

Liberation or License: The Problem of Grace

I can still remember being a senior in high school, when a fellow student who was a Christian attempted to share the gospel with me. He began by telling me I was a sinner, to which I chuckled. I asked him if he had ever done any drugs or had any alcohol, and I said I was not really much of a sinner because I hadn't done those things. I then went on to list all my good deeds.

I thought it funny that someone who was, in my eyes, more sinful than I was sought to convince me I was a wretched sinner who needed God's grace. To me, all religions were much like hospitals for sick and dying people—and as long as people were not sick or dying, they had no need for any religion.

Since I was doing just fine and excelling in life, the thought of needing God and religion made as much sense as a healthy person needing a surgeon and a hospital. Yet in my heart I was filled with self-righteousness, pride, condemnation of others and no real love for God, though I was somewhat spiritual.

Awareness of my own sinfulness hit me in college during a state university philosophy class, of all places. There, God broke through and revealed to me the depth of my sin. We had to read some writings by the church father Augustine, who said the root of all sin is pride—that pride is the greatest sin of all and, in effect, the mother sin that births all other sins. Furthermore, he argued biblically that sin is not just what we do but is, in fact, a far deeper problem of who we are by nature. As I read Augustine's words and the fact that Satan was the proudest person who ever lived and Jesus the humblest person who ever lived, it was as if my entire world turned upside down.

I was shaken to my core when I heard that pride was the root of my corruption and not the source of my righteousness. I had not sought to merit my salvation but simply assumed the “good” life I was living was adequate enough for God to be pleased with me and to take me to heaven when my “good” life was concluded.

The Bible told me the unvarnished truth: Sin has infected and affected all of me. Sin has corrupted my mind so that I do not think God’s thoughts (Eph. 4:18). Sin has corrupted my will so that I do not desire God’s desires (Rom. 6:16-17). It has corrupted my emotions so that I do not feel what God feels (Titus 3:3). It has corrupted my body so that I do not experience the health God originally intended for me (Rom. 8:10). It has corrupted my relationships with God and people so that I am separated by sin (Col. 1:21). And it has corrupted my behavior, as I do the opposite of what God commands of me (Rom. 7:15-20). Apart from the grace of God, I am doomed to misery for all eternity.

Put simply, nothing in all of Christianity makes any sense apart from a proper understanding of our sin and God’s grace. Indeed, the Bible is a sword, and anyone who fails to understand grace will wield it to their own demise and the devastation of their hearers. For this reason, it’s important to recognize the two directions in which we drift away from the grace of God: legalism on the right and libertinism on the left.

Grace and Legalism

Legalists see only the demands and commands of Scripture and make long lists of rules by which to judge people and enslave them to the law of duty that kills delight. They also overlook all that Jesus has done to fulfill the demands of the law in our place so that our hope and trust is in our own efforts and not Jesus’ finished work, which is a disgrace to grace.

Paul condemns legalists, saying, "You have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4, ESV) to people who basically thought they were saved by grace but were kept by their own works and law-keeping so that God would love them. They wrongly believed that if they obeyed, God would love them, rather than believe the truth of grace, which is that God loves us so that we will then want to obey. That is why Paul says the entire domain in which true Christians live is no longer works but grace, "this grace in which we stand" (Rom. 5:2).

The self-effort of works that dominates every religion but biblical Christianity focuses legalistically on what we must do so that God will accept us, forgive us, embrace us or, in a word, love us. Conversely, Christianity alone says that human works are antithetical to God's grace. Romans 11:6 declares that "if [salvation] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Indeed, we are saved by God's saving grace, and we are saved to good works.

Nonetheless, those good works also come by God's grace working powerfully by the Holy Spirit through us: "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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

The issue is not whether Christians should do Spirit-empowered good works, such as loving their city, feeding the poor, caring for single mothers and their children, loving their enemies or telling the truth, but rather how and why. The answer is not that we do good works so that God will love us or because we have to do them. Rather, we do good works because by grace in Jesus Christ, God does love us and we want to do them.

God's grace through the Spirit not only accepts us as we are,

but also changes us to be increasingly more like Jesus out of new hearts with new desires. Therefore, telling a Christian empowered with the Holy Spirit that they have to obey God is like telling a child they have to eat their dessert—there's no need to yell or threaten, as that's what they want to do at the deepest level.

Grace and Libertinism

Contrary to legalists, libertines fail to understand that Jesus' death for sin and God's saving grace enable us to put our sin to death. They are prone to simply see God's grace as having no effect until after we have sinned. To them, grace merely forgives the evil we do without transforming us to change what we do.

Anticipating such an abuse of grace, Paul argues, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:1-2).

In context, Paul is not declaring that anyone will achieve sinless perfection in this life. Rather, he is declaring that anyone who has experienced the saving grace of God knows that Jesus can and will forgive sin—and that in addition, He transforms us. Subsequently, those who want to keep sinning and simply expect Jesus to forgive them without experiencing any real repentance or life change have no true saving relationship with God and are abusing the grace of God. A sinning Christian is a miserable Christian.

Perhaps the most pathetic man I have ever argued with about this point was an adulterer. He had been divorced a few times, on each occasion for committing adultery on his Christian wife while claiming to be a Christian and then running off with other women. When I confronted him on his repeated violation of the seventh commandment, he espoused the sorriest view of grace I have ever heard.

When the man first married, his wife had said she would never divorce him and would always forgive him. He interpreted that as a free pass to a life of adultery. He also said that as far as he was concerned, God's grace meant that he could do whatever he wanted and that Jesus was obligated to forgive him and give him grace. In his mind, Jesus was not his Lord but rather his clean-up crew.

I told him that if his response to a gracious wife was habitual, betraying sin, he was an evil man who had no understanding of grace. I also told him that, by definition, God is not obligated to give him grace because grace is a gift to the ill-deserving. I told him God's grace not only forgives our sin but also transforms our lives so that we put sin to death because Jesus died for sin.

He disagreed and said he could not lose his salvation so he was not worried. I replied that Christians cannot lose their salvation—but that by all I could surmise, he was likely not a Christian. I then shared 1 John 2:4, which says, "Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar." This man's walk with Jesus resembled the walk of Judas.

Too Good to Be True?

I do believe in the grace of God. But I must confess that sometimes I easily forget and wander from it. Why? Because it all seems too good to be true. God's grace is true and found only in, by, through and for Jesus Christ. Therefore, I keep reminding myself of the grace of God and its sufficiency for every aspect of every day of my existence.

From beginning to end, the Christian life is by the grace of God to the glory of God for the good of His people.

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Mark Driscoll answers the tough question of why God's saving grace allows so many to live as "lukewarm" Christians at