

INTRODUCTION

This message is entitled, “Don’t Waste God’s Grace.” When I was pastoring in Oneonta, Alabama in the 1980s, I drove 45 minutes into Birmingham one morning. I went to a hospital to visit some of our members there. At that time I was driving a Vette—a Chevy Chevette, that is. After I parked my Chevette in the parking garage, I accidentally locked my keys in my car. This was long before cell phones, so I went into the hospital and called my church office. When I explained my predicament, Tommy Pierce, our minister of music, offered to run by my house and pick up an extra set of keys and drive the 45 miles to Birmingham so I could unlock my car. So, after I visited our members in the hospital, I returned to the parking garage to wait beside my car. As I was standing there, a hospital security guard came by and asked me what was wrong. I explained that I had locked my keys in my car. He pulled out a “slim jim” lock-picker and slid it into the door and with one yank, he had the door unlocked. I thanked him for his kindness and he drove off. But I was in a pickle. Tommy was half-way to Birmingham, and there was no way to call and tell him to turn around. I didn’t want him to arrive on his errand of mercy only to learn that he had made the trip in vain. I don’t know what you would have done, but I just walked back over to my car and locked the keys back in it! Sure enough, about 20 minutes later, Tommy drove up and triumphantly handed me the extra set of keys. I shook his hand and told him how much I appreciated his kindness in making that 90 minute round-trip journey of grace to bail me out. Years later when I told him the full story, we both got a good laugh out of it.

The reason I intentionally locked my keys back in my car was because I didn’t want his errand of kindness to be in vain: I didn’t want to waste his grace. In our text today, Paul warns us about the potential for us to “receive God’s grace in vain.”

2 Corinthians 5:21- 6:2 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and the day of salvation I helped you.’ * I tell you now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

**Isaiah 49:8*

Paul warns us about receiving God’s grace in vain, because there is the possibility that we can actually waste God’s grace. Grace has been defined as “God’s unmerited favor.” But that definition isn’t enough. To say that God’s grace is “unmerited favor” is like saying Niagara Falls is a trickle. It’s like saying the Grand Canyon is a ditch. It’s like saying the Amazon is a creek. Grace is so much more than unmerited favor.

There is always a risk when we try to define grace. Phillip Yancey has said that trying to define grace is like dissecting a frog in biology class. You can learn a lot about the frog, but in order to do it, you have to kill it first. By simply trying to define grace, we kill it of its impact. We don’t really need a definition of grace, because we have something better. We have the demonstration of grace—just look to the cross. A God-man becoming sin for me so I might become the righteousness of God. How do you respond to God’s grace? Do you live in constant appreciation of it, or do you receive God’s grace in vain and waste it?

This reminds me of a story about a lady who was helping her mother-in-law clean out her attic. They were sorting through all the items accumulated through the years. The lady picked up a box that contained a brand new, never-been-used purse. She asked her mother-in-law why she never used that purse. The mother-in-law said, "Oh somebody gave me that purse for Christmas years ago, and I thought it was so hideous that I never used it. You can throw it away." The daughter-in-law was crushed because she recognized it as a purse she had given her mother-in-law years earlier. By refusing to use the purse, the mother-in-law had received that gift in vain. There are four ways we sometimes waste God's grace.

1. BY RELYING ON MY OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul was aware of his own sinfulness and His need for grace. Here's his self-assessment. "For 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." (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) Paul worked hard for God, but it wasn't to *add* to grace, it was part of the *effect* grace had on him. He realized how unworthy he was. He wrote, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature." (Romans 7:18)

Remember our focus verse from last week? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) A sinless Christ became sin for me, so I might receive His righteousness as a gift. But in spite of this glorious truth, many of us still hang onto the notion that there is something good about us that we can add to God's righteousness.

Randy Alcorn wrote a great little book entitled, *Grace and Truth*. In it he tells about an experience of attending a conference where he was one of the speakers. Just before he spoke, a gifted soprano soloist sang "Amazing Grace," and Randy noticed she changed the tenth word in the first verse. She sang, "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a SOUL like me." Randy wondered if he was the only one who realized she changed the harsh word "wretch" to a much softer word, "soul." When John Newton wrote the song, he had been a former slave trader, guilty of the vilest sins imaginable. He had no trouble admitting he was a wretch of the worst kind. The dictionary definition of a wretch is "a person considered to be mean, base, and despicable." The fact that we're all wretches is what makes God's grace amazing, mind-boggling, knock-down awesome! If we believe we're basically good-natured souls who only need a little help from God, that guts grace of its impact.

I'm afraid too many people are trying to improve their standing before God by creating their own righteousness. They're members of the Human Improvement Society. The Christian life isn't turning over a new leaf, it's a new life. The Christian life isn't about *improving* your flesh, it's about *replacing* it. Salvation is more than a change in your life, it's an exchanged life. He takes my sins on Himself and replaces my dirty-rags righteousness with His white-robe righteousness. Another way we may waste God's grace is:

2. BY BEHAVIOR THAT DISHONORS THE LORD

The Bible says, "For the grace of God that brings salvation ... teaches us to say, 'no' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age." (Titus 2:11-12) God's grace is for wretches like me and you. But once we've been touched by His grace, He transforms our behavior. When it comes to our conduct under grace, there are two extreme grace mistakes that can be made.

(1) LICENSE says, "Since I'm under God's grace I can sin all I want."

I'm afraid grace has been misunderstood by some people. They think, "God's grace has forgiven all my sins, past, present, and future, so I can just sin all I want and I'm still saved." Jude warned that there would be people like that in the church. "... they are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." (Jude 4)

There are some churches that no longer talk about sin, and the blood atonement of Jesus Christ. Sin is no longer called wickedness; instead it's just a weakness. Their attitude is, "Live any way you want, and we'll allow you to be a part of our church." These churches are filling up with people who want to have Jesus and their sin, too. I've got a name for those kinds of people: GRACE POTATOES. Like couch potatoes who are so lazy they just sit around and watch TV, grace potatoes aren't appalled by their own sin, or anyone else's! This is a terrible perversion of grace. In Romans, Paul asked, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may abound? By no means! We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1)

I once had a man tell me. "You Baptists believe once-saved-always-saved. If I believed that I would go out and sin all I want to." I said, "I *do* sin all I want to. In fact I sin *more* than I want to. The truth is that since Jesus is in my heart, I don't *want* to sin." Don't waste God's grace by using it as a license to sin! The other extreme is

(2) LEGALISM says, "I must obey the rules to earn God's love."

Legalism reduces Christianity to set of rules to be obeyed instead of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the belief that I can earn God's favor by my rule-keeping. Paul addressed legalism in Galatia when he wrote, "How is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you." (Galatians 4:9-11). Paul castigated them because they were still enslaved to religious rules, religious regulations, and religious rituals. You can find some grace-less, legalistic churches today. They expect members to change their behavior *before* they will be accepted in that church. Christianity to them has been reduced to using a certain translation of the Bible, wearing a certain kinds of clothes, wearing your hair a certain way, or whether or not you go to the movies.

I remember a pastor friend of mine in Alabama who was called to serve in a rural church. He worked at a regular job in addition to pastoring the church. He lived in the parsonage beside the church, and one Sunday afternoon he decided to wash his wife's car, because he didn't have time

during the week. That was a bad choice, because before he finished the job, two of the old deacons in the church drove up and told him that it was a sin to wash his car on the Lord’s Day, and that he could no longer be their pastor. That’s legalism.

As a recovering legalist myself, I still slip into the fallacy of sometimes thinking that God loves me less or more depending on how well I perform for Him. That’s a waste of God’s grace.

(3) LOVE says, “Because I am loved, I love God, so I want to obey Him!”

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” (John 14:15) It all boils down to our motive. Why do we want to live a holy, pure life? The best reason is because I realize how much God loves me, and as I love Him in return, I *want* to obey Him.

Once there was a husband and wife who really didn’t love each other very much. He was very demanding of her, so much that he gave her a list of things he wanted done, and he insisted she read them every day and follow them to the letter. The list included demands like what time she should get up, when his breakfast should be served, and exactly how the housework should be done. After several long years of unhappiness, the husband died. After some time, the woman fell in love with another man, who dearly loved her. They were soon married, and her new husband did everything he could to make her feel happy and loved. He continually showered her with compliments and tokens of his love. One day when she was cleaning house, she found the old list from her first husband tucked away in a drawer. As she read through the list she realized even though her current husband hadn’t given her a list, she was doing many of the things on the list anyway. She realized she was so devoted to her husband that she was doing those things out of love instead of out of obligation. That’s the reason we should obey Jesus.

The devil wants to push us to extremes. But there is a wonderful balance to grace. Don’t sink into far extreme of license, thinking that since you’re under grace anything goes. Don’t get petrified into legalism, reducing your faith to a list of rules and regulations. Stay centered on love as your primary motive!

3. BY FAILING TO GROW AS A CHRISTIAN

We receive God’s grace in vain and waste it when we simply consider grace to be a get-out-of-hell-free card. God instructs us, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)

One of the problems in the Corinthian church was spiritual immaturity. In the third chapter of his first letter Paul chided them, saying they were a bunch of squalling spiritual babies who demanded constant attention and care. He wrote that he had to feed them spiritual milk because spiritual meat would have upset their little tummies.

Don’t we love newborns? Sure! But what if I showed you a picture of Lizzie, my 18-month-old granddaughter and I told you I took it last week? And what you see in the picture is a six pound, twelve ounce infant with no teeth, little hair, and barely able to hold her head up on her own. You’d probably feel very uncomfortable and if you’re honest, you’d have to say, “I’m so sorry.”

But the good news is that Lizzie is growing! She's walking, even running, and talking, and getting into everything that isn't locked up or nailed down.

A baby that doesn't grow is tragic. The sad truth is I'm afraid I've been around some Christians who are still spiritual babies. Years ago when Amy Grant sang a song entitled "Fat Baby." The lyrics said, "I know a man maybe you know him too; you never can tell, he might even be you. He knelt at the altar and that was the end; he's saved and that's all that matters to him; His spiritual tummy; it can't too much; one day a week he gets his spiritual lunch; on Sunday he puts on his spiritual best and gives his language a spiritual rest. He's just a fat little baby; He wants his bottle and he don't mean maybe; He's sampled solid food once or twice, but he says doctrine leaves him cold as ice." (*Words by Steve Millikan and Rod Robinson*)

How long have you been a child of God? Is there any spiritual growth and progress in your life? If we equated spiritual growth to education, what grade are you in spiritually? Spiritually speaking, are you in elementary school, high school, or college? Or are you still in spiritual kindergarten?

Spiritual growth isn't rocket science. Years ago, I learned the simple model of the disciple's cross that produces spiritual growth. Just imagine a cross; it has a vertical beam and a horizontal beam. The vertical beam represents our relationship with God. When I move up the cross, that represents me talking to God, prayer. When you move down the cross, that represents God talking to me, Bible study.

When you move out the horizontal beam it points to the two groups of people in world, believers, and those who haven't yet put their faith in Christ. When I move out in one direction horizontally, I relate to believers by fellowship. That's what we're doing now. When I move out in the other direction of the cross, I related to pre-believers by sharing my faith.

Just as there are four extremities to a cross, these are the four habits of growing, maturing Christians. If you concentrate on participating in these four activities on a daily basis: Prayer, Bible study; fellowship; and sharing your faith, I promise you will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!

When you remain a spiritual baby, you waste God's grace. Finally, I waste the grace of God:

4. BY ASSUMING I CAN LIVE WITHOUT GOD'S GRACE

Look again at verse 2 in our text, "I tell you NOW is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." The most important word in that verse is the word NOW. The Bible says, "But he gives us more grace. That is why the Scripture says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (James 4:6) It doesn't say God GAVE us grace (past tense), it says God GIVES us grace (present tense). God gives us grace and then He gives us more grace. Receiving and depending on God's grace is a daily activity, not a one-time commodity we accessed when we were first saved.

Jerry Bridges has written a great book entitled *The Discipline of Grace*. He says, "On your best day you are never good enough to be out of need of God's grace, and on your worst day you are never bad enough to be out of reach of God's grace." (*The Discipline of Grace*)

I must confess for much of my Christian life I received God's grace in vain, because I thought I received His grace back when I was 9 years old and that was all the grace I needed. But the longer I walk with the Lord, the more I appreciate His grace. Once the grace of God was just a doctrine to me, a truth in God's word that I could quote from memory, "For by grace are ye saved through faith." Of course, it is a wonderful truth, but the older I get, the more I cherish God's grace in the present tense. I am coming to realize that the grace of God is as vital to me as breathing. I could not exist for one moment without His grace. His grace is a powerful, life-sustaining reality in my life.

I once heard a story about a man in Europe in the early years of the 20th Century who dreamed of emigrating to America so he could start a new life. He scrimped and saved every penny he earned until he had enough money to book passage on a passenger ship to New York City. As the day of his departure approached, he packed all his belongings into a tattered bag. With the little money he had left, he bought some cheese and a few crackers for the voyage. As the ship departed, the man was excited, but after a couple of days, the cheese had become moldy and the crackers were soggy. As he walked the deck of the passenger ship he gazed into the portholes to see happy people in the dining room eating sumptuous meals, and that only made his hunger pangs sharper. Another few days passed, and his hunger only intensified. It was torture to walk by the dining room and see and smell the delicious food being enjoyed by the other passengers. Finally, on the last day before the ship docked, he was so famished he approached a steward and said, "Please sir. I'm starving, but I don't have any money. If you'll just give me some food, I'll be glad to wash dishes or do any other chore to pay for some food." The steward said, "Let me see your ticket." After examining the ticket, the steward said, "Sir, this ticket includes all your meals. You could have been eating every meal here in the dining room." While that man had been suffering, he didn't realize all that food he had seen had been available to him. Ephesians 1:7 speaks of the riches of God's grace. All those riches are available to you now, if you'll claim them.

CONCLUSION

God's grace is such a precious, powerful, amazing commodity that we should be careful we don't receive it in vain, that we never ever waste God's grace.

A man who doesn't attend our church ask me a theological question recently. A few weeks ago, an elderly man in our community shot his wife, and then turned the gun on himself. Both of these people were professing Christians and active in their local church. I won't mention their names, but I know many of you knew them. The man asking me the question knew the old man well from when he had served as bailiff in court. He explained to me the man's wife had painful pancreatic cancer, so it's most likely her husband shot her to end her suffering and then he turned the gun on himself.

Some churches teach suicide is a mortal sin and that a person who commits it forfeits any hope

for heaven. The theological question the man asked me is one that I'm sure many people wonder about. "Will that man be in heaven?" Before I answered him, I pondered for few seconds, praying for wisdom. And the words to one of my favorite songs by Chris Tomlin came into my mind that say, "Your grace is enough. Your grace is enough. Your grace is enough for me." So I said to the man who asked me if he believed this couple would be in heaven. "That was a tragic event, and murder and suicide are terrible sins, no doubt. I certainly don't excuse what he did, and I believe there are other God-honoring ways to deal with a terminal illness. But if that man knew the Lord and trusted Him for salvation, I believe God's grace has covered all his sins, including his final ones. It boils down to this: either His grace is enough to cover every sin, or it isn't. What do you think?" And he said, "I believe it's enough. Thanks, that helps me a lot."

The most tragic way people receive God's grace in vain is: If you aren't yet a follower of Jesus Christ, then you're receiving a message of grace right now. If you don't respond right NOW to God's grace by surrendering your life to him, then you're wasting His grace.

You may be thinking, "What's the rush? I've always got tomorrow." *Are you certain?* God's time for salvation is always now. The devil's time for salvation is always tomorrow. God says, "Trust me now." The devil says, "Wait, you've got plenty of time." Which voice are you going to follow? Will you receive God's grace and forgiveness today?

OUTLINE

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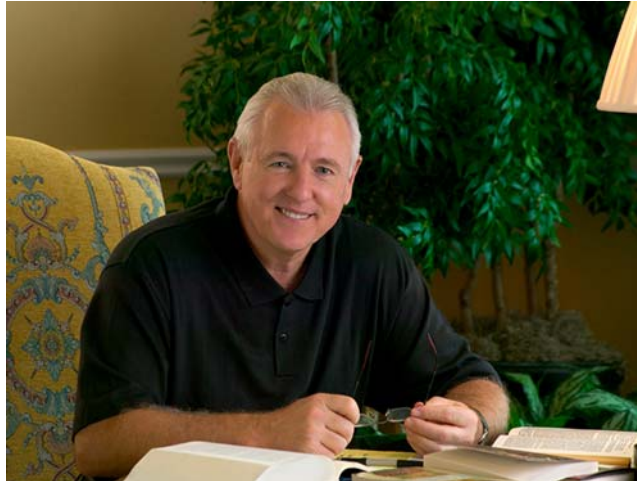
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes