

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Peter Ollerhead

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## Features of Christianity: The Grace of Christ

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where the subject for this morning's talk is contained in 2 Corinthians 8:9. If you have been listening to the recent programmes, you will know that this is the fourth in a series on various features of Christianity. Previously, we have dealt with the sweet savour of Christ in chapter 2, and epistles of Christ in the following chapter. Last week it was the love of Christ under consideration, whilst today it is the grace of the Lord Jesus. I read our text, as usual, from the King James Version of the Bible; "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."

The grace of the Lord Jesus is a favourite topic of the Apostle Paul in this letter, indeed in most of them, though we have not time to quote more than a couple of references from the second letter to the Corinthians. In verse 1:2 he writes: "Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus." Again in 4:15 we read: "For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God."

I want, this morning, as the Lord helps, to show the beauty and wonder of the Lord's grace in the great salvation that reaches out to every one of us. We ought, before we proceed further, to explore the meaning of the word, in order to learn just what is meant when the apostle uses the word 'grace' in his letters to the various churches. I say apostle, yet I must emphasise it is not limited to his writings. The thought of grace is in the Lord's statement to Zacchaeus when He said that the Son of man had come to seek and to save that which was lost. There was no way that Zacchaeus, the tax collector, could ever have known the favour of God, except the Lord had stopped beneath the tree and spoken to him. Another example from Luke's Gospel must be that of the prodigal son, whose father ran to welcome him home, freely restoring his position as a son of the house, a totally undeserved action. Can any of us ever fathom the depths of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ? How true are the words of Moffatt, the great Bible translator, who claimed that the religion of the Bible is a religion of grace, or it is nothing; No grace, no gospel!

I think that it is well known that at the heart of the meaning of grace is the basic thought of a completely free gift, especially when it concerns God's gift of salvation. This comes to men unearned and unmerited, never for one moment could it be achieved, or possessed, by man's own striving.

We must always beware of thinking that we can earn God's favour, or work our way into His good books. I am sure that we have heard people complain, when something bad has happened to them, that they did not deserve it, as if God is awarding rewards or punishment in the light of our merit, as we go through life. We live in a world where good and bad things happen to all of us owing sometimes to the actions of men, the economy or a combination of circumstances. People, generally, have chosen to live without God and cannot, therefore, complain that events that affect them badly are the fault of God.

What is plain from Scripture is that God, through Christ, is waiting to bless people with many spiritual blessings, not according to our goodness or merit, but according to His purpose and grace. It might be asked how God makes known this grace to us. The answer comes from such passages as 2 Timothy, 1:9-10: "[God] 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, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

From such verses, we see that the free gift of grace was manifest in its fullness in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

To further emphasise the divine activity involved in grace, I wish now to quote directly from WE Vine's *New Testament Dictionary of New Testament Words*, where he writes that grace is: "the friendly disposition from which the kindly act proceeds, graciousness, loving kindness, goodwill generally, especially with reference to divine favour."

When we read such phrases as "friendly disposition" and "kindly act", we have to remind ourselves that we are discussing the Supreme Governor of the universe, or to use another's phrase, the God who is immortal, invisible, wise, and hidden in light. Truly, the revelation of God, presented to us in the Lord Jesus, is revolutionary. He offers to

us life, when all we could look forward to was death, as Romans 6:23 states: "For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life."

A modern hymn, in *Mission Praise*, puts this quite succinctly:

*"Wonderful grace  
That gives what I don't deserve,  
Pays me what Christ has earned,  
Then lets me go free..."*

Wonderful grace! To close this discussion on the word 'grace' I want to quote the thoughts of another, which, I believe, will confirm the meaning I have been trying to get across at the beginning of this morning's talk. It is from Kenneth Wuest's *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*. "God's grace is that matchless, wonderful, marvellous, act on His part when He out of the spontaneous infinite love of His heart steps down from His judgment throne in heaven to take upon Himself the guilt of our sin and the penalty which is justly ours, doing this not for His friends but for His enemies. Here the word 'grace' goes beyond its meaning in pagan Greece."

With such a description, none of us can be unsure as to the depth of the word that forms so great a part of our study this morning.

When we grasp the fact of God acting in grace towards us, we begin to realise the failure and offensive attitude of trying to earn His favour. How insulting to proffer a few paltry actions of our own in the face of such divine generosity. We must, however, bring in at this point the necessity of faith, as Paul makes clear in Romans 3:24-25: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God."

This passage is also clear that the holiness and justice of God are not compromised by His desire to bestow blessings upon us.

On reading over what I have written so far, it occurs to me that it can appear technical and theological, and not related to our everyday life. This is not the impression that I wish to bring out from the Scripture regarding the grace of the Lord Jesus, as it is a most precious attitude for God to display towards us.

Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean by recounting an incident that I was involved in some years ago when I was teaching in a large school in one of the midland cities. I was bringing in my class of nine and ten year olds to begin morning school, when I noticed one of the girls in tears. "What's the matter, Mandy", I enquired. "Please sir," she said, "My rabbit's died this morning" "Never mind," I replied, "I'm sure your mum will buy you another one." As might be expected, such an answer did not pacify Mandy. This was noticed by one of my colleagues, who was waiting by the door for her class. She bent down, wiped Mandy's eyes with her handkerchief, gave her a hug and a kiss, and the little girl responded to that far more than to my platitudes. The grace of God can be active in us by bringing the enriching experience of His great salvation and His continuing presence as we live this earthly life.

In that incident there is a little picture of the graciousness of God, who reaches down to where we are to deal with the major problem of sin, through the gracious actions of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. When we turn the actions of a loving God into theology there is a danger of leaving out the intimacy and immediacy of His presence, that can be ours through faith, as we learn from Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

I urge you to read the whole passage for I have only time to add the last four verses of the chapter that state: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together growth into a holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye are also builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

The result of being saved by grace is that we are brought close to God and to our fellow believers. This is not just theology to stimulate the mind, but rather a revelation of the grace of God to stir up our affections.

After that rather long general introduction to the subject of the grace of the Lord Jesus, I wish now to return to 2 Corinthians 8 to view the verse in its context. In the early chapters of this letter, Paul has been explaining his conduct towards the Corinthian church, along with a description of his apostolic ministry. In chapter 7 he concentrates on the reconciliation with the church at Corinth. When we reach chapter 8, we find that Paul introduces the necessity of supporting the poor of the flock, especially the Christians in Jerusalem. Verses 1 and 2 bring the grace of the Macedonian churches to the fore: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to it of the grace of God bestowed on the churches

of Macedonia; how that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.”

We must note how the grace of God had affected the Macedonians, so that they looked kindly upon their fellow saints, despite their own poor circumstances. Notice, also, that their trials and afflictions did not rob them of their joy. The following three verses make clear that the apostle is aware that they reached deeper into their pockets than would have been expected, considering their slender resources.

In addition to this, he makes it clear that they had pleaded to be allowed to express their unity with the believers in Jerusalem, by participating in the collection. I emphasise again that our subject today is the grace of the Lord Jesus, and we have learned that being gracious is to have a friendly disposition. From these verses we see that the Macedonian Christians, having tasted the grace of the Lord, replicated it in abundance.

Now in verses 6 to 12 he is waiting to see the response of the Corinthians, as we can read in verses 7 and 8: “Therefore, as ye abound in everything, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.”

It would seem that the Corinthian church was not short of spiritual gift, as we learned from the passage just quoted, so Paul was hopeful that his plea for support for the poor in Jerusalem would be answered out of an abundance of grace.

It could appear to the shallow reader as if Paul, by citing the generosity of the Macedonian church, is seeking to introduce a spirit of competition, to ensure that the Corinthian donation would exceed that of the Macedonians. Nothing could be further from Paul’s mind as can be seen by his desire, in the passage just quoted, that the Corinthians’ giving would be a gift stimulated by grace. This is the reason for the lovely and oft quoted verse 9, where the Lord Jesus is held up before their gaze as the supreme example of generosity in sacrificial giving. Let us read again those beautiful words: “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.”

There is such a depth of meaning in this verse that, sometimes, all we can do is to meditate on the wondrous love of the Father, who sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. As another and favourite commentator of mine has written regarding this verse: “Rich, indeed, both was and is the Lord, who had called them by His grace; and to what an unmeasured depth of poverty did He abase Himself, that they and we might share the blessings of His wealth. The wealth of the believer is the Lord Himself. His grace is apparent in His acts, and we should thence infer His love. The one is our salvation, the other, the unending joy and meditation of the saved.”

After that pause, to allow for a short concentration of the sublime beauty of the graceful activity of the Lord, we must proceed in our study of the grace of the Lord Jesus, as seen in this passage. Notice how Paul singles out the Corinthians as the recipients of that grace. He does not write: “...for our sakes He became poor,” but rather: “... for your sakes He became poor,” He is seeking to stimulate their affections by reminding them that they were the ones who were the objects of the Lord’s gracious giving of Himself.

We must also notice, from this verse, that grace is not a feature of God that remains unknowable. The first words of verse 9 state, categorically, that the Corinthians knew that grace. What they knew, we also can know, if we turn unto Him in repentance and faith. I feel that here I must quickly point out that repentance and faith are not independent actions on the part of a sinful human being. Even the very faith and repentance are products of God reaching out to us in grace.

Some of you listening to me might be asking just when the Lord Jesus became poor. This, I believe, was the act of incarnation that followed His pre-incarnate renunciation of heavenly glory. Having said that, I must emphasise that it does not mean that He ever ceased to be God because, as many Scriptures make clear, He ever was and ever will be the Son of the Father, whether in the manger at Bethlehem, or on the cross at Calvary. The apostle is comparing the wealth of the Lord’s heavenly existence with the lowliness of His earthly existence, including the suffering upon the cross. The incarnation of the Son of God into manhood is another wondrous demonstration of grace that should cause us to break out in songs of praise and thanksgiving, whenever we are reminded of it.

We must now move on to consider again the practical effects of this knowledge of the Lord’s grace on our lives. As we have seen, the immediate circumstances that Paul wished to affect, at Corinth, was for the completion of the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, as verse 11 makes clear. The rest of the chapter deals with the delegates, who will take the whole collection to Jerusalem. It is obvious that the apostle is endeavouring to place such a delicate matter above his personal involvement. He did not want to be accused, or to allow for any possible suspicion that he was enriching himself. If there is a situation that calls for grace to be exercised, even today, it is where money is involved.

Before finishing this morning's talk, I wish to recall a visit I made to a church in Olney, Buckinghamshire. This is where John Newton, the writer of the hymn "*Amazing Grace*", ministered in the latter years of the 18th century. In the church there is plaque that mentions the rich mercy and forgiveness experienced by Newton, who spoke of himself as a libertine and an infidel. It is well known that he was, for a time, a slave trader. After experiencing a dramatic conversion, Newton was ever conscious that it was only grace that had forgiven his sins and brought him into the knowledge of salvation. A few verses of his most famous hymn will be a suitable conclusion for our time together today:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*

I finish by repeating the words that the Apostle Paul uses at the end of most of his letters. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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