philip Yancey explores grace at street level. What is grace? If grace is God's love for the undeserving, then what does it look like in action? If Christians are its sole dispensers, how are we doing at lavishing grace on a world that knows far more of cruelty and unforgiveness than it does of mercy? In his most personal and provocative book ever, Yancey offers compelling, true portraits of grace's life-changing power. He searches for its presence in his own life and in the church. He challenges us to become living answers to a world that desperately wants to know *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Why Sin Matters by Mark McMinn (Tyndale, 2004; 189 pages). Sin is not just the sign of human imperfection. It is, more importantly, a constant reminder of God's forgiveness and never-failing love. This book discusses God's grace as it pertains to our sinfulness—two sides of the same story.





Bible Studies

"Amazing Grace" from ChristianBibleStudies.com explores what the classic hymn teaches us about the transforming power of God's grace.

"Full of Grace and Sin" from ChristianBibleStudies.com explores what Scripture says about a tough question: Can we continue to sin even after we've given our lives to Christ?



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