

Applying and Abusing God's Grace

The *grace* of God is generally defined as *unmerited favor*. While this probably is an overly simplified characterization, it is, nonetheless, adequate for our purposes here. But even with this basic definition, we understand God's grace to be *phenomenal* in its nature, *magnanimous* in its scope, and *overwhelming* in its effect. Is it any wonder Christians so enthusiastically embrace it, so completely depend upon it, and so universally sing its praises? After all, it is *amazing, wonderful, greater than our sin, and reaches even me!* However, these things don't always prevent us from trying to misapply it, or from abusing it...

We tend to *misapply* God's wonderful grace in one of two ways: 1) we attempt to apply it where He **has not** promised to do so; or, 2) we refuse to acknowledge where He **has** applied it. Let's take these one at a time.

The *application* of the benefits of God's grace, contrary to the thinking of some if not most, has requirements. This can be plainly seen through Noah and the Flood. God's grace was present and active in the saving of Noah and his family. After God decided to destroy the exceedingly wicked world, the text says "*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord,*" cf. Genesis 6:5-8. Note that this *favor* ("*grace*" in some translations) was evidently bestowed particularly on Noah because he "*was a righteous man, blameless in his time, Noah walked with God,*" Genesis 6:9. However, Noah was not, because of these things, saved from the Flood. Instead, and undoubtedly because of his previous penchant for *walking with God*, God's grace was extended to Noah in two forms: 1) a *warning* about the upcoming destruction of the world, Genesis 6:13,17; and, 2) *instructions* on how to avoid this destruction, Genesis 6:14-16,18-21. But the *application* of God's grace in the saving of Noah was dependent upon Noah precisely following God's specific instructions- which Noah obviously did, Genesis 6:22. Now, nothing has changed. God's grace is still extended in the form of *instructions* to avoid a *coming destruction*. Note, "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age,* Titus 2:11-12. God has warned those willing to listen about the coming destruction of the world (see 2Peter 3:8-10), and through His grace provided *instructions* by which we can be saved- **if we obey them**. If we can see that Noah was saved *by grace* because he heeded God's warning and in *faith* obeyed the instructions provided by it, then we can understand how we are saved *by God's grace* AND *our faith* working in concert, Ephesians 2:8-9. Here's the point: We cannot attempt to apply the benefits of God's saving grace *where* and *how* He has not. Those unwilling to *listen* and *heed* the warning of grace, and then *follow* its instructions in obedient preparation, are NOT promised its saving power.

The other way we tend to *misapply* God's grace is by refusing to acknowledge where He **has** applied it. Obviously, we don't actually *apply* God's grace for Him- ever. He does so for Himself *where, when, and how* He chooses, cf. Romans 9:14ff. But if we refuse to *acknowledge* His application (as specified in His word), we will find ourselves out of agreement and fellowship with God. Such is never a good place to be! How do we do this? Usually, we do so by refusing to *forgive* and *fellowship* those whom God, by His grace, has forgiven and accepted. Initially, Jewish Christians had a problem accepting Gentile Christians, Acts 15:1ff. Some churches apparently excluded those from fellowship whom God had accepted, 3John 9-10. We are not the arbiters of God's grace. When *anyone* meets the requirements of God's saving grace by faith and obedience, who are we to hold grudges or refuse to forgive and accept those whom God has accepted?

One more thing before we're done: *abusing* God's grace. As Christians, when we sin we are supposed to confess our sin to God and others who are affected by it, and pray for forgiveness, cf. Acts 8:12-13,18-24. However, this gracious provision of forgiveness we (including me!) often abuse **by refusing to repent** and turn from the sin. Instead, we continue to sin, thinking we can just plead for pardon again as needed anyway. This is exactly the *abuse of grace* that Paul addressed in Romans 6:1-23. Please read this text and think soberly about how you attempt to apply and use God's *wonderful* grace. We all need it. We all must properly understand and apply it to receive its saving benefits. (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)