

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 17, 2011**

## **MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE**

**Romans 6:1-15**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every church, for better or for worse, has its own character. And every church, for better or for worse, has its own characters. One of the characters in the church I pastored in Altoona, Pennsylvania, was an outspoken older woman named Meriel Smith. Meriel's husband, Frank, an elder in the church, was retired after a long and successful career as a banker in town. It was he who imparted to me this profound spiritual truth, which I have shared with you before: "In the beginning, everyone was named Smith. Those who sinned had to change their name." ☺ (I forget exactly where it says that in the Bible. If you find it, you can let me know. ☺)

Frank and Meriel were not blessed with any children, but they lived a long, prosperous life. The thing about Meriel – perhaps I should say, *one of the things about Meriel* – is that she spoke her mind, sometimes too freely. She did not have the spiritual gift of tactfulness. Or, if she had it, she neglected to use it. Meriel stepped on more than a few toes with the force of her words. And she knew it. She knew her opinionated comments often got her in hot water. Over the years I knew her, I heard Meriel say many times: "All I want on my tombstone is (the word) 'Misunderstood.'"

Misunderstood. You've been there, haven't you? It is easy to be misunderstood, isn't it? And to misunderstand or misread, from time to time, what others want to communicate to us.

Even something as foundational and essential to the Christian faith as grace can be easily misunderstood. It has happened many times throughout history. Lots of people have done it. And it still happens today. So, in the light of Paul's teaching here in Romans 6 on the implications of grace, I want to talk with you today about *Misunderstanding Grace*.

### **THE TRUTH ABOUT GRACE**

I don't want you to misunderstand the word grace, which I think is the most beautiful word in the English language. Or any language. Grace, says Jerry Bridges, is "God's free and unmerited favor shown to guilty sinners who deserve only judgment" (*Transforming Grace*, p. 21). That is a good definition. In the words of Philip Yancey, which I hope are familiar to you by now, "Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it" (*What's So Amazing About Grace?* p. 42). Free of charge. You cannot buy it. You cannot earn it. It is a gift, freely given by God, to people like you and me who do not deserve it and never will. When you receive the gift of God's saving grace in forgiveness and freedom from the burden of your sin and guilt, through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ (which is the only way to receive it) then you become a new person on the inside. You become a new person in Christ. And you can begin, as Yancey says, "to pipe the tune of grace" (p. 42) in a world

polluted with ungrace. As people who have been saved by grace, God wants us to live by grace. God wants us to be people of grace. He wants the church to be a place of grace. A grace place. God wants us to live grace-filled lives, spreading the aroma of grace “in an atmosphere choked with the fumes of ungrace” (p. 35).

### **THE BENEFITS OF GRACE**

We spent several weeks exploring the benefits of grace laid out for us in the first 11 verses of Romans 5, the blessings given to everyone who has been justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who demonstrated the love of God for us by giving His life for us on the cross, the righteous dying for the unrighteous, in order to redeem us from our sins and to reconcile us to God. We have looked in depth at these five benefits of grace:

- Peace with God
- Unrestricted access to the grace of God, which is available to us at every moment, in every situation, and for every need
- A joy-filled, Christ-centered hope of seeing and sharing in the glory of God
- Joy in suffering, because of the ways God uses suffering in our lives for good
- Salvation from the righteous and holy wrath of God against sin.

All these benefits belong to you, if you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ in saving faith. They are your present possession and your future hope. They are God’s gifts to you. Take hold of them. Embrace them. Meditate on them. Work them into your life, and live them out in your daily life through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you.

### **DOES GRACE GIVE US A LICENSE TO LIVE A SIN-DRIVEN LIFE?**

In the second half of Romans 5 (verses 12-21), Paul contrasts the sin of Adam and the consequence of it – death – with the grace-gift of forgiveness and salvation that we who put our trust in the Lord Jesus have received through Him. The good news, Paul concludes in verses 20 and 21, is that God’s grace is greater than all our sin. No matter how big or terrible or frequent our sin, the grace of God is bigger still. Big enough to cover all our sin. *All* of it.

But, one may ask, if this is true, if God’s grace really does cover *all* my sin, why bother to be good? Since grace increases where sin increases (which is what Paul says in Romans 5:20), why not keep on sinning to give God more and more opportunities to forgive us? Why not be as bad as we want to be in order to show how good, how gracious, how merciful, how forgiving God is?

The answer may be intuitively obvious to us (or maybe not), but it is a serious question. It was a serious objection raised by critics of the gospel Paul proclaimed. So Paul asks the question in Romans 6:1: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

Then, in verse 15, he asks an almost identical question: “What then? Shall we sin (or keep on sinning) because we are not under law but under grace?”

Both times Paul gives exactly the same answer. In the Greek, it says *Me genoito*. Different Bible translations translate it differently. The NIV and the ESV both have it, “By no means!” The King James Version, which is 400 years old this year, says, “God forbid!” Other ways of expressing it might include: “Absolutely not! No way! May it never be so! Are you crazy? How could you even think such a thing?”

You can tell that Paul is adamant about this. But some people don’t get it. Paul had critics who raised loud objections because they thought his message of grace encouraged sin. They thought it promoted sin. They thought it was a license to self-indulgence, a free pass to enjoy the pleasures of sin, without any spiritual consequences, because it proclaimed the forgiveness of the totality of a person’s sins, past, present and future. They thought it would lead to a life of lawlessness.

At the other end of the spectrum are people who also misunderstand the gospel but, instead of objecting to it, they embrace it. Only they do it for the wrong reason. They are looking for a free pass to do whatever they desire and live a life of unbridled sin. They think, “This is cool. I can do anything I want, because God has already forgiven me.” There is a character in W. H. Auden’s poem *For the Time Being*, who says, “Every crook will argue: I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.” (Quoted in Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* pp 177-178)

Both of these perspectives reflect a terrible misunderstanding of grace. In the next to last book in the Bible, Jude (the brother of James and half-brother of Jesus) minces no words in calling out “godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (Jude 4). In its paraphrase, *The Message* describes these false teachers as “shameless scoundrels” whose “design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license – which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master.” This is the misunderstanding of grace Paul was seeking to prevent, or to correct.

Yancey calls this misunderstanding of grace “grace abuse” (p. 180). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazi regime in April 1945 for his part in a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, used the term “cheap grace” to describe it in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*. There were exceptions, of course, but the church in Germany in the 1930s was largely marked by a belief that God just loves and forgives everyone, so it doesn’t matter how you live. You can live any way you want. The only thing required is a mental assent to certain doctrines of the church. Bonhoeffer called it “cheap grace.” Here is part of what he wrote:

“Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before.... Cheap grace ... amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

True grace, costly grace, “is costly because it condemns sins, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of His Son ... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon His Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 45-48).

Grace is free, yes. But it is not cheap. It comes free of charge to us. But it cost Jesus everything. There is no place in Paul’s message of grace – no place in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ – for “cheap grace.”

To those who thought the gospel he proclaimed would actually promote sin, and to those who wanted to use it as an excuse or license to continue to live a life of sin, Paul’s answer is that God’s grace not only forgives our sins, it also delivers us from a life of sin. Grace, as John Stott writes, does more than justify. It also sanctifies. It changes us from the inside out. It changes how we think. It changes the desires of our hearts. The kingdom of self-promotion, self-indulgence, self-absorption, self-fulfillment – in other words, the kingdom of self – is toppled. A desperately needed regime change takes place. A new king begins to reign in us. Jesus takes the place which is rightly His on the throne of our lives.

No longer are we under the dominion of sin. No longer are we under the oppressive rule of sin. Now we live under a regime of grace (6:14). As Paul says in verse 2, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” Then, using the imagery of baptism, Paul describes the death and burial of our old, sin-driven way of life, and our resurrection to a new way of life by the grace and power of God. Notice that Paul does not say that sin has died in us. He says that we died to sin. He does not say that we will no longer be tempted to sin. He does not say that we will no longer be bothered by the enemy of our souls. But through the grace of Christ, we have died to the power of sin and guilt, which will never be able to separate us from His redeeming love. He has brought us from spiritual death to new life (Ephesians 2:1-10). He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and brought us into His own kingdom (Colossians 1:13). How in the world can we go back to the old way of life? Or refuse to let go of it? Tim Keller writes in the foreword to Eric Metaxas’ acclaimed biography of Bonhoeffer that if we truly understand and believe the gospel, it will change what we do and how we live. “Anyone who truly understands how God’s grace comes to us,” he says, “will have a changed life” (*Bonhoeffer*, p. xiv).

Grace does not leave us the way we were. It changes us. Grace does not encourage sin. It discourages it. Grace does not promote sin. It opposes sin. Grace does not condone sin. It liberates us from sin.

If you have experienced this saving grace in your life, you are no longer under the dominion of sin. You live in the land of grace. You live in Grace-land. And grace is able to do what the law cannot. Grace triumphs over sin in the life of every person who trusts in the saving

power of Christ. No matter how messed up you are. No matter what sins you have committed. No matter what skeletons you have in your closet. No matter how different your public image may be from the way you really are. Repentance, as Yancey says, is “the doorway to grace” (p. 182). For everyone who comes to the Lord Jesus in true, humble repentance and trusting faith, grace wins. *Grace wins!* Not cheap grace, but the costly grace which nevertheless comes free of charge to people like us who don’t deserve it now and never will.

### **HOW TO LIVE UNDER GRACE**

Before I close, notice for just a moment in verses 11-14 how Paul instructs us to live as people of grace under the dominion of God’s grace. As grateful recipients of God’s grace, we are to actively resist and oppose sin in its ongoing efforts to gain mastery over us. Having died to sin (verse 2), we are to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God (verse 11), since that is in fact what we are through the saving power of Christ. We are to refuse to let sin have any power in us or over us in this mortal life (verse 12). We are to refuse to offer any part of our bodies, whether eyes or mouth or hands or feet or our private parts, to sin of any kind. Instead, we are to give ourselves completely to God (verse 13). We are to glorify Him with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20). To put it another way, you are not to give sin a vote in the way you conduct your life. Don’t give it the time of day. Don’t even run little errands connected with the old way of life. Instead, throw yourself wholeheartedly into God’s way of doing things. Sin has no right to tell you how to live. (From *The Message*).

Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? *Me genoito!* Are you out of your mind? Dear friends, make sure you do not misunderstand God’s amazing grace. Do not ever make it into cheap grace. Instead, receive God’s costly grace in your life, rejoice in it, live by it, and let it change you from the inside out.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the praise of Your glorious grace. Amen.