



U N L I M I T E D G R A C E

*The Heart Chemistry That Frees from Sin
and Fuels the Christian Life*

B R Y A N C H A P E L L

“In *Unlimited Grace*, Bryan Chapell draws our attention to the amazing grace of God. Many Christians struggle to understand and apply God’s grace personally. The church often struggles to apply the grace of God corporately. The unbelieving world desperately needs to hear the message of grace. In light of these realities, I am thrilled to see this needed, Christ-centered, and readable book. I wholeheartedly recommend it!”

Tony Merida, Lead Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh,
North Carolina; author, *Ordinary*

“Chapell unpacks how the entire Christian life, from beginning to end, is by grace. The deepest message of the Bible and the ministry of Jesus Christ is the extravagant grace of God to sinners and sufferers. This good news is necessary to avoid the pitfalls of minimizing both the assurance of salvation and sanctification. *Unlimited Grace* celebrates God’s grace for all of life as it addresses head-on the practical and honest questions about what this looks like in real life.”

Justin S. Holcomb, Episcopal Priest; Professor of Christian
Thought, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; coauthor,
Rid of My Disgrace and *Is It My Fault?*

“Bryan Chapell shows how God’s love transforms us from the inside out. The questions he recommends we bring to the biblical text (such as What does this passage teach me about God the Redeemer?) are ones I recommend for teachers and leaders tasked with delivering God’s Word on a regular basis. Let this book remind you that the power of God’s love is what moves us to obedience!”

Trevin Wax, Managing Editor, The Gospel Project; author,
Gospel-Centered Teaching, *Counterfeit Gospels*, and *Holy Subversion*

“When the prophet speaks for the Lord and proclaims, ‘My ways are not your ways,’ we shake our heads in agreement while assuming that it can’t possibly be true. We assume that we know better, especially regarding the things that will motivate God’s people to desire to live holy lives. We assume that the message of God’s radical grace will make people into radical sinners. That’s because, as Bryan Chapell so wisely states, we don’t understand the ‘chemistry of the heart.’ What makes the heart desire to love? What turns us from ourselves outwardly toward our neighbor? Pastor Chapell has been a gracious voice for years in my own life, and he really does understand that heart chemistry. I’m so thankful for his faithful life and work and that I get to recommend this book to you. I love it. I think you will too.”

Elyse M. Fitzpatrick, counselor; speaker; author, *Found in Him*

“Few books on the subject of God’s grace are as balanced, practical, and clear as this one. Bryan Chapell’s pastoral experience permeates these pages with both a realistic appraisal of the human heart and a compassionate, Christ-centered message of hope. This book is packed with insight into the mysteries of why we do what we do and how to live in the light of God’s grace. Thank you, Bryan—I was helped.”

Donald S. Whitney, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality,
Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the
Christian Life*

“Once again my brother and friend has done what he does as well as anyone I know, or anyone in print. Bryan Chapell invites us to see and savor the endless riches and transforming implications of God’s grace. There are so many reasons I’m excited about this book. At the top of the list is the invaluable wisdom Bryan offers to those who fear an overemphasis on God’s grace. With the mind of a scholar and the heart of a pastor, Bryan shows us that we never balance grace with anything. Though it’s certainly possible to misuse God’s grace, it’s impossible to make too much about what God has accomplished on our behalf through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God’s grace, and God’s grace alone, gives us the motivation and means for living and loving to God’s glory.”

Scotty Smith, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church,
Nashville, Tennessee

UNLIMITED GRACE

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UNLIMITED GRACE

*The Heart Chemistry That Frees from Sin
and Fuels the Christian Life*

BRYAN CHAPPELL

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To Kathy,
through whom God's grace
fountains to multiple generations
and floods my heart

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Preface

No season of ministry has been more blessed than my years at Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois. I was invited to be the pastor of this historic church after three decades of teaching and administration at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The church's offer that I could not refuse had three sweet attractions. First, the church was near family and friends. Second, the church offered the support of a wonderful executive pastor and managing director, who free me from administrative tasks and allow me to focus on the teaching and preaching ministries I love. Third, and most important, the leadership of the church asked me to help them minister the grace of the gospel that had transformed their own lives and vision for our church.

For many years, our church was a leading influence in our community. Much good was done, and many were helped as the church grew in stature and influence. But at some stage the growth stopped, stress fractures divided the congregation, and adult children walked away. The leaders could have blamed others, tested the latest church growth fad, or walked away themselves. They did none of these. Instead, they said, "We confess that we have grown proud, inward-facing, and self-oriented. We need help to learn to lead with humility so that we daily depend on the gospel ourselves

and can really serve others in Christ's name. We want grace to be our identity, not just our title."

Those honest words of confession and hope, more than anything else, brought my wife, Kathy, and me to Grace Church. We thought, "This is the kind of leaders we need around us to understand the grace of the gospel better ourselves." And so we have been on a journey together with the dear people of our church to discern how the grace of the gospel can transform a church by freeing people from sin and fueling their lives with new hope and joy.

This book is an effort both to reflect what we have learned together and to teach the values that we hope will guide those who join us in this gospel endeavor. The phrase *Heart Chemistry* in the subtitle reflects what we know is a common concern about a ministry that focuses on the grace of the gospel. Many people will quickly do spiritual math and will reason that if all we teach is God's forgiveness of sin, then people will have no incentive to avoid evil.

We can always respond to such objections with the reminder of Jesus's words "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Our Savior knew there is a chemistry of the devoted heart that is stronger than the math of the divided mind. When we experience how great is his grace toward us, then our hearts unite with his. He changes our "want to" so that his priorities become our greatest joy, love, and compulsion. Through the blessings of grace, walking with Jesus is no longer a forced march of merit, gain, or protection, but a willing response of love, gratitude, and thanksgiving.

Part 1 of this book takes us on the journey to discover how grace not only frees us from the guilt and shame of sinful lives but also provides daily fuel for the joy that is the strength of Christian living.

Part 2 explains how preachers, teachers, counselors, mentors, parents, and all others who share God's Word can find grace in

every portion of Scripture. My hope is that everyone will be able to see that grace is not a sidebar in the Bible but the consistent theme that culminates in the ministry and message of Jesus. Seeing grace in all of Scripture keeps us from segregating the Bible into passages that are about either being good or getting your due. Rather grace motivates and enables a life of loving God.

Part 3 attempts to answer the common questions people ask about how to find grace, and how to keep from abusing its blessings. I try to provide some plain answers while, at the same time, not ducking the hard questions.

Part 4 is not in this book; it is the chapter God is now writing on our hearts and in our churches as we seek to discover how far and deep and well the gospel of grace will take us into the heart of our Savior.

Part 1

HEART CHEMISTRY
FOR OUR LIVES

The King's Gift

Once upon a time, there was a king who looked from his palace window and saw one of his children collecting flowers in a distant field. The king watched as the child collected the flowers into a bouquet and wrapped it with a ribbon of royal colors. The king smiled because the ribbon indicated that the flowers were being collected as a gift for his own pleasure. Then the king noticed that the child—because he was a child—gathered not only flowers. From time to time, the child also added some weeds from the field, and some ivy from the border of the woods, and some thistle from the unmown banks of ditches.

To help his laboring child, the king gave a mission to his oldest son, who sat at his right hand. The king said to his eldest son, “Go to my garden and pick from the flowers that grow there. Then, when your sibling comes to my throne room with his gift, remove all that is unfit for my palace from his bouquet. Make it fit by putting in its place the flowers that I have grown.”

The elder brother did exactly as his father had instructed. When the younger child came to the throne room, his brother

removed the weeds, the ivy, and the thistle, substituting all with flowers from the king's garden. Then, the firstborn son rewrapped the royal ribbon around the bouquet so that his sibling could present his gift to the king. With a beaming smile, the younger child entered the throne room, presented the gift, and said, "Here, my father, is a beautiful bouquet that I have prepared for you."¹ Only later would he understand that his gift had been made acceptable by the gracious provision of his father.

Grace for Weeds

This ancient parable sweetly reminds us of our heavenly Father's grace. Each of us is the child with the weed-filled bouquet of good works. Though we may strive with energy and zeal to honor God, our deeds are never really worthy of his holy throne room. So our eternal King graciously provides the holiness he requires. He has sent his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, to make us and our efforts fit for heaven.

Christ's sinless life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection are the perfect flowers that God prepared as substitutes for our "weedy" works. As we rely upon Jesus's provision, rather than on our own good works or intentions, he removes the flawed and sinful deeds from the bouquet of our lives and replaces them with his perfections. When we stand before God in his heavenly throne room, everything we have given to God is made right by Christ's work in our behalf. Christ's flowers are provided by the grace of God that makes our lives' bouquets acceptable and pleasing to him.

The aim of this book is to identify not only how these truths of grace affect our understanding of God's acceptance at the end

1. I have heard this adapted story variously attributed to Anselm, Francis of Assisi, and Bernard of Clairvaux. I have been unable to find the source of the story in this form, but it may be derivative of a passage in Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, chap. 3; see http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god.v.html.

of our lives, but also how they empower our efforts to honor God every day of our lives. How grace makes our daily lives more like Christ's is not always obvious. After all, as precious as may be the grace that substitutes Christ's righteousness for our sin, and as comforting as it may be to know that God will provide the holiness he requires, such assurances may seem to let us off the hook for now.

If our works are not the basis of our standing before God, does that mean they don't really matter? And if God is ultimately going to credit us with Christ's righteousness, why should we bother to battle temptations or obey him?

The Math of the Mind

The answer to these questions requires us to acknowledge that there are some real, practical problems with the claim that God will substitute Christ's righteousness for our imperfections. There is a math of the calculating mind that figures, "If God will ultimately substitute Christ's good works for my bad behavior, then I might as well sin now." We don't have to sing, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." We can instead chortle, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow God forgives." Any assurance of God's pardon has the danger of W. H. Auden's fictional King Herod's reasoning: "I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving crimes. The world is really admirably arranged."²

How do we answer that kind of logic? First, we should be careful not to counter this shady math by denying the gospel. Telling people that God will *not* forgive them later may scare some into temporary good conduct, but such a message betrays Christ. He taught, and gave his life to convey, the message that God would fully pardon all who trust that Jesus paid the final penalty for their

2. W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 459.

sin (John 3:16). God really will forgive those who truly trust him to pardon them. Whenever we humbly turn to God and ask for his grace, he will grant it.

You cannot claim as “Christian” any message denying that the grace of God is greater than all our sin and always available to cover it. New obedience and daily living in harmony with Christ’s standards may enable us to *experience* God’s forgiveness, but we never *earn* it. God is not waiting for us to get good enough to deserve his mercy and pardon. The Bible teaches that those who truly confess their need of God’s mercy are truly forgiven (1 John 1:9). Though our sins be as scarlet marks against us, God will wash them white as snow (Isa. 1:18). He forgives murderers, adulterers, abusers, gossips, thieves, and liars (1 Tim. 1:8–16). He forgives us. No sin counts against us more than Christ’s provision for us (Rom. 5:20; 1 Pet. 2:24). Christ takes the worst weeds from the bouquet of our lives and replaces them with fragrant flowers of God’s eternal pardon.

The Chemistry of the Heart

So, if we cannot leverage good behavior by threatening that God will withhold his forgiveness from those who don’t deserve it, how do we counter the manipulative math that is so ready to take wrong advantage of God’s grace? We must employ a force stronger than raw logic—an impulse more motivating than calculations of personal advantage, pleasure, or gain. The force the Bible engages to motivate and enable us to serve Christ is the chemistry of the heart: love. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

The apostle Paul echoes this when he says, “The love of Christ controls us . . .” (2 Cor. 5:14). Without sentimentalism or apology, our Savior and his messengers advocate a chemistry of grateful hearts that is stronger than the math of calculating minds. God’s

great grace toward us fosters such love for him that we want to please and honor him. His mercy toward us stirs such overwhelming thanksgiving in us that we desire to live for him. Love compels us.

How strong is this compulsion? Nothing is stronger. This is not simply a schmaltzy appeal to emotions. The most powerful human motivation is love. Guilt is not stronger. Fear is not stronger. Gain is not stronger. What drives a mother back into a burning building? Love for her children. Such love is stronger than self-protection, self-promotion, or self-preservation. Such love finds its highest satisfaction and greatest fulfillment in protecting, promoting, and preserving its object. A Christian for whom love of God is the highest priority is also the person most motivated and enabled to serve the purposes of God.

While there are many motivations that drive us—and many to which the Scriptures appeal—the foundation and priority of all that is done for God must be love for him, or else our expression of faith will inevitably be some form of dissatisfying selfishness. That is why Jesus taught that loving the Lord above all else is the foundation of our faithfulness to God (Matt. 22:37–38). Not only does such love enable us to find our deepest satisfaction in pleasing God; it also provides us the greatest strength for doing so. We will inevitably focus our resources of heart, soul, mind, and strength on what or whom we love the most.

The Power of Grace

What will spark such compelling love? That's easy. The Bible says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's greatest expression of love was giving his Son to pay the penalty for our sin. Through Jesus's sacrifice we are forgiven and freed of sin's ravages forever (John 15:13; 1 John 3:15). When we comprehend

the greatness of this divine grace toward us, the chemistry of love stirs within us. And the more we perceive his grace, the stronger is our love.

Jesus taught that one who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47). Our love will be as strong as our realization of the guilt of sin and the hell of consequences from which we have been rescued. That is a primary reason Jesus and the apostles spent so much time warning people about hell. Their goal was not to scare us into heaven—that actually won't work, for reasons we will explore later. Their intention was to give us a soul-deep appreciation of the eternal rescue Christ provides. By his grace we are freed from slavery to passions and pursuits that leave us guilty, exhausted, and empty. As a result of our liberation, we long to embrace and honor our deliverer. His grace enables us to do both.

Heart chemistry ignites devotion that is more compelling and enabling than any mental math endlessly computing personal risk/reward formulas. The priorities of a renewed heart trump the mind games that make sin acceptable even for a season. As grace ignites love for God, his priorities become our own. What most serves and honors him most satisfies and delights us. As a consequence, the apostle Paul claims with counterintuitive, head-spinning, life-changing confidence that the grace of God trains us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12).

Heart Change

How can that be? If grace means our sins will be forgiven, how can it be a restraint on bad behavior? Isn't everyone going to figure, “Now that I got my grace ticket, sin city here I come!”? The answer is that grace draws the one to whom it is extended closer to the One expressing it.

Mercy and love magnetize the heart to Christ's priorities. The temptations don't depart, and the rules don't change in a grace-filled world, but desires do. The grace of God changes our "want to."

Prior to experiencing the grace of God, our inclinations are hostile or indifferent to him (Rom. 8:7). But when the kindness and mercy of God become profoundly real to us, at the same time that we deeply perceive how totally undeserving we are of them, then we desire nothing greater than to love him—and to love what and whom he loves.

I am not contending that grace removes all the allure of sin, but our love for it (which gives sin its power) is broken by the greater love grace produces. This dynamic signals the real power of change in the Christian life: we are ultimately controlled by whatever we love the most.

The alcoholic may hate the consequences of his addiction and intensely love his family, but at the time of intoxication the liquor means more. The workaholic may love her children with ardent devotion, yet love more the reward of a job, distancing her from them. An adulterer may tell his spouse with full sincerity, "She means nothing to me; I love you," but at the time of the unfaithfulness, the passion is loved more than the spouse. And the Christian who sins may say with complete honesty, "I love Jesus," but at the moment of surrender or rebellion, the sin is loved more than the Savior. An ultimate love ultimately controls.

Real change—real power over seemingly intractable patterns of sin and selfishness—comes when Christ becomes our preeminent love. When that happens, all that pleases and honors him becomes the source of our deepest pleasure, highest aim, and greatest effort. We honor him not merely out of duty and resolve—or to keep our distance from an angry God—but because our greatest delight is pleasing the One we love the most. The result is that the joy of the Lord becomes our strength (Neh. 8:10).

Chains of addiction, patterns of sin, and habits of apathy that have been forged by lesser loves are displaced by a surpassing love for the One who saves us from their power and consequences. When his delight is our greatest joy, we give our lives in fullest measure to his purposes.

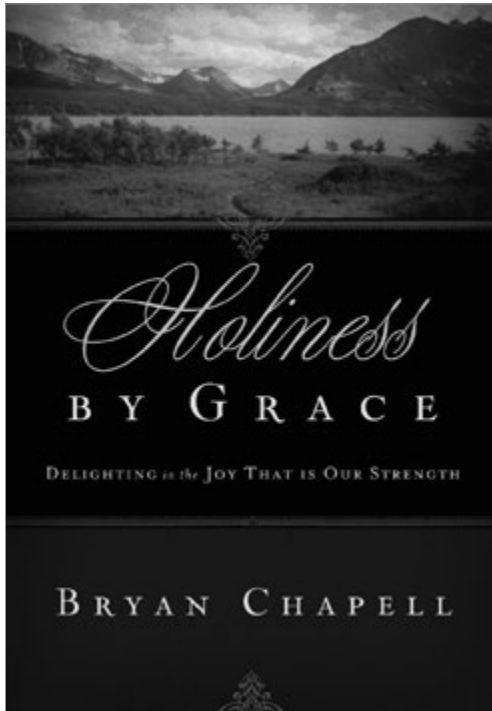
With such ardor for Christ's priorities, Christians have suffered excruciating pain without losing their peace, surrendered possessions with undiminished passion for Jesus, endured family strife to maintain a testimony of his love, sung hymns to their torturers to display their Savior's heart, and turned from sin without regretting the cost.

No human math can account for these priorities. Yet, the heart completely understands such choices—and makes them. The following chapters are devoted to identifying how the truths of God's grace create this heart chemistry, changing the focus and forces of our life's pursuits.



To learn more about Unlimited Grace,
the teaching ministry of Bryan Chapell,
please visit **unlimitedgrace.com**.
While there, you can also register to
receive free weekly devotionals and
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Discover the gracious source of joy and strength
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HOW GOD'S UNLIMITED GRACE LEADS US TO HEARTFELT OBEDIENCE

What if obeying God is not just dreary duty—going through the motions to avoid God's wrath or earn his favor? What if following Christ is pure joy—living in loving response to a grace so profound that it changes all our motivations and affections? Far from encouraging sin, this biblical understanding of grace fuels and empowers the obedience that God commands.

Explaining why grace is important and giving us tools to discover it in all of Scripture, *Unlimited Grace* helps us to see how gospel joy transforms our hearts and makes us passionate for Christ's purposes. Experienced pastor and author Bryan Chapell takes insights from a lifetime of relishing God's grace and pours them into this highly accessible and engaging book, helping readers see how God's grace shines through all of Scripture, for all of life.

"I am thrilled to see this needed, Christ-centered, and readable book in print!"

TONY MERIDA, Lead Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; author, *Ordinary*

"*Unlimited Grace* celebrates God's grace for all of life as it addresses head-on the practical and honest questions about what this looks like in real life."

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"Once again my brother and friend has done what he does as well as anyone I know, or anyone in print. Chapell invites us to see and savor the endless riches and transforming implications of God's grace."

SCOTTY SMITH, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

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CHRISTIAN LIVING / PERSONAL GROWTH

