

The Outrageous Grace of God

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I want to tell you a story about Max. Max was not the best driver and nor was his wife. Consequently they had a few dingles in their vehicle over time – nothing major – but each one was their fault and so they had multiple insurance claims. Finally one day, Max received a letter from the insurance company saying they were cancelling his policy because of the number of claims. He had made too many mistakes and they no longer wanted to insure him. Max was not surprised, but then he started to think about what insurance is actually for in the first place – for those who make mistakes - and now they cancel his policy for making mistakes? Isn't that like a doctor treating only healthy patients? Or a dentist hanging a sign in the window, "No cavities, please." Or a teacher penalizing you for asking too many questions. Isn't that like qualifying for a loan by proving you don't need one? What if the fire department said it would protect you *until* you had a fire? What if a bodyguard said he'd protect you *unless* someone was after you? Or a lifeguard said he'd watch over you *unless* you started to drown? Or what if, perish the thought, heaven had limitations to its coverage? What if you got a letter from the Pearly Gates Underwriting Division which read like this:

Dear Mrs Smith,

I'm writing in response to this morning's request for forgiveness. I'm sorry to inform you that you have finally reached your quota of sins. Our records show that, since employing our services, you have erred too many times and your prayer life is sub-standard when compared to others of like age and circumstance.

Further review reveals that your understanding of doctrine is in the lower 20th percentile and you have excessive tendencies to gossip. Because of your sins you are a high-risk candidate for heaven. You must understand that grace has its limits. Jesus sends His regrets and kindest regards and hopes that you will find some other form of coverage.

Sub-consciously I believe many fear receiving such a letter. Some worry they already have! If an insurance company can't cover our honest mistakes, how can we expect God to cover our intentional rebellion? Well, the Apostle Paul answers the question with what John Stott calls "the most startling statement in Romans." Romans 4:5 tells us that God makes even evil people right in His sight. God actually justifies the ungodly. What an incredible claim!

It's one thing to make good people right, but those who are evil? We would expect God to justify the decent, but why the dirty? Surely coverage is provided for the driver with the clean record, but the speeder? The ticketed? The high-risk client? How in the world can justification come for those who rightly deserve the punishment they get? Well, it can't – not from this world anyway. It must come from another world, another kingdom – the kingdom of God – the kingdom of heaven.

Up until this point in Paul's letter to the Romans, all efforts at salvation he talks about have been from earth upward. Man has inflated his balloon with his own hot air and not been able to leave the atmosphere. Our pleas of ignorance are inexcusable (Rom. 1:20). Our comparisons with others are impermissible (2:1). Our religious merits are unacceptable (2:29). So the conclusion is unavoidable: self-salvation simply doesn't work. We have no way of saving ourselves. But Paul announces that God has a way. Where mankind fails, God excels. Salvation comes from heaven downward, not earth upward. "A new day from heaven will dawn upon us." (Luke 1:78). "Every good action and every perfect gift is from God" (James 1:17).

Salvation is God-initiated, God-given, God-driven and God-empowered. The gift is not from man to God. It is from God to man. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* (1 John 4:10). Grace is birthed in God and given to man. On the basis of this point alone, Christianity is set apart from all the religions of the world. No other system, ideology or faith proclaims a free forgiveness and a new life to those who have done nothing to deserve it, but who deserve only judgment. As far as the way of salvation is concerned, there are only two choices in this world: a relationship, based on divine accomplishment, which is biblical Christianity... or ... religion, which is human achievement and ineffective. Every other approach to God is a bartering system; if I do this, God will do that. I'm either saved by works (what I do), emotions (what I experience), or knowledge (what I know). But by contrast, Christianity has no whiff of negotiation at all. Man is not the negotiator; indeed, man has no grounds from which to negotiate.

Those closest to God have understood this. They have never boasted about their deeds; in fact, they are disgusted by the very thought of self-salvation. They describe legalism in repulsive terms. Isaiah said that even our righteous acts are *"like filthy rags,"* before God (Isa. 64:6). Paul equated our religious credentials with the pile of dung you avoid in the cow paddock. (Phil. 3:8).

We can summarize the first three and a half chapters of Romans with three words: **we have failed.** We have attempted to reach the moon but scarcely made it off the ground. We tried to swim the Pacific but couldn't get beyond the reef. The quest is simply too great. We don't need more supplies or more muscle or better technique; we need a power we simply don't have. Only God has a way to make people right with Him. (Rom. 3:21). How vital that we embrace this truth. God's highest dream is not to make us rich, not to make us successful or popular or famous. God's dream is to make us right with Him. How does God make us right with him?

Let's return to the insurance company and ask a question: Was it unjust in dismissing Max as a client? No. He may find their decision distasteful, unenjoyable, even disheartening, but he cannot call it unfair. The insurance company only did what it said it would do. So did God. He told Adam, *"If you ever eat fruit from that tree, you will die"* (Gen. 2:17). No fine print. No hidden agenda. No loophole or technicality. God did not play games with us. He has been fair. Since the garden of Eden, the wages of sin has been death. (Rom. 6:23). Just as reckless driving has its consequences, so does reckless living. Just as Max had no defence before his insurance company, we have no defence before God. Our record accuses us. Our past convicts us.

Now, just imagine that the founder and CEO of that insurance company chose to have mercy upon Max. Suppose, for some reason, he really wanted to keep Max as a client. What can he do? Can't he just close his eyes and pretend Max made no mistakes? Why doesn't he take Max's driving record and just tear it up? Well, there are two reasons. First, the integrity of the company would be completely compromised. He would have to relax the standards of the organization, something he could not and should not do. The ideals of the organization are too valuable to be abandoned. The company cannot abandon its precepts and still maintain its integrity. Second, the mistakes of the driver would be encouraged. If there is no price for his mistakes, why should he drive carefully? If the president will dismiss Max's errors, then what's to keep him from driving however he wants? If he is willing to ignore any blunders, then blunder on!

This is the dilemma God faces on a much larger scale. How can God punish the sin and love the sinner? Paul has made it clear, *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness"* (Rom. 1:18). Is God going to lower His standard so that we can be forgiven? Is God going to look away and pretend I've never sinned? Would we want a God who altered the rules and made exceptions? No. We want a God who *"does not change like . . . shifting shadows"* (James 1:17) and who *"judges all people in the same way."* (Rom. 2:11).

Besides, to ignore my sin is to endorse my sin. If my sin has no price, then sin on! If my sin brings no pain, then sin on! In fact, *"We should do evil so that good will come"* (Rom. 3:8). Is this the aim of God? To compromise His holiness and enable our evil? Of course not. Then what is He to do? How can God be just and love the sinner? How can God be loving and punish the sin? How can God satisfy His standard and forgive our mistakes? Is there any way God could honour the integrity of heaven without turning His back on us? Holiness demands that sin be punished. Mercy compels that the sinner be loved. How can God do both?

Let me answer the question by returning to the insurance executive and Max. Imagine Max is called into the CEO's office and he is told this.

"Max, I have some good news for you. I have found a way to deal with your pathetic record – all your mistakes. I can't overlook them; to do so would be unjust. I can't pretend you didn't commit them; to do so would be a lie. But here is what I can do. In our records we have found a person with a spotless past. He has never broken a law. Not one violation, not one trespass, not even a parking ticket.

Well, he has volunteered to trade records with you. We will take your name and put it on his record. We will take his name and put it on yours. We will punish him for what you did. You, who did wrong, will be made right. He, who did right, will be made wrong."

Max says, *"You've got to be kidding! Who would do this for me? Who is this person?"*

To which the CEO answers, *"Me."*

Now, it you're waiting for an insurance executive to say that, please don't hold your breath. He won't. He can't - even if he wanted to. He has no perfect record. But if you're wanting God to say those words, you can breathe a sigh with relief. He already has ... and that, my friends is the Gospel! That is why they call this good news! That is the outrageous grace of God in action.

For as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, *"... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation... God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Cor. 5:19, 21). The perfect record of Jesus was given to you, and your imperfect record was given to Him. Jesus was *"not guilty, but He suffered for those who are guilty to bring you to God"* (1 Peter 3:18). As a result, God's holiness is honoured and His children are forgiven. By His perfect life Jesus fulfilled the commands of the law. By His sacrificial death He satisfied the demands of sin. Jesus suffered not *like* a sinner, but *as* a sinner. Why else would he cry, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Matt. 27:46).

Just ponder this amazing, outrageous grace of God. He doesn't condone our sin, nor does He compromise His standard. He doesn't ignore our rebellion, nor does He relax His demands. Rather than dismiss our sin, He takes on our sin and, incredibly, sentences Himself. God's holiness is honoured. Our sin is punished. And we are redeemed. God is still God. The wages of sin is still death. We are given the righteousness of Christ as a free gift. We are made perfect. That's right, perfect. *"With one sacrifice he made perfect forever those who are being made holy."* (Heb. 10:14).

God justifies (makes perfect) then sanctifies (makes holy). God does what we cannot do so we can be what we dare not even dream: perfect before God. He justly justifies the unjust. And what did He do with your poor driving record? *"He cancelled the debt, which listed all the rules we failed to follow. He took away that record with its rules and nailed it to the cross"* (Col. 2:14).

I am sure you are familiar with the statement, "Give credit where credit is due." Well, in the Kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down and inside out ... because God gives credit where credit is NOT due. If Max was to go back to that Insurance Company and ask them to check his record, they would type in his name and then report to him, "Sir, you have a perfect past, your performance is spotless."

This is grace. This is the God we love and serve. And this amazing, outrageous grace is what overwhelmed a man 280 years ago as he lay on his sick bed reading Martin Luther's book on Galatians. He was overwhelmed by the grace of God and he wrote this in his journal:

"At midnight I gave myself to Christ, assured that I was safe, whether sleeping or waking. I had the continual experience of His power to overcome all temptation, and I confessed with joy and surprise that He was able to do exceedingly abundantly for me above what I can ask or imagine. I found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ. I saw that by faith I stood in Him."

That man was Charles Wesley and two days later he wrote these words:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*