



INTRODUCTION:

VISIBLE GRACE

I wouldn't follow myself on Instagram. Over the past few years, I've been posting pictures of my daughter at an exponential rate, and now I have two sons who are just brimming with social media potential. Yes, I'm one of *those* parents, and yes, I know it's ridiculous. I used to mock parents like me, but now I'm publicizing my kids' first words like they're the great pioneers of the English language—planting flags on the tallest linguistic summits. Like I said, it's a bit much. What happened to me?

Fatherhood. Kids came into my world, and a camera phone came out of my pocket. It just

happened. Now, I notice every wonder about them, and I want everyone else to see too—kind of like another father I know.

Our heavenly Father celebrates every flicker of grace in his sons and daughters, and he invites the watching world to marvel with him (Matt. 5:16). He's poised, ready to take snapshots of grace in the church. And he doesn't need to strain his eyes to glimpse it. No, his grace is clear. It's conspicuous. It's visible.

How is that possible? Because God's grace is a reflection of himself.

What is grace? *Grace is the personal love of God for people who deserve the eternal wrath of God.* Because of our sin and God's holiness, we should be in hell right now, and what has God given us? His triune love (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:1–10; Tit. 3:3–7). The Father gave us his Son, love in the flesh, and through the Son, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—offers us himself (Jn. 3:16; 16:7; 17:26). So, God's grace isn't impersonal, like tokens at an arcade or Skittles in a vending machine.¹ Again, grace is the personal love of

1 Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 88.

God for people who deserve the eternal wrath of God. That's what God is looking at—or, perhaps, who he's looking at—when he looks for grace. He sees himself, the glorious, triune God, in the church (Eph. 3:20–21).

This is sometimes hard for me to believe.

I'm often more aware of my sin than God's grace, especially as the day progresses. I start the day with a fresh, white tee—looking good, feeling good—but by the end, after dribbles of doubt and spills of various sins, I look like I've been in a spiritual food fight. I'm not looking good or feeling good. And while Jesus loves me, surely he can't take his eyes off all the splotches? They're too distracting, too pervasive. That's what I think anyway.

Maybe you can relate. If Jesus had to describe you, what do you think would come out of his mouth first? Signs of his grace or your splotches of sin? While you may expect the latter, it would be the former: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Hallelujah! Dust off the church organ, grab a hymnbook, and “sing praises to God, sing praises” (Ps. 47:6)! Jesus can't think of you apart from the new

creation you *are*. You may battle pride, doubt, or sexual sin, but your old self can't obstruct—try as it might—the grace in your new self. The Spirit's work is just too visible.

When Jesus looks for grace in your life, it's less like finding a needle in a haystack and more like spotting the sunrise in the dark sky. The smallest rays of grace escort sin into the background, each sunbeam from the Spirit stirring the heart of the Son. Perhaps you've shown humility with your co-worker! Or trust at the doctor's office! Or purity on social media! They're all visible to Jesus.

Unfortunately, apart from the Spirit, we don't naturally see the church the way Jesus does. Finding grace can feel like finding Waldo. We know grace is there—somewhere—but as hot tempers, cold relationships, infidelity, arrogance, grumpiness, bitterness, oppressive leadership, unremarkable sermons, lackluster programs, and unmet expectations fill the page, grace seems invisible.

Or, when grace does emerge, our gaze quickly returns to the sins of the saints.

If you had to describe your local church, what comes to mind first? Signs of God's grace? Or ways your church is falling short? I often assume

the former but reflect on the latter. Michael's thoughtlessness catches my attention, Hannah's unreliability grates, and Jessie's impatience annoys me. Barely noticed are Michael's encouraging words, Hannah's care of elderly Christians, and Jessie's faithful presence at the Sunday morning gathering. I glance at grace and stare at sin.

Don't get me wrong. Looking for grace does not entail looking the other way when Christians sin (Gal. 6:1). And noticing sin does not necessarily make you a graceless curmudgeon. Until Jesus comes back, the church will sin. You'll see it, and you may need to confront it. Confession and repentance are fertilizers for growth, and we should till them into the soil of our churches (2 Cor. 7:9–10). But if we are seeing the church the way Jesus does, shouldn't grace be more remarkable than sin? I believe so, and that's what this little book is about.



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VISIBLE GRACE IN YOUR CHURCH

When friends and family visit, I like to take them to the Sandia Crest, a ridgeline overlooking Albuquerque, New Mexico. We'll also tour the city—hiking in the Pino Canyon or stopping for barbacoa tacos at El Paisa Taqueria—but from the Crest, you can see Albuquerque in one shot.

The Apostle Paul brought his friends to a similar overlook. Climbing the mount of Calvary, he walked the early church through the gospel, showcasing God's visible, expansive grace in

their lives. And through his New Testament letters, Paul extends the same invitation to you.

If he had a membership directory of your church (a list of Christians in your church who have promised to care for each other), he'd flip through each page, pointing out God's grace in predestination, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Predestination:

God has reserved your church

Paul didn't have access to a pre-released copy of the Book of Life. But that didn't shake his confidence that God "chose" the Thessalonians (1 Thes. 1:4). Paul didn't see Rufus' name printed on page 456 of heaven's guest list, but he wanted the Roman church to know that God "chose" Rufus (Rom. 16:13). What gave Paul license to make such bold claims? Because Paul knew grace doesn't come out of nowhere. Like rivers, grace comes from somewhere. So, when Paul saw a river of sanctification, he followed it upstream to the spring of predestination (Rom. 8:29–30).

After he heard about the Ephesians' faith in Christ and love for the saints, Paul thanked God for choosing them (Eph. 1:4–6, 15–16).

Faith and love: that was all Paul needed to hear before praising God for his predestining grace. He didn't wait until the Ephesians memorized Leviticus, and his prayer of thanksgiving wasn't limited to the most impressive church members. Paul wasn't looking for extraordinary resumes. He was just looking for signs of genuine conversion, and once he saw those, he sprinted to the predestining grace of God.

Friend, your church's membership directory is not the Book of Life, but if you're practicing regenerate church membership—receiving members who have made a credible profession of faith and repented of their sins—it's a pretty good rough draft. Look over *all* the names, not just the impressive ones. Do you see faith and love? If you do, praise God that he has reserved your church for himself.

Regeneration: God has recreated your church

Years ago, my wife and I were members of a church that held a prayer meeting every Sunday evening. We noticed a pattern in how these dear friends began their prayers: “Father,