

When Grace Is Not Grace

Eph. 1: 6, 7

If not for God's infinite, inscrutable grace, where would we be? We would be nowhere. We would be nothing. Nowhere. Nothing.

Christianity begins with an admission, an admission of undoneness. This undoneness is called sin. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23) This frank admission is the beginning of real wisdom and progress.

Humanist theories may propose that man—by just one more peace conference, one more breakthrough in science—can pull himself up. Evolutionists may—very unscientifically—hypothesize that man is getting "better" now than at any time in the past. New Agers may dream-with old Eastern thought-that man is on the dawn of a better day-if only we can do just a little better ourselves.

But the Christian is free to admit that we are at the mercy of God's plan of grace. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Being justified freely by his [God's] grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23, 24)

How then could anyone think of adding anything to God's grace? Would there be anything a Christian can—or must—do beyond being justified simply by faith because of the grace of God? The Apostle Paul says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not by works lest any man should boast." On the other hand, in another place Paul does say, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." And, of course, the Apostle James says, "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:20) Are these scriptures contradictory to clear teaching that we are saved by God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ? Not at all.

Faith, Works and Salvation

Most of the Apostles' arguments seemingly against "works" are taken from the context of keeping legalisms of the Law of Moses, the Law Covenant. The Apostles dealt extensively in this area, showing how once justified by faith, we cannot please God by works of the Law. Needless to

say, one could not be justified before God in the first place by works of the Law—instead of faith in Jesus.

What does it mean to be "saved by faith"? Furthermore, how are we to understand "salvation"?

First, one is saved from the condemnation, which rests heavily, and squarely on all Adam's posterity, "As in Adam all die." (1 Corinthians 15:22) There is nothing anyone can do to save himself from this predicament of sin and its consequence of death. "Our righteousness is as filthy rags" Only God's merciful grace alone can provide a recovery from this no-way-out situation.

Paul adds a further dimension to "salvation" when talking to the Church at Rome, "For now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed (Romans 13:11). If a Christian had salvation when he first believed, how could salvation be said to be "nearer" at any point after that time? Also, Jesus himself taught, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 10:22). Paul too warns, "Ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I have preached to you, unless ye have believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2).

It is evident that after a Christian receives justification by faith, he or she must "show his faith by his works" (James 2:18). Justification is not eternal life. Salvation from condemnation is one thing. And salvation to life is another. The Christian must grow in Christ-like character and serve God with his whole heart, mind, soul and strength. Once we become "branches" in the true vine of Christ, we must bear fruit. If a branch does not bear fruits of spiritual development, it is "cut off." John 15:1-8

The Justified Must Bear Fruit

Where then is God's grace? God's grace—through Jesus—enables the Christian to grow and mature. "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). A Christian must do his part after he is freely justified by God. To expect grace to continue without growth is to "receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). One must not presume on the grace of God. Grace received without responsible living is grace received in vain.

What kind of fruitage must a Christian bear? Peter says we are to add to our faith, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and finally love. How necessary is fruitbearing?

"If ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:3-11).

God's grace does not stop with justification; but God's grace enables the Christian to grow. "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Christians must do their part.

Too many Christians feel all they need to do is acknowledge Jesus died for them and they are guaranteed passage to heaven—regardless of what they do or fail to do. In *Christianity Today*, January 14, 1991, p. 28, David F. Wells says, speaking of evangelistic revivals, "They prove hollow, and when a mere 10 percent of the professed converts in a crusade are still faithful after a year, evangelists and pastors pronounce it a great success. What happens to the substantial number of people who 'decide' for Christ but find their decision was apparently empty of spiritual reality?" Has the 90 percent "received the grace of God in vain"? Or perhaps they never accepted grace in the first place. In any case, if they have not born fruit, they could not be abiding in the grace of God.

Some of the same Christians who believe expecting "works" on a Christian's part is demeaning God's grace—also believe countless billions will be lost forever because they do not accept God's grace now. Consider this question: Which of these two views is demeaning to God's grace—we can do nothing now or God can do nothing later?

The Gospel of the Grace of God

What did Paul mean when he so eloquently referred to the "Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24)? Paul himself identified the "gospel" as given to Abraham, "In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Galatians 3:8). He goes on to explain, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds as of many; but as of one. And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Vs. 16). Is the "seed" from Abraham only Jesus Christ? Paul does not leave us to wonder. "Ye are all one in Christ. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Vss. 28, 29). Which promise?

"By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore...and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:17, 18).

Does the "gospel of the grace of God" teach that the Christian church, the seed of Abraham, would alone be blessed? No! The gospel is this: In Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed. Truly, the "seed" would be blessed by being a blessing to the nations. "So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham" (Galatians 3:9). Abraham will be blessed because he will be a blessing! If we are to be blessed "with Abraham," not specifically by him, we are to share the same type of blessing he does. The Christian Church will be the bride of the "king" and

Abraham will be among the "princes of all the earth" (Psa. 45:14,16). Abraham and his "seed" together will be blessers—of the nations.

The gospel of God's love and grace has been "preached [virtually] in all the world for a witness unto all nations." (Matthew 24:14) Are we to believe that if the nations have had the gospel "preached" to them, the promise to Abraham is fulfilled? A "witness" does not mean a conversion of the world. The gospel was sent out to "take out of them [the Gentile nations] a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). Is this preaching alone all there is to the blessing of the nations? Certainly it could not be so. Although the gospel has been printed in every language of the earth, precious few of earth's billions have really been able to hear or believe.

God's Grace to the Nations

Might the promise to Abraham so long ago, then, have been an overstatement? Or is the promised blessing this—the future "healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2)? For the Christian who has been blessed by believing the gospel, the promise may seem to be fulfilled. But not so for the vast majority of people blinded by Satan.

[Satan]"the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Thus the gospel has not been understood—if even heard at all by the many—but it will be in "due time" (1 Timothy 2:4-6).

The only opportunity for believing the gospel will come when Jesus binds Satan a thousand years "that he should deceive the nations no more" (Revelation 20:2,3). Christ's thousand-year Kingdom is when God's grace will bless the nations.

"And in this mountain [Kingdom on earth] shall the Lord of hosts destroy the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God we have waited for him, and he will save us we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:6-9).

To say God's grace will only save a few now while Satan is the "god of this world"—is not grace at all. To say God's grace does not require that a Christian must grow and show his faith by his works—is not grace at all. But God's grace does enable the faith justified Christian to grow. And God's grace has planned blessings for all others as well—blessings that "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

This grace is grace.

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