

A NEW CATECHUMENATE

BELIEVING

Study Guide

Session #11 | Grace & Repentance

INTRODUCTION

During an interview with C. S. Lewis, someone asked him what was most distinctive about Christianity as a religion. Without a moment's hesitation, he shot back: "Grace."

It is an unusual concept. To my knowledge no religion highlights grace in the way and to the degree that Christianity does. The theme of this particular session is grace and repentance, which follows logically from sin and evil. There is the bad news of our sin; there is the good news of God's grace.

Grace is God's primary disposition toward us. God creates, sustains, reveals, exposes, disciplines, forgives, restores, and redeems because God is gracious. Grace makes repentance possible in the first place. Christians do not have to bargain with God, earn something from God or prove themselves to God. They simply have to repent, that is, turn toward God. And they don't even have to do it perfectly. God does not require a certain degree of sincerity first. He looks for any sign of turning toward him, however incomplete. ANY sign of turning is enough.

The goal in this session is to develop the habit of turning toward God, and thus experience renewal through the grace of God. Repentance is not a "one-and-done" practice; it is a lifestyle. Every time we turn toward God we return to our true home, that place—that relationship—where there is perfect love, safety, forgiveness and life. Marriages grow when spouses develop the habit of turning toward each other. Likewise in our relationship with God. We grow in faith and obedience when we keep turning toward God. That is the essence of repentance. God welcomes us home just as the father of the Prodigal Son did, however unworthy we are. That is the essence of grace.

NOTES

1. Repentance

a. The Greek term: *metanoia*

b. A turning

c. No need for perfection

2. Grace

a. Definition

b. Examples

c. The Greek term: *Charis*

d. Romans 5

e. Ephesians 2

f. Luke 15

g. God's grace as primary

h. Thus: not *our* choices, feelings, experiences, commitments, etc.

i. As good as God is, not as good as we are . . .

j. How far-reaching? See II Corinthians 7:5-12

3. Three problems:

a. Temptation

b. Presumption

c. Habits

d. The discipline

i. Put off!

ii. Think differently!

iii. Put on!

BIBLE STUDY: WEEK ONE

A number of Psalms are prayers of repentance. We will spend time in two of them over the next two weeks. Keep in mind that the goal of repentance is not excessive and morbid introspection. God does not call Christians to self-hatred. God calls Christians to turn away from self and toward God. Repentance is a turning toward God.

The first, Psalm 51, is the classic prayer of repentance written by David after he was confronted with the sin of adultery and murder. As you read this Psalm—over and over again—reflect on what you learn about repentance. Notice what God really wants from us: a clean and pure heart.

The second, Psalm 36, describes two ways of living life. The first way consists of pursuing transgression or sin. What happens to the person who lives that kind of life? The second way consists of turning toward God and experiencing his steadfast love and faithfulness. What happens to the person who lives that kind of life? Read both of these Psalms repeatedly.

There is simply no counterpart in ancient literature to the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), nor the story of the woman of the street, called a “sinner” in the passage, who washed Jesus feet (Luke 7:36-50). Try to read both of these passages three times a week, each time identifying with a different character in the story. The story of the Prodigal Son is the last of three stories that deal with something lost (sheep, coin and son). Notice how Luke sets up the telling of these stories in Luke 15:1-2. Religious leaders criticized Jesus for the company he kept. Then read the three stories, focusing your attention on the last one. Think about the story of the Prodigal Son from the perspective of the son himself, from the perspective of his older brother, and from the perspective of the father. What do you learn in each case? What does this story teach you about God?

Consider these questions before reading the Luke 15 story:

1. How does Luke set up the series of stories in Luke 15 in 15:1-2?
2. Note the chorus repeated three times in this story: “Rejoice with me . . .” Do you ever imagine that God REJOICES in you, delights in you, welcomes you with enthusiasm into his family? What would happen to you if you actually thought that way about God?
3. How do you see lavish grace at play in the story of the Prodigal Son?
4. How do you see lavish grace in the story of the elder brother?

5. Which character would you identify with more? Why?

Day One: Read Psalm 51; Luke 15:1-1-10.

Day Two: Read Psalm 51: Luke 15:11-24.

Day Three: Read Psalm 51: Luke 15:25-32.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

I rarely meet new Christians who know how to live in grace. They might be enthusiastic and grateful, having tasted grace for the first time in their lives, but they are far from having grace really sink in. They are far more excited about their conversion than they are about grace. It takes time to discover how vast and deep, how lavish and abundant, God's grace really is. It is usually when religious performance dips, when feelings wane, when sincerity dies, that we cross the threshold of experiencing God's grace. Or we end up collapsing in on ourselves, thinking that we are the worst sinners in the world, far

beyond God’s capacity to forgive and restore. The parable of the Prodigal Son underscores just how gracious God is. Grace wears us out and wears us down until we grow weary of sinning and learn to receive God’s grace.

The first step in that process is to develop the habit of turning toward God, no matter what we have done, no matter how we feel, no matter where we are, no matter who we think we are. This turning—repentance—should become an instinct, leading to a constant conversation between God and us.

Here is the spiritual exercise: turn to God first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening. Start there. Turn to God and say a brief prayer: “Lord, thanks for the gift of this day. Thanks for making me yours. Thanks for forgiving me. Thanks for your loving presence. I stumble and sin. I have bad habits. I yield them to you and I yield myself to you. Help me to be faithful and attentive to you.” Continue to try this practice as you go about your day: *a frequent turning toward God*. You will never fool God. So turn to him as you are. Express gratitude and need.

What you are doing is developing the spiritual practice of *turning*, like a young child turns toward a parent. If you observe a young child over time, you will see that he or she brings everything back to a parent: fears, tears, joys, questions, discoveries and needs. That is how we can and should relate with God.

It begins with turning, the true meaning of repentance.

FIRST SMALL GROUP

1. Begin with prayer.
2. Reflect on what you learned and how you applied the content from the last session. How can you hold each other accountable? Any specific needs or concerns? What is happening in your life?
3. Key question: why is grace so hard to accept, especially when we most need it? What keeps us from accepting grace? Why is turning toward God so difficult, especially when we are most desperate and needy?
4. What did you learn about the meaning of repentance and grace?
5. What did you learn by reading and praying Psalms 51?
6. What did you learn from Luke 15? What happened to you as you try to step into it, as if you were there? What character did you identify with more—the younger

brother or the elder brother? What did you feel as you thought about the way the father responded to both brothers? Do you experience God this way?

7. What happened to you as you tried to turn toward God throughout the day? Did it have any impact?
8. Why is grace so hard for us to grasp and receive?
9. Pray for each other.

BIBLE STUDY: WEEK TWO

The second story, found in Luke 7:36-50, is full of fantastic detail. Imagine yourself in the scene as you read it. Observe who invites Jesus to dine, who the guests are, what the setting is. Watch the woman sneak in. What does she do? What happens to the guests once they take notice of the woman? How does her presence change the atmosphere of the meal? How does Jesus handle it? Why does Jesus tell the story to Simon the Pharisee? Then take note of the shifting of eyes once Jesus turns to look at the woman (keep in mind that in those days, people reclined to eat, with their heads nearest to the low table and their feet pointing away from the table). Looking at the woman, Jesus continues to speak to Simon and the other guests. What does Jesus say? What is the outcome? What do you make of the conclusion: the person who is forgiven little loves little; the person who is forgiven much loves much? Can anyone ever say that they have been forgiven little? If not, then what is the point?

Again, consider these questions:

1. How does Psalm 36 describe two kinds of people? Which do you identify with more?
2. Use your imagination in reading the Luke 7 story. What do you SEE going on? Who does Jesus direct his attention toward? Who does he address? Did you observe the shift of where all eyes were looking?
3. What did the woman do that was so true and right?
4. In your mind, what was the essential problem of Simon the Pharisee?
5. What does it mean to be “forgiven much”? “Forgiven little”? Can ANYONE claim to be forgiven little? Can good, religious people be worse off than notorious sinners like the woman in this story? Why? What does that say about their view of religion?

Day One: Read Psalm 36; Luke 7:36-50.

Day Two: Read Psalm 36; Luke 7:36-50.

Day Three: Read Psalm 36; Luke 7:36-50.

SPECIAL PROJECT

We tend to separate religion and life. It is a bad habit that has long afflicted western Christianity. We do religion; we do life. We do not integrate the two together very well. The special project this session is to begin the process of integrating the two. If God is truly God, God is God of everything, not merely of formal religion. The gods of the Roman Empire had their specific duties and spheres of influence. The God of Christians is Lord of all.

We are focusing on grace and repentance. To turn toward God is repentance; to receive from God is grace. Begin each day for two weeks by inviting God into your daily life. What does your day consist of? Where will you be going? What will you be doing? Who will you meet? Simply invite God into your ordinary life. This is turning toward God and receiving from God. "God," you are saying, "I turn to you. I invite you into my life. Make me aware of what you are already doing and what you want to do in my life."

SECOND SMALL GROUP

1. Begin with prayer.
2. What did you learn by meditating on Psalm 36?
3. What did you experience, FEEL, and learn in your meditation on Luke 7:36-50? What did the sinful woman experience? Simon the Pharisee? What was his central problem? What did he miss? How did his behavior toward Jesus, as well as the woman, reflect his understanding of himself AND God?
4. What happened as you tried to invite God into your ordinary life, always turning toward him? Do you struggle with keeping God confined to mere religious activities? What might happen to you if you turned toward God more consistently?
5. Close in prayer.