

Grace Revisited

9/18/22

Osaka International Church

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Dear Heavenly Father, We know that your word tells us that when 2 or 3 are gathered in your name, You are present. May your presence, power and grace fill this room and each of our lives. May the Holy Spirit guide my words so that my words may be your words. Please bless this time together. In Christ's name, Amen.

Today's message focuses on God's grace. Grace is an essential truth of the Christian faith. The Biblical concept of grace makes Christianity different from the other religions of the world. Grace is a broad and multi-dimensional topic and I have limited time. So, I will only scratch the surface. Nonetheless, I hope today's message encourages you and gives you something to think and pray more deeply about.

The essence of this message I have shared before. Yet, my hope is that your understanding of God's grace might be revealed and/or refreshed in your life and in the life of the OIC church body.

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Does anyone know who this individual is? Hint: His birth name is Paul David Hewson. But, he is commonly known as Bono. Bono is the lead singer for the Irish rock band U2.

Many years ago Bono and his band U2 were playing in Osaka and staying at a hotel where I was working. At that time, I had a brief encounter with Bono as he was leaving the hotel to go play at the Osaka Dome.

That is, **unexpectedly**, while Bono was walking down a long corridor to leave the hotel, I saw him looking right at me. And, walking toward me. I thought to myself...what is going on here? Why me? Why is this famous rock star walking toward me? In fact, Bono walked right up to me, reached out his hand and shook it vigorously and said, "thank you very much...I hope you enjoy the show tonight."

I was stunned. I'm sure there was a great look of astonishment on my face. Bono, had clearly made a mistake. As it turns out, he mistakenly thought I was the hotel general manager (and I was not). And, he was thanking me for his hotel accommodations (the Presidential suite) and letting me know that tickets for the U2 performance that evening had been left for the General Manager (not me – unfortunately).

OK, that's my Bono story. And, again, for those of you who don't know, Bono is the lead vocalist and song writer for the Irish rock band U2. He's been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, granted honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II, named "Person of the Year" by Time Magazine and even given the Pope sunglasses...

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And, despite his rock star status, Bono is very human. He clearly makes mistakes. Like you and me.

Well, my unexpected encounter with Bono serves as an entry point to talk about grace. Grace is the focus of today's message and Biblical grace is for everybody. No mistaken identity's here. God knows each of us by name. Let's begin.

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When I speak to an audience, I often ask 3 questions – what, why and how? That is, what are we talking about? Why is it important? And, how does it work? For today, we are considering **What** is grace? **Why** is grace important? And, **How** does grace work?

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The first question, what is the Biblical concept of grace?

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Grace is described throughout the Bible in a variety of ways. Simply, the Bible defines grace as Unmerited Favor. Something we can't earn ourselves or pay for. It is a gift freely given to us from God. Young and old. Rich and poor. It's for those who are famous and not famous. For Japanese and non-Japanese. Specific Bible verses Bible describe and illustrate grace in these ways:

Rom 11:6 – And, if by grace, then it is no longer by works and if it were, grace would no longer be grace. (You can't earn it.)

Eph. 2:5 – It is by grace you have been saved. (It is only from God.)

Gen 6:8 – Prior to “But Noah found favor in the Eyes of the Lord” (One of the earliest humans – Noah received God's unmerited favor)

Eph. 2:8 – goes on to say “not by works, so no one can boast.” (Again, it's not based on something you do but something given freely by a loving God.)

2 Tim 1:9 – Who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purposes and grace.

Grace is unmerited favor.

7

Grace is wide.

Grace “book ends” the Bible. By that I mean it appears in the beginning (first book – Genesis) and in the end (last book – Revelation) and everywhere throughout the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament, Noah lived 100's of years and “found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Genesis 6:8). In the New Testament and at the end of the Bible in Revelations, the commendation to all Christians is “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen” (Rev. 22: 21)

Many different people from many different backgrounds and experiences – in both the old and new testaments – experienced God's grace throughout human history.

Grace is wide. Grace is everywhere.

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Grace can also run deep through the course of an individual's lifetime. That is, grace can and should be a common experience throughout our life. We can experience grace early in life, or very late in life and/or anywhere in between. As we grow deeper and mature in our Christian walk, God's grace manifests itself in different ways – as individuals and as organizations. For Noah, he believed, trusted and obeyed God and experienced His favor and saving grace later in life. For Paul, he experienced God's grace much earlier in life. In fact, grace changed Paul unexpectedly and dramatically. That is, he moved from a murderer of Christians to the foremost preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. From murdering Christians to professing the life-giving gospel of Christ - that's a 180-degree turn-around and that characterized Paul for the rest of His life. That's what grace does.

Importantly, God's grace focuses on sin but not sin size. While Paul's sin was much bigger and more obvious than righteous Noah, Noah was not without sin. Yet, God freely demonstrated His grace – unmerited favor – on both – big and small sinners. Older and younger sinners.

God's grace also extends beyond individuals to institutions. OIC's existence for over 40+ years is testimony to God's goodness and grace. The life of a church is not much different than a life of an individual – with ups and downs. God's grace is much needed and has been evident and sufficient through the years at OIC as many individuals have come to know and grow in grace at OIC. In short, God's grace runs deep in individuals and organizations - it spans our lifetimes and human history.

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Let's recap, grace is unmerited favor. Grace is not something we bargain with God (well, I worked very hard, I gave you a portion of my earnings, I was upset when people were mean to you etc). Grace is freely given by God – yet paid at a high price - the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Grace is wide. It is for 1 race. The human race. It is for all people across time and place.

Grace is deep. It is for you – at any life stage – old, middle age, young. Grace is given to you by a loving God not because you have overcome sinfulness but because He loves you.

That's a little bit about what God's grace is about.

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Next, let's consider why God's grace is important.

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God's ambitions for us are greater than our own. Whether you are a Christian or not a Christian, God wants more for you. For Christian's, he wants you grow in knowledge and faith and live a holier "good" life. For non-Christians, he does not want you to give up in your pursuit of truth. He wants to save you and provide you with a "good life", a better life - now and forever.

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For Christians, grace is important because we are saved by grace. We have repented of our sins and, yet while still forgiven sinners, growing in His grace. Really the only thing we bring to the relationship is our

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sin and a repentant heart. God's grace is the difference maker and is what makes Christianity different from any other religion. God's grace changes everything.

Beyond saving grace, God's grace challenges us and brings us into living a holier life. Directionally, we desire to grow in grace be more holy. Grace is also the promise that there is also something better. This truth is revealed in **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."

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So, I'd like to ask a question. To those of us who call ourselves a Christian, is God's grace motivating you more to bring honor and glory to Him? Is God's grace empowering you to live a holier life? If yes, great. If no, have you devalued grace by not admitting your sin and depending fully on Christ's forgiveness? What is blocking you from living a more God glorifying, empowering and holier life?

Grace has come at a price through Jesus Christ. It is not cheap. Let us not devalue this gracious gift from God. Just as God has given, let us give more of ourselves to God and to others.

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For those who are not Christians, we're glad you are here. And, the Bible tells us that God's grace is available to everybody. And, I'd also like to check in with you and see how life is going. Because we all know life is hard...yet, it is good. In the book of Titus, we are reminded that, "...the Grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men." That is, God knows you and your particular hard situation. It may be difficult life circumstances. Or, challenges related to your pursuit of truth and greater meaning and purpose in your life. For sure, God does not want you to lose hope or give up.

Many years ago, I saw a newspaper headline that read, "Japan set for suicide, homeless surge." Below the headline read, "***In Japan, economic woes historically herald a rise in people taking their own lives in a society that already sees a suicide about every 15 minutes.***" That headline and fact hit me hard. Suicide is the ultimate form of giving up – a complete loss of hope. And, if that suicide rate still holds today, during the course of today's, very sadly 5-6 people in Japan will kill themselves. Very sad. Very bad. There is a better way to live that embodies truth and hope. A better way is experienced through grace-driven relationship with the true and living God.

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Yet, the reality then and the reality now is that life in this world is hard. And, given our life in the age of Covid now, grace seems increasingly important. We all know that Covid has changed our lives and livelihoods in temporary and permanent ways. Many of us have been sick and/or perhaps know family and friends, church members and colleagues who have been severely affected – perhaps they've lost their jobs or family members and loved ones.

So, in preparing this message, I also better wanted to understand Covid's impact on suicide rate and risk in Japan. Based on a recent 2022 study, findings suggest that women and young people have been most negatively affected in terms of suicide rates and risk. Sadly, these two subgroups are "socioeconomically" more vulnerable - that is, typically don't have as much money or resources as males.

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Moreover, women often carry an additional and heavier burden related to family responsibilities - including care for extended family and other responsibilities.

These findings are important to understand as we try to navigate these difficult and uncertain times together. Yet, they highlight the question, regardless of gender or age...how are you doing being master of your life? Are you satisfied? Please carefully consider the precious gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ and take steps toward finding new hope and meaning for your life starting today.

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Simply, grace is important. The Bible teaches that grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone saves us all. For the believer, there is the opportunity to grow in God's grace and live a holier life. For the non-believer and truth seeker, grace offers the promise of salvation and a more hopeful and purposeful life.

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The third and final question is - How does grace work?

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How does grace work? Grace works in many different (and sometimes mysterious) ways but I would like to finish with three observations, or descriptors, of how grace works. When Paul prayed that God would "remove his thorn in the flesh", God told him, "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (**2 Corinthians 12: 9**). So, one descriptor of grace is its sufficiency. I'd also like to consider two other areas – the amazing and unexpected nature of God's grace.

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First, grace works unexpectedly. When I started my message today, I talked about my unexpected meeting with Bono. Most people do not start messages talking about an aging rock star but I did. That was likely unexpected for you also. Now, I'd like to share with you Bono's thoughts on grace based on an interview I unexpectedly read years ago.

Also, as a separate note, I encourage you to later watch Bono sing a song that he wrote titled "Grace". It is worth a listen. Pls. do a YouTube search later if you are interested in hearing about grace in song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Zk26KXSH3g>).

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Anyway, in the article I read, the interviewer asked Bono about his religious beliefs. Bono responded honestly and thoughtfully about God's love, grace and his personal sin. Bono said this, "Grace defies reason and logic. [God's] love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done ***a lot of stupid stuff***"

Life is hard and grace can make an unexpected difference. Grace from the true and living God is shared generously and often unexpectedly. That's the one observation related to how grace works.

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Secondly, let's now look at the sufficiency aspect of grace. God in His word stressed to Paul the sufficiency of His grace when Paul prayed that God would remove the thorn in the flesh.

At a younger and more tender age, I experienced God's grace in a very hard time. When you are young, you often count on parents – mom and dad - and even grandparents to provide guidance and support. Well, I was a Mama's boy and unfortunately, at age 9 my grandfather who lived with us died. That was hard. And, shortly thereafter, my mom was diagnosed with cancer, and that was harder. She fought courageously and always with a smile, but her death at 11 was a devastating, painful loss. Yet, I recognized years later that my dad rested in God's sufficiency and that was re-assuring and became an "example to follow" for me over time in my life.

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Now, almost 50 years later, I can look back on my mom's death and my father's example more thoughtfully and confidently. That is, when I needed strength (just as my dad did), God's grace has been sufficient and provided in my life. God's provision and sufficiency in some ways has been almost 3 decades of crossing of cultures to live and work in Japan and the US. I've had five (5) significant crossings. These big moves were often hard and fraught with professional (and personal) uncertainty with no clear outcome. Yet, God graciously and consistently has provided each time. I can testify that God's grace is sufficient.

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My third and final point on how grace works is...amazingly. Grace works amazingly. The old slave trader, John Newton, wrote the song Amazing Grace. John Newton was not a good man. He sold other human beings and profited from their sale. But later in his life he repented and experienced forgiveness through Christ. In his world-famous hymn, "Amazing Grace", he states that he was a wretch who was lost, but God found him. God finds us where we are – even the bad and hard places. John Newton was saved by God's amazing grace – and every human being before and after him. God's grace sets people free when with the leading of His Holy Spirit, we freely accept grace for ourselves. So, whether you are an international rock star, slave trader/hymn writer or average sinner, it does not matter. God's amazing grace is for you.

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Again, amazingly, the Bible says in Isaiah that He knows you by name. You are important to Him. **Isaiah 43:1** reads "But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; **I have summoned you by name; you are mine.**" Incredible. The creator of the world knows you by name. God's grace is amazing

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Let's do a final recap on how grace works and what it is and why it is important. Then, we will close in prayer. 1) Grace often works unexpectedly. God and His grace often enters our lives at times and in ways we would never expect, 2) God's grace is always sufficient – no matter your age or stage of life, 3) God's grace defined is simply "unmerited favor". We don't deserve it. We can't earn it and we just accept His love invitation and live in it, 4) God's grace is wide. It covers the full range of time and place.

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People have been living in it since the beginning of time and will until the end of time, 5) God's grace is deep. It is for all people of every age and culture and stage of life, 6) For Christians, God's grace saves us and calls us to more holier living, 7) For non-Christians, God's grace challenges and encourages you not to give up in your pursuit of truth – do not let people, personal pride or fear rob you of God's grace. Finally, 8) God's grace is multi-dimensional and amazingly so much more! God's grace is for you.

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Dear Heavenly Father,

You promise that when we draw close to you, you draw close to us (**James 4:8**). Your grace and truth are for all. For those of us who believe, help us to draw closer to you now and grow in knowledge, truth and grace. For those of us who do not, Lord Jesus, you claim to be the way, the truth and the life. Grant that they might be undaunted by the cost of following you and carefully consider the reasons for doing so. May your Holy Spirit comfort, guide and direct all of our steps and decisions. In Jesus name, Amen.