

It's Yours If You'll Take It

*Condensed from a Broadcast Series
Presented by E. Lonnie Melashenko
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Imagine a very kind—and very rich—friend, who one day sets a huge stack of hundred-dollar bills on your dining room table: one million dollars! “It’s yours,” he says. “My gift to you.” You can sit and stare at that stack of Ben Franklin portraits for the rest of your life, but the money won’t do you any good unless you reach out your hand and accept it.

Thirty years ago American government nearly ground to a halt. Less than halfway into his second term, President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace in August 1974 as a result of the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford became the 38th President of the United States.

But the continuing questions about Nixon’s guilt, about the tapes, about possible jail time for Nixon, were simply consuming Washington, D.C. President Ford couldn’t get a clean start. It was impossible to conduct foreign policy. The poison of the lingering crisis hung in the political air.

After only about a month in the Oval Office, President Ford decided that a pardon was the only way to make a complete break with the past. It would be a political bomb. Many people would be upset. Ford might very well jeopardize his own reelection two years later. He knew that, but he believed it was essential for the good of the nation.

He recalls in his autobiography, *A Time to Heal*, that while researching this difficult executive decision, lawyer Benton Becker dug out an 1833 statement by Chief Justice John Marshall that described a presidential pardon as “An act of

grace which exempts the individual on whom it is bestowed, from the punishment the law inflicts for a crime he has committed” (p. 159).

Becker made a top-secret Air Force flight to San Clemente in Southern California. His mission was to get a statement from Nixon, first of all accepting the pardon, and second, admitting some level of guilt in the Watergate mess.

Ron Ziegler, Nixon’s former press secretary and now the “guardian at the gate,” met Becker and immediately snapped, “Let me get one thing straight right now,

President Nixon isn’t issuing any statement whatsoever regarding Watergate, whether Jerry Ford pardons him or not.”

Becker was so mad he just about said to the limo driver, “This is nuts. Just take me back to the plane. Nixon can rot in jail for all I care.”

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, Becker stayed over, and by the next day they had worked out a statement in which Richard Nixon sort-of-graciously accepted the

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by the receiver.*



pardon that was offered at such personal sacrifice by President Ford (pp. 153-174).

Saying "No" to Grace

Not all presidential pardons have been accepted. In an article entitled "Abundance of Grace"

(*Adventist Review*, September 25, 2003, p. 6), Wesley Torres tells the story of George Wilson and James Porter, who robbed a federal payroll in 1829. Historical

accounts vary as to whether they shot and killed a man.

Six months later, Porter was hanged, but some influential friends interceded on behalf of first-time offender George Wilson.

Eventually President Andrew Jackson, moved by public sentiment, sat down and wrote out a pardon reducing his sentence to 20 years in prison.

But for some reason,

Grace can only be experienced when it is accepted.

Wilson refused to take it. He wouldn't stretch out his hand and grasp the presidential parchment of grace.

The matter went all the way to the Supreme Court, where Chief Justice Marshall wrote: "A pardon is a parchment whose only value must

be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it. George Wilson refused to accept

the pardon. . . . We cannot conceive why he would do so, but he has. Therefore, George Wilson must die."

And that's what happened. This man who, amazingly, did not want "Amazing Grace" went to the gallows and was hanged.

Torres draws the parallel: "So it is with God's grace. He offers it to us, but it can be experienced only if we accept it."

That's the reality of the universal gift from our loving and gracious God. He intends and

desires for every single person to say yes to His gift. But He's not going to force us. It isn't enough to be in His universe where grace rains down upon us. It isn't enough to sing "Amazing Grace" or read Bible verses about it. We have to reach out our hands and take it.

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36, NIV).

Believers have to weigh that word "wrath" with real care. We know from many verses that God is eager to save us, intensely determined to love us into heaven.

His wrath is actually His heart-

wrenching disappointment and anger at the folly caused by sin which leads some to do like George Wilson and spurn the gift.

The Role of Faith

A wonderful promise in Ephesians 2:8 declares that God's children are saved "by grace . . . through faith" (NIV). That is the accepting part. We have faith that God's promise is true, that Jesus' sacrifice is valid, that the offer is meant for us.

Picture yourself on the fifth floor of a burning building. Strong firemen hold a net down below. You hesitate. But finally you jump out of a window and are caught by the net.

Grace is the net, but faith is the jump! You aren't saved by your jump—many people have jumped to their death from buildings. But without jumping, you can't be caught by the net! At some point, each of us must say: "I believe this

loving Savior who is holding the net is strong enough to catch me."

All through the pages of both the Old and New Testaments, we

see that our generous God is a lover of our free will. Clear down at the end, after all He has done to win people back to Him, what is the invitation? "Whosoever WILL, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17, emphasis supplied).

Asking and Getting

Sometimes when I've preached from the pulpit about grace, I've waved a \$20 bill and said, "First person to ask gets this." And people just sit there! Silence. No one moves. Everyone's thinking, "You just ask? It can't be that easy!"

And that's exactly how many people view God's grace: "An absolute pardon, full and free, unconditional and unexpiring,

Our generous God is a lover of our free will.

eternal and everlasting, simply can't be received just for the asking!"

But it is. The thief on the cross—he asked, he got. The jailer in Philippi—he asked, he got. Thousands who attended our recent series of meetings in Lusaka, Zambia—they raised their hands, they stood up, they came forward, we baptized them. They asked, they got.

Did we study the Bible with them? Sure. Did they determine to honor God and become obedient Christians? I heard them say that with their own lips. But the condition of receiving grace was the same in Lusaka as it was in the days of Luke. You ask for grace . . . and you get it.

Maybe you have seen or shared a simple tool like the "Four Spiritual Laws," distributed by the millions by the late Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ. You can read through all four of the laws in about a minute and a half. How do you accept Jesus' grace? You just say it.

In Bill Hybels' book, *Becoming a Courageous Christian*, he tells how he has many, many times sat down with a secular friend—perhaps a sailing buddy who's just been out with him on windy Lake Michigan. He draws the salvation story on a napkin—a little pencil picture of a big chasm. God's on one side, we're on the other. What separates us? Our sins. But then the cross of Jesus comes down and is a bridge between us and God. There's no longer a barrier, and we can come home.

And Hybels hands this word-for-word solution to his friend: "We do this by humbly admitting to God that we've rebelled against Him and need His forgiveness and leadership. That simple act of trust and obedience results in our sins being pardoned and our debt being paid. Our relationship to God is firmly established, because we're immediately adopted into His family as His son or daughter" (with Mark Mittelberg, © 1994, Zondervan Publishing House, p. 159).

So how do you qualify for Heaven's wonderful, absolutely free, no-strings-attached, all-expenses-paid gift?

You ask—you get.

How to Defeat Grace

*Excerpted from a Broadcast
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On a dark Thursday night, the power of grace met its match. The King of the universe knelt before a man, and welling up in His heart of divine

sympathy was unlimited grace. He loved this lost man so much.

He loved him with a love that reached infinity. His desire to forgive him was equally infinite. He was willing to wipe away all sins: small ones, large ones. Sins of thievery, pride, betrayal.

And the Man with unlimited grace radiating from His quiet eyes and His gentle touch—as He washed the man's feet—also possessed unlimited power. By a single word, lepers were healed and dead men walked out of their tombs. By a single word, He could create worlds.

But now, in the shadows of an upper room—with the murky faces of 11 other disciples watching the unspoken drama—unlimited grace, unlimited love, and unlimited power all reached the borders of their effectiveness.

Judas Iscariot experienced the love of Jesus. He knew about the grace of Jesus. He had

witnessed the infinite power of Jesus. And yet, he turned on his heel and went out into darkness. His free will defeated unlimited grace.

The hard truth is that our free will can limit the vast and mighty reservoir of God's amazing grace. "Whosoever will" is invited to come (Revelation 22:17). But you and I must "will" to come.

Grace and Love

John Fowler discusses "The Limits of Grace" in the *Adventist Review* (September 25, 2003, pp. 12-14). "The very fact that salvation is

Our free will can limit God's amazing grace.



intertwined in God's love," he suggests, "shows that the first limitation of God's grace is our human response to that grace. 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), and love cannot force allegiance. All that God does—His plan of creation, providence, redemption, relationship, restoration, and judgment—proceeds from love. While He does not 'drive away' any sinner who may come to Him (John 6:37, NIV), He cannot force anyone to come to Him against that person's will."

Going clear back to the pathetic Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11, man has been trying to save himself. But every time we lapse into thinking we can earn salvation or please God by good deeds, the ocean of free grace languishes as an unexperienced oasis in our desert of legalism. This is the second limitation of grace.

Fowler points out that "philanthropy, ethics and lifestyle, humanism and moral uprightness, social justice and social gospel, universal meditation, and even obedience to the Ten Commandments" are among the "shapes and forms" of this false gospel which renders grace null and void.

Ironic Barriers to Grace

The Apostle Paul passionately exhorted his new Christian friends in Galatia to stay clear of the slippery slope of renewed legalism. "How can you go back to that?" he entreated them. "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?"

(Galatians 3:2, NRSV). Fowler writes, "Legalism can never be the good news of salvation. It is indeed the sad news of adding to the burden a sinner already bears. The antidote to the Galatian heresy must ever be to keep before the Christian the finality of the cross."

Having said that, it's interesting what he presents as the third possible limitation to grace. Legalism is a huge barrier, but ironically, so is disobedience! The Bible is crystal clear: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15, NKJV).

Legalism is a huge barrier to grace, but so is disobedience.

A person accepted by heaven may choose to stay or depart.

The Word of God is eloquent in reminding God's people that true faith is an obedient faith. Obedience is the fruit of salvation, not the root, but it is still part of the tree. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2, RSV).

No Locks on the Doors

Finally, grace has one more limitation, says Fowler. And I'm thankful it does. There are no locks on heaven's doors. God won't force us into His kingdom, and He won't force us to stay. Along with Martin Luther, I believe that a person who comes to Jesus Christ and is accepted

by heaven does retain within them the free-will opportunity to stay for eternity, or depart if they choose. Free and generous love could have it be no other way.

John Fowler joyfully concludes: "As long as we abide in that grace, bearing fruit, living a love relationship with Christ, we need not fear any limitation on the workings of God's grace. He is able to save us to the uttermost."



Pass It On

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Watergate co-conspirator Chuck Colson “found Jesus” right during the thick of the political scandal. Not everyone believed that Nixon’s right-hand hatchet man had been converted; skeptics joked that it might all be just a nifty trick to stay out of prison.

One of Colson’s worst enemies was a big, burly, two-fisted Democratic senator named Harold Hughes. In 1972 he had made an abortive run for President against Colson’s boss, Richard Nixon.

Nixon was a conservative standard-bearer for the GOP; Hughes was just about as liberal as they come. And when born-again Christian Harold Hughes heard that Chuck Colson had “got religion,” he shook his shaggy head and said: “Oh, come on. Gimme a break.”

Then when some of his Christian friends suggested that Hughes might now want to meet with the converted dirty-trickster, Senator Hughes said no way. “I hate that guy,” he said. “I hate everything he stands for. Everything. Now you want me to hold hands with him and sing ‘Blest Be the Tie That Binds’? Not a chance.” But Doug Coe, their mutual Christian friend, reminded his blustering Senate pal that he wasn’t exactly being a very good Christian himself right at that moment. Finally, with a huge sigh, Harold Hughes agreed to the meeting.

As they sipped iced tea and ate homemade apple pie at Al Quie’s country home, Harold Hughes listened pensively as Chuck Colson haltingly shared his conversion story: how he’d burst into tears one dark night in the driveway of Tom Phillips’ home and asked God to

come into his life.

When the story was done, and the last words were hanging there in the evening air, ardent Democrat and left-leaning Senator Harold Hughes raised both of his huge hands up in the air, slapped them down on his knees and declared: “That’s all I need to know. Chuck, you have accepted Jesus and He has forgiven you. I do the same. I love you now as my brother in Christ. I will stand with you, defend you anywhere, and trust you with anything I have.”

As you read Colson’s autobiography, *Born Again*, you find that Harold Hughes and others in the Christian community of Washington, D.C. did exactly that. They embraced Colson physically and emotionally. They sustained him during the Watergate hearings. They prayed for him when he went to prison. One of them even offered to finish out his sentence for him.

Absolute Forgiveness

That’s what grace does. Grace restores the fallen to fellowship. When you come to the foot of the Cross and experience grace, you’re entitled to a new beginning. It’s guaranteed. You get it. You’re allowed to join—or REjoin—the family.

And one more thing: *this is the rule*. It’s a RULE, a commandment, that sinners who are forgiven get to come home. That’s as big as anything there is in the Christian faith.

To his credit, Harold Hughes accepted Chuck Colson into Christian fellowship. He gave Colson a huge bear hug and prayed with him. Later, Chuck would write in amazement: “[This] from a man who had loathed me for years and whom I had known for barely two hours.”

Over in Luke 17, Jesus tells His baffled disciples that this isn’t just the rule, it’s the rule seven times in a single day: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (verses 3-4, NIV).

Interestingly, all 12 disciples cry out: “Lord, increase our faith!” In other words, “Jesus, that’s going to be hard to do! Someone is so stupid or stubborn he messes up against us seven times in one 24-hour period . . . and You want us to forgive him all seven times? Are we enablers, then? Are we pushovers? What are You saying here, Jesus?” And the answer plainly is that this is how it is in the Christian faith.

When you experience grace, you’re entitled to a new beginning.



Now, friend, this is not to say that the Church should not also be wise and prudent. It is one thing to forgive a child molester, a sexual predator. It's another thing to keep that person in leadership in the children's division of your church.

The Bible also says to deal vigorously to defend the lambs in the congregation; in fact, Luke

17 has that kind of talk exactly two verses earlier. But the spiritual forgiveness should be absolute, and to the extent that fellowship is possible and safe and wise-as-serpents-harmless-as-doves, it is to be extended as well.

You might be thinking here of another place where Jesus plainly teaches The Rule—in the beautiful Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12, NIV).

That stark command really spanked Senator Harold Hughes, who had himself been forgiven by friends and family for being a recovering alcoholic who almost committed suicide, leaving a wife and two little girls bereft. Now it was his job, his moral imperative, to pass along forgiveness to Colson, to allow him into the family of forgiven Christian sinners.

Fellowship Restored

In his book, *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink, professor of Biblical

Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, tells an incredible story about Polish Christians who received a visit from two peacemakers a number of years after the end of World War II. "[A group of German believers wants]

to ask forgiveness," they said, "for what Germany did to Poland during the

war and to begin to build a new relationship."

The request didn't just fall on deaf ears, it fell on hostile deaf ears. One animated Pole spoke up, emotion ringing in his voice: "What you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!"

As far as these still emotionally shattered Polish survivors were concerned, the answer was *nigdy, nigdy*, a thousand times *nigdy! Zadna droga!* In other words, never, no way, not a chance, don't bother asking.

That cast a pall over the proceedings, but the group did try to talk about some less painful agenda items. When it was time to adjourn, the group decided to hold hands and say the Lord's Prayer together.

Which ground to a halt when they got to the impossible line: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive . . ."

All at once, the same man who had delivered the heart-rending speech before

bowed his head and said: "I must say yes to you. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us the strength."

Walter Wink informs us that a year-and-a-half later, there was an active, successful alliance, a fellowship of German and Polish Christians meeting together in Vienna. Why? Because grace leading to fellowship restored is a RULE. It's not an option. It's a cardinal tenet of the faith, a bedrock prerequisite just as binding as every other line in the

Lord's Prayer or the Sermon on the Mount.

Really No Choice

Whenever you and I are tempted to think, "This time it's too much"; "That person has gone too far"; "Now, for sure, my enemy cannot be forgiven," or when we simply look into the mirror and lament, "Surely my case is lost . . .," let's remember that grace is an unlimited, never-ending fountain flowing from the infinite heart of God.

We don't restore sinners because they're good now, or because we feel like it. We restore them because the grace of Calvary demands it.

Grace isn't some kind of soft and gentle cloud, just the tender touch on a weeping cheek, and nothing more. It is truly unlimited only because of the cross. Unlimited grace, the kind that conquers death, was forged from nails through the palms and a crown of thorns on the brow and the triumphant Friday afternoon cry, "It is finished."

It's this unlimited power of grace that provides the promise of resurrection. That guarantees a reunion when we will meet the Lord in the air, along with those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

We have these promises only because Jesus had the raw strength and the determined love to go up on a cross and give Himself for us. Despite our sinfulness, even though

we have rebellious hearts, Christ died for our sins and gladly accepts us as returning sons and daughters of God. That's grace.

But two must never forget the other side of grace. "Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Or as Paul writes, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7, NIV).

Once the spark of grace has touched our own heart and got our fire going, we really have no choice but to pass it on to others who haven't yet been warmed up by the glowing good news!

The unlimited power of grace provides the promise of resurrection.

