

## *Unwrapped*

### *Week 1*

*How to use this guide:*

*This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.*

What do you hope to unwrap this Christmas? Do you have your eyes on the hottest toy or the newest gadget? Perhaps you've dropped some hints or made a wish list of all the things you'd love to find under the tree. On Christmas morning, when all the gifts are unwrapped, what presents do you hope to have received?

**[Q] What is the best Christmas present you've ever received?**

I think everyone likes presents. There's something universally wonderful about receiving a gift that was picked out specifically for you. It's more than just the present itself, but also the time and energy and thought that went into the present. Hopefully we all know what it is like to unwrap a present that was picked out just for us.

**[Q] What is it about a present that makes it meaningful or special to you?**

But what would you say to the idea that God has already given us the best gift we could ever imagine. As we head into the Christmas season and our minds begin thinking about all of the presents we'd love to unwrap, what would it look like in our lives if we unwrapped the best gift ever given, a gift personally picked out by God for you and for me. Over the next several weeks, we'll be in a series called "Unwrapped" where we'll be taking a closer look at God's gift of grace given for us.

Grace. The word conjures an assortment of images. When we bow our heads before dinner it's often because we are saying grace. Credit cards and loans often have a grace period where you aren't required to pay anything. When someone moves smoothly or with elegance, they are said to be graceful. When you hang a new painting in your living room it is said to grace the wall. Into this hodgepodge of definitions, we lump in the concept of God's grace given to us.

**[Q] What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word grace?**

So, what in the world does grace mean? Does grace as it relates to a loan mean the same things as grace as it is associated with God? Grace is a word that's tossed around all the time in religious settings, but what does it really mean?

Grace, as described in the Bible and taught by Jesus, is undeserved and unearned favor. Grace is God rescuing us even when there is nothing we can do to pay for or earn it. But what does grace really mean for us?

To begin our investigation of what grace really means, we are going to look at the book of Romans from the Bible. Romans is the first book in the New Testament portion of the Bible that's called an epistle, a letter written for the purpose of giving instruction. This letter was written to the growing and

thriving church in Rome. This church, in the heart of the Roman Empire, was pivotal for its position to influence Christians all throughout Europe and Asia Minor.

The book of Romans is a complex one. In many ways it's a theological essay that shows how a proper understanding of God connects with how we live our lives. This is seen in no topic more clearly than when it comes to grace. Over and over again in Romans we encounter Paul doing everything in his power to help Christians get a better grasp of what grace is and what it means for us.

Paul, the author of Romans, was uniquely positioned to address the grace of God. The journey of his life had many highs and lows. He began his life known as Saul, born into a Jewish family in the Greek culture, and as a citizen of Rome. Paul was a zealous Jewish teacher belonging to a sect of Judaism called Pharisees who were deeply concerned with the knowledge of and keeping of the Jewish laws.

This background brought Paul into sharp conflict with the followers of Jesus. Jesus' teachings were a challenge to the teachings of the Pharisees, and it challenged their hold onto the religious power they wielded. Paul became the poster child of the Pharisees' retribution against the followers of Jesus, and he began a crusade to hunt down, imprison, and kill Christians. When Christians were being killed, Paul was right there, cheering them on and smiling his approval.

Not exactly the background you'd expect for one of the most influential Christians in history, is it?

**[Q] What is your reaction to hearing Paul's background? Do you find it challenging or encouraging that Paul's early life was marked with so many mistakes?**

Yet, perhaps you can see how a background so clearly marked with darkness and distance from God is exactly the sort of background that can speak about grace. Paul came to see that he was wrong, that Jesus was the only true way to live the life God wants for us, and Paul gave his life over to Jesus. (If you're interested in reading more about Paul's learning about Jesus and his conversion to Christianity, read Acts 9.)

What this background meant for Paul was that he was acutely aware of how far he'd fallen from the expectation that God desired for him. Paul was well versed in all of the laws and regulations in the Bible. And Paul knew how he hadn't kept them. Paul knew that he was a sinner, someone who had missed the mark God set for him.

This is precisely where we need to begin with our conversation about grace as well. It is something that Paul knew well, and it's something that Paul wants to teach us too: we have all missed the mark.

*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . Romans 3: 22-23*

We are all in the same sinking boat. We are all in the same position that Paul found himself in; we have missed the mark and have failed to live up to God's standards. It doesn't matter if we're raised to be religious and to know all of the laws of God (like Paul) or whether we're just learning about God for the first time right now. We have all messed up. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.

**[Q] What do you think it means to fall short of the glory of God?  
What do you think it means specifically for you and your life?**

Any conversation about grace and about God rescuing us must begin with this understanding, because we need to know, not just intellectually but to really know, that we are in need of rescue. If we don't have a clear understanding that all of our lives are sinking like a lead balloon, then we can never really converse about grace. After all, if we don't need to be rescued then the perfect gift of grace will sit under our tree, unopened and still wrapped up tight.

This might seem basic, but we can live in such a way that we are still trying to earn our own way, trying to rescue ourselves.

Sometimes people can live with the mindset that as long as they keep the rules, they're fine.

Sometimes people can live with the idea that as long as they're a good person, everything will be okay.

Sometimes people can live with the understanding that as long as they show up at church and put some money in the basket, they're in good shape.

Sometimes people can busy themselves by comparing how they act and what they do to other people, which makes them feel pretty good about themselves.

All of these are attempts to live without a recognition that we need to be saved. If we could do it on our own, there would be no need for God to rescue us. But what Paul is teaching, and where our conversation about grace begins, is with understanding of the truth of our situation. We have fallen short.

And what we all need is God's grace.

**[Q] What are ways that you try to “be good enough”? What would it look like to unwrap God's gift of grace in your life?**

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## *Unwrapped* *Week 2*

*How to use this guide:*

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Every year there are countless wish lists made, each detailing gifts that one hopes to unwrap on Christmas morning. What would make your wish list this year? Maybe it's something tangible, like the newest gadget or the hottest toy. Maybe it's something less concrete, like a peaceful family or a good night's sleep.

**[Q] What is the best Christmas present you've ever given?**

Yet, what if the items that make it on our wish list pale beside the gift that God's given to us? What if God is offering us the best gift we could ever receive and all we had to do was unwrap it to make it our own?

As we approach Christmas, we're going to spend some time in a series called "Unwrapped" where we'll be taking a closer look at God's gift of grace, given to us through his son Jesus. Last week we began by underscoring the importance

of acknowledging our universal need to be rescued. This week, we're going to take a closer look at what it means to live with the gift of God's grace.

I think one of the biggest objections to the idea that God offers us unmerited favor if we have faith in Him, is it's just too easy. It's like playing tennis with the net down. It's like a slam dunk competition on a basket only four feet high. It's like a microwave cooking contest. There's something about grace, about the undeserved and unearned goodwill from God, that grates against our sensibilities. I mean, where's the fairness? After all, doesn't it seem too easy if all we have to do is believe in order to unwrap God's gift of grace?

**[Q] What is your reaction to the idea that God's grace is available simply by having faith in Jesus?**

For others, the concept that faith and belief are all that is needed to unwrap grace seems too vague. They want something verifiable and tangible, like a list of accomplishments to point to. Faith seems too ethereal. Something concrete, like a scale of progress, is more comfortable.

Still others struggle with the fact that their faith fluctuates from day to day. If all that is needed is faith to unwrap God's gift of grace, then does a great day of faith mean that we're close to God and his love while a bad day of faith means we're at risk of slipping out of God's reach?

**[Q] Can you identify with the objections that faith is too vague and inconsistent to be relied on to give us access to God's grace? Why or why not?**

What this leads to is the debate about the relationship between faith and works when it comes to grace and salvation. This is a debate that's worth engaging. It's vital that we understand what the Bible teaches about God's grace and how it relates to faith and works. The book of Romans in the Bible is a perfect place to learn about both faith and works and what they have to do with grace.

In Romans we read:

*. . . all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

*Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3: 24-28)*

Paul, the author of Romans, wants to be perfectly clear about how we receive the gift of God's grace – through faith. The work of grace, the work of salvation, the work of restoration, the work of paying the debt that sin demands; this is work only God can perform. God, through Jesus, provided a way for us to be made whole and justified and righteous and pure. This is the work of God and God alone. Our role is to accept this work done on our behalf with faith and belief in Jesus.

We receive grace through faith.

But what about works? I mean, doesn't it matter the kind of person I am and the things that I do? Doesn't it matter whether I'm a generous and humble person or whether I'm selfish and arrogant? Doesn't it matter if I'm truthful and loving or whether I'm dishonest and hateful?

The answer is that it does matter, but maybe not for the reasons we think.

[Q] Do you find it easier to behave or believe? Why?

I once saw a sign in front of a church that read, "Live what you believe." Undoubtedly, the idea behind this sign was to encourage people to live out the things they profess to believe. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if we've all missed the universal truth that we all *do* live out what we believe. We might not always live out what we *profess* to believe, but we do all live out what we *actually* believe. If I believe God is not big enough to rescue me, then this will impact how I live, and I will be more and more tempted to try and earn my own way. If I believe God is not forgiving, then I'll be apt to attempt to make up for my mistakes. If I believe God is like a harsh parent who delights in punishing his children, then I'll be more liable to live in fear and dread.

The truth is that we all live out what we believe. The way the Bible describes this reality is with the image of a tree bearing fruit.

Jesus once taught:

*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7:16-20)*

An apple tree can be recognized as such mainly because apples grow on it. If someone pointed to a tree and told you it was an apple tree, you would easily know they were wrong if peaches were growing on it. A tree can be identified by its fruit. In the same way, what we believe can be identified by the fruit we produce. What we believe can be seen in the things we do, the words we say, and the life we lead.

[Q] What are some of fruit that your life produces?

God designed it so that faith and works act together. Faith is the root of the tree, works are the fruit the tree bears. When we look at our lives, there is an underlying belief (or lack of belief) that produces an action. There's no point in trying to figure out whether faith or works are more important, because they are so inextricably linked together. As C.S. Lewis put it, determining whether faith or works is more important is like figuring out which blade of a pair of scissors is more important. They work in tandem.

So what do you believe? What does your faith look like? These might seem like difficult questions to answer, since faith and belief are invisible and hard to put your finger on. But we have something very concrete to turn our eyes toward: our actions. What do you believe? Well, how do you act? What fruit is your tree bearing? What are the results of your life?

**[Q] If someone was looking at your life and your works were the only things that could be used to identify what you believe, where would they conclude you put your faith?**

Our works can never save us and grace is a totally free gift from God that can never be earned with our works. But works are the harvest our faith yields in our lives.

**[Q] What is one thing you could do this week to bring what you profess to believe and how you act more in line?**

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## *Unwrapped* *Week 3*

*How to use this guide:*

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Life just seems to speed up around Christmas. The traffic gets thicker, the malls fill up with shoppers, and our schedule gets crammed with gatherings and events. Without even noticing, Christmas can zoom past us in the blink of an eye.

**[Q] What things keep you busy during the holiday season?**

During this Christmas season, we are setting aside some time to ensure we notice what Christmas is really all about. Over the past several weeks we've been looking at God's perfect gift given to each of us: grace. We began by looking at our universal need for grace and how we all need to be rescued. Last week we investigated how grace calls for a delicate balance between faith and works in our lives.

Yet, perhaps we think of the word grace in exclusively religious settings. If we only think of grace happening inside the walls of a church, have we tragically reduced what it means? What does grace really mean for our lives?

If we understand grace as the Bible describes it, then we will begin to see that it covers every part of our lives.

When we misunderstand the full extent of how God's grace is active in our lives and in our world, we might be tempted to think we are somehow responsible

for the good things that happen around us. When we do, we forget God's grace.

After all, what do we actually own in our lives?

**[Q] If someone asked you what you own, how would you normally respond? What do you think this answer says about you and your view of God's grace?**

Maybe we think our possessions are our own. After all, we paid for them with our own money, money we earned or that was given to us. Yet, in the Bible we read:

*You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)*

*To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. (Deuteronomy 10:14)*

*For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. (1 Timothy 6:7)*

All of the things we possess are not by our own power, but by God's. God has given us the ability to work and to gain money and possessions, money and possessions that belonged to God in the first place. There's no need to explain that we brought nothing into this world when we were born and that we'll take the same amount out again when we die. We began with nothing.

God gives us the ability to work and make money. God gives us the freedom to use and enjoy the world that was created by God and ultimately belongs to God. Which of our possessions are truly ours? Which of the material items we

hold have not first come from God? God, in his grace, gives us possessions and the freedom to choose how to use them.

**[Q] In what ways do you live as if your possessions were completely your own?**

Maybe our time is ours? We each wake up in the morning with the same twenty-four hours, and it's easy to envision that these hours belong to us. We talk about how we're going to spend our days and become irritated when someone interrupts our timetable.

Again, we turn to the Bible to read:

*Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:13-14)*

*Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? (Matthew 6:27)*

What can you do to add a single hour or a single minute or a single second to our lives? If we spent all of our worry and energy and money and effort, how much time can we add to our lives? Not a single moment. We make plans as if we own the hours of our days, but, in the end, our time is nothing more than a mist that is burned away with the rising sun.

You and I are gifted with the same twenty-four hours each day, and there's nothing we can do to change this truth. God, in his grace, gives us time to use and the freedom to choose how to use it.

**[Q] If you were to look at a typical day in your life, how do you use your time? Do you live as if you owned the time you've been given?**

Perhaps our bodies are our own. Is there anything more basic than the idea that we own our bodies? Repeatedly we use the excuse that our bodies are our own to justify our actions.

The Bible teaches:

*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)*

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. (Psalm 139: 13-14)*

You were born on a specific date and no one asked for your consent. You are a part of a family that you didn't get to choose. You were born with a body of a particular shape and color and size, and no one asked your preference. You didn't even get to pick which country you'd be born in, much less which generation. And one day you will be ejected from your body and no one is going to ask your permission first.

Your body has been set aside as a temple for God's spirit, a place for God to dwell inside of us. We are not, in the end, our own. We were bought with a steep price. God created us in the first place, weaving our existence into being and making us in fearful and wonderful ways. God, in his grace, gives us bodies to live with and the freedom to choose how we use them.

[Q] Why do you think it's so easy to live as if our bodies are our own? What are choices you've made that reflect this attitude?

With that in mind, what could we possibly think we own? If we don't even own the very bodies we live in, if even that was a gift, then what could we possibly have that is purely ours?

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:17-18)*

When we begin to embrace that life is filled to the brim with God's grace, then something amazing begins to happen. We begin to see everything differently. We begin to see that we don't actually possess our material possessions. We begin to see that our time is not really ours. Our families, our relationships, even our own lives, are not our own.

Yet, we can short circuit grace when we live as if our possessions and time and bodies are ours. When we forget the grace of God includes the gifts of possessions and time and our own bodies, we are at risk of forgetting that we didn't earn any of it. It was all a gift. Pure grace. Yet, it's easy to forget and begin to boast, as if it was by our own power that we live and breathe and move.

*For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (1 Corinthians 4:7)*

When we boast, we forget and abuse the grace of God. Yet, an amazing expression of God's grace is not only that God gives us possessions and time and bodies to enjoy, but also the freedom to choose how to enjoy them. God's grace is also the gift of freedom. When we think of the ways that God has gifted his grace to us, it can change the way we think and act. During this Christmas season, let's all see the grace that surrounds us and unwrap God's amazing gift.

[Q] What would change about your life if you truly understood that your possessions, time, and body were not your own? What are ways that you see the grace of God active in your life? What is your reaction to the idea that God's grace is also in the freedom He gives us to choose how to use His gifts?

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*Unwrapped*  
*Week 4*

*How to use this guide:*

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There's always something a little sad when Christmas is over. All the decorations go back into storage. All the presents have been unwrapped. All the cookies have been eaten. When the calendar page turns to December 26<sup>th</sup>, it feels like we revert back to a previous mindset where kindness, generosity, and grace are put on the back burner.

[Q] What is one thing you miss about Christmas after it's over?

During this Christmas season, we've been setting aside some time to pay attention to what Christmas is really all about. Over the past several weeks we've been looking at God's perfect gift given to each of us: grace. Its worth

spending time investigating what God's grace really is, because when we live with grace in our lives, it can change everything.

Yet, grace is hard to grasp. It might be an easy thing to understand intellectually, but it's hard to really seize grace deep in our bones. We all know that having intellectual knowledge is not the same thing as having a deep knowing that plays itself out in our lives, where the rubber hits the road.

People know how to be fit and how to be in shape. I don't think it's a great mystery that if we eat healthy food and exercise, we'll be in good shape. Yet, intellectual knowledge isn't enough, is it? If it were, we'd live in a country full of healthy people.

**[Q] What are examples of times when intellectual knowledge is different than a deeper knowing that changes our lives?**

I think one of the main reasons grace is so hard to grasp is because it just doesn't seem to add up. I don't mean to sound sacrilegious or irreverent, but it doesn't seem like God's very good at math, at least when it comes to grace. When you look at how the Bible talks about grace, the math just doesn't make sense.

Jesus told a lot of stories and parables about grace. One thing you encounter over and over again with these stories is grace doesn't follow mathematic rules.

Jesus told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep grazing in a field. The shepherd looks around and finds one of those sheep has gone astray, has gotten lost. The shepherd in Jesus' story leaves the other 99 sheep on the hill alone and goes out to search for the one that wandered off. **(Matthew 18)**

Why would a shepherd leave 99 healthy, obedient sheep on a hill by themselves to search for one sheep that was lost? The 99 sheep that are not lost were presumably facing the same dangers after the shepherd was gone as they were before. There were the same wild animals, the same risk of thieves, the same

risk of the weather, and the same risk from their own propensity to wandering off and getting lost themselves. Why would a shepherd put 99 of his sheep at risk to rescue one that was lost? After all, you don't risk 99% of what you have to attempt to rescue and recoup the 1% that was lost. That's just bad math. It doesn't add up.

Jesus told about a widow who placed two pennies in the temple offering. It might have been easy to overlook her two pennies because wealthy people who were giving significant sums of money to the temple surround her. Jesus, upon seeing the widows offering, says that her two pennies was worth more than all of the riches of the wealthy. **(Luke 21)**

Why is the widow's two pennies worth more than the millionaire's large gift? What charity or church would rather have two pennies instead of a large financial gift? The math doesn't make sense.

Jesus told a story about the owner of a vineyard who was looking to hire some people to work for him. The owner went out and hired people to work for the day. He hired people at dawn and they began working in the vineyard. The owner went out again mid-morning and hired more. Then again at noon. Finally, the owner of the vineyard went out just one hour before the work day was over and hired another crew to work for him. At the end of the day, the vineyard owner paid everyone the same wages for a full day's work, even the people who only worked for a single hour. **(Matthew 20)**

This is a horrible way to run a business. Why would a boss pay the employees who worked one hour the same amount as the ones who worked all day long? If you own a company, it would be completely foolish to pay everyone the same, ignoring their output and the amount of time they worked. It's just not fair. The math doesn't add up.

Jesus was asked one time, "How many times should I forgive my brother?" Jesus answers that they should ignore the normal expectation of forgiving

someone three times, but instead to forgive over and over again for as many times as forgiveness is needed. Jesus makes it clear that, when it comes to forgiveness, we need to give it out without keeping track or count of how many times its been given, whether the other person deserves more chances at forgiveness or not. (Matthew 18)

That doesn't make any sense at all. How's that fair? Why should people offer forgiveness over and over again? Shouldn't there be a limit to forgiveness? Shouldn't there be a line where we aren't required to forgive anymore? It doesn't add up.

These are just a few of the hundreds of stories found in the Bible about the scandalous mathematics of grace. Repeatedly we encounter Jesus living out and teaching about a grace that doesn't add up, that isn't financially responsible, and where the math doesn't add up.

**[Q] What is your reaction to reading stories where grace doesn't make sense? In what ways would you agree or disagree with the assertion that God, when it comes to grace, isn't very good at math?**

If you're like me, it's a little upsetting. When I come across stories where grace so clearly goes against the rational, reasonable thing to do, it rubs me the wrong way.

From childhood on, we are taught certain things about the world of "ungrace." We are taught that the early bird gets the worm. No pain no gain. There's no such thing as a free lunch. You should demand your rights. Everyone gets what they pay for.

All throughout my life, I've been taught to work for what I earn. I want to win. I want people to get what they deserve, nothing more nothing less.

I know these rules of life and I would guess you do too, because we all live by them everyday. The odd mathematics of grace may sound odd, but the rules of “ungrace” are strikingly familiar. No umpire turns to a base runner and says, “You’re really out, but because of your exemplary spirit, I’ll call you safe.” No football referee says, “You actually didn’t get over the goal line, but you really tried hard, so I’m going to say you scored a touchdown.”

It doesn’t happen. We live in a world of “ungrace.”

**[Q] What are examples of ways that our world is dominated by “ungrace?” What are ways you have trouble accepting God’s grace because of your experience with the world’s “ungrace?”**

This might be why it’s so hard to grasp the amazing grace of God, because it is so unfamiliar to us. We want what we think we deserve. God wants to give us what we don’t deserve and what we could never deserve.

God, out of his great love for us, wants to teach us a different kind of math. He wants us to know that you and I are worth dying for. He wants us to know that all we really deserve is punishment and wrath, but what God is offering us is forgiveness and love.

And God calls us to live out this irrational, math-deficient grace in our lives as well. In a world full of “ungrace,” God calls us to shower grace on those we encounter in our lives.

This is the amazing mathematics of grace. It might not add up as the world counts things, but it’s all that really matters.

**[Q] What would it look like if you lived with a deep knowing of God’s grace in your life? What would it look like if you expressed this same sort of grace to people in your life? What are some of the ways the world’s “ungrace” pushes God’s grace from your life?**

