

continuous conversion

Grace and Doing Favors

What is Grace?

The basic concept of the Christian faith is grace. God gracefully gives His Son Jesus to redeem each of us from the consequences of both general human sin and our own personal sins. Becoming a Christian means accepting this grace as a free, unmerited gift. Once grace is accepted, the process of conversion begins.

All the lifestyle changes associated with being a Christian (the fruits of the Spirit), such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control, follow more or less naturally from the initial acceptance of grace. If you truly accept the gift of redemption, no one has to coerce you into being changed—it will flow naturally (if slowly, at times).

Grace and Favor

Grace and favor are closely associated terms. Grace is the gift; favor is the procedure or act of giving. Favor is bestowed on someone, not because of that person's claim to it, but because of the giver's ability to give it. In the same way that a person can't be forced to accept grace, a person can't be forced to accept a favor. In both cases, there needs to be a relationship of offering and acceptance in order for the process to work correctly.

"No" to Grace and Favor

Given that grace and favor are both offered in the spirit of generosity and helpfulness, you might think that they are always accepted in the same spirit. You'd be wrong. I've found, repeatedly, that the very people who most desperately need the grace of God and the favor of His help are unwilling to accept either. Maybe that's how they got so desperate in the first place.

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On Charles Bridge, Prague

Thoughts, ideas and questions about religion



Sv Ludmila, Prague

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The basic task of missionaries is to present the gift of God's grace to people who don't know Him. That task, undertaken (in most cases) out of love for God and gratitude for His grace, is most devilishly difficult. Rather than admit that they need to accept God's grace, many people will stubbornly hold onto their independence and freedom, even if they are quite unhappy and unfulfilled.

Doing someone a favor is even more likely to cause problems, if the person receiving the favor doesn't have the ability to gracefully accept help. In the first few months of 2012, I met two women who asked me for help, one with knitting (one of my hobbies) and the other with career development (one of my professions). I agreed to help because of the desperation the people expressed—both were at wit's end, unable to cope with their immediate problems.

What happened? As you might imagine, in both cases the outcome was not completely satisfactory and pleasant. Although I did the best I could, putting my time, energy and talents at their disposal, neither woman accepted the favor graciously. (Forgive my whining tone, please!)

When I look at what happened, I see that what I considered a favor, with me "going out of my way" to be helpful, was not seen by the women as a gift that they truly needed, but as something of little value to me that I was tossing their way. No doubt I am to blame for half of the misunderstanding by not insisting that what I was giving was valuable. Perhaps I was too modest, or too vague, or too inscrutable. Or maybe I was unconsciously proud, thinking that my gift was so obviously precious there was no need to mention it.

How does God like being told "No"?

Even factoring in my own selfishness, blind spots and so on, I know that I did what I could to help these two women. I did it as a favor, to pass on the grace that God has given me. Neither woman was grateful—in fact, one woman was angry at me for what she called a lack of balance in the relationship. She asked for my help, but her pride rose up when I noted why I was offering it to her. Both situations puzzled me, and I felt hurt when my favors were not appreciated. How, then, must God feel, when His perfect gifts, given out of perfect love, are so harshly rejected by the very people who so desperately need them? I imagine He sees us as foolish and prideful, not knowing how irreplaceably precious His gifts of grace and favor really are.