

## Week 5: Jesus – His Gift of Grace

[ *Pen and paper on tables for people* ]

Good evening and welcome to Week 5 of Christianity Explored.

First of all let's do some revision.

[ OHP 1 ]

Mark chapter 1, verse 1.

Gives us the heart of this course:

*"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."*

And this course seeks to explain why we believe the person of Jesus Christ is great news.

Now you may have had a profoundly disillusioning experience of church,  
or of people who call themselves Christians,

which may have turned you right off and caused you to say  
"no thank you" to the Christian faith.

But what we are saying to you is  
please say "yes" to the person of Jesus Christ.

Christianity is great news about Jesus.

[ BLANK OHP ]

And since Christianity **is** Jesus we've spent the first four weeks looking at who he is and why he came.

In Week 1 we saw that, while we may have a sense of wonder at the world in which we live, we need God to reveal himself to us in order for us to know him.

Christianity is great news because God **has** revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

We saw in Week 2 that Jesus has authority over the whole world, sickness, death and nature.

Then in Week 3 we looked at why Jesus had to come.

And we saw that we cannot rescue ourselves from the problem of our rebellion against God and its consequences.

But last week, we saw, wonderfully, that Jesus was abandoned by God at the cross, so that we could be accepted by God.

Jesus died to take all of God's anger at our rebellion on himself.

For the Christian, right at the heart of reality is our desperate need of rescue from God's just judgement for our wilful rebellion.

Let me try and put this into perspective.

How would you feel if your spouse treated you as someone who is there only when they needed you?

How would that make you feel to be treated in that way by someone you love?

If I treated my wife like that, that she is only there when I needed her, she'd probably want to kill me, and rightly so.

Is that any way to keep a relationship going - let alone build it up?

We'd end up getting divorced sooner or later.

The thing is.

God loves you and created you to have a relationship with him.

So how do you think God feels about being treated as only there when we need him?

Is he going to feel any less anger than you would?

A lot of people have no conception that the Christian faith is about rescue.

Many believe that it's useful in the tough times, or when you're getting married - it's there for when you need it.

But how would you feel if people treated you like that, and just wanted you there when they needed you?

So, this week we are going to be looking again at Jesus' rescue and how we benefit from it.

And to that end I've got a couple of questions which go right to the heart of how Christians see reality.

So, you should have pens and paper on the table, and maybe you would like to jot down your answers.

Let me assure you they will **not** be made public.

They're just for you, to put yourself on the spot.

Here are the two questions:

[ OHP 2 ]

Question 1. Do you know for certain that you have eternal life?

Question 2. If you were to die tonight and found yourself standing before God, and he asked,

"Why should I let you into my heaven?", what would you reply?

[ SAY QUESTIONS AGAIN ]

I'll give you a few moments to jot down your answers,  
or to think about them.

[ PAUSE ]

Okay.

This may be a bit morbid, but let's suppose tonight we were going to die and stand before God and he asked us these questions.

Now, basically all the answers to these questions fall into two categories:

1. The right answer, and
2. The wrong answer.

We like to try and keep things simple in this course.

We'll do the wrong answer first.

The wrong answer is if I place my confidence in what I have done.  
This is called salvation by works.

Let me say that again!

The wrong answer is if I place my confidence in what I have done.

[ BLANK OHP ]

This applies to you if you have written down,  
"God, you should let me into heaven because I" dot dot dot.

And listed lots of different things that you hope might get you right with God.

So you may have written:

"Let me in, God, because:

- I have been good enough or I'm a good person.
- I don't steal.
- I don't lie.
- I give to charity.
- I'm not a murderer or a rapist.
- I've kept the Ten Commandments.
- I go to church;
- I'm the Curate;
- I've been baptised;
- I've been confirmed;
- I pray and I read the Bible."

So, for all those kinds of reasons, you think you've been good enough.

Now I can tell you categorically that doing any or all of these things will **not** get you into heaven.

Saying, "Let me in because I do these things",  
is **absolutely** useless when it comes to getting right with God.

If you are putting your confidence here,  
then please don't,  
for you've been misled.

But why?

Why does trusting in doing these good things count for nothing when it comes to getting right with God?

Can we please turn to Mark chapter 7 and we'll read verses 20-23.

Page 1010.

It's the paragraph above the section entitled,  
"The Faith of the Syro-Phoenician Woman."

[ Mark 7:20-23 ]

<sup>20</sup> *Jesus went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'.*

<sup>21</sup> *For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,*

<sup>22</sup> *greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.*

<sup>23</sup> *All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."*

So here we see why those things will not get us into heaven;  
why those good things count for nothing before God.

According to Jesus, our key problem lies deep down in our hearts.

The heart is not just the pump that sends blood around your body.

The heart is the real you, the inner you.

The root source of all your urges and instincts,  
and desires and dreams.

Your heart is who you truly are.

Now as we've said before.

Sin in the Bible is not about breaking a number of religious taboos.

It is about whether or not God is central to my life.

The Bible tells us that, when we were made by God,  
we were designed to have God, our Creator, at the centre of our lives.

[ OHP 3 ]

So, as Jesus says in Mark chapter 12 (*verse 30*):

*"The most important commandment is this -*

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and  
with all your mind and with all your strength."*

But that is not my heartbeat.

Sadly my heart, the inner me, beats to a different drum.

[ BLANK OHP ]

Our anthem is the same as Frank Sinatra's:

*"I've lived a life that's full,  
I've travelled each and every highway.  
But more, much more than this,  
I did it my way."*

And that is the issue.

That is the heart of the human condition,  
that in my world I am the centre of the universe.

I instinctively think of everything in terms of how it relates to me,  
not how it relates to the God who made me.

Sadly, the dominant rhythm of my heart is not  
*"how can I love God today with my heart, soul, mind and strength?"*

That is not my heartbeat.

My heartbeat, my anthem is "My Way".

And my good deeds, whether they are:

- going to church,
- giving to charity,
- getting on with others
- or whatever

are just like sticking plasters on measles.

Having measles and putting plasters on the spots seems like a crazy thing to do.

They'll hide the spots,  
but they aren't going to get rid of the virus causing the measles.

It's like wall-papering over the cracks - the cracks are still there - you just can't see them.

And our good deeds are like the plasters or the wall-paper.

They're fine in themselves and I don't want you to get the impression I am against these good things.  
Because I'm not!

But they can't **solve** the problem of the human heart.

That's why they won't get me right with God,  
they don't cure the problem.

And what is really dangerous about good deeds is that I delude myself into thinking that they are the means by which I put myself right with God.

And here, in Mark chapter 7, the Pharisees and teachers of the law have decided by what criteria God would accept them.

They thought that God would accept them because they were so good at keeping their own rules and traditions.

Getting right with God became something external - a question of washing (verses 1-5) and eating (verses 14-19).

It was all about outward ritual which has nothing to do with what I am like before God or how self-centred I am.

This is why Jesus forces them to review their own hearts in verse 6, when he quotes the prophet Isaiah:

*"These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."*

It is so much easier to concentrate on the outward and to stick on a few plasters or paper over the cracks, than to look at what is within us.

Jesus insists that no amount of religious tradition,  
or washing  
or praying  
or Bible reading  
or morality  
or turning over of new leaves  
can actually deal with the problem of our hearts.

Which are sadly, fountains of evil,  
as Jesus here in Chapter 7 points out.

For doing good can never deal with the problem of the human heart.

Which is after all, the heart of the human problem.

And no amount of religious tradition can deal with it either.

There is a terrible danger that we delude ourselves into thinking that we  
can get right with God,  
as the Pharisees do here,

by keeping some rules and persuading ourselves they cover over the  
evil in our hearts.

[ PAUSE ]

So salvation by works is the wrong answer.

[ OHP 4 ]

*Question 1. Do you know for certain that you have eternal life?*

*Question 2. If you were to die tonight and God asked,  
"Why should I let you into my heaven?"; what would you say?*

We **can not** work our way into heaven.

I really must stress this.

Thinking I can get into heaven because of what I have done is useless when there is nothing I can do to save myself.

But, wonderfully, that is not the end of the story.

There are right answers to these questions,  
*"Do you know for certain you have eternal life?"* and  
*"God asking you "Why should I let you into my heaven?"*

According to the Bible,  
the right answer to these questions is called "Salvation by Grace".

And it is all about what Jesus has done on the cross.

It's about Jesus' rescue.

[ OHP 5 ]

So the right answer is,

*"God, you should let me into heaven because of what Jesus has done;  
because Jesus died on the cross so that I could be forgiven my sin;*

*because he was abandoned by You at the cross  
so that I could be accepted by You my God."*

Salvation by Grace - means a gift.

It means receiving something which is free and undeserved.

I love gifts - for one simple reason - I don't pay for them.

Somebody else pays for gifts - we just receive them.

The whole point of receiving a gift is that you do not pay for it.

It costs the giver everything and the recipient nothing.

[ BLANK OHP ]

And that gets right to the heart of what I am talking about here.

Grace means being given something that I do not deserve.

And the root word for grace is "charis", which means "well-being, I rejoice, I am glad".

Which is how we feel when we are given a gift we can't afford.

It makes us glad. It's great.

And the opening scenes of the film *Les Misérables* captures something of what it feels like to be treated graciously.

The criminal, Jean Valjean, is an incredibly bitter man, having spent 19 years in a chain gang for stealing a loaf of bread.

He has just been released and is taken in by the bishop who gives him a meal and a bed for the night.

In the middle of the night Valjean creeps downstairs to steal the bishop's silver cutlery.

The bishop hears him, comes to investigate and Valjean knocks him out as he runs off with the silver.

The next day Valjean is stopped by the local police and found with the silver.

He insists the silver was a gift from the bishop.

And so he is taken by the police to the bishop,  
and they ask if that is true.

The bishop, sporting a huge black eye, says,  
*"Yes, of course I gave him the silverware.  
But why didn't you take the candlesticks?"*

*That was very foolish.  
Madame Jilou, fetch the silver candlesticks.*

*They are worth at least 2,000 francs.  
Why did you leave them?"*

So a stunned Valjean is released and  
given the silver candlesticks as well.

Valjean stutters, *"Why? Why are you doing this?"*

And 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  
having been assaulted and robbed by him.

Firstly, he could have treated Valjean with justice,  
which is what Madame Jillou, the housekeeper, wants.

He could have given this criminal what he deserves; no more, no less.

In this case the cutlery would have been returned and Valjean  
imprisoned for theft and assault.

That is being just.

Secondly, he could have treated Valjean with mercy.

Mercy is giving him less than he deserves.

In that case he could say:

*"Return the cutlery and I won't press charges."*

That is being merciful.

Thirdly, the bishop could do what he actually does,  
which is treat Valjean with grace.

He gives this criminal standing before him a very expensive,  
and utterly undeserved gift.

And Grace is receiving a totally undeserved gift.

No wonder Valjean can only stutter out:

*"Why? Why are you doing this?"*

He is stunned.

He can't comprehend such undeserved love and generosity.

And nor indeed can Madame Jilou.

Her face shows that she thinks it's a scandal.

And you know something.

She is quite right.

It is sheer lunacy,  
that a guilty person should be treated in this way.

The bishop knows what Valjean is like;  
he knows what he deserves.

And Valjean knows what he has done.

And yet, the bishop treats him so graciously.

And the Grace of God only becomes real to us when we see ourselves standing before God as Valjean stood before the bishop:

utterly guilty with no resources to draw upon;  
facing a terrible punishment for what we have done to him;

deserving to be thrown into hell.

And until we see ourselves in that state,  
we won't see the amazing generosity of God's gift of forgiveness to us through Christ's death on the cross.

Paying for our sin at no small cost to himself.

At the heart of grace is the fact that **it is** undeserved and that I have done **nothing** and can do nothing to earn it.

[ OHP 6 ]

And perhaps the best summary of grace in the Bible is in the book of Ephesians (2:8-9), which says.

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -  
and this not from yourselves,  
it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast."*

And a Christian is simply someone who has been saved from God's eternal punishment by Jesus' death on the cross.

It's a free gift.

You can't earn it "by works".

You can't boast about it for "It is the gift of God".

[ BLANK OHP ]

You have just been handed a cheque which says,

"My life for your sins, signed Jesus Christ."

You have done nothing to deserve it and just as you trust that the cheque is valid,

so you trust in what Jesus has done.

So when God says, "*Why should I let you into my heaven?*", you reply,

*"Because I have faith in - I am trusting in -*

*what Jesus did on the cross to pay for my wrongdoing."*

And he did it to save me from hell, through the cross, for heaven.

And faith involves understanding that and acting on it by simply accepting that gift.

It is saying "*thank you*" and receiving what is offered.

It is turning to God, as Valjean turned to the bishop.

In utter weakness,  
in utter dependence and receiving what we do not deserve:  
deliverance from a terrible sentence and punishment.

And like Valjean, it should leave us stunned, saying,  
"*Why, why are you doing this?*"

And some people just find it so hard to believe that God would give them this incredibly costly gift of forgiveness for free.

But He does.

It is a free gift and all these good things -  
reading the Bible, baptism, prayer, going to church, giving to the poor -  
**point me to that gift.**

**But they never pay for it.**

Which is why the Christian life is all about joy and not about duty.

It's about receiving a gift I don't deserve.  
It's about a life of thanksgiving, of "charis", of grace, of rejoicing.

So what does it mean to receive something I don't deserve?

What does it mean, not just for my future eternal life but, what does it mean now?

Victor Hugo also wrote these words:

*"Life's greatest happiness is to be convinced we are loved."*

And in Les Miserables we see that the utterly-undeserved forgiveness and generosity which Valjean receives from the bishop does indeed touch his soul at its deepest part.

It unlocks his heart and unleashes his potential.

He really is ransomed from fear and hatred and becomes a human being of remarkable generosity and mercy, touching numerous lives.

He is transformed by grace and it all stems from the new identity he found when the bishop

*"bought his soul and gave him back to God."*

Living by grace is to find my identity, my ultimate worth as a human being, in the love of God.

Who knows exactly what I am like and yet loves me unconditionally.

Grace means I am more wicked than I ever imagined but more loved than I ever dreamed.

So I go through life knowing the wickedness of my heart and yet looking at the cross and saying to myself,

*"I am the one that Jesus loves".*

Let me leave you with 3 building blocks which are central to finding our identity in the Grace of God.

They help us to experience the slow, steady undertow of Grace in our lives.

[ OHP 7 ]

1. There are no masks

God knows exactly what I'm like, yet he still loves me.

So I don't have to pretend with God, and that is such a relief.

Grace means God knows all about my sin and yet he still loves me.

Have you ever been worried that your friends would think badly of you for something?

Perhaps you've been concerned about being misunderstood or your reputation being harmed.

But God knows the absolute truth about us - and it's much worse than our friends think.

God knows the truth about me and yet he still loves me.

Because I'm loved unconditionally, I don't have to wear a mask, or think that if this person really knew what I was like they would reject me.

It is an amazing experience to live in the light of the fact that God loves me anyway - in spite of my sin.

He knows exactly what I am like and there is nothing I need to hide.

[ OHP 8 ]

Secondly, I've got nothing to prove to God.

There is nothing I can do to make him love me more and nothing I can do to make him love me less.

Now, that is a great truth because we live in a culture of conditional love.

Love comes with a price tag:

I'll love you if you are young or successful or beautiful or athletic or whatever.

And people can often be conditioned by the sense that unless they win they won't be loved, so they must win.

So there is a moment of amazing joy and liberty when I realise that grace means that God loves me anyway.

There is nothing to prove to him,  
for I am the one that Jesus loves.

3. No grudges.

The Lord Jesus, as he was dying prayed for his executioners,  
*"Father forgive them, they know not what they do",*

also taught his followers to pray,  
*"Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who sins against us."*

And the word "as" is conditional.

We forgive others as we have been forgiven by God.

C.S. Lewis understood this truth when he wrote,  
*"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable  
because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."*

This means that grace is the God-given mechanism for reconciliation.

Grace melts my stubborn heart when I feel deeply hurt by another human being.

It gives me the resources to forgive as I look at how I have been forgiven.

In marriage Grace enables a husband and wife to say these two phrases that can be so hard to say:

*"I'm sorry; I was wrong,"* and, *"That's OK; I love you."*

And without grace, without forgiveness,  
We can get into a downward cycle of blame and pain which is so destructive.

But by grace that can change.

So this is grace:

- No masks;
- Nothing to prove;
- No grudges.

Grace means,  
you are more wicked than you ever realised  
but more loved than you ever dreamed.

[ BLANK OHP ]

And our prayer is that you will find your primary identity here in the  
Grace of God.

Which is available to you through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Thank you for listening.