

## RETHINKING THE BIBLE—WITH JACK PELHAM

### Episode 4: Rethinking Grace

Welcome to Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham. This is an audio podcast, where we apply Reality-Based Thinking to interpreting the Bible. Reality-Based Thinking is a method of thinking that seeks to make constant use of honesty, rationality, and responsibility in seeking out the reality of things. And we define reality as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to one's perceptions, beliefs, or wishes about them.

In Episode 1, I gave you some evidence to consider concerning how God wants us to think and to think well. And that's a theme that will likely be spun into all my episodes, more or less, regardless of the specific subject matter of the episode, because it's a huge theme that runs throughout the Bible, and it doesn't get enough play time, in my opinion, in the churches today.

So, today, I'd like to address one of the reasons that I think it doesn't get enough play time. We'll be talking about how our understanding of Grace and our reaction to it plays into all this business of how we use our minds. Before we get into that, however, I want to lay a little more of the foundation behind this general theme of how God wants us to think.

I want to share some material I didn't have time for in Episode 1, so that you can see a bit about how I develop my opinions about what the scriptures mean. My opinion about this present topic has not come only from the passages we looked at in Episode 1. No, there are many verses throughout the Bible that either mention thinking in passing, or come right out and teach something about it.

So, let me tell you about some research I did, and that'll give you some idea of how rigorous a good Bible study project can be—and how much grunt work is involved. I believe that, when studying a Bible topic, it's very wise to go find out everything you can learn about it. A thorough Bible student is going to look into the original language of at least some of the words in the passages in question, and the good student will certainly want to understand the context of the passage as well as possible. I find that a good starting place, however, is often found in a more mundane task—simpler in concept, anyway, even if it's harder in effort. That is, whenever some Bible topic is in view, it's a great idea to find out how much the Bible talks about the thing. How many places is a certain word or phrase used? And is the topic ever written about using *other* terms. And is it ever alluded to anywhere, even if the alluding passages don't speak so directly about it as to make it immediately obvious what they're talking about?

Well, all of that makes for quite an exhausting project, of course—and it's really just a *beginning*, in my view! But then, I find it very fun and intriguing to search things out—even if it can be tiring. And it *can* be tiring! So you have to pace yourself. But I think that's OK, because the way I see it, the Bible is a big-enough book for a lifetime of pondering and searching and studying. And I suspect that it may have been designed that way on purpose. I'll likely get into that some more in later episodes, but let me get back to this particular search I did in preparation for this podcast series.

I've been thinking about thinking for many years, and have been aware of some very relevant and useful passages about it for a long time, I thought that before I launch this podcast series, it would be good to research just how big is the scope of Bible language regarding thinking. So let me quiz you:

There are just over 31,000 verses in the Bible. **What percentage of Bible verses do you think are related to thinking in some way?** Go ahead and take a guess, and then I'll tell you what I figured out.

I wanted to get a rough idea of this, so I decided to approach it by hacking out a rough analog in order to get some idea of the ballpark. I thought I'd come up with a list of search terms related to thinking, and then to search the Bible for verses where those terms appear. So I went to thesaurus.com and I searched for synonyms for words like "think" and "thought" and "knowledge" and such. By the time I was done searching, I had built a list of 50 words related to thinking. Here they are in alphabetical order, so I'll read it through quickly so that you can see just how wide is the scope of language that needs to be considered.

1. Approve
2. Assume
3. Attitude
4. Belief
5. Believe
6. Calculate
7. Cogitate
8. Conclude
9. Consider
10. Contemplate
11. Decide
12. Determine
13. Discern
14. Evaluate
15. Examine
16. Expect
17. Faith
18. Forget
19. Forgotten
20. Hear
21. Heart
22. Hope
23. Inspect
24. Intent
25. Judge
26. Know
27. Knowledge
28. Learn
29. Look into
30. Meditate
31. Mind
32. Mindset
33. Opinion
34. Perceive

35. Ponder
36. Pondering
37. Reason
38. Reckon
39. Reflect
40. Reflection
41. Regard
42. Ruminare
43. See
44. Soul
45. Study
46. Suppose
47. Think
48. Thought
49. Understand
50. Wish

So these are the words I came up with---words that seemed good to search. (And there are certainly others that should be on this list, but it is useful even to have a rough idea, so this would be a fine start. So, I painstakingly searched the English Standard Version of the Bible for each word. Each of these 50 searches returned a list of Bible verses that use the word in question—showing book, chapter, and verse, and also the text of the verse. I knew there would be some duplicates, because some of these verses use two or more of these search terms in the same verse. So I copied and pasted all these results into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, where I could remove all the duplicates. And how many unique verses do you think there are on my list? Go ahead and guess.

There are just under 5,000!

Now, to put that in perspective, there are just over 31,000 verses in the Bible altogether. These 5,000 verses I found, then, represent roughly 1 in 6—or 16%—of the verses in the whole Bible. And remember, I only searched for 50 search terms, and there are certainly more relevant terms than that.

Now, I should be careful to mention that these verses about thinking vary by type. That is, some just tell us what so-and-so was thinking at the time that such-and-such happened, and others tell us things specifically about thinking. So please don't go away from this podcast with the impression that there are 5,000 verses that talk about thinking in the same ways as do the few verses we looked at in Episode 1. No, as I said, some of them simply tell you what some Bible character or other was thinking at the time of some event. But even that is very meaningful, because it goes to my points that “there's nothing more 'you' than the way you think”, and that “God cares about the way you think.” That's why the authors would mention what so-and-so was thinking—because it's **central** to the story.

As I've said already, it's my opinion that our thinking is the most quintessential thing about us. And it's the most revealing thing about us—at least to somebody like God, from whom our thoughts cannot be hidden. I found a good thought about this some years ago the opening words of an A.W. Tozer book, [The Knowledge of the Holy](#), where he wrote:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Perhaps this is true. Perhaps Tozer has got this right. And perhaps what are the next most important things about us are what comes to mind when we think about ourselves and about others. And if all this is right, then the Bible is probably our best source of information about all three. How we learn to read it, then—to interpret it—to understand it—is of the utmost importance.

And we'll talk about it more in subsequent episodes, but I think that a lot of this all comes down to what we think about God. That is, what kind of people we are comes down to what our opinions about God are. Do we admire him or not? Do we respect him? Do we want to be like him in his character? And are we willing to keep adjusting our own thinking as we hone in on the truth of the matter. I think that Tozer is probably right when he says that

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

And I would add something to that thought---because we're all at different places in our grasping of what God is like. I would add:

“No matter what you think about God, he's better than that!”

And that brings me to today's topic: Rethinking Grace.

I'm sure you're aware that there are a great many different denominations, representing many different points of view about the things in the Bible. Many will see some Bible passages in the same way, more or less, but there will also be stark disagreements about it all---not only disagreements in the conclusions they reach about various passages, but in how they go about the thinking that leads to those conclusions.

To me, this is good evidence that the difference is in how much we're actually thinking these things through, and how *well* we're thinking about them. And that comes down to our various dispositions as humans. That is, it comes down to what kind of people we are. If we're prone to *this* kind of error, we're going to go wrong in one sort of thing. And if we're prone to *that* kind of error, we're likely to go wrong in some other sort of thing. We all have a different set of cognitive and moral habits, so we tend to be prone to errors in different sorts of ways. We may see one certain Bible topic very clearly as the writer or speaker intended it to be understood, and yet on some other topic, we may be off—and maybe we don't even know it, because we've never given it the careful thought it deserves.

So before we start talking about grace specifically today, I want to introduce an idea that I call the Road OF Attrition. It's a bit of a metaphor, but I think it's fairly easy to grasp. Imagine that there were a road from a person's current understanding of a topic to a complete and accurate understanding of that same topic. And imagine that that road is like one of our Interstate highways, with exits all along the way from the starting point to the ending point of that complete understanding of a thing. Obviously, if you exit too soon---if you get off on the wrong exit without reaching the intended destination---you're not going to attain the full understanding of the topic in question. You may gain a *lot* of understanding about it, but not a *full* understanding. You may correct *some* of your old thoughts about the topic, but you didn't stay on the path long enough to correct *all* your erroneous thoughts about it.

Perhaps you exited early because you were distracted, or upset, or because you were simply tired of the pursuit. But if you don't get back on that highway, headed in the right direction, and drive all the way to the end of the line, you're just not going to have a full understanding of the topic in question.

And I think this happens a lot in our culture. I think that a great many people will start considering some Bible topic, but most of them will exit the search far too soon, before reaching the full conclusion of it. For whatever the cause, the outcome is bad, because people tend to proceed with the understanding they have—whether right or wrong. If they have a half-baked understanding of a topic, it tends to influence their understandings of *other* topics, too, and the one error can easily snowball into a series of related errors.

On a real Interstate highway, there are a lot of enticements to exit during your journey from point A to point B. There are rest stops and fuel stops and restaurants and shopping and sight-seeing, and all manner of other interesting reasons to stop. And I think it can be like this with the Bible, too. That is, you start studying one thing, and you find something else that's intriguing, and so you get distracted by that, and you put your original study aside—at least for a time. So it might take us quite some time to think a matter through fully. But if we're wise, we'll keep at it—keep pondering. Keep reading. Keep discussing.

Well, one topic that I think people tend to get distracted from, and tend not to reach the end of the road for, is grace. And more specifically, it's the question of what is the proper response to God's grace. The term, grace, generally refers to blessings or gifts that bring some pleasure or benefit. For example, God's gift of Jesus as some sort of atoning sacrifice for our sins—that's an obvious example. Or even the fact that we have a Bible from which to read about what happened between God and mankind in the past—that's a huge benefit and blessing to us. And we could go on and on with other examples, such as how God is the patient sort, and how we're built to be able to change our minds when we're wrong. And on and on it goes.

But what's the proper response to all this? As we come to discover what God is like with regard to all these blessings that he has provided, what should *our* response be? What should our attitude be?

As I've studied this, I see three general responses in the texts.

1. Those who simply ignore God's blessings altogether.
2. Those who respond with the gratitude and eagerness exemplified in the scriptures—and we'll be looking at this in depth today.
3. And those who, rather than ignoring the grace or embracing it, twist it into something else—perverting it and using it as an excuse for not overcoming their sins.

That first group, those who simply ignore God's grace altogether—they're the sort not even to consider the question. If they should find themselves on that Interstate, they're likely to get off at the first exit and never give it another thought. And that's all I have to say about that, as Forest Gump would say.

The second group is one I want to spend some time on. They are the ones who respond to God's grace with gratitude and with eagerness.

It's a little ironic to me that when people talk about grace, they very often find themselves quoting from the letters of Paul. But among all the people doing this—of all the people citing Paul as an expert witness on this subject—many of them seem not to have made it to the end of the matter yet, so as to understand that grace, and to have developed as full and robust a response to it as Paul had done. So I want to look at Paul's response—both in his own personal accounts, and in what he taught to others.

We'll pull out a few passages for your consideration, and I hope that you'll go back later and give them deep consideration in their contexts.

We'll begin with one of the most famous passages in the Bible on the topic of grace.

Ephesians 2: <sup>8</sup> For **by grace you have been saved through faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

These two verses are often used to set the idea of earning one's own salvation against the idea of having one's salvation granted as a gift of God. And many will get off on that exit, not realizing that Paul had more to say on the subject. Indeed, it's in the very next verse, verse 10, that he continues with this:

Ephesians 2: <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, **that we should walk in them**.

Whatever is the right way to understand salvation, we ought not miss the fact that they were taught that the proper response to God's grace is that they should walk in good works. Not just dabble in them, mind you, but walk in them. That is, to live that way—to have good works exemplify their lives. It even says that they were created for this very purpose. It says "...created in Christ Jesus for good works..." But again, I think a lot of people miss this, and their idea is something more like "...created in Christ Jesus to be saved..." Or "...created in Christ Jesus so I can have eternal life." But that's not what it says, is it?

No, it seems that part of the plan for them was that they were going to be transformed into people who habitually did good things. And we'll see that this connection between grace and works is actually mentioned or alluded to several times in scripture. Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 15:10:

[1 Corinthians 15:10](#) But by the **grace** of God I am what I am, and his **grace** toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, **I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I**, but the **grace** of God that is with me.

Notice that Paul very explicitly attributes his hard work to God's grace. Did Paul work hard just because he was that sort of guy? No, he specifically pins it to his response to God's grace. Was it because he was the arrogant sort who wanted to show everybody up? No, it was his response to God's grace, and not some sort of one-up-manship. And notice how he says "...his grace toward me was not in vain." That's a very important line. He seems to be suggesting that grace was **supposed** to have some certain effect, and that it had not come up empty in his case. So, the same apostle who had previously written that God's plan of grace was supposed to include the believers walking in good works shows himself here to be walking very diligently in good works—as a way of life. And was he telling the truth when he said "I worked harder than any of them?" I believe he likely was. Indeed, what evidence do I have to accuse him of lying in the matter?

Let's look at what Paul said in Romans 12:3

[Romans 12:3](#) For **by the grace** given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Shall we assume that when Paul wrote, “I worked harder than them all”, that he was sinning against the very command he gave about not thinking more highly of oneself than one ought? Or was it, indeed, the fact of the matter—that he had worked that hard? Again, I think he was telling the truth.

And isn't it interesting here that in Romans 12:3—and we read this passage in Episode 1 regarding the sober judgment about oneself—isn't it interesting that he tells us where this message is coming from? He is very explicit here that this idea comes from grace, for he says “...by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought...”. And this is very instructive to us, if we'll listen—that grace is supposed to have some effect on how we think about ourselves. And so is faith. Where there are low levels of grace and faith—where we are deficient in those—what would you expect would be our success in keeping a sober estimate of ourselves? What would you expect would be the likelihood that we would see ourselves as we truly are—as opposed to having either too high a view (or too low—as people occasionally do)? I think it's fairly obvious that the greater the effects of grace and faith, the more accurate one's self-view will be.

Paul's view of God's grace was that it was something that was supposed to change people, and to “build them up” and prompt them to work hard for the goals of God and Jesus. Look what he says in his farewell to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:32 and following:

Acts 20: <sup>32</sup>“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his **grace**, which can **build you up** and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup>I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup>You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. <sup>35</sup>In everything I **did**, I **showed** you that by this kind of **hard work** we **must** help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**’”

This one is packed with things that are worthy of our notice. Paul commits them “to God and to the word of his grace”. I think he's referring here to the general message about God's gifts to mankind. Indeed, earlier in this same discourse, in verse 24, he makes reference to “the gospel of grace”. And the gospel is referred to in several different ways throughout the New Testament—and I'm so glad that he thought to refer to it this way here, so that we could see something about his view of the gospel. If you make a quick search of the term “gospel of” (in quotes) through the New Testament, you'll find these about 26 returns, and that list will include one or more of these names for the gospel. (And these are from the English Standard Version.):

- Gospel of the kingdom
- Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Gospel of the grace of God (which is the passage we're looking at right now)
- Gospel of God
- Gospel of his Son
- Gospel of Christ
- Gospel of the glory of Christ
- Gospel of your salvation
- Gospel of peace
- Gospel of the glory of the blessed God

So we see that the writers would name the gospel in different ways to emphasize certain things that they were talking about at the time. And here in Acts 20, Paul does indeed call it “the gospel of the grace of God”. And he tells those elders that he’s leaving that he’s handing them over to God and to the “word of grace”—which I think is the overall gospel message that they had been taught, and that they had in print form, by way of the scriptures they had, and the apostolic letters (or epistles) they had received. And if you remember from Episode 1, Peter had endorsed Paul’s letters as being “scripture”.

So Paul commits them to these written words, and what does he say they should expect from that? He says that the words could “build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

So let’s think about this. He commits them to “the word of grace”—that is, to what he had just called “the gospel of grace”, and promises that this can build them up. And Hebrews puts it another way in a one-liner in Hebrews 13:9, where it says in passing:

[Hebrews 13:9b](#) ...it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace,

So here’s a question: Should it be expected that the proper result of grace should be that people end up being built up? That is, being edified and matured and trained—being of higher character at the end than at the beginning?

Yes, I think so. Just like it was to trigger them walking in good works, and just like it was to motivate them—as in Paul’s case—to work hard—it was also supposed to build them up into better people—into people who would have a proper place among the sanctified—among those that God had set apart for holiness.

And at this point, we should see a pattern emerging, whereby the proper response to God’s grace ends up in the transformation of the person’s life. And it wasn’t just about building good qualities in the person’s life, but about avoiding sin. Let’s look at Titus 2:11-14:

Titus 2:<sup>11</sup> For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. <sup>12</sup> It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, <sup>13</sup> while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup> who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

The grace that Paul taught would teach the willing follower to say “no” to sin, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives”. They were being redeemed from *all* wickedness, it says. Not just some of their wickedness, mind you, but all of it. And they were being purified—and the expected result of it all was that they would become a people who were “eager to do what is good”.

Do you see the pattern here? Created to do good works, working hard, being built up as people, finding it more blessed to give than to receive, and now, being eager to do what is good. Look where he says it in a different way in 2 Corinthians 9:8

2 Corinthians 9:<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

They weren’t only supposed to dabble in good works, but to abound in them.



This was Paul's ethic about grace—even if it's different from how many see grace today. His grace was a transforming grace—an edifying grace—a renewing grace. He saw grace as being a motivator for being straightforward and sincere. Look what he says in 2 Corinthians 1:12:

[2 Corinthians 1:12](#) For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

It was not earthly wisdom that brought him to this way of life, he says, but the grace of God. And he notes that he had acted supremely in his behavior toward the Corinthians. Supremely. And I ask you, what would prompt a person to go to that much cognitive and moral trouble—to work so very hard to be sure his or her behavior was supremely godly and sincere?

Well, someone trying to make a show might try that—like the Pharisees that we talked about in Episode 1, but what Paul is talking about here as the motivator was grace. And it had enabled him to have a supreme success in his behavior, as opposed to the mixed bag of success that the Pharisees had had putting on a show in Jesus' day. (And let me remind you, Paul knew them quite well, for he had been one of them, and here he was a couple of decades later, being a champion for the godly cause of Jesus.)

Starting in 2 Corinthians 5, near the end up the chapter, Paul makes an appeal to the Corinthians not to receive God's grace in vain. I want to start reading in a spot that many misunderstand because they exit the Interstate of investigation too soon to see where Paul is going with all this. He is speaking as an authorized apostle of Jesus, commissioned to start and to care for many congregations among the Gentiles. And he says this, starting in 2 Corinthians 5:20

2 Corinthians 5:<sup>20</sup> Therefore, **we** are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through **us**. **We** implore **you** on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Let's stop here and notice something before we go on. Paul is not saying to them, as many erroneously assume, something like "All us Christians are ambassadors of Jesus." No, there's a strong we/you thread in this epistle, as in several others, where the apostles and their missionary teams are contrasted with those to whom they were sent. So here, Paul, the ambassador, is appealing to the Corinthian Christians that they should be reconciled with God. Although he doesn't use the word "grace" just yet, he's clearly leveraging the sacrifice of sinless Jesus as the motive for the Corinthians to "become the righteousness of God". And he goes on. Now, remember, the chapter and verse numbers were added later just as a convenient way for us to talk about the Bible to each other. So Paul continues in what we call Chapter 6 and verse 1:

2 Corinthians 6:1 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you **not to receive the grace of God in vain**.

That is to say, that God did this for you—he sacrificed Jesus for you—and I hope that your response to that act is not an empty response—I hope it's not in vain—I hope it's not devoid of the things that God considers the proper response. And what would those things be? Well, we've already been studying that. It would be walking in good works, working hard, being built up in character, saying "no" to sin, giving (rather than just receiving), and so forth. And Paul continues in the next verse with a discussion

where he shows just how much he had been investing in taking this gospel of grace to the Gentiles everywhere:

We continue in 2 Corinthians 6:2

<sup>2</sup> For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,  
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. <sup>3</sup> We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that **no fault may be found with our ministry**, <sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup> by **purity, knowledge**, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; <sup>7</sup> by **truthful speech**, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup> through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Paul was one deeply-motivated apostle of Jesus! And look at how his commitment extended even to matters of careful consideration—that is, of use of the mind. In all this mention of what he endured in his job—which he considered a great gift in itself, by the way, and not a drudgery—he made sure to mention that he ran his ministry in such a way that no fault could be found with it. Think about that! So many people are lazy—either in their thinking or in their morals and behavior—and it’s fairly easy to find fault with something or other that they’re doing. Even when they’re making some point to us, they may be right in the overall point, but sloppy in the way they’re making that point—sloppy in their proofs and supports, that is. But not Paul. He went to the trouble to get those things covered. He mentions “purity” in his list—and that reminds me of the passage from James about “purify your hearts, you double-minded”. And he mentions “knowledge”. And he mentions “truthful speech”.

What would motivate a person to go to this level of effort in presenting the message of God?

Grace would.

He had told the Corinthians not to receive God’s grace in vain—and then he demonstrates that he himself had certainly not done that, but that he had such a paradigm of excellence about his service to God. And he wanted the Gentile believers to be acceptable to God in this way, too—and he was willing to wrestle them for it. You can see what I mean in Romans 15, starting in verse 14. As he summarizes his letter to them, he says to this one particular congregation at this particular point in time :

Romans 15: <sup>14</sup> I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. <sup>15</sup> But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, **because of the grace given me by God** <sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul viewed his work among the Gentiles as his own personal offering to God, and he wanted them to be “acceptable” to God, having been made holy. He sees that they have indeed been maturing in goodness and knowledge, and in their ability to teach one another, but look what else he says. He says he had written very boldly to them in some matters, by way of reminder, he says.

But why would he do that? Why would he dare to be seen as nagging them—or why dare to be seen as being critical of them? Why would he open himself up to the undisciplined responses that you’re sure to find in almost every crowd? Things like, “Well, I don’t like your tone, mister!” or “I don’t feel like you’re telling the truth in love, Paul.” Or even, “I don’t hear much grace in that message, Paul, but instead, I hear lots of legalism.”

Have you ever met people like that? Or are you like that yourself? Well, I certainly used to be like that—before I had continued down this highway of trying to understand God’s grace and the proper response to it. But Paul was willing to risk the bad responses of a few—and he tells us exactly why did would dare to write boldly to them on some points of reminder. Get this. He says:

<sup>15</sup> But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, **because of the grace given me by God**

And this one is probably pretty troubling to a lot of people who don’t fully understand God’s grace, but who got off on an exit too early and haven’t yet continued on to the end of the matter. Paul was willing to confront them—not because he was some belligerent, hard-headed guy who “just likes to argue”—no, but because he understood God’s grace. And he understood that they needed to become a people who were acceptable to God in their attitudes. In other words, as he had told the Corinthians, he did not want them to receive God’s grace in vain. And let me add in a bonus point here.

The second of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” This wasn’t about cursing, as some decide prematurely. No, it was about operating under the name of God—as one of his chosen people in this case—as an Israelite—without bearing the proper *character* of one of God’s people. They were not to take on his name for themselves, and yet fail to be people who were godly on the inside. It’s like our previous discussion of washing the cup on the inside, as well as on the outside. That is, you can paint God’s name, or something similar, on the outside of your cup—and this is all a metaphor, of course—but you can write “Christian” on the outside of your coffee mug, yet the inside of it can be all nasty and not clean and not purified and not eager to do what is good.

And the second commandment is warning against that—because that’s bad in God’s eyes. And similarly, when we get to the New Testament, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that they’re being told not to take all these gifts of God—this grace of God—in vain. No, it was supposed to be producing something in them, or else, something was going terribly wrong.

Paul even thought—and this is where it gets even more radical in the minds of some—Paul even thought that the proper response to God’s grace included—get this: Obedience. You can find a lot about this in the Bible, but let me just give you one example passage. I’ll read 8 verses from Romans 6, starting in verse 15—and this is where we start getting into how some of them misunderstood the gospel of grace—or would even spin it on purpose into something other than how it was intended:

Romans 6:<sup>15</sup> What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under **grace**? By no means! <sup>16</sup> Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you

are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, **or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?**<sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, **you have come to obey from your heart the** pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.<sup>18</sup> You have been set free from sin and have become **slaves to righteousness.**

<sup>19</sup> I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.<sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.<sup>21</sup> What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!<sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap **leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.**<sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Did you catch that last line? This “gift of God”—the word for gift there in the Greek is “charisma”, which is built on the same Greek word that’s used for “grace” all over the New Testament—such as in the passages we’ve been studying today. So the end of the road for those who stay in God’s grace is what? It’s eternal life. This was their hope—their expectation, that is, and not just a mere wish. They knew that if they would stay in that grace, in obedience to it, that the end of that journey would be eternal life with God. That’s what this gospel of grace was supposed to yield in them—to build in them—to transform them into. And Paul tells them something very instructive about the road they had gotten themselves onto here. Listen again to verse 17:

Romans 6:17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, **you have come to obey from your heart the** pattern of teaching that has now claimed **your allegiance.**

They once had been slaves to sin, but now they had been converted—even in their very hearts and minds, and not just outwardly, such that they were now slaves to God himself. And once again, we have some evidence of just how God had planned for all that to work. Do you remember how Paul had earlier called it “the gospel of grace”, and how he had committed those elders in Ephesus to “the word of grace”, promising that if they’d stick to it, it would “build them up”? Well, here we see some very similar language, for the Christians here had become slaves to a “pattern of teaching”, and that pattern now had their “allegiance” where sin had had their allegiance before.

When you talk about an “allegiance from the heart to a pattern of teaching”, that’s getting pretty radical for many who think that grace is very important, but who have not yet studied it to the end of the matter—to the end of that highway of attrition. Some people are decidedly un-intellectual, or even anti-intellectual in their view of what a proper religion is, so they find this fact that God expects us to use our minds in religion to be not only disturbing, but just **wrong**. It offends their sensibilities. Not only do they think that God does not, and should not, expect them to study and investigate and ponder and discuss and learn and correct themselves and such—but they will vigorously defend the notion that one can please God **without** doing such things—without having the kind of response that Paul had, and that Paul taught to his congregations.

Can they **prove** this? No—not honestly, rationally, and responsibly—but to them, it’s not so much about having proof as it is about feeling strongly in the matter. In other words, they often make the mistake of

taking the strength of their own opinions in the matter as being evidence in support of the matter itself. It's as if they would argue: "If I **believe** it, it must be true." Or perhaps, "If it doesn't **sound** right to me, it must be wrong." Or, "If it doesn't **feel** right to me, it must be wrong." And some of them will have some partial information on the matter—perhaps a verse or two about grace, for which they have not yet fully considered the greater context of the matter. And they have a very hard time decoupling from those beliefs, feelings, expectations, and ideas they have about it, in order to see the fuller picture that they'd get if they were to continue the investigation to the end of the matter—if they were to "settle the matter", as discussed in Episode 1.

In the early days of our marriage, Kay and I developed a paradigm that was inspired by the Bible, but that also borrows from juris prudence, and from Thomas Jefferson as well. Without going into all that, let me just tell you the motto. It's this: "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, wherever it may lead." (That last clause is the one we borrowed from Thomas Jefferson.) The idea was that we just wanted to know the truth, even if it was going to be shocking to us—or scary—or inconvenient. And I think that we are more apt now to understand the scriptures better than we were before we reached that point—before we were willing to ask the hard questions and do the hard digging, and such. It has opened up more possibilities than just those that are convenient and unchallenging to our thinking and our way of life. So we are free to draw conclusions that differ from those we have drawn before, or from what various churches might draw, or from what our friends might draw.

But suppose that a person were simply unwilling to do or to be like these things that Paul mentioned. Suppose we were unwilling to walk in good works, or to work hard, or to give (as well as to receive), or to be built up in character, or to be allegiant to this pattern of teaching, or to be slaves to righteousness?

How would a person like that handle God's grace?

Well, I've already mentioned those who simply choose to ignore God's grace. But then there are those who twist it to some extent. And let me be very careful to say this clearly: Some will twist God's grace—or take a twisted response to it—a **lot**, and some will only do it a **little**. And whether they do it on purpose, or as an accident—as an error of understanding—I'm sure that makes a difference to God as the just Judge of us all. But it's still bad if it's an error—and even if it's by an error that they exit that road of understanding too soon, they still don't make it to the destination. And I'm not just referring to a full understanding of God's grace, but to the result of that, as discussed back in Romans 6, that we just read. Here is Romans 6:22 and 23:

<sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap **leads to holiness**, and **the result is eternal life**. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Being a slave to God, Paul taught would "lead to holiness" and "the result is eternal life". If he believed that one could get to eternal life without having been "set free from sin" and having "become slaves of God"—and if they could get there without attaining "holiness"—this would have been a really good place to mention that. But he says nothing of the sort. In other words, that gift of eternal life was not for everyone. The two choices were "slave to sin" and "slave of God"—and the two outcomes were "death" and "eternal life". No other choices are mentioned here—nor elsewhere, as far as I have yet to discover in the scriptures.

So while God does indeed pour out grace to people in various ways, he doesn't give that ultimate grace of eternal life to just anybody. It's not for slaves to sin, but for slaves of God.

And again, this truth may be very shocking to some. But it is nothing new. It was in Peter's message in 1 Peter 5, starting in verse 5. Listen very closely:

1 Peter 5:<sup>5</sup> Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,<sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.<sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful.

Again, here's that language about being sober-minded—and note that this is about something that happens in the mind—in the heart—and not just about outward behaviors. And here we see that this sober-mindedness was considered by Peter to be the same thing he called "humility". And what does he say about who gets God's grace? He says that God gives grace to the humble. But what about the non-humble people—what about the proud? Well, it says something quite decisive here. It says that God "opposes the proud".

Now let's park right here for a minute. Do you mean to tell us, Peter, that God's grace isn't for everybody? Do you mean to tell us that God does not extend the fullness of his grace to proud people—to people who will not take a proper mental view of themselves—to people who choose to see themselves not in a reality-based way, but in a falsehood-based way?

Yes, that's what he's saying. And he was not alone in repeating this. James says it in the greater context of the "purify your hearts, you double-minded" passage that we studied in Episode 1. Listen to

James 4:6b Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.<sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.<sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.<sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Again, we have the opposing of the proud, and the giving of grace to the humble. And we have the appeal to purifying the mind—the shunning of the double-minded way of life—and we have the call to humble oneself.

And do you remember that grace-driven "allegiance to a pattern of teaching" in Romans 6:17? Well, Paul seems to be talking about the desertion of that whole idea in Galatians 1:6

Galatians 1:<sup>6</sup> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Their desertion came about not by saying, "I don't like God's grace anymore" or "I don't want God's grace anymore", but by turning away from the actual facts of the gospel of grace to some twisted version of it that included having to follow the Law of Moses as a Christian. He calls this "distorting the gospel of Christ", and it's quite obvious that he didn't think this was good. In fact, right after this, he said that such people would be condemned. Oops!

Jude also talked about the perversion of the truth grace into something else. Writing about something that was going on in his own day in the First Century, he says this starting about half way through in verse 3

Jude 3b ...I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. <sup>4</sup>For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, **who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.**

He talks about the faith having been “delivered to all the saints”. And what I think he’s talking about here is the message of Jesus and the apostles—what Paul elsewhere called “the gospel of grace”. And here come these certain people who had crept into the congregations of the Christians—people whose way of life had long before been noted as assigned to destruction—and they perverted the grace of God into something that would allow for their ungodly and sensual ways.

Do people still do this today? Do they still try to turn the word of grace into something that allows them to remain as slaves to sin, even while calling themselves slaves of God, or children of God, or Christians? Yes, I think so. And I think that while the people Jude were talking about were very extreme in their practice of such things, there’s a whole range of this kind of abuse of grace. It can range from being used to protect, defend, or condone egregiously sinful practices, or from being used to defend what may seem to be much smaller transgressions, such as the idea that the Christian can be right before God even if he or she is unwilling to engage the mind that God gave him or her to use in this world.

Well, who’s the rightful judge of all this? Who’s the one who says whether each of us have had the proper and full response to God’s grace, or whether we’ve fallen short in it? Who says whether we have been eager enough to do good works, and whether we have walked in good works far enough and long enough to be a pleasing sacrifice to him?

Well, it’s God, of course, and Jesus. They’re the ones who have the say-so in the matter. They are the ones who came up with the following idea as the very greatest point in all the Law of Moses. We’ll pick up in the middle of a discussion here in Mark 12, verse 28:

Mark 12:28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup>And you shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **mind** and with all your **strength.**’

That was the command—the greatest command. “Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

Let me ask you—if a person has devoted heart, soul, mind, and strength to God, what else is left inside him to give?

Nothing, right?

Jesus expected that his gifts—his grace—would have the proper effect on the good heart. Just like the seeds sown by the sower in those various soils, the seed down in the “good soil” would produce a great amount of fruit—a tremendous transformation from beginning to end, from day one forward

throughout the rest of the person's life. It would be seen in the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, and in the outward actions as well.

I hope that everyone will keep striving for the fullest possible understanding of God's grace, as well as for the fullest possible response to it. It's so easy to satisfy others with far less than our full efforts, but this isn't about pleasing other humans; it's about pleasing God—even in our most private and inward thoughts, and certainly in how we apply ourselves to understanding the whole Bible and the word of grace.