

Grace

The foundational complaint heard repeatedly against Bill Gothard is, "He is so wrong on his definition of grace". Indeed, the current leading contra site is called "Recovering Grace". His handling of grace is bold and distinct among evangelicals, introduced in the first night of his "Basic Seminar", and framing the many topics that follow. He has either brought sorely needed clarity to a sometimes muddled presentation of the key to the ways of God with man, or he is engaging in open heresy. Because of this we took "Discovering Grace" as the declared purpose of our website, and it is worth the discussion to get it right.

The Definition

The working definition Bill provides for grace is,

"The desire and power to do what God wants me to do"

This definition is quite distinct among those evangelical theology has given us. These include:

"Unmerited Favor"

This is actually a definition for grace that Bill accepts. But his point is that it is simply inexcusably vague to be called a definition. Grace is unmerited favor, but so is the food we eat, our spouses and children, the nation we live in. Mercy - the withholding of deserved judgment for our sin - is "unmerited favor", as is ultimately the gift of salvation found in Jesus.

Being allowed to pursue happiness in this land of opportunity is an "unmerited favor" which I was born into, did not earn, and do precious little to ensure. The fact that some exercise this favor by working hard to get ahead, further ahead perhaps than others that may be less willing to suffer to see their dreams realized, adds a "merited" aspect to obtaining the benefits of an "unmerited" gift.

In similar manner Scripture speaks of God's unmerited favor being ministered to those who will humble themselves, obtained by asking, exercised through sowing and reaping. We are commanded to "give all diligence" (2 Peter 1:5) to ensure that we do not miss any part of the "exceeding great and precious promises" given to us. The dispensing of God's favor is thus tied in measure to how seriously we take Him. God will grade His children in the final judgment based on our works, and not everyone is going to get an "A":

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10)

To whatever extent one believes the diligent pursuit of God to be merit – which it is not - to that extent "unmerited" cannot define grace.

"God's Riches At Christ's Expense"

This is a creative acronym often quoted as a definition. Once again, however, it fails to say much. It gives no clue as to how those riches found through Christ can be obtained by the believer, let alone "grown" as Paul describes. Apparently we can get more of those riches, specifically, we read, if we are humble. Those riches "labored" in Paul . . . and were enough to make up his weaknesses, he said. Since some people fail in weakness it remains that some get grace, and others do not. The why's and how's of that acquisition have become the life focus of Mr. Gothard, a man whose primary life ministry is counseling, leading people to victory over their problems caused by sin.

"Irresistible Power"

The "Calvinists" among us - "Reformed Theology" - focus much on grace as a force, a power than can make us desire and do things we would not naturally do. God not only provides a free salvation in Christ through His death, but also gives both desire and the ability to receive it to those He favors.

Here we start to see the essence of Bill's definition, up to the "irresistible" part. While Bill sees a great responsibility that rests with us to embrace grace and not reject it, "irresistible" removes all personal involvement. The problems are obvious. Since not all are saved and delivered from sin, it follows that God must not love those people since He blocks them from deliverance. He also must want the failures of sin to occur, since He can – with grace - overrun our will and make us joyfully choose righteousness. This becomes a violation of one of the foundational laws of the universe, that of Personal Responsibility. "Irresistible grace" makes God a liar, He who claims to hate sin and commands us to do the same, yet forces it on us. Coupled with "Total Depravity", meaning each of us is a helpless sinner on our way to hell from birth, this becomes completely unjust. And God is never unjust.

It is interesting that some form of fatalism - "My destiny is determined by the wishes of outside forces" - appears to present itself in almost every culture and religion. The reason is simple: the heart of man hates accountability, and much prefers to find a Higher Force to blame. A universe scripted entirely by the whims of an absolute sovereign is at the very least boring, devoid of any genuine danger, emotion, blessing, friendship. It leaves us with a grand melodrama with as many acts as the author chooses, puppets to create and crush, others to dress up and promote. I am not alone in being most uncomfortable with the Calvinist perspectives on grace. I find that Bill's most articulate and energetic doctrinal opponents are ardent Reformed/Calvinists. There is a clear connection between this theology and the opposition to what Bill teaches about grace.

Leave out the "irresistible" part and the perspectives that Bill promotes quickly come right in line with the gift of life, righteous thinking and action that the Calvinist sees. Grace is the wind that blows from the Holy Spirit on our little helpless ships. A sailor in a ship without wind can "work" to row, but the task is impossible, strength giving out long before the harbor is gained. A soft wind gives power to move the ship - a stronger wind more. Hence a wise sailor will tack to the more advantageous location, better wind. But wind is useless for a ship with lowered sails, and ships can in fact sail in many other directions than the direction the wind is blowing, depending on how the sails are trimmed. No ship will make the trip without the unearned, uncontrolled wind, as gratefully acknowledged. But the wind may be "fallen from" or "failed of", terms the Scripture uses of grace neglected or rejected.

The Spirit of God is Himself a "breath", a "wind", the very meaning of the Greek word "pneuma" which the Bible translates as "spirit". God's Spirit is given to man as an unmerited gift:

"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13).

The force of the Holy Spirit blowing on us, motivating us, empowering us is a gift, a gift we can request or refuse . . . a gracious gift . . . Grace personified. Unmerited, free, but not "irresistible":

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." (Acts 7:51)

Etymology and Usage

Let's look at the derivation of the Greek and Hebrew words for grace and see what we can learn. The Greek word for grace is "charis" - The following definition is from Strong's Concordance:

*"**χάρις charis**; ("chairo", cheer, to be cheerful); graciousness (as gratifying), of manner or act (abstract or concrete; literal, figurative or spiritual; especially the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life; including gratitude)"*

Fundamentally it is used as favor, gift. It is a word we find in English as the root of "charisma" and "charismatic". From this we can see that besides being "a gift" it brings the sense not just of "a favor" but of "a favored one", someone blessed. The "favor" of grace may be in the giver of grace, or in the recipient, as exhibiting characteristics of being favored.

The Hebrew word translated "grace" in the OT is "chen". To settle that the OT "chen" is the same thing as NT "charis" we turn to a verse in Proverbs which is quoted several times in the NT:

"Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace ("chen") unto the lowly." (Proverbs 3:34)

"God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace ("charis") to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5). [Also James 4:6, verbatim]

That satisfies me that we are dealing with the same "grace".

Strong's on "chen":

*"**חֵן hên**; graciousness, i.e. subjective (kindness, favor) or objective (beauty): — favour, grace(-ious), pleasant, precious, (well-)favoured."*

Here we are especially brought to the idea of favoring . . . and of being favored, in a favored state. In this case, when the recipient is in view, this is - again - the idea of being "blessed".

Grace as a "Thing"

Besides a state of favor in a giver, and the state of being favored in the recipient, grace is also the item showing the favor – a "gift". This thought of grace is highlighted by this verse:

"Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift (grace, "charis"), and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints." (2 Corinthians 8:4)

This is speaking of a collection of money the Christians in Macedonia took for the needy saints in Jerusalem. Grace here is quite tangible . . . A "thing". "Favor" has legs . . . It turns into a blessing for the favored one. The biggest example of grace as a gift is with unmerited salvation itself:

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift (grace, "charis") of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

Discovering Grace in the Old Testament

For those that hold to the "Law of First Mention" as a divinely ordained tool to declare the fundamental aspect of a scriptural concept, here is the first time grace is used in the Bible:

"But Noah found grace ("chen") in the eyes of the Lord." (Genesis 6:8)

This coupling - "find grace" - is used over and over in the Old Testament. Example:

"Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace ("chen") in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger? And Boaz answered and said unto her, It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore." (Ruth 2:10-11)

It is also found twice in the New Testament:

"And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour ("charis", grace) with God." (Luke 1:30)

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace ("charis") to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

So the idea of finding/discovering is important to our understanding grace. The Hebrew word for "find" is מָצָא, mâšâ', which Strong's tells us means in part "to attain, i.e. find or acquire". It immediately conveys the idea of purpose. In the usage with grace, the finder is clearly favored for a specific reason . . . which they have a role in:

- Ruth asks the question of Boaz as to why she "found" grace - his response focuses on her character, her sacrifices. He had a choice as to whether to favor her, just like the other relative with the right of first refusal.

- Noah was similarity favored "for cause" - chosen because he was "a preacher of righteousness", unlike his godless neighbors.
- In Hebrews we must come - and come boldly - "that" we will be able to find grace. Clear implication is that those that do not come, do not find.

Charis With Merit

Let's look again at where grace in the Scriptures is not "unmerited" in the Calvinist sense, something forced on randomly chosen individuals for no apparent reason. First in our consideration are verses that build the sense of merit directly into the use of "charis":

"For this is thankworthy ("charis", grace), if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable ("charis", grace) with God." (1 Peter 2:19-20)

Another way to read this is, "This is favor-producing with God" to take unjust harm graciously, patiently. Same verses in another translation:

"For this finds favor (grace), if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor (grace) with God." (NASB)

Another Scripture to bear this out:

"[The disciples were] Praising God, and having favour (charis) with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts 2:47).

Here the disciples found grace, favor in the eyes of the people because of the honor of the way they conducted themselves.

So, if the thought of merit is often clearly implied with grace, how do we understand the following scriptures?

"That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:7-9)

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

"Wages" would be the fullest expression of "merit", where an investment of so much time, completion of predetermined tasks, results - by law - in a defined benefit. So we learn that God's favor and gifts

cannot be earned by following the rules of law – we lost that battle a long time ago. God is uninterested in our sacrifices and good living, anything that allows us to brag to others.

Yet freely given gifts may also have conditions for being granted, things that carry no bragging rights but separate between the serious and the careless, believers and unbelievers, grateful from proud, those that obtain and those that do not. Take the analogy of "amnesty" for "illegal aliens". No amnesty law instantly makes citizens out of non-citizens, even if graciously offered to all. There are steps that must be followed, paperwork to be completed, deadlines which must be met. Those that come forward to claim the blessing cannot boast, for the just reward of their deeds is deportation or worse. They would go to their family and friends and urge them to accept the free gift. Some hearing will accept, some will not.

Why would someone refuse such a great benefit? One reason is guilt - those that have secrets to hide will not come out of the shadows to register themselves. Some will feel that the responsibilities of citizenship are more onerous than the risks and hardships of continuing to live illegally. And then there is pride - the outlaw may find self sufficiency much more exciting.

The labor of the "alien" to be good did not earn his freedom, but he still must exert himself to claim it. And God's grace is all of that. Boasting is excluded, but only those who have the sense and courage to do business with God on His terms will get it.

Desire and Power: To Will and To Do

The clearest expression of these effects of grace is seen in a section that does even not contain the word "grace" . . . yet most clearly embodies it:

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12-13)

"To will and to do of His good pleasure". If nothing else this encompasses Bill's definition completely. God works, which makes us want what He wants us to want, and then we work toward those objectives with the energy He gives us. What should we call the work of God within us "to will" and "to do"? Paul calls it "grace":

"But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." (1 Corinthians 15:10)

We need the power of grace to serve God, particularly to do it the way He wants:

"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28)

There is that idea of trembling, fear. The consequences of failing to work out our salvation are great. The more we realize this the more we will embrace and cling to the grace God gives us for that purpose.

Paul tells us to not try to work (Greek "ergo") our way into God's reward, that being supplied by grace:

*"Now to him that worketh (Greek "ergo") is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt."
(Romans 4:4)*

Yet in Philippians 2 he tells us not only to work, but to work out our own salvation with focused effort. The Greek word for "work" in "work out your own salvation" is "katergazomai", which is the word "ergo" on steroids . . . Work it out fully, make it happen. What we thus learn is that grace moves us to "work", but to do so standing in His authority and enabling power instead of our own.

So let's see another example of grace as "Desire to do what God wants me to". In Titus 2 grace is defined by Paul as something which teaches us to think like God thinks about sin, so that we instinctively turn from it:

"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2:11-14)

Grace appears to us all, and immediately begins to motivate us to hate sin, love righteousness, get excited about His soon return. Grace does all of that as it seeks to lead us to salvation and thereafter to redeem us from all the effects of sin. It turns us into zealots for godliness and good living. Strongs tells us that the Greek for "zealous" means "most eagerly desirous of, zealous for, a thing, to acquire a thing, (zealous of) to defend and uphold a thing, vehemently contending for a thing". Whatever grace is, it gives us powerful longings we never had before.

What Grace is Not

Often a concept becomes clearer by what it is contrasted to. So let's look at some examples:

- **Debt:** *"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." (Romans 4:4).* The idea of wages again. You cannot be guaranteed favor of God by a contractual arrangement. The concept of earning favor as a right ended at the moment we were declared sinners and thus incurred the unpayable debt of death and eternal suffering.
- **Sin:** *"That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:21).* Here is a contrast to the master called sin . . . a power to coerce us to do evil. Thus grace is presented as a new master, a new power to similarly coerce us to do right.
- **Bondage:** *"For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." (Romans 6:14).* The domination of this new boss, reigning, is the opposite of bondage. It is still servitude, to be clear, as pointed out here:

"For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being

made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." (Romans 6:20-22)

So . . . Freedom in grace is the freedom to do what God wants us to. We are not free to do as we please, but Free to be good. More on that next.

True Grace vs. Fake Grace

It is easy to sympathize with those who regard theological debates such as this as mind numbing and unnecessary. Yet the importance of getting a correct definition for grace is highlighted by the fact that an entire book of the Bible - albeit a very short one - was written precisely for this purpose.

Jude was an actual blood half-brother of Jesus who became a preacher of the Gospel. As he recounts in the little book bearing his name, he was getting ready to write some encouraging words to the church when he became aware of a serious problem, and had to completely change his tone and focus. The problem was this: Christians - or those claiming to be such - had completely high jacked the meaning of "grace", turning it into something completely different to make it fit the lifestyle they were favoring:

"For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." (Jude 1:4)

Turning grace into "lasciviousness". Anyone who has ever attended a Basic Seminar will recognize that old English term as something Bill gives some intense focus to. Without discussing all the details it is enough to recognize it as "moral looseness", a lifestyle that favors pleasure.

To bring this close to home, there are those today who see grace as a God-ordained ticket to do whatever they want. The dour warnings of "the law" concerning the consequences of things we must never do give way to a new "Jesus way" which consists of "no rules" for the Christian, a life unencumbered by issues of conscience, guilt. Rather than rebuke others for sin we embrace them as they are, assuring them of God's eternal favor that will not diminish due to anything that they have done, are doing, or ever will do. We are "Free to be bad" if necessary for a time in our "Journey of Grace" with the assurance that such "unconditional love" from our loving Heavenly Father will eventually win our hearts and turn us around.

Did I get it right? This appears to me to be the "grace" that some are seeking with great energy to "recover" from Bill. Yet as already highlighted, Bible grace, when it appears to us, immediately drives us, not to forget about sin and holy living, but rather the opposite, to actively "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts" and start living what must seem to some as dour "sober, righteous, and godly" lives (Titus 2:12). We are freed from one slavery to immediately find ourselves in another, this one in the Household of Grace, bringing about "fruit unto holiness" (Romans 6:22), an overt powerful lifestyle that is sinless, clean, morally pure.

Clearly we cannot live this way in our own strength. That is precisely the point of grace: Not suspending the need to be holy, but giving us both the earnest desire and ability to do so. As Jesus said to Paul:

"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The focus in Scripture is always on grace as the power to move us into that which God has always expected us to be and do. Grace removes us from the authority of the law given that we have already died in Christ because of our failures, judgment falling on Him, and THAT can never happen again. The fear of death, of hell is gone. But this new life we have been given in Jesus - which can never be lost - immediately moves us, with gratefulness and joy, to begin to live exactly like Jesus lived, "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled (filled up, completed) in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."(Romans 8:4)

"No Law"

Modern evangelical Christianity has at times lost its way when it comes to the role of "the law" in the life of the believer. Ask the average Christian their perspective on "the law" and they will most likely tell you that it "isn't for us today" . . . "No law" for the Christian! To attempt to clarify that thinking we must highlight the following statement from Paul in Romans:

*"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."
(Romans 3:31)*

The Greek for "make void" is "καταργέω", katargeō, which Strong's tells us means "to be (render) entirely idle (useless), literally or figuratively: — abolish, cease, cumber, deliver, destroy, do away, become (make) of no (none, without) effect, fail, loose, bring (come) to nought, put away (down), vanish away, make void." Ouch! The church has been busy doing all of those things with the law, when we are in fact supposed to "establish" it. "Establish" in the Greek means to "abide, appoint, bring, continue, covenant, establish, hold up, lay, present, set (up), stanch, stand (by, forth, still, up)". The "God forbid" tells us that Paul anticipated the errors that a surface understanding of all that follows in Romans might lead to. He uses those "God forbid" alerts sparingly.

Clearly Paul's labors in the book of Galatians leave no doubt that "establishing" the law is not "becoming a circumcised Jew" as some were preaching in his day. Rather it points to the fact that God's notions of right and wrong have not changed since the creation of the world. Salvation in Jesus, rather than giving us license to live as we see fit, gives energy and ability to live our lives holy, to God's defined standard, just like He did.

Let's focus on this concept of "no law" for Christians as an expression of "grace". In the Greek the particle "a" means "no" . . . and the word for "law" is "nomia". Put them together and we get "anomia" - "no law". And that word is used in the New Testament, here by Jesus himself:

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name

done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (ἀνομία, anomia)" (Matthew 7:21-23)

Jesus tells us that there would be those who were into "anomia", "no rules", that would bear His name, preach in pulpits, even see miracles done in His name. Yet they never knew Him at all, and will be cast into hell at the final judgment. That should solemnize us all - there really is a need to get this right. Now we know that "anomia" - "no rules" - for the Christian not only is not grace, but is in fact bad, very bad.

Now God has a pecking order of "righteousness", some things more important than others. Although not a Bible term, "legalism" refers in simplest terms to a condition where we ignore God's big commandments and spend all our time focusing on little, largely inconsequential stuff. If our group is distinguished by how we observe a day of rest or by how and when we perform "the act of marriage", or by not eating pork or even by what Bible translation we use - instead of by our love - we are in trouble. Jesus addressed this in His rebuke of the religious leaders in His day who were meticulous about "tithing" the mint from their gardens - every tiny tenth leaf went to the temple - but ignored widows and the needy.

We can't hide imbalance, no matter how sincere we are. And to whatever extent some of us in ATI have been guilty of that, we bear our shame. Some, finding imbalance, have rejected all attempts to live a holy life, citing the "freedom" of this fake grace. Neither is correct. Solomon wisely said:

"Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil." (Proverbs 4:27).

Conservative, liberal, right, left, let's be done with that. Let us learn how - in simplicity - to obey, follow and love Jesus in the power of His righteousness-seeking grace.

Rejecting Grace

"Legalism" on the "right" side and "Lasciviousness" on the other side are both grace killers. So we need to highlight the warnings from Scripture for each. First the legalist:

*"Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace."
(Galatians 5:2-4)*

Now Paul, when referring to "circumcision", is not referring primarily to the physical mark performed on males. If so he is a hypocrite since we read:

"Him [Timothy] would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek." (Acts 16:3)

Rather this points to Christians picking up the "covenant" of Moses as demonstrated by this symbol, seeking to become Jews to get right with God. We "fall from grace", i.e. we lose the joy and power of the Holy Spirit for Christian living, when we, like Peter walking on the stormy sea, take our eyes off Jesus and begin to sink. We start looking at the rules for living with their consequences and rewards, forgetting that we are living in Jesus now, trusting in His finished work to get us right with God . . . plus

nothing. As soon as we begin to sink we cry out in terror and find His strong hand lifting us back up. Then we can relax and, in that "desire and power" of His resurrection life, walk effortlessly across the impossible sea of God's holy standards and expectations.

Now that we understand the legalist "falling from grace", let's look at the other side, those that reject God's authority, standards, commands and "fail of grace":

"Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." (Hebrews 12:15-17)

We "fail" of grace when we decide to love our rights, our lives and life objectives more than Jesus . . . "No rules" . . . or, in the case of bitterness, "My rules". Which tips us sooner or later into "fornication", Greek " pornos", sex sins, and from which word we get our word "pornography".

Exhibit A was Esau who rejected the moral standards of the Lord. When God's subsequent disciplines deprived him of his fortune, a happy married family life and the support of his birth family, he was bitter at the unfairness of it all. His brother Jacob, though far from perfect, trusted God to handle the unfair things. He respected his parents, obeying them, finally leaving home as a celibate 75 year old to acquire a wife according to their command instead of playing around like his brother. [Genesis 28 - Jacob died at 147, so 75 was about middle age in those days] And God poured His grace out on him, renaming him "Israel" - Prince with God - for his spiritual character, the father of an innumerable multitude, blessed beyond measure.

So a life focused on externals instead of Jesus, and a bitter life trying to live free from "rules" . . . both are "grace killers". Without grace we lead miserable, powerless lives and accomplish nothing of value for God.

Discovering More Grace

If grace can be decreased in power and effectiveness, hopefully there is a way to increase the same. Paul keeps saying "grace to you" at the beginning of his epistles and Peter tells us to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

The first way to increase grace is frankly out of our control - or better be:

"Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20)

Which statement Paul quickly clarifies two verses later, highlighted with another "God forbid":

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:1-2)

Grace - the desire and power to overcome sin - is enlarged automatically whenever we are faced with increasing sin. That could be sin from past failures, or new temptation being pushed on us by the devil and his minions. We don't pick this fight, but if it comes, God responds with an increase of supernatural desire and power to overcome it. And the effects are general and lasting. Those that come to Jesus out of the blackness of sin tend to burn brighter and fly higher than many of us with more protected backgrounds. At times it almost seems unfair . . . But it is how God "rolls", to use the vernacular. The answer to our failures is not just to put us back together, but to put us together with a "Welcome Home" present, a gift we would never have otherwise had.

"The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts." (Haggai 2:9)

Is there anything we can do - "legally" - to increase grace? The easy answer is that since God makes grace increase, we can just ask Him for it as we need it:

"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work". (2 Corinthians 9:8)

We have already focused on the "throne of grace" which we are urged to come to boldly to get all we need. But as we have discovered, we can dispense with that grace, freely given as it is, so there are responsibilities on our part if we are to "grow in grace".

We need to go back to another previously cited verse to see how grace can really grow in us:

"Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." (1 Peter 5:5-7)

This statement - God giving grace to the humble while pushing away the proud - is also found in James 4:6, both of these in turn a quotation from Proverbs 3:34. It tells us that the key to "growing in grace" becomes as simple as how much we are prepared to humble ourselves before God and others. "Clothed with humility", something we deliberately put on and, like clothing, is clear enough that everyone we are in contact with can see.

Apparently genuine humility is very much our responsibility. It is really not that hard, something any child can do. Dying to our pride, now that is hard. But no Christian should ever be under any illusion that any aspect of blessing or benefit enjoyed is due to his working really hard. Once we realize that God graces us in spite of our helpless and useless labors to improve our standing with Him, then we can relax, ask for, accept that grace, and then with joy "get busy" for Him.

Ministering Grace to Others

As important as grace is to the work of God in the life it would be tremendous if we had the power to give it to others, so they too would have the motivation, the energy to do what God wants them to. And amazingly, Scripture tells us that this is our job. We can dispense it, like a manager - we can send it to others.

Let us begin with the words of Peter:

"As every man hath received the gift (grace, charisma), even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace (grace, charis) of God." (1 Peter 4:10)

We get it, then we manage it as a steward, then we pass it on to others. The gift we are given relates to our "spiritual gift", our specific role in the body of Christ:

"Having then gifts (charisma) differing according to the grace (charis) that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12:6-8)

We immediately see that grace is given differently to different people. This is the idea of "manifold" - "many kinds of" - in Peter's statement and "gifts differing" in Paul's statement. We are given motivation and power for a specific role, a unique job in the church. Things get us excited that do not get others excited in the same way. We see things differently, we can speak to specific problems of others with authority, because God gave us that job.

Paul knew that his unique role in the body of Christ was given as a gift, that it really wasn't him doing it, but God:

"But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." (1 Corinthians 15:10)

"If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery . . . Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:2,7-9)

And this was quickly recognized by the young church, among those themselves already gifted for specific roles:

"And when James, Cephas[Peter], and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision." (Galatians 2:9)

He went so far as to acknowledge that he would be in big trouble if he resisted this grace and didn't fulfill this responsibility:

"For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me." (1 Corinthians 9:16-17)

And, to make a point, Paul tells us that it was this specific "grace" on him that gave him the insight and authority to even tell us about grace giving insight and authority:

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." (Romans 12:3)

Grace given makes us the opposite of proud. And part of that grace is the specific faith to believe the message He expects us to deliver.

Of course Paul's grace was for a historically unique role, that of helping complete the Scriptures, but he urged us to realize that we too have such a gift, albeit based on the Holy Spirit enlightening the Scriptures to us instead of creating it. We have a job to do, we have the supernatural tools to do it . . . And no one else can do it. As Paul says in the verse just before the ones quoted:

"For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." (Romans 11:29)

God does not make junk, disposables. When He chooses us for a gift, He intends us to use it. Weakness and relative insignificance and even failures on the way don't change His mind. Like Jonah He may opt to discipline us if we attempt to "wimp out", until we finally get the point that He really does love us, really plans to use us, will not take no for an answer.

Grace in Our Lips

One of the more interesting uses of grace (chen) in the Old Testament is as something coming out of the lips:

"Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever." (Psalms 45:2)

"He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend." (Proverbs 22:11)

The first verse specifically is speaking of Jesus, and the NT says the same:

"And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious (grace, charis) words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22)

These verses imply much more than just "pleasant". These words coming forth with the force of grace as a blessing provide the power of grace to those who hear. Those hearing are filled with new grace, a new desire to please God and the energy to do so. As Paul exhorts:

"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." (Col 4:6)

Grace is the spice that makes people hungry for God, hungry for righteousness. It is our job to always provide that energy in all our words. Perhaps Solomon had this in mind when he wrote:

*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."
(Proverbs 18:21)*

Paul was so concerned that we not waste our words:

"Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks (εὐχαριστία eucharistia)" (Ephesians 5:4)

Yes, the "thanks" here is a modified and strengthened word from the root "charis", grace - the word "eucharist". Thanksgiving, blessing minister grace like nothing else.

Grace and Faith

As a last point, many have wondered how a definition of "desire and power" fits the following verses, already cited:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

There are a couple of ways to look at this. If this grace is solely the role of the Lord, then this is referring to His "desire and power" to save us. As the Sunday School song goes:

*"He's ready; He's willing; He's able to save you,
Only believe His word . . ."*

But we have seen how grace is also the hand that moves us to do God's will. Thus He offers us faith as a gift, that assurance that God loves us and is trustworthy. And that, if received, ministers grace, a burning desire to know Him and strength to rise up and receive Him, confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

"By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:2)

Conclusion

"Amazing Grace", John Newton wrote, was something that first made him desire to be right:

"T'was grace that taught my heart to fear"

and then empowered him to come and trust Christ:

"and grace my fears relieved".

Julia Johnston in her hymn "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" exults: "Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace!" An enormous topic, springing from the depths of all God is. It is unmerited, it is free . . . but it becomes our personal responsibility to embrace and not hinder. As we in weakness and humility open the door of grace Jesus has unlocked for us, this power of the Holy Spirit begins to blow on us like a gale, driving us with joy and zeal to do the impossible things our Heavenly Father desires us to do.

May you discover and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.