

What is Grace?

by Peter John Schrock

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even while we were dead in our trespasses, He made us alive together with Christ --by grace you have been saved--
(Ephesians 2:4-5)*

“Where are you going?” cried James Caris as a man grabbed James’s wallet and started to run down the street. This was not an uncommon thing. James had lived in the inner city of Chicago for almost two years now and people there had cheated and stolen more things from him than he could count or sometimes buy. Turning the ignition of his car, it huffed a few times and then revved up. Applying some gas he started after the stranger. James had wanted to talk to this man when he had first seen him on his front porch. The man had been wearing an old dirty T-shirt and a pair of green shorts. James had seen him on the same porch several times before in this run-down neighborhood and his heart was heavy for him.

“Hey! wait up...” James shouted leaning out his window. The man could run surprisingly fast for someone who had to be at least 50 or 60 pounds over-weight. It was almost humorous to see his extra weight bounce with him as he took every leap forward.

“There isn’t anything in the wallet, look for yourself,” he cried out again. James knew a lot better than to leave a wallet full of stuff sitting on his passenger seat when in neighborhoods like this. He had learned all too well that some of the people in this area were more interested in getting money to support drug habits than have a real conversation, especially to have real conversations with people like James. James was a short man who was well trimmed. He wore large plastic frame glasses that most people would have only worn back in the eighties, but he just could not bear to look through the tiny little frames that seemed to be popular now. Plus, they were much cheaper and they helped in regard to his low budget.

James was just about caught up to him as the man slowed enough to glance in the wallet while he was

running. Finding that James was telling the truth, the man came to a stop.

James stopped along side him saying, “I spent the last of my money on gas when I was coming over here, but if you want the ninety nine cents I have left over, its right next to where you got the wallet.” Looking through the window the man could see that James was telling him the truth as he counted the four pennies and other change. He was a little out of breath and now looking at James with curiosity.

“What do you want?” the man said as he spoke between gasps of air.

“I told you before, I wanted to help you mow your lawn. I was driving through here a week ago and I noticed that your yard was the only one that actually was covered in grass. So, I figured I would wait a little while and come back and see if you needed some help to mow it.” The yard was a surprisingly large lot because the houses on either side seemed to have been bulldozed in the past and now there remained only a wide open yard with one house in the middle.

The man squinted his eyes and slightly turned his head as he asked, “Did you make that grass grow there?”

James smiled, for he knew he had been found out. “I can’t make anything grow, but I can plant.” He let out a chuckle. What a great night that was, he remembered. He had taken a bit of a risk, but had managed to get a bunch of grass seed and spread it all over the man’s lawn when it was dark and raining one night.

The Man was looking at him now, tilting his head a little to the side trying to figure out what to think of the whole situation.

“I got my lawn mower in my trunk and it’s already full of gas...” The man still looked at him, trying to tell if this was something that might lead to trouble. His breathing became a little more regular, but a bead of sweat was dripping from his head. It was about 85 degrees outside and the glaring sun was the only thing in the sky.

“You want something to drink?” James tried as he could see the man’s shirt was starting to become saturated from his little jog. “I picked up a couple Gatorades for us when I was getting the gas.”

The man let out a sigh and skeptically said, “the yard’s over there.” The man nodded his head toward the yard. James began to back up. In this neighborhood, the street didn’t usually have too many cars on it and so James backed up all the way to the man’s house rather freely. He had already gotten the lawn mower out of the car and was ready to start by the time the man had made it back to his house. James watched as the man walked up to his porch, sat down on the steps, and began to stare at him. Pulling the cord, James attempted to start the mower. It took a couple tries because the engine had gotten a little flooded from the bumpy ride over to the house. Once he had the mower started, he went to work going back and forth with a nice even pattern. After about an hour and a half James let the mower wurr to a stop in front of the man’s house.

The Man sat there looking at him. “What do you want?” he asked with some concern in his voice.

James replied, “I want you to know that I care about you.” The man just looked at him for a while. “It’s important that you know that I care about you,” James said again.

The man leaned back on the steps and tilting his head to one side said, “Why?”

James looked a little sorrowful, “you are going to hell unless you stop living your life of sin and rebellion to God.”

The man looked down at the ground and sighed and went back into his house. James’s heart sank a little. He had been thinking of all the things he could say to the man while mowing, but now it seemed that his chance to talk had ended for the day. Walking up to the man’s door, he placed a small card on it. The card had his contact information on it and a few scripture verses. Then down

by the foot of the door, he put his two bottles of Gatorade that he had purchased in the hopes that they could have shared them together over a lengthy conversation.

About a week later when James was getting ready to head out of his house, the phone rang. He snatched it up as he grabbed his keys.

“Hello,” he chimed.

“My grass is getting kind of long...” a man’s voice came cautiously through the ear piece. James’s forehead wrinkled as it took him a few seconds to realize who it was.

“Would you like me to stop by again sometime soon?” James asked.

The man spoke a little freer this time, “Could you come over this evening?”

“Sure, how’s seven sound?” James spoke with a smile forming.

There was a little pause, “that will work.”

The day went by quickly and once again James found himself at the man’s house. The man was on his usual place on the porch leaning back in his chair. In his hand was a bottle of Gatorade and another sat by his feet. When he saw James, he stood up and started down his porch steps. James got out of his car and started to go for the lawn mower, but was caught off guard when the man told him to wait. The rest of that evening the man explained to James how the Lord had been working in his life for a long time, and when they had talked it had really pricked his heart. Later on, being greatly convicted in his heart of his rebellion to God, he decided that he was no longer going to seek to please himself, but to live for Jesus. Finally, he explained how he woke up the next morning and had seen all the grass in his yard. While he was looking, the Lord had spoken to his heart and said, “the seed that falls on good ground produces a harvest.” At this James Caris smiled, because he could see that God’s seed was now growing and producing a harvest in this man.

what does this mean....

Many may consider this story to be pointless, and may think that it was simply a waste of time to read all of it, but it was placed here for a reason. Most people have come to look at grace in two different ways. It is either a blanket that covers up sin or it is some abstract force that empowers people to live holy lives. Of course, in the back of people's minds they are always told to remember that grace means unmerited favor, but when it comes right down to it, grace has become a doctrine about the things stated above. The purpose of the story is to bring our minds back to a tangible definition of grace. Grace is the way James lived. In all points he treated the man with kindness that was not deserved. This is GRACE.

The Bible speaks of grace many times, and in many different ways. We are saved by grace...we are under grace...it is by grace and not of works...not I, but God's grace at work in me...grace and peace...and the grace that brings salvation appearing to all men and teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly passion, and to live self controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age. Having stated all these, the question stands, how does God's undeserved favor save us and teach us to live godly lives without becoming the doctrines stated above?

In 1 John 3:16 it says, "This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." Jesus came and showed us unmerited love by laying down his life for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). You see, it was by the favoring love shown to us that we have learned what a life of love is and have entered into that love relationship with him. If God reveals to you his character and how to live like him, that is undeserved kindness (that is grace). No one deserves to know him or to be able to

live in fellowship with him. God is favoring you when he reveals himself to you and when you have intimate fellowship with him. God's grace is an intimate display of loving affection toward the unworthy. Through his display of affection toward us, we learn how to display that affection back toward Him and toward others. This is the heart of Titus 2:11-12, that the undeserved love that we are receiving from God is teaching us to have the same, yet tremendously deserved, love for him. We must remember that we don't deserve to be loved by God, and so it is unmerited favoring of us if he does love us (it is grace).

God doesn't bestow this affection on everyone. Romans 5:2 teaches us that it is by believing what God says that we enter into a relationship with him of undeserved kindness (grace). So we are saved by God's display of intimate affection toward us by sending his son, and through our belief that we can lay hold of that salvation despite the fact that we are undeserving. We must believe that we do not deserve anything from God in order to lay hold of an intimate relationship with him. For in 1 Peter 5:5 we learn that God resists and opposes the proud, but he shows intimate loving affection to those who are humble enough to realize they don't deserve it. When men continually experience God's kindness and favor toward them (i.e. God's grace is at work in them), they are empowered to delight in difficulties and live a holy life.

The grace of God is not a doctrine about some "covering" thing that makes God forget about sin or some abstract force that does mighty works. It is much more! It is the intimate loving affection of the Father for his undeserving children, which saves and transforms their lives.