



THE WHITBY FOUNDATION

BEFORE THE THEREFORE

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE AND THE LIFE IT CREATES

Understanding why the mercies of God come before the commands of God

ROMANS 12:1 / ROMANS 12:1 TO 2

TEACHING AIM

To understand our need for grace, behold Christ's saving work, and live with grateful obedience, repentance, humility, and mercy.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God" Romans 12:1

MAKING FAMILIES STRONGER

Introduction: Before the Command, There Is Mercy

It is possible to know what the Bible commands and still misunderstand the Christian life. A person may know that Christians should forgive, serve, pursue holiness, love their neighbors, and offer their lives to God. Yet beneath those good responsibilities may lie a destructive assumption: If I perform well enough, perhaps God will finally be pleased with me.

The problem is not obedience. Scripture commands obedience. The problem is making our obedience the foundation of our acceptance before God rather than the fruit of what Christ has accomplished.

Pastor Derrick Levandusky of Redeeming Hope has emphasized a teaching insight about Paul's letter to the Romans: we often try to begin living at Romans 12 without first understanding why Paul spent the preceding chapters explaining our need for a Savior and the mercies of God.

Paul's appeal in Romans 12:1 begins with a decisive word: "Therefore." He urges believers, in view of God's mercies, to present their bodies as a living sacrifice. He has not simply changed subjects. He is moving from the saving work of God to the worshipful response of God's people.

This does not mean Romans 1 through 11 contains no commands. Romans 6 already calls believers to resist sin and present themselves to God. Rather, the major movement of the letter is that God's gracious work supplies the foundation, identity, and power for a transformed life. We must see what the "therefore" rests upon.

Big Idea: Grace is not the reward for a changed life. Grace in Christ is the gift that creates a changed life.

1. Why We Need Grace: The Diagnosis We Cannot Escape

Read Romans 1:16 to 3:26. Paul's thesis in Romans 1:16 to 17 announces the gospel as God's power for salvation and reveals the righteousness of God received by faith. He then spends the following argument showing why every kind of person needs this good news.

Romans 1:18 to 32 describes humanity suppressing God's truth and exchanging the Creator's glory for created things. Idolatry is not merely bowing before an image. It is the disordered devotion of the heart, treating something God made as though it could take God's rightful place. Such exchanges distort worship, desire, and conduct.

Romans 2 confronts the religious and moral observer. Possessing knowledge of God's standards does not itself justify a person. The one who judges another while practicing sin is also accountable to God's impartial judgment. Paul does not let respectable conduct become an escape route from the need for grace.

Romans 3 brings the argument together. Both Jew and Gentile are under sin, and no one is justified by works of the law. Romans 3:23 states that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. The law exposes guilt; it cannot provide the obedience and reconciliation that guilty sinners need.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift" (Romans 3:23–24, ESV, excerpt)

Sin is deeper than isolated mistakes. It includes culpable rebellion against God and corruption affecting our desires, loyalties, and actions. This does not mean every person is equally wicked or incapable of any outward good. It means no person can present a moral record that establishes righteousness before the holy God.

If our problem were merely ignorance, better information would suffice. If it were merely poor habits, improved discipline would be enough. But Paul describes a problem involving guilt before God and bondage to sin. We do not simply need instructions. We need redemption.

The wonder begins here: the gospel does not flatter us about our spiritual condition. It tells the truth about our sin so that we may recognize the glory of God's mercy.

2. What Grace Gives: God Provides the Righteousness We Cannot Earn

Read Romans 3:21 to 5:21. Romans 3:21 marks the great turn in Paul's argument. After exposing universal human guilt, Paul announces God's saving righteousness revealed apart from the works of the law, yet witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. God's answer comes from outside our moral achievements.

Romans 3:24 speaks of people being justified by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Justification is a judicial declaration: God counts the believer righteous in Christ. It is not a claim that sin never happened, nor a suggestion that God's holiness is negotiable. Romans 3:25 to 26 insists that God is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. At the cross, mercy does not bypass righteousness. God deals with sin through the saving death of His Son.

Consider how different this is from every system that tells you to make yourself worthy enough to be received. The gospel declares that the holy God against whom we have sinned has provided the Savior we could never provide and the righteousness we could never achieve. We contribute no saving merit. Christ accomplishes our redemption, and the glory belongs to God.

Romans 4 uses Abraham to show that righteousness is counted through faith rather than wages owed for works. Faith is not a new achievement by which we earn the gift. It is the response of trust that receives what God graciously provides in Christ.

Faith does not make grace a transaction in which God contributes salvation, and we contribute a commendable achievement. Paul contrasts working for wages with trusting the God who justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:4 to 5). Faith receives Christ and His righteousness; it is not the righteousness for which God justifies us. Even the strength of our faith is not the ground of our acceptance. That ground is Christ Himself. As Ephesians 2:8 to 9 makes clear, salvation is the gift of God, leaving no room for boasting.

Romans 5 then unfolds the blessings of justification: peace with God, access to grace, and hope of glory. Paul's statement that Christ died for us while we were still sinners means God's saving love did not wait for our moral improvement. In Romans 5:12 to 21, Adam and Christ stand as representatives whose actions carry profound consequences. Condemnation and death are associated with Adam's trespass; righteousness and life are found through the obedience of Christ. Paul's point is not that sin is trivial, but that God's gift in Christ overcomes what human rebellion could never repair.

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, ESV)

We should not speak of grace merely as God being nice. Saving grace is God's unearned favor expressed in His decisive action to reconcile sinners through Jesus Christ. Grace is free to the recipient, but it is not cheap. Its cost is seen at Calvary.

Big Idea: Grace does not mean God lowers His standard. It means God has acted in Christ to save those who cannot meet His standard on their own.

3. What Grace Changes: Union With Christ and Life in the Spirit

Read Romans 6 to 8. When some hear that salvation is received rather than earned, they fear obedience will become optional. Paul anticipated this misunderstanding long before we did. Romans 6:1 asks whether believers should continue in sin so that grace may increase. His answer is an emphatic rejection.

Why does grace not permit sin? Because the person who belongs to Christ is united to Him in His death and resurrection. In Romans 6, believers are told to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Sin remains a dangerous reality, but it no longer possesses rightful dominion over them. Christians must not present their bodies as instruments of unrighteousness. They are to offer themselves to God as people brought from death to life.

That argument is essential. Grace is not simply pardon without transformation. Union with Christ establishes a new identity and brings a new allegiance. We do not fight sin to purchase union with Christ. We fight sin because Christ has made us His own.

Through union with Christ, believers share in the saving benefits of His death and resurrection. Paul describes those baptized into Christ as joined to His death and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3 to 5). This does not make believers saviors or confuse their obedience with Christ's finished work. Because they belong to Him, His death marks a break with sin's dominion, and His risen life grounds their new life through the Spirit. The verdict of no condemnation (Romans 8:1) and the Spirit's power to put sin to death (Romans 8:12 to 13) are distinct blessings of the same union. Holiness does not earn our place in Christ; it increasingly expresses the life we have in Him.

Romans 7 describes the goodness of God's law and the way sin exploits the law. Christians disagree about the precise identity of the speaker in Romans 7:14 to 25, so the passage should not be used to flatten every believer's experience into a single formula. Paul's broader argument remains clear: God's holy command cannot, by itself, liberate people from sin's power.

Romans 8 answers with the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The Spirit gives life, enables believers to put sinful deeds to death, and bears witness that they are God's children. The language of adoption matters: grace does not merely bring us into God's courtroom for a favorable verdict. It welcomes us into His family through Christ.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1, ESV)

Romans 8 also refuses the idea that grace removes all present suffering. God's children groan as they await the redemption of their bodies. The Spirit helps them in weakness, and God works toward the completion of His saving purpose. No circumstance can sever God's people from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Here is the biblical balance. Grace does not make holiness unnecessary, but neither does holiness become a ladder by which we climb into God's acceptance. The Holy Spirit forms the obedience that God's saving grace calls forth.

4. The Mercies of God: Why Romans 9 Through 11 Matter

Read Romans 9 to 12:2. If we hurry straight from Romans 8 to Romans 12, we miss something Paul deliberately includes. Romans 9 through 11 wrestles with God's faithfulness, Israel, the inclusion of the Gentiles, unbelief, and divine mercy. Paul's concern is not merely an individual's pathway to self-improvement. He is explaining how God's saving promises remain faithful amid Israel's unbelief and the surprising inclusion of the nations.

Romans 9 stresses that God's saving purpose rests upon mercy rather than human entitlement. Romans 10 proclaims Christ and the necessity of faith, including the calling to hear and respond to the gospel. Romans 11 warns Gentile believers against arrogance. They have no grounds for boasting over Israel, because they stand by faith and depend upon mercy. Paul anticipates God's continuing faithfulness to His promises, even as Christians differ over details of how Romans 11 describes Israel's future.

Romans 11:30 to 32 repeatedly names mercy as Paul describes Jews and Gentiles. The claim that God has consigned all to disobedience to show mercy to all must be read within that argument. It does not, by itself, teach that every person will ultimately be saved regardless of faith in Christ. Paul's emphasis is that no group possesses salvation by superior merit and that mercy remains God's to give.

Paul responds by worshiping: he marvels at the depth of God's wisdom and the unsearchable character of His judgments in Romans 11:33 to 36. Only then does he say, "Therefore," in Romans 12:1. The Greek word *oun* marks the connection between what God has done and how believers are to live. The appeal comes "by the mercies of God," the gracious compassion Paul has traced across the letter.

Paul calls believers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice. This is not a vague spiritual feeling. Grace claims embodied life: our habits, speech, sexuality, work, relationships, resources, and everyday decisions. He describes this offering as fitting worship and then calls for the renewing of the mind in Romans 12:2. The command to be transformed points to a work of renewal that touches how believers perceive and discern God's will.

The order is crucial. God's mercies come before the living sacrifice, but those mercies do not leave the believer unchanged. In *Build Your Life on the Mercies of God* (2004), John Piper observes that Paul's "therefore" grounds Christian conduct in the gospel truths of Romans 1 through 11. The life offered to God is not rootless religious effort; it is worship arising from what God has done through Christ.

Big Idea: Romans 12 is not the entrance fee for mercy. It is the fitting response of those who have encountered God's mercy.

5. What We Mean When We Say Grace

Grace is God's undeserved favor toward sinners, shown supremely in Jesus Christ and applied by the Holy Spirit. It includes God's saving initiative and His continuing work in the lives of His people. We must distinguish the gifts grace brings without pretending they are unrelated.

Justification: God declares believers righteous based on Christ, received through faith (Romans 3:24 to 26; 5:1). This concerns our standing before God, not our claim to personal sinlessness.

Regeneration: The Holy Spirit grants new spiritual life (John 3:3 to 8; Titus 3:4 to 7). Regeneration is not simply adopting a new moral program.

Adoption: God welcomes believers as His children and grants the privileges of belonging to His family (Romans 8:14 to 17; Galatians 4:4 to 7).

Sanctification: God continues to set believers apart and form holiness in them (Romans 6:19 to 22; Titus 2:11 to 14). Genuine sanctification involves effort and obedience, yet its source and power are found in God's gracious work rather than self-sufficiency.

Glorification: God will complete His saving work, including the redemption of our bodies and conformity to Christ (Romans 8:23, 29 to 30). Hope rests finally on God's faithfulness.

These descriptions do not settle every debate about the order in which saving benefits are received. Reformed Christians commonly discuss effectual calling and sovereign election under the title the doctrines of grace. Wesleyan Christians emphasize prevenient grace, God's enabling work preceding human response. Those are real theological differences about how grace operates. They must be examined honestly rather than erased or treated as though Scripture used every later theological term identically.

Yet this teaching does not require readers to resolve the entire historical debate before encountering the gospel. The central proclamation is plain: salvation is God's gracious work through Jesus Christ, received through faith, and a life of holiness is its fruit rather than its purchase price.

Ephesians 2:8 to 10 holds the sequence together. Believers are saved by grace through faith, not by works, and are created in Christ Jesus for good works. Titus 2:11 to 14 likewise teaches that saving grace trains God's people to renounce ungodliness and live godly lives. Grace does not only forgive the past. Grace teaches us how to live in the present as we await Christ's appearing.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith” and “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” (Ephesians 2:8, 10, ESV, excerpts)

6. What Grace Is Not: Neither Performance Nor Permission

Imagine a believer who has spoken cruelly to someone she loves. The conviction that follows is appropriate: her words were sinful and need to be confessed. Yet two very different responses are possible. She may try to earn back God's acceptance through days of religious performance, as though her justification has been canceled. Or she may come honestly to the Father, confess without excuses, ask the person she hurt for forgiveness, seek to repair the harm, and depend upon the Spirit to change how she speaks. The second response does not minimize sin. It takes sin seriously without treating repentance as another payment for salvation.

Because her standing before God rests on Christ, her repentance does not purchase a new verdict of justification. This does not mean obedience is unimportant to her Father. Hebrews 12:5 to 11 teaches that God lovingly disciplines His children, and Scripture portrays obedience as pleasing to Him. The believer is not working to become a child, but learning to live as one who has been received by grace.

Legalism treats acceptance as a wage secured by performance. License misuses mercy as permission to ignore God's will. Romans 3 and 4 reject justification by works; Romans 6 rejects continuing in sin as though grace had no transforming purpose. Timothy Keller, explaining Galatians 3:10 to 22 in *The Law and the Promise* (1998), draws attention to the decisive order: we do not become saved by adding obedience to faith; obedience follows the salvation received through faith. The changed order produces a changed life.

Charles H. Spurgeon, preaching on Romans 6:14 to 15 in *The Doctrines of Grace Do Not Lead to Sin* (1883), argues that saving grace does more than pardon guilt. It breaks sin's claim to dominion and produces holiness. His point supports Paul's argument: genuine grace is no invitation to cherish the sin from which Christ saves us. The believer may still struggle deeply, but the struggle now belongs to a new life in Christ, not to a hopeless effort to purchase acceptance.

Christian obedience is therefore neither a bargaining chip nor an optional accessory. It is the grateful fruit of belonging to Christ. We do not earn adoption by acting like God's children. We learn to live as God's children because He has graciously received us in Christ.

7. From Receiving Mercy to Extending Mercy

Read Luke 7:36 to 50; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12 to 13. At Simon the Pharisee's table, Jesus tells a story of two debtors and exposes the distance between Simon's self-confidence and a woman's grateful love. The woman is not portrayed as buying forgiveness by performing enough acts of affection. Jesus ultimately identifies faith as the means through which she is saved. Her love displays the response of someone who grasps mercy.

Grace received ought to produce humility toward other sinners. The person who knows that their own standing before God rests on mercy has no basis for spiritual superiority. This does not erase moral discernment. It should make us truthful about sin without becoming proud of our own imagined innocence.

One revealing test of our understanding of grace is the way we interpret another person's failure. We may expect others to understand the motives behind our sin while judging their conduct by the harshest possible interpretation. We may remember every offense against us while overlooking the pride that shapes our own reactions. Jesus' warning about the log and the speck (Matthew 7:3 to 5) calls us to examine ourselves before correcting others. Remembering that we stand before God by mercy should make us quicker to confess, slower to claim moral superiority, and more willing to pursue another person's good. It does not require treating every wrong as equal, surrendering discernment, or removing appropriate boundaries.

In marriage, grace may take the form of confessing without excuses, hearing a spouse's pain without immediately defending ourselves, forgiving without keeping score, and accepting responsibility for genuine harm. In parenting, grace combines loving correction with patience and instruction rather than humiliation. In church and community, it moves us toward hospitality, generosity, and practical care for people who cannot repay us.

But grace must never be made an instrument of coercion. Forgiveness is not the same thing as restored trust. Reconciliation may require repentance, truth-telling, safety, accountability, and demonstrated change. Extending grace does not mean concealing abuse or offering unrestricted access to a person who continues to cause harm. Biblical mercy is not the abandonment of truth. God Himself is merciful and just.

The gospel gives us a new question to ask when we encounter another person's failure: How can I respond truthfully and mercifully as someone who has received undeserved mercy through Christ?

8. Grace for the Long Road of Christian Life

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7 to 10; Hebrews 4:14 to 16; Philippians 2:12 to 13. Some believers accept grace as the beginning of salvation and then live as though growth depends entirely on personal determination. They treat the gospel as the front door and moral effort as the rest of the house.

Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 12 resists that conclusion. In weakness, he learned the sufficiency of Christ's grace. Hebrews calls believers to approach the throne of grace for mercy and help in time of need. Philippians commands believers to work out the implications of their salvation because God is at work in them, enabling both willing and doing according to His good pleasure.

These passages do not erase effort. They establish its proper source. Grace sustains repentance, perseverance, courage, and growth. It also provides hope when progress is uneven, and suffering continues.

The mature Christian does not graduate from needing grace. Maturity includes increasing dependence upon Christ, deeper gratitude for His mercy, and growing willingness to obey Him from the heart.

Gospel and Grace: The Wonder That Changes Everything

God is holy. We have sinned against Him. No moral achievement can erase our guilt or earn reconciliation. But God has acted in love and righteousness through Jesus Christ, His Son. Christ lived in obedience, died for sinners, and rose again. Through repentance and faith in Him, sinners receive forgiveness, righteousness before God, peace with Him, and new life by the Spirit.

The good news is not that God decided our sin did not matter. The good news is that our sin matters so much that only Christ could bear its saving cost, and His mercy is so great that He willingly did so. The gospel humbles our pride without leaving us in despair. It exposes our need while revealing the sufficiency of our Savior.

If you have never trusted Christ, the invitation is not to become respectable enough to deserve Him. Turn from sin and trust the risen Savior. If you belong to Christ yet live under the crushing fear that you must earn His love, return to the mercy that first brought you to Him. If you have used grace as an excuse to remain unchanged, hear Paul's call to offer your life to God.

God's grace does not end at forgiveness. It welcomes, renews, teaches, sustains, and will one day complete the work He has begun. Before Paul asks us to offer our bodies, he has revealed God's mercy in Christ. The living sacrifice is our response, not our payment. The transformed life is not the price of grace but evidence of its work. The glory does not belong to the person who has learned to perform; it belongs to the Savior who has graciously redeemed. This is why Romans 12 begins with "therefore."

The heart of this teaching: We do not begin with what we must do for God. We begin with what God has done for us in Christ. Then, in view of His mercies, we offer Him our lives.

Faithful Application

When you encounter a biblical command this week, first identify what the passage reveals about God's character, Christ's saving work, and the Spirit's help. Then ask how obedience should flow from gratitude and faith rather than from an attempt to purchase acceptance.

Name an area where you have tried to change through shame or self-reliance. Confess what is sinful, receive the gospel's assurance where Scripture provides it, seek help when needed, and take one concrete step of obedience. Grace does not require pretending that the struggle is easy. It calls you to depend upon Christ within it.

Finally, identify someone toward whom you have become proud, resentful, indifferent, or impatient. Consider one truthful act of mercy you can offer without overlooking wrongdoing or abandoning necessary boundaries.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where have you tried to begin at Romans 12, attempting to perform Christian duties without first considering the mercies of God? How would your motives change if obedience flowed from what Christ has already done?
2. Which aspect of grace most challenges your assumptions: that you cannot earn justification, that the Spirit must give new life, that God receives believers as children, or that He continues to transform them? Why?
3. When you think about someone else's sin, how does remembering your own need for mercy change your response? What would it look like to extend grace while preserving truth, accountability, and appropriate boundaries?
4. How should receiving grace produce worshipful obedience in one specific area of your life this week, including your home, church, work, or community?

Selected Sources and Further Study

Scripture: Romans 1 through 12; Ephesians 2:1 to 10; Titus 2:11 to 14; Luke 7:36 to 50; 2 Corinthians 12:7 to 10; Philippians 2:12 to 13.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Historical and theological dialogue: Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Doctrines of Grace Do Not Lead to Sin* (sermon, 1883); Stanford E. Murrell, *Five Doctrines of Divine Grace*; Geoffrey R. Kirkland, *The Doctrines of Grace Defined, Explained & Defended*; Mark Royster, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective* (1989). These works represent distinguishable theological traditions and are used as conversation partners rather than interchangeable authorities. For complementary exposition, see John Piper, *Build Your Life on the Mercies of God* (2004), and Timothy Keller, *The Law and the Promise* (1998), linked below.

Further study: [John Piper, Build Your Life on the Mercies of God](#)

Further study: [Timothy Keller, The Law and the Promise](#)