



FRESH START

You are beginning life's most satisfying adventure – your walk with God! As you start this adventure, here's what God says to you:

Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be —you get a fresh start, your slate's wiped clean. Psalm 32:11 (MSG)

When you make a commitment of your life to Jesus, not only is your “slate wiped clean”, you also get a “fresh start” – a new lease on life. This class is designed to help you have a good start to your fresh start. During these weeks together you'll discover and begin to unwrap ten gifts that God gives you:

F ORGIVENESS	– Accepting God's Grace
R ELATIONSHIP	– Worshipping
E NCOURAGEMENT	– Handling Failure
S CRIPTURE	– Understanding God's Word
H ELP	– Following God's Guidance
S HAPE	– Being You
T OGETHERNESS	– Living in Community
A UTHORITY	– Serving Others
R ECOGNITION	– Being Baptized
T ESTIMONY	– Telling Your Story

This session: FORGIVENESS – Accepting God's Grace

Jesus said, “There is **forgiveness** of sins for all who turn to Me.” Luke 24:47 (NLT)

1. Why do we need forgiveness?

Luke tells us about an intriguing incident that happened while Jesus was having dinner one day at Simon the Pharisee's house. It was a common practice in Middle Eastern culture that during a dinner like this one, the house was open to anyone. Sometime during the meal, a woman came into the house, a woman who had a reputation around town. Jesus was at the table in typical fashion, leaning on one arm, eating with the other, His feet extended behind Him when she came in and walked toward Him.

This woman's life had been changed by Jesus, she had discovered a fresh start, Jesus had given her a reason for living, and out of her deep and uncontrollable gratitude she began to cry and her tears fell on the feet of Jesus...feet that were dirty and dusty from the walk over to Simon's place. She immediately began to dry Jesus' feet with her hair, never noticing that her tears, mixed with the dust on His feet meant mud in her hair, and when she had dried them, she started kissing them, and poured perfume on the feet of Jesus.

Simon just didn't understand, he just didn't get it. So, Jesus told Simon a story about two men who were in debt, different amounts, one owed the creditor an amount equal to five hundred days' pay and the other fifty days' pay, but neither of them could pay their debt, so the debtor forgave them both.

Then Jesus asked Simon an interesting question, "Which of them will love him more?" And Simon answered, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." Jesus said, "You have judged correctly," then He explained to Simon about the depth of this woman's love because her huge debt had been canceled, paid. Then Jesus turned to her and said, "Your sins are forgiven." Wow! She had been carrying such a burden, such a load of guilt and shame because of who she was in town and what she had done. And with one short statement, Jesus lifts all that burden, all that shame, all that guilt off of her and sets her free. She knew the gift of forgiveness—a fresh start!

And we need to know that gift too. Here's why...

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both." Luke 7:41-42 (NIV)

2. Because we are in debt!

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty." Luke 7:41

A denarius was equal to one day's wage. Although the amount of their debts were significantly different, the fact is...they were both still in debt.

Spiritually, all of us are in debt, some of us are a lot deeper in debt than others. Some people have stretched the truth, others have created lies. Some people have lusted, others have had affairs. Some people have cheated on their taxes, others have robbed a bank. Some people have driven 1 mile per hour over the speed limit, others don't realize a speed limit exists. Some people do just enough to get by on their jobs, others get paid for what they never do. You get the point, it's simply a question of **degree** of debt; it's not whether or not we're in debt.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8 (NIV)

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 (NIV)

The glory of the Lord, the glory of God, is Jesus. And if Jesus was standing here right now, not one of us would measure up very well to Him. That's what the Bible means when it tells us we

have all sinned and because of that sin we fall short of the glory of God. We're in debt, we don't measure up.

Falling short of the glory of God means, I don't measure up to Jesus.

3. Because we are in debt over our heads!

"Neither of them had the money to pay him back...." Luke 7:42

For any number of reasons, people get in debt financially over their heads. And, when they do, they have to do something about it. Under the Roman law of Jesus' day, the creditor could have seized both of these men who couldn't pay and had them jailed or forced them to go to work for him. The idea was to force the debtor to sell whatever property he might have to help liquidate the debt, or to force the debtor's friends and relatives to pay off the debt, or to apply the value of the debtor's labor against the debt.

Whenever the debtor couldn't pay the debt he was in over his head, and at great risk. Let's apply the biblical story to us—spiritually we're in over our heads.

The sin debt we owe to God is beyond our ability to repay. We can't work hard enough, pray diligently enough, give abundantly enough, or live rightly enough to pay our debt. God knew that and He gave us both Christmas (that means God sent Jesus to us) and the cross (that means Jesus died in our place) so that we could do something about our debt. He saw that we were spiritually bankrupt, and if we just tried to reorganize our lives, file a spiritual bankruptcy form, we would fail. We needed our debt forgiven, paid, and his answer was Jesus.

For the wages of sin is death.... Romans 6:23 (NIV)

The sin debt that we owe God is beyond our ability to repay.

Why do we need forgiveness?

3. Because we cannot cancel our own debt!

The end of verse 42 tells us, "...so he canceled the debts of both." That's what Jesus did on the cross, He canceled, He paid my debt, and He paid yours.

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 9:22 (NLT)

Christ's death was ... a one-time event, but it was a sacrifice that took care of sins forever. Hebrews 9:28 (MSG)

In the book of Ephesians, Paul tells us that God has chosen to adopt us as His children through Jesus (1:5). Through Jesus' death on the cross, when we accept what He did for us, God adopts us into His family.

Here's what that means. When the Roman adoption was finalized it was really finalized, it was complete. The person who had been adopted had all the rights of a natural born child in the

new family and completely lost all rights in their old family. In the eyes of the law the person adopted was a new person. So new that even all debts and obligations connected with the previous family were abolished as if they had never existed.

Recently, a friend adopted a little boy and the state issued a brand new birth certificate with his "new name" written on it!

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. Ephesians 1:7 (NIV)

When you are willing to give, really give your life to Jesus and let His death on the cross be the price paid for your sins, to stop trying to do it on your own and start trusting what Jesus did for you, then you are forever forgiven, that's God's gift to you – THAT'S CALLED GRACE!

What is God's grace?

You are a God of **forgiveness, gracious and merciful**, slow to become angry, and full of **unfailing love and mercy**. Nehemiah 9:17 (NLT)

Circle the word "gracious."

Grace has been described as unmerited favor. That means: something for nothing.

In our culture, something for nothing just doesn't make sense, does it?

Complete these common American phrases for me:

If it sounds too good to be true... it is.
We make money the old fashion way, we ... earn it.
There's no such thing as a free ... lunch.
There is no gain without ... pain.
God helps those who ... help themselves.

Most of us have a hard time believing this is possible, especially with God. So, we try to earn His forgiveness. The reality is, forgiveness does have a price, it's just that **Jesus has already paid it**.

Grace is:

- God's
- Riches
- At
- Christ's
- Expense

*In this man Jesus there is forgiveness of your sins. Everyone who believes in Him is **freed from all guilt** and declared right with God. Acts 13:38-39 (NLT)*

1. **Grace is a free gift.**

Many people think that they're saved by works like going to church, giving to charities, getting baptized, by earning their way to heaven, by being good enough that God says, "OK, come on in."

If you were to do a sidewalk survey of 100 people and just ask, "How do you get to heaven?" you'd get a lot of different answers. But basically they would all be summarized by, "You've got to earn your way to heaven." You'd hear things like, "The way you get to heaven is you try to be good and do your best" or "Work real hard at being good or just try to be a good, moral person" or "Do more good things in life than you do bad things in life and if your good pile is higher than your bad pile, God's going to say, 'You're a good guy. Come on in.'" It's all based on works, not grace.

You need to understand that God says here that salvation is absolutely free. Circle "free gift". You don't work for a gift....or it wouldn't be a gift. God says salvation is absolutely free. You can't earn it, you can't buy it, you can't work for it....it's a gift.

*All of us need to be made right with God by His grace, which is a **free gift**...through Jesus Christ. Romans 3:24 (NCV)*

Religion is spelled **D-O**, but Christianity is spelled **D-O-N-E!**

This is the fundamental difference between Christianity and every other religion. Every other faith, every other belief system, whatever it is... if it's Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses...you pick, but if it's anything other than Christianity it is based on works and you can summarize them in one word -- "do". There are certain things you **do** in order to gain God's approval.

On the other hand, if you were to summarize Christianity in one word, it's the word "done". It's already been done for you. It was done on the cross and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There isn't anything you can do to save yourself. You just accept God's free gift of grace.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – **not by works**, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)*

It's the greatest gift you're ever going to be offered. Since it's a gift, someone has to give it...and...

2. **Jesus is the only one who can give grace.**

*... **grace** and truth came **through Jesus Christ**. John 1:17 (NCV)*

*...many people received God's gift of life by the grace of the **one man, Jesus Christ**. Romans 5:15 (NCV)*

*Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except **through Me**." John 14:6 (NIV)*

Why through Jesus Christ? Why is Jesus Christ the only way to heaven? Why not Buddha? Why not somebody else?

Because He paid the price of admission. On the cross, He paid for your sins and through the resurrection proved He is the Son of God.

Jesus is the one who paid my admission price, so that I could enter Heaven.

Grace is free, no doubt about that...But it is not cheap. It cost Jesus Christ His life.

He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5 (NIV)

*God made **Christ**, who never sinned, to **be the offering for our sin**, so that we could be made right with God through Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NLT)*

In the Bible, the favorite description for someone who's accepted God's grace is the term "in Christ." That phrase, "in Christ", is used over 120 times in the New Testament. It refers to somebody who has found salvation through the grace of God by being in Christ.

Let me explain it to you like this. This banana peel represents my life and let's let this bag represent Jesus Christ. In my life there are a lot of things I've done wrong, that disqualify me to live in a perfect place like heaven. I'm beat up, bruised, ripped, torn, and empty. Then I look at that messed up, broken, damaged, scarred life and I think, "There's no chance of this getting into heaven. It's certainly not perfect." The Bible says that when I come to Jesus and say, "Jesus, I open my life up to You and I want to accept Your free gift of salvation" then God gives me the gift of grace, takes my life, with all the scars, all the tears, all the mistakes, and places me in Christ.

Now, when I'm in Christ, can you see my imperfections? Can you see the things that I'm ashamed of? No...All you can see when I'm in Christ, is Christ. When God looks at me with eyes of grace He only sees the perfection of Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches that when I commit my life to Jesus, that I am "in Christ." Once I am "in Christ", when the Father looks at me with eyes of grace, all He can see is the perfection of His Son Jesus.

3. Grace is available to anyone and everyone, including me.

God doesn't play favorites—regardless of your background, your status, or your sin. It doesn't matter whether you've been a religious person or a non-religious person.

The promise is not only for those people that live under the law of Moses. It is for anyone who lives with faith like Abraham. Romans 4:16 (ICB)

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Romans 10:13 (NIV)

There are no quotas in heaven.

It doesn't say only really good people will be saved if they call on the name of the Lord or really religious people or really smart people, or people who haven't failed. No. It says everyone - everyone who calls on the name of the Lord - everyone who has faith in the grace of God will be saved. So...how long does grace last?

4. Grace lasts forever.

*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is **eternal life** through Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (NLT)*

Circle *eternal life*. How long is eternal? The results of God's grace are going to go on and on forever. Eternal life is one of the benefits of grace. You could say that grace is the gift that keeps on giving. The Bible says the free gift of God is eternal life in heaven.

Have you ever thought of what heaven is really going to be like? The Bible tells us that heaven is going to be like at least three things.

Heaven will be a place of:

- o Reunion
- o Reward
- o Release

And here's some good news: all of that starts right now. Look at this verse.

*Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given **a brand-new life** and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future **starts now!** 1 Peter 1:3-4 (MSG)*

5. I can have eternal life, by accepting it.

If you're offered a gift and you don't accept it, it's a worthless gift. You need to realize that Jesus Christ makes this eternal grace gift available to everybody but it has to be accepted.

How do you accept it? By believing, by faith! God's gift is received by faith. I trust that what Jesus did on the cross and through the resurrection is enough.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through **faith** – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)*

Faith is the key that unlocks the door to heaven.

But because salvation is a gift, you can't brag about it. If you could work your way to heaven, do you realize how miserable it would be in heaven? Everybody would be bragging about how they got there. We'd all be trying to "one up" each other with great stories of what great people we were on earth. God says, "It's a grace gift. I just give you forgiveness free. I give you heaven free." So what do you do with a gift? You accept it and are grateful for it.

People **receive** God's **promise** by having **faith**. This happens so that the promise can be a free gift. Romans 4:16 (NCV)

- Salvation is not based on my performance, it is based on God's promise.
- Salvation is not based on my goodness, it is based on God's grace.
- I'll get to heaven, not based on my merit, but based on God's mercy.

That's why He gets all the credit, all the glory. There's nothing I can do. It's a free gift that's received by faith.

Here's how much God wants you to get this gift...

*The Lord longs to be gracious to **you**. Isaiah 30:18 (NIV)*

God really, really wants to be gracious to you. Does grace just mean that I can accept God's gift and keep on living any way that I want to—thumbing my nose to God? Of course not. When Jesus gave grace to the people He met He also gave an instruction “follow Me.” He was saying, “I’ll give you this tremendous gift. I want you to take it, and I want the rest of your life to be lived in fullness—follow Me. Live like I tell you to live. That’s how you can really live it up.” What a deal!

How does a person accept God's grace and get the gift of forgiveness?

The Bible makes this promise:

*Everyone who **believes** in Him **receives forgiveness** of sins through His name. Acts 10:43 (NIV)*

In the Bible, the word “believe” means more than just brain knowledge, it means “to make a commitment to.” So, everyone who makes a commitment to live the rest of their life for Jesus, accepting the price that He paid for their sins on the cross, receives forgiveness.

Belief is saying, “I believe ‘enough’ that Jesus Christ is God's Son that I'll follow Him with my life.”

*Jesus said, “Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear Me calling and open the door, **I will come in...**” Revelation 3:20 (NLT)*

When you get home tonight, imagine that you hear a knock on your door. You go to the door, open it, and it's a friend of yours. What will you say? That's right, “Come in.” Well, it's just that easy to invite Jesus into your life, to accept God's grace and the gift of forgiveness.

Many people have come to Christ, had their sins forgiven, invited Him into their life by saying a prayer similar to this one:

God forgive me for all of my sins and come into my heart and life. I believe, with all I understand, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God...and God, I believe with all I understand that when Jesus Christ died on the cross, He paid for my sins. And, with all I understand I believe He rose from the dead. Right now, I'm saying 'come in' to Jesus. I'm trusting Him to forgive my sins and give me eternal life. Thank You for the fresh start You are giving me. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."

When you pray that prayer, you are doing four things:

1. Admitting you have sinned.
2. Believing that Jesus died to pay for your sins.
3. Accepting God's free gift of salvation by grace.
4. Inviting Jesus to come into your life.

There's a chance that some of you may not have prayed a prayer like that one, so what I want to do right now is to read that prayer, and as I do, if you've never prayed a prayer like that and meant it, you pray it in your heart, and invite Jesus into your life. (Note: Read the prayer again.)

If you prayed that prayer right then, or you've prayed that kind of a prayer already, here's what the Bible says has happened in your life:

*In the past you were without Christ...and you had no part in the promises that God made to His people. You had no hope, and you did not know God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. Though you once were far away from God, now you have been **brought near to Him** because of the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2:12-13 (NCV/NLT)*

Since you've been brought near to God, let's take a look at how we can build that relationship. The second gift God gives you for a fresh start.

In our next session:

RELATIONSHIP – Worshipping

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