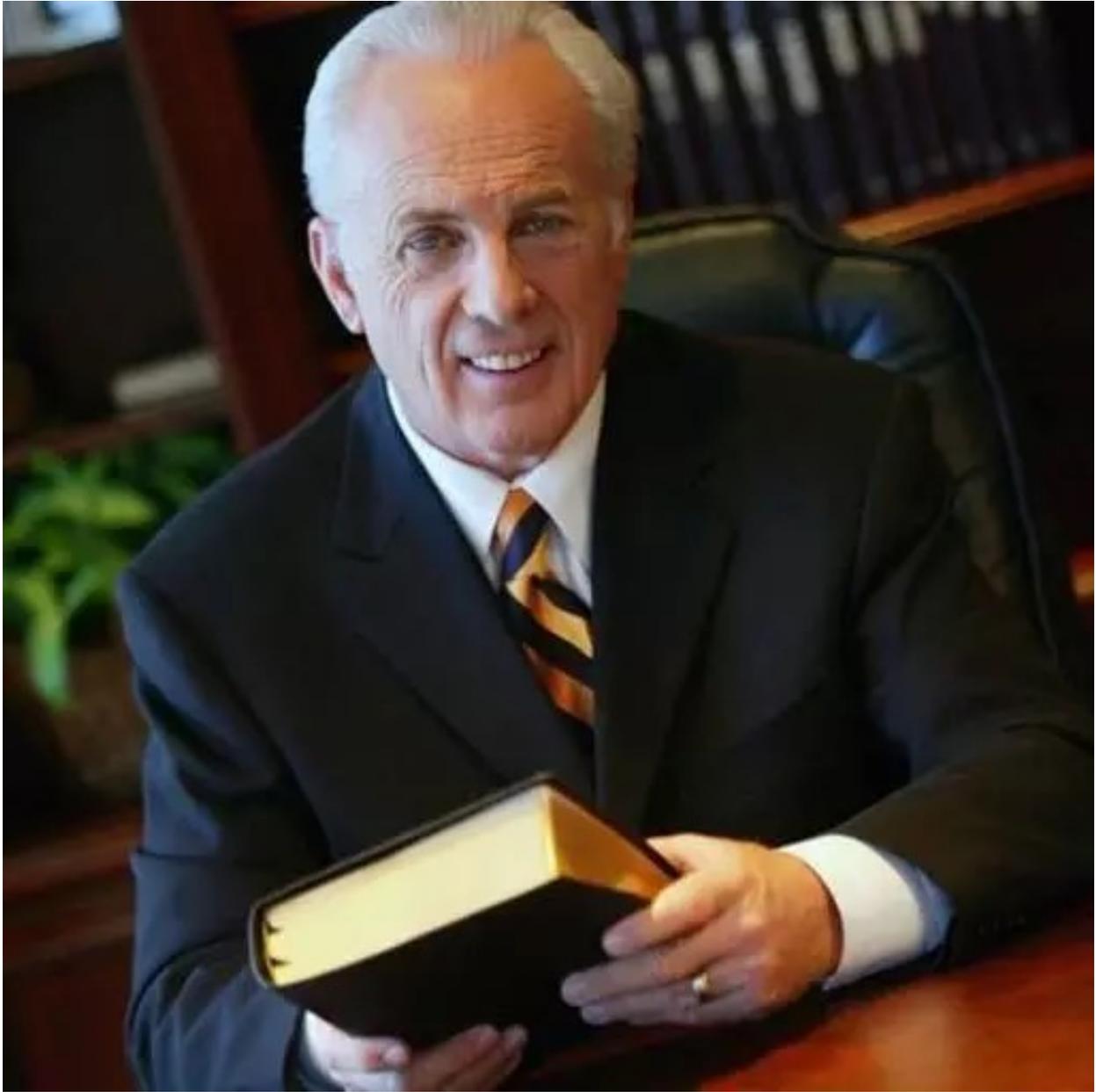


# What Is Grace?



John MacArthur

Many years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined a term that has come to characterize much of evangelical Christianity — it's the term "cheap grace." Cheap grace is in reality a self-imparted grace, a pseudo-grace, and in the end the consequences of living by it are very, very costly.

Cheap grace is not at all a reference to God's grace; it's a contemptible counterfeit. It's a grace that is "cheap" in *value*, not cost. It is a bargain-basement, damaged-goods, washed-out, moth-eaten, second-hand grace. It is a man-made grace reminiscent of the indulgences Rome was peddling in Martin Luther's day. Cheap? The cost is actually far more than the buyer could possibly realize, though the "grace" is absolutely worthless.

Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor was neo-orthodox, and evangelicalism rightly rejects much of his teaching.

But Bonhoeffer spoke powerfully against the secularization of the church.

He correctly analyzed the dangers of the church's frivolous attitude toward grace.

After we discard the neo-orthodox teachings, we do well to pay heed to Bonhoeffer's diatribe against cheap grace:

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system.

It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God.

An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure the remission of sins.

The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace.

In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.

Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God.

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.

Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. "All for sin could not atone."

The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners "even in the best life" as Luther said.

Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin (*The Cost of Discipleship* [New York: Collier, 1959], 45-46).

Cheap grace has not lost its worldly appeal since Bonhoeffer wrote those words. If anything, the tendency to cheapen grace has eaten its way into the heart of evangelical Christianity.

While verbally extolling the wonders of grace, it exchanges the real item for a facsimile.

This bait-and-switch tactic has confounded many sincere Christians.

Many professing Christians today utterly ignore the biblical truth that grace "instruct[s] us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Instead, they live as if grace were a supernatural "Get Out of Jail FREE" ticket—a no-strings-attached, open-ended package of amnesty, beneficence, indulgence, forbearance, charity, leniency, immunity, approval, tolerance, and self-awarded privilege divorced from any moral demands.

Sadly, the rank-and-file Christian is further cemented in an unbiblical view of grace by what comes out of some seminaries.

There are scholars who actually legitimize the error as a correct understanding of grace.

They call their teaching "grace theology" and their movement "The Grace Movement."

They advocate a "grace" that alters a believer's *standing* without affecting his *state*.

It is a grace that calls sinners to Christ but does not bid them surrender to Him. In fact, no-lordship theologians claim grace is *diluted* if the believing sinner must surrender to Christ.

The more one actually surrenders, the more grace is supposedly watered down.

This is clearly not the grace of Titus 2:11-12.

No wonder Christians are confused. Christian churches mirror the world; Christian leaders follow the culture; and Christian theologians provide their stamp of approval.

The situation is nothing short of deplorable.

But here's what I propose — let's start by laying down a *biblical* definition of grace with this simple question:

*What is grace?*

*Grace* is a terribly misunderstood word.

Defining it succinctly is notoriously difficult.

Some of the most detailed theology textbooks do not offer any concise definition of the term.

Someone has proposed an acronym: GRACE is God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

That's not a bad way to characterize grace, but it is not a sufficient theological definition.

One of the best-known definitions of grace is only three words: God's unmerited favor.

A. W. Tozer expanded on that: "Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits on the undeserving."

Berkhof is more to the point: grace is "the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit."

Grace is not merely unmerited favor; it is favor bestowed on sinners who deserve wrath.

Showing kindness to a stranger is "unmerited favor"; doing good to one's enemies is more the spirit of grace (Luke 6:27-36).

Grace is not a dormant or abstract quality, but a dynamic, active, working principle:

"The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation...and instructing us"  
(Titus 2:11-12).

It is not some kind of ethereal blessing that lies idle until we appropriate it. Grace is God's sovereign initiative to sinners (Ephesians 1:5-6).

Grace is not a one-time event in the Christian experience. We stand in grace  
(Romans 5:2).

The entire Christian life is driven and empowered by grace: "It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods" (Hebrews 13:9).

Peter said we should "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

Thus we could properly define grace as the free and benevolent influence of a holy God operating sovereignly in the lives of undeserving sinners.

Paul frequently contrasted grace with law (Romans 4:16; 5:20; 6:14-15; Galatians 2:21; 5:4).

He was careful to state, however, that grace does not nullify the moral demands of God's law.

Rather, it *fulfills* the righteousness of the law (Romans 6:14-15).

It does not annul the righteous demands of the law; it confirms and validates them (Romans 3:31).

Grace has its own law, a higher, liberating law: “

The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death"  
(Romans 8:2; cf. James 1:25).

Note that this new law emancipates us from sin as well as *death*.

Paul was explicit about this: "What shall we say then?

Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?

May it never be!

How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2).

Grace reigns through *righteousness* (Romans 5:21).

*That* is the good news of the gospel! God has acted to set us free from sin — not just the consequences, but it's very power and presence. One day we will never know the experience of temptation, a stray thought, a misspoken word, a false motive.

Guilt will be gone, and with it shame, and "so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

In the meantime, we enjoy the liberation from sin's cruel power and defiling influence.

God has enabled us, through grace, to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires" so that we can enjoy a sensible, righteous, and godly life in the present age (Titus 2:12).

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Adapted from *The Gospel According to the Apostles* © 2000  
by John MacArthur.

All rights reserved.

This article originally appeared here at Grace to You.