

STUDY GUIDE

FIVE SESSIONS

PHILIP YANCEY

VANISHING GRACE

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO
THE GOOD NEWS?



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WITH STEPHEN AND AMANDA SORENSON

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Vanishing Grace Study Guide

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PREFACE

As a Christian, I have deep concern about how we represent our faith to others. We are called to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and hope, yet I keep coming across evidence that many people do not hear our message as good news. Surveys show that outsiders increasingly view Christians as bearers of bad news, not good news. It appears the church is failing in its mission to dispense God's amazing grace to a world that is thirsty for it.

The journalist in me felt compelled to explore how and why the climate of our culture has taken a dramatically hostile turn against the Christian faith in a very short time. As a committed Christian, I wanted to discover what adjustments we might need to make in order to communicate the good news to our friends, neighbors, coworkers.

So I took a step back to reconsider why the gospel truly is good news to people in our world. I explored the ways Christians seek to engage in a diverse world and discovered that some of our efforts can actually drown out the good news and become stumbling blocks to faith. I also looked for models of people from all walks of life—pilgrims, activists, artists—who are effectively communicating the good news to a culture that is running away from faith.

Grace happens at unexpected moments. It stops us short, catches our breath, disarms us. If we manipulate it, try to control it, or earn

it, it is not grace. God's desire is for those of us who have drunk deeply of his grace to offer its healing balm in a world of division and discord. What can we do to show that grace is real, that we can believe in it? How can we lift the cup of amazing grace to the lips of those who have not yet tasted it?

—Philip Yancey,
Spring 2014

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

GROUP SIZE

The *Vanishing Grace* video-based curriculum is designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering. To ensure everyone has enough time to participate in discussions, it is recommended that large groups break up into smaller groups of four to six people each.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Each participant should have his or her own study guide, which includes notes for the five video segments, activities, and discussion questions, as well as personal studies to deepen learning between sessions. Although the course can be fully experienced with just the video and study guide, participants are also encouraged to have a copy of the *Vanishing Grace* book. Reading the book along with the video sessions provides even deeper insights that make the journey richer and more meaningful.

TIMING

The time notations—for example (20 minutes)—indicate the *actual* time of video segments and the *suggested* times for each activity or discussion. Adhering to the suggested

times will enable you to complete each session in one hour. Because more discussion questions are provided than most groups can likely get through in an hour-long meeting, feel free to choose in advance the ones you want to be sure to cover. Of course, if you have additional time, you may wish to allow more time for discussion and activities.

FACILITATION

Each group should appoint a facilitator who is responsible for starting the video and for keeping track of time during discussions and activities. Facilitators may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate.

PERSONAL STUDIES

Maximize the impact of the course with between-sessions personal study, which includes both Bible discovery and ways to put that discovery into action.

SESSION ONE

WE'VE GOT PROBLEMS

Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.

—UNNAMED CRITIC¹



INTRODUCTION (8 MINUTES)

As much as Christians may want others to know the good news of forgiveness and experience the hope of a redeemed life, the good news isn't sounding so good to many people these days. In fact, to some "outsiders" the very word *Christian* arouses feelings of fear, distrust, antagonism, and hostility. It is a challenge to be salt and light to people who view Christians so negatively.

Questions to Think About

Choose from among these icebreaker questions as time permits.

1. What experiences have you had with people who react negatively or suspiciously when they find out you are a Christian? If you have had such experiences, share them with the group and discuss how you feel when you interact with those people.

2. If you do not identify yourself as a Christian, what kind of reactions do you get from people who call themselves Christians, and how accepted and valued do you feel by them? (Or, share what non-Christians have told you about whether or not they feel accepted by Christians.)

3. When you engage with someone whose religious, social, or political views differ from yours, to what extent do you think that person feels accepted and valued by you? Share any experiences you may have had when bad feelings resulted from discussions on controversial subjects such as religion or politics.

What kind of attitudes, words, or behaviors might contribute to a person feeling judged or disrespected by you or someone else?

What specific things can you do in an effort to help people whose views differ from yours to still feel accepted and valued by you?

GROUP DISCOVERY (46 MINUTES)

Video Presentation (20 minutes)

Watch the video segment for Session 1, using the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

“Nones” who claim no religious faith commitment

A changing climate for the Christian faith

God is good news for:

Individuals

Communities

Societies

The bad news about communicating the good news

Video Discussion (6 minutes)

Jesus had the uncanny ability to look at everyone with grace-tinted eyes, seeing not only the beauty of who they were but also the sacred potential of what they could become. We his followers have the same challenge: “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view,” Paul told the Corinthians. Evidently we are not doing likewise since many people think of faith, especially evangelical faith, as bad news. They believe Christians view them through eyes of judgment, not eyes of grace. Somehow we need to reclaim the “goodnewsness” of the gospel.

—VANISHING GRACE, PAGE 70

1. How do you respond to the research on the number of “nones” and their increasingly unfavorable impression of Christians? To what degree have you found these trends to be true in your own interaction with people, particularly among the young?
2. What do you think may be the reasons some people perceive the good news of the gospel as bad news?
3. If you asked the question “What’s the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word *Christian*?” what kind of responses might you expect to receive from your acquaintances—coworkers, neighbors, people you meet at a party?

people have the opportunity to hear the gospel—good news about God's love for us, God's forgiveness offered to us, and God's invitation to join his family.

Jesus showed us how to use the “weapons of grace” and treat even our opponents with love and respect. His interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42) demonstrates what it looks like to see others through eyes of grace.

6. The Gospels give us a hint of the intense animosity between Jews and Samaritans during Jesus' day:

- Which terms did the Pharisees use to insult Jesus in John 8:48?

- What did Jesus' disciples suggest when Samaritans did not welcome Jesus into their village? (See Luke 9:51–54.)

- How did Jesus respond in this hostile environment? (See Luke 9:55–56.)

7. In stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes of religious Jews and Samaritans, consider how Jesus portrayed members of both groups by reading Luke 10:30–35.

- Everyone in Jesus' day knew who the Samaritans, rabbis, and Levites were; how they lived; and how they interacted. How much of a stir do you think this parable might have caused among his audience, and why?

 - If Jesus told a similar story about people of opposing political, religious, or social views in our own time, which groups might he include? What impact do you think his story might have on you, and on others?
8. John 4:1–42 lets us in on a close-up encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman who was keenly aware of the flash-points between Jews and Samaritans. As you skim this passage, (1) identify the opposing perspectives revealed, (2) consider how the grace-filled eyes of Jesus saw beyond the conflict, and (3) in each instance notice how Jesus presented the truth of the good news to address the longings of her heart.
- Why was it scandalous for a Jewish rabbi to speak to a Samaritan woman in those days? (See John 4:1–9.)

 - How quickly did the cultural and religious tensions over whose heritage was greater crop up in their conversation? (See John 4:10–15.)

- The Samaritan woman was no model of moral character. As you read Jesus' conversation with her, what do you learn about God's love and how to extend grace rather than judgment? (See John 4:16–19.)

- The Jews and Samaritans had a longstanding debate regarding who really knew the right path to God. (See John 4:20–26.) What do you learn from Jesus' dialogue about addressing similar debates regarding differences in denominations and religions today?

- What important question about Jesus did his interaction with the Samaritan woman raise—for her and her community—and what impact did it have? (See John 4:28–30, 39–42.)

- What was Jesus' motivation for this interaction? (See John 4:34.)

9. What did you learn from Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman about conveying what Paul calls the "incomparable riches" of God's grace in Ephesians 2:7?

Group Discussion (5 minutes)

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God.

HEBREWS 12:14–15 (NIV 1984)

During his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus had ample opportunity to fuel animosity and create deep wounds — not just between himself and the woman, but between himself and her village, between the people of her village and all Jews. It would have been so easy to put up barriers that cause division. Yet Jesus chose to take down those barriers, to dispense God's grace, to pour out his living water to anyone who was thirsty.

10. Animosity similar to that between the ancient Jews and Samaritans exists between Christians and others today.
 - Identify some of these groups and describe the conflicts that exist.

- How much does the growing public hostility toward Christianity concern you, and to what degree have you felt anxiety or fear over our increasingly “post-Christian” culture?
11. Jesus has granted us, as his followers, the immense privilege of dispensing God’s grace to a thirsty world—including the groups identified in question 10. But when we ignore basic principles of relationship by making condescending judgments, proclamations that aren’t backed by compassionate action, or speaking without first listening, we fail to love—we fail to communicate grace and thus deter a thirsty world from finding the source of living water.
- Identify several ways we Christians may be obscuring the view of God’s grace for people in our world, giving personal anecdotes if you can.
 - Consider practical changes—in specific attitudes, actions, and words—that we can make to take down those barriers and make God’s grace more visible to those who have not experienced it.

- Which agendas (that may be very good and well intentioned) might we need to adjust or even let go of in order to make God's grace more visible?
12. If you feel comfortable doing so, give examples from your experience about ways in which Christians have created deep wounds and hostility—perhaps in the name of God. What have you learned from such negative experiences that may help us to better reach out to those who have been wounded by our failure to dispense God's grace in our world?

PERSONAL REFLECTION (4 MINUTES)

Christians can come across as superior and judgmental, dismissing others' beliefs while being defensive about their own. When I sense those tendencies in myself, I try to remember how I feel when someone argues that I'm wrong about something—which gives a strong clue to how others must feel when I present my own beliefs insensitively. I've yet to meet someone who found their way to faith by being criticized.

VANISHING GRACE, PAGES 43–44

As you reflect on Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman, which persons come to mind who, like the woman, long for but have not experienced the life-giving grace of God?

How concerned are you that these persons have not heard the good news in a way they can recognize as a valuable and desirable gift from God, and what might you do to change that?

How might your present attitudes come across to these persons? How might your interactions improve if you were more intentional about:

- Viewing them more as spiritually thirsty rather than as *wrong*?
- Seeking to convey God's good news of forgiveness and hope not just in words but hand-in-hand with sincere, loving action?
- Living in a way that is so significantly different from the norm that even those who disagree with you can't miss the aroma of Christ and are drawn toward faith in God?
- Stepping back from the "us versus them" attitude and becoming more thoughtful and considerate in expressing your opinions and judgments regarding people you disagree with or who don't believe as you believe?

- Responding to criticism or judgment with “a gentle answer” that turns away anger (Proverbs 15:1) as opposed to a hostile, harsh attack that escalates it?

CLOSING PRAYER (2 MINUTES)

Begin your prayer with these words from the Bible:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me ... You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

MATTHEW 5:11, 43–44

Continue in prayer, focusing on Jesus, who teaches us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to continue dispensing grace to a hurting, thirsty world. Ask for forgiveness and healing for the ways in which you may have caused people to turn away from, rather than seek, God. Pray that God will break down barriers between you and those who are not Christians, teaching you to be more loving, sensitive, patient, and kind. Ask God to fill you with courage and compassion as you offer his living water to others.

Personal Journey: To Do on Your Own

God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.

JOHN 3:17, *THE MESSAGE*

Bible Discovery

Jesus came for the sick and not the well, for sinners and not for saints. Thankfully, many people who are not Christians remain open to faith. They are drawn to the gospel's answers to questions of meaning, its promise of afterlife, and provision of support for those in need.

But Christians today face great challenges when sharing the good news with the growing number of people who have negative impressions of Christianity, who are apathetic, suspicious, or even hostile to the gospel message. Nothing short of an encounter with Jesus' love for those who are lost will set the world right for these men and women.

1. Many of Jesus' stories center on themes of compassion, longing, and sacrifice for what is lost. Read the parables of the lost coin and lost sheep in Luke 15:4–10.
 - What do these parables reveal about the priority Jesus places on reaching spiritually lost people?

- What is the motivation for finding that which is lost—scolding or saving?

 - What is the response when the lost are found?

 - To what degree does your motivation for engaging “the lost” reflect that of Jesus?
2. In 2 Corinthians 5:14–20 Paul wrote, “For Christ’s love compels us . . . So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”
- When it comes to interacting with people with whom we disagree, how would you describe the “worldly point of view” and its result?

- In contrast, what do you think is God's point of view on people who oppose the good news and its messengers?

- In light of this passage, write out for yourself what it means to “regard no one from a worldly point of view” and to be an ambassador of reconciliation between God and those who do not know (and may vehemently oppose) God.

Take Action

1. In what ways has my perspective on how to relate to people who are not Christians changed as a result of this session?

2. Who in my circle of influence do I now see as a lost, spiritually *thirsty* person who longs for meaning and fulfillment rather than as someone I'm tempted to judge—or even as an enemy?

How do I want to treat this person differently when we interact in the future?

3. What do I think attracted those people who were frowned upon by most religious types to Jesus?

Which of these characteristics of Jesus do I want to cultivate in order to better live out my faith in a thirsty and sometimes hostile world?

4. What one step will I take to tone down any animosity I feel toward people who are hostile toward Christianity and bring them God's healing grace instead?