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Definition of Grace

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Why Is an Accurate Definition So Important?

The Book of Jude is a strong warning that certain ungodly individuals will gradually infiltrate the Church with the goal of promoting a life of pleasure and personal freedom without any restraint or obligation to Godly standards. In so doing, they will grieve the Holy Spirit and destroy the power of the Church. Their primary objective will be to distort the definition of grace so that it becomes a license for sensual living rather than a Divine enablement for Godliness. Jude warns believers to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ One commentary uses the Greek word translated "crept" to describe the method used by those who corrupt the meaning of grace.

of the spacious and seductive words of a clever pleader seeping gradually into the minds of a judge and jury; it is used of an outlaw slipping secretly back into the country from which he has been expelled; it is used of the slow and subtle entry of innovations into the life of state, which in the end undermine and break down the ancestral laws. It always indicates a secret, stealthy, and subtle insinuation of something evil into a society or situation.²

The goal of these infiltrators was to "turn the grace of God into lasciviousness." They may have viewed grace as so all-embracing that no care needed to be taken in their personal lives. Twisting the biblical truth of justification of the ungodly by faith, they may have thought that this meant just justification to sin rather than justification from sin. They may have thought that grace implied a change in God's mind, rather than a change in human nature, experience, and conduct. Jude's message is to warn against the danger of a perversion of the doctrine of grace into a pretext for sinning. He urges Christians to realize that God's power is able to transform a person's life to the extent that one may be victorious over sin.²

1. The Biblical Definitions of Grace

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for grace is *chen*.⁴ It is translated thirty-seven times as grace and twenty-six times as favor. It comes from the root word *chanan*, which means "to bend or stoop to an inferior." It is a causative word meaning "to implore (i.e., move to favor by petition), to beseech, to intreat, be merciful, have (show) mercy upon, have pity upon, or to make supplication." The New Testament word for grace is *charis*.⁵ It comes from the root word *chairō*, which means to be "cheerful, happy, or well-off, to be joyful, or to rejoice." *Charis* is defined in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible as "the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life; including gratitude, joy, and liberality."

2. Grace in the Old Testament and Grace in the New Testament

In the Old Testament, certain individuals "found grace" in the eyes of the Lord, such as Noah⁷ and Gideon⁸. However, in the New Testament, an initial gift of grace is given to each individual. For "of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."⁹ "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world."¹⁰ In the Old Testament, those who found grace possessed qualities that merited God's favor. "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God."¹¹ God said to Moses, "I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight."¹² Moses found grace, because he chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."¹³

In the New Testament, grace is given on the basis that there is none righteous and that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,"¹⁴ "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."¹⁵ Those in the Old Testament who found grace sometimes needed reassurance before they acted upon it. Moses said, "If I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight."¹⁶ Gideon said, "If now I have found

d grace in thy sight, then shew me a sign that thou talkest with me."17 Those in the New Testament are to act upon the grace that is given to them so that more grace can be received. "For by grace are ye saved through faith,"18 "By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name."19"

3. The Dynamic Nature of God's Grace

The grace that comes by Jesus Christ is an active, dynamic energy from God to carry out His will. This concept is based on the definition of grace (charis), "the divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life, including gratitude, joy, and liberality"

Grace Enables Salvation-Grace is a free gift that activates faith. Each person who receives grace chooses to either act upon it or resist it. "For by grace are ye saved through faith."20

Grace Motivates Godly Living-"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world."21

Grace Enables Generosity-The Greek words for grace (charis) and for gift (charisma)22 are related. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich."23

Paul promised that if the Corinthian believers gave generously and cheerfully, "God is able to make all grace abound to ward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.24 Paul further assured them that God would be glorified through their gifts, and a spiritual bond would develop between the givers and the receivers because of the obvious grace of God in them. "By their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you."25

Grace Motivates Godly Labor-Paul's personal testimony praises the dynamic power of grace, as well as his position in Christ through grace. "But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me".26

Grace Enables Increased Strength-When Paul was afflicted with a "thorn in the flesh," he pleaded with God to remove it. However, God told Paul that He had allowed it to keep Paul humble so that he could receive more grace. "For God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble."27

"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.28 "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ : By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."29

The power of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life are both related to obedience. Disobedience resists grace30 and the power of the Holy Spirit can be quenched through disobedience:31

Grace Enables Spiritual Gifts-The Holy Spirit gives to every believer spiritual gifts "according to the grace that is given to us."32 A spiritual gift is God's basis to work supernaturally through our lives to edify other believers and carry out God's work in the Church and in the world.

The power of grace through gifting is clearly stated by Paul when he wrote, "I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power."33

Grace Motivates Genuine Love-The dynamic power of grace is featured in Ephesians. Paul was given the dispensation of the grace of God for the Gentiles34 and the ministry of grace that was given to him "by the effectual working of his power."35

Paul goes on to expand the potential of this power to actuate love: "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that w

orketh in us."36

Grace Motivates Us to Endure Tests-Scripture reminds us that "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do"37 and that Jesus was tested in all points as we are tested-yet without sin. "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."38

Grace Motivates Us to Seek God-We cannot acceptably serve God in our own strength or wisdom. Therefore, "let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."39"

The Faulty Definition of "Unmerited Favor"

The word unmerited is not found anywhere in Scripture, nor is it listed in most dictionaries. In an 1828 dictionary, it is simply defined as "not merited, not deserved, obtained without service."40 Does this mean that we have nothing to merit grace or that we can do nothing to merit grace-or both? It is certain, based on Biblical truth, that we can do nothing to merit the grace of God for salvation. Grace for salvation is a free gift and not the reward for any works that we do to merit it. This distinction was the great battlefield of the Reformation because of the false doctrine that a person could earn salvation by good works. However, reactions to error tend to produce opposite extremes which also breed error. For example, Martin Luther was so committed to the fact that salvation is by grace alone that he did not know how to deal with the verse in James that states, "faith without works is dead."41 He concluded that the Book of James was not inspired Scripture. His problem would have been solved by seeing that initial grace is a free gift of God and growth in grace is a process after salvation. The definition of "unmerited favor" has several inherent problems.

It is too general a definition.-The definition of unmerited favor could apply to any and every blessing we receive from the Lord. We are not deserving of His daily provisions, or of health, sunshine, or rain. This definition is so general that it fails to give any precise explanation of the power and importance of the term grace.

It is more applicable to mercy than to grace.- The term unmerited favor would be more descriptive of mercy than of grace. Grace gives us the desire and the power to do God's will, whereas mercy is what we need if we resist God's grace and fail to do His will. "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not."42

It is not a true definition in all cases.-The term unmerited favor would not apply to the favor that Noah received from the Lord, because that favor was based on his being a righteous man. "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God."43" Neither would this definition apply to Moses, who found favor with God. "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth."44

Two witnesses in the New Testament also affirm that additional grace is merited by a person's humility. James said, "But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."45 Peter reaffirmed this truth by writing, "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time."45

It fails to describe the diverse nature of grace.-Grace is not some static condition that believers possess; rather, it has various functions and is diverse in its nature. Peter explains this: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."47

It makes no allowance for growth in grace.- The favor of God is unlimited; therefore, according to the definition "unmerited,"there is nothing we can do to gain it or increase it. How then do we grow in grace according to the instruction, "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ"?48

It neglects the danger of resisting grace.-If all grace is unmerited favor and there is nothing we can do to gain more of it, the resulting implication is that there is nothing we can do to diminish it. The definition implies that all grace is totally apart from our actions with it or upon it; yet we are clearly warned in Scripture to not resist the grace of God. "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled."49

It encourages lasciviousness when it is applied to the Law.-If growth in grace is totally separate from any action on our part, quoting only part of Romans 6:14 ("for ye are not under the law, but under grace") gives the false perception that we are to reject the Old Testament because we have a special dispensation of grace. This false perception gives the idea th

at God smiles at whatever we do with no consequences for violating His principles.

The context of the phrase, "not under law, but under grace," confirms a definition of grace opposite to "unmerited favor." Paul teaches that God will give a greater enablement to overcome the temptations resulting from a greater exposure to sin. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20).

"What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?"⁵⁰ The Old Testament gives specific insight on how to love God and how to love others more effectively. Toward that end, God gives instructions on how to avoid unseen dangers. A child who does not want to be protected from evil will look at parental instruction as unwanted control. However, a wise parent will not only give detailed instructions on how to avoid problems, but will give further encouragement and assistance to carry them out. This illustrates the true nature of grace which is "the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life."⁵¹