The words to Amazing Grace were penned by John Newton and published in 1779. You may know the story behind it. Newton lost his mother at an early age and spent his formative years with his father at sea. He learned all the bad habits of sailors and was eventually forced to join the British Navy. Newton was a rebellious young man. He eventually deserted, was caught, and then marooned in an African colony in the custody of a slave trader.

From there Newton himself entered the slave trade and shuttled other human beings to America to be bought and sold like cattle. In 1748, Newton was on a ship called the Greyhound when a terrible storm hit. The ship was taking on water, and Newton watched as a crewmember was swept overboard in a place where he had been standing just moments before.

He later recalled that was the hour he first believed. Newton knew that his life was in the hands of God, and he knew it was only by the grace of God that he had been saved that night. Newton’s life didn’t immediately change, but over time he grew closer to God and grew stronger in his convictions that buying and selling human beings was an atrocity against people made in the image of God.

Newton became the pastor of a small church in England and began to advocate for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. A former slaver turned abolitionist because of the grace of God he experienced. It was many years later when he wrote the words to the song we know so well, but those words were born out of his experience with an amazing grace.

The words to that song are so familiar to us that we know them by heart. We can sing them without the words on the screen and often without music. The problem with a song so familiar to us is that in becoming so familiar, there is also a danger of it becoming something we gloss over. Something that is so easy for us to repeat that we no longer think about what it really means that we have received God’s amazing grace.

We sing these words about an amazing grace, but how often do we experience it? How often do we remember that we too have received that amazing grace? How often do we think about the fact that we were truly the enemies of God when he gave us his grace? How he rescued us from the penalty of our sin and laid that penalty on his son instead? I think the answer for most of us is, “Not often enough.”

The word that is often translated grace in the New Testament is the Greek word χάρις (charis). It’s a word that speaks of someone showing favor, or kindness, or goodwill to others. It is something given as a gift.

Understanding where this word χάρις (charis) comes from might help us get a better picture of what it means. The root of the word for grace is the verb χαίρω (chairo) that means to be glad, or to rejoice. The word χαρά (chara) means joy. The word εύχαριστέω (eucharisteo) means thanksgiving or thankfulness. That’s where we get our word eucharist, one of the ways we talk about communion. The word χαρίζομαι (charizomai) means to forgive or to give freely. The word χάρις (charis) that is so often translated ‘grace’ in Scripture has its root in all of those things. It’s a rich word that is full of meaning.

Philip Yancey made the observation that the word grace is one of the few theological words that our secular culture doesn’t scorn. The word grace is always used in a positive sense, even if it doesn’t carry the biblical idea of grace with it. We say grace before meals, we have grace period on loans and bills. British subjects still refer to royalty as ‘Your grace’. When someone Britain is pardoned of a crime, the British Parliament declares an ‘act of grace’. When someone in a high position is brought low, we speak of their ‘fall from grace’. Obviously, grace is still a good thing in our culture, even if most people don’t understand it.

But grace is far more than just a word that everyone seems to like. Grace is the only reason that any of us have any kind of hope of eternal life. Paul says it best in **Ephesians 2:1-2,4-5 ESV — 1** And you were dead in the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once walked, following the course of this world, …**4** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **5** even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

Because God is a holy God, he cannot be around sinful people. That means that even though we were created as eternal creatures, because of our sin we would have to be separated from God for all eternity. Whatever other descriptions of hell we have, that is the single scariest thing that could be said about it. James tells us that every good and perfect gift comes from God. That means eternity without God has absolutely nothing good in it.

There will be no friendship, no love, no comfort, no peace. All good things are gifts from God, and eternity without him is void of all those things. We are spiritually dead in our sins without the grace of Jesus. It is only because of that grace that our spirits come to life and we have a hope of eternity with God.

This is something we all face. No one can escape the reality of their sin. **Romans 3:23–24 ESV — 23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

You will often hear people talk about how someone else is a good person, especially at funerals. That may be true when we compare ourselves to each other. One person may be a very good compared to some of the evil we see running rampant in our world today. But no one is good when compared to the righteousness of God.

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus to ask him about eternal life, he called him ‘Good teacher’. Jesus stopped him right there and said **Mark 10:18 ESV — 18** … “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

None of us are able to be good enough on our own, even though we try. When the church was just beginning, the challenge was that the Jewish people had grown up believing that if you did everything right according to the law, you would be saved. Today that same idea is still alive and well within the church, but today it’s about how much you read your Bible, how many good works you do, how much you pray, whether you stay away from certain things that are taboo.

The idea is that we earn our way into heaven because of the good things we do, because we are good enough. The problem is that no one can do that. Because we all fall short of God’s righteousness, no one can possibly be saved by being good enough. Because God is holy and perfect, we all fall short when we are compared to him.

We needed another way to be saved, another way that we could be considered righteous. **John 1:17 ESV — 17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. We could never do enough good to make up for the sin in our lives. We could never follow the law well enough to make it to heaven. So God gave us grace.

John 3:16 tells us that God loved us so much that he gave his son as a sacrifice to pay the penalty of our sin. He gave us grace. A gift that we did not deserve. A gift we couldn’t possibly earn. God’s grace is the only way we could be saved. We could not do it on our own.

God’s grace had to be gift, otherwise it wouldn’t really be grace. Paul tells us in **Ephesians 2:8 ESV — 8** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Paul wanted to be very clear that we do not earn grace. We cannot do enough good works to make God give us his grace. Grace is freely given because of God’s choice.

Imagine the scene on Christmas morning. You’re together with your family to celebrate, and then comes the kid’s favorite part of Christmas: opening the gifts. The gifts get passed around, and the wrapping paper starts flying. You unwrap this beautiful watch. (See that way this applies to both men and women.) You go over to the one who gave it to you and give them a big hug. You tell them how grateful you are for their gift, and they say, “Oh, you’re so welcome. By the way, here’s an invoice, you owe me $300 for the watch.”

Suddenly that beautiful watch isn’t so much of a gift anymore, right? A gift is not something you earn or pay for, it’s something that is given. If a gift is not given freely, if there’s some kind of proviso included, some kind of expectation for reciprocation, then it’s not really much of a gift.

Paul makes a clear distinction between what we’ve earned and what we’ve been given in **Romans 6:23 ESV — 23** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. A wage is something you earn. Your paycheck is your wage. It’s what you earn for doing your job. Paul says that what we have earned for our sin is death. That’s what we deserve. That’s what our rebellion against God has cost us.

But then he gives us the good news. The free gift of God, something we could never earn, is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. He says later on in Romans 11 that we are… **Romans 11:5–6 ESV — 5** … chosen by grace. **6** But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

Rod talked last week about how reckless the love of God is. His grace is pretty reckless as well, and for a lot of the same reasons. God gave his grace to us before he knew how we would respond. He gave us grace while we were still sinners. He paid for that grace by giving his life in one of the most brutal ways possible.

He did all that and then left the choice in our hands whether we would accept his grace or not. God chose to risk giving the life of his son, then watching people ignore, or worse, scorn his sacrifice. In fact, more people choose to ignore and scorn his sacrifice than choose to accept it.

Even if we did accept his grace, he had no guarantee that we wouldn’t go right back to the sin he died to save us from and just use his grace as an excuse to sin even more. Paul warns us about that in **Romans 6:15 ESV — 15** What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! The words that Paul used there are one of the strongest ways he could have expressed his opposition to the idea of using grace as an excuse to sin more. It means ‘may it never come into existence’, ‘may it never happen’. God’s abundant grace cannot be used as an excuse to sin more abundantly.

So, if that’s not the right way to go, then how do we respond to God’s grace?

1. We have to accept his grace.

Beth and I took a group of Jr High students to CIY Believe a few years ago, and the speaker explained the idea of receiving the grace of God with an illustration. He asked a kid to come up on stage and tried to give him a big bag of candy. It was a gift, but the kid wouldn’t take it. He tried to put it in the kid’s arms, but when he let go, the bag of candy just thudded to the ground.

Obviously, the kid had previous instructions to not take the gift that was given to him. But the thing is, so many people treat God’s grace the same way. There is this gift that God is trying to give to all of humanity, a gift that is the most precious thing they will ever receive. But they allow that gift to just fall by the wayside because they don’t ever choose to receive it.

The gift of grace that we receive is not something we can earn in any way. It is a gift that is freely given. Our accepting that gift does not mean that we have earned it, simply that we have accepted what was bought and paid for by someone else, and freely given to us.

Sometimes gifts are hard to receive. Sometimes we don’t want things done for us or given to us. We feel like we need to do things ourselves. We need to fix our own mistakes. We need to earn our way. We need to clean up the mess that we’ve made. We don’t want to think that we can’t handle things on our own. The problem is that no amount of fixing, and no amount of doing it ourselves will ever be good enough. God’s grace is the only way, and we must accept his gift.

Maybe we’re afraid that even God’s grace isn’t enough. God couldn’t possibly forgive us for all our sins. God couldn’t possibly want someone as weak and feeble as me. Believe it or not, Paul felt the same way. This is what God had to say to him: **2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV — 9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

1. Stand in the grace of God

Paul tells us in **Romans 5:2 ESV — 2** Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. That word for ‘stand’ is the word ίστημι (histemi) which in this sense means that we are in a particular condition or state. The verb Paul uses here is a perfect indicative for you Greek buffs, which means that it’s something that happened in the past that continues to have an effect in the present.

God’s grace has been given to us already, but it’s not a one and done kind of thing. God’s grace is continual and constant, and we need it to be. In case you hadn’t noticed, human beings don’t just switch off their ability to sin when we accept the grace of Jesus. On this side of heaven we will continually need the grace of God. Thank God it’s there for us every time we turn away from him. Live in a state of constant grace, and never forget that you need it every day.

1. Be people who give grace

As people who have been given grace abundantly, who are we to withhold grace from other people? Jesus once told a parable about a man who could not pay his debt to the King, so he pleaded with the King to give him more time. The King was so moved that he forgave the man’s enormous debt that was far more than he could ever pay.

The man immediately went out and began to threaten and abuse another man who owed him just a fraction of what he had owed the King. The man who had been forgiven far more than he could ever pay was not forgiving of those who owed him a very small sum in comparison. When the King heard of it, he threw the man in prison because of his lack of grace.

We too have been forgiven more than we could ever repay. We have been given an enormous amount of grace. We who have received that amazing grace should also give grace to others in whatever ways we can. By doing that we can show the love and grace of God to those who don’t know him yet.

1. Be a church that is graceful

Philip Yancey says in his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, “Trace the roots of grace, or charis in Greek, and you find a verb that means “I rejoice, I am glad.” In my experience, rejoicing and gladness are not the first images that come to mind when people think of the church. They think of holier-than-thous. They think of church as a place you go after you have cleaned up your act, not before. They think of morality, not grace.”

What are the first things that come to mind for people in La Porte when they think of Agape Christian Church? Do they think of a stuffy place full of holier-than-thous who would not welcome someone who hasn’t cleaned up their act already? Do they think of a place where they will be looked down upon and made to feel unworthy?

Or is Agape Christian Church the kind of place where grace abounds? Do people in our community see our church as a place where everyone is welcome regardless of their past? Is our church one that opens its doors to the kind of people Jesus spent his time with? Or do we grumble like the Pharisees that didn’t approve of the company Jesus kept?

Our task is not to be the moral policemen of our community. Our task and responsibility as a church is to extend the reckless love and reckless grace of Jesus to the world around us. If we do that well, our church will soon be full of sinners, but that’s okay, because it already is. We who have received abundant grace are now tasked with giving that grace to others as well. Showing the love and grace of Jesus to a world who desperately needs him. Let’s make Agape a church that is known by the grace that we show and live in every day.