

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Encountering Mission

## Counterintuitive Grace

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**Abstract:** Especially in the Lutheran tradition, we are immersed in the awareness of God's grace. However, we need to understand that for those of other religions, the governing principle of grace is highly confusing and incomprehensible. Of course, the counterintuitive nature of God's graciousness is also what can break through the other's worldview and into the freedom and relief of the gospel.

Grace is a very counterintuitive concept. Very often we who have been raised in the Christian tradition don't realize how radical it is. Grace runs directly contrary to our intuitive sense of justice and fairness: You should get what you deserve.

Yet, grace is the central theme of the entire biblical narrative. From the Garden of Eden to the fumbling patriarchs to the "stiff-necked" Hebrews to the righteous Deuteronomic laws to the prophetic promises to Incarnation and life and words of Jesus to the Pauline epistles, God's unfailing love and forgiveness is the governing theme. God doesn't give us what we deserve. He has compassion to the extent of taking upon Himself what we deserved.

How does such an understanding of God mesh with the narrative in other religions? In other religions, you get what you deserve, and it makes sense. Whether it is through karma or divine judgment or self-judgment or reincarnation or vengeful spirits, justice will be done. We find that psychologically satisfying (especially in reference to other people). The threat of repercussions keeps people under control. Our gospel message is counterintuitive. It doesn't make sense, even considered offensive and dangerous.

Grace is an assurance, a promise, a certainty. Grace is a reality that does not depend upon us. It is an undeserved gift. Even among Christians, the reality of grace



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often has a fragile hold. Most hope they are good enough to be saved. Some kind of purgatory makes sense. We want to create and have a religion that makes sense to us rationally. It is counterintuitive that justice would be effected by God on Himself in Christ's suffering and death so that grace might prevail for us.

Of course, there are themes of grace in other religions. However, what is distinctive in Christian theology is that grace is the governing principle—in theological terms, the “crux.” For Martin Luther, grace was the heart of the whole Reformation effort. His “*sola gratia*” (“grace alone”) principle was so determinative that he eliminated seven New Testament books in the canon of his German translation because they did not present the concept of grace adequately, in his opinion.

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What is the governing principle in other religions? In Islam it is the awareness of God's judgment. We are called to obedience to his laws, and all our deeds are being recorded. One day we will be called to judgement before him on the basis of our deeds. Muslims will hope in God's mercy, but they don't know. They don't have the assurance of grace. Christian theology certainly has the awareness of Judgment Day, but it is not a day of uncertainty or fear. It is a day of celebration because of God's redemptive action for us in Christ.

In Hinduism, the governing principle is karma. Every action has its consequences, both good and bad, if not in this lifetime then in the next. Certainly, there are examples of grace in the Hindu scriptures and appeals to deities and rishis in popular Hinduism. But there is not the certainty as in the gospel message. Similarly, references to karmic thought are there in the biblical narrative: with the man born blind in John 9:2, “Whatever a man sows he will reap” (Gal 6:7). Even passages such as Romans 2:6, Matthew 16:27, and Revelation 14:13 might be interpreted as karmic, from that worldview. Yet, the final and governing word is one of forgiveness and grace in and through Jesus.

How, then, do we communicate a message that is so counterintuitive? I think we do it as a message of relief. So much of life depends on us. It is a heavy burden of obligations and responsibilities. When we understand God is one of ultimate compassion, we comprehend that He wants to lift those burdens from us. Even to take them upon Himself, as a loving heavenly Father, a self-sacrificing elder Brother, a guiding inner Spirit. Our attitude is one of joy and confidence and certainty, in Him.

Our message is “God is love,” with all of its radical, counterintuitive implications, His unmerited grace toward us in Christ.

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