

Amid all the buying, wrapping, gifting and regifting, it's easy for us to forget that the gift of grace we received in Christ Jesus is a gift designed for everyday use, and that our best thank-you card to God the Giver is to use it!

The Greek word for "grace" (*charis*) has many meanings: graciousness, benefit, favor, gift, good-will, and thanks. We tend to think of God's grace as a "free" gift because it comes to us without any strings attached, much like a young child receives a Christmas gift and is expected to give nothing in return. God's grace is "free" in that it is given without consideration for the worthiness of the recipient. God offers this gift of grace to all people, the Divine Giver lavishing God's favor on God's children. God's gift of grace is *unconditional* because it doesn't depend on our status or good works to receive it.

Grace is unconditional in the giving, but grace is a gift designed to be used, enjoyed, and treasured. Grace is the kind of gift given for the benefit of altering one's life. In that sense, grace is also a *conditioning* gift because it changes the relationship between the giver and receiver, and *conditions* the receiver into a new way of living. As New Testament scholar John Barclay says, "This grace is free (unconditioned) but not cheap (without expectations or obligations)." Grace is given freely, but grace requires a response.

This is Paul's point about God's gift of grace in his letter to Titus. Luke gives us a beautiful story of the first Christmas, the arrival of Jesus, and the song of the angels. Isaiah describes the gift given in a child born for us. But Paul's short admonition reminds Titus (and those of us gathered on Christmas Eve) to *remember*, to *celebrate*, and to *use* the gift of grace we are given.

"For the grace of God [the gift of God] has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Titus 2:12). Paul uses these words to connect God's grace to his previous instruction to Christians about teaching and acting in ways that are "consistent with sound doctrine" (2:1). Every Christian is to live in ways which bring honor to the word of God (2:5), in ways which will draw others to God (2:8), and in ways which will allow their good character to "shine through their actions, adding luster to the teaching of our Savior God" (2:10). We live this way because God's grace is not solely for our benefit, but for the benefit of the world, particularly for those who have yet to receive God's offer of salvation in Christ.

The gift of grace is thus, also, *conditioning* us, showing us how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life" (v. 12). We are to see the shiny, sparkly, spinning things of the world for what they really are: distractions from God's pure gift of grace. The appearance of Christ as the world's ultimate gift was not

just for salvation at some future time, but for full salvation now in a life which finds its happiness and security in being patterned after the image of Christ in whom we are created. A life that receives, opens, and uses the gift of grace in the present can anticipate an even greater gift in the future: "the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (v. 13). The One who came in a Bethlehem manger will come again as a gift that the whole world will acknowledge, and those who are conditioned by the original gift will be even more blessed and rewarded by the next!

Christ is the ultimate Gift, the One who "gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity" (v. 14). We had done nothing to deserve the gift, nor could we do anything to be worthy enough to receive it. Still, Christ offers himself to us *unconditionally*, humbling himself as a servant and being obedient to the point of death on a cross for us (Philippians 2). And yet this gift is not given simply to be enjoyed, shelved, or set aside for a later time. Grace is a *conditioning* gift, one in which the Giver will "purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (v. 14). Accepting God's grace and allowing it to transform us into servants of others is the best way to thank the One who gave us this great gift in Jesus Christ.

Writing of God's grace, Cynthia Rigby says:

"Reformed theology does a great job of emphasizing grace in a world that is so often graceless. Don't get me wrong, I think it is a fairly common occurrence for people to receive more than they deserve. In the midst of all the hatefulness, there are plenty of examples of people being really kind. But grace, as Reformed theology teaches it, is not in the business of being exceptionally kind; God is not simply kinder, let's say, than the kindest among us on our very kindest day. Grace is something utterly disassociated from merit, something that cannot be conceptualized in terms of contracts, transactions or incredible deals. Following Scripture, Reformed theology teaches not that God gives us more than we deserve or something we don't deserve at all, but that God has claimed us as God's own entirely apart from our worthiness or unworthiness.

In an economically precarious world in which we are frequently reminded that no one is irreplaceable, the reality of God's grace can reassure and transform us. The challenge is, however, living with a perception of it. To move through one's days with a cognizance that one is saved by grace and grace alone takes attention and practice. It also takes the support of a community. To pray and worship, study, and discuss in fellowship with other members of a Reformed congregation positions us to become increasingly mindful of our unalterable identity as children of God. When we know we are God's

beloved, irreplaceable children, we are able not only to survive a world that is relentlessly measuring our worth, we can also work to change this world into one that more clearly manifests the kingdom of God. We can, more and more, come to see others also as irreplaceable, treating them accordingly, living differently together as members of the beloved community.”

On this Christmas Eve, we need to ask ourselves how are we putting the gift of grace to best use? With whom will we share the gift of grace? How does our life reflect the character of the Giver? Do we believe ourselves to be children of God and live accordingly? The truth is that we spend a lot of time picking out gifts that are temporary. We must remember, however, that the best gift we will ever receive, and the best gift we can ever offer to someone else, is the gift of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. We receive it and offer it best when we live for the glory of the One who has given the gift to us. Oh, and regifting God's grace is always acceptable!

Prayer: God of grace, sometimes discipleship is so difficult. We see you standing in front of us, and we look for glory. Then you tell us to expect heartbreak and challenge. We get a glimpse of your glory, and we are confused, frightened, unsure what to do or say. God of grace, made known in Jesus the Christ, in the challenge and in the glory you call us to look toward you, to listen to you. God, your grace is wider than our wildest imaginings. God, your grace embraces us as we are and where we are and draws us out to be the people we were created to be. Grant us the grace and wisdom to watch, to listen, to follow, to learn, and, in the end, to possibly understand, as we join you on The Way, as we explore the glorious Kingdom. Amen.

Sources:

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The Unused Gift

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Titus 2:11-14

There's nothing like a little Christmas morning chaos. Seeing children bound down the stairs wide-eyed at the colorfully wrapped presents under the tree is something to which every parent looks forward (coffee in hand at that early hour, of course). There's the inevitable flurry of wrapping paper flying in all directions, the squeals of joy, the flashing lights and sounds of those new electronic devices, or the latest cool toy.

But there's also the inevitable letdown once the wrapping paper is cleaned up and the toys and other gifts are sorted out. Every year we are reminded of the truth that not all Christmas gifts are equal. The toy that children pined for over the course of many months is suddenly left sitting in a corner while they play with the box in which it came. The gift you put a lot of thought into for your loved one is now set aside and forgotten. While they may be appreciated, there are always a few gifts that are just never put to good use.

A survey last year estimated that around 25% of the gifts given to children at Christmas are never used. In terms of real money, that's billions of dollars of gifts that don't make the cut. And that doesn't count all the gifts that adults might give to one another that are quietly donated to the local thrift store or regifted to another unsuspecting recipient. Consequently, there is now a push to give kids fewer, but more meaningful, gifts.

The best gifts are always those that elicit a practical response, whether it be long-lasting enjoyment or regular use. Thank-you cards are still the standard response for gifts, acknowledging the relational capital that is transacted in both giving and receiving. But the greatest thank-you a giver can receive is seeing the gift become a regular part of the recipient's life. When that happens, the relationship between the giver and the receiver is strengthened and there's an anticipation that more gifts may be exchanged between them.

Of course, the very reason we give gifts at Christmas time is because of the gift the world received in Jesus Christ. Some would say it's because the Magi gave gifts to Jesus (which is technically more of an Epiphany thing), but we associate the Christmas holiday with gift-giving more than any other holiday all year. Curiously though, we tend to celebrate God's divine gift by giving gifts to one another instead of considering what response we might offer to the Ultimate Giver.