

An old tale speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven's gates. The angel said, "Here's how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in."

"Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

Gabriel replied, "That's wonderful. That's worth three points."

"Three points?" said the man incredulously. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific!" said Gabriel, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the angel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"Come on in," said Gabriel.

*Bryan Chapell, Holiness By Grace (Crossway Books, 2001)*

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Just what IS Grace???

How do we recognize it?

Wikipedia – lots of entries here.

Religious meanings (saying grace before a meal, God's grace), and lots of titles of songs, albums, people.

One movie, one short story – and even a special technological entry:

**Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment = GRACE.** NASA and the German Space Agency have been working together to measure the earth's gravity, and GRACE is the project's name.

There's also a nineteenth century game for girls called, "Game of Graces" which involved two sets of long sticks and a ribbon-decorated hoop...the idea is that two girls should be able to throw and catch the hoop to develop grace. Boys didn't play this (unless it was with a sister!).

It would probably help to think about what **we know about grace...**

- Jesus' death and resurrection for all sin is grace
- God's love, mercy, graciousness is grace
- forgiveness is grace
- kindness is grace
- acceptance and tolerance for differences is grace
- a baby's smile is grace – you get the picture.

James A. Fowler, founder of "Christ in You Ministries," is a progressive theologian/historian who writes LOTS of articles about our life with God. Much of what I'll share with you today comes from one of his articles called, The Grace of God.

### **Where do we learn about grace?**

In Bible – but exclusively in NT, because the folks in the OT didn't have access to what grace really is: God's act of love, through the gift of Jesus Christ.

**OT had law and rules** for people to follow – **NT has grace through Jesus** – different type of rules.

OT word in **Hebrew** that could come close: **chen** (derived from chanan) = favor, pity, good-will.

Examples: Moses had God's favor, Noah had God's favor – **implies stronger helping or assisting weaker – weaker is in need of what stronger can give.**

Also, OT word in **Greek translation of the Hebrew OT** (Septuagint, the LXX - 250 years before Christ) that could come close: **charis = mercy, pity or favor.**

**Neither word comes close to "grace,"** though King James translated them to the word Grace in the OT, which is why things might be a little confusing to those studying the Bible now.

In **traditional Hebrew and Greek, there is no mention of “gospel of grace”** in OT...it wasn't a concept they had experience with.

When used in **NT, charis = beauty, charm attractiveness or mercy, pity or favor...Paul used the word because it was the closest fit to explain Jesus and what he could mean to early Christians.** Scholars note here that Paul never used the OT text to talk about grace either...he referred to the Law instead.

Concept of grace so astounding, early Christians weren't the only ones who had trouble wrapping heads around it...**We keep thinking there's more to the whole notion – and add little human components which muddy it's true meaning and value.**

There are different “types” of grace, with different names and meanings – all humanly constructed to **make sense to us** – not necessarily what God intended.

Our human nature just makes it hard for us to believe something this simple - that God loves and forgives, no matter what.

This could be in part **due to the emphasis of OT stories and times – Law was focus**

Judiciary - **someone was always watching and judging...**  
Law **demanding works and obedience** to be “good” people

**Remember who made and enforced the Law?**

**Dishonorable scribes and Pharisees – Jews experienced much that wasn't good about these guys!** No wonder they struggled with God's act of grace...

In all those early letters to his satellite congregations, Paul constantly reminded them that grace was real and worth taking to heart...they should believe and trust God to follow through. **“Grace through Jesus Christ” - this phrase is repeated in each letter over and over again.**

Paul tried to explain to them that the Law and its negative connotations from all those years ago worked against the Way of God with grace through Jesus – what a contrast!

**TWO VERY IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES!**

**To keep Law, you had to follow the rules – Law has limits and finite characteristics.**

**But to get Grace, you just have to receive it in faith...Grace just “is”...there is no “end of grace.” It’s limitless!**

Paul experienced this in his own life at his conversion. He used the rest of his time on earth to try to get people to understand how intense and real this grace could be.

In Galatians, Paul said, “I died to the Law, that I might live to God...I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

In other words, **if the Law alone is what makes you a Christian, then you don’t recognize the Grace of God through Jesus’ death and resurrection.** There are some religious practices today that would meet this description...

In spite of Paul’s efforts, the Jews just didn’t seem to understand how it works – they continued to argue with one another and worship other gods – **their experiences had them so jaded, their behavior really challenged the idea that God could love even them, no strings attached.**

**We are no different** than those early Christians...in our time, we still struggle with the concept...

*(Late Fuller Seminary prof/scholar Lewis Smedes in How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?)*

***Why do we call grace amazing? Grace is amazing because it works against the grain of common sense. Hard-nosed common sense will tell you that you are too wrong to meet the standards of a holy God; pardoning grace tells you that it’s all right in spite of so much in you that is wrong.***

***Realistic common sense tells you that you are too weak, too harassed, too human to change for the better; grace gives you power to send you on the way to being a better person. Plain common sense may tell you that you are caught in a rut of fate or futility; grace promises that you***

***can trust God to have a better tomorrow for you than the day you have made for yourself.***

As difficult as it might be, if we just accept what God offers us, not only do we find forgiveness and hope, but **we also find and know God in the most intimate way possible.**

Grace (through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus) is **the true covenant between God and God's people.**

Grace is **personal – a love letter from God** – for each being.

Grace is “essential to humankind.” We need to know that grace follows us through our days – it should guide how we live – **grace-filled lives can change the world.**

And grace pulls us down to our lowest common denominator – it humbles us – it forces us to give up control of our lives. We can't help but see our sinfulness glaring at us in the light of such grace, but we know that if we can come past our human need to be in control and we choose to accept God's grace, we demonstrate our belief that **God is all we need** – and we surrender to that trust in God that allows us to just live, to be open to what life brings – knowing that God is in the background, waiting to bring us through it, no matter what.

**Grace brings God to humanity. Grace IS God...**

***Karl Barth: "...grace is not merely a gift of God which He might give or not give...No, grace is the very essence of the being of God. ...God Himself is in it. He reveals His very essence in this streaming forth of grace...In this action He is manifested in the whole majesty of His being. ...If we find and recognize and receive His grace, we find and recognize and receive no less and no other than Himself."***

We don't understand why God loves us this much, but that isn't what matters, because all the goodness of God (the forgiveness, the tolerance, the joy, the hope, the love and more) comes with the grace God gives through Jesus...**grace IS God...and we can be grace, too.**

And this amazing grace – all bundled up in love and hope – is available to us on one condition – **all we have to do is respond in faith**. That's it... God will take it from there...

**But this doesn't mean that we just sit around waiting for God to dump all this grace on us – we aren't to be passive believers with this grace, because when we accept grace, we demonstrate that we believe God loves us – God gave us Jesus, an unselfish act of love – a lifeline to save us from ourselves.**

**Faith and grace work hand-in-hand...and responding in faith means that our job is to just take it and pass it along.**

Grace that comes from us to others can't help but be enfolded in demonstrations of selfless giving – “acts and works” – the ones that aren't required to get grace - are a **natural extension in thankful response to our love for God**, which in turn allow our hearts to be even more open to accepting God's offering to us.

**We become part of a cycle of God's love...**

**If we willingly accept God's grace.**

**Accepting God's grace gives us confidence in hope**, security in how we'll handle challenges, acceptance of whatever will come our way.

**Accepting God's grace means we'll come back if we stray** – we'll know where to go and whom to talk with in the middle of troubled times – **our prayers really go someplace, and black isn't that black of eternity.**

**Accepting God's grace means we reject other options for salvation and hope – God is more than enough** to get us through life.

There really isn't a choice!

As Christians in today's world, we must accept grace, “naked grace,” because **it is pure and all God** – loving, forgiving, renewing, saving, awesome.

I'd like to send you home with these parting thoughts about grace from Frederick Buechner in “Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.”

***The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party***

**wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.**

**But there's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.**

**Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.**

God's Grace to us all...amen.