We often say “grace” before a meal. What is the meaning of the word “grace” and what does this have to do with food?

Grace defined:

The word “grace” can have a variety of meanings such as thanks, gratitude, favour or elegance, but for our purpose we will refer to grace as an underserved blessing or gift.

Therefore “grace” before a meal could be an expression of thanks and gratitude, or it could also be an acknowledgement that the very meal on the table is an undeserved gift from God.

Acronym: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense - author unknown

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)
8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

As believers, we understand that we are saved by grace. However, once in the family of God, we often struggle with understanding the role between our behaviour and how God chooses to bless people.

Have you ever had an experience when you felt your sin (your lack of righteous behaviour) limited God’s blessing in your life? Discuss your thoughts around the following tensions.

After you stumble spiritually:

• do you feel you can't ask God for anything in prayer? that he won't listen?
• do you think God will withhold blessing from your life?
• do you feel you will receive some form of judgment?
• how long do you feel you must wallow in your guilt/shame before you are back in God’s good books again?

Have you ever felt frustrated that God hasn’t blessed you more than he has? Share your experience.
Have you ever felt like the Psalmist in Psalm 73:13, “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.”? What is the frustration behind this statement?

Does the following story of Ahab frustrate you in any way?

Context: Ahab is one of the most spiritually apathetic kings in all of Israel’s history. He allows his pagan wife, Jezebel, to lead all of Israel into Baal worship. Ahab wants Naboth’s vineyard for a vegetable garden. When Naboth refuses for godly principles, Ahab goes home and sulks. Queen Jezebel, with Ahab’s consent, maliciously arranges for Naboth to be murdered so that the property can be claimed by Ahab.

1 Kings 21:16-29 (NIV)
16 When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth’s vineyard.
17 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 18 “Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth’s vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. 19 Say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?’ Then say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood--yes, yours!’”
20 Ahab said to Elijah, “So you have found me, my enemy!” “I have found you,” he answered, “because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. 21 I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel--slave or free. 22 I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.’
23 “And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: ‘Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.’
24 “Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country.”
25 (There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. 26 He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)
27 When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.
28 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 29 “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.”

Why might God’s grace to Ahab in verse 29 be frustrating to some of us?
Ahab ruled in a manner consistently defiant to God. Under his reign many of the prophets of God were put to death, Israel was led into Baal worship and now he has just had a righteous man murdered so he can plant vegetables. When God declares his judgment we inwardly cheer that justice will be done. Ahab is finally getting what he deserves.
Then, in one little act of repentance, God removes immediate judgement from Ahab and allows him to continue on his merry way.

It evokes in us tension with regard to: where is justice? What about the crime against Naboth? This is especially difficult as we read on and discover that Ahab never permanently changed his heart towards God.

What insight does this frustration give us with regard to our perspective of grace?

What does it imply about how we think blessing should be withheld or granted?
Examples such as this reveal that we believe grace should be distributed based on the merit of the person. If a person is good, then they should receive blessing, but if they are evil, they should not be blessed.

In other words, we believe the outpouring of God's grace should be determined by our behaviour alone, and not simply by a decision of God.

Part of the problem is that our perspective of who is “deserving” has become very distorted. Without realizing it, we have slowly developed a culture of entitlement.

What do we mean when we say we live in a culture of entitlement?
To live in a culture of entitlement means we believe we deserve to be given certain privileges and rights. It states that we should have a certain standard of living and anything below that is unjust. It is a perspective that says society owes us something and it had better deliver.

What are some examples of things we have begun to assume we rightfully deserve in society?

What are some possible ways have we promoted a culture of entitlement within our churches?

What happens when people feel they are not given what they deserve?
This perspective of entitlement creeps into our relationship with God as well. It is tempting to feel that if we live a relatively “righteous” life, then God should bless us; he owes it to us. How is this thinking in conflict with the very definition of grace?

If someone earns or deserves grace – then it is not grace. Grace by definition is a gift given that is not deserved. Grace is a blessing God chooses to give, simply because God chooses to give, not because we deserve it. A culture of entitlement is actually in complete contrast to living by grace.

Romans 11:5-6 (NIV)
5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Whenever we struggle with grace, we expose a belief that we can be righteous enough to deserve God’s blessing.

Romans 3:10-12 (NIV)
10 As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Romans 3:20 (NIV)
Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Titus 3:4-5 (NIV)
4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

Galatians 3:2-3 (NIV)
2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?

What do the above scriptures reveal about our ability to earn blessing?
Apart from Christ we are not righteous! To attempt to earn God’s favour is to deny our sinful state and discredit the grace he offers us. We can never use our good behaviour as a basis to expect blessing from God. Grace is free of performance and rooted solely in the work of God.

Anyone who has been following Christ for some time understands this truth. You may already be saying, “I know all this stuff.” However, the reality is, we still revert back to a performance mentality when it comes to expecting blessing from God. Grace gets left at salvation and the lie of performance continues to distort our view of God and life.
How might a distorted view of grace create tension in our relationship with God?

**Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

If God gave us the greatest expression of grace (life through Jesus Christ's sacrifice) when we were the most rebellious, then what does that teach us about our ability to receive grace right now?

If God gave you his best when you were at your worst, then he will not stop blessing you now that you are a part of his family. God, by his loving nature, wants to pour out his blessing into the lives of people and bring them back to joyful relationship with himself.

**Do you ever feel that you are too flawed to be blessed by God?**

**Colossians 1:21-22 (NIV)**

21 *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.* 22 *But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—*

**Romans 8:1 (NIV)**

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*

Sometimes we feel God must be unhappy with us because we do not “see” his blessing in our lives. How do these passages counter that misbelief?

These passages reveal that God is not holding anything against us. If our sin did not prevent him from showing grace when we were separate from him, our sin does not control his grace towards us now. All our sin is removed as far as the east is from the west. It is no longer a barrier between us and God. We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ and fully pleasing to God.

**How does an understanding of grace actually put our life into proper balance?**

God’s grace reminds us that we deserve nothing but judgment, but that God offers us blessing instead. It removes the perspective of entitlement and moves us into a deeper appreciation for who God is and all that he graciously does for us. It removes us from a state of despair into a position of hope. Grace aligns our perspective with reality and frees us to live more effectively in relationship with God and how we live in this world.
What are some practical steps we can take to shift from a culture of entitlement to a deeper appreciation for the grace of God?

*James 1:16-17 (NIV)*

16 Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

*Romans 1:21 (NIV)*

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

*Ephesians 5:20 (NLT)*

And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Culture of Thankfulness:

How might thankfulness destroy a culture of entitlement?

Thankfulness helps us see that we are actually being blessed by God. We may not have everything happening as we desire and we may struggle with various life issues, but God is still at work showing us grace. Thankfulness gives us the larger picture of how God is at work on our behalf. In so doing, it softens our doubt as to whether or not God truly loves us.

What are some examples of things we take for granted, that are really gifts of God’s grace?

Why are we to give thanks for “everything” in Ephesians 5:20?

How might starting your day with thankfulness affect the rest of the day?

Spend some time in prayer thanking God for his incredible grace.