

## Complete the Circle of Grace and Works

Leader's Guide

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*Sometimes Jesus sets conditions on grace.*

*As Christians, we know that we get to spend eternity in heaven, not because we're such great people, but because Jesus is. Yet, what does that mean as we respond to the remarkable grace God has shown us in Christ? What does that demand of us? What should that make us want to be and do?*



Scripture: Luke 6:37–42

Based On: "No Wonder They Crucified Him," sermon series by Daniel Meyer, [PreachingToday.com](https://www.preachingtoday.com).



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### Part 1 Identify the Issue

**Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.**

In his book *Bono in Conversation*, author Michka Assayas recounts a remarkable discussion he had with the lead singer and songwriter of the megastar rock group U2. While Bono is frequently criticized by some Christians for his salty language and liberal social views, it remains a fact that U2 began as a Christian fellowship and still plumbs biblical themes in many of their chart-busting songs.

Mr. Assayas, who is not a follower of Christ himself, began by asking the rock star, "Don't you think appalling things happen when people become too religious?" Bono acknowledged that there were certainly risks there, but then countered by saying something fascinating: "It's a mind-blowing concept [to me] that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people... but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma."

Assayas wanted to know what he meant by that last line, and Bono answered, "At the center of all religions is the idea of karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one... And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that... Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. I'd be in big trouble if karma was going to finally be my judge." Bono added: "It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity... Christ took on the sins of the world so that what we put out did not come back to us, so that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven."

It's God's grace. It's that amazing grace.

#### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What do you see as the difference between karma and grace?
- [Q] Does grace mean that there are no consequences to our actions? Explain.



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### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus gets all the credit.

Is there any more precious and distinctive belief held by Christians than this truth described in the gospel and by Bono? It is simply impossible to hold an accurate understanding of the utterly holy character of God, as the Bible describes him, and think for a single moment: When I meet God face-to-face one day, I think he is going to be really impressed by my character. I reckon he'll take a gander at all my moral merit badges—my church attendance, my charitable gifts, my community service and voting record, and say, "Wow, this guy is really going to improve the quality of fellowship here in heaven; let's definitely advance him to the next round."

How many of you have ever watched a tone-deaf contestant come before the judges on American Idol—all impressed by his own costume and performance—only to hear the evaluation of an actual singing star? It's not pretty, is it? That scenario, however, barely hints at what would happen to someone who came smugly before the judgment seat of God. God is a being who lives eternally at such a perfectly pure and holy pitch that the performance of even our best moral rock stars looks like a polyester lounge act in comparison. The Bible tells us that God is a being whose goodness burns so brilliantly hot and clean that, unfiltered by grace, it would instantly incinerate anything stained in the slightest by sin—no matter how nice the outside looked.

This was a hard concept for some of the religious people in Jesus' time. The Pharisees, for example, saw themselves as serious contenders on the Israelite Idol show. They were costumed in pristine robes, untainted by close contact with the people they called "sinners." They spent hours and years do-re-me-ing their way up and down the scales of ritual purity and religious observance. They were convinced God would be seriously impressed by their performance. And then the Great Rock and Star of Eternity himself came crashing down to earth and gonged their act. No wonder they crucified him.

We know better now, don't we? We understand with Bono that we're not rocks or stars in the most important sense. We know with the apostle Peter that we are people made of shifting sand. Read Mark 14:72.

We know with the prophet Isaiah that we are people of unclean lips. Read Isaiah 6:5.

We know with St. Paul that we fall far short of the glory of God. Read Romans 3:23.

We know that we get to spend eternity in heaven not because we're such great singers, but because Jesus is—because in the finals of the great contest with sin and death on Calvary, Jesus chose to enwrap us in the most remarkable song. Even as the crowd spat at him across the



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judgment table, Jesus sang: Don't make them pay for their tone deafness, Father. Let me pay instead. Let me pay the price here and now. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

[Q] Why do our efforts at holiness fail to impress God?

[Q] Does that mean that ritual purity and religious observance are worthless? Why or why not? What kind of balance do we need to find?

[Q] In what ways do we fall into Pharisee-like attempts to win favor with God?

### Teaching Point Two: There is a condition on God's grace.

In a sense, you and I are like barroom brawlers suddenly given the chance to become roadies or backup musicians for the ultimate Star. Suddenly, we find ourselves offered a free pass into the great concert that roars with such splendor and majesty in the massive hall of the kingdom of God. If we have accepted that pass, we are eager to use every instrument we can lay our hands on to play the Master's song. If we have accepted that pass, we are raising our hands and throwing our arms around everyone we can reach. If we have accepted the pass that Jesus freely offers, we are singing beneath our breath, wherever we go: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

But here's the part that could get a man killed. Here's the part that is so disturbing, so upsetting to some hearers that it made plenty of people want to see Jesus dead: There is a condition on God's grace. Please listen carefully here because it is going to run hard up against the way many of us have come to view things. God's love is unconditional. God's willingness to meet us where we are today, to redeem and bless us, is unconditional. We don't merit it. We don't earn it. It is freely given to us, because love is what God is and does.

But grace is something different. On one level, grace is like being offered a pass into the great concert, even though we aren't perfect singers ourselves. But in its fullest sense, grace is life in and at the concert. Have you ever heard the expression "a state of grace"? In this sense, it is appropriate to speak of the idea of "conditional grace." We don't merit grace by our actions, but grace itself is a condition into which we must enter to have its benefits.

Bob Geelhoed and Vickie Bare suggest that "grace is like being offered a heart transplant free of charge. Until we accept the heart, however, and allow the surgeon to cut us and implant the new heart into us—until we undergo that operation, the heart can't pump its life-giving blood through our body. The reality is that we don't just need a ticket to heaven; we need a heart transplant now. Our problem is that severe. And the free gift is that radical."



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Dallas Willard says that, for years, Christians have tended to live with a truncated, withered understanding of this crucial biblical concept. We've tended to see it as all about getting a ticket to heaven when we die. That's important, Dallas says; you certainly want to attend to that. But grace in the sense Jesus taught it is so much more. It's more than having God scan the barcode on the back of our Jesus ticket.

Grace isn't just the way into the kingdom of God someday; it is the truth and way and life of that kingdom we start walking in today. Grace is God acting supernaturally in us. It is God joining us to his concert, moving us to his music, giving us a song to sing and instruments to play with one another. Grace isn't a stub we hold. It is a circle we participate in. It is life on the kingdom side of the fence.

**[Q]** How can there be a condition on God's grace if his love is limitless?

**[Q]** What does Daniel Meyer mean when he says "grace is life in and at the concert"?

**[Q]** In what practical ways should our lives reflect that we are living life on the kingdom side of the fence?

**[Q]** How can we practice spiritual disciplines without them becoming a way to earn God's favor, instead of a way to know God? What's the difference?

### Teaching Point Three: We can complete the circle.

Read Luke 6:37–42.

What Jesus is saying in this passage is that grace always moves in a circle. If you really know that you've been freed by God from judgment and condemnation, you will not judge and condemn others. If you've truly accepted the huge forgiveness God has offered you, you are going to forgive others their sins against you. If you're genuinely conscious of all you've been given by God, then you are going to be a generous giver.

Of course, we are not perfect in these things. We're not the Rock Star. We don't sing the song or play the instruments exactly like Jesus does. But if we are not at least stirred by the music to the point that we're starting to pursue reconciliation in our relationships, starting to forgive the people who have hurt or failed us, starting to turn away from the criticizing, condemning way of the world and moving more and more to Christ's amazing grace song, then we haven't entered the circle. We haven't gone in to the kingdom concert. We're still sitting on the other side of the fence. As the great reformer John Calvin put it, "While it is true that we are saved not by works but by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone."



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This is why Jesus said to the Pharisees, and by extension to you and me: Don't you folks understand that the love of God is always aimed at completing the circle of grace? Why do you stop it up? Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye," when you fail to see the plank in your own eye? Do you honestly expect God's grace, when you won't extend it to others? Repent, I tell you, or by the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

*Gong.*

**[Q]** Give an example of when you have ignored the plank in your own eye in your effort to get a speck out of someone else's.

**[Q]** How does this passage help explain why grace is conditional?

**[Q]** Why does grace motivate our works and not the other way around?

**[Q]** In which of the following do you most need Christ's help?

- Pursue reconciliation in a relationship
- Forgive someone who has hurt or failed you
- Turn away from the criticizing, condemning way of the world
- Other

### Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** *To help us understand the difference between works to earn God's favor and works out of gratitude for God's grace.*

**Activity:** *Read the following case studies and ask the group to discuss how each person could be acting either to earn God's favor or out of joy for God's grace in his or her life. Discuss what might help that person to determine their motivation.*

- *Cheryl volunteers at the local homeless shelter.*
- *Johann spends two hours a day in prayer.*
- *Rachel has memorized all of the Epistles.*
- *Bradley fasts once a week.*



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### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

What do you do with a message and Messiah like that? You think: *I have got to walk further into this concert. I've got to examine my circles. I have got to change the way I've been doing some of my relationships, root myself more in some kingdom disciplines, and let the song and its Singer move through me more and more.*

**Action Point:** Which of the following do you most need Christ to transform in you? Share your answer with the group and ask them to pray for you.

- Help with my relationships
- Develop spiritual disciplines
- Let Christ transform my bad habits
- Other

—Study by Daniel Meyer, with JoHannah Reardon

