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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

VOLUME 15 • NUMBER 2 • 2006



Y'KNOW, I'M STARTING TO THINK
IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BIG GUY.

GRACE-FULL



MONTE E. WILSON

Grace
She takes the blame
She covers the shame
Removes the stain
It could be her name

Grace
It's a name for a girl
It's also a thought that
Changed the world
—U2

Many of the words and concepts we Christians cherish have grown vague due to overuse, misuse, and abuse. The word "love," for example, is used as so much white-noise in conversation, or as if it were a cheap perfume to cover up odorous behavior. Not so with the word "grace." It still has a bit of a shine to it, still makes our hearts skip a beat at the

thought of it, and still holds deep meaning for all who know their need of it.

But do we really understand the fullness of what God's grace is and what it demands?

Most evangelicals are fairly certain they know the meaning of "grace." Grace is God's unmerited favor—"for by grace are you saved," and so forth. This is the gift of grace that is "for" us. Fewer, however, are familiar with the concept and experience of God's grace working "in" them. This is the grace that restores, reforms, and transforms us. Sadly, fewer still are familiar with the grace that flows "through" them toward others. But there is only one kind of grace, not three. The gift produces the fruit that results in service to others.

Being grace-full has been a concern of mine for most of my Christian life—especially when I have acted as if I were full of something you don't even want on the bottom of your shoes. The question that constantly bombards my heart and mind is this: What does it look like when grace is flowing out of me toward others?

- How does a grace-full person behave toward his or her enemies?
- How do I demonstrate God's grace, in word and deed, to unbelieving "notorious sinners"?
- How, specifically, does an individual who is full-of-grace behave toward all humans?
- How will a grace-full person show up for the poor, the sick, the orphan, and the disenfranchised? (By "show up," I mean: What will the grace-full do, and how will needy people experience such a Christian?)
- What does being grace-full look like when interacting with those Christians who are "overtaken in any trespass"?
- How am I to give grace to those with whom I have serious theological differences?
- What does it mean to "grow in grace"?

- How does a church—a community birthed in and sustained by grace—corporately apply the answers to the above?

"Grace" is not a little prayer we offer up before chowing down. It is the gift of life that directs how we live our lives. Those who have accepted God's gift of grace are thereafter molded in character and motivated in deed by his gift.

Grace is the gift that keeps on giving. It is the nature of a person filled with grace to give that grace to others, for grace recreates us for good works (Ephesians 2: 8–10).

GRACE BEHAVES GRACIOUSLY

There is another question regarding being grace-filled. On the face of it, this question appears so trivial and inconsequential compared to the preceding questions that, when asked, has the impact of momentarily stopping all of the mind's other thought processes in their tracks. Yet, I think it must be asked.

What does grace manifesting itself as graciousness look like in our social behavior and habits?

- How does a grace-full person behave as a host or hostess of a dinner for friends?
- How does grace shape our conversation and behavior with our peers at the office?
- What does a grace-full person do when an elderly person steps into the room?
- How does an individual filled with God's grace behave toward those who can do him no good or offer him no advantage?
- What does graciousness look like when interacting with people from different cultures and ethnicities?
- How does a grace-filled person respond when his or her cell phone disrupts a conversation he or she is having with other people?

- How does an individual who is grace-full show up before bellhops and maids?

Before pooh-poohing these questions, ask yourself this: What did Paul mean when he wrote that love is not rude, that love behaves appropriately? Do we reserve acting appropriately (lovingly) at church but forget about it at the office dinner party? And if we do forget about how love behaves at the party, were we actually behaving appropriately at church—or were we merely putting on our Jesus-mask?

G. K. Chesterton once said, “There is no such thing as being a gentleman at important moments; it is at unimportant moments that a man is a gentleman.” Replace “gentleman” with the idea of “social graces,” and you will get the point I want to make. While many of us reserve acting with grace for “important moments,” such as ministering to loved ones on their deathbeds or going on a two-week mission trip to Haiti, it is in those “unimportant moments” that we see just how filled with grace we are.

People who are full-of-grace are gracious, courteous, and kind. Typically, when we hear a minister speak about evidences of growing in grace, courteousness and kindness are not topics that are even referred to, much less emphasized. Yet isn't it the social coarseness of so many of our more zealous fellow believers that most often hinders our ability to effectively witness to unbelievers?

Think about it: How often is the intent to bring God's grace into the public square undercut by an utter lack of social graces? For example, imagine being an advocate for the life of unborn children . . . while chewing food with your mouth open and holding your fork as if it were a baseball bat.

“Truth” is *not* all that matters. Was the truth spoken in love? Was the bearer of truth behaving courteously? It is not enough to share God's grace with others: we must also *demonstrate* his grace in our deportment.

Being grace-full means that all our attitudes and actions are shaped, informed, and directed by God's grace. This includes those actions in both “important” and “unimportant

moments.” People who have received the gift of God's grace in Christ, and in whom his grace is doing its transformational work, will increasingly manifest his grace in their day-to-day interactions with the world in which they live . . . *will they not?*

Like the song says, *this* is the “thought that changed the world.”

AUTHOR

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