

A Maze of Grace

Those who use the Bible authoritatively do not dispute the clear biblical statement “by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:8). But universal affirmation does not necessarily mean universal agreement about *how* we are eternally saved. That depends on how one defines *grace*. When the meaning of grace is changed, the condition for salvation is also changed.

So exactly what does grace mean when it comes to our salvation? If grace means something other than the absolutely free and unconditional gift of God received through faith, then it must involve human effort. At least that is what many have said in one way or another. But in their “maze of grace,” grace is anything but amazing. Here are a few of the more common twists and turns foisted upon grace:

Common corruptions of grace.

Jehovah’s Witnesses. The JW’s New World Translation usually translates grace as “undeserved kindness.” How far does this kindness extend? In a discussion titled “What Must We Do to Be SAVED?” (on their official website, www.watchtower.org), we see the implications of their understanding of grace: “Salvation is a free gift from God. It cannot be earned. Yet it does require effort on our part.” Here we have an echo of Ephesians 2:8 that conflictingly depicts grace as something that *cannot be earned* yet requires *our effort*!

Mormonism. A visit to the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (www.mormon.org) finds this statement: “Grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts.” In the Book of Mormon, we read “for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23b). This obvious parallel to Ephesians 2:8 takes a strange twist. We find that after all, grace is help that is given only after we have made our best effort.

Roman Catholicism. On the official Vatican website (www.vatican.va) we read these statements: “Grace is *favor*, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God” (emphasis theirs). “It is received through baptism and other sacraments. . . . we can merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for . . . the attainment of eternal life.” “Grace is the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons.” Note that grace is only *undeserved help* so that we can *merit* more grace to attain eternal life.

Different religions are not all that different! Grace is not totally free and unconditional, but only a reward or boost added to our own efforts. In these views, it must be earned or merited rather than received through faith.

Costly or cheap?

Unfortunately, even Bible-believing evangelicals get lost in the maze. Many have adopted the terms “costly grace/cheap grace” coined by Deitrich Bonhoeffer (a German Lutheran theologian/activist). One author writes, “While it [grace] is free, it is not cheap” (John F. McArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Revised & Expanded, p. 65). So grace is free—but not cheap; it must be costly. But how can grace be free if it is costly—

or cheap, for that matter? When we read Bonhoeffer and these others, we see that “costly/cheap” are adjectives mistakenly applied to the concept of grace itself, when what they are really talking about is how a Christian may *respond* to God’s grace (with behavior that reflects appreciation for God’s grace or with behavior that depreciates it). But there is already biblical language for an unworthy response to grace. The Bible states that grace can be received in vain (2 Cor. 6:1); set aside (Gal. 2:21); insulted (Heb. 10:29); and fallen short of (Heb. 12:15). This biblical language expresses an incorrect response to free grace without impugning the pure concept of grace itself, which is the unfortunate result of using terms like “costly grace/cheap grace.”

Biblical free grace

The Bible can use the word grace to mean “favor” in a general sense, or in the New Testament epistles even use it as a greeting coupled with “peace.” But when speaking of God’s salvation from hell and deliverance from sin, the Bible is very clear about the meaning of grace. One clue to its meaning is found in the original word for *grace* (*charis*), which is the root of the word translated *gift* (*charisma*). Consider the unequivocal meaning of grace in these verses:

Ephesians 2:8-9. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” We learn from this that saving grace does not originate with us, but God, and that it is exclusive of our works (effort) as part of the overall gift of God’s salvation. Since it can not be earned, it can only be received through faith.

Romans 3:24. “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” The grace that saves (justifies) is absolutely free, because Jesus already paid in full the price (the essential meaning of “redemption”) for our sins.

Romans 4:4. “Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.” In a discussion on justification, the Apostle Paul explains that any works nullify grace and produce a situation of debt and obligation, not gift.

Romans 11:6. “And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.” Grace and works are mutually exclusive. Grace excludes all concept of merit; it is not a reward or boost to human effort.

Conclusion

There is a confusing “maze of grace” encountered in religious commentary. But when we let the Bible speak for itself, it does not cloak or confuse the pure grace of God that saves us. Saving grace is not a reward for human effort, nor is it a power-assist for our own human effort. Grace is not works, nor is it merited. Grace is not costly, nor is it cheap. It is a totally free and unconditional gift of God bestowed on those who in no way deserve it. It is the gift of eternal life given to lost sinners who have absolutely no merit of their own before God, and who can only receive the gift through faith. That understanding keeps grace amazing.