

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. And we are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification. In our session last week, one of the verses we looked at was Romans 6:15, where Paul asked and answered a rhetorical question. He wrote, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!”<sup>1</sup> And at the end of the session Dr. Spencer, you said you wanted to discuss what it means to be under grace. So, how would you like to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by defining grace.

Marc Roby: Well, one definition that you often hear is that grace is God’s unmerited favor.

Dr. Spencer: And that is a good short definition, but we can go further, I think it is even more accurate and useful to say that it is God’s favor shown to those who deserve his wrath. We need to be humbled. We need to see how ugly our sin is. We defined this term way back in Session 15 and in that session I quoted from the theologian Louis Berkhof. He wrote that the most common meaning is that grace “signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. ... it is in reality the active communication of divine blessings by the inworking of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we could say that the grace of God is the source of a Christian’s power to overcome sin, Satan and the world, and to live a victorious Christian life that is pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: In other words, it is the power of God, given to Christians, to enable them to make progress in their sanctification.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is yet another useful way of putting it. In the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, he speaks about the great humility and obedience of Jesus Christ. And then, as a result of considering Christ’s great obedience, he draws a conclusion for us in Philippians 2:12-13. He wrote, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Marc Roby: It’s always challenging to realize that Jesus Christ is held up as the example we are to follow. He was perfectly obedient to the will of the Father. There was no sin in him at all and we should strive to be perfectly obedient as well, and we should do so with fear and trembling because we never live up to that standard.

Dr. Spencer: And it is good to constantly remind ourselves that God’s purpose is good. In fact, his will is always best. And God provides us with the assistance we need to be able to walk in

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996 (combined edition of *Systematic Theology* and *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*), pg. 427

obedience. That is grace. It is real power. As Paul said, it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose. But, that fact does not negate the concomitant fact that we must also work. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10 that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And that is what sanctification is all about. We learn more and more how to make use of the grace that God provides to do the works he has ordained for us to do. And it is through our obedience that we fulfill the command given to us in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

**Marc Roby: And, as we have noted before, obedience is a one-word summation of what is required for us to glorify God.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s true. In fact, we can say that God chose us *for the purpose* of making us obedient. In the opening line of his first letter, Peter wrote, in 1 Peter 1:2, that we “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” Notice that he says explicitly that we are chosen “for obedience to Jesus Christ”. And note also that grace and peace go together. Grace is the power we need to live an obedient, sanctified, life, and peace with God and with one another is the result of such a life.

**Marc Roby: Peter’s first letter, which was written to the diaspora – meaning in this case the Christians who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire – is a great encouragement to Christians living as strangers in a hostile world, which is certainly true of us today.**

Dr. Spencer: It is certainly true of us today, and is becoming more so all the time in this country. Peter speaks about the glorious and gracious nature of the salvation that God has brought to us and draws a conclusion, telling us, in 1 Peter 1:13-16, to “prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”

**Marc Roby: It’s interesting that he speaks in these verses of the grace that is to be given to us when Christ returns.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we can speak of God’s having been gracious to us in the past by electing us and causing us to be born again, and we can speak of his grace being given to us now to enable us to be sanctified, and we can speak of the even greater grace that will be given to us when we are perfected and glorified in his presence.

**Marc Roby: That is similar to what we have seen before. We can say that we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. All three tenses make sense. It also makes sense, as we’ve noted, to say that we have been sanctified, which is speaking about definitive sanctification, we are being sanctified and we will be sanctified, which speaks about the completion of this wonderful work.**

Dr. Spencer: That's all true and important. And Peter also speaks of the process of sanctification in the past tense in this same chapter. In 1 Peter 1:22 we read, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart." The idea of being purified is synonymous with being sanctified, and here Peter speaks of it as something that is already true of us. It is also important to again note how it is that we can be purified. It comes through obeying the truth, which of course is God's Word. And it results in our having sincere love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Marc Roby: Which reminds me of what Jesus Christ said in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

Dr. Spencer: And we need grace to do that.

**Marc Roby: And Paul makes it clear elsewhere that grace provides the power we need. In 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 he wrote that "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."**

Dr. Spencer: Those are great verses to make this point. In addition, when God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and Paul prayed to God to take it away, God said "No". Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." So grace is power. And Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:8 that "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

**Marc Roby: What a wonderful promise that is. And the purpose of God giving us grace is so that we can do good works, which means to obey his Word.**

Dr. Spencer: And because grace provides power and ability to do God's work, it is visible. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul told them about the first time he went to the other apostles in Jerusalem after his conversion. In Galatians 2:9 we read, "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me." Now we must ask, "How did they recognize the grace given to Paul?" And the obvious answer is by examining his life and work. Both in terms of his personal life and what he had accomplished in evangelizing the Gentiles. If grace only meant some kind of inner warmth or good feeling supposed to come from God, it would not be something others could see. Grace is powerful and makes a real difference in people's lives. A difference that is visible to others.

**Marc Roby: And God gives grace to every single believer, although not in equal measure.**

Dr. Spencer: That's certainly true. In Romans 12:5-6 we are told that "in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." In other words, God doesn't give us grace just to bless us individually. We are to use whatever abilities, resources and opportunities God gives to us for the good of others. But we must again be careful to note that we actually have to do the work God gives us to do. God will not do it for us. He is not pleased when we are passive and lazy.

His grace empowers us to work, not just sit around and meditate, even if it is on God and his Word that we meditate.

**Marc Roby: Although we should certainly spend time meditating on God and his Word.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh, of course we should. That is one of the means of grace God supplies, but everything in its proper time. If *all* we did was to meditate on God and his Word, we would not be of use to anyone else and we would not be being obedient to God's Word. We are also to get up off our chairs and do the work God has assigned. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth telling them that they were to be Christ's ambassadors to the world, and then, in 2 Corinthians 6:1 he wrote, "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." This makes it clear that God's grace does not do the work for us. It is possible for us to receive it in vain, in other words for it to not accomplish its purpose.

**Marc Roby: Now, we should probably make it clear that you aren't saying that we can thwart God's plans.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh, no, I'm not saying that at all. We have no such power. God has known from all eternity when and how we would disobey and he has taken that into account in his plans. But it is still true that we have the lamentable ability, if you want to call it that, to disobey. We can fail to do the work God wants us to do. But even when we fail, we can be sure that God's purposes will be accomplished without our help, and we can also be sure that there will be discipline coming to us for our disobedience. But one of the wonderful benefits of our being adopted children is that God disciplines us for our own good, it is not God's wrath, it is our heavenly Father's discipline.

**Marc Roby: We read in Hebrews 12:10, "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, isn't that a wonderful purpose? That we may share in God's holiness. Which is a necessary requirement for being in heaven. A few verses later in that chapter, in Hebrews 12:14, we are told that "without holiness no one will see the Lord." So, if we think we are saved and on our way to heaven, we should be very zealous to root sin out of our lives and to walk in holiness.

**Marc Roby: But there are Christians who take a different view. They look at verses like 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, where Paul prays for the Thessalonian Christians and says, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." And from verses like these some people say that God will sanctify us, it is something he does and we don't need to work at it.**

Dr. Spencer: That view is sometimes expressed by saying that we need to just let go and let God do his work. And there is a sense in which we must let go. But we need to have a balanced view of what the whole of Scripture tells us and those verses that tell us about God working are complemented by others that clearly speak of our active involvement. For example, in Galatians 5:16 Paul wrote, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." In Ephesians 5:1-2 he commanded us to "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved

children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” And in Colossians 3:5 Paul commands us to, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

**Marc Roby: Well, those verses certainly speak of our active involvement. So how would you explain then the proper combining of these two strands of biblical instruction?**

Dr. Spencer: James Boice answers that question well I think. Referring to the sometimes competing ideas of “letting go and letting God”, versus our obligation to make good use of the means of grace, he wrote the following; “Which of these is right and which is wrong? If we mean by ‘letting go’ that we may therefore abandon Bible study, prayer, Christian fellowship and the worship of God and still expect to grow in the Christian life just because we have ‘let go,’ we are greatly mistaken. We will stagnate in the Christian life and drift away from Christian circles. But we are also wrong if we think that by making use of these means we can automatically achieve our own sanctification. The correct understanding is a combination of the two, working as fully and consistently as possible: God working in us and we being as diligent and obedient as possible in these areas.”<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: In other words, we need to be active, but also consciously humble and dependent on God doing his work within us.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We need to make use of what are called the means of grace that God makes available to us. A means of grace is simply something which God uses to strengthen us to do his will. We need to be humble and recognize our need and yet be diligent and work hard at the same time.

**Marc Roby: I think that’s a difficult balance to achieve.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. No one said it was easy. God wants us to recognize that we are completely dependent on him at every moment, but also to recognize that his promises are true and that he will strengthen us and enable us to do all that he commands. Which is why Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 that “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

Now, before we go any further, let me state Wayne Grudem’s definition of the means of grace. He wrote, “The means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to Christians.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: And what are those means of grace?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, obviously, it begins with faith itself. We must be born again and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. That requires grace, but to exercise faith and walk in faith every day is also a means of grace, although not everyone will list that. Everyone will agree,

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<sup>3</sup> James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 19, pg. 452

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 950

however, that personal Bible study, prayer and corporate worship are the primary means of grace. The more we know about God and the more serious we are to spend time meditating on him and his Word, repenting of our sins and seeking his forgiveness, applying his Word to our own lives, worshiping him, both privately and with others, the stronger we will be to resist temptation and walk in personal holiness.

**Marc Roby: That all certainly makes sense. And I'm afraid that very few Christians today take personal Bible study and prayer seriously enough.**

Dr. Spencer: I'm absolutely certain that you're right about that. I suspect that anyone who cares enough to listen to these podcasts is far less likely to fall into that group, but even still I want to encourage our listeners to take up a good reading plan and to read through the entire Bible. Not just once, but over and over again throughout your life. There is nothing more important than prayerfully and systematically reading through the Word of God on a daily basis. We follow a reading plan in our church that I would certainly recommend to any believer. We read through the Old Testament once a year and the New Testament twice each year. That plan is available on our church website<sup>5</sup>, and the link is in the transcript for this podcast.<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: Yes, I join you in recommending that reading list. And I look forward to continuing this discussion about the means of grace next week, but I think this is a good place to end for today. So I'd like to close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). And we will do our best to answer.**

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<sup>5</sup> [www.gracevalley.org](http://www.gracevalley.org)

<sup>6</sup> A pdf version of the list is available at:  
<https://gracevalley.org/wp-content/uploads/ReadScheduleNonLpYr.pdf>