

What's Wrong With Grace?

Why a distorted message of grace is the church's greatest crisis today—and how we must respond

The most powerful, significant and liberating message ever given to the human race is the gospel of grace. The Christian life is established on the foundation of this wonderful truth, which emphasizes what Christ did *for us* on the cross and what the Holy Spirit does *in us* in our daily life. Paul's dramatic declaration that we have become new creations in Christ has vast implications for our lives: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away ... all things have become new ... that we [our spirit] might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

The "he" that is a new creation is our spirit man. We possess the very righteousness of God in our spirit (v. 21). This describes our new legal position in Christ—how God sees and relates to us. In Christ, all things have become new pertaining to our spirit. This includes being fully accepted by God, receiving the authority to use the name of Jesus and possessing the indwelling Holy Spirit—all of which enable us to resist sin, sickness and Satan; to walk in victory; and to release the works of God through prayer. The old things that passed away under this legal shift include no longer being under the *penalty of sin* nor being dominated by the *power of sin*.

So what's the problem if we've been given such freedom as new creations? Unfortunately, man's natural tendency to distort truth gets in the way. And when it comes to a truth as fundamental and crucial as grace, that distortion has far-reaching implications. In short, it can become the central crisis of an entire generation.

The Crisis of Our Time

The apostle Jude confronted the great spiritual crisis of his day when he exhorted believers to contend earnestly for the “faith” or for the message of grace originally delivered to them through the first apostles. In Jude 3-4, he writes: “I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed ... ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness.”

Think about this: Within one generation after Jesus’ resurrection, it was already necessary to contend for the true grace message. That’s how key this battle over the true grace message is and always has been since Jesus’ definitive work on the cross.

Jude warned of certain men who crept into the fellowship of the church *unnoticed*—that is, their error went unnoticed by most of the leaders and the people. These men turned the message of grace into a message of lewdness or one that affirmed various compromises, even sexual immorality. These men with persuasive teaching abilities twisted what the Bible said about grace, thus empowering many to confidently continue in sinful activities without feeling any urgency to repent.

Undoubtedly, these teachers of error appeared outwardly to live godly, but in their private lives they refused to repent of various lusts. Instead, they justified their ungodly habits by distorting the message of grace to accommodate their lifestyles.

The result was devastating, as many in the church concluded that it was acceptable for them also to live with similar compromises because these popular teachers were justifying this sort of lifestyle with various Bible verses. In reality, they took these verses out of context of the broader New Testament message, which called believers to live in wholehearted love for Jesus as evidenced by seeking to live in obedience to Him (John 14:15, 21).

The same is true with hyper-grace teachers today. They choose to emphasize only God's love and forgiveness while practically ignoring Jesus' call for His people to walk in wholehearted commitment to the Lord. They preach mostly on forgiveness without repentance and on receiving God's blessing on their circumstances without any conditions. The truth is, it's glorious that we are freely forgiven by Jesus and that He blesses our circumstances; but these truths are in context to seeking to live in a real relationship with Him and in agreement with His leadership and Word.

Jude's exhortation is a significant warning for the body of Christ today. When the grace message is distorted, everything else in one's spiritual life becomes blurred. In fact, there is no spiritual battle more significant in the church today than contending to keep the grace message faithful to Scripture.

Sadly, some believers aren't even aware of this spiritual crisis regarding a diluted grace message. They must wake up to the emergency at hand—because today, as we contend for the spirit of truth, we are fighting for the very soul of a generation.

It's easier in today's world for teachers to *creep in unnoticed*, as Jude said, because of television and the Internet. Some contemporary teachers distorting the message of grace come from high-profile ministries whose very popularity gives them a false sense of credibility. We must not receive a ministry because it's attractive and popular; we should only receive it if it's faithful to the truth.

Paul prophesied of a time when many who profess loyalty to Jesus would fall to unsound doctrine: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim.

4:3-4).

These people aren't willing to embrace the challenges of a lifestyle of obedience to Jesus as emphasized by the sound teaching in the New Testament. Instead, they have "itching ears" to hear messages that affirm their sinful desires. They want to feel comfortable in their relationship with God, even as they continue to boldly walk out their sinful lusts.

By isolating Bible verses about God's blessing and forgiveness from the larger context of the New Testament's call to love Jesus with obedience, they affirm the lustful desires of their hearers. One famous TV preacher went so far to say that there is no longer a need for a believer to repent because Jesus' work on the cross did that for them. He obviously overlooked the fact that Jesus repeatedly called born-again believers to repent for yielding to various compromises (see Rev. 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19).

Grace: The Power to Love and Obey Jesus

If countless sincere believers have already succumbed to the rising tide of this distorted grace message, how can we stand strong through the crisis? It starts by remaining grounded in biblical truth. We must approach the biblical grace message through the lens of God calling us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30).

The Lord wants us to love Him in a wholehearted way because that's how He loves us—with all of His heart, mind and strength. This mutual relationship of wholehearted love between a believer and the Lord is foundational to the kingdom. In fact, this is the very way that the Father loves the Son—with all of His heart. The Son loves the Father and the Spirit loves the Father and Son in this way too. Oh, the glorious mystery of one God in three persons who delight in Their relationship of wholehearted love for each other (see John 3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 15:9; 17:23, 26)! God's plan from the

foundation of the earth was to redeem people so that they could participate in this loving fellowship that the three persons of the Trinity enjoy.

The core reality of the grace message is to empower us to walk with God in a relationship of wholehearted love. Jesus called this “the first commandment” (Mark 12:30). Thus, the Holy Spirit’s first agenda is to establish the first commandment in first place in the church. This must also be our first agenda. Wholehearted love is to be “first” in our response to God because it is how the Father relates to the Son and how the Godhead relates to us. We must see grace through the lens of this quality of love. To think of grace without it being anchored in the first commandment is to be aiming at the wrong target. Thus, we distort the grace message when we do not interpret it through the lens of the first commandment. We must love Jesus on *His* terms, and He defined loving God in terms of a spirit of obedience to His commandments (see John 14:15, 21, 23).

There’s no such thing as loving Jesus without seeking to obey His Word. Some seek to love God on the terms of a humanistic culture that has no reference to obeying the Word. But loving and seeking to obey Jesus are synonymous. All of His commands are based in His love. Thus, the biblical message of grace teaches us to live righteously and to deny ungodliness as the way of expressing our love to God. Titus 2:11-12 says, “The grace of God ... has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly.”

If you hear a teaching on grace that doesn’t call you to deny ungodliness, it’s not a biblical grace message—it’s a distorted one.

Legal Position vs. Living Condition

As we correctly view the grace message through the lens of the

first commandment, we can also begin to understand the difference between our *legal position* before God and our ongoing *living condition* as a response to what Jesus has done. Not only is there a key difference between these two, it's often the element that hyper-grace adherents conveniently overlook.

Our legal position is what Jesus *accomplished for us* on the cross, while our living condition is what Jesus *requires of us* in our response to Him. In our legal position, we stand before God by possessing His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Our legal standing before God is so glorious that it will never be improved upon—not even with the perfection of a resurrected body—because we received Christ's very own righteousness. Our legal position relates to receiving His righteousness *instantly* on the day that we are born again.

Our living condition, on the other hand, relates to growing in righteousness *progressively* as our mind is renewed, causing our behavior and emotions to be transformed by the Holy Spirit in us.

The gospel is the good news about receiving God's righteousness and can be seen in three tenses:

1. *Justification*: our legal position—past tense, focused on our spirit
2. *Sanctification*: our living condition—present tense, focused on our soul
3. *Glorification*: our eternal exaltation—future tense, focused on our body

One-third of our salvation is complete (the salvation of our spirit), but the other two parts are not yet complete in our experience (the salvation of our soul and body). All believers have received the fullness of grace in their spirit (legal position), and yet they can still live far below it in their daily experience (living condition).

Much misunderstanding about grace can be traced to misunderstanding the distinctions of these truths. Many confuse what Jesus did for us in our legal position with what He requires of us in our response to Him in our living condition.

Jesus' finished work on the cross makes His grace fully available to us as a gift. However, our regular interaction with the Spirit causes us to experience the transforming power of this grace in our daily life. James wrote about this when he urged believers to walk in a greater measure of grace because God "gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

James wrote this to born-again believers, calling them to receive more grace. A believer already has the gift of righteousness and therefore can't receive "more grace" in his or her legal position. However, each of us can receive "more grace" in our living condition—and this is what James was referring to. We can always experience more of God's grace to transform and renew our mind and emotions (see Rom. 12:2).

Grace in the Eight Beatitudes

If we hope to experience more of this transforming grace on a daily basis, then we must follow the words of the greatest teacher on grace who ever walked the earth: Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is His most comprehensive statement about a believer's role in cooperating with God's grace. In this teaching, Jesus defined loving God in context to the eight beatitudes (5:3-10), offering us a rich understanding of how to walk out biblical grace in our daily lives.

One aspect of this is Jesus' exhortation to us to hunger for more of God's righteousness (v. 6). Here, Jesus affirmed the need to press into God for a greater release of righteousness in our daily lives—our living condition. Keep in mind that He wasn't calling us to receive more of the gift of righteousness, since we already fully possess this in our

legal position. Our hunger for righteousness doesn't cause us to deserve grace—nothing can do that—but hunger positions us to receive more of the outworking of righteousness in our character.

Some believers don't hunger to grow in righteousness in their daily life. Rather, they seek to know how far they can go in sin and how little they need to talk with Jesus to keep their salvation intact.

Imagine a couple in their wedding ceremony who have just completed their vows. While walking down the aisle for the first time as “one,” the man whispers to his new bride, “How far can I go with other women before we get divorced? And how much do I have to talk to you each week?” Adding insult to injury, he then says, “By the way, we just signed a marriage license that legalized our marriage—so now I have legal rights to all that you possess.”

Of course, the new bride would be heartbroken to hear that her husband didn't love her with all of his heart but was instead establishing their marriage on a faulty foundation—and focusing almost entirely on the bare-minimum “requirements” and legal ramifications involved.

Some teach about grace in a way that parallels the lack of wholeheartedness portrayed in this analogy. It's a version of grace more concerned with what it takes to “meet the requirements” on paper than to engage in the authentic, loving relationship for which it was originally intended. Sadly, this error is bound to occur whenever people separate the grace message from the first commandment.

How to Receive God's Grace

Grace was never intended to be abused, but as our current church crisis proves, it can be. God gives us the freedom to choose relationship and obedience to His Word—and thus benefit from the true liberty found in grace. Yet this is also why

Paul urged the believers in Corinth “not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1).

The gospel of grace is distorted in two main ways: first, by presenting God’s love as something we can earn; second, by refusing to call people to respond in wholeheartedness to God. The fruit of the biblical grace message is confidence in the gift of God’s love combined with a spirit of obedience. If either of these two elements is missing, then it isn’t the true message. Thus, receiving God’s grace in vain is to receive it in such a way that it doesn’t produce confidence in God’s love nor the resolve to respond wholeheartedly to Jesus’ leadership. Either distortion is disastrous for our spiritual life.

Like Jude in the first century, we must earnestly contend for the truth about grace. The very soul of the youth in our nation hangs in the balance.

The good news, however, is this: The Holy Spirit is highlighting this spiritual crisis and is committed to the recovery of the biblical grace message. We can be confident that He will release His power to establish the first commandment in first place in the church before Jesus returns for His fully prepared Bride (see Rev. 19:7). Let’s come alongside Him, rather than opposing Him, when it comes to receiving, understanding and walking in grace.

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