Do Not Receive the Grace of God in Vain

1Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (2 Corinthians 6:1 ESV)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul makes a serious appeal to the church in Corinth to not “receive the grace of God in vain.” It is key to understand this phrase because Paul’s appeal reveals that he is concerned that some may receive the grace of God in vain.

B. Receiving God’s grace “in vain” simply means that we are not receiving all the benefits of His grace. To receive a gift in vain means that the gift did not have the intended consequence or blessing. The gift was given, but did not accomplish the purpose for which it was given.

C. For example, if you were in deep debt and someone gave you a million dollars to pay off your debts, but you left the money in the bank and never actually paid off your debts then the gift of a million dollars was given in vain because the point of the gift was to bring a dramatic shift in your living situation.

D. Any time a significant gift is given and our lives do not change according to the gift given, then it is in vain. Paul makes his appeal because the grace of God is intended to produce something in the life of a believer and Paul is concerned that God’s grace is not having its full effect in the Corinthian church. To use the illustration used above, he is deeply concerned that the “million dollars” given to the Corinthian church actually have its full effect on the lives of the Corinthians. He wants them to avoid the tragedy of receiving the grace of God, but not experiencing the divinely intended life change that goes along with that grace.

E. In order to understand Paul’s concern, it is important to understand how Paul sees the grace of God in this context.

II. PAUL’S DEFINITION OF GOD’S GRACE

A. When people think of receiving the grace of God in vain, they immediately think of the need for lifestyle transformation related to sinful habits and behaviors. This change in lifestyle, which is biblically referred to as repentance, is important because God has forgiven our sin and extended grace towards us, the only right response is for us to turn from sin and embrace the power of the Holy Spirit to begin to live in a holy way. To live in sin after we have received His

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grace and His forgiveness is to receive His forgiveness and grace in vain. While this is a true, it is only one facet of how the grace of God applies to our life and it is not Paul’s emphasis in this passage.

B. When we look at verse 2 it reveals how Paul thinks about the grace of God, and Paul primarily describes the grace of God as the favor of God towards believers.

“For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2 ESV)

1. Paul begins verse 2 by quoting Isaiah 49:8 and then repeating it to emphasize his understanding of the grace of God.

   Thus says the Lord: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, (Isaiah 49:8 ESV)

2. In context, Isaiah is predicting the favor of God towards Israel in the time of trouble. A time will come when God will answer the cry of the “Servant” in Isaiah 49 and extended His favor and help.

3. In this context Isaiah is prophesying a time when God will extend His favor and fight on behalf of Israel. His favor will help them in a difficult situation.

4. Paul quotes Isaiah’s prophecy, then repeats a key phrase and declares it to the church in Corinth. He emphasizes that now is a favorable time and now is the day of salvation. Salvation in this context if the divine help and favor of God.

C. Paul’s primary burden is that the church recognize the gift of God’s favor that has been given to us now. In this context, Paul’s primary definition of the grace of God is the favor of God towards His people. We used to be God’s enemies, but now we have His favor. Now He stands ready to save us. When Paul declares that now is the day of salvation he is saying that God stands ready to save us. His power is at our disposal. He claims us as His own and He is committed to save us.

D. While it is true that turning from sin is part of a response of gratitude towards the mercy of God, that truth is not Paul’s primary point in this passage. It is certainly true that, in light of God’s favor, that we should not continue to

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behave like His enemies but Paul is emphasizing something powerful that has a deep effect on how we live our lives.

III. **EMPOWERED BY THE FAVOR OF GOD**

A. We frequently confuse grace and mercy. God’s mercy is His free offer of forgiveness towards us. His grace is different - it is His favor towards us. Paul is deeply concerned in 2 Corinthians that the church would not receive the grace, or favor, of God in vain because Paul recognizes the power of living with an awareness of God’s favor.

B. Paul expresses something very similar in Ephesians 3:12 when he reminds the Ephesians of the access they have to God.

> 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (Ephesians 3:12 ESV)

1. In Ephesians 3, Paul reminds the church that we can stand before God in boldness because we have access with confidence.

2. Most Christians believe that they have access to God through prayer, but few truly live their entire lives as though they have access to God with confidence and that He stands ready to release His salvation. If they did, they would live very different lives.

C. Paul’s point in Ephesians 3:12 and in 2 Corinthians 6:1 can be illustrated by a simple illustration: When someone without relationship approaches a powerful king, they tend to ask very small things. They approach the king carefully and nervously hoping that he will extend his favor towards them, because they are hoping for favor, but not certain of it. On the other hand, when the king’s son approaches him, he comes very differently. He comes boldly because he has relationship. He asks big things because he is confident in his father’s heart. He knows he has favor and it changes the way he acts and behaves both before the king and how he relates to others. He knows that his father takes pleasure in fulfilling his requests and he knows who he is.

1. This illustrates precisely what it means to receive the grace of God and what it means to receive the grace of God in vain. By virtue of being in Jesus, we are called to approach God and live before men as a confident son rather than an insecure petitioner.

2. In Jesus we have God’s full favor so when we live without confidence that God is for us and we approach God in timidity or with doubt we are
not living according to what is ours in Jesus and this is precisely what it means to receive the grace of God in vain.

3. When we do not act like we have God’s favor in the way we live before God and man, then that grace is “in vain” because it has not resulted in the transition in our living condition that God designed for it. We are not experiencing the benefits that God intends for us to experience.

D. The grace and favor of God has been given to us so that we can approach God in confidence. It has been given so that we view the circumstances and situations of our life through a very different lens. We are not alone in this world. We are not helpless. Our lives are not meaningless.

1. What we become is not ultimately determined either by our own weakness or by the assault of the enemy. What we become is determined by the fact that we now live under God’s favor. Now is the time of favor. Now is the time of salvation. We are called to walk in confidence before God and man - not fear and insecurity.

2. We need not succumb even to the difficulties in our lives because they are not an indicator of God’s posture towards us. Even when we face disappointments, problems, and obstacles, God is for us and that radically transforms our emotions, our thinking, and ultimately how we react to the challenges of life.

E. The grace and favor of God that has been extended towards us is intended to produce a dramatic transition in how we live and how we think about ourselves. The son of a great king behaves very differently from the son of a peasant. He has an air of confidence in his situation and his future. Even when he faces challenges he knows that the king is for him and that strengthens him. Understanding the favor of God towards us empowers us. It causes us to make different decisions. We face opposition and disappointment very differently. We interpret life through a completely different lens.

F. The way we interpret God’s posture towards us affects us far more than we realize. While some are living in sin and in that way taking advantage of the grace of God, far more believers are still weighed down by fear and insecurity because they are not confident in God’s favor towards them. They have received the grace of God in vain because they have not fully recognized the dramatic transition in their situation when they were born again.

G. Both of Paul’s letters to Corinth reveal that the church in Corinth struggled with serious issues of sin and maturity. Even though Paul rebuked their sin, he also wanted to make sure that they stayed confident in the grace of God. He knew
that the church would suffer great loss if they did not understand the reality of the grace of God that had been extended towards them. Paul both addressed their sin and made sure that they did not lose sight of the fact that they had still receive the grace of God. He did not want them to lose sight of their position of favor with God.

H. Paul knew instinctively that our view of who God is and our view of who we are in relation to him determines so much of how we live. This is why Paul wanted to make sure the Corinthian church remembered their position before God. They needed to address internal issues of immaturity and sin, but in all of that it was critical that they remembered that they had received God’s grace and favor. To not live in that truth would be a tragedy and a loss of potential. To turn from sin, but not be confident before God was not enough. The church needed both to come into the fullness of their calling. That is why he made his appeal to them to live in light of the grace of God.

I. Like the Corinthians, we need to heed Paul’s apostolic appeal. We need to be empowered by the grace of God to live with full confidence in who He is and who we are to Him.

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