

Romans study week 5 - Grace

We tend often to contrast grace and works, and that is at least in part due to reading Paul's letters through the eyes of Luther and Wesley. Romans 11:6 is the only verse in the letters of Paul that we have which contrasts grace and works. 'If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works'. For Paul the problem that many Jews had was not that they kept the law, but that they did not see God's action in Jesus and many of them rejected him. So for Paul what was important was that God's grace was for everyone, both Jews and Gentiles.

Q: What does the word grace mean to you?

Q: See these verses: Romans 3:24, 5:15-17, what do you think grace means here?

Q: The Greek word for grace is charis, from which we get charismatic – what do you think this means?

In the Old Testament there were 2 words used when which meant grace or favour and chesed which meant gracious favour, loving kindness and covenant love. The former tended to mean something more temporary 'I'll do you a favour' whereas chesed was a relationship word which indicated a long term commitment. In Paul's day charis was not particularly a religious word. It was one that was quite commonly used to mean: beauty, favour, goodwill, delight in. It was also the word used when a favour was given to an individual or a city, like a benefactor in Victorian England funding a public library; that would be charis. So when Paul's first readers read charis they would probably think first of inscriptions in their cities commemorating or honouring previous benefactors.

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We tend to understand grace as a free gift, and you can see the link with charismatic. If we describe someone as charismatic we usually mean they are gifted. However there is no such thing as a free gift. You like me will probably be irritated by people offering you free gifts which are no such thing. There might be a free offer; it only becomes a free gift when it is accepted. God offers to us himself, his own nature or spirit. However we can still accept or reject him. Believing is to grace as breathing is to air – can you see how this is true?

The good news is that the Spirit of God is freely offered to everyone without any prior conditions. People still have free will and we may accept or reject this. 'In summary, the distributive justice of God is our justification coming as grace to be accepted by faith'. ¹

God's grace is freely offered; both to those who seek it and those like Paul who initially reject it and behave as God's enemies. We are free to respond; and if we respond by accepting a relationship with God in Jesus this is what Paul calls faith. 'Faith means a grateful submission to the Spirit transplant of God's own nonviolent distributive justice, which empowers us to will and enables us to work toward a reclamation of this world in collaboration with God.' ²

You might remember that Paul writes that we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Borg points out that the reason we should fear and tremble about our salvation is not because God will punish us if we fail, but because the world will punish us if we succeed!

We often say the grace – 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' for Paul it was the gift of Jesus which transformed or converted people.

So grace means spontaneous kindness and generous giving. For Paul God's purpose for humankind was one of generous initiative and faithfulness from start to finish. Paul quite often linked grace with the words for gift and/or undeserved gift. (Romans 5:15). Grace also has a sense of action. It is a word Paul uses to describe the powerful action of God in Jesus. 'Grace described the dynamic experience of being grasped and engraced by God.' The Theology of Paul the Apostle' ³.

For Paul this was a hugely rich experience, think of words that you quite often find with grace: overflowing, surpassing (hyperballo), riches, abundance (Rom 5:20)

¹ Marcus Borg The First Paul p181

² Borg 'The First Paul' page 184

³ James Dunn page 322

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The reception of God's grace in Christ results in gracious acts. The character of divine grace in Christ was fully recognised and responded to when the recipient became a vehicle of that same grace to others. 'So the grace of God came to characteristic expression not only in the salvation of the individual but also in the building of the community.'⁴

Q: Have we lost our sense of 'amazing grace'?

Q: Has 2,000 years of Christianity diminished our sense of wonder?

Q: How much is community a feature of Christianity?

Q: How can you contribute to the community?

Q: What would your life look like if you lived it more grace fully?

⁴ Ibid p323