



LESSON 7

By Grace Alone

We are saved *by grace alone*, but what is “grace”? How do we define it? The most widely known hymn of all time – *Amazing Grace* – is all about grace. John Bunyan, who wrote the classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, also wrote *Grace Abounding*. The modern poet and essayist from South Dakota, Kathleen Norris, author of the well-known book, *Dakota*, has also written a book titled *Amazing Grace*.

One of the most famous verses in Scripture, John 1:16, is about grace: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” What is this “grace upon grace”? The English phrase here probably reflects a superlative in the original Hebrew: the greatest of all grace.

Frequently Used

The word “grace” regularly appears at the beginning of Paul’s letters. For example, he writes to the Romans: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Even in Galatians, where Paul leaves out the traditional “thanksgiving” of the Greek letter because he is severely criticizing the Galatians for abandoning the “truth of the Gospel” (Gal 2:5, 14), he nevertheless begins with the traditional salutation.

The word “grace” also often appears at the end of Paul’s letters, as in the famous benediction in 2 Cor 13:14: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”

There is a bishop whose stock sermon is: “Everything is grace!” The well-known Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said: “The Lord has no enemies. All is grace.”¹

But what is grace? It is a gift, as Paul writes in Romans 3:24: “They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. . . .” Grace is goodness, divine love, and forgiveness. It is all that which is good.



Other religions affirm “grace”

We may think of “grace” as a Christian word, but other religions affirm “grace,” too. For example, Buddhists and Hindus believe in grace. Hindus even affirm *grace alone*.

New Age religions also affirm “grace.” These “religions” are hard to define because they usually do not have doctrines or structures. Rather, they are “movements” which blend traditional Christianity with Eastern mysticism. They commonly teach that we all have a spark of divinity within us and we are all progressing toward a kind of godhood, a “Christ-consciousness.” We all have the potential to grow in grace if only we engage in certain spiritual disciplines or exercises.

If everybody – Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, New Agers – affirms “grace,” are all religions essentially alike?

To the contrary, it is the devil’s own trick to turn the message of the cross into a general idea of love and grace. Whenever this happens, we have left the narrow way of salvation that is Jesus *Christ alone* and fallen into the ditch called Gnosticism.

The word “Gnosticism” means having secret knowledge or ideas. The ditch of Gnosticism is not a new problem. It has been a danger from the beginning of the church. In our day many have fallen into this ditch, that is, into the temptation to regard grace as anything lovely or loving. Many Christians today speak as if “grace” is like the colors of a sunset, or anything nice, sweet, or beautiful.

But beauty, even the beauty of the earth, is not what Christian grace is all about.

Being nice and sweet is not what Christian grace is all about.

Just as salvation is *by Christ alone*, it is also *by grace alone*. Grace is what God does. What does God do? He takes us, caught in sin and death, and saves us from sin and death by the cross. Grace is what God does on the cross. Grace is, as Paul says in Rom 5:8: “. . . while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

What *grace alone* excludes

What is *grace alone* against?

Here a basic difference between Catholics and Protestants comes out. For Catholics grace is in nature, that is, within us. Catholics claim that there is a bent toward God within us. If only you do the best that



is in you, then God will help you. After doing the best that is in you, you can get the saving grace which comes through the hierarchy of the church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, which claims that it alone has the fullness of grace.

In contrast, for Lutherans (sinful) nature is *overcome* by grace. In other words, there is an opposition between nature and grace.¹

God alone is the Holy One, and we are the unholy ones – the opposite. In God there is no sin, no unholiness. He is the only one who is able to defeat sin, death, and the devil. He does it on the cross, by himself, without our help, and it is finished (John 19:30).

In baptism the Lord snatches us. As Luther says: “And this is the reason our theology is certain: It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.”²

Salvation *by grace alone* is like the picture on page 57 of the hand reaching down out of the sky to grasp the drowning man.

Grace alone, by itself, is an error

Grace alone by itself is heresy. As we have seen, other religions affirm “grace,” but they define grace quite differently than Christians do.

Even some Protestants, such as the writer Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian, adopt the Catholic view that grace supplements nature. In her book, *Amazing Grace*, especially in the chapter on Mary, the mother of Jesus, Norris presupposes grace supplements nature rather than that the Lord snatches us because we are falling to our destruction. We are saved *by grace alone*, grace which is outside of us, in spite of us.

The Cross and the Crown

The “alones” are not loners. Rather, over the head of *Christ alone*, like a crown, circle the other *solas*, pointing to Christ as the living center. Working together, the *solas* mutually define each other – *the Word alone* equals *scripture alone* equals *the cross alone* equals *faith alone* equals *grace alone* – to *the glory of God alone*. Each *sola*, if isolated from the others, becomes a false gospel. Taken together, they make what is the gospel of *Christ alone*, the one upon whom we can depend.

50 • The Cross and the Crown

Resources related to this lesson

Chapter 4 of *Where God Meets Man*, Gerhard Forde.

Website: www.crossalone.us

From the home page link titled **Major Theological Issues** go to:

Universal Salvation and click on:

- Is everybody saved?
- Is “mission” all important?

Buddhism click on:

- Buddha loves me, this I know.

Islam click on:

- Do we pray for Muslims?



For discussion

1. What is “grace”?
2. Broadly speaking, what do New Age religions teach about grace?
3. Describe how Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian, adopts the Catholic view of grace in her book, *Amazing Grace*.
4. Which of the two images on page 57 best conveys salvation by *grace alone*?
5. Which of the following hymn lines convey that grace is what God has done in Jesus Christ? Which suggest grace is a special power that infuses good works?

- • Rise, remember well the future
God has called us to receive
Present by God’s loving nurture,
Spirited then let us live.
Alleluia, alleluia;
Spirit, grace by whom we live.
- • May swords of hate fall from our hands,
Our hearts from envy find release,
Til by God’s grace our warring world
Shall see Christ’s promised reign of peace.
- • O blessed heav’nly chorus!
Lord, save us by your grace,
That we, like saints before us,
May see you face to face.
- • Son of God, eternal Savior,
Source of life and truth and grace,
Word made flesh, whose birth among us
Hallows all our human race.

Endnotes

- 1 Recall the title of Desmond Tutu’s recent book, *God is not a Christian: And Other Provocations*. See Lesson 2, endnote 1.
- 2 *LW* 26:387.