

What is Grace? (Or Salvation, Grace, and Obedience)

Many years ago, someone gave me this illustration of God's grace and I haven't forgotten it since. Suppose you went down to the local car dealership and walked into the front door and someone walked up to you, but instead of saying, "Can I help you," they said, "Today is your day! Today you are our 100,000th customer and we have a great surprise for you. Here is the key to a brand new car with all the bells and whistles. All you have to do is take these keys and drive the car off the lot and the car is yours. We'll take care of the rest." Now, as you stood there, you would probably be thinking, "Ok, what's the catch," right? But suppose there was no "catch." Suppose that this new car was simply "yours for the taking."

Could you say that in taking that car that you earned it? Or would you rather say that the car was a gift? Would you say that you deserve that car? Or would you rather say that the car was given by the favor of the owner? Can you say that through the actions of taking the key and driving off the lot that you merited the car? Or would you say that the car was unearned? The answers here should be obvious. No way could we say that we earned the car or that we merited the car or even that we deserved the car. The car was given by the favor of the owner; that favor was unmerited on our part; we did nothing to earn it; we really don't deserve it, but because we met the conditions of the owner, we got it. Does taking the key and driving the car off the lot mean that we deserve, have merited, or have earned the car? No, obviously not. How do we know that? Because we recognize the inequity of the value of our actions in accepting the car in relationship to the car's value. That is, our actions in taking the keys and driving the car off the lot (if such actions have any value at all), in no way begin to compare in value to the car itself. So it is with unmerited favor that the owner of the car dealership has given us the car.

You may not know it, but we've just illustrated God's grace. God's grace is unmerited favor. And receiving something by God's grace is obtaining something by gift that we don't deserve, haven't merited, and didn't earn. Now, the Bible says that we are saved by grace ([Ephesians 2:8](#)), and that salvation is a gift from God ([Romans 6:23](#)). It also says that we don't deserve salvation, can't merit it and don't earn it ([Ephesians 2:9](#), [2 Timothy 1:9](#)). So how can we say that human activity must be involved in order to receive God's grace? Let's continue thinking about our illustration and see if we can answer that question.

When we think about our illustration in relationship to God's gift, of how much more value is the gift of God's Son (the manifestation of God's grace) than a new car? It is, of course, infinitely (incomparably) more valuable. And of how much less value are our actions in comparison to what God has done? The inequity is infinite and truly incomparable. How can we then say that any act of obedience that man does as part of the conditions that God has set forth for salvation, in any way merits God's grace? We cannot. Just as taking the keys and driving off the lot cannot be considered to be meriting, earning, or deserving that new car, so also, when we hear the gospel, believe it with all our heart, repent of sins, confess Jesus as Christ and are baptized for the remission of our sins, neither can we say that we merited, earned, or deserved the

salvation that has been purchased by the blood of Jesus and given to us through the grace of God. We receive it because God gave it and we met God's conditions for receiving it; but not because we earned or merited it. In comparison to the infinite value of salvation, the value of our obedience is zero. But that doesn't mean we have the luxury to be disobedient.

Take Naaman ([2 Kings 5](#)) for an example. Here was a man who had leprosy. There was nothing that he could do to earn, merit, or deserve freedom from that disease. Yet he was told that he could do something, namely, dip in the Jordan seven times. There was no value in dipping in the Jordan seven times to heal one from the disease of leprosy. Yet, that was the condition that God gave Naaman in order to be healed of that disease. Naaman's actions of dipping himself seven times in the Jordan were obedient, but they were valueless in comparison to the gift that God gave him, namely, Naaman's health. God gave Naaman health by His grace; but Naaman, through his obedience, in no way earned that health. We might say that the value of his obedience in relationship to God's gift of health was zero. But that didn't mean that Naaman had the luxury of being disobedient.

So wherein lies the misunderstanding? Many today have redefined God's grace to mean unmerited and unconditional favor. But that's not God's grace. God's grace is unmerited favor, but just because grace is unmerited doesn't necessarily mean that it is unconditional. "Unmerited" means that something can't be earned. "Unconditional" means that something can't be refused. For example, life is an unconditional gift from our parents (and from God) to us; once conception has occurred, there's nothing we can do to refuse it. Life is also unmerited because we can't do anything to earn it. On the other hand, food, clothing, and shelter are unmerited gifts from parents to children, but the children must themselves eat, wear their clothes, and come in the house when it rains. So while these gifts are unmerited, they are conditional. There is a difference between a gift that is unconditional and one that is unmerited. A gift that is unconditional is unmerited, but one which is unmerited is not necessarily unconditional.

Now, just because God's grace is unmerited does not mean it is unconditional. Some get these two concepts confused and want to say that if God's grace is unmerited, then that means that it is unconditional. What makes something unconditional is the inability to refuse it. What makes something unmerited is the inability to earn it. Once we understand that salvation can be refused (by disbelief; [Mark 16:16](#)) then it is clear that salvation is NOT unconditional. However, the fact that we can refuse salvation doesn't mean that when we meet the conditions God has set for salvation that we necessarily earn it and that is true because our obedience in relationship to God's gift of salvation has no purchasing value. It simply doesn't follow that because salvation is conditional that it must be merited. No, not at all. Salvation can be both conditional and unmerited. God's gift of salvation is by His grace. That means it is unmerited. It is unmerited because none of the actions that we can do can ever prove to be of value in relationship to God's cost for providing salvation. However, that doesn't mean that salvation is unconditional. Just because our obedience doesn't merit salvation doesn't imply that

God has no conditions for salvation. It simply means that when we meet God's conditions through obedience, that God favors us with salvation, without our having deserved it.