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Reformation
& Revival



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John Blanchard

The Grace of God

Richard C. Lucas

My theme is “The Grace of God,” and to deal with it I am going to focus on a very short story. It is a moving one, but I do not intend to leave you on an emotional high. That would be bad for you and for me too. To avoid that I want to finish with some applications that will bring us back down to earth.

The text is Mark 2:13-14: “Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to Him, and He began to teach them. As He walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow Me,’ Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed Him.” That may seem a very small text to study, but I assure you that in those few words there is tremendous spiritual treasure. I passed a shop in Philadelphia which said it had the best counterfeit diamonds in town. I had never seen a shop like that before. But I got to thinking about it, and I want to assure you that our text is not counterfeit treasure. It focuses on the grace of God in the forgiveness of sinners, which is *the great theme of the Bible*.

So I pray that God will speak through this passage and enable us thus to understand the grace of God more fully.

The Authority of Jesus Christ

First, let me put this in context. In Mark 1, Jesus is presented as One having authority. That is, He has power over all the enemies of mankind.

We have a course at our church in London called “Read Mark, Learn.” We find that most of the young people coming up to London for their studies—largely nurses and young medical students—are totally ignorant of the Gospel record. Sunday schools seemed to have disappeared. Bible classes are not what they were. So we started this course in which we study Mark’s Gospel together. There are sixteen weeks in the first two terms, and since there are sixteen chapters in Mark’s Gospel, we aim to cover this one Gospel in that

time.

November is the most horrible month of the year in London, climate-wise, but I love it, because during November I sometimes slip over to see these young people at the end of their evening study, and I know by the time they have gotten to November they will have gone through chapters 1-3 and will have discovered, to their amazement, a picture of Jesus that they never knew before. No longer is He the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, though that is true in its way. He is now, rather, a figure who has all authority in heaven and on earth. This is because, in these early chapters, Mark puts before us a Jesus who is more powerful than all the many enemies of mankind: Satan, sickness, sin, guilt, religious traditionalism, and the forces of nature.

I have read this so often, I almost take it for granted. But as these young people read it—some of them for the first time—they see the sovereign authority of Jesus Christ and find it to be tremendous.

What does Jesus exercise His sovereign authority for? We learn that in chapter 2, where our text is found. Mark 2:1-17 shows that the priority of Jesus is to release men and women from their sins. By so doing He reconciles God and man and man with man. This section has three little subsections: the story of the paralytic, which is a story of forgiveness; the story of Levi, which is another story of forgiveness; and, then (vv. 15-17) there is a picture of the fellowship with Jesus that results from that forgiveness. Verse 17 wraps it all up: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

That is a marvelous description of the grace of God, isn't it? Grace is “God in Christ calling sinners.” It is “God through Christ forgiving sin.” I hope you don't underestimate the forgiveness of sins. For many years I did. I had gotten the impression that forgiveness was rather preliminary. It was something we had to get settled before the really exciting

things began. I changed my mind about that long ago. Rather than being preliminary, the forgiveness of sinners—providing reconciliation of God and man, and man with man—is the most exciting thing of which the Bible speaks, and we never get beyond it.

Grace Means That God Chooses

Verse 14 shows three elements in God's grace. They are very familiar elements, but they come out in this story powerfully. First, the grace of God means that God chooses. God chooses! Notice the text: “As He walked along, He saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. ‘Follow Me,’ Jesus told him” (v. 14).

The choice of God is difficult to explain, because there is no human analogy to this activity. God's grace is free grace—that is, in making His choices, God is under no constraints whatsoever. He may do what He wishes, calling whom He wants. Let us suppose that the early Christian enterprise was democratic and that, when Jesus gathered the first four disciples together (Mark 1:16-20), He said something like, “Boys, it's time to call a fifth member of our band. I'm going to call twelve eventually; I've called only four so far. I've been thinking about calling Levi. What do you think of that?”

“Which Levi?” they ask.

“Well, Levi son of Alphaeus.”

“Not the tax official!”

“Yes, the tax official.”

“Oh, no,” they say. “You couldn't possibly consider calling that man. Let us list the problems for you. First, politically he is unacceptable; he has to do with Herod. Second, religiously he is unacceptable; he has dealings with the Gentiles, and as for our Jewish friends, well, he's unclean. Third, not only is he politically and religiously unacceptable, he is also socially unacceptable; he's greedy, and

we have had enough of yuppies; we don't want more. Lord, if You choose this man, Your cause will be at risk."

"Indeed," says one of the four, "it will be ruined."

And strictly speaking, that is true, isn't it? It remains true today. Perhaps you younger Christians will not realize this, but all older Christians will know that when God called you He was putting His kingdom at very great risk. Now that you know what you do know about yourself, you would never have taken that risk and have chosen yourself, if you were the one choosing, would you? I certainly would never have chosen myself.

If we know the depth of our hearts, our deceitfulness, waywardness and frailty, then we can see the risk of our becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a serious risk indeed.

I hope you younger ones are long past what I call the school "Speech Day syndrome." In England, Speech Day comes, and some great man, the speaker, arrives. He distributes the prizes. Then he says what is always the same every Speech Day and is complete nonsense: "You are the hope of the future. We are depending on you. You are the people we are looking to." There is a kind of evangelism like that, isn't there? I hope that if you were evangelized in that way you've gotten over it. Because you are not the hope of the future, we cannot depend on you and, apart from the grace of God, you will fail. Think of God's patience. Think of the way He has stayed with you when you fell and betrayed Him. Think of those glaring inconsistencies. Think of that secret life that only He and you know about. If you think of those things, the story of Levi does not seem such a strange exception, because actually he is no exception. There is no difference fundamentally since we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So, as I introduce the grace of God afresh, I point to this total freedom of God to choose. There is no human leader

who can do that. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:26, and compare the divine framework with the human framework. God has been planting His church on the European mainland, and He has been calling those who were to represent Him in Corinth. Paul asks them to look at what God has done: "Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose [*God chose; and what did God choose?*] the *foolish* things of the world . . . the weak things of the world . . . the *lowly* things of this world and the *despised* things— and the things that *are not*."

Let's transpose that into the human framework. Imagine a new president of the United States sitting down in his office preparing to choose a secretary of defense and a secretary of the treasury. He says, "I want to do this as a Christian man, following the example of our heavenly Father. I want to choose the kind of people He chooses." Would he talk like that? Of course, he wouldn't. Would he say to his advisors, "I am going to choose what is foolish; I can't afford to have many clever men in my cabinet. I am going to choose what is weak; I can't have many able administrators. I am going to choose what is low and despised; I can't have many from influential families." He wouldn't get very far that way, would he? The human framework demands that he choose people who have wisdom, ability and influence.

But God does not.

When I say that—I think this is important—I am not saying that God's choices are arbitrary. All I am saying is that God's choices are without human precedent. There is no way we can look at some human analogy and say, "This is how we do things. Therefore, we understand why God does them this way."

Sometimes our amazement at whom God calls becomes so insistent that we feel that the church cannot continue

unless in some way we can bring more important people into it. I have noticed in the last twenty-five years or so the development of a kind of “elitist” evangelism. People come to me at St. Helen’s, our church in London, and say, “We ought to have some evangelism among the parliamentarians. We ought to have some among the business leaders.” I am not against evangelizing anybody. The “up-and-outs,” as we call them, need the gospel just as much the “down-and-outs.” Parliamentarians, emperors and kings all need Christ. But I sometimes wonder if this very expensive, elitist evangelism that sets people down in the most expensive hotels, eating the most expensive food and treating them with kid gloves as though they are very special people and must have the gospel served up to them in a very special way—I sometimes wonder if that is worthwhile. I do not notice that the efforts we have made among parliamentarians in London has made any great inroads for the kingdom of God in our country. It does not seem to me that they are strong Christians.

Maybe we should realize that we are to sow our seed widely and that it is God who calls—moreover, that He does so in free grace. Look again at Mark 2:14. As I understand it, there is no suggestion that Levi is making a decision. As I read verse 14, I understand Mark to be saying that it is Christ who is making a decision. Of course, there is a response to the divine decision from Levi. But it is a divine decision. Therefore, it is a powerful example of the grace of God calling whom He will.

There is no understanding of the grace of God apart from this divine choice. It may be difficult to face. Our minds sometimes rebel against it. Theologically we cannot always fit it in. But it is a fact.

When I first went to St. Helen’s twenty-seven years ago, I had lots of time. (Now I seem to have none.) I used to sit in the church —because nothing very much had been going

on—and people used to look in to see what was happening. I would wait there, hoping to talk to people. I hoped that some of the people who were working in the city would come in and that I would get a chance to talk to them about the gospel. I did have some interesting conversations, but the progress was slow. After I had been there a week or two—I do not remember exactly when—a fellow came into the church who was a bit spastic. He was a messenger boy, which is obviously a fairly low position in the city. He came to talk to me, and then he wanted to come back and talk again. It was not long before Christ called him to faith. We had many long conversations together in those days, and I remember saying to myself once or twice, “Well, it’s grand that this fellow is now in the kingdom, but I don’t suppose he is going to be very influential.”

It happened that soon after this he stopped coming to our services, and I did not see him again for seven or eight years. But one day he turned up and was a very different man. He started with an apology. “You must have wondered why I didn’t come back to St. Helen’s,” he said. “The reason was, I found I was depending on you too much. So I went and joined a church, and I’m now the head of the Sunday school.” He told me the list of jobs he did in that church, and I was absolutely amazed. God had chosen someone and had put him to work—he was being mightily effective—but I had thought that he was so much one of the weak of this world that I had to hurry on to the strong.

We need being brought down to earth in that way at times, don’t we?

Grace Means Forgiveness

What else does this verse tell us about the grace of God? It tells us that grace also means the forgiveness of sins, that God through Christ not only chooses but liberates and delivers.

As I said earlier, I labored for a long time under the

delusion that forgiveness was God coming into my life, looking at the stains of the past and saying, “I’ll wipe that clean. Now you must start to live for Me.” But now I see that if that was all forgiveness was, it would mean merely that God had turned over a new leaf in my life and given me a new blank page to write on. But if that is all it was, would I not write on that new page very much as I had written on the pages before?

Forgiveness must be more than dealing with the past; it must provide for the future. Look at Colossians 1:13. “He [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Notice what forgiveness of sins is, according to this verse. It is “redemption.” Redemption is “deliverance.” And what is deliverance? Deliverance is being rescued “*from* the dominion of darkness” and being brought “*into* the kingdom of [God’s] Son.” There cannot ever be a greater work of God in your life than that.

At one period in my Christian life I was brought into touch with people who gave me the impression that, although to be converted was fine, God had a much greater work of grace to do than conversion. I’ve forgotten what it was called—“Baptism with power,” I think. But now I know (and I want to point out) that there is no “baptism” (or anything else) greater than the forgiveness of sins. There is no change greater than that deliverance, when God takes me out of Satan’s kingdom and transfers me into His kingdom, and I thereby come out from under the authority of evil and under the good and holy authority of Jesus Christ.

Now go to Colossians 2:13-14. These verses explain the theological groundwork of the forgiveness of sins.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He

forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross.

Now go to verse fifteen. What else did God do? He “disarmed the powers and authorities.” He “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” We must hold verses fourteen and fifteen together. If Christ has cancelled the bond that stood against you, if He has nailed your sins to the cross—and there are many more than you have any idea of—then at the same time, He has disarmed the powers and authorities and delivered you from their dominion.

At this point, when we come back to Mark 2, we find that it is spelled out quite obviously. How could we have missed it? To spell it out, Mark told the story of the paralytic. We might think verses one through twelve are simply a healing miracle, but they are not, are they? They are a story of the forgiveness of sins. And what is so tremendous is that Jesus teaches that the forgiveness of sins does not belong to the last day—the day of judgment, when the books are to be opened—but that He is able to go to that last day, get the verdict, bring it into this world, as it were, and apply it to a person’s life. That is what forgiveness means. It means that I have the verdict of the last day now.

It was easy to object to Jesus’ claim to be able to give this forgiveness, of course, because nobody is able to see what happens in the invisible world. We cannot see Christ go to that judgment day and get an acquittal. So the scribes who were looking on objected. But notice how He answers them: “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (v. 9). I advise you not to try that one. If you do, you will be shown up for lacking the power of God—because, of course, for us it is much easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” To say,

“Take up your mat and walk” puts a person to the test. However, one is not harder than the other for Jesus. He says, “As far as I am concerned, there is no difficulty in either one. But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, get up and walk.”

This was not one of those hysterical meetings in which people throw away their crutches and five minutes later fall flat on their faces. This man had no muscles on his bones. He had never learned to walk. But now he gets up—his bones and muscles are in place—and he goes out before them all. That is what it means to be forgiven. It means that forgiveness is deliverance. It means release from bondage or paralysis. It means rising to newness of life.

“Grace in the Bible,” says a fine writer, “always includes the idea of the divine power which equips a man to live a moral life.” Grace is not just God’s undeserved love to sinners, forgiving them the past. It always includes the idea of “the divine power which equips a man to live a moral life.”

I was standing in the hall of a very large rectory. The pastor, his wife, a charming daughter and I were in the downstairs hall together. From time to time the man would call up the staircase, “It’s time to go. Come on.” Then there would be a little voice echoing from a far corner of a bedroom, “Coming.” But nothing happened. Forgive me now if I go from the ridiculous to the sublime and remind you that, at the tomb of Lazarus, when Jesus said, “Lazarus, come forth,” it was not the case of there being a muffled reply from within, saying, “Coming,” while nothing happened. The reply was full and instantaneous. Lazarus came forth. When grace says, “Come,” we do come; otherwise, not one of us would be in God’s kingdom.

Grace Means the Divine Command

Grace means choice. Grace means power. Third, grace also means command. “As He walked along, He saw Levi son

of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow Me,’ Jesus told him.” This is not an invitation. It is not an option. It is an order.

I think the disciples must have learned this very early because in Peter’s letters there is a very interesting way of referring to faith. He calls it “obedience.” What he means is that faith is following when God tells us to follow, even though we do not know where we are going. I hope you will agree with me that there is no cheap grace here at all. Jesus is not setting a man free to be himself, though He has set him free; He is setting him free to follow Christ, never to return to the old life.

Of course, a Christian may fall many times. Being a Christian does not mean that I am always victorious, never fail and never find myself sorrowful because I have fallen. But the Christian is someone who, when he falls, rises again. That is the mark of him. He goes on obeying—however many times he falls. When he falls he weeps and is sorrowful, but he *does not go back to the beginning*. He goes on.

The only certain proof of my forgiveness—the only certain proof of my call and election—is that *today* I am following the Lord. May I say it again: the only certain proof of my election is that today I am following the Lord. It is not some spiritual gift like tongues. It is not some denominational allegiance. It is not some fanatical devotion to a strong leader. It is not great knowledge. It is not some decision I made in the past. The only proof that I have been forgiven is that today I am following Jesus.

Was Levi forgiven? Yes, he was. We know because he rose and followed Jesus. And, mind you, it was not easy for him. Some commentators rightly call the stories in Mark 2 “the conflict stories.” They mean that the battle has already begun. So already it was clear that to follow Jesus was not to be an easy way of life.

What does it mean to follow Christ? It is not some

emotional commitment merely. It must be practical. Commitment to the Lord must mean commitment, for example, to the Lord's day. It is a very strange "commitment" that says, "I am committed to the Lord through the winter months, but when the summer comes my Sundays belong to myself."

I had a great spiritual leader when I came out of the Navy and went to Cambridge University. He was tough. Looking back on it, I am simply amazed, though at the time I just did what he told me to do. Every Sunday I went to the bus station, caught a bus and went to some school to give a talk to the Christian Union. It meant traveling long miles to some of those boarding schools where there was a little Christian group. But every Sunday he had some job for me to do, and I did it. I am thankful that from the beginning it was made plain to me that commitment to Christ meant commitment to His day and to His service.

It did with Levi too. Look at verse fifteen. "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with Him [Jesus] and His disciples." Well, of course. When Levi's heart was open to the gospel, his house was open to the gospel too. And what better place to meet with Jesus! Levi did not say to his old chums from the tax collecting table, "Come to the synagogue with me next week, will you." No. He said, "Come to my house." The curtains are the same; the furnishings are the same; the food is the same; the surroundings are the same. They feel at home there. But look who has been invited. Jesus! That is always the very best kind of evangelism.

So when we say that Levi rose and followed Him, he did follow Him. He knew that meant commitment to Jesus' service from the beginning.

The Grace of God Applied

I have said that the grace of God means God's choice,

God's power and God's command. It is of the gracious mercy of God that he Has called us, enabled us and led us. But now I am going to stop describing the grace of God and go to application. I want to ask four questions, of myself and of you.

The first one is: *Do I really believe in the grace of God?* That is, do I believe that the Levis of London—and they are legion—can become true disciples of Jesus Christ, being completely changed in their whole outlook and ambitions? I am not saying this because I want to expose my frailty to you, but I want to say honestly that for several days after I had asked myself that question, I was not really sure I did. Of course, we have seen some Levis changed, but there have been all too few cases of real outsiders.

Many of our weekday congregations don't believe this. A man came to me the other day and said, "At last, I've got somebody to come to the service on Tuesday."

I said, "Good. Who?"

"My church warden," he said.

"That's grand," I said. "I'm glad. But, you know, this is a service for outsiders. If your church warden is unconverted, well, of course, he is very welcome. But what about getting the office atheist?"

That is difficult, isn't it? It is difficult to get the atheist to come, and it is even more difficult to believe that, when he does come, something good will happen.

My second question is: *Am I willing to do my part?* Believing that something is God's work and that only God can do it does not mean that I do nothing. The fact that the Lord alone can enlighten the mind does not mean that I do not have to think. The fact that the Lord alone can change the heart of Levi does not mean that I do not have to evangelize him. It depends upon God—it all depends on God—but it also depends upon me.

That is the point of verse thirteen: "Once again Jesus

went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to Him, and He began to teach them.” Levi would not have been changed, the grace of God would not have been active, if that had not taken place. I take it this is the context. Therefore, if I want to see Levis of London saved, I have got to go out to them and ask them to come in. I have got to have “invasion evangelism” as well as “invitation evangelism.” One of my staff is always saying that to us. He says, “We must not simply invite people in; we must go out to them. We must ask if we can teach them.” We had a member of the staff who was amazingly bold in this. He has now gone to Belgium to do church planting. But he used to write to city leaders, saying, “May I come to you for one lunch hour, open the Bible and teach you what Christianity is about?” You would be surprised how many of these very great men agreed to have him come. I think they were so flabbergasted they didn’t know how to say No. Or put it this way. Since their secretaries obviously answered their letters, this is the one the secretary did not know how to answer. So she sent it to the boss.

I take it that verse thirteen speaks to this. It tells me that I have got to be willing to go out and teach people if I expect to see the grace of God in action in the Levis of this world.

What an important balance this is. And what unbalanced people we are. So often evangelism has been made all human activity. That is frightening. It is Arminianism gone to seed. It is all human manipulation and pressure. I am sure you fear that, as I do, especially as people in our day are so brilliant at applying that pressure.

Your advertisements in the United States are the most astonishing that I have ever seen, and I can only imagine that people spend so much money producing them and airing them because they work. I was watching one on television a little time ago. It was a powerful advertisement for toothpaste. It happened I was at a drugstore the next

day, wanting to get some toothpaste, and I looked for this particular brand. I wasn’t going to buy it, mark you. I knew what I wanted. I just wanted to see it so I could pass it by with scorn. But when I got to the shelf where it should have been, they were all gone. You couldn’t find one. So advertising obviously pays.

I do not know what your surgeon general does here. But our ministry of health has insisted that on every cigarette advertisement there must be the warning, “Smoking will seriously damage your health.” You have to be brilliant in advertising to get people to queue up for something that will kill them. But the advertising agents are brilliant, and people do. It is no wonder then, though I say it with sorrow, that some evangelists have decided to go that way.

But if there is an Arminianism that has gone to seed, there is also a Calvinism that has gone to seed. It occurs when we say, “It all depends upon God. Only God can change men’s hearts. Only God can save a soul,” and then we do not do verse thirteen at all. It is awfully sad to find a church like that, a church where people have put up barriers, retreat behind them, and now no longer know how to speak to others, just leaving it all to God.

Maybe this is the answer to the first question. I asked: Do I believe in the grace of God? Perhaps the only real proof that I do believe in the grace of God is that I put verse 13 into practice.

The third question: *Is evangelism the priority of my church and my group?* Obviously, it was a priority with Jesus. When the four men lowered the paralytic through the roof to Jesus, Jesus did not heal him straightway. He looked at the man and said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” It was as much as to say, “That is the first thing you need.” The man might have replied, “I didn’t come for forgiveness. Can’t you see what I need? I came for healing.” But Jesus made forgiveness the priority.

I will never speak against healing, because we have recently had a wonderful case of healing in our church. A senior businessman with young children had a brain tumor, and in answer to the prayers of God's people he has been healed as far as we can see. We thank God for it. But I have noticed that people who let healings become too much in the front of their minds soon seem to let them gobble up almost everything else. So I say evangelism is a priority.

Is it a priority for you?

At college? Or at seminary?

You say, "But I am there to learn (or teach) theology." You may be, but evangelism is still a priority. If you are in school, you should be seeking to evangelize your classmates.

"I belong to a Christian relief agency," someone else says. "We do things like averting famine, in the name of Christ." That is all very good. But evangelism is still a priority.

"But in the summer, I have my holidays to think of." Evangelism is a priority, and holidays are wonderful times for it.

The fourth and last question is: *Am I willing to work with those of other denominations in this task?* St. Helen's is very much interdenominational. Our congregations have people from all kinds of denominations.

I went down a street in London recently and saw that a Memorial Chapel, which had been dead for many years, had got a new minister. There were some lovely, bright notices outside. They indicated that he was preaching the gospel, and I rejoiced in that. But then my heart was slightly chilled, because I saw in very large gold letters that this was a strict and particular Baptist church, and below it were listed all the things I had to do (mostly negative) if I wanted to come there. I thought to myself, Is this the grace of God?

I felt towards the end of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' life that he was beginning to wonder whether evangelicals would

ever be able to have real unity, not in the sense of being together in one denomination necessarily, but in genuinely accepting one another. I do not know whether they will be able to in our time or not, but I am encouraged when I look at the passage once again. Notice that in verse sixteen there is a little microcosm of the church in which those who have been forgiven their sins are described as eating at table with Jesus. Isn't that wonderful?

So let's have no barriers there except the barriers against sin.

Lets have no barriers against saints, only sins, that we may show that we really do believe in the grace of God.

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