

PLEASING GOD  
BY OUR OBEDIENCE

*A Neglected New Testament Teaching*

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It is a privilege to write this essay in honor of my friend John Piper. He has been an encouragement and an example of godly living to me since the days when we were both young faculty members at Bethel College in St. Paul (John was teaching New Testament and I taught systematic theology).

I arrived in January of 1977 at Bethel College, where John was already teaching, and though we had met prior to that time, our friendship and partnership in the work of the kingdom really began at Bethel and has grown deeper and stronger over the last thirty-three years. We worked together in the founding of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), in the drafting of the Danvers Statement for CBMW, in co-editing the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, in cautiously exploring what God was doing through the Vineyard Move-

ment (John with more caution than I!), in meeting together at various sessions of the Evangelical Theological Society, in supporting one another regarding our opposition to the gender language changes in the TNIV Bible, in helping to lay the initial groundwork for the translation of the English Standard Version, in speaking together at the funeral after the tragic accidental death of my daughter-in-law, Rachael Grudem (a time when John was such a great comfort to my son Alexander), and in countless instances of mutual prayer and counsel and encouragement over many years. I am so very thankful to God for John's faithful, strong, winsome, wise, thoughtful, persuasive, articulate proclamation of "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

In John's influential book *The Pleasures of God* he has a chapter on "The Pleasure of God in Personal Obedience and Public Justice."<sup>1</sup> In that chapter he points out that God takes pleasure in the obedience of his children. I was thankful for the emphasis in that chapter because in the evangelical world generally today I see and hear very little emphasis on God's taking pleasure in our obedience as Christian believers.

Therefore I thought it might be appropriate in this chapter to add to what John wrote in *The Pleasures of God* by carrying out a more extensive examination of the New Testament teaching on God's pleasure in our obedience. John's study was largely based on 1 Samuel 15:22:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,  
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?

It was an excellent study of Samuel's words in that context, and it included a helpful explanation of the fact that obedience must come by faith and not "by works,"<sup>2</sup> but it did not provide an extensive survey of the New Testament data on this teaching. That is what I propose to do in this chapter.

This topic seems important to me because I think that evangelicals today are generally afraid of teaching about "pleasing God by obedience," for fear of sounding as if they disagree with justification by faith alone. But when the need to please God by obedience is neglected, we have millions of Christians in our churches who fail to see the importance of obedience to God in their daily lives.

Another reason why I am writing on this topic in this book is that John Piper's own life has been for many of his friends (including me) a significant example of a life that is pleasing to God.

<sup>1</sup>John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 2d ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 241–67.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 251–57.

**Pleasing God Is a Frequent Motivation for Obedience  
in the New Testament**

***A Wide Range of Verses on Pleasing God***

The New Testament authors often encourage Christian believers to try to please God by what they do. It may surprise us to find how frequent this emphasis is in the New Testament:

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, *how to please the Lord . . . how to be holy in body and spirit.* (1 Cor. 7:32, 34)

Try to discern *what is pleasing to the Lord.* (Eph. 5:10)

It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for *his good pleasure.* (Phil. 2:13)

I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and *pleasing to God.* (Phil. 4:18)

Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, *fully pleasing to him*, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:10)

Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord.* (Col. 3:20)

We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and *to please God*, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. (1 Thess. 4:1)

[Grateful prayer] is good, and it is *pleasing in the sight of God our Savior.* (1 Tim. 2:3)

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, *for this is pleasing in the sight of God.* (1 Tim. 5:4)

Now before [Enoch] was taken he was commended as having *pleased God.* (Heb. 11:5)

And without faith it is impossible *to please him . . .* (Heb. 11:6; cf. Rom. 8:8-9, which implies that believers who are not "in the flesh" can please God)

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are *pleasing to God.* (Heb. 13:16)

. . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us *that which is pleasing in his sight*, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:21)

And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do *what pleases him*. (1 John 3:22)

Other New Testament passages speak of what is “acceptable” to God, and these verses also use the same Greek term *euarestos* (“pleasing, acceptable”) that was used in several of the passages above (namely, Eph. 5:10; Phil. 4:18; Col. 3:20; Heb. 13:21; the related verb *euarēsteō* was used in Heb. 11:5, 6; 13:16):

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and *acceptable* [Gk. *euarestos*] to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and *acceptable* [Gk. *euarestos*] and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

Whoever thus serves Christ is *acceptable* [Gk. *euarestos*] to God and approved by men. (Rom. 14:18)<sup>3</sup>

Let us offer to God *acceptable* [Gk. *euarēstōs*, the related adverb] worship, with reverence and awe. (Heb. 12:28)

Still other verses talk about the actions of Christians that are “acceptable” to God, using another term, *euprosdektos*, “capable of eliciting favorable acceptance, acceptable.” For example, Peter says that we are “to offer spiritual sacrifices *acceptable to God* through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

In addition, Paul seems to characterize his entire life and ministry as one of seeking to please God by what he does.

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be *acceptable* [*euprosdektos*], sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:15–16)

<sup>3</sup>This is referring to someone who refrains from putting a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother because of what he eats.

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim *to please him*. (2 Cor. 5:9; cf. Gal. 1:10)

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but *to please God* who tests our hearts. (1 Thess. 2:4)

The supreme pattern of a life pleasing to God is found, of course, only in Jesus Christ himself. He alone could say, "He has not left me alone, for *I always do the things that are pleasing to him*" (John 8:29). And at Jesus' baptism the voice of God the Father came from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am *well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17; cf. Matt. 12:18; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; 2 Pet. 1:17).

***The Desire to Please God Is Used to Motivate Christian Obedience***

Such a desire to please God is explicitly used as a motivation for Christians to obey God in several places. For example:

Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord*. (Col. 3:20)

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, *for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*. (Heb. 13:16)

. . . and whatever we ask we receive from him, *because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him*. (1 John 3:22)

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, *for this is pleasing in the sight of God*. (1 Tim. 5:4)

The idea of pleasing God as a motivation for obedience is also implicit in all those other verses above that encourage Christian believers to seek to please God. The New Testament authors simply assume that believers would want God to be pleased with them, and therefore they would do those things that will result in his good pleasure.

***What Kinds of Things Please God?***

What kinds of things are said to please God? We find a variety of specific kinds of obedience that touch all areas of life. In addition, some general statements include all forms of obedience to God's will for our lives. Consider how many diverse items are on the following list:

1. Presenting our bodies as a "living sacrifice" to God (Rom. 12:1).
2. Not being conformed to this world but being transformed by the renewal of our minds, and thereby learning by practice what the will of God is (Rom. 12:2).
3. Not putting a stumbling block in the way of a brother's Christian life (Rom. 14:18).
4. Being holy in body and spirit (the implication of 1 Cor. 7:34 with v. 32).
5. Preaching the true gospel and not adding to it the requirement of circumcision (Gal. 1:10).
6. Sending a financial gift to support Paul's ministry (Phil. 4:18).
7. Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, and leading a life that bears fruit in every good work and increases in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10).
8. Obeying one's parents (Col. 3:20).
9. Speaking and teaching all of God's truth faithfully (1 Thess. 2:4).
10. Having a pure heart before God in one's ministry (1 Thess. 2:4).
11. Praying for civil government authorities (1 Tim. 2:3).
12. Supporting one's own parents or grandparents who are in need (1 Tim. 5:4).
13. Believing that God exists and rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6).
14. Offering pleasing worship to God "with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28).
15. Doing good (Heb. 13:16).
16. Sharing what you have with others (Heb. 13:16).
17. Doing God's will (Heb. 13:21).
18. Keeping his commandments (1 John 3:22).

This list is so broad that it implies that all kinds of obedience to God's will as revealed in Scripture, as well as daily trust in God, are all pleasing to him.

#### **Pleasing God by Obedience Is Complementary, not Contradictory, to Justification by Faith Alone**

I suspect that the main reason for the neglect of this doctrine in evangelical circles today is that pastors and teachers and writers are afraid of

compromising the great doctrine of justification by faith alone. If we can please God by works, doesn't that sound like justification by works?

No, it does not, or else the New Testament authors would not put so much emphasis on telling Christians to please God by their obedience! The key to understanding this is to distinguish clearly between justification (on the one hand) and sanctification and our daily relationship to God as Christians (on the other hand).

### *Justification Is by Faith Alone*

The New Testament is clear that our justification comes through faith alone: Paul says, "So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be *justified by faith in Christ* and not by works of the law, because *by works of the law no one will be justified*" (Gal. 2:16). Paul says also, "Since we have been *justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

But justification by faith alone does not mean that we are *sanctified* by faith alone, because in sanctification, active obedience on our part is required.

And justification by faith alone does not mean that we *please God in our daily lives* by faith alone, for obedience to God is also required.

And justification by faith alone does not mean that our *daily relationship with God* depends on faith alone, for our obedience is also important.

### *The Importance of Good Works*

Although the New Testament is emphatic that we cannot be justified before God on the basis of works (Gk. *ex ergōn*, Rom. 3:20; 9:32; 11:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:10; Eph. 2:9), on the other hand, the New Testament authors frequently insist that "good works" (*erga kala* or *erga agatha*) are very important for the Christian life:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

[Tabitha] was full of *good works* and acts of charity. (Acts 9:36)

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10)

They are to do good, to be rich in *good works*, to be generous and ready to share. (1 Tim. 6:18)

Show yourself in all respects to be a model of *good works*. . . . (Titus 2:7)

[Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for *good works*. (Titus 2:14)

The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to *good works*. These things are excellent and profitable for people. (Titus 3:8)

And let our people learn to devote themselves to *good works*, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. (Titus 3:14)

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and *good works*. (Heb. 10:24)

With such a frequent emphasis on the importance of “good works,” it should not surprise us to think that good works *done by Christians who are already eternally justified* are pleasing to God.

#### ***Our Good Works Can Actually Be Pleasing to God***

Sometimes Christians assume that they can do absolutely nothing in this life that will please God. They think that God counts even their faithful obedience as totally worthless, totally unworthy of his approval. But that assumption is surely wrong, both because the New Testament so frequently speaks about “pleasing” God and because such an assumption tends to deny the genuine goodness of the work that Christ has done in redeeming us and making us acceptable before him. Such a view would maximize our sinfulness to the extent that it is even greater than Christ’s redemptive work, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for *good works*” (Titus 2:14).

I suspect that just as Satan accuses Christians and wants them to feel false guilt and false accusation, so he also seeks to keep them from the great joy of knowing the favor of God on their daily activities, of knowing that God is pleased with their obedience. In this way he seeks to hinder our personal relationship with God, for the ability to take pleasure in another person is an essential component of any genuine personal relationship.

Is Christ not capable of producing in us works that are genuinely “good works”? All the verses cited above with reference to the “good works” of believers would indicate that he is, for such works are not called “bad works” but “good works”! Though they are imperfect, they are certainly



not 100 percent evil and sinful, especially when they proceed from faith and are motivated by a love for God and for other people.

The Westminster Confession of Faith also speaks of God's acceptance of our good works, imperfect though they are:

Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, *their good works also are accepted in Him*; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprieveable in God's sight; but that He, looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.<sup>4</sup>

Paul can even use the language of "worthiness" in speaking of the conduct of obedient believers before God, implying that our conduct can actually be "worthy" of God's approval:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner *worthy* [Gk. *axiōs*, "worthily, in a manner worthy of"] of the calling to which you have been called. (Eph. 4:1)

. . . walk in a manner *worthy* of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:10; cf. Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:11)

We may conclude that God delights in our good works, that he is pleased with them, that he accepts them in Christ, and that, according to the evaluation of his own Word, we should think of them not as "evil works" but as what he himself calls them, "good works."

If we boldly teach that justified Christians can and should seek to please God by their obedience, we will not obscure justification by faith alone! Zeal to protect one great biblical teaching should never cause us to neglect another great biblical teaching. In fact, if we fear to teach something that is clearly taught in the New Testament, we probably need exactly that teaching to keep us from an unbalanced and misleading emphasis on the doctrine we are so zealous to protect. In this case, such an unbalanced emphasis can lead us to a wrongful neglect of the importance of obedience to God in the Christian life, and a neglect of the great truth that we actually can live lives that are pleasing to God each day. It can rob us of a great motive for obedience and also rob us of the great joy of knowing that we at this very moment actually are pleasing God!

<sup>4</sup>Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.6, my emphasis.

### Pleasing God by Obedience Is a Skill That Can Be Learned

The apostle Paul assumes that pleasing God by obedience is a skill that needs to be taught to Christians, a skill that they can develop over time: “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that *as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God*, just as you are doing, *that you do so more and more*” (1 Thess. 4:1). In other words, their entire lives should be devoted to increasing in the skill of pleasing God.

This is similar to Paul’s very first statement of life application to the Christians in Rome immediately after he finished his magnificent summary of the truths of salvation in Romans 1–11. In Romans 12:1–2 he appeals to them, on the basis of all God has done, to seek to please God more and more in their daily lives:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable [Gk. *euarestos*, “pleasing, acceptable”] to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that *by testing you may discern* what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable [Gk. *euarestos*, “pleasing, acceptable”] and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

The expression “by testing you may discern” is the ESV’s helpful attempt to capture the force of Greek *dokimazō*, which has the idea of trying something out in the actual events of life and, by that test, discovering a good result (other translations attempt to express this by “prove” or “test and approve”). The idea is that as we seek daily to obey “the will of God” (v. 2), we will gain greater skill in *knowing by experience* when we are walking in conformity to God’s will, and thereby we will discover again and again that the sacrifice of our bodies to follow God’s will is not only “pleasing” or “acceptable” to God (v. 1), but also “good and acceptable and perfect” (or pleasing) both in God’s sight and in ours.

In another place Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, “*Try to discern* what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:10). Here again we find the same verb (Gk. *dokimazō*), which shows that while we seek daily to “walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:8), we will learn over time, by the practice of obedience, to experience and give approval to “what is pleasing to the Lord.”

In other passages Paul implied that it was his constant goal to please God: “So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim [Gk. *philotimeomai*, “have as one’s ambition, consider it an honor, aspire”] to please him” (2 Cor. 5:9; cf. Gal. 1:10).

In practical terms in our ministries today, it seems to me that this New Testament pattern means that we ought to be teaching our people that they should daily be seeking to please God by their obedience. As we teach the moral standards of Scripture, we should be saying, "Do this, for this pleases God." Or, to put it even more bluntly, "Walk in obedience to God every day, because God will be happy with you if you do!" And should we not desire to live each day under the light of God's good pleasure, experiencing his favor and his delight in our lives?

#### **Pleasing God by Obedience Must Flow from Faith in God and Must Rely on the Power That Comes from God**

However, the New Testament teaching about pleasing God by obedience must never be taught as if it were something we could do in our own strength. In fact, Paul is emphatic in saying that we of ourselves, apart from the Spirit of God within us, have no ability to please God: "Those who are in the flesh *cannot please God*" (Rom. 8:8). And the author of Hebrews says bluntly, ". . . and without faith it is *impossible to please him*, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). Similarly, Paul says, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

And Jesus clearly reminded his disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for *apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

When speaking of his own obedience to Christ, Paul reminded his readers that it was not by his own strength that he was able to do this but by the power of God working in him: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, *though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*" (1 Cor. 15:10).

Similarly, he spoke of living by the power of Christ within him: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, *but Christ who lives in me*. And the life I now live in the flesh *I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Gal. 2:19-20).

So the New Testament teaches a combination of (a) active effort on our part to walk in obedience to God and also (b) a firm trust in God for his power to enable us to do what we could not do on our own. That is why Paul could encourage the Philippians to make continual progress along the path of sanctification, "*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*" (Phil. 2:13). Apart from God's power, and apart from trust in him to work within us, we could not please him.

But because of God's power within us, we can work to please him, and we can, again and again each day, please him by our actual obedience.

The other side of this teaching is also important: there is some "obedience" that is not pleasing to God because it is not fully consistent with the teaching of his Word. Mere outward conformity to some rules of Scripture, but with a cold heart, is not pleasing to God:

This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me. (Matt. 15:8)

And legalistic obedience that adds to the commands of Scripture does not please God: Jesus told the Pharisees who had added multiple commands to Scripture, "For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (Matt. 15:6).

### We Can Also Displease God by Our Disobedience

If the New Testament teaches that our obedience pleases God, then it should not be surprising to find that our disobedience is displeasing to him. Paul writes, "*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*" (Eph. 4:30). The implication is that sin in our lives will cause the Holy Spirit to be grieved with us—something far different from his being pleased with us.

Similarly, the risen Lord Jesus, in his words to the church in Laodicea that was "neither cold nor hot" (Rev. 3:15), and that was "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17), issued this warning: "*Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent*" (Rev. 3:19). Though they still were experiencing the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35–39), in this case it was a disciplinary love, a love that flowed from Christ's displeasure at their continued sin. (As any parent can attest, or as any husband or wife can attest, it is possible to love someone deeply and yet be displeased with that person at the same time! So it is here with Christ and a disobedient church.)

In the same way, God in his love sometimes puts us through painful discipline "for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). When we disobey God, we can experience his love as a disapproving, disciplinary love that flows from his fatherly care for us. (Compare also the painful discipline of God on the Corinthian church for its abuse of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11:30–32.)

The authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith understood this in 1646 when they included the following in the article on "justification":

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under *God's fatherly displeasure*, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.<sup>5</sup>

To have “the light of His countenance restored” unto us is another way of expressing the idea of moving from what the confession wisely calls “fatherly displeasure” back into a situation in which he is once again pleased with us because our previous sins have been confessed and forgiven, and because we have forsaken those sins and have begun to walk in obedience once again.

This of course is why Jesus tells us that we should daily ask God to forgive us our sins (Matt. 6:12), and it is why the promise of forgiveness in 1 John is so precious to believers and so necessary if we are ever to experience God's pleasure in our lives: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We should seek to please God by our obedience, and we should also pray each day that he would forgive us for those ways in which we have not pleased him, so that our relationship with him might be restored and we might enjoy his favor once again. Another way of saying this is that when God is displeased with our sin, although our spiritual *union* with God by virtue of being “in Christ” is not lost, our *communion* with God can be disrupted.

#### **Pleasing God by Obedience Will Result in Experiencing More of His Favor (or “Grace”) on Our Lives**

Someone might object that what I have said to this point seems inconsistent with the New Testament emphasis on grace (Gk. *charis*) in the Christian life. Haven't we been told that grace is God's unmerited favor? How then can we say that God gives more grace or more favor to those who are obedient?

#### ***Grace Also Includes the Idea of Favor from God***

The New Testament term *charis* is often translated “grace,” but we must realize that there is always a nuance of “favor” in it as well, and in fact, in earlier Greek literature, the sense of “favor” is more central to the meaning of the term than the nuance of something that is undeserved. The Liddell-Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* does not even mention the idea of favor being unde-

<sup>5</sup>Westminster Confession of Faith, 11.5.

served or unmerited in its definition of *charis*, but gives the meaning “*grace, kindness, goodwill . . . for or towards [someone].*”<sup>6</sup> And the current edition of the Bauer *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines *charis* as “a beneficent disposition towards someone, *favor, grace, gracious care/help, good will.*”<sup>7</sup> While it adds that in the New Testament *charis* generally includes the idea of doing something that is “not otherwise obligatory,”<sup>8</sup> it clearly also retains the sense of “favor” or “a favorable disposition toward someone,” which can be seen in most or all of its uses in the New Testament. While it often has the sense of going *beyond* what is deserved, the word itself does not mean something that is *totally* undeserved.

The sense of “favor” in *charis* is evident in passages like the following:

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the *favor* [Gk. *charis*] of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40)

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in *favor* [Gk. *charis*] with God and man. (Luke 2:52)

But we would hardly want to say that God’s favor on Jesus was unmerited or undeserved favor!

In the Old Testament, *charis* is the regular Septuagint translation of Hebrew *khēn*, which means “favor, acceptance” either with God or with other people, as in the following verses:

But Noah found *favor* in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen. 6:8)

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found *favor* in my sight, and I know you by name.” (Ex. 33:17; see also v. 12)

Toward the scorners he is scornful,  
but to the humble he gives *favor*. (Prov. 3:34)

A good man obtains favor from the LORD,  
but a man of evil devices he condemns. (Prov. 12:2)

All of these verses in the Septuagint have the term *charis*, “grace, favor,” and the sense of the word in these verses would have been in the

<sup>6</sup>Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1978, meaning 2.1.

<sup>7</sup>Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1079.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

background for the New Testament authors and readers when they used the term *charis*, which is so frequently rendered “grace” in our English Bibles. They would have clearly heard the nuance of “favor” also connected to this term, and would not have thought of it as something that had to be totally undeserved.

***Grace in Justification Is Totally Unmerited Favor from God***

It is certainly true, however, that God’s grace in justification is entirely unmerited, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and so we must be justified as a free gift: we “are justified *by his grace as a gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). Because we deserve nothing but the condemnation of hell, our salvation must be a totally free gift: “For the wages of sin is death, but the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). So justification cannot be based in any part on our works: “But if it is by grace, *it is no longer on the basis of works*; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6).

And in a larger sense, the totality of all that we receive in salvation is an undeserved gift from God. Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Paul reminds the Corinthians that all that they have is a result of God’s gift: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

***Grace (God’s Favor) after Justification Is Given in Greater Measure to Those Who Please God by Obedience***

However, after we are justified, God can choose to give more favor and more blessing to whomever he wishes. After all, he is the Lord! Therefore, if “grace” has both the sense of “going beyond what is deserved” and the sense of “favor” from God, it is not surprising that many verses in the New Testament can speak of receiving more grace from God or of having grace increase or abound in our lives.

How does God decide to whom he will give more favor in this lifetime? Is it entirely random and arbitrary? No, there seems to be a connection between God’s being pleased with his children (when they trust him and obey him) and his bestowal of more favor on them. Just as the Old Testament narratives demonstrate over and over again that God rewards covenant faithfulness on the part of his people, several New Testament passages also reinforce that teaching. *God’s favor is often directly related to our obedience*—obedience that has been made possible by Christ’s great salvation and his power at work within us. During our lives here on earth, there seems to be a pattern

whereby God chooses to give more favor (or we could say more grace) to those who trust him and walk in obedience to him.

This is seen in a number of passages. For example: “But he gives *more grace*. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but *gives grace* to the humble’” (James 4:6; see also 1 Pet. 5:5, both quoting Prov. 3:34). Humility brings us more favor from God.

Prayer is also a factor in receiving more grace from God, because the author of Hebrews encourages us to “draw near to the throne of grace” in order that “we may receive mercy *and find grace* to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16), implying that through prayer we can receive more grace or favor from God.

Peter also says that God gives additional “favor” (or “grace”; Gk. *charis*) to those who patiently endure suffering for doing good:

For this finds favor [Gk. *charis*], if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor [Gk. *charis*] with God. (1 Pet. 2:19–20 NASB)

Peter can also say, “May *grace* and peace be *multiplied to you*” (2 Pet. 1:2), and can encourage his readers that they should “*grow in the grace* and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). In other words, Peter assumes that Christians can grow in the experience of God’s favor on their lives each day.

Spiritual gifts can be understood as the result of varying degrees and varying types of favor that come from God: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace [*charis*]” (1 Pet. 4:10). All of the spiritual gifts are gifts of God’s favor/grace upon us, for Paul says, “having gifts [plural of *charisma*, “that which is freely and graciously given, favor bestowed, gift”] that differ according to the grace [or “favor,” Gk. *charis*] given to us, let us use them . . .” (Rom. 12:6). Different kinds and measures of grace result in different spiritual gifts.

In the early church, extraordinary measures of grace were seen in some believers:

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and *great grace was upon them all*. (Acts 4:33)

And Stephen, *full of grace* and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)



On the other hand, we can also pray for God's grace to be given to others, for every epistle that Paul wrote opens with a greeting in which he expresses the desire that God would give blessing to his readers: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7). And he closes every epistle with a similar prayer or expression of desire for more grace from God to come to them, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (Rom. 16:20). Such verses show that we can pray for God's grace to be given to others, and also that grace can come to us in increasing measure throughout our Christian lives. We *stand* in the grace of justification (Rom. 5:1) and *grow* in the grace of sanctification and in the increasing favor of God on our lives (see 2 Pet. 3:18).

**Pleasing God by Obedience Will Bring Various Blessings of Other Kinds**  
Other passages speak of other kinds of blessings that God gives to believers who faithfully obey him. For example, Peter affirms another section of Old Testament Wisdom Literature in which God rewards faithful obedience with blessings in this life, and then he applies this passage to New Testament believers, saying that if they are obedient (if they have things like "brotherly love" and a "humble mind" and do not return evil for evil), God will watch over them with his providential protection ("the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous") and will be more ready to hear and answer their prayers ("and his ears are open to their prayer"). Here is the entire passage, emphasizing the importance of living in love and humility and not repaying evil for evil:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, *that you may obtain a blessing. For*

"Whoever desires to love life  
and see good days,  
let him keep his tongue from evil  
and his lips from speaking deceit;  
let him turn away from evil and do good;  
let him seek peace and pursue it.  
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."  
(1 Pet. 3:8–12, quoting Ps. 34:12–16)

Peter explicitly encourages his readers to live in obedience to God “that you may obtain a blessing” (1 Pet. 3:9), and he then illustrates that with examples of blessing that will occur in this lifetime (God’s protection and answers to prayer), not just at the final judgment.

Paul seems to connect pleasing the Lord by obedience with a different kind of blessing, that is, fruitfulness in one’s own life and ministry. He prays that the Colossians would be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9) so that they would “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, *fully pleasing* to him, *bearing fruit in every good work* and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

In writing to the Corinthian church about their financial contributions to the offering that Paul was collecting for the poor in Jerusalem, he encourages them to give generously and cheerfully and implies that then God will also meet their needs, for he says that God is able “to make all grace abound to you” so that they would have enough to supply their own needs and to supply the needs of other good works as well:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and *whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully*. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And *God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work*. . . . He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. *You will be enriched in every way* to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. (2 Cor. 9:6–8, 10–11)

Here, “enriched in every way” is not limited to material provision (for it surely includes spiritual blessings as well), but it must include material provisions for their needs.

In one passage the author of Hebrews seems to appeal to God’s own justice in expecting blessings to come *in this life* for the faithful believers among his readers: “For God is *not unjust* so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do” (Heb. 6:10). The implication seems to be that if God were to give no blessing for their work and love, this would not be truly just. Apparently he is able to say this because he understands the whole-Bible pattern of God in blessing and rewarding those who obey him in daily life.

The author of Hebrews also indicates that part of pleasing God is believing that he will reward those who “draw near” to him and who “seek” him: “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would *draw near* to God must believe that he exists and that *he rewards those who seek him*” (Heb. 11:6). In the context of the book of Hebrews, to “draw near” to God is connected to genuine worship and prayer in this lifetime, for the same Greek verb (*proserchomai*) is connected with drawing near to God in prayer and worship in Hebrews 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; and 12:22.

John also sees the blessing of answered prayers as a result of obeying God’s commandments and doing “what pleases him” in the following passage: “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, *because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him*” (1 John 3:21–22).

Therefore the pattern of Scripture seems to be that God is pleased to give more of his favor and more of his other blessings to those who please him by living lives of obedience to his commandments.

Why should this surprise us? By giving additional blessing to obedience, God encourages us to obey him, which brings glory to him and is good for us as well. Although all of our obedience is still imperfect, and our hearts are never completely pure, and we can never demand that God grant us any measure of blessing, nevertheless, after we have been justified as an entirely free gift of God’s grace, these verses indicate a pattern in which God does bestow additional blessings in this life on those who obey him, and withholds blessing and brings discipline upon those who disobey him. Why do we not hear this taught more often in evangelical churches?

#### **Pleasing God by Obedience May Lead Us on the Path of Suffering**

Lest we misunderstand the fullness of New Testament teaching on this matter, it is important to remember that the New Testament authors also frequently warned that believers should be ready to experience hardship and suffering as part of the Christian life. This is not an indication that God’s favor on them has diminished, for our Savior Jesus Christ was himself “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), yet he followed the path of obedience to God even to the point of death.

Peter can say, “If when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds *favor* with God” (1 Pet. 2:20 NASB). The reason for this is that we have been called to follow in Christ’s steps: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might

follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). And the Holy Spirit will rest in unusual measure on those who suffer for Christ’s sake: “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14).

Paul told the Philippian Christians, “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29; the term “granted” translates Gk. *charizomai*, “graciously given”!). And Paul himself, who knew the abundant favor of God on his ministry, experienced extensive suffering throughout his life (see 2 Cor. 11:23–29; 2 Tim. 1:12; 3:10–13).

Therefore when we teach believers that their obedience to God will please him and will bring more of his favor and blessing in their lives, we must also make it clear that the life of Christ, the example of Paul and the other apostles, the teaching of the New Testament, and the entire history of the church show that God’s blessing in this life is not a guarantee that we will live a life of ease or prosperity or perfect health, or be able to avoid suffering and hardship! But it is a guarantee that God will be with us and strengthen us and make his presence known to us even in times of great difficulty. In fact, it will often be at such times that our awareness of God’s favor and his wonderful presence will be the strongest.

#### **Pleasing God by Obedience Gives Us the Joy of Thinking That God Is Pleased with Us Most of the Time**

The New Testament teaching on pleasing God by obedience should have a profound effect on how Christians think of their relationship to God throughout each day. Of course, whenever we sin we need to confess that sin and ask God’s forgiveness at once (Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:9). But often we will be walking in conscious obedience to God and God’s commands insofar as we understand them and how they apply to our lives.

During those times when we are obeying God to the best of our knowledge, how should we think of God’s relationship toward us? What should we think of his attitude toward us at this very moment?

It seems to me that these verses on pleasing God should encourage us to think that our heavenly Father is actually pleased with us at this very moment. He takes pleasure in the good work that he has done in us through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. He takes pleasure in our sincere desire to obey him. He takes pleasure in the increasing manifestation of his own character in our lives. He takes pleasure in the acts of obedience that we daily offer him as “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). He takes pleasure in the

fact that he is daily equipping us with “everything good” that we “may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Heb. 13:21). He takes pleasure in the fact that we have learned how we “ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing” (1 Thess. 4:1). He takes pleasure that, like John’s readers, we can say, “We keep his commandments and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22).

And just as we may expect that at the last day he will look over our life and say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21), so it does not seem wrong for us to be able to think, at the end of a day when we have sincerely sought to obey him, that he is pleased with our work done by trusting in Christ’s power within us, and is saying to us at the end of that day, “Well done.”