

# “What Grace is Not”

- Corinthians 6:1-10 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson  
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**2 Corinthians 6:1-10** *We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says:*

*"In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*



Paul's first letter to this Corinthian church served to the discipline of the local fellowship. His second letter was primarily an issue of the discipline of each individual within that fellowship. There are many within the greater church who will not even entertain the word discipline in their Christian lives, therefore sadly rejecting the root meaning behind our word "disciple." Without discipline in our lives, we will never be a disciple of Christ.

Yet so many balk at such a notion! They want to hold the position that grace excuses them from all personal effort and accountability. But grace is not the mediator between God and man, **Jesus is**. Oh, we are indeed saved by grace, but grace is not to determine the perimeters of the personal manifestation of our faith. Our mediator, our *example*, and our standard is Christ, who clearly calls us to serve one another, serve the Father, and work for the kingdom as a whole.

Paul began this chapter with the call that we not "receive God's grace in vain." Such is truly one of the most abused directives in all of scripture, sadly, because a large part of the Christian world has been "self-justified" in the false belief that grace not only saves (which is true), but that grace also excuses them from all scriptural commands. Point of fact: *it does not*.

*"There is a form of religious piety that utters a hearty 'Amen!' to the most stringent demands of discipleship, but which rarely does anything about them."* (D.A. Carson, "The Gospel According to John")

There is a great danger ...an active threat to our spiritual position, in the *hearing* the Word of God over and over, and slowly becoming numb to its call to action. Like a callous, over time we can become insensitive to God's "still, small voice." We can gradually lose our sensitivity to God's direction and slide into the most dangerous of spiritual situations, where we no longer are aware of God's presence or hear His voice, even while we continue in perpetual religious exercises like church attendance and church service.

There is a rare disease known as CIPA that renders a person unable to feel pain or much of anything. We can far easier develop "spiritual CIPA" and not even know it. Note Ezek 33:30-32

*“Speedily I will dissipate the grace of God, it’s supply will become stale and ineffective in my life, and I will become totally barren if I am always looking back upon the past, drawing upon past experiences and old deliverances...if I am not proving that the God of Jacob and the God of Elijah and the God of Moody and Taylor is my God today, with grace sufficient at every moment to meet every need. Beware that you do not dissipate the grace of God by failing moment by moment to lay hold of a heavenly supply.” (Redpath)*

The *manifestation* of God’s grace ...the *concrete and tangible grace*, is to be actualized daily in the life and ministry of every born-again individual. We are called to live our lives as “*believers in sacrifice*,” as Jesus was, the broken bread and poured out wine, in service of the King and the blessing of our brothers and sisters in Christ. How have we as a greater church so lost our way? What happened to Jesus being the model of our faith manifest? Radical? We don’t even want to be *uncomfortable*...

**6:1 We then, [as] workers together [with Him] also plead with [you] not to receive the grace of God in vain.**

I am often amazed when I come across clear scriptural directives that are either so completely ignored or directly rejected by vast segments of what would call themselves “the church” and then they wonder why things aren’t working as the label indicates. This is one of those passages. For Paul begins in verse one with a crucial doctrinal standing that admittedly we can blow right by, or like the old children’s game of telephone, we simply hear something other than what was really said. Paul makes the statement “as workers together with Him...” What we tend to hear is “as workers *for* Him.” But those two statements are very different things.

Paul accurately states we are rather “workers *with* Him.” That subtle change in language has profound ramifications. It puts to rest the hyper-Calvinist position wherein God does *everything* to the degree that we can do *nothing*, and to even try is legalism and works oriented belief-ism. It at the same time stops the individual that is attempting to earn his way to good standing with Christ with the thinking that God somehow needs our help, and we then try to operate on a point system.

Our service is to be *with* Him. Oh, He indeed wants us to work, but *beside* Him, in *relationship with* Him, in *unity with* Him...*connected to the vine*. Via His power, guidance, leading, and methodology. Psalms 127:1 says “*Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted. Unless the LORD protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good.*”

In that same vein of thought concerning building our faith house on false ideas, Paul then goes on to tell us to not “*receive God’s grace in vain.*” Once again, we have a large segment of the greater church that has built their whole “house” on the principle of extreme grace. Don’t misunderstand me on this...I believe that all grace is extreme, and how glad I am that it is. I am speaking about...with vernacular failing me no doubt, concerning the teaching that grace in unlimited and essentially serves as a get-out-of-jail-free card.

The doctrine is then established that looks to an unequivocal grace as the power to save us and to enable a successful walk. But that saving “power” is not an *attribute* or *practice* of Christ, nor is it a side effect of a gift He has given us. (IE: “grace”) It IS Christ and our close relationship with Him. Our work *with* Him. We are saved “by grace *through* faith.” Not faith in grace or faith in faith, but faith *in HIM*. The true “grace” aspect lies in the fact that we actually *can* do it that way and not have to pay the insurmountable debt of sin ourselves!

We in this church generation tend to lean upon grace as a kind of superglue that binds together all of our worldly participations, passions and pursuits with our faith life. Meaning I can have the world *and* God, because I have “grace brand” crazy glue. Our faith will undoubtedly look like a Frankenstein...with various parts all glued inexplicably to our creation, but hey “*it’s alive,*” or so with *think*, so we’re ok to forgo the aesthetics!

Or we treat grace like a lordship “discount card.” I don’t have to give God *everything* because I have my “grace discount card” which allows me to indulge in worldly pursuits, excuse my fleshly behaviors, and regularly renegotiate the terms of my contract with Jesus for salvation, redemption, and eternal life. Because...*well*, because I have grace.

And yet it is *literally* this kind of thinking that Paul is talking about when he says we are not to receive His grace in vain! He is calling upon us to “make good use of God's gift of undeserved grace,” to not to let God's kindness be wasted on us. Romans 6:14-17 tells us “*Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God’s grace. Well then, since God’s grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Don’t you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.*”

We have all witnessed some wicked behavior by some who would call themselves Christians. Instances of great hurt toward others and abominable lies, where there is no repentance exercised and the thinking is it is ok because they have grace. Is that what grace is? I assure you it is not. For our actions therein is known in scripture as a “transgression.” Transgression is a “knowing sin”...one in which I knew it was wrong and did it anyway, and moreover have not repented of it before Christ *and* the one sinned against. Scripture would tell you in that situation you are not only not covered by grace, but that you should be concerned that you aren’t actually a Christian, no matter how religious you might be. See Romans 10:26-31 and 1 John 3.

Those passages and others clarify the boundaries of this ocean of grace. First John 3:6 says, “*No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.*” Verse 9 says that those who have been “born of God” will not continue to live sinfully. The implication is that this is not a matter of trying harder. Rather, it is the equivalent of saying, “A fish cannot remain on land for long because its nature is to seek water.” A fish could flop onto the shore and survive for a short time. But it was not made for land and cannot continue there. When we are born again, our natures change, and we cannot continue in sin or hold a sin unrepentive.

We must take note that, bearing this passage in mind, that God’s free, unmerited love and favor *can* indeed be received in vain; received as emptiness and void of truth. The original word interpreted as “vain” means “destitute of spiritual wealth, as one who boasts of his faith as a transcendent possession, yet is without the fruits of faith...endeavours, labours, acts, which result in nothing...fruitless, without effect.” The grace given to us is indeed to ***have effect upon our lives and walk. It is to make us stronger, more committed, more focused, more aware.*** But it usually just makes us more excusing of our shortcomings and often simply lazy.

For all God has done to open the doors and clear our debt, what will be our response? Will we live and breathe each day embracing the gift of life, and acknowledging the gift of salvation being offered us? We can play church and walk in religiosity, yet still not embrace his full salvation practically in our lives. Will we step upon the cross in our pride and resistance to Him? Will we attempt to receive eternal salvation while still holding on to our daily lives and the world in which we are merely to be ambassadors? Will we attempt to receive eternal life and forgiveness of sin while withholding our actual living, our allegiance, and our love?

Paul has no doubt in the work and power of God, nor in God’s ability to make good on all His promises. His skepticism lies rather in whether men will respond in kind. For it is the nature of humanity to be “takers.” Being a “giver” comes only through a real controlling indwelling of the Spirit of God. We are fond of saying we are “saved by grace.” But that’s not what the passage says, is it? Grace alone will not save you. Jesus saves you. What He did on the cross saves you. *Grace exercised through and with a faith in Christ* saves you.

***6:2 For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.***

This is from the book of Isaiah and in the original language, the words literally read: “In the time of grace I answer you.” So neither Paul nor God himself has changed the subject after verse 1.

Today we live and breathe in the loving and gracious hands of Christ. How long will we wait to make a full commitment? Will we ever surrender all? Today God’s grace is indeed poured out upon us. *Today* is our day. Today is *your* day.

Many of us have said “someday” for so very long.

“*Someday* I will become a Christian.”

“*Someday* I will stop this sin.”

“*Someday* I will make things right with God.

“*Someday* I will give Him ALL of me and ALL of my life.”

“*Someday* I will serve Him.”

“*Someday* I will respond to His grace toward me.”

“Someday” of course is one of Satan’s greatest weapons. We know the old adage; “someday” never comes. It lives only as part of our “famous last words.” “*Someday I am going to...*”

### **6:3 We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed.**

The ministry to which Paul is referring is not just aimed at pastors and teachers. He has already spoken concerning the fact that the ministry of the kingdom of God is a call upon every life that has been renewed in Christ. Grace is not permission to stand down and grow lax, but rather the permission *and the empowerment* to step up and engage on Team Jesus. With that being said, I am willing to take that call as a pastor and as a man.

Paul is calling us to embrace the righteous use of God’s grace, to minister, to *serve* in such a way as to do our level best not to bring a mark against God or His church. That will require us to embrace consistency, faithfulness, holiness, and endurance, even through difficult and in-convenient situations. It will certainly require us to embrace the practice of repentance.

*“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...”* Winston Churchill (June 4, 1940) Does our Lord and the eternal nature of the battle we fight deserve less than this?

We cannot afford half-hearted involvement in serving a Saving Redeemer who has never wavered in His commitment to us. He made the supreme sacrifice, living every moment for us, then ultimately dying to redeem our very lives. There was no holding back, no complaints, no resentment over the cost. He gave everything. It was a perfect and total sacrifice of life.

Yet how often we can forget all that He has done and has given us in the way of life and blessing. We can begin to compartmentalize God into our datebook calendar like a meeting we have scheduled on a Tuesday between 3:30 and 4! What does your life and service unto Christ say about our God? Do people point at you and say, “*If he is a Christian, then I have no interest in Christ?*” Paul was always careful that he never subjected Christianity to ridicule through faithlessness or a half-hearted commitment in his life.

### **“It’s a Strange World.”**

*“Shy sedate, conservative, normally very quiet people scream at the top of their lungs, yell obscenities at the umpire, jump up and down, hug the person sitting next to them whom they have never seen before in their lives, and we call them fans!*”

*Hundreds of thousands of people endure sub-freezing temperatures, and wind-driven rain, sleet, or snow. They bake in a heat-exhausting sun; they sweat, they pass out, they get sick—all to cheer on their team of spoiled millionaires, and we call them fans!*

*Sitting in the stands at a Green Bay Packers football game are a group of young men with their shirts off. The temperature is 15 degrees below zero and the wind is blowing 30 mph. Somehow their exposed chests communicate enthusiasm for their team, and we call them fans!*

*They decry the evils of television, yet they watch it from three to eight hours at a time if their favorite team is playing. Early-to-bed-early-to-rise people have been known to stay up until 2:00 am to see if their team can pull it out in the last inning, and we call them fans!*

*School children and teachers alike cut classes, faithful employees with exemplary work records call in sick, people throw shredded paper out of buildings, hundreds of thousands of average humanity parade for miles behind a caravan of trucks carrying the World Series champs, and we call them fans! They cry when their team loses and cry when they win; they carry elaborate signs saying “We love You, Roger Clemens” or “Albert Pujols for President,” they pay thousands of dollars for next years’ season tickets, and we call them fans!*

*They go to church for an hour or so on Sunday. They read their Bibles, they believe in God as Creator, they volunteer to help the poor, they bow their heads to say grace at meals, they lift their hands in worship, they talk to other people about Jesus, and we call them fanatics!”*

**How much more should our love and commitment be to our Savior, our Redeemer, our Lord?**

**6:4-10** *But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

There are various paths one can pursue in order to prepare for the ministry of the kingdom: bible colleges, seminaries and the like. But here we find the record of Paul’s training and the credentials he held: This list serves as a very real dividing line for the church today.

On one side are those who preach the historic and biblical faith, the path that may indeed include any number of the things listed here. On the other side is the new Jesus-light church that is busy rewriting the faith to make it more palatable and comfortable for our modern world. One which embraces experiences over substance and truth. It is ignoring God’s idea of love, which is essentially parental in nature, and replacing it with one humanistic in essence and politically correct in manifestation.

The “new Christianity” wants nothing to do with the kind of faith we read here. It is based on a “feel good” agenda that pursues comfort and emotional well-being as its supreme goals instead of discipleship, glory to God, the advancement of His kingdom, the salvation of lost souls, the dying to this world and the embracing of Him as our Lord *not just our Savior*. Paul’s ministry was based upon the “word of truth” (vs 7). Truth is eternal, never changing, and always based on fact. Regardless of the reputation or report that preceded him, Paul never compromised on the integrity of his message.

Paul did not finish his ministry with a PHD or a big church, rather being thought of as a deceiver, never being known or received by the intellectuals in Jerusalem. Although Paul may have been unknown in Jerusalem, he was however well known in hell.

*“Going about casting out demons, the sons of Sceva said, ‘We adjure you in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches, Come out.’ ‘Jesus we know,’ the demons answered, ‘and Paul we know. But who are you?’”* (see Acts 19:15).