

Christianity Explored

What Is Grace?

Selected Texts

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Introduction

In June 2006 Warren Buffet, the world's second-richest man at the time, announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Commenting on this extreme level of generosity, Buffet said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."²

Many people think like Warren Buffet. They think that there is more than one way to get to heaven.

But, is that what the Bible teaches?

Lesson

Today I want to explain God's grace and its implications.

Mark says at the very start of his Gospel, in Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the gospel [i.e., the good news] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We have started to explore exactly why Mark describes Jesus as "good news." We've seen who Jesus is: that he has the power and authority of God himself. We've seen what he came to do: to rescue sinners like you and me by dying for us on the cross.

This week let me begin by asking you to answer the following question: "If you were to die tonight and God asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?"

I don't mean to be morbid, but if you were to die tonight and you found yourself standing before God and he asked, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" what would you say?

According to the Bible, answers to this question always fall neatly into one of two categories: "the right answer" or "the wrong

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), 45-61.

² Associate Press, "How Do You Spend \$1.5 Billion a Year?" cbsnews.com (6-27-2006).

answers.”

I. The Wrong Answers

Let’s look at the wrong answers first.

The wrong answer is one that places confidence in what I am or what I have done. So if you said, “God, you should let me in to heaven because *I. . .*,” I’m afraid you’re on the wrong track.

Perhaps you said something like, “Let me in God because I’ve been pretty good on the whole. . .

- I’m a good person.
- I don’t steal.
- I don’t lie (well, not unless I absolutely have to).
- I give to charity (not as much as Warren Buffet but I still give what I think is a lot of money to charity).
- I’ve certainly never killed anyone. (Actually, there are lots of people worse than I am.)
- I pay my taxes.
- I don’t drive through red lights.
- Other people like having me around, God, so I imagine you will too.”

They sound like reasonable answers. But I can assure you that none of these things are of any use at all when it comes to entering heaven.

Another wrong answer is the religious one. You may be relying on your religious habits to get you into heaven. So perhaps you said something like this: “God, you should let me in because. . .

- I go to church.
- I never take your name in vain (and when others do, I strongly disapprove).
- I do good things in the community.
- I’ve been baptized.
- I go to communion.
- I sing in the choir.

- I pray daily.
- I read the Bible regularly.
- And there aren't many people you can say that about in this day and age."

You're correct that you're in a minority. But the religious answers are still wrong. If you said something like that, then let me say to you categorically that doing these religious things will not get you into heaven either. Again and again, Jesus taught that religious observance has no power to save people. If you are putting your confidence here, then please don't because you have been misled.

In fact, any answer which places confidence in what I am or what I have done is absolutely useless. Answers that begin "God, you should let me into heaven because *I . . .*" will do you no good at all.

Now, there's nothing wrong with those things in themselves. It's good when people try to live honest, selfless lives. But the good things we do won't get us into heaven. Why? Because they can't solve the problem of our sin.

Remember what Jesus said in Mark 7:20-23, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

The good things we do count for nothing before God because our key problem lies deep down in our hearts. When Jesus talks about the heart he's not simply talking about the pump that sends blood around the body. He's referring to the very core of our being—the source of all our urges and instincts, desires and dreams.

Jesus says we are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

But that's not the way we live, that's not our heartbeat. So our good deeds, whatever they may be, are fine in themselves—but

they cannot solve the problem that keeps us from God: our sin.

According to Jesus, our biggest problem is what we are deep down in our hearts. We are sinful. And nothing we do can change that. Our good deeds are like Band-Aids: they might cover up what we are really like, but they are powerless to actually cure us.

Again, I want to stress that there is nothing wrong with good deeds. They only become dangerous when, like the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Mark, I delude myself into thinking that God will accept me because of them. You see, these religious authorities had already decided the criteria by which God would accept them. They kept their own rules and traditions. Getting God to accept them meant attending to external details. For example, they were to wash in special ways and avoid eating certain things. It was all about outward ritual, and nothing to do with our inner problem: the selfishness of the human heart. That's why Jesus says this about them in Mark 7:6: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." It is so much easier to concentrate on the outside appearance, to stick on a few Band-Aids, rather than face up to what is within. And Jesus insists that no amount of religious tradition or morality or Bible-reading or "turning over of new leaves" can bring our hearts any closer to God because out of our hearts come "evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness."

Let's be honest about our own hearts here, and try to apply the words on this list to ourselves. Let me ask you this:

- What would it be like never to have lied?
- What would it be like never to have nurtured bitterness and hatred?
- What would it be like never to have gossiped?
- What would it be like never to have been selfish or greedy?
- What would it be like never to have entered into a con-

versation in which our whole purpose was to promote ourselves before others, even if we do it very subtly?

- What would it be like never to have nurtured dirty thoughts?
- What would it be like never to feel vindictive or a little jealous when you hear of another person's success?
- And what would it be like—on the positive side—to have always loved God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?
- What would it be like to have always loved other people as ourselves?

Even Paul, one of the most effective Christian workers in history, lamented the state of his heart when he wrote in Romans 7:19, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." Jesus' words about the evil of the human heart are as true for Paul as they are for us. Can we, with the Pharisees, hope that the good things we do will cover over the evil in our hearts? No, according to Jesus, that is the wrong answer. There is in fact nothing I can do to save myself.

II. The Right Answer

But thankfully, that's not the end of the story. There is a right answer to God's question, "Why should I let you into heaven?"

According to the Bible, the right answer has to do with God's grace. The right answer is something like this: "God, you should let me into heaven, not because of anything I've done, but because of what Christ has done." In other words, it's not about the good things we've done for God, but rather it's about the good thing Christ has done for us. He died on the cross so that we could be forgiven our sin. He was abandoned so that we could be accepted.

Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may

boast.”

So we are saved by faith, by placing our trust in what Jesus did for us on the cross. We’re not saved by anything we do, by being nice people, by paying our bills on time, or by going to church or reading the Bible. No, we are saved from eternal punishment by Jesus’ death on the cross, and it’s a gift. You can’t earn it “by works.” You can’t boast about it. “It is the gift of God.”

The only forgiveness available to us is the forgiveness received because of what Christ did. Because only Christ’s death deals with the problem of the human heart.

Les Misérables tells the story of a criminal named Jean Valjean. A tough, bitter man, he has spent nineteen years in prison. When he is finally released, he finds it impossible to find work or shelter because no-one wants anything to do with him. But finally he is taken in by a kindly bishop, who gives him food and a place to stay. However, in the middle of the night, Valjean creeps downstairs and steals the bishop’s silver. He is quickly caught by three constables and brought back to the bishop’s house.

Things look desperate for Valjean. The bishop has the opportunity to incriminate him for his act of betrayal and have him imprisoned for the rest of his life.

But instead, the bishop says to Valjean, “So here you are! I’m delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They’re silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?”

So, at considerable cost to himself, the bishop asks the constables let Valjean go.

After they’ve gone, the bishop insists that Valjean keep the silver and the candlesticks. Basically, the bishop absorbs the cost of the silver, and tells Valjean, “Do not forget, do not ever forget that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man.”

So a stunned Valjean is released and given the silver candlesticks as well. Valjean stutters, “Why? Why are you doing this?”

The bishop replies, “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer

belong to evil. With this silver I have bought your soul and now I am giving you back to God.”

Now the bishop could have treated Valjean in one of three ways.

First, he could have treated Valjean with justice. He could have given him exactly what his deeds deserved. He could have said, “Give me back my silver,” got the constables to arrest him, and have him packed off back to prison. That would be justice, simply giving him what he deserves—no more, no less.

Second, he could have treated Valjean with leniency. He could have said, “I want my silver back, but I won’t press charges.” That would be leniency—giving him a little bit less than he deserves.

The last option open to the bishop is the option he actually takes: he treats Valjean with grace. He says, “I know what you’ve done, how you’ve abused my generosity. But look, keep the silver and take these candlesticks as well. You can go free. The only thing I ask is that you use the money to change your life for the better.” He gives the criminal standing before him a very expensive gift—one that is totally undeserved. That is grace, treating him with undeserved love and generosity.

We will never understand Christianity until we see ourselves in exactly the same position as Valjean. All of us stand before God as Valjean stood before the bishop: utterly guilty, deserving judgment for the way we’ve abused his love for us, and with no way of putting the situation right. But rather than treating us as we deserve, God in his amazing grace and generosity offers us forgiveness—forgiveness that is made possible by Jesus’ death on the cross. And remember that this forgiveness is “the gift of God.” There’s nothing I can do to earn it.

The right answer, again, is: “I trust in what Jesus did for me on the cross: that’s why I should be allowed into heaven.”

Of course, we can only give that answer when we realize that we are powerless to save ourselves. We turn to God in utter dependence and weakness, realizing that nothing we do will be enough

to cure the problem of the human heart.

Not surprisingly, some people find this very hard. It is difficult not only to admit how weak and dependent they are, but also to accept that anything so costly could be given to them for free. It is hard to accept this gift from God when all our lives we've been taught that we have to earn our supper, earn our praise, earn our salary. But the truth is that the Christian life is not about duty. It's about receiving a gift I don't deserve, and then living a life of thanks for that gift. In fact "charis," the Greek word for grace, also means "rejoice."

And we know that as soon as we accept that gift, we will have eternal life in heaven. We are accepted by God. But what happens in the meantime?

Victor Hugo wrote, "Life's greatest happiness is to be convinced we are loved." And in *Les Misérables* we see that the undeserved forgiveness and generosity that Valjean receives from the bishop changes his life. It unlocks his heart and unleashes his potential. He is ransomed from fear and hatred and becomes a human being of remarkable generosity and mercy, touching numerous lives. It all stems from the new identity he found when the bishop treated him with grace.

You see, God's grace allows me to find my identity, my ultimate worth as a human being, because God knows exactly what I'm like, and yet he loves me anyway. And that is such a relief! Grace means God knows all about my sin and yet he loves me unconditionally. The cross makes that very clear, because even though he knows what I'm like, Christ still died on my behalf. The very person who will ultimately judge the world loves me completely and unalterably. What greater proof of love could there be than to die for someone? Although we are more sinful than we ever realized, we are more loved than we ever dreamed.

Conclusion

This unconditional love means three things.

First, there are no masks to wear. As Philip Yancey says in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, there is “nothing I can do to make God love me more, and there is nothing I can do to make him love me less.” God knows exactly what I’m like, and yet he still loves me. That means I don’t have to pretend with God. There’s no hiding behind masks. Have you ever been worried that your friends would think badly of you for something? Perhaps you’ve been concerned about being misunderstood or about your reputation being harmed, so you’ve kept things quiet. But God knows the absolute truth about us—and it’s much worse than our friends think. God knows the truth, and yet he still loves me. So I don’t have to wear a mask because I’m loved unconditionally. It’s an extraordinary relief to no longer have to hide the truth about ourselves.

Second, there is nothing to prove. The Olympic diver Greg Louganis was once asked how he performed so well under pressure. He replied: “Even if I blow this dive, my mother will still love me.” You see, he reminds himself of the one relationship that will remain the same, whatever his performance. Louganis has nothing to prove to his mother. She loves him anyway.

And in the same way, if you’ve put your trust in Christ, you’ve got nothing to prove to God. Now, that is a great truth because we live in a culture of conditional love. At school, we’re told over and over again, “If you get the right grades, we’ll affirm you and make you feel loved. But if you don’t, we’ll withdraw that love.” As we get older, love always seems to come with a price tag: “I’ll love you if you are young enough, successful enough, beautiful enough, talented enough, thin enough ...” and so it goes on. People’s whole lives can be conditioned by the sense that, unless they constantly prove themselves, they won’t be loved. But the Christian life isn’t like that. The Christian life is motivated not by conditional love, but by unconditional love. It’s not about duty or proving yourself. It’s about receiving a gift you don’t deserve and can’t earn, and then living a life of thanks for that gift.

Third, there are no grudges to bear. You see, God’s grace af-

fects every other relationship we have. Jesus taught his followers to pray, “. . . and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). Now, as you know, forgiving people who wrong you is an extremely difficult thing to do! But it’s so much easier to forgive others when we remember how much God has forgiven us in the first place.

So this is grace: God sending Christ to die on the cross so that I can be forgiven, even though I’ve done nothing to earn it, even though I deserve punishment. In the light of that, there is no need to pretend we’re something we’re not or boast about what we’ve achieved, and there is every reason to freely forgive those who wrong us.

I hope you can see that although you are more sinful than you ever realized, you are more loved than you ever dreamed. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
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PRAYER:

O God, help us to understand and embrace your grace. You sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross so that we can be forgiven. We deserve to pay the penalty for all of our sin. But Jesus paid the penalty for our sin on the cross. Even though we cannot earn your forgiveness, in grace you give it to us as a free gift.

And now, having received your grace we realize what joy there is for us. We no longer need to wear a mask. We no longer need to prove anything to anyone. And we can escape the grudges that gnaw at our souls.

Thank you for Jesus. And thank you for your grace.
And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.