

How God Changes Us

By Ney Bailey

From time to time, we all see areas in our lives that we struggle with; areas that we wish could be different. It might be moral failures or habits that have us discouraged. How does God want us to approach those areas? Is there a way to find freedom and real change? Yes. What I have come to understand about God's grace has made a powerful difference in my life. And I believe it can make a powerful difference in yours.



When you hear the word grace, what comes to mind? I think the best definition I've found is by author Joseph Cooke who wrote, "Grace is nothing more nor less than the face that love wears when it meets imperfection, weakness, failure, sin."¹

What is grace?

It's that quality in the heart of God that causes Him not to deal with us according to our sins, or to retaliate against us according to our iniquities. It is God's faithfulness to us, even when we are not faithful. In fact, it is what love must always be when it meets the unlovely, the weak, the inadequate, the undeserving, and the despicable. God is willing to respond to need without reference to merit. It is unmerited favor.

God's grace pours out love, kindness, favor to all who will trust Him. You don't have to earn it. You just have to be in relationship with Him to receive His grace.

We most need God's grace when we become aware of aspects in our lives we know are wrong—things like: poor decisions, habits, behavior that we are ashamed of, areas we want God to change, but where we may fear His condemnation. If we have received Christ into our hearts, we have been declared His own, forgiven, and now under His grace. It is His grace that frees us and changes us. This is why it is so important to know what Scripture says about God's grace.

We are all aware that inside of us, we have a good part and we have a bad part. We have a part that we want the world to see—when we are on our best behavior. And then we have a part we would rather hide—things we are ashamed of.

We live in culture bent toward self-improvement. We spend a good deal of time and energy analyzing ourselves and trying to figure out how to make the bad part better. We go shopping or to the gym focusing time, energy and money on improving what we consider to be the bad part. And the part we can't improve, or we haven't improved yet, we tend to hide.

Hiding in Shame

Have you ever been in a situation where you are getting to know someone, and way down deep inside you say, "I hope they don't find out this about me?" Or you may tell a good friend, "Please don't tell anyone this about me." When we enter our relationship with God, we may think that He is like we are. We think that we need to hide our bad part from Him. However, if we try to hide unacceptable portions of our personality, we can lose touch with our real selves and we can lose touch with God.

God is not like this. His ways are not our ways. He doesn't accept our good part and reject our bad part. He sees us as a whole person. He doesn't see us as a split personality. He says, "Don't try to make your bad part better. It's impossible on your own. No matter how much better you can make it, it will never be good enough, because I am perfect. Give me your good part and your bad part and let me make you whole."

How can we experience God's grace?

It's difficult to understand grace without understanding the law. We see God's perfect law, His commands, how He wants us to live...and frankly we often don't measure up. What do we do with the law, with God's commands? The law is like a mirror for us. When you look into a mirror you may see a big smudge of dirt on your face that you didn't know was there. The mirror can't get rid of the dirt, but you're really glad you looked at that mirror before you walked out the door. In the same way, God's law reveals our shortcomings, our sins, and we are thankful to see them, so that we can bring them to God, and God can deal with them through His grace. Galatians 3:24 says, "The law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ that we may be justified by faith." When we come to Christ we know we need a Savior. The fact is, for the rest of our lives, we will always need a Savior.

Hebrews 4:13-16 says: "And there is no creature hidden from His sight but all things are opened and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin. Let us therefore, draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Come in Truth and Humility

We can experience grace when we come to the throne of grace, in truth and in humility. The opposite of coming in truth is when we try to hide and we don't come to the light.

I'm going to be candid and share an area of my life that I needed to bring to the Lord, to His throne of grace. The whole area of food has been a difficulty for me most of my life. I don't ever remember being heavy as a child, but I do remember when I was about in 10th grade my friends (who weighed less than I did) complained about how fat they were. And I thought, "If they think they're fat and I weigh more, I must really be fat!" I think at that time I weighed something like 118. I remember that's when food started to become an issue in my life. And I would think about what I shouldn't eat, which made me want to eat it all the more.

And my mother would say things like, "I think you would look better in your clothes if you wouldn't eat that. Why don't you try to lose weight?" She even took me to a weight doctor.

When I went off to college, knowing I shouldn't eat certain things, I would get food and then I would hide it. I would hide Hershey bars in my drawer. One time I had a whole pound cake under my bed. And if someone said you shouldn't eat that, it would make me want about 10 of them. We had two hamburger places close by to campus. I can remember going to one and ordering a cheeseburger, fries and a coke and eating that. Then I would get in the car and go down to the next hamburger place and I would order another cheeseburger, fries and a shake. I was too embarrassed to get that much food in the same place so I would get it in two different places. And if my time was a little shorter, I would go to one place and say, "Let's see. I want a cheeseburger, fries and a coke." Then I'd say, "Now what did he want? Oh yeah, he wanted a hamburger and a coke and fries." I would act like I was ordering for two people. And I would go out and eat it all. But I hid. And I lied.

Freedom from Hiding

When I came to Christ, He accepted me as I was and gradually through the years there has been a measure of healing in the eating situation. Back then I was a compulsive eater and through the years the Lord has taken most of the compulsion away from me.

But occasionally I will struggle, especially with my thoughts. For example, I knew I was going to speak at a large singles conference at Keystone, Colorado, and I thought, "I've got to lose weight by the time I get to Keystone." I would try and I couldn't quite do it. So I thought, "Okay, next Monday I'll start." And the time was getting closer so about two weeks before I went to the conference, I still wanted to lose about 10 pounds. The more I tried the less I could do. I confided to a dear friend, "You know Kay, I'm really discouraged about my weight. I'm just not doing very well. I'd like to lose about 10 pounds before I go to Keystone." I told her what I weighed. And she looked at me and said, "Ney, do you think they are going to love you more at that conference if you weigh less?" And I got choked up. And I said, "You know Kay, I think there is something in me that does think that." And she looked at me and said, "Ney, I love you just like you are. I don't care how much you weigh." And I started to cry. My friend Kay demonstrated grace to me as I humbled myself and told her the truth. And you know what? I found a new internal motivation and lost some of that weight.

What the law could not do grace did. In Hebrews 13:9, it says, "It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace." God will do the same for us, if we will come to Him in honesty.

Look at Luke 18:9-14, where Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up into the temple to pray: one, a Pharisee and the other a tax gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God I thank Thee that I am not like other people, swindlers, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax gatherer. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes of all I get.' But the tax gatherer, standing some distance away was even unwilling to lift up his head to heaven, but was beating his breast saying. 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather

than the other. For everyone who exults himself shall be humbled but he who humbles himself shall be exulted."

Come with Honesty and Faith

If we refuse to humble ourselves and receive His grace, then there is no relationship. As we come to the Lord and tell Him how we are falling short in those areas then He will meet us in that need with His grace. God is not demanding that we change ourselves. Instead He asks us to come to Him in honesty and faith, and cast all our cares on Him. (1 Peter 5:5-7)

The healthiest people are the people who are aware of where they fall short and instead of being defensive, they are able to say, "Lord be merciful to me, a sinner."

The Pharisees tried hard to be holy, to keep the law, but their motivation was to impress others. Jesus called them "white-washed tombs." They appeared fine on the outside, but inside they were dead and their hearts were bitter toward Jesus. For example, they went to the extreme to enforce the law "to do no work on the Sabbath." When Jesus, out of compassion healed someone on the Sabbath they criticized Him for it.

Sometimes it's easier for us to have a relationship with the law than it is to have a relationship with the Lord. And Satan would much rather we focus on the law (God's commands) than for us to focus on the Lord.

Do we want to experience God's grace? We need to come in truth and humility. James 4:6 says, "God is opposed to the proud but He gives grace to the humble."

Some years ago, a young woman came up to me at the end of a seminar. Her face looked full of darkness and she seemed very weighed down and condemned. As we began to talk, I realized that Christ was in her life, but she had a habit in her life that she was very ashamed of. She had tried and tried to get rid of it, but to no avail. She couldn't stop it. In spite of all of her vows and effort, she couldn't stop it. And when this thing happened she felt awful, and she felt condemned. I explained to her that Satan loves for us to sin and he loves to beat us over the head with it and to condemn us. And I asked her if she had ever brought it to the Lord. And she said no. She was so ashamed of it that she had never brought it to the Lord.

I said, "The next time this happens, instead of staying isolated, instead of staying condemned, I want you to use your sin to remind you of God's love." I told her the next time she was in the process, she should bring it to the light, saying something like this, "Lord I thank you that I belong to You. Lord, I thank you that You love me. Lord, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses me from all sin. Lord, I acknowledge my sin, but I cannot do otherwise unless you enable me. Lord, I put my will; I put myself, on the side of You and Your Word. Will you do in me and through me by Your Spirit what I cannot do for myself?"

I prayed with her and together we thanked God for His grace and peace. It was very evident to me that she wanted to turn and repent of this sin and she had. A couple months later I got a note from her because I asked her to write me to let me know how she was. In her letter, she said she had done what I told her to do and she said,

"Ney, I am amazed how in these couple of months, everything that was troubling me has dwindled way, way down compared to what it was before." She had been in the grips of sin but she was outside grace. When she humbled herself before the Lord and before me and she brought her sin into the light of God's grace, He met her there.

Believe It to Receive It

Hebrews 4:13, "There is no creature hidden from His sight but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." Romans 5:20 says, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more." God's grace is there but we must believe it to receive it. We must take God at His Word that His grace is there, in order to be able to receive it. Someone has said there is absolutely one inescapable condition that must be met if grace is to change a person, which is that God's grace must be believed. We have to respond to God with an answering trust. And He will act.

If I can know that God is absolutely trustworthy, if I can know that His love is absolutely real, that His kindness is utterly sincere, that His concern for me really does mean an abundant life, then He will do what is His very nature to do. He will reach me way down deep where I really live. His grace can transform me. It can touch the very deepest motivating drives of my heart and He can make me a new person. And this is the very thing that God is committed to doing for us. He says, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Hebrews 8:10) God will do in our lives by His grace what the external law could never do.

2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Transformation is a process. When we trust God and take Him at His Word, He will be free to transform our hearts and minds. But it needs to be understood that this change does not happen all at once. It is a process.

Lewis Sperry Chaffer wrote a very comprehensive book on grace and he says, "The overwhelming testimony of the Word of God is that every aspect of salvation, every blessing of divine grace, in time and eternity is conditioned only on what is believed."

God Transforms Us by His Grace

How then do we experience God's grace? We come to the Lord in our weakness, in our inability, in our sin and in our failure. We choose to believe His love and ability to change us, as we rest in His grace. The result is that we grow.

2 Peter 3:18 says, "We grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the story of the Prodigal son in Luke 15, the Prodigal son left home, squandered his father's wealth, finally realizing his need and his father's possible kindness. (vs. 17) "How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread but I am dying here of hunger? I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called

your son. Make me as one of your hired men." He humbled himself and he got up and went towards his father. He was truthful when he came back to the father. But you know what? The older brother didn't like it a bit. The older brother who chastised the father for extending grace to this son represents legalism. Because that older brother was saying, he didn't keep the laws, he doesn't deserve your grace. But the father still loved that prodigal son no matter what he had done.

A relationship with God is more powerful than the law. Satan would rather have us be connected to the law in legalism so we will walk around guilty and condemned all the time. But the Lord says in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." Under grace we have more than our own resources. We have God's Holy Spirit enabling us to do His will. The Spirit filled life is moment-by-moment realizing His grace. The Spirit filled life is acknowledging it when I fail and keep bringing it back to God. It is when we take personal responsibility for our sin, and ask God to change us that brings the growth.

On the cross, Jesus died for our sin, for our badness. We were guilty and He paid for the guilt. When we confess our sins, we are taking care of what is wrong and what the cross already pays for. Being a man or woman of God is a matter of being humble and truthful about our sin and accepting His grace and growing.

John Powell said this, "We think we have to change, grow and be good in order to be loved. But rather we are loved and we receive His grace so we can change, grow and be good."

The only limit to healing in our lives is the degree to which we don't reveal ourselves. To grow we must hold a commitment to what is true. God's grace gives us the freedom to face God and face the truth about us in the light of God's Word. Knowing we are fully loved and accepted by Him, He calls us to come to Him with everything so that He can help us experience freedom (John 8:32) and a more abundant life (John 10:10).

No More Condemnation

I remember a young woman who came to me for counsel. By her description, her stomach was tied in knots, her guilt was overwhelming, and she wasn't sleeping. She was full of condemnation and incredible fear and humiliation. The reason she was feeling this way was because she had been involved in immorality. She knew God's word said she wasn't to be involved in that way. She was caught in a web and she was afraid to tell anyone because she was afraid of rejection. With her head lowered she blurted out the whole story. She didn't leave anything out because she needed help. She was truly remorseful about her sin. She was repentant. In my presence, she confessed her sin to the Lord and she received His forgiveness and His grace. She told me later that when she came she was in an internal emotional prison. And what she found when she came, instead of rejection, was love and acceptance of her.

A few months later I received a letter. She said, "My chains fell off, the dungeon door flew open, a thousand pounds lifted off of me. I had a sense of freedom and freshness. When I was in your presence I didn't do anything. It was what you did. It was who you were. You demonstrated His love and acceptance and forgiveness to

me." I asked her at that time to be accountable to me and she later told me that the accountability never felt like a burden. But it felt safe because she was accountable to the person who had extended grace. She went on to get additional help and came to understand her own needs more. She said grace became more than theological when she experienced it.

The law that is good, holy and perfect had revealed her sin like a mirror. She humbled herself. She confessed. She told the truth to herself, to me, to the Lord. And it was in the coming that she received the grace for her in time of need. Bringing her sin to the light and to the Lord in humility and in truth allowed her to receive His grace and set her free to grow.

Think of your own area or areas where you feel condemned or you fear rejection...where you don't feel like you are perfect. We need to come to Him in humility and truth where we are falling short of God's law. There is no need to hide. There is no need to lie. There is no need to be condemned.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do...God did by sending his own Son...in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:1-4)

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1Peter 5:5-7)

"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?...Is it Christ Jesus...who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...For I am sure that neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)

¹Free For The Taking – The Life-Changing Power of Grace, by Joseph R. Cooke (out of print)

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Additional Reading:
Changes That Heal, Dr. Henry Cloud. Zondervan