



SESSION 1: FREE!



WELCOME

One definition of grace is “getting what you don’t deserve”. Tell about a time you got what you didn’t deserve. What did you deserve? What did you actually get?



WORSHIP

You belong! See 1 John 3:1.



PRAYER & DECLARATION

Dear Father God, thank You for adopting us as Your children through Jesus Christ, and for giving us the privilege of calling You “Abba, Father”! Please open the eyes of our hearts so that we may really understand what this means for us. Amen.

I have been bought out of slavery by the blood of Jesus. I choose to submit myself to God and I resist anything that would drag me back into slavery.



WORD

Focus verse: 1 Samuel 16:7b: “For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Focus truth: In Christ we are perfectly loved and accepted for who we are, not what we do. From that position of security, we can make a free choice to serve God because we love Him, and get rid of any other false motivation.

Introduction

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
and Grace will lead me home.

(Amazing Grace by John Newton)

This course is about helping us live in God's grace every moment of every day for the rest of our lives, so that we can become everything God wants us to be and do everything God has for us to do.

In Romans 5:2, Paul tells us that we have obtained by faith "our introduction... into this grace in which we stand" (NASB). But God wants us to go beyond our introduction to grace, He wants us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

The objective of the course is to help you know what it means to experience God's grace every day so that you can be fruitful to the fullest possible extent.

Understanding grace

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands" (John 14:15 NCV). How do you hear Him saying it? What expression is on His face?

The story of the two brothers (Luke 15:11–32 NIV)

The younger brother

The younger brother has behaved so badly that he is expecting to be disowned or at best to be severely punished — and that would be what he deserved. Yet his father is looking out for him and runs to meet him, overjoyed to have him back.

The father immediately embraces this smelly, dirty, broken individual, puts rich clothes on him and throws a magnificent party.

He also gives him three things that are laden with symbolism.

The **robe** symbolizes that the son has once again been given the right to enjoy the place of “right standing” with the father, that he is completely restored.

The **ring** symbolizes power and authority to carry out the father’s business.

The **sandals** show that the boy, despite everything he has done, is still entitled to the rights of a son.



What is the worst thing you have ever done? If you went out of here and did it again or worse... and then sincerely came back to God, what reception would you get?

The context of the story

The religious people were complaining and saying “This man welcomes sinners and even sits down to eat with them.”

Jesus tells this story in response to the accusation that His behaviour was wrong, that it was displeasing to God.

The point of the story is that it is not our behaviour that puts us into a right relationship with God – it’s His grace.

But behaviour does matter

Sin has consequences. But one of those consequences was **not** the ending of the son’s relationship with his father.

God is rooting for you and has given you everything you need so that you do not have to fail. But if you do, His loving arms are there to welcome you back no matter how badly you have messed up.

Note: there is an old heresy called “antinomianism” which pushes Biblical truth too far and says that, since we are saved by God’s grace through faith, there is no need for a moral law so our behaviour doesn’t matter. That is not what we are saying as will become clear!



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 1

What does “grace” mean to you?

The father gives the younger son three gifts which symbolize things that God has given to you. Which gift is most meaningful to you? Why?

If you knew for sure that God’s acceptance of you and love for you did not depend on how well you behaved, how might that change the way you live?

The elder brother — slaving rather than serving

The elder brother is often overlooked but is the character that Jesus was specifically addressing. He did not throw everything back in his father’s face. He always toed the line and did what was expected of him so was outraged when his brother was welcomed back with a party after behaving so badly.

He didn’t understand that the father’s love and acceptance was as little to do with his **good** outward behaviour as it was with the other son’s **bad** outward behaviour. It is nothing to do with behaviour. It’s all about grace.



He had been “slaving away” day after day for the inheritance he would one day receive. But his father says, “Everything I have is yours”. He could have been enjoying everything the Father had for years.

Are we like this brother in that we do not really know what we already have or who we already are?

The story of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)

The workers all received the same no matter how long they had been working.

The owner’s response was, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matthew 20:15)

What you receive from God is nothing to do with what you do. It’s down to His generosity, His grace.



Are we “slaving” for God?

Both brothers traded in the place of grace and privilege that they had been born into, and chose to walk away from their relationship with his father.

The younger brother found himself “in a distant land” with the pigs. Although the elder brother never left home physically, he is out in the fields “slaving away”. He had in effect taken the identity of a hired servant, the identity that the younger son was also expecting to have to take up.

The father’s presence alone wasn’t enough for the elder son. He preferred to strive for what the father could give him, and was trying to make his father bless him by seeking to do everything right externally, but internally his heart was far away.

Jesus was showing the religious people that if they thought that outward behaviour was enough to earn God’s favour, they were terribly deceived.

But what we do is still important

What we do is nevertheless important. At the end of the age, there will be a day when what we have done will be specifically tested by God to see if it has any real value for eternity.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

(1 Corinthians 3:12–15)

Fire will burn up the works that are of no value – “wood, hay, straw” – while works that are of value – “gold, silver, precious stones” – will remain.

Romans 8:1 assures us that there is no **condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus but will there be any **commendation**?

Two people can be doing exactly the same thing – feeding the poor perhaps, spending an hour a day reading His word and praying. One will be delighting God, the other not.

It's not what, but why

When God chose David to be King of Israel, Samuel said,

“The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7b)

What is important to God is not so much **what** we do but **why** we do it. God has never taken pleasure from people just obeying a set of rules outwardly if they are not doing it from the heart.

It's all about our motivation. And if that motivation is not love, then what we do, no matter how good it looks, is worth precisely nothing. It's wood, hay or straw.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14 (NIV), Paul says, “For the love of Christ compels us”.

God wants our motivation to be love and nothing but love. But we can easily end up motivated by other things:

- guilt
- shame
- fear
- pride



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 2

At the end of Jesus' story, the younger brother has been received back as a son but the elder brother continues to act like a slave. How might their attitudes differ towards the work they do for their father?

God wants what we do for Him to be motivated purely by love. What other things can motivate us instead? If you are able, share how you have been motivated by these things.

If we realize that we have been motivated by things other than love, how can we change?

What we do comes from who we are

Consider two pictures:

1. The younger son at the point that he collapses into his father's arms and casts himself on his mercy. He can scarcely believe his father's grace as he realizes that, even though he richly deserves it, he will not be punished. He is forgiven.



2. The same son a matter of minutes later when he is dressed in the finest robe, with the ring on his fingers and the sandals on his feet, feasting on the finest food. He is still acutely aware of his past failures, yet he has been not just forgiven, but completely restored to his position as son with free access to everything his father owns.



Which picture most accurately represents how you see yourself in relation to God?

Whether it feels like it or not, the second picture represents you!

In order to live as the Father wants us to, we have to know that we are more than just forgiven. We are completely restored and deep down inside absolutely acceptable — indeed a delight — to God.

You will get halfway through most of Paul's letters to the churches before you find an instruction on what to do, how to behave. The first half of the

letters is all about what has already been done, what you already have, who you now are in Christ. Paul knows that if you grasp that, the rest will flow naturally.

God's love and acceptance of you is nothing to do with your behaviour. But when you stop trying to "act like you think a Christian should act" and just simply live from the truth of who you now are, you'll behave well!

Bondslaves

In New Testament times, it was very common for Roman masters to free their slaves, but sometimes of their own free will they decided to stay and continue to serve in the household simply because of love for the master.

From the outside what they did day-by-day probably didn't look very different but there is in fact a world of difference between doing what you do because you are forced to or, as in the case of the elder brother, to gain some future reward — and doing it simply out of love because you make a free choice.

Paul describes himself as "a slave of Christ" (Romans 1:1).

- We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).
- We give freely because we have received freely (Matthew 10:8b).
- We are merciful because He has been merciful to us (Luke 6:36).
- We forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32).

God the Father — looking for relationship

At the start of our experience of Jesus, we know we're the younger son. We know we need Him.

At that point we're meant to go on a journey to becoming like the Father but most of us in fact end up going on a journey to become like the elder brother, slaving away for God.

You have a great master! He has some significant works that He has prepared in advance for you to do. But He doesn't force you in any way to do them. He will love you whatever you do. However, as you make a choice to serve Him just because you love Him, you'll find it becomes a real pleasure to do the work He gives you to do!

Uncovering faulty thinking

Use the *Lies List* on the last two pages of this book to note down any areas where you realize that your belief system is not quite in line with what God tells us is really true. Note the "lies" down on the left hand side and, if you can, try to find corresponding truths to write on the right hand side.

This session may have highlighted lies such as:

- what I have done is too bad for God to forgive me or to accept me back.
- God loves other people but He can't really love me.
- I have to live up to a certain set of standards for God to be pleased with me.
- God loves me more when I work hard for Him.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 3

Why might a bondsman who has been given his freedom choose to remain in his former position, with his master having complete ownership of him and control over him?

Do you feel ready to make a commitment to God to be His bondsman, to serve Him not because you are in any way compelled to but simply because you love Him?



WITNESS

People who don't yet know God as their Father are like spiritual orphans. What do orphans need? How can I help meet that need?



IN THE COMING WEEK

The story of the two sons turns on the character of the father who, of course, represents God. He is not an inspecting sergeant-major figure looking for us to put a foot wrong. Jesus portrays a father who longs to fellowship with his sons. He runs to meet the younger son. He goes out to plead with the older son.

Sometimes our earthly fathers have not been all they might have been. Maybe we never knew our father. This makes it difficult to know God as the perfect Father He is because we tend to project our experiences onto Him. Use the My Father God statements overleaf every day this week (and for as long as it takes after that) to renounce lies that you may believe and joyfully affirm what is really true about Him.

My Father God

I renounce the lie that my Father God is:

distant and uninterested in me.

insensitive and uncaring.

stern and demanding.

passive and cold.

absent or too busy for me.

impatient, angry or never satisfied with what I do.

mean, cruel or abusive.

I joyfully accept the truth that my Father God is:

intimate and involved (see Psalm 139:1–18).

kind and compassionate (see Psalm 103:8–14).

accepting and filled with joy and love (see Romans 15:7; Zephaniah 3:17).

warm and affectionate (see Isaiah 40:11; Hosea 11:3–4).

always with me and eager to be with me (see Hebrews 13:5; Jeremiah 31:20; Ezekiel 34:11–16).

patient and slow to anger and delights in those who put their hope in His unfailing love (see Exodus 34:6; 2 Peter 3:9, Psalm 147:11).

loving and gentle and protective (see Jeremiah 31:3; Isaiah 42:3; Psalm 18:2).

**I renounce the lie that my
Father God is:**

trying to take all the fun out of life.

controlling or manipulative.

condemning or unforgiving.

nit-picking or a demanding
perfectionist.

**I joyfully accept the truth that my
Father God is:**

trustworthy and wants to give me a full life; His will is good, perfect and acceptable for me (see Lamentations 3:22–23; John 10:10; Romans 12:1,2).

full of grace and mercy, and gives me freedom to fail (see Hebrews 4:15–16; Luke 15:11–16).

tender-hearted and forgiving; His heart and arms are always open to me (see Psalm 130:1–4; Luke 15:17–24).

committed to my growth and proud of me as His growing child (see Romans 8:28–29; Hebrews 12:5–11; 2 Corinthians 7:14).

I am the Apple of His Eye!