

Grace, Grace, And More Grace

Posted By [Tullian Tchividjian](#) On December 13, 2013 @ 10:21 am In [Uncategorized](#) | [17 Comments](#)

^[1]The definition I give for grace in [One-Way Love](#)
^[2] comes from Paul Zahl:

Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is love coming at you that has nothing to do with you. Grace is being loved when you are unlovable.... The cliché definition of grace is “unconditional love.” It is a true cliché, for it is a good description of the thing. Let’s go a little further, though.

Grace is a love that has nothing to do with you, the beloved. It has everything and only to do with the lover. Grace is irrational in the sense that it has nothing to do with weights and measures. It has nothing to do with my intrinsic qualities or so-called “gifts” (whatever they may be). It reflects a decision on the part of the giver, the one who loves, in relation to the receiver, the one who is loved, that negates any qualifications the receiver may personally hold.... Grace is one-way love.



Grace doesn’t make demands. It just gives. And from our vantage point, it always gives to the wrong person. We see this over and over again in the Gospels: Jesus is always giving to the wrong people—prostitutes, tax collectors, half-breeds. The most extravagant sinners of Jesus’s day receive his most compassionate welcome. Grace is a divine vulgarity that stands caution on its head. It refuses to play it safe and lay it up. Grace is recklessly generous, uncomfortably promiscuous. It doesn’t use sticks, carrots, or time cards. It doesn’t keep score. As Robert Capon puts it, “Grace works without requiring anything on our part. It’s not expensive. It’s not even cheap. It’s free.” It refuses to be controlled by our innate sense of fairness, reciprocity, and evenhandedness. It defies logic. It has nothing to do with earning, merit, or deservedness. It is opposed to what is owed. It doesn’t expect a return on investments. It is a liberating contradiction between what we deserve and what we get. Grace is unconditional acceptance given to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver.

It is one-way love.

Think about it in your own life for a moment. Odds are you have caught a glimpse of one-way love at some point, and it made all the difference. Someone let you off the hook when you least expected or deserved it. A friend suspended judgment at a key moment. Your father was lenient when you wrecked his car. Your teacher gave you an extension, even though she knew you had been procrastinating. You said something insensitive to your spouse, and instead of retaliating, she kept quiet and somehow didn’t hold it against you the next day. If you’re married, odds are the person you ended up with showed you this kind of love at some point along the line.

When the chain of quid pro quo is broken, all sorts of wonderful things can happen. One-way love has the unique power to inspire generosity, kindness, loyalty, and more love, precisely because it removes any and all requirement to change or produce. And yet, as beautiful and lifesaving as grace can be, we often resist it. By nature, we are suspicious of promises that seem too good to be true. We wonder about the ulterior motives of the excessively generous. We long ago stopped opening those emails and letters that tell us what we’ve “already won.” What’s the catch? What’s the fine print? What’s in it for them?

Grace is a gift, pure and simple. We might insist on trying to pay, but the balance has been settled (and our money’s no good!). Of course, even if we’re able to accept one-way love when it comes our way, we have trouble when it reaches other people, especially those who’ve done us wrong. Grace offends our sense of justice by being both implausible and unfair. We are uncomfortable because

grace turns the tables on us, relieving us of our precious sense of control. It tears up the time card we were counting on to be assured of that nice, big paycheck on Friday. It forces us to rely on the goodness of Another, and that is simply terrifying. However much we may hate having to get up and go to the salt mines every day, we distrust the thought of completely resting in the promised generosity of God even more. So we try to domesticate the message of one-way love—after all, who could trust in or believe something so radically unbelievable? Robert Capon articulates the prayer of the grace-averse heart:

Restore to us, Preacher, the comfort of merit and demerit. Prove for us that there is at least something we can do, that we are still, at whatever dim recess of our nature, the masters of our relationships. Tell us, Prophet, that in spite of all our nights of losing, there will yet be one redeeming card of our very own to fill the inside straight we have so long and so earnestly tried to draw to. But whatever you do, do not preach grace... We insist on being reckoned with. Give us something, anything; but spare us the indignity of this indiscriminate acceptance.

The idea that there is an unconditional love that relieves the pressure, forgives our failures, and replaces our fear with faith seems too good to be true.

Longing for hope in a world of hype, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the news we have been waiting for all our lives. Jesus came to liberate us from the weight of having to make it on our own, from the demand to measure up. He came to emancipate us from the burden to get it all right, from the obligation to fix ourselves, find ourselves, and free ourselves. Jesus came to release us from the slavish need to be right, rewarded, regarded, and respected. Because Jesus came to set the captives free, life does not have to be a tireless effort to establish ourselves, justify ourselves, and validate ourselves.

Once this good news grips your heart, it changes everything. It frees you from having to be perfect. It frees you from having to hold it all together. In the place of exhaustion, you might even find energy. No, the Gospel of grace is not too good to be true. It is true! It's the truest truth in the entire universe. God loves us independently of what we may or may not bring to the table. There are no strings attached! No ifs, ands, or buts. No qualifiers or conditions. No need for balance. Grace is the most dangerous, expectation-wrecking, smile-creating, counterintuitive reality there is.

Grace is a bit like a roller coaster; it makes us scream in terror and laugh uncontrollably at the same time. But there aren't any harnesses on this ride. We are not in the driver's seat, and we did not design the twists and turns. We just get on board. We laugh as the binding law of gravity is suspended, and we scream because it looks like we're going to hurtle off into space. Grace brings us back into contact with the children we once were (and still are)—children who loved to ride roller coasters, to smile and yell and throw our hands up in the air. Grace, in other words, is terrifyingly fun, and like any ride worth standing in line for, it is worth coming back to again and again. In fact, God's one-way love may be the only ride that never gets old, the only ride we thankfully never outgrow. A source of inexhaustible hope and joy for an exhausted world.