

What is grace? You often hear it defined as ‘unmerited favour’. When we hear the word ‘grace’, it is almost always as a specifically religious word. It features heavily in doctrinal debates and theological themes. However, for the original readers of the New Testament, it was a word and term in the everyday social life of the general non-Christian world. In this article I want to summarize an important scholarly article that explains this. It is by a Professor called David A. deSilva and is called ‘Patronage and Reciprocity: The Context of Grace in the New Testament. Anyone wishing to read the lengthy (53 pages) original can do so here

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ashland_theological_journal/31-1_032.pdf.

Today we live in a society where transactions are mostly impersonal and fixed. We buy an item, enter into contracts, including employment contracts, or are supported by government welfare. For us the phrase ‘it’s not what you know, but who you know’ smacks of unfairness. It goes on, but it’s not something to shout about. In the society in which the New Testament was written, it was very different. Buying in the market, or renting an apartment was done on a transactional basis similar to ours, but in almost every other way, society was based around patronage. This was public and expected and publicized, part of the very make-up of society. Society was governed by the giving and receiving of favours. This would be how you did business, got ahead, got promoted, or gained emergency help in time of crisis. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, and to get access you had to have a personal connection with those blessed people. The patron-client relationship was central to the functioning of society. These could potentially be long-term relationships, where the patron assists the client, and the client did all they could to praise the patron – publicizing the good deed and showing respect and faithfulness to the patron, and providing services in return whenever they could. Even if the patron couldn’t help you directly, they could often put you in contact with someone who could give you what you wanted. There were also similar relationships of mutual help between people of social equals, to help each other, and were called ‘friendship’. However, the term ‘friends’ was also used by patrons of their clients ‘graciously’ to honour them, even though they were lower socially. Clients, however, would call openly acknowledge the patrons as such, as superior. Honour played a great part in this – if your neighbour helped you, but you refused to help others, it would blot your reputation as a ‘good neighbour’. If you help your neighbour, then it means you are more likely to receive help in a time of crisis.

Patronage could be broad and public – a rich person could pay for entertainment, or a public building or sewerage, or disaster relief, and in return received public honours from the town or city so helped. In some cases in the pagan world, kings or emperors who acted as benefactors were worshipped.

The term ‘grace’, (*charis*, in Greek) was used to describe various aspects of this patron-client reciprocal relationship. It referred to the willingness of the patron to grant a benefit to a person or group – and so means ‘favourably disposed to’ or ‘favour’. It was the help given to someone in need, for their sake, not the helper’s sake. In this case ‘unmerited favour’ is a pretty accurate summary. The word was also used to denote the ‘gift’ that was given. However, the term was also used to describe the proper response to the patron and their gifts on the part of those who received them, which was ‘gratitude’. One kind of ‘grace’ was expected to be met with ‘grace’, even if of another kind. It was described as a circle of grace, beautiful only if unbroken. Favour must be returned.

There were well defined social rules. The giver must genuinely give for the benefit of the client, and not to further their own interests, expecting some sort of profit or gain in return. However, such gifts of grace were to be made strategically – they would aim to give first and foremost to a virtuous person with a record of gratitude and who would maintain a good relationship. They could and sometimes did give to less worthy people, but the danger was that this was like ‘feeding stray dogs, that snarl at all, including those who feed them’. On the other hand, such giving could result in a change of heart in a previously ungrateful recipient. As the article says ‘A reputation for knowing how to be grateful was, in effect, the ancient equivalent of a credit-rating’. It was about the heart attitude of the recipient. The grateful recipient would look for ways to ‘be of service’ in the future.

The benefactor could choose to give, but the response of the recipient was not optional – gratitude was a duty. It made you indebted to respond appropriately, and to think of appropriate ways to give back, to return the favour with interest. It might simply be that you would publicly praise the virtues of your patron. Failing to do so was the worst of crimes, because it discouraged the generosity that was crucial to public and social life. Those who were grateful were praised by everyone as honourable, but those who didn’t were seen as a disgrace and shameful. It was considered vital to avoid ingratitude or returning evil for good at all costs. Yet strangely, the expected response was also regarded as needing to be free and uncoerced – it wasn’t ‘If I do this for you, you have to do this for me’, but there was an expectation of gratitude in some way or other in appropriate proportion. There was an exchange, but it was put to the background, and mutual favour, good will and generosity brought to the foreground. The receiver of the benefit would get great profit, but didn’t have the ability to repay in kind, so would act so that the giver would receive great public honour – ‘increasing the fame of the giver’. The Old Testament says similar things, such as in Psalm 116.12 – responding to God’s favour by publicly testifying to God’s honour. You would also be expected to be loyal to the giver, and own to your link to the giver, even if their fortunes turn and it becomes costly to do so, whether that meant exile, or putting yourself in physical or financial or reputational harm to protect and defend them. In practice, that didn’t happen, but it was supposed to.

The term ‘faith’ fitted into this – it was about dependability – the patron was depended on to give help as promised, and the client had to ‘keep faith’ too in commitment and gratitude. Each had to trust the other to do their part. If you gave a gift, you then had to look to the ‘good faith’ of the receiver. This meant that clients or friends would need to be careful to avoid crossed loyalties. Multiple patrons were fine, but if they were enemies, then things got dangerous, because you would have to choose one to be loyal too in conflict.

Gratitude was not enough, because you still ‘owed’ an actual gift in return. It didn’t have to be equal in value if it was with a patron rather than an equal, but it meant offering services when asked or when you see the opportunity arise to be of service. It was not right to try and give in return as soon as possible to be rid of the obligation, but you were to return the ‘grace’ at the best possible moment, something real and not manufactured – something that will help the personal bond.

The article says that this is a ‘dance of grace’, with different rules for each party, full of creative contradictions. The giver was to give without expectation of return – to give for the sake of giving, and any return is a bonus, whilst the recipient cannot forget they must make a return and not think they own nothing because the other had given just for giving’s sake. In the pagan world there was a direct parallel with Jesus urging his disciples to be like their Father, giving to the good and the bad.

Gratitude was expected, but givers are urged to imitate the gods and give even to the unworthy (even though the greater gifts would go to those who were known to be worthy).

At the time of Jesus, Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures were all based on these patronage and friendship networks. So when Christian preachers taught about God's amazing grace and how Jesus was the sole mediator, or broker, of that grace, then their audience would have understood it in this background. God's grace was greater in quality and degree, but it would be the same kind of grace, which laid them under an obligation, the greatest obligation because they had been shown the greatest grace. Thus, what the New Testament writers often do is to urge a proper 'grateful' or 'graceful' response to God's grace. Thus when the local Jews come to Jesus on behalf of the Roman Centurion who is seeking a miracle, they praise him as a benefactor, worthy of the miracle and act as brokers on his behalf, seeking the 'grace' or benefit of Jesus' miraculous healing powers. We can see this patronage system in the letter to Philemon, where Paul says he could address Philemon as one with authority, since he has brought him salvation by his preaching, but prefers to appeal to him as a 'friend' and partner, and on the basis of reciprocal benefit. He seeks to gain a favour from Philemon for his own client, the slave who has run away from the very same Philemon, asking for the runaway slave to be treated as Paul, his patron deserves, not as his own actions do, whilst Paul offers to meet any debts incurred. He puts Philemon in a corner.

More to the point, the New Testament depicts God as patron and benefactor, the greatest of all, since he is the Creator who has given life to all of us, and yet we have all failed to show the gratitude we should, and thus have insulted God and face his wrath. And yet, he shows yet more favour and grace by providing Jesus as the way to be restored to relationship with God, giving of his own self, even to dying shamefully on a cross, the ultimate act of grace and favour on behalf of not just ingrates, but enemies. In the process God shows how reliable a benefactor he is by fulfilling his promises to his client people, Israel. Now non-Jews too were adopted into this already existing patron-client relationship, as shown by their receiving the gift (grace) of the Holy Spirit, which in itself is a pledge of the future benefits God has prepared. God has not waited for those who offended him to make an overture of reconciliation, nor has he waited for lesser people to seek his patronage, but has taken the initiative himself to give a means of escape from wrath and dishonour by providing Jesus as a broker or mediator of access to God's grace and favour. He does all this for the sake of His own reputation and honour. Jesus' death is the ultimate demonstration of God's righteousness and virtue, far beyond all the normal expectations of grace in society. God gives public benefits to all, but becomes a personal patron to those who receive Jesus and thus come into his 'household'. God gives this to any that will come to him and adopts them as heirs and sons and daughters, unlike in society where patrons were careful who to pick, and would reject some applicants. How will God refuse us any good thing when he has already given up his only Son to death for us? We pray and ask God for what he already knows we need so that we can have the opportunity to show gratitude and respond appropriately and thus increase God's honour and reputation. Prayer is the means of seeking God's favour for ourselves or others. We publicly thank God for how he has grown us as individuals and a body (the church). People giving to the church are a means of God's grace and provision, but they are not to be doing it to make the church part of their power base as patrons.

Jesus is God's provision for reconciliation, a Mediator between God and the created world right from the start of creation. Acts 10.38 tells us Jesus' ministry was to go about doing good (the word for

being a benefactor), in particular healing. Teaching and good advice that he gave were also considered valuable gifts. His relationship with God lets him be the mediator, the gateway to God's grace for us. Those who received Jesus' 'grace', did as they should (mostly) and spread his fame abroad, even when Jesus had told them not to, possibly because they merely saw his instruction as evidence he was genuine and not a glory seeker. People also respond by giving thanks to him, whether by words, or by acts of service, such as the women who served and financially supported him, and they also responded by giving praise to God as the ultimate source of the good Jesus had done. Jesus' ultimate act as benefactor was to give up his life for others (benefactors sometimes did put themselves at risk to help others), and for this he was deserving of supreme honour, as soldiers who died defending their city were honoured. As a result, we should live for him who died for us. However, Jesus made his disciples – and us – mediators of God's grace, with the authority to do as he did, but emphasized that they – and we – should act in service, not to build up our power bases. It is not for us to get favours and gratitude, but we should act out in gratitude for what God has done for us, and one way this manifests is to go and help the needy and the unconnected. This is an 'obligation of grace' for us – a proper response. Apostles and church leaders are a kind of mediator, and so those who benefit from them have an obligation to honour them too, just as leaders are obligated to God for their position.

Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we can have the 'grace' of power to endure and be faithful in the face of opposition, and in the face of the damaging effect of our own sin. Because he faced temptation and opposition, he knows exactly what we need from God to overcome and be counted worthy of the future benefits he has promised in the age to come, such as resurrection sinless bodies and eternal life. This is the gift or grace that we can confidently set our hope on, because God is reliable – and so we must be faithful and loyal to him, even in the face of great opposition, and we do so by keeping our hope and yearning for this gift strong – thus it becomes an 'anchor of the soul'. (Although the article does not mention this, there is a saying ascribed to Jesus by an early church writing where he says – this is from memory - 'Take care of faith and hope, through which is born love for God and humanity that brings eternal life'.)

Also, the term 'Saviour' was one that was often used to honour powerful figures who offered help – saving a city from an army or famine and so on. We have received some aspects of his promised deliverance, such as deliverance or salvation from sin, but we still await future aspects such as deliverance from wrath on the day of Judgement, and deliverance from death at his return.

Just like in the social world of the day, we need to show gratitude, and that is a way to receive more grace. We need to do our part in the divine dance of the circle of God's grace. Grace is never earned, neither in the ancient Roman society nor in our relationship with God, but we do good and keep the door open for grace by responding generously and fully, as God has been toward us. For instance, Paul almost always starts his letters by praising and thanking God for the churches. However we also need to make God's fame glorious and speak his praises out so his virtues are known in the world. We have this 'obligation of grace' to do this, proclaim God's favours and publicly acknowledge your debt to and association with Jesus – this is the simple beating heart of evangelism. We are also required to live a life of good works, because that also gives God glory, causing even slanderous opponents to 'give God glory'. (One of the complaints of critics of the early church was that they 'not only look after their own poor, but they look after ours, too!').

We need to show loyalty to Jesus, no matter how costly, because of the costly price he paid for us, even if it means facing the wrath of powerful enemies. Jesus needs to matter more than our own personal safety. In this way, we show the firmness of our loyalty to Jesus, and this too is 'grace'. This is how we 'preserve our souls', confident that Jesus our patron will do as he promised. Suffering for Jesus is thus a gift or grace from God, so we can follow in Jesus' footsteps, and receive the promised deliverance in the age to come. We should also be careful not to give any sort of allegiance to God's enemies, in whatever form they manifest themselves. If we try and find salvation in anything other than Jesus and loyalty to him, we are saying we have no confidence in Jesus mediation with God. If we truly trust, we will be firm and faithful, and thus in line for even more future grace. Good works, acts of obedience and the persistent pursuit of virtue are the services we are required to render God and Jesus in return for their grace to us. (This is why, for instance, Jesus said that eternity will be decided on how we help the least of his brothers, whether that is fellow disciples suffering for him, or Jews or the poor in general – what we do for them, we do for him, and are rewarded accordingly). Another way is to use our gifts and resources as fully as we can in service of the church of Jesus, and humanity, and not for boasting or power plays. Obedience leads to 'friendship' with the patron Jesus and future blessings, which is why the bible says things like Jesus is the 'source of eternal deliverance for those who obey him'. Proper response keeps us in God's favour.

But there is the danger of failing to attain God's gift or grace, or receiving it in vain – receiving it with neglect, ingratitude or contempt puts us in danger of being excluded from future benefits of grace. This treatment of grace means we are likely to turn God's favour to wrath. Disowning Jesus by declaration or denial or by denial by lifestyle or unbelief or allying with God's enemies dishonours God's name – it publicly proclaims him as unworthy of obedience despite his incredible grace and good will and favour. It is saying to the watching world that they are right, that Jesus' great favour is not worth the cost.

Jesus did change some aspects of the cycle of grace for his human community. He taught that we should give to those who are not in a position to repay us, and instead God will repay us at the 'resurrection of the righteous', as he also taught in Matthew 25, as we have seen – eternal judgement is based on how we are generous to the suffering and poor. Giving within the church is an activity that results in honour and recognition – so Paul honours those who gave sacrificially to help other churches, even out of their own poverty, and praises people for their sacrificial service in other ways, but such giving is part of God's giving, not a way to use money and hospitality to build up a client base. The New Testament transforms patronage into stewardship, because the true and ultimate Patron of all is God. Giving is not, or should not be, a place for competition for honour and power, but a way of honouring God. It is not a way of placing the recipients under obligation to you, but a way of faithfully serving out your obligation in response to God's grace.

If we want to understand and appreciate the true meaning of grace, and respond in a true manner, we need to understand grace as it was understood by the first hearers of the good news. If we want to live in grace, rather than in disgrace, we need to know how to respond in grace as a client or friend of the great Patron. Ultimately God's grace is unmerited, at least at the start, but there is such a thing as merited grace, within this 'cycle of grace'. If we want to avoid imperilling our access to future favour and grace from God, then we need to pay attention to how we should act. Our evangelism is not about a contest to win souls, but to spread forth the fame of God and his

goodness, and our obligation is to obey in every area of life, giving our all as he gave His all for us, and to be loyal to him without wavering, to fight against our own sins since they are signs of disloyalty. This is the way of gratitude, boldness and the growth of and in grace, holding on to the promise of the future and thus being firm and faithful in life and in God's grace, focused on what is true and eternal, and that furthers our friendship with our supremely great and gracious Patron.

Nathanael Lewis (c) 2018

www.natlewis.co.uk