

Applying Grace and the Finished Work of the Cross to Your Life

Grace and the finished work of the cross are foundational concepts in the New Testament. Concepts benefit us little, however, if we don't understand the nuts and bolts of their practical applications in our everyday lives.

For example, how do we overcome sin and live in righteousness? Does the finished work of the cross mean we don't have to do anything? The phrase implies that Jesus has already done it all for us. Or do we play a part in accessing this finished work? Is grace automatically bestowed on us or do we play a part in walking in grace?

First of all, we need to answer the question, "What is grace?" In the New Testament, the Greek word for grace has a very rich meaning. It is used to describe God's total provision. Grace includes the concepts of provision, strength, favor, blessing and equipping. The provision through God's grace is so vast human language struggles to describe it.

One of the best definitions of grace I have heard is this: Grace is the empowering presence of God to be everything you are called to be and to do everything you are called to do. Many confuse grace with mercy. There is some degree of overlap between these two words, however, grace and mercy have their own distinct meanings. Put very simply, mercy will cause you to keep your heart open to someone in a pitiful state. Grace, on the other hand, will impart strength for them to walk free of their pitiful condition.

The New Testament talks about three dimensions of God's provision—past, present and future. When you understand these three dimensions, many theological complications disappear.

The Past Provision

The finished work of the cross describes that which Jesus has already done for us. It is the foundation for Christian living. You can't add to it. You can't improve it. You can't enhance it. Jesus completed the work. It is finished. The provision of the cross is total. Jesus' death was your death. When Jesus died, your old nature died with Him. Jesus' resurrection was your resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, you were resurrected with His new nature. Many who emphasize this glorious truth teach that if we would simply believe what Jesus has already done for us, we would walk free from sin. I agree. The finished work of the cross is the total provision of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Present Provision

God's present provision comes to us as a continual river of grace. We can access it at any time. It is a constant source of provision and strength, enabling us to walk in the fullness of Christian experience. Although the Bible describes the work of the cross as already accomplished, it also exhorts us to put off the old nature and to put on the new nature.

"That you put off the former way of life in the old nature, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that you put on the new nature, which was created according to God in righteousness and true holiness. Therefore, putting away lying, let every man speak truthfully with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:22-25).

Through the finished work of the cross, your old nature was crucified, and you were given a new nature. This is already accomplished. When you were born again, there was a permanent change. However, this is not the end of the story. Also through the finished work of the cross, an ongoing river of

grace was released over your life. Accessing this river is not automatic. You are not a robot. You are a human being with a God-given gift of free will. You have to choose to access this river and then cooperate with the grace that continues to change your behavior. Through grace, God's full provision is available—healing, transformation, deliverance—but it is not automatic.

To summarize: The past provision of the cross is already accomplished. The present provision of grace is a river of enabling that flows from the finished work of the cross. Yes, the way to change behavior is to put our faith in that which Jesus has already done for us; however, our part is to deliberately put off the old behavior and to deliberately put on the new behavior. We do this by choosing to receive from the river of grace that is constantly flowing over our lives. Choosing to put off old behavior and put on new behavior can be intensely rigorous, but it is also intensely rewarding. It includes deliberate decisions of our will such as forgiveness and repentance.

In Douglas Moo's commentary on Galatians (*Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*), he says:

The crucifixion of the flesh does not mean that it is totally destroyed but that it is definitely judged and its power decisively broken. The definitive defeat of the flesh is conditioned on the response of believers. This combination of what God has done and what we must do is typical of Paul's presentation of the Christian life. A concentration on either to the neglect of the other leads to an imbalance. Either the believer is lulled into passivity by assuming that God automatically does all we need apart from the response of our own will—or the believer, thinking it all falls on their own shoulders, lapses into a "works" mentality that breeds anxiety.

The Future Provision

Paul reassures us that God's river of grace will continue to flow over our lives, "until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, into a complete man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

So there are three aspects of God's provision: accomplished, present and ongoing. We are to exercise faith on all three levels. Those who focus on only one aspect and ignore the others invariably end up in theological confusion. We are to put our faith in that which is already accomplished. We are to put our faith in the resulting river of grace that is flowing over our lives right now. We are to put our faith in the continual supply of this grace until we come to the fullness of Christ.

To help us live in the fullness of God's grace, I want to highlight three different types of language used in the New Testament:

1. The language of intimacy.
2. The language of spiritual reality.
3. The language of behavioral change.

The Language of Intimacy

Jesus is seated next to His Father in heaven, but through the Holy Spirit, He is also here with us on the earth. This is one of the most exciting truths of Scripture. Jesus is both here and there. John 14:17 says that the Spirit will be "with you" and "in you" (Both emphatic in the original Greek). "With you" is an intimate phrase meaning "beside, at one's house," not merely "in one's company." "In you" implies deep intimacy. Jesus goes on to assure His disciples He will not leave them as orphans; rather, He will come to them. The language Jesus

uses for the resulting intimacy is very beautiful: “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20).

These truths are glorious. Jesus comes to us by and through His Spirit. He comes not just to assist us but out of desire to be intimately one with us. And whenever you get Jesus you also get the Father (John 14:20-23). This is an ongoing and developing relationship of intimacy. “If anyone loves me (present continuous tense) he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23, NKJV).

The Language of Spiritual Reality

Many times in his letters, Paul talks about Christ being in us or us being in Christ. Paul uses this language to describe a spiritual reality:

- By the Spirit, Christ is in us.
- By the Spirit, we are in Christ.

In Paul’s letters, understanding this spiritual reality is the foundation for a relationship of intimacy. In other words, the language of spiritual reality leads to the language of intimacy.

A good example of this is the book of Ephesians. From the beginning of Ephesians Paul asserts that we are in Christ.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3, MEV).

Using very powerful language, Paul continues to describe what it means to be in Christ. He goes on in Ephesians 3 to describe an experiential intimacy that grows and evolves:

“[I pray] that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and

depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:17-19).

Here is the essence of what Paul is saying: You are already in Christ, and because of this spiritual reality, you can come to know an experiential love that surpasses knowledge. Being in Christ is the language of spiritual reality. Knowing God's love that surpasses knowledge is the language of intimacy.

The Language of Behavioral Change

Paul goes on in Ephesians 4 to use the language of behavioral change (Eph. 4:22-25). The Ephesian Christians are exhorted to "put off" the old nature and "put on" the new nature. The old nature is our old ways of behavior that are contrary to who Jesus is. The new nature is the nature of Jesus. The word picture is that of putting off one piece of clothing and putting on another piece of clothing. It makes sense. You put off one to put on the other.

But here's where the confusion comes in. When does this putting off and putting on happen? Does it happen when you are born again? Or is it a process we engage in after we are born again? Both are true. In some passages of Scripture, Paul addresses the importance of behavioral change in believers who are already born again. In other passages, Paul emphasizes that something very dramatic happened through our conversion experience.

Living a Transformed Life

What Jesus did on the cross only Jesus could do. You can't crucify your old nature. You can't make yourself like Jesus. Only He can accomplish that. If you have ever tried being patient through your own effort, you will know that it took so much effort that you ended up both exhausted and impatient. Your impatience was crucified when Jesus died. Through His resurrection, you were given a new nature that is slow to

anger. Now you can walk free of impatience; however, it does often require real effort. As Paul says, you have to put off the old nature and put on Christ. We have to choose to put off the old nature. Those who have overcome any type of addiction know how rigorous that can be. We have to choose to embrace the nature of Christ.

To live a transformed life, it is important to understand that there is a part only God can do and there is a part only we can do. When Jesus died, we died. His death is our death. However, only we can make the decision to put off the old nature. When Jesus rose from the dead, we rose from the dead. His resurrection is our resurrection. However, only we can make the decision to put on the new nature.

Every time sin takes dominance in our lives, we have to wage war against it. One of the most important weapons in the battle against sin is this simple truth: When Jesus died on the cross, my sin died with Him. God can graciously give us counselors to help us in this battle, but only we can make the decisions to put off the old and put on the new. A counselor can help identify a pattern of sin and the reasons for its existence in our lives. Only faith in the finished work of the cross and cooperation with God's river of grace can cause that sin to cease. It is as we learn to receive and drink from the river of grace that flows all around us that our lives are powerfully transformed.

Here are some principles that will help you on your journey.

Jesus yearns for intimate relationship with you. As you focus on His desire toward you, it will ignite a yearning for intimacy in your own heart. Pursuing intimacy with God is foundational to a life of overcoming. Even in your immaturity and weakness, He delights in you. Develop the language of intimacy. If you don't pursue intimacy you will find it hard to resist sin.

Develop the language of spiritual reality. Know what Jesus has accomplished for you. You are in Christ, and Christ is in you. Because of this reality, you can be assured of victory in every battle over sin. There are many Scriptures that tell us who we are in Christ. Make these your confession. They are the language of spiritual reality. They declare what Christ has already accomplished. Speaking them out will strengthen and increase your faith.

Learn to drink and receive from the river of grace that is flowing all around you. A grace-filled life is an empowered life. It is this river of grace that enables you to put off the old nature and put on Christ. The battle to overcome sin is a battle that requires us to overcome (Rev. 2-3). Be deliberate in this battle. Never give up. Always remember that light is more powerful than darkness. And finally, may God strengthen you through His incredible supernatural grace.
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