

Is Grace Really “Unmerited Kindness”?

Introduction

One of the terms that is often mentioned in Christian churches is **grace**. In particular, that term is often used in the context of *salvation*. Most churches tend to define grace as “unmerited kindness”, or “unmerited favor” – and by that, they mean that Christians have not earned salvation. That is, since we are all sinners, we do **not** “merit” salvation – and as a result, we are all dependent upon God’s grace to be saved.

Of course, it is certainly true that none of us “deserve” salvation, due to our sins. That, in turn, means that we are all dependent on **grace** for salvation. Here is one of the most well-known Scriptural passages, which confirms that concept:

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV):

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

However, the term “unmerited kindness” might not be the most *accurate* definition of grace.

The Meaning of “Unmerited”

The term “unmerited” means **not** earned, **not** deserved, **not** warranted, etc. As a result, if an action is *unmerited*, then there is no justification whatsoever for that action to occur.

As mentioned above, we certainly have not earned our salvation, due to our sins. However, is it really true that there is **no** justification at all for our salvation? In other words, has **nothing at all** ever been done, to provide merit for us to be saved?

Scripture gives us the answer to that question. Consider the passages below, which describe the justification for our salvation:

Christ gave his life **for us**:

Mark 10:45 (ESV):

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Hebrews 10:12-14 (ESV):

¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Adam brought death to mankind; but Christ brings **life** to mankind:

1 Corinthians 15:21-22 (ESV):

²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Romans 5:17-18 (ESV):

¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

Jesus' righteousness allows **us** to be forgiven:

Isaiah 53:5 (ESV):

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

1 Peter 3:18 (ESV):

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God

Hebrews 2:9 (ESV):

⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Jesus was completely righteous – he perfectly obeyed God – and therefore, Jesus merited salvation. Jesus' death on the cross then allowed his righteousness to be extended to us; so that **we** have the opportunity to be saved.

So, our salvation is actually merited – that is, it is actually *justified* that we be saved. The difference is, our salvation was **not** merited by us – instead, it was merited by Jesus. In essence, the righteousness of Jesus is “extended” to everyone who follows him – so that followers of Jesus also **merit** salvation.

As a result, the definition of grace as “unmerited kindness” does not look correct. A more *accurate* definition could be the following: “Kindness which was merited by Jesus and then extended to his followers”. Of course, that definition is something of a “mouthful”... So, a simplified way to state the definition of grace could be: “extended righteousness”.

Two Additional Examples

As shown above, the righteousness of Jesus is being “extended” to his followers – and that is *precisely* why Christians have the opportunity to be saved. As it turns out, this concept of “one man’s righteousness being extended to others” is **also** present in the Old Testament! That is, there are passages in the Old Testament which demonstrate that **one** man merited salvation – and that one man’s righteousness was then “extended” to **other** people. The passages below detail two separate examples of that concept, from the Old Testament.

First, consider the example of Noah. Scripture tells us that immediately prior the flood, the moral condition of humanity was *extraordinarily* unrighteous:

Genesis 6:5-8 (ESV):

⁵ The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

As shown above, the entire human race had *completely* fallen away from God – so much so that Scripture uses this incredible phrase to describe mankind: “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was **only evil continually**“. In the face of such extreme evil, God reluctantly decided to destroy the human race. However, there was one exception to this sorry state of affairs – **Noah** found favor with God. In other words, Noah – himself – merited salvation from the flood. As a result, God instructed Noah to build the ark, so that he would *survive* the flood.

As part of the instructions for building the ark, God gave Noah this information:

Genesis 6:17-18 (ESV):

¹⁷ For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. ¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.

Notice what God says above: Noah – **and** his *wife and children* – are to enter the ark, and therefore to be **saved** from the flood. However, from the previous passage, it certainly appears that only Noah was righteous – and therefore, that only Noah merited salvation. Is it possible that Noah’s wife and children were also righteous? The passage below answers that question:

Genesis 7:1 (KJV):

And the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.

God tells Noah that he – *and* his family – should enter the ark; but then He states that **only** Noah is righteous – not his family. We can see this because the archaic personal pronoun “thee” is a singular pronoun – it only refers to **one** person. So, when God tells Noah “for **thee** have I seen righteous”, we know that He is **only** referring to Noah – not to his family. (The more modern English translations use the word “you” for singular *and* plural pronouns, of course – so in modern translations this is not obvious.)

So, we know that Noah's family was *not* considered righteous – and yet God allowed them to be saved. This is evidently because Noah's righteousness was “extended” to them; i.e., they were saved because of their *association with Noah*. That is, Noah was righteous; and therefore God permitted Noah – and his descendants – to survive. This explains why God *also* saved Noah's wife and children, despite the fact that they did not “merit” salvation from the flood.

Now, consider the example of Moses. During the time that Moses was receiving the Torah from God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites built a golden calf, and began to worship it as their god. This had *enormous* consequences to the “relationship” between God and the Israelites:

Exodus 33:1-6 (ESV):

¹ The Lord said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

⁴ When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

⁵ For the Lord had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” ⁶ Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

Up until the golden calf episode, God, Himself, had gone with the Israelites, during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. However, in the above passage, God tells Moses that He will **not** go with them any longer, because of their sin. In fact, in that passage, God does not even refer to the Israelites by *name* any longer – or even *acknowledge* the fact that He brought them out of Egypt! Instead, when God talks to Moses, He refers to the Israelites as “the people whom you (Moses) have brought up out of the land of Egypt”.

So, we can see that the great sin of the Israelites, in worshiping the golden calf, had caused God to completely “distance” Himself from them. This is understandable, because sin causes **separation** between God and people. For example, Isaiah 59:2 tells us: “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear”.

The fact that God had distanced Himself from the Israelites was disastrous, of course; so Moses interceded with God for them. As noted, sin causes separation between God and people. So, during his intercession, Moses essentially asked God to forgive the sin of the Israelites, because that would allow God to “rejoin” them; i.e., it would allow Him to go with the Israelites once more. Here is the passage in question:

Exodus 33:12-17 (ESV):

¹² Moses said to the Lord, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it

be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

¹⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

In the above passage, Moses *pleads* with God to "take Israel back"; i.e., to go with the Israelites once more. As mentioned, this means that God will need to forgive the sins of the Israelites. God initially states that He will go with *Moses* – but not with the Israelites. Moses does not accept that offer, though, and continues to plead for the Israelites. God eventually does grant this request to Moses – and He "rejoins" the Israelites on their journey.

One important point to note about that passage is the fact that God agrees to forgive the Israelites, solely on the basis of **Moses'** righteousness. As listed in verse 17, when God agrees to go with the Israelites again, He tells Moses: "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name". So, this is a prime example of "extended righteousness". That is, Moses was righteous – and his righteousness was then extended to the Israelites. That, in turn, allowed God to forgive the sins of the Israelites – despite the fact that the Israelites did not "merit" forgiveness.

Conclusion

The concept of "extended righteousness" is an *extremely* important Scriptural tenet. Essentially, that concept refers to the fact that one person's righteousness can be **extended** to other people – so that other people will be able to be *saved*, based on the **one** person's *merit*.

Many Christians will recognize this concept with regard to Jesus – in that Jesus' righteousness merited salvation; and then his righteousness was subsequently extended to his followers. As it turns out, that concept is also present in the Old Testament. As mentioned, the accounts of Noah and Moses also provide examples of one man's righteousness being extended to others.

The reason why this is important is because many groups claim that Jesus must be God, in order for his sacrifice to allow **us** to be forgiven. In other words, those groups claim that it is **necessary** for Jesus to be God, to allow his righteousness to be "extended" to us. The examples above demonstrate that that is **not** the case. For example, Moses was not God – and yet Moses' righteousness was extended to the Israelites, so that they could be forgiven of their sins. Similarly, Noah was not God, and yet Noah's righteousness was extended to his family, so that they could be saved from the flood. So, Jesus certainly does not have to be God, in order for his righteousness to be extended to us – all that is required is that we devoutly follow him – i.e., that we "associate ourselves" with him.

With that being said, there is still a significant difference between the examples of Noah and Moses, compared to the example of Jesus. In the case of Noah and Moses, their righteousness was only "relative" – i.e., they sincerely tried to follow God; but they still fell short of perfect obedience. As a result, their righteousness only allowed for "temporary" salvation. That is, their righteousness only allowed people to be saved from **premature** death, during this age. In contrast, Jesus' righteousness was absolute – i.e., he obeyed God *perfectly* – and as a result, his righteousness allows for "permanent" salvation. In other words, Jesus' perfect obedience allows people to be saved from death *permanently* – i.e., to be granted **everlasting** life, in the next age.

Thank you Lord Jesus!