

Mod 12 — LIVING BY GRACE

by [Jack Cottrell](#)

Long ago I saw this comic strip: (Panel 1) – The boss bawls out his employee. (2) The employee goes home and hollers at his wife. (3) The wife yells at Junior. (4) Junior screams at the dog. (5) The dog growls at the goldfish. The scolding stops with the poor goldfish.

Here are two separate scenes of a little girl playing with her doll. Scene 1: The girl says to her doll, “You bad doll! You spilled your milk again! You’re no good for anything! Can’t you ever do anything right? Take that!” – as she slaps the doll on the side of its head. Scene 2: The girl says to her doll, “Oh, Dolly! You spilled your milk again! You must be more careful. There now, don’t cry; Mommy still loves you. Here, let me give you a big kiss!” – as she picks up the doll and hugs it.

What’s going on here? It’s simple: people tend to treat one another the way others have treated them. Why do the little girls treat their dolls so differently? Because they are acting out toward their dolls the way **THEIR** mothers have treated them.

This idea helps to explain what it means to “grow in grace” (2 Peter 3:18). How does one grow in grace? This is not talking about how we **RECEIVE** a greater quantity of grace each day. Actually, it is a command. Growing in grace is something **WE** must **DO**. So what does it mean? I am suggesting that to grow in grace means that every day we as Christians must strive harder *to treat others the way God has treated us!*

We have seen how God has saved us and blessed us with his grace. He has given to us the wonderful gifts of forgiveness and the indwelling Spirit. We have gratefully received these blessings of his grace. Now what does God expect of us? Very simply, he expects us to **LIVE BY THE SPIRIT OF GRACE** toward other people—to be gracious to them—to develop a *lifestyle of grace*.

We know the “golden rule”: do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matt. 7:12). Now here is a similar rule, the “gracious rule”: **DO UNTO OTHERS AS GOD HAS DONE UNTO YOU!** This gracious lifestyle is summed up in two words: **GIVING** and **FORGIVING**.

First, **GRACE MEANS GIVING**. The most basic meaning of the Greek word for grace, *charis*, is “a **GIFT** that brings joy.” Giving is the very essence of grace. That God is gracious means that he is a giver (see James 1:17). It is his nature to give, and his greatest gift is grace itself (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 6:23). We have accepted this gift gladly. Now what? How must we respond? As Jesus said in Matthew 10:8, “Freely you have received, freely give.”

What is the alternative to being a giver? That’s easy: being a **TAKER**. A taker is someone who is always interested in what he can get out of others, i.e., how he can take advantage of them or exploit them. This includes husbands who treat their wives as slaves, and spoiled children. It includes those with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude. It’s the person who thinks like a dog we

once owned. We decided her philosophy of life was “Everything that exists is here for ME—either to eat or chew on.”

But if we are saved by grace, we cannot live like this! God wants us to be GIVERS. A skeptic once said, “I can’t stand this Christianity business. All I ever hear from them is “Give, give, give!”” The preacher to whom he was speaking answered, “That’s about the best description of Christianity I have ever heard!” But it is not just about money, of course. It is about one’s very heart or character. We must have a giving heart, a giving spirit. You can give a lot of money and still not be a giver.

We must work and pray for a giving heart. This will lead us to share our possessions with those in need (Luke 6:32-35). It will lead us to serve others with our talents and abilities (all of which are given to us by God—1 Cor. 4:7). It will prepare us to be ready to give in many ways: to give others the credit for work done, to give others the benefit of the doubt, to give them another chance. It will help us to accept people without making them earn it.

An old hymn says, “I would be giving, and forget the gift.” This is living by grace.

Second, GRACE MEANS FORGIVING. Are you a gracious person? Are you truly living by grace? The ultimate test of the gracious heart is this: how do you respond to people who have harmed you in some way? The response of grace is *forgiveness*.

Actually, nothing is more characteristic of grace than forgiveness. It is the greatest gift you can give. Forgiveness is the heart of the package of salvation God has given us: forgiveness of sins, remission of sins, justification. This is the way Jesus treated people, even his crucifiers: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). His manner is summed up in Isaiah 42:3 and Matt. 12:20, “A bruised reed he will not break.” Sinners are bruised reeds; they deserve to be broken off and discarded. WE are such bruised reeds, but Jesus is treating us with a forgiving heart, tenderly nursing us back to good spiritual health.

Now what? How must we respond? As the Apostle Paul specifically says, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32).

What is the alternative to being a forgiver? The answer is simple: being a BREAKER. I.e., when someone has hurt us, the common response is to desire to BREAK that person like a bruised reed: to strike back, to get even, to make him suffer or to cause him pain in some way. Let’s be honest. When someone harms us or our family, what is our first impulse? Do we not want to break the offender in some way—to punish “that dirty rat”? Maybe not with physical harm, but via harsh words, insults, ridicule, the “silent treatment,” or economic harm.

But here is where we must learn to LIVE BY GRACE. We must be forgivers, not breakers. “But they deserve my wrath!” Yes, perhaps so. But grace is the very opposite of treating people as they deserve. Isn’t that how God in his grace has treated us? This means that if someone has done us wrong or harmed us or ours, we will not continue to hold it against him or her, much less try to cause them overt pain. We will not want to hurt back or do things designed to “get even.”

Here is a very important point: being personally gracious and forgiving toward offenders does NOT rule out LEGAL justice when this is warranted and when it is rightfully administered by our justice system. Remember the two sides to God's nature, i.e., holy wrath and loving grace. It is God's desire and prerogative to punish evildoers, and he has appointed civil government for that very purpose (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-15). It is not wrong to want to see criminals punished. But God has appointed government to do that, and has forbidden us to take personal revenge (Rom. 12:14-21). In our role as Christians we represent the church, and the church's job is to present the loving and forgiving side of God's nature to the world. The government lives by justice; we as individual Christians live by grace.

The bottom line is that we as Christians have no choice but to forgive. The so-called Christian who makes no attempt to forgive does not really understand what Christ and Christianity are all about, and can make no claim to God's grace (see Matthew 6:14-15). So let's take 2 Peter 3:18 seriously, and seek to GROW IN GRACE. We can do this by giving up the spirit of taking and breaking, and developing the spirit of giving and forgiving.