

# Grace and Its Enemies

by George Verwer

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*The sermon emphasizes the need for a grace awakening in missions work, recognizing the importance of extending horizontal grace to others and avoiding the enemies of grace.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15, Mark 9:39, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Galatians 5:1, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:29, Ephesians 4:32, Philippians 2:3

**Topics:** "Grace And Freedom", "Christian Unity"

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## Description

George Verwer preaches about the importance of a 'grace awakening' in missions work, emphasizing the vertical significance of grace as a free gift from God and how it should lead to extending grace horizontally to others. He highlights the need for Christians to use their freedom in Christ to serve one another in love and respect. Verwer discusses the enemies of grace, such as legalism and control, and the importance of speaking graciously about the work of others. He calls for a big-hearted, grace-filled approach in mission work, urging for unity, understanding, and constructive criticism among believers.

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## Transcript

One of the main reasons I decided to write this book was to give a heart's cry for a "grace awakening" in the area of missions work. This term "grace awakening" comes from the title of Charles Swindoll's book that has spoken so powerfully to me and many thousands of others over the past years. The book begins with a reminder that Christians are saved by faith through the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross and that we have nothing to offer him in return. We can simply accept his free gift given to us in grace. Swindoll says,

"Once we grasp its (grace's) vertical significance as a free gift from God, much of horizontal grace - our extending it to others - automatically falls into place."

It is this "horizontal grace" that I want to write about in this chapter. This is the quality that allows us to recognise that individual Christians and groups of Christians, including our group, are free in Christ from legalism, to grow and work as He leads us.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

We rejoice in this freedom but we do not flaunt it. We use it to build up others and show them respect in their walk with God and their work for Him.

"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13)

Many spiritual writers have emphasised this message. Stanley Voke's book *Personal Revival* is another book that has spoken powerfully to me of this truth of grace. Roy Hession's "Calvary Road" has been recommended reading in *Operation Mobilisation* since the very early days. These and many other books point us back to the Scriptures where great passages like 1 Corinthians 13 and Ephesians 4 show us how to live in relationship with one another.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)

Another name that I sometimes give to this quality is "big-heartedness". I think of the incident recorded in Mark's and Luke's gospels when John reports to Jesus how the disciples stopped someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name but who was not one of them. John took the narrow, legalistic view but the account goes on,

" 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'No-one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.' " (Mark 9:39-40)

Jesus took the big-hearted view.

Romans 8:28, such a familiar verse, is another one of the "big-hearted" scriptures.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

We often use this to encourage ourselves or others we are close to when things seem not to be going well, as a reminder that God's compassion still surrounds us. But of course we can also apply it to others when we believe things are going "wrong" for them because they aren't acting correctly. The scripture applies even to people whose are following policies and strategies that we don't agree with.

There is such a need for this grace-awakened, big-hearted approach in mission work. There are so many areas where a lack of grace causes hurt and tension and positively hinders the work of God across the globe. So often our fellowship as Christians seems to be based more on minor areas in which we are like-minded rather than on the real basics of the gospel and the clear doctrines of the Christian faith which are so amazing and which we should be more united on.

Swindoll powerfully lists the enemies of grace as:

"...from without: legalism, expectations, traditionalism, manipulation, demands, negativism, control, comparison, perfectionism, competition, criticism, pettiness and a host of others; and from within: pride,

fear, resentment, bitterness, an unforgiving spirit, insecurity, fleshly effort, guilt, shame, gossip, hypocrisy, and so many more ... grace killers, all!" (page 302)

I think of all the people who have been rejected, to some degree, because they did not fit in with someone else's expectations - because they were not Baptists or Anglicans or because they did not speak in tongues, or did not come up to the mark on any one of a hundred possible issues which may or may not be of genuine importance. Many have felt rejection and hurt because they were not received by those who emphasised the gifts of the Spirit simply because they did not have the same understanding of those gifts. The reverse is also true. Those who emphasise the gifts of the Spirit have felt rejected by other members of the body who didn't.

What makes this problem even more complicated and difficult is that so often preachers emphasise these smaller issues from the pulpit and that in turn affects how their congregations think about them and how they evaluate other people and their beliefs. It seems to me that by our behaviour we often testify that these little issues are more important to us than the oneness, unity and reality that we have in Jesus Christ by the new birth through His Holy Spirit. We lack grace in this area.

#### SPEAKING GRACIOUSLY ABOUT OUR WORK AND THE WORK OF OTHERS

One of the areas where lack of grace shows itself most harmfully is in the supposedly factual statements which people from one group - a church, a para-church group or a missions agency - make about those from another without first of all checking that they have their facts straight and that they have the whole picture. Often, again, it is the leaders of organisations who make these kinds of statements. My own experience of forty years is that they can easily say negative things, however subtle, about other leaders or their ministries. Sometimes these comments show a lack of factual basis, which leads to false conclusions and generalisations. Sometimes, even when perhaps the facts are correct, they are put over in a way that is hurtful and damaging.

Constructive criticism following the pattern of Matthew 18 is something quite different.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church ; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-17)

I confess it is a great struggle to find the balance between openly and boldly telling the truth and acting with love. I think that those of us in leadership often don't realise how much extreme or untrue statements upset other leaders who hear them. Once they get into print or on e-mail and go around the world, it is almost impossible ever to put them right. If we are grace-awakened and love the Lord, then we are going to be more careful about all that we say or write about others.

In our present society, commitment to telling the truth is under threat. When we do say something that is not true it takes grace to confess and put it right. Some are not able to do it and this leads to a cover-up. If you think that there are no "Watergates" in the Christian world, then I'm afraid you are in for a big shock.

The law in most countries is that you are innocent until proved guilty - but sometimes in the Body of Christ you are guilty until proved innocent. May God have mercy on us for this habit. If we are to see great victory

in these confusing days, then we must listen to one another and try to keep communicating with one another with grace. This is true in mission activities, in our local church and indeed in our marriages and all personal relationships.

Along with graceless criticism often goes a tendency among some to make exaggerated claims, again without sometimes having the facts right. Many are confused and even angry when they hear boasting on the part of another Christian, although few have the love and courage to call the person to account and ask for more specifics about what is being stated. How extremely sad that the term "evangelically speaking" has come to mean that something is an exaggerated statement or statistic. Any effort we can make in reporting numbers more accurately would be a great victory for those involved in mission work.

For example when a TV or radio station talks about a potential audience, we make a huge mistake if we report that as the number who actually watched or listened to a particular programme. And surely we can all finally agree that a decision or profession of faith doesn't necessarily mean a convert or true new Christian. Someone once said that if all the claims about his country were true then everyone in the nation would have been converted twice! If we hold our listeners in esteem then we are more likely to be careful with the facts.

On the other hand people who are angry or offended by the exaggerations or wrong statements of other missions leaders must not "write them off" without any discussion or confrontation. If they know something of reality, brokenness and the way of the cross they will be very slow to condemn or speak evil of another brother or sister, especially a leader in God's work. At the same time those making strong-minded statements or apparent exaggerations must be more approachable and willing for correction. They must also be more diligent in their preparation and research and make an extra effort to stick to the facts and the truth. They will have to learn to love their critics and keep from making unkind statements about them in their ministry.

In a chapter entitled "The Grace to Let Others Be" Charles Swindoll identifies two powerful tendencies which nullify grace in people's dealings with one another. The first is the tendency to compare, of which he says,

"Before we will be able to demonstrate sufficient grace to let others be, we'll have to get rid of this legalistic tendency to compare. (Yes it is a form of legalism.) God has made each one of us as we are. He is hard at work shaping us into the image He has in mind. His only pattern (for character) is His Son. He wants each one of us to be unique ... an individual blend and expression unlike any other person."

The second is the tendency to control. Swindoll says,

"Controllers win by intimidation. Whether physical or verbal, they bully their way in as they attempt to manipulate us into doing their will. ... Whatever the method, controlling, like comparing, nullifies grace. If you are given to controlling others, grace is a foreign concept to you."

The opposite of grace awakening is the human tendency to be legalistic, narrow minded and rigid, which is so often partly a cover-up for our own insecurities and fears. To be honest, I believe in some sincere saints it is actually a wrong view of scripture, linked with overemphasising favourite verses rather than the whole counsel of God.

It is amazing how some churches that I knew twenty years ago, born out of a new freedom of the Spirit, with lots of new ideas and strategies are now more rigid in certain ways than the older churches they left in search of grace, freedom and reality. If you try to confront some of these new (now older) leaders about this you will see in their attitudes that history does repeat itself.

Don't we have 2000 years of proof of the variety of ways that God works ? Different missions have different strategies and even within a mission or church there can be tension and division over strategy and the detail of how things should be done. Must we be so dogmatic on matters that the Bible is not clear about? Can't we accept that God works in different ways among different groups of people? The work of God is bigger than any fellowship or organisation. To get a job done we need organisations that respond to specific needs. God, for example, brought Operation Mobilisation into existence for a specific purpose; to mobilise the young people of Europe and North America and then across the globe. We don't worship organisations or get up tight because we don't agree with everything in them. We assess them in the context of their specific purpose and we should be big-hearted about it. Remember the message of Philippians 2 that we should esteem others as better than ourselves ?

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

Wouldn't the practical implications of this bring a revolution of love and grace? It would mean that, as well as being caught up in the plans, goals and strategies of our own organisations, as of course we must be, we would become bigger-hearted and understand more the full picture of what was happening and the unity in the Body of Christ. What a wonderful day it would be if we were to hear mission leaders speaking out in a positive way about other people's plans, goals and strategies. How wonderful it would be to hear Christian writers and artists plugging other people's work and not just their own, taking other peoples' books and materials to the meetings they speak at. I thank God for those who already do this.

Esteeming other groups and individuals as better than ourselves would involve more than just speaking out on their behalf. It would include one group getting under the burden of another and assisting them positively with money, practical resources, know-how and prayer. There is a balance to be kept here because of course each mission group has its own God-given vision and methods and we must not pretend that there is unity where there isn't and insist on it when it isn't necessary. But nor must we use this as a cop-out and deny that the scriptures require us to esteem one another and act in grace towards one another as God has to us.

## GRACE WHERE THERE'S GENUINE DISAGREEMENT

So we need a grace awakening in the way we speak about one another, in the way we report the progress we are making in the work of taking the gospel to the world, in our practical approach to one another's work and our sensitivity to one another's cultural and theological differences. But we also need grace within the many genuine debates in the church over the best way to operate as we work to fulfil the Great Commission. So often the alternative ways of doing a job in missions are presented as incompatible, as "either / or" instead of "either or both". There are many of these controversies and some of them are written about elsewhere in the book. For example I deal with the debates over the relative value of tentmakers and full-time professional missionaries (Chapter \*\*); the relative value of short term and long-term missions workers (Chapter \*\*); whether missions should ask for money or not (Chapter \*\*) and

whether to send missionaries from "Western" countries or to concentrate resources on "national" workers (Chapter \*\*).

In all these debates my plea is for a "grace-awakened" approach which gives esteem to the ways other people do things, which does not "compare" or "control", which does not say "this is the only way" and which does not judge an organisation outside the context of its specific purpose. At the same time, where there is genuine disagreement, let there be loving and constructive discussion and even sometimes, loving and constructive confrontation. Let us be honest about our differences. As Christians with a commitment to take the gospel to the world there will of course sometimes be genuine disagreements. Sometimes there is a need to take a hard line. Sometimes I wish Christians would take a harder line on some issues - such as the Ten Commandments, the doctrine of salvation by grace alone and the need to respond to the Great Commission, just to mention three examples. Where co-operation is not possible on central issues then we should have the grace to disagree lovingly and then get on with our work.

I want to look at a particular controversy in the world of missions which is not dealt with in detail elsewhere in the book as an example of how a grace awakened, big-hearted approach could help to show the way forward. This is the disagreement over who is a suitable candidate for certain types of mission work. There is great controversy over the word "apostle" in the present church and of course churches and denominations must make use of this term as they feel led without condemning those who do not use it. In some circles it only refers to a relatively small number of highly gifted and qualified people. This way of thinking encourages the view that only the "very best" candidates should be considered for mission work. I am fully in agreement with the practice of selecting mission candidates with care but the long history of the church shows that God sends out and uses all kinds of people with a huge range of gifts and talents. Stephen Gaukroger in "Why Bother With Mission" says,

"The history of missions is a colourful history of 'unlikely heroes' - characterized by obedience rather than ability. Time after time God confirms his word; '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 the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong' (1 Corinthians 1:26-27)."

Modern short-term mission agencies have often received people at an early age and many with no real mission experience. On-the-field mentoring, the method used by Jesus, has proved to be one of the very best ways to produce long-term church leaders and missionaries out of such people. Some assume that if we have a large number of new, especially young, workers that they will not be quality workers. My experience has shown me, and I love to testify to the truth of this, that God uses all kinds of people. Books like "Ragamuffin Gospel" make this point and are received well by many Christians but sadly, when a "ragamuffin" senses that God is leading him or her to be a missionary, then suddenly many start to get very concerned about the quality issue.

At 19 I was one of those "ragamuffins" who God somehow led and sent to Mexico. Today, why are there so many pouring cold water on young people and others who may not be "apostles" (according to some people's definition) but who want to move out and serve God? Somehow perfectionism has got married to legalism and these two together can now stop even the most sincere and zealous disciple from taking steps of faith in the area of missions.

"Missions do need highly qualified men, but they also need good people who may not have high academic or professional qualifications. Missions desire to work amongst people of all sorts, so they need workers of every experience and background." (Martin Goldsmith in "Don't Just Stand There".)

Let us older and supposedly more mature leaders acknowledge that many of the so-called "quality" people of our generation have been knocked out of the battle or fallen into serious sin. The really big mistakes and sins that cause grief to the Body of Christ in ways that are hard to assess are not usually those of some inexperienced young person on a short-term mission trip following a call to mobilise. As God's people we need to be more compassionate and concerned for our youth. Instead of condemning their music or the way they dress, we should be reaching out in grace and love. We should not compare what we think our strong points are with their weak points, but rather face our own weak areas more realistically and learn to let love cover their weaknesses. In this way we may begin to recognise the tremendous energy and commitment which they are able to bring to the work of taking the gospel to those in need.

Charles Swindoll in "The Grace Awakening" entitles one of his chapters "Graciously Disagreeing and Pressing On". In many ways the words of this title describe perfectly the approach that I have been trying to encourage to the controversies that I have described in this and other chapters. Swindoll says,

"One of the marks of maturity is the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable. It takes grace. In fact, handling disagreements with tact is one of the crowning achievements of grace."

He goes on to quote Ephesians 4:29-32, fitting words to end a chapter on the need for an awakening of grace in mission work. I have already quoted verse 32 but here is the whole passage:

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

In the midst of writing this book, I started to read What's So Amazing About Grace by Philip Yancey which just won the 'Book of the Year Award' of the Christian Publishers Association. I urge people to read it as part of their pilgrimage to be a more grace-awakened person.

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