

What is Grace?

By: Barry Cooper

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Christians love to throw around the word “grace.” What does that mean?

The film *Saving Private Ryan*, set during World War II, tells the story of how one soldier—Private James Ryan—is rescued from behind enemy lines in Normandy.¹

The mission is extremely perilous; immediately it begins claiming the lives of the men on the rescue team, one after another. In the final battle scene, set on a heavily-shelled bridge, the captain of the rescue team whispers his last words to a dumbstruck Private Ryan: “James . . . earn this . . . *earn it.*”

At the end of the movie, we see an elderly James Ryan return to Normandy with his wife, children, and grandchildren. He kneels beside the grave of the captain who rescued him and, as tears fill his eyes, he says, “My family is with me today. . . . Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that, at least in your eyes, I’ve earned what all of you have done for me.”

Then, turning to his wife, he pleads with her, “Tell me I have led a good life. . . . Tell me I’m a good man.”

Never Good Enough

James Ryan has lived his entire life with the last words of his rescuer ringing in his ears. *Earn this.* In a way, those words have ruined him. How could his life ever be worth the deaths of those young men? Nothing would ever be truly good enough. But he’s driven to keep trying.

Perhaps you feel something of that in your own life. Are you driven to try to earn approval from your parents, your peers, your spouse, your friends, your God? Do you try to get that sense of being “good enough” from the job you do, the relationship you have, the home you live in, the family you’re raising, the money you earn, the charity you give to, the ethical choices you make, the church you go to? Do you sometimes feel that it’s just never “enough”?

We Can’t Earn It

It’s not only religious people who are driven to try to be “good enough.” The motivation for this endeavor is rooted in something real. The [Bible](#) says each of us has a very serious problem, which separates us from our Maker.

It's called "[sin](#)". Sin isn't so much the bad things we do—although those are symptoms of the deeper problem we have. Sin occurs when we exchange the real God for false gods.² Instead of living for the real God—the one who created us and gives us every good thing we enjoy—we live for ourselves, or for our career, or for our spouse, or for material things.

The result of doing this is catastrophic. The "gods" we choose to serve are merciless slave-drivers. They are gaping mouths that never seem to be satisfied—and they can never satisfy us in a lasting way. The Bible refers to them as "broken cisterns that cannot hold water."³

When we treat the God who made us in this way, we deserve every bit of his condemnation and judgment. Jesus is uncomfortably clear that because we sin against God in this way, we deserve [hell](#).⁴

Putting Things Right

The Christian understanding of God reveals that he takes no pleasure in our endless attempts to make ourselves acceptable to him. The book of Acts says, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."⁵

In other words, nothing we can do for God can make us acceptable to him, because a) he doesn't need anything we have to offer, and b) anything we offer him is something that he made in the first place.

So . . . we deserve God's condemnation and cannot earn God's acceptance. What hope is there?

Grace

The Bible claims that Jesus is our only hope.

He, too, died as part of a rescue mission—God's rescue mission for humanity. But the words Jesus cried out just before he died weren't "Earn it." He said plainly, "It is finished."⁶

That simple statement is an expression of the fact that Jesus "earned" forgiveness and freedom for us. In Christian understanding, Jesus lived a uniquely sinless life in which he loved God perfectly. And then, having lived that perfect life, he died the perfect death.

On the cross, he bore the punishment that you and I deserve for our sins. He took on our sins; died in our place; and rose again, conquering death and sin and opening the way for all to have a personal relationship with God. And we—if we put our trust in him—are credited with and redeemed by his perfect obedience. This is what Christians mean when they say things like "Jesus paid it all."

Second Corinthians 5:21 puts it like this: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is grace—a word you may hear a lot of Christians throw around. It is by grace that God freely, lavishly sets his love on an undeserving people. It’s all made possible because of Jesus’ life and death.

One of the clearest expressions of this stunning truth comes in the book of Ephesians. The Apostle Paul, one of the New Testament writers, says this to those who believe in Jesus: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”⁷

In other words, we can’t [earn salvation](#) by the things we do. If we could, we would be proud and arrogant. Instead, we are saved through faith and trust in what Jesus has done for us. And even that faith is a gift from God.

How Should We Respond?

When someone understands God’s grace and embraces it, it transforms them wonderfully and irrevocably.

James Ryan felt he had to “earn it,” and so his life became weighed down by joylessness and anxiety about whether or not he had done enough. But those who put their trust in Jesus know that he has already earned it for them.

As a result, they are freed from the enslavement of trying to earn it. They are freed to love and serve God—and others—as they revel in the joy of a restored relationship with him.

1. Robert Rodat, *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures, 1998).
2. See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Romans 1:21–25.
3. Ibid., Jeremiah 2:13.
4. See, for example, Matthew 10:28, 23:33 and Mark 9:42–48.
5. *The Holy Bible*, Acts 17:24–25.
6. Ibid., John 19:30.
7. Ibid., Ephesians 2:8–9.
8. Photo Credit: [Thomas Hawk / Stocksy.com](#).

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