

**AMAZING GRACE – Part 19***'All of Life as Grace'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Grace is not a static, passive or abstract concept. Grace is the dynamic real presence of God that saves you, heals you and empowers you to be all that you were created to be and to do all that God calls you to do. So in this teaching series we have not just been exploring grace from different angles, but discovering ways of participating in that grace and experiencing it personally and that's important because everybody wants life! The Apostle Paul understood this better than anyone:

**Ephesians 2:4-10** *"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (empowered) to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

God has created good works for us to do as we experience His empowering presence and become all that we can become and to do all that we can do **now** - as we participate in His grace. When we discern what those good works are which God has prepared for us to do and then, by faith, and with courage, step into them, that is when we find we have the power to do exactly what God has called us to in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

When I look around in the Christian world I see many people who are perpetually frustrated because they are trying to do something that they apparently don't have any gifting or power to do - or there's no market for it. I see others passively just waiting for something to happen. They're going to be there a long time! But then I see some people who have moved gracefully, prayerfully, thoughtfully, intelligently, discerningly into the good works that God has prepared for them and then they have found the grace, the power, to do all that and more! They experience the abundant Christian life.

If I were to ask you: when were you saved? How would you respond? Well there are at least three ways that you could answer that would be correct biblically. You could say, 'I was saved over 2000 years ago on the cross of Christ and it was in the heart of God to save me before the beginning of time. My salvation was conceived and accomplished by God single-handedly - I was saved by grace before I was even born.' That would be a correct answer.

**2 Timothy 1:8-9** *"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time."*

Or you could say: 'Well, yes I was saved a long time ago, but I do not yet fully experience my salvation.' That answer is right also. There is a 'now, but not yet' reality as we journey through the kingdom of this world and embrace the kingdom of God more fully.

**1 Peter 1:13** *“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” ()*

You have been saved by grace but you will not receive the full measure of that saving grace until Jesus returns or you are called home to glory. Salvation is not just that act of getting us into God's kingdom; it is the repairing and healing of everything that is wrong with us. But even that is only partial; we are all going to die. The final healing - the final salvation comes when Jesus appears at the end of the age.

Or thirdly, you could say: ‘Yes, I have been saved by grace in the past and yes, I will be totally saved when the grace of God is fully revealed at the end, but it’s also true that in an ongoing way I am being saved every day.’

**Titus 2:11** *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope of His glorious appearing.”*

The grace of God teaches us (present tense) to say no to death and yes to life. So the saving grace of God is also a present reality and it improves the quality of our life day by day as we learn to participate in it. It is present and personal - the power of God in our lives, by the Holy Spirit.

**Romans 5:9-10** *“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath (present continuous tense) through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved (ongoing - present continuous tense) through his life!”*

We were reconciled by His death, we are now constantly (present tense) being saved by His life. Salvation by grace is something that is ongoing. All of life is a grace, and if we respond favourably to that gift and live in an attitude of gratitude, our lives will work. If we don't they won't, and it really doesn't have a lot to do with circumstances. Let's look at one of Jesus' most confronting parables.

**Matthew 20:1-16** *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard ... (a denarius was about a day's wage - a good day's pay for a good day's work) ... About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard. and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour (this is five o'clock in the afternoon) he went out and found still others standing around He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' "Became no one has hired us.' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'*

*"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman. 'Call the workers and pay them their wages beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first. "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. (a full day's wage) So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.*

*When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend. I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?*

*Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

Now this parable is not about labour and management. This is a parable about the kingdom of God. The landowner is God and the employees are the rest of us. Let's begin by putting ourselves in the position of the workers he hired first.

You set your alarm clock for 4:00am (best time of the day!) so you can be down at the market place in time to get a job for the day. You are conscientious, hard-working, and industrious. Some days you stand there all day and don't get hired - but you are back there again in the morning! This day, however, you get hired first thing in the morning and you are grateful for this grace of work. Nobody is obliged to hire you; there are no welfare payments - so if you don't work, you don't eat. You're happy that at the end of the day you can go to the market and pick up some food for your family that evening.

You work hard all day and notice that other workers are joining you throughout the day and you probably don't think much about it - until pay time. Then the boss does something interesting. He begins by paying the people who turned up last, not the early morning shift. However, the real shock comes when you discover that they are getting a full day's wages for only an hour's work! You think, "Wow! This guy is generous, or he's won lotto, or he's a lousy business-man!"

Who cares? This is great - if he pays that much to those who came last, obviously the all-day workers will get even more. But then the foreman comes around and gives you exactly what you agreed to work for - one day's pay. You're angry, because at that point you compare your lot to someone else's - and on that basis, you determine what is fair or not. So you protest: "You've made these men who worked for only one hour, equal to us. It's not fair!"

The boss responds by answering: "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for exactly what I paid you? Take your money and go ... and be grateful. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

'It's Not Fair!' That is our typical fallen human response when we see other people getting more than we think they deserve and us getting less than we think we deserve. This is a very real part of our sinful nature - this sense of fairness. How many times do parents hear their children say: *It's not fair?* We don't have to teach our children to stand up for their own rights, do we? They are born with this sense of 'fairness'. What we *do* have to teach them is to stand up for other people's rights. Watch what happens when you get one child to cut a cake, but tell him that the others will choose their piece first. That child becomes extremely skilled in dividing the cake with mathematical precision, so that it's absolutely fair to him or her, the one who chooses last. The problem is, when we become adults, we don't seem to grow out of that desire for an equal lot in life.

What God (the landowner) is saying in this parable is: "You're saying it's not fair, but you all got a fair day's pay. In fact, work in the first place was a gift! I didn't have to hire you. Yet I did and I have treated everybody fairly. Now, don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine?"

Once everybody has been treated fairly, they can no longer demand their rights. The only person in the story who has any rights is God, the one with the resources. Everybody today knows their rights and everybody's an expert on what is fair and unfair as it relates to them. The idea that life itself in any form is a huge undeserved gift is foreign to most modern minds, including many Christians.

The graciousness of God in giving us life itself ought to consume us with gratitude. If life happens to be kinder to one than another, it should not be an occasion for envy or bitterness or this evil sense of things being 'unfair.' This parable was told to make that point. The problem arises because the king chooses to be especially gracious to some, over others. Remember this is a story about the kingdom of God. God is treating some with more grace, more favour and more mercy than others.

What we need to learn is that God doesn't treat us all equally. If you think that, you're going to go through life frustrated and upset and wondering what in the world is going wrong. Understand this:

### **God treats everyone fairly - but not equally.**

That is what irritated the Pharisees so much about Jesus. He was a friend of sinners. Jesus treated the prostitutes and the criminals and the tax-collectors as if they had gotten up at 4am in the morning and worked hard all day long and been good citizens, when in actual fact, they came in at the last hour and said: "*Hey Jesus, we've been really bad, but if it's O.K, can we hang out with you?*" They haven't earned God's friendship, but Jesus gives it to them as a free gift. And that really gets up the Pharisees' noses (then and now!). That is what this parable of the workers is all about. We have to get this or we are going to be miserable all our life. Grace is not earned and it is not deserved. God shows mercy, favour and abundant grace towards some more than others and many people see this as unfair. This goes against some deep sense of justice that the world instils in us. We try so hard to treat our children equally and fairly. Why doesn't God give it a try? I don't know: all I know is that the Bible reveals the ways of God and this is the way God operates.

Jesus' ministry involves healing the sick, binding-up the broken hearted and releasing the captives from Satan's grasp. He has called us and empowered us to do the same because it is not God's will that any suffer physically or emotionally or spiritually because of the effect of sin. The victory that Christ had over sin, He also had over the effects of sin. When we start taking that fact seriously – we'll see God in action in some very special ways.

However, regardless of the movement of God powerfully in all kinds of ways, your height, the colour of your eyes, your ethnic heritage is the way God intended to make you. Your basic I.Q. is pretty much what God intended for you. God hasn't treated us all equally. He's made some more attractive (by human standards) than others; He's made some much more intelligent than others; He's allowed for certain life chances to be given to some but not to others. That's just the way life is. That's just the way God is. Those early workers were happy until they saw the grace which was shown to someone else. I have prayed for years that my children will grow out of the childish and destructive idea which says, '*It's not fair! I haven't been treated equally to someone else.*'

Sadly, many adults in our nation have not matured past that childish perception. This attitude is potentially present in every one of us. It's called envy or jealousy and it's evil and destructive. Those who allow such an attitude to rest in their hearts for any length of time will be consumed by it and I know of no stronger barrier to our experience of the real presence and power of God than this '*It's not fair*' attitude.

If the enemy of God can keep us comparing ourselves to those who seem to be more blessed than us, then Satan will effectively blind us to those who have so much less. We need to ask God to break that bondage as we deliberately turn the other way towards the millions of people in this world who have far less than us. Next time we start losing sleep over our financial problems, we need to think of the thousands of people who maim their own children just so they can beg for money and stay alive. Next time we start complaining about our job we should sit outside an employment agency to see the despair of those who cannot find work. As we think about those who have so much less, we should say: "*But for the grace of God, there go I.*"

What about in the Church? You might see people who have been given gifts that you envy. You might see people moving into leadership positions ahead of you. You might see people being given favour or responsibilities that you would like. You might see people forming relationships with others whom you desire to be close to. Instead of thinking about the 'fairness' of all that, you should compare yourself to those outside the kingdom, not inside, then fall to your knees and worship the One Who rescued you and reconciled you and be thankful you are even here in the first place. Anything else is a bonus from God, by His grace!

We will never stop those comparisons coming to our attention - Satan has a steady supply for us - however we do have a choice in how to respond. Don't let the thought '*it's not fair*' even enter your mind! Don't let the blessings of others cause envy, jealousy, bitterness or resentment in you. God treats us all fairly, but not equally.

In Romans 9 God says: "*I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy.*" He created and bestowed life on us in the first place and He is free to give us as much or as little of life's blessing that He chooses. That's His right. You might be thinking that this sounds like fatalism. It sounds like God decided all this at the beginning of the world and there's nothing we can do to change it. Please don't let that thought stay in your mind - because it isn't true. God does not sit in heaven at the beginning of the week and say: "*O.K. now this week everybody with surnames beginning with A through to L are going receive my blessings.*" There's nothing arbitrary or fatalistic about God's blessings.

God gives to whom He chooses, whatever He chooses, but He often chooses those who influence His choice. The first way that you can influence God's free grace and mercy towards you and those you love is profoundly simple: you ask for it. In Luke 11 we are told by Jesus to keep on seeking, keep on knocking, keep on asking. He reminds us that our heavenly Father is good and He knows how to give good gifts to His children. Jesus said, "*Ask anything in my name and you shall have it.*" We exercise faith by persistent asking. James says in His letter: "*You have not because you ask not.*" That's one reason why your life may not be working as it should: you have not asked God persistently and faithfully.

Secondly, God often shows mercy to those who are responsible with it. You find throughout the Bible statements like: "*To him who has little - more will be given. To the one who is faithful with a little - more is given.*" That's the positive side of it. The negative side is that love suffers long but it doesn't suffer forever. We see in the Old Testament where Israel abused God's grace and blessings. God suffered long and sent them Prophets and Judges and they experienced warnings and renewals. His love suffered long; but sooner or later because of their habitual irresponsibility with His grace, He withdrew His protection and they found themselves in exile. Whilst we now live under the New Covenant where the judgment of God fell on Jesus, the principle is still valid. God shows mercy towards whom He chooses to show mercy, but He tends to show more mercy to those who are responsible with it.

Thirdly, God also shows mercy to those who pass it on. There are many dear children of God who desperately desire to experience the grace and mercy of God in their lives in a richer and fuller way, but who block that from happening by being so full of self-pity. When we are no longer grateful for the life we have (no matter how that compares to someone else's life) then we can shut off God's mercy and grace (in our experience) and we become bitter in our soul and unhappy in our spirit. It is the most effective and sure way of closing our heart to God and ensuring that we can no longer hear from the Holy Spirit. Self-pity is often triggered by envy: that is, comparing your lot in life to someone else's and concluding: *it's not fair!* Such attitudes are deadly in our daily experience of God's grace. They don't change how He feels about us, but they sure change how we feel about Him and about ourselves and others.

These attitudes are also contagious. We teach our children and others by our example to compare and complain which leads us to doubt God and envy others. Our very life's breath is a grace, a gift, and God delights in showing mercy to those who pass it on to others. Those people who are always sharing the abundant grace of God in their lives with others, who are building one another up and spurring each other on to love and good works - they are the people who invariably experience more and more of God's grace in their own lives. There is an observable reality in the world:

**If you become a channel for God's blessing, then He entrusts you with more. If you shut that off towards your neighbour, or your family, or your Church, it will dry up in you also.**

We see many examples of this in the world today. Joni Eareckson-Tada, crippled in a diving accident as a young person, had a choice. She could have compared herself with the millions of people who seemed to have a better life than her, but she chose to thank God that she had a life at all. As a result she became a channel of blessing to others and found more and more of God's grace and mercy filling her and flowing through her. She has had a enormous impact on millions of people around the world because she was able move past *"It's not fair"* and embrace God's gift of life.

Sadly, there are countless Christians who have so much of life's blessings and freedom, who are abundantly rich by comparison to the majority of the world's population, yet they have become bitter because of some struggle or lack in their life. Whether physical or emotional illness; material or financial need - they see life as unfair and get angry at God for giving them such a raw deal. A lot of us never grow out of feeling that life is unfair.

How must God feel when we dare even question what He has given us in life, let alone withdraw from Him or accuse Him or feel that He has robbed us in some way. But for the grace of God, we'd all be lost. Our very breath is a daily gift of God's grace. Some of us need a regular dose of Romans 9:20: *"But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"*

I am not saying you should accept disease or pain and struggles without crying out to God for healing. I am talking about your attitude in those situations. Are you consumed by self-pity, bitterness or resentment, thinking that life or God is unfair because of what you are enduring? Are you praying for God to heal you or bless you because it's your right, because you deserve it? Or are you just incredibly grateful that God, Who in His infinite love and mercy chose to call you into His kingdom and give you the gift of eternal life?

Does your heart and mind rejoice as you try to comprehend that He has seated you at His right hand in the heavenlies and He loves you with the same everlasting love that He poured out upon His own Son? Are you so overwhelmed by His grace in even allowing you to live, especially in such a country as this, so rich and so free compared to millions of your fellow-pilgrims on this planet? Do you see every new day as a fresh gift of God's grace, a privilege, and never a right?

My friends, we each have a choice how we feel in this life. We can cry *'unfair'* and let envy, jealousy, bitterness, resentment, doubt and fear grip our hearts, or we can allow the Spirit of God to enable us to see our life, as it is, struggles and all, as a gift of God's amazing grace regardless of our circumstances. I pray that God would open up your heart and unburden you of anything that resembles self-pity, anything that is making you ungrateful or envious or bitter in any way, so that you can experience what it is to receive life as a grace from God - every day - all day!

The grace of God teaches us to say no to death and yes to life. All of life is a grace to us. Our response of thankfulness and praise to God, frees us from the self-focussed, *'it's not fair'* attitude of comparison and complaint.

We are happy to agree that grace is neither earned nor deserved when we are the recipients of some special grace; but our hearts are tested in how we respond to the grace shown to someone else. When we make comparisons or become absorbed by self-pity, we are, in effect, judging God and what He chooses to do. Nothing will block our experience of the grace and presence of God more quickly.

In this coming week, let's all take a fresh look at Who God is, all that He has done for us and all that He has blessed us with and we will be overwhelmed by gratitude and released in praise and worship. Our lives will then become fountains of grace, mercy and blessing to others. Then, just maybe, Jesus will finally be able to build His Church through us.

How then shall we live?

By His grace, every moment of every day - and always and only for His glory!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

*Salvation is not just that act of getting us into God's kingdom; it is the repairing and healing of everything that is wrong with us.*



*God treats everyone fairly - but not equally.*

*If you become a channel for God's blessing, then He entrusts you with more. If you shut that off towards your neighbour, or your family, or your Church, it will dry up in you also.*

*When we make comparisons, or become absorbed by self-pity, we are, in effect, judging God and what He chooses to do. Nothing will block our experience of the grace and presence of God more quickly.*