

What Is Grace?



Session 1



**John 1:14-17;
Romans 8:28, 31-35,
37-39**

Session Objective

Participants will consider grace as both characteristic and gift of God in relation to human beings and the created order.









Faith Statement

Question 1. What is God's purpose for your life?

God wills that I should live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the love of God, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

—*Study Catechism: Full Version*

Session Overview

 Enter	Rules and Grace	 Enhancements Family Connections Movie Connection Congregational Connection
 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question Option B: Church Words	
 Explore	Option A: Images of God's Grace Option B: God's Grace through Jesus Christ	  For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.
 Express	Option A: Grace Seek and Find Option B: Grace Hymn Search	
 Exit	Option A: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" Option B: Learn the Catechism	

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Pray: Ask for God's guidance and blessing. Seek to convey what God would want God's children to know and receive. Pray for each of the participants.

Reflect: Where do you know the grace of God in your life?

Remember: You are a source of grace for the youth.



Understanding the Scripture

Grace is a gift from God. We begin the study of grace by looking at this word from the Latin, *gratia*, and the Greek word, *charis*, which mean almost the same thing. The Old Testament uses several Hebrew expressions to speak of God's care and favor. For the Greek translation from the third century B.C. (the Septuagint), the scholars settled chiefly on the word *charis* to convey the meanings of those words.

God chose Abram and Sarai (Abraham and Sarah), an act of grace. God chose Joseph, Moses, judges, kings, prophets, and even adversaries of Israel and Judah, all in grace-fully leading a people and seeking a blessing for the nations (Genesis 12:2).

The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau employs the language of *grace* throughout. Jacob saw the angels of God and then gave livestock to find grace in the eyes of Esau (Genesis 32:5, KJV; *favor* in NRSV). Jacob had cheated Esau, according to the story. Esau received Jacob graciously. Did the angels counsel Jacob? Were they not a gift from God? Jacob became Israel, the namesake for God's people.

The Gospel of John begins with the unique nature of Jesus Christ, who from eternity was "full of grace and truth." From Jesus' "fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:14, 16–17).

The first Christians found this common word a splendid image to convey their conviction that God provides for us freely faith, hope, love, and much else. God's free gifts include not only virtues, but provisions for our lives and for the whole creation.

Grace, graciousness, favor, and even gifts are all related in Scripture. The noun *charis* carries an aesthetic meaning, "beauty," and an economic meaning, "free." That word gives us *charismatic*, *charity*, and *charisma* (leadership ability).

As we study particular passages of Scripture, consider that themes of God’s favor, grace, and gifts are common throughout the Bible. Indeed, Presbyterians find God’s grace, especially as embodied in Jesus Christ, the central truth of faith.



Understanding the Faith Statement

Question 1 of the Study Catechism approved by the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) focuses on a question many teenagers ask: What does God want me to do with my life? The response is threefold: grace, love, and fellowship—our purpose is centered in the person and character of our Trinitarian God. God creates, redeems, and sustains by grace, which is a gift. Our lives begin and end in God’s grace. Live in grace, love, and fellowship with the assurance that nothing we do or don’t do can defeat or block God’s purpose. All hope we have comes from God’s promise that God will always love us.



Teaching Today’s Question

Grace can mean many different things in different contexts, but in the Christian life, grace is central to our understanding of who God is and how God relates with us. When the word *grace* is used in Christian worship or theology, it takes on a meaning different from the several meanings it has in the secular world. A simple definition describes grace as God’s unmerited favor, but that definition needs explanation. Each of the common meanings of grace—welcome, acceptance, freedom from accountability, presence, something extra, kindness, courtesy, or beauty—expresses some aspect of what we understand as God’s grace. Although a concise definition is difficult, the struggle to understand the meaning of grace is worthwhile because it can lead us to greater awareness of God’s call and a broader understanding of our response.



Enter

Rules and Grace

- Newsprint, markers

Before the session, write the following questions on separate sheets of posted newsprint:

- What rules do you have to obey each day?
- What happens when you break a rule at school or at home?
- Where does grace come from when you break rules?
- Can you count on grace happening every time you break a rule? Why? Why not?

Greet the youth by name as they arrive. Give each person a marker. Have participants move around the room and write responses to the questions on each sheet of newsprint. When all are finished, review the responses together. Discuss the written responses.

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

O God, whose Spirit fills our lives with peace, joy, gratitude, and hope, open our hearts so that your Holy Word will inspire each of us. Let our thoughts, words, and actions glorify you now and always. Amen.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, marker, candle, matches, recording of contemplative music, music player

Before participants arrive, write *What is grace?* on a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent location. Place the candle in the center of the meeting space.

Light the candle to focus the group's attention. Point out the session question, which is written on the newsprint. Invite group members to reflect on the question while you play the contemplative music. After a couple of minutes, invite the participants to share their reflections while discussing the session question and the following questions:



- Why might someone ask the question “What is grace?”
- What issues or other questions are at the heart of this question?
- What does *grace* signify when used to describe God’s character? God’s actions?

Explain that when the church uses the word, *grace* is a gift of God. Whenever we talk about God’s grace, we are talking about God’s love given freely to us. God’s gifts are free. That is grace. Because it comes to us at God’s initiative, we can’t earn it or control it. We don’t have to deserve it. What can we do? Accept that God accepts us.

Option B: Church Words



Worship bulletins, pens

Welcome the youth by name. Hand out worship bulletins and explain that the church often speaks a language all its own and assumes that everybody knows what it means. Invite the youth to work with a partner to circle words in the bulletin that have special church meanings. After sufficient time, ask:



- Which words are different when used in church instead of other settings? (For example, *praise, trinity, disciple*)
- Which words survive only in church usage? (For example, *sexton, manse*)

If the word *grace* does not appear, introduce it as a church word and wonder together ways the word is used in and out of the church.

Explain that when the church uses the word, *grace* is a gift of God. Whenever we talk about God’s grace, we are talking about God’s love given freely to us. God’s gifts are free. That is grace. Because it comes to us at God’s initiative, we can’t earn it or control it. We don’t have to deserve it. What can we do? Accept that God accepts us.



Explore

Option A: Images of God’s Grace



Bibles, copies of “Images of God’s Grace” (Web Resource 1a), pens

Hand out Web Resource 1a to each person. Invite the participants to work individually or in small groups. After sufficient time, draw the group members’ attention and receive their observations about God’s grace. Ask:



- How do the images of grace confirm your image of God? How do they differ from your view of God?
- If you tried to paint a word picture of God to a friend based only on the listed passages, what would you say?

Option B: God's Grace through Jesus Christ

Copies of "God's Grace through Jesus Christ" (Web Resource 1b), newsprint, marker
Hand out copies of Web Resource 1b to group members. Invite volunteers to read the Scripture passages. Lead a discussion about God's grace using the questions at the bottom of the resource sheet.

Based on John 1 and Romans 8, invite the group to create a definition of grace as gift from God and as attribute of God. Record this definition on newsprint. Ask:



- Imagine that you have a friend who knows nothing of God. What do you think would appeal to your friend about the God you have described?
- How could you introduce your friend to the gracious God?



Express

Option A: Grace Seek and Find

Copies of "Grace Seek and Find" (Web Resource 1c), scissors, tape

Help the youth identify ways God's grace is alive in your congregation. Discuss this threefold cycle of grace:

All things belong to God;
God gives to us out of grace; and
We share in God's gift of grace by giving from our abundance to others.

Explain that with eyes attuned to see God's grace in action, we can perceive it around us.

Distribute copies of Web Resource 1c, scissors, and tape. Tour your church building looking for signs of God's grace. Possible stops: food bank collection box, information about local outreach, prayer room, welcome signs, list of those in hospital or care homes, child care rooms, information about pastoral care, community garden, recycling box, or prayer letter from missionaries. Invite the youth to post resource sheets wherever they see signs of God's grace alive in your church. Offer a brief prayer of thanks in each place. Invite the youth to take copies of the resource sheet to post signs of God's love in other places during the week.

Option B: Grace Hymn Search

- Copies of your congregation's hymnals

Form three groups. Distribute the hymnals or songbooks your church uses in worship. Explain the threefold cycle of grace:

1. All things belong to God.
2. God gives to us out of grace.
3. We share in God's gift of grace by giving from our abundance to others.

Ask group 1 to look for hymns about all things belonging to God; group 2, God gives to us out of grace; and group 3, we share in God's gift of grace by giving from our abundance to others. (If a topical index is available in the back of the book, show youth how to use it.) Ask each group to choose two hymns or songs.

Gather the entire group and ask small groups to tell about their choices.

Discuss ways grace is described and what emotions are associated with grace. As time allows, sing one verse of several of the hymns or songs. Make a list of the favorites and give it to your church's worship planners, requesting that some of these be sung in upcoming services.



Exit

Option A: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

- Copies of your congregation's hymnal

Ask everyone to turn to "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" in the hymnal. Sing or read together at least the first verse and the chorus of the hymn to celebrate God's grace. Pray the closing prayer.

Option B: Learn the Catechism

- Prepared cards from "Study Catechism Question 1" (Web Resource 1d)

Hand out cards cut from Web Resource 1d to each person. Invite the group members to memorize and repeat the answer to question 1. Encourage them to carry the cards with them or post them on a prominent place in their personal spaces as a reminder of God's grace.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we are grateful for your grace and mercy that flow to us as gifts, not gifts that we earn, but gifts you give us because of your love for us. In your blessed name, we pray. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Movie Connection

Watch the movie *Amazing Grace* (PG, 2006). Wilbur Wilberforce, a member of Parliament in England, works to end slavery. His friend John Newton wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace" after an especially perilous storm at sea. Wonder together the faith motivations that would lead someone to work against a social injustice. Name ways that believing in a gracious God would lead someone to act against a social evil like slavery.

Congregational Connection

Invite the pastor and some church members to meet with the youth for youth group or Sunday school. Ask them to be a part of a "Grace Panel." Decide on some questions you would like to ask them and give them the questions ahead of time so they can prepare what they would like to say. Some suggestions:



- When have you experienced God's grace in your life?
- How have you seen God's grace demonstrated in others' lives?
- What age were you when you began to know of God's grace in your life?

Your panel members may want to take questions from the audience.