

First Things First

Life is filled with "firsts." We celebrate a child's first steps, the first day of school, a first job, or the purchase of a first home. We often remember these moments because they mark new beginnings and shape the course of our lives.

The Bible also emphasizes the importance of first things. Throughout the Bible, the principle of giving God our best appears repeatedly. Under the Law of Moses, Israel was instructed "*The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God...*" (Exodus 23:19). While Christians are not under that law today, the principle remains: God deserves our first and best, not our leftovers. Jesus also taught that God desires first place in the hearts of His people. He said, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33). When God is first, everything else finds its proper place.

Putting God first affects every area of life. He should have first place in our schedules, our decisions, our relationships, our finances, and our priorities. Too often, God receives whatever time is left after work, recreation, and other responsibilities have claimed our attention. Every day presents a new opportunity to decide what will come first. Will it be our own desires, or the will of God? The answer is revealed not merely by what we say, but by how we live.

Will today be a first for you? If you have never truly put God first, let today be the day you begin. Commit yourself to making Him the highest priority in your life and then continue putting Him first every day that follows. There is no better time to begin than now.

- by Josh McCord

The Boundaries of Grace

Everyone likes to talk about God's grace - and rightly so. We would have no hope without it. But many have stretched the concept far beyond what the Scriptures actually teach.

Some view grace as if it automatically overlooks every act of disobedience. Others make it so mysterious that no one can really know where he stands with God. The truth is much simpler. God's grace is wonderful beyond measure, but it operates within the conditions He has revealed.

Before we can appreciate what grace is, it helps to understand what grace is not:

- Grace is not a permission slip for sin. Some seem to think that because we are saved by grace, our conduct is no longer important. Paul addressed that very error when he asked, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" His answer left no doubt: "God forbid" (Romans 6:1-2). Grace does not excuse sin; it provides the means by which our sins can be forgiven.
- Grace is not unconditional. We certainly cannot earn salvation. Paul plainly taught that we are saved by grace through faith, "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Yet God has always attached conditions to His blessings. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8), but he still had to build the ark exactly as God commanded (Genesis 6:22). God's grace provided the opportunity; Noah's obedient faith accepted it.
- Grace is not forced upon anyone. God offers His favor freely, but He does not remove man's ability to choose. The Scriptures warn that one can "fall from grace" (Galatians 5:4) and can receive the grace of God "in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). These passages would make no sense if grace could not be resisted.

So, what does grace do?

- First, grace teaches us. Titus 2:11-12 says that the grace of God has appeared, "teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." Grace is more than God's favor—it is God's instruction. It teaches us how He wants us to live.
- Second, grace provides the remedy for our sin problem. All have sinned (Romans 3:23), and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Left to ourselves, we would be in a

hopeless condition. Through His grace, God sent His Son to die for us, making forgiveness possible while He remains perfectly just.

- . Third, grace gives us access to God. Because of Christ, we can "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). What a tremendous blessing that is!

The bottom line is simple: Grace is God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. But His grace never relieves us of the responsibility to do what He has commanded.

May we never take God's grace for granted. Instead, let us humbly receive it, gratefully obey Him, and faithfully walk in the light of His truth.

- by Greg Gwin