

Grace in the New Testament
A Series on the Difference Between Grace and Forgiveness: Part 2

With the birth of Jesus Christ, does the New Testament view of grace differ from the Old Testament? Did the Greek noun for grace, “charis,” alter the original meaning of the Hebrew “hēn”?

Just as in the Old Testament, grace in the New Testament, “charis,” carries over the same meaning of “hēn.” It is the favorable inclination of a stronger person towards the weaker. However, the “grace” of human beings is often with the intent of using a favor to obligate another for a benefit in return.

But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a **favor** (charis), Felix left Paul imprisoned. (Acts 24:7)

But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a **favor** (charis), answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these charges?” (Acts 25:9)

Serving as a Roman governor, Festus’ “charis” may have been intended to obligate political support from Jewish religious leaders.

Jesus criticizes this false form of grace. It is view that does not recognize the supremacy of God and His Son and uses favors as the means of a transaction.

If you love those who love you, what **credit** (charis) is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what **credit** (charis) is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what **credit** (charis) is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. (Luke 6:32-34)

“Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’? He does not **thank** (charis) the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’” (Luke 17:7-10)

Note carefully that Jesus is responding to His disciples who ask Him to “increase their faith,” because they learn what forgiveness really means; Jesus’ concept of unlimited and complete forgiveness of a brother who repents is beyond their comprehension. This Luke 17 passage speaks of discipleship in the context of servanthood, and this statement about one’s inferior position before God intensifies one’s understanding of God’s grace as a recipient and command to obedience.

Genuine grace, exemplified by divine grace, is the favorable inclination of a stronger person towards the weaker with no expectation of anything in return; God’s unilateral beneficial act towards a human being.

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have **found** (charis) favor with God. (Luke 1:30)

The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the **grace** (charis) of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:40)

And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in **favor** (charis) with God and men. (Luke 2:52)

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While ontologically the same as Jesus, the Bible portrays God as the superior Being in position of authority, and God's "charis" was dispensed through other human beings who saw and treated Jesus favorably in the course of God fulfilling His covenant promises to Abraham.

Jesus would allude to His Father's "charis" (John 5:19; 14:31) in the context and course of doing His work among the weak, poor, hopeless, and lost (Matt 11:4-5, 28).

Of all the New Testament authors, Paul speaks about "charis" the most, and he sees God's grace as linked with Jesus Christ; it is the provision of His Son for the atonement of mankind's sin.

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His **grace** (charis) through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; (Rom 3:21-25)

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with **grace** (charis), so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (Rom 4:16-17)

God's provision of His Son is in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and available to all (Gen 12:3; 22:18); however, the benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant are guaranteed only to those who are of the faith of Abraham.

And it must be emphasized that God is not fulfilling His contract mechanically; He is purely motivated by love:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. (John 3:16-7)

The physician and companion of the apostle Paul associates God's "word of His grace" with the gospel.

Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His **grace** (charis), granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. (Acts 14:3)

And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through **grace** (charis), for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 18:27-28)

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His **grace** (charis), which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

With careful study of the Bible, it becomes clear that divine grace comes from each God and Jesus Christ individually. God's grace is the provision of His Son, and Jesus' grace, seen as the "gift by grace," is His willing sacrifice of atonement.

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But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the **grace** (charis) of God and the **gift by the grace** (charis) of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of **grace** (charis) and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:15-17)

God's grace provides the only opportunity for human beings to completely reconcile with God, and Jesus Christ provides the only means to complete reconciliation. The consequence of the grace of God and the grace by Jesus Christ is sanctification and righteousness, which are seen as gifts, because there is no human effort that could achieve this outcome. It is in this context that John speaks of "grace upon grace."

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of **grace** and truth. John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" For of His fullness we have all received, and **grace** (charis) upon **grace** (charis). For the Law was given through Moses; **grace** (charis) and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14-17)

Note carefully that the apostle John links grace to truth. God's real existence and His grace is embodied in the living person of Jesus Christ. This is the basis for "boasting in the Lord," because God's grace is not a quality one can possess; it is a quality that only Believers can reflect to bring people to "righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor 1:30-31)

After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, divine grace is associated with power.

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant **grace** (charis) was upon them all. (Acts 4:32-33)

And Stephen, full of **grace** (charis) and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the **grace** (charis) of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:21-24)

Just prior to His ascension, Jesus Christ promises that His disciples "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon" them.

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you**; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. (Acts 1:8-8)

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It is in this context that God's grace can be seen by others, and how much divine grace one receives is based on one's faith and can be visibly seen as spiritual gifts.

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as **God has allotted to each a measure of faith**. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; (Rom 12:3-6)

But to each one of us **grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift**. (Eph 4:7)

But to **each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit** for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (1 Cor 12:7-11)

The New Testament makes apparent that divine charis is all about the pardon and legal acquittal of sin. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant which the nation of Israel was unable to keep (Jer 31:3-32), the New Covenant portrays God's grace as available to all (John 3:16-17), and the acceptance of Jesus' grace as the complete forgiveness of sin.

Believers today mistakenly believe that forgiving another of an offense is a display of grace. There is no comparison to divine grace. If God's grace, out of agapē love, cost Him His only Son, and Jesus Christ's grace, out of agapē love, cost Him His life; what did it cost you to forgive another?

Jesus Christ challenges Believers about their "charis." Genuine "charis" is not a favor that is dispensed with the hope or expectation of a reciprocal act or gratitude; it is a unilateral act of doing something that will benefit another. By recognizing the magnitude and supremacy of God's grace or Jesus' gracious act of atonement, one is cognizant of their personal status and limitations and can grow in faith. Jesus Himself lauds the faith of the Centurion who portrayed this attitude (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-10).

When forgiveness is in view of another's offense, Jesus Christ commands Believers to forgive:

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (Matt 6:14-15; Mark 11:25-26)

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (Matt 18:21-22)

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).