

P H I L R Y K E N

✦ G R A C E ✦

TRANSFORMING



“With courage and tenderness President Phil Ryken tells Wheaton College students that no college needs the gospel more than Wheaton College. It’s not that the sins of Wheaton students are greater than those of others, but rather that their need of grace for godly power and peace is no less. In a college culture where you are expected to be holy and smart and successful, President Ryken teaches students (and the rest of us) not only that grace is greater than all our sin but also that it is release from human pressures and fuel for fruitful joy.”

Bryan Chapell, author, *Holiness by Grace*; Chancellor,
Covenant Theological Seminary

“‘Cheer up! God’s grace is greater than you can imagine.’ Whether you’re a novice or a veteran in the school of grace, these words are meant to refresh, enliven and illumine your heart. I’m so thankful for Ryken’s bold yet humble declaration of the marvelous grace of God—grace meant for all who believe, grace that is ours from the beginning of our walk all the way into the eternity we’re longing for. Pick up this lovely little book and let its ageless message remind you of the grace that first transformed your soul.”

Elyse Fitzpatrick, counselor; speaker; author, *Give Them
Grace and Comforts from the Cross*

“Phil Ryken’s *Grace Transforming* is a captivating series of chapel addresses reminding us that we never outgrow our need for the transforming power of God’s grace. With wonderful illustrations, sound biblical exegesis, and hard-hitting, relevant applications, Phil invites us to face the realities of our own life in order to realize in ever more profound ways the power of God’s life-changing grace. I was personally enriched by reading this new treasure and reminded of the things I love the most, even when I fail to realize their lively, pulsating reality in my own life.”

Gayle D. Beebe, President, Westmont College; author, *The
Shaping of an Effective Leader and Longing for God*

“Hebrews 13:9 says, ‘It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.’ As a church planter, I needed the truths in this book to strengthen my weary, performance-driven, approval-hungry, externally oriented, and self-righteous heart. My pharisaical heart was exposed, and I found myself praying, ‘God, be mercy-seated to me, the sinner.’”

David Choi, Lead Planter, Church of the Beloved, Chicago, Illinois; International Speaker

“To grasp the fullness of God’s grace is to come humbly to Christ in empty-handed spiritual poverty. That alone may be the greatest challenge for any Christian! And it’s why I so appreciate Phil Ryken’s extraordinary insights in this new book. He points us to Jesus Christ in all his saving power, reminding us that without the Savior we are nothing and have nothing. If you are seeking a fresh look at your Lord and your own desperate need of him, this is the book for you!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“I listened attentively in chapel during every one of Dr. Ryken’s messages and found them life-giving, and I’m sure I’ll need it for the rest of my life. The grace of Christ is so simple yet so hard to fathom. Ryken illuminates the power of grace, combining artful prose, inspiring quotations, and personal anecdotes. Here’s a book that hands readers transforming grace on a silver platter.”

T. Ryan Buchanan, 2011 Student Body President, Wheaton College; Teach for America Corps member

Grace Transforming

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P R E F A C E

This book began as a series of chapel messages given at Wheaton College. Wheaton is a performance-oriented place, so in my first year as president I wanted to speak as often as I could about the grace of God. Instead of being defined by who we are and what we do, we are defined by who Jesus is and what he has done for us in his death and resurrection.

I am grateful to Crossway for the invitation to edit my chapel messages on God's life-changing grace and adapt them for a wider audience. I am also grateful to Marilee Melvin for her help in making many corrections to the original manuscript.

Our family has been deeply grateful for the extraordinary welcome we have received from the Wheaton College community, especially the students. Their friendship and openness to God's work in their lives make it a joy to teach them the Word of God. This book is sent to press with gratitude to God for the high privilege of serving as their president.

Phil Ryken
Wheaton, Illinois

GRACE'S HUMBLING NECESSITY

We begin at the beginning, with our desperate need for grace. From the moment we came into the world as helpless babies, right up until this exact second, we are utterly and completely dependent on the grace of God for everything we have, including life itself. What is more, if we have any hope of life after death—eternal life—it is only because of God's free and undeserved grace for us in Jesus Christ.

Until we understand this, it is impossible for us to have the relationship with God that we truly need. But when we do understand this—when we understand our absolute need for Jesus—then his grace changes everything.

PAST EXPERIENCE, PRESENT NEED

Our need for grace may seem obvious at the beginning of the Christian life, when we first put our trust in Jesus. Then we know that if there is anything we contribute to our salvation, it is only the sin that necessitates a Savior. According to the good news of our salvation, Jesus died

and rose again so that in him we would receive forgiveness for our sins and enter into everlasting fellowship with the true and living God. We are not saved by anything that we have done, therefore, but only by what Jesus has done. It is all by his grace, not by our works.

Yet grace is not something we leave behind once we decide to follow Jesus. Grace is our present need as well as our past experience. The gospel is not just the way *into* the Christian life; it is also the way *on in* the Christian life. We continually need to remember that God “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:9).

In my first chapel address as president of Wheaton College I said something that took some people by surprise, maybe because it’s something that many Christians forget. I said that I don’t know of a college anywhere in the world that needs the gospel more than Wheaton does.

In saying this, I did not mean to imply that there aren’t a lot of Christians at Wheaton. In fact, every student, every professor, and every staff member on campus makes a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Still, it wouldn’t be surprising to find unbelievers on campus: in most Christian communities there are at least some people who do not yet have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is not what I meant, however, when I said that Wheaton College needs the gospel. I meant that the gospel is

for Christians every bit as much as it is for non-Christians. We never outgrow our need for God's life-changing grace—the gospel of the cross and the empty tomb.

A SELF-CENTERED PRAYER

The main reason we continue to need the gospel is that we continue to sin. To experience God's life-changing grace for ourselves, therefore, we need to recognize the deep-seated sin that necessitates our salvation.

One of the best places to see our need for grace, and also the way that God answers that need, is in a story Jesus told “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). In other words, this is a story for people who will not admit their need for grace. It is a story for us, if we are too proud to confess our sins. It goes like this:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10–14)

The story opens with a surprise, because in those days everyone knew that tax collectors did not go to the temple and did not pray. Tax collectors were employed by the Roman government, and thus they were considered traitors to the Jewish people. Many practiced extortion. Thus one preacher compared them to “drug pushers and pimps, those who prey on society, and make a living of stealing from others.”¹ Make no mistake about it: this tax collector was a crook!

The Pharisee, by contrast, stood for everything that was right and good. The Pharisees were widely regarded as spiritual overachievers. They were theologically orthodox and morally devout. Possibly our respect for this particular Pharisee increases when we overhear his prayer. He comes before God with thanksgiving. He testifies that he is not an extortioner or an adulterer. Rather than taking money for himself, he gives it away to others. He not only prays, but also fasts. In contemporary terms, this man would be a pastor or a theologian—or maybe the president of a Christian college.

Yet for all his devotion, the Pharisee was not righteous in the sight of God. Why not? His most obvious problem was pride. Although he began by addressing God, he spent the rest of his prayer talking about himself. In only two short verses he manages to mention himself five (!) times: I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . I. It gets worse, because if we translate verse 11 more literally, it reads, “The Pharisee, standing, prayed *about* himself,” or even “*with* himself,”

in which case he was not talking to God at all! He did not truly ask God for anything or offer God any praise but simply reveled in his own sense of moral superiority. In other words, the Pharisee was exactly like the people listening to Jesus tell this story: confident of his own righteousness. Here is a man, said London's famous preacher Charles Spurgeon, who thought he was "too good to be saved."²

It is easy to see how self-righteous the Pharisee was, but what we really need to assess is the same attitude in ourselves. If we are living in Christian community, then either we will grow strong in the grace of God or else we will become bigger and bigger hypocrites. So we need to ask ourselves: When am I like the Pharisee in the story Jesus told?

Here are some possible answers: I am a Pharisee when I care more about my religious reputation than about real holiness. I am a Pharisee when I look down on people who are not as committed to the cause of mercy or justice that I am committed to. I am a Pharisee when I look around and say, "Thank God I am not like so-and-so" and then fill in the blank with whatever person in my neighborhood, or student on my campus, or colleague at my workplace, or family in my church, or group in my society that I happen to think is not as whatever it is as I am.

When else am I a Pharisee? I am a Pharisee when I am impressed with how much I am giving to God compared to others. I am a Pharisee when other people's sins

seem worse than my own. I am a Pharisee when I can go all day, or all week, or even all month without confessing any particular sin.

ANOTHER WAY TO PRAY

Thankfully, there is a totally different way to pray—a way that will save your sinful and maybe hypocritical soul. Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector did not count on his own merits but begged for mercy instead: “The tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13).

There are three parts to the tax collector’s prayer: God, the sinner, and the merciful grace that comes between them. The man’s prayer started with God, which is where all prayer ought to begin. The first act of prayer is to approach the majestic throne of the awesome and almighty God. When the tax collector made his approach, he refused even to look up to heaven, because he had a right and proper fear of God’s bright, burning holiness.

So the tax collector’s prayer began with God. It ended with himself, the sinner. I say “the” sinner, rather than “a” sinner because the Greek original of this verse uses the definite article. As far as the tax collector was concerned, he was the only sinner that mattered. Rather than comparing himself to others, he measured himself against the perfect holiness of God. And by that standard,

he saw himself for what he was: nothing more and nothing less than a guilty sinner before a holy God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wisely wrote, “If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all.”³ One good way to avoid this error and acknowledge the true extent of our sin is to identify ourselves as “the” sinner when we pray, as if we were the biggest, most obvious sinner in our congregation, corporation, family, or dormitory. “It’s me, Lord,” we should say when we begin our prayers. “You know: the sinner.”

AT THE MERCY SEAT

This brings us to the most striking feature of the tax collector’s prayer: in between God’s holiness and his own sinfulness he inserted a prayer for mercy. Like King David, he stood before God and said, “Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace” (Ps. 86:6).

When the tax collector prayed, “Have mercy,” he used a Greek verb that essentially means to atone for sin by means of a blood sacrifice. To understand this, we need to go back in the Old Testament to Leviticus 16. Once a year, the high priest would make atonement for the people’s sin. He would take a perfect male goat and sacrifice it as a sin offering. Then he would take its blood into the Most Holy Place of the temple and sprinkle it on the mercy seat.

What did this priestly act signify? The sacrificial goat represented God’s sinful people. In a symbolical way,

their sins were transferred or imputed to the animal. Then, having been charged with sin, the animal was put to death. The goat thus served as a substitute, dying in the place of sinners.

Once a sacrifice had been offered, the animal's blood was the proof that atonement had been made for sin. The sacrificial blood showed that God had already carried out his death penalty against transgression. So the priest took the blood and sprinkled it on the mercy seat, which was the golden lid on the ark of the covenant. This sacred ark was located in the innermost sanctum of the temple—the Most Holy Place. On top of the mercy seat there were golden cherubim, symbolizing the throne of God. Thus the ark served as the earthly location of God's holy presence. Inside the ark, underneath the mercy seat, was the law of God as a covenant that the people had broken. Sprinkling blood on the mercy seat, therefore, was a way to show that an atoning sacrifice had come between the holy God and his sinful people. The sacrificial blood showed that their sins were covered, that they were protected from the holy wrath of God.

In effect, this is what the tax collector prayed for when he said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." He was asking God to make blood atonement for his sin. There the man was, praying in the very temple where the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat. When Jesus says that "two men went up to the temple to pray," this is generally taken to mean that they were there around three

o'clock in the afternoon, with the crowds that attended the daily sacrifice. Knowing that he was under God's judgment because of his sin, the only thing the tax collector could do was ask for mercy to come between his guilt and God's wrath. So he begged for God to be "mercy-seated" to him. He was asking God to atone for his sins, to cover his guilt, and to protect him from eternal judgment.

The order of the tax collector's prayer echoes the Old Testament pattern for sacrifice: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." First comes God, who is perfect in his holiness. Last comes the sinner, who deserves to die for his sins. But in between comes the sacrificial blood that saves his sinful soul.

SAVED BY THE BLOOD

This is a good prayer for anyone to pray: "God, be mercy-seated to me, the sinner." Not counting the Lord's Prayer, or the words of thanks I give before eating a meal, it is probably the prayer I offer more than any other. It's short and easy to remember. I pray it first thing in the morning or the last thing at night. I pray it before I preach, or any time I am feeling weighed down by guilt: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

When I pray this way, I am really praying the gospel. By shedding his blood, Jesus Christ became the atoning sacrifice for my sins. His death is my substitute; his cross is my mercy seat; and the blood that he sprinkled on it is my salvation.

To say that Jesus died for sinners is to say that his sacrifice accomplished what the blood on the mercy seat accomplished. Like the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament, Jesus died in our place. Our sins were transferred or imputed to him: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). As a result, our sins are covered; our guilt is taken away. The Scripture says Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).

Our mercy seat is the cross of Jesus Christ, where the atoning blood was sprinkled for our salvation. In fact, to explain what Jesus was doing on the cross, the New Testament sometimes uses the noun form of the same verb for *mercy* that we find in Luke 1. We see this terminology in Romans 3:25, which says that God presented Jesus “as a propitiation by his blood,” and again in Hebrews 2:17, where he is described as a “merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God,” who has made “propitiation for the sins of the people.”

This is mercy-seat vocabulary, which assures us that our plea for grace will always be answered. When we say, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner,” we are making an appeal to the cross. We are asking for the blood of Jesus to cover all our sins.

GOING HOME JUSTIFIED

Has God been mercy-seated to you? What compels me to ask this question is the conclusion to the story Jesus

told. Two men went to the temple, where they offered two different prayers and, as a result, met two entirely different destinies.

In the end, the tax collector got what he asked for. His prayers were answered. God was mercy-seated to him. Thus Jesus closed his story by saying that this man (and not the other) was “justified.” In other words—and we will say more about this in a later chapter—the tax collector was counted righteous. He was justified by God’s mercy on the basis of the atoning blood of a perfect sacrifice, which he received by a prayer he asked in faith.

God did not justify the Pharisee, however. This would have come as a total shock to anyone who was listening to this story when it was first told, so Jesus was very specific about it. Although the Pharisee declared his own righteousness, he was never declared righteous by God, and therefore he went home *unjustified*. Sadly, his righteousness was part of the problem. He was too busy being self-righteous to receive God’s righteousness, which comes only as a gift.

The Pharisee’s prayer was all about what he could do for God: “I thank . . . I am . . . I fast . . . I give.” All his verbs were active, in the first person singular. What made the tax collector’s prayer different was that he was asking God to do something for him. Therefore, the only verb in his prayer is passive: “God, be mercy-seated to me, the sinner.”

Pray this way, and you too will be justified before God. What is more, you will be so humbled by your desperate need for God's life-changing grace that you will not look down on anyone but live instead with the humility, joy, and gratitude that only grace compels.

For those of us who are performance-oriented
or for those who have long since thrown in the towel,

A WORD ABOUT GRACE IS IN ORDER.

Within these pages are 9 key messages on the grace of God. These are masterful lessons, built on Scripture, edifying and applicable for all who want to experience the freedom that comes from resting on the promise of God's unmerited favor.

Helping us to understand that we are not defined by what we do—but rather by who Jesus is and what he has done, this book powerfully addresses the transforming power of grace that is essential for every Christian.



"I so appreciate Ryken's extraordinary insights. . . . If you are seeking a fresh look at your Lord and your own desperate need of him, this is the book for you!"

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GAYLE D. BEEBE, *President,
Westmont College*

PHIL RYKEN (PhD, University of Oxford) is the 8th president of Wheaton College and, prior to that, served as senior minister at Philadelphia's historic Tenth Presbyterian Church. He has lectured and taught at universities worldwide and has written over 30 books.

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