

DON'T REJECT THE GRACE OF GOD

2 ¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him [directly] to his face, because his actions deserved to be condemned. ¹²Before certain men came from James, Cephas had been eating with the Gentile [believers]. But when they came, he withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who belonged to the [faction who advocated] circumcision. ¹³The rest of the [believing] Jews joined with him in his hypocrisy, so much so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not walking in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, and no longer like the Jews, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? ¹⁵We who are Jews by birth, and not sinners from among the Gentiles—¹⁶knowing that a man is not justified by his observance of the law,* but through faith in Jesus Christ—even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law,* because no [sinful] man shall be justified by his observance of the law.* ¹⁷But if, by seeking to be justified by Christ, we ourselves are also found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? God forbid!—¹⁸because if I rebuild what I destroyed, I demonstrate myself to be a law breaker. ¹⁹Since I, through the law, died to the law, (in order that I might live unto God,)—²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me—²¹I do not reject the grace of God; for if righteousness could be achieved through the law, then Christ died needlessly.

3 O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was publicly proclaimed to be crucified. ²This one thing I want to find out from you: Did you receive the Spirit by your observance of the law,* or by believing [the message] you heard? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now seeking to achieve your goal by human effort? ⁴Have you experienced so many things for nothing?—if indeed it was for nothing. ⁵He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, does he do so because of your observance of the law* or because you believed [the message] you heard? (Gal. 2:11-3:5)

*Literally, “by works of the law”

Introduction

One day the British pastor and author, G. Campbell Morgan, was visiting a local coal miner. As they spoke together about the things of God, Dr. Morgan asked the man, “Are you saved?”

The miner replied, “I can’t answer that question, Sir. But I sure am trying.”

Then Morgan asked him, “Do you work down in the mine shaft?”

“Yes, Sir.” replied the man. “I work very deep in the mine.”

“Well, now,” continued Dr. Morgan, “at the end of the day how do you get up out of that mine shaft? Do you use your pick axe and climb up the side of the shaft?”

“Oh no!” laughed the miner. “That’s not how we get out. The company has provided us with an elevator. At the end of our shift we get into that elevator and it takes us up out of the shaft.”

“I see” replied Dr. Morgan. “Now tell me, my good man, would you ever ignore that elevator and seek to climb up out of that mine shaft by yourself?”

“Oh no, Sir!” exclaimed the miner. “That would be foolish! That elevator is the only way for us to get up out of the mine shaft.”

“And,” interrupted Dr. Morgan, “the grace of God is the only way to get saved—don’t ignore that either.” (*Our Daily Bread* 11/20/92)

We unintentionally reject the grace of God whenever we take our eyes off of Christ and rely upon our own efforts to gain acceptance with God—that is just the mistake the Galatians were making. The lesson for them and for us is this: Don’t reject the grace of God, because there is no other means by which we can be saved.

I. Don’t Reject the Grace of God, by Reverting Back to Works (2:17-18,21)

The Apostle Peter came to Antioch to visit the church in that city, a congregation composed predominantly of Gentile Christians. While there, he entered into complete fellowship with these fellow Christians who were of a Gentile background, even going so far as to eat with them. By so doing, Peter was testifying to two truths. First Peter was testifying that he himself was trusting in the grace of God for his salvation as that grace is offered to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was no longer trusting in his Jewish heritage (his Jewish nationality and his observance of the Old Testament ceremonial regulations.) Second, by his action he was testifying that the Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to be saved, they needed to trust in the grace of God as it is offered in the person of Jesus Christ.

But when “*certain men came from James,*” Peter, in a moment of weakness, was intimidated by them and began to withdraw from fellowship with the Gentile Christians. Peter’s latest action, although not in harmony with his true beliefs, was nevertheless communicating the message that the Gentiles, indeed, did have to become Jews, submitting to the sacrament of circumcision, and taking upon themselves the obligation of observing the Old Testament ceremonial regulations in order to be saved. By his action, Peter was wrongly declaring that Jesus is not sufficient to save the Gentiles; they need to take upon themselves the full responsibility of producing a life that is pleasing to God, (one that is in complete accord with His moral law and that is faithful to observe all of the Old Testament regulations.)

At this point the Apostle Paul stood up and rebuked Peter, reminding him that the only source of salvation is the grace of God, not our personal efforts to comply with the law of God and observe religious regulations:

We who are Jews by birth, and not sinners from among the Gentiles—¹⁶knowing that a man is not justified by his observance of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ—even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law, because no [sinful] man shall be justified by his observance of the law. (Gal. 2:15-16)

Now in verses 17-18 Paul points out to Peter the wrong and ridiculous conclusion that can be drawn from Peter's hypocritical conduct. In verse 18 Paul provides an illustration: A man has just finished tearing down a wall. But sooner has he torn it down than he turns right around and begins to rebuild it! Does not his act of rebuilding indicate that it was wrong for him to have torn it down in the first place?

Verse 17 contains Paul's argument: Peter and Paul had grown up in Jewish households. Ever since childhood they had trusted in their Jewish identity and had sought to scrupulously observe the Jewish ceremonial regulations and the moral law, in an effort to gain salvation. They had kept themselves separated from the Gentile "sinners" so as not to become spiritually polluted by them. But when Peter and Paul met Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, He instructed them to trust in Himself alone for their salvation, trusting in His perfect righteousness and atoning sacrifice upon the cross of Calvary: He alone is able to save and He is fully sufficient to save. Now when Peter and Paul placed their faith in the grace of God for their salvation, in effect, they were becoming like the Gentiles: men who could not take comfort in the fact that they had been born and raised in the covenant community of God's people; men who could not claim to have conscientiously observed the Old Testament ceremonial regulations from their youth; men who knew that they did not measure up to the moral standard of God and could only cast themselves upon His mercy and trust in His grace for their salvation.

Now if it were wrong for Peter and Paul to have stopped trusting in their religious heritage, and like the Gentiles, to trust solely in the grace of God as it is offered in Christ Jesus, who is to blame for their error? The answer is, **Christ** Himself is to blame, for it was Christ who instructed them to trust in Himself alone for salvation, note John 6:40, where the Lord Jesus gives this testimony: *"My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."* So Paul points out to Peter the ridiculous and even blasphemous conclusion that could be drawn from Peter's inconsistent conduct. Of course Christ, the divine Messiah, could not promote wrongdoing or give erroneous counsel. Of course it was right for Peter and Paul to abandon all trust in themselves, their personal moral endeavors, and their religious heritage and place their trust in Christ alone for their salvation.

In verse 21 the Apostle Paul emphatically sets forth the true Christian position: *“I do not reject the grace of God, for if righteousness could be achieved through the law, then Christ died needlessly.”* We dare not reject the grace of God offered to us in Christ Jesus, because there is no other way in which we can be saved. Christ’s atoning death was absolutely necessary, it was not needless, Christ did not *“die needlessly,”* because no one can measure up to God’s standard of absolute righteousness, as the Scriptures teach, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23.) But as they go on to declare, *“now apart from the law a righteousness from God has been revealed ... ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all those who believe”* (Rom. 3:21-22.)

Let us not reject the grace of God, by reverting back to works—reverting back to seeking to merit our own salvation by relying upon our own efforts to comply with the perfect law of God. Let us not forget that which Paul reminded Peter:

... knowing that a man is not justified by his observance of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ—even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by our observance of the law, because no [sinful] man shall be justified by his observance of the law. (Gal. 2:16)

II. Don’t Reject the Grace of God, by Forgetting What Has Happened to You (2:19-20)

In giving his Christian testimony, Paul declares that he *“died to the law”* (vs. 19.) The principle involved here is the simple fact that the law has jurisdiction over a man only so long as he is alive. By way of example, note Romans 7:1-2,

Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ²For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. (Rom. 7:1-2)

Death removes a man from the jurisdiction of the law. Once a man has died, the law can no longer impose its claims upon him and hold him liable and subject to punishment for non-compliance with its righteous claims. By way of illustration: After a man has died, the government tax collector no longer comes to his door demanding that he pay his taxes or suffer the consequence of serving a prison term.

Paul elaborates upon his assertion by stating, *“through the law I died to the law.”* The moral law of God is constantly confronting us with its demand for obedience: *“You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am Jehovah your God. ⁵Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am Jehovah”* (Lev. 18:4-5.) Furthermore, the law pronounces against us the sentence of death—eternal separation from the blessing of God, becoming eternally subjected to the righteous condemnation of God that our

sinful lives deserve—for our disobedience, note Ezekiel 18:20a, *“The soul that sins shall die.”*

Paul declares that, in compliance with the law’s demand, he was put to death, and by his death he was consequently removed from the jurisdiction of the law. But how could Paul, as a sinner, succumb to that awful fate of death—having the divine judgment of God enacted against him and being consigned to the pains of hell—and survive?

Paul’s explanation is contained in the statement, *“I have been crucified with Christ”* (vs. 20.) When the Lord Jesus Christ died upon the cross of Calvary He was experiencing the pains of hell, the physical and spiritual awfulness of being separated from the blessing of God and being exposed to the righteous curse of God:

Surely he has borne our afflictions and carried our sorrows; but we regarded him as one who was stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted [as an evildoer]. (Isa. 53:4)

When the sixth hour [of the day] arrived, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? (which, being interpreted, means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?) (Mk. 15:33-34)

But because Christ is the Holy One of God, the LORD in His righteousness could not permit Christ to continue in that state of judgment, thus He raised Him up to the glory and blessing of His own divine presence. At Pentecost, Peter explained the certainty of Jesus’ resurrection by referring to the promise God the Father had made to His Holy One recorded in Psalm 16:10-11,

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him ... ²⁷because “you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. ²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” (Acts 2:24,27-28)

Everyone who believes in Jesus is spiritually united to Jesus, sharing in both His crucifixion and His resurrection. The moment you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you become joined to Christ in His crucifixion and subsequent resurrection and entrance into glory. Thus, upon believing in Christ, Paul became involved in Christ’s crucifixion, spiritually participating in it as a personal experience. As a result, his former identity (“the old man,” as he calls it in Romans 6:6, or, the old “I”) that revolved around himself has been transformed and replaced by a new identity that revolves around Christ. Consider the testimony of a Christian man in reply to the question, “What has been the biggest

change in your life since you became a Christian?" He answered, "Whereas formerly my life was self-centered, it has now become Christ-centered."

It is by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, and the believer's personal and spiritual participation in Christ's death and resurrection, that the Christian has safely "*died to the law.*" By way of illustration: If you were to walk into the flames just as you are, you would be consumed by them. But if you entered those flames clothed in an asbestos suit, you would be protected and could re-emerge unharmed. Likewise, by faith, we are received into the bosom of Christ, and by virtue of our union with Him we pass safely through the judgment of God and emerge into the blessing of God.

Let us not reject the grace of God, by forgetting what has happened to us. We have been saved by grace in order to live by grace. By virtue of having been crucified together with Christ, we died to the law and are no longer under its dominion: we are no longer dependent upon the law as the instrument of your salvation—Christ is now the source of our salvation. We are no longer liable to the punishment pronounced by the law—the righteous demands of the law were satisfied by Christ in His atoning death upon the cross of Calvary on our behalf and with us spiritually united to Him.

Let us ever bear in mind the Apostle Paul's divinely inspired declaration, "*you are not under law, but under grace*" (Rom. 6:14b.) What it means to be "*under law*" may be illustrated as follows: the law may be portrayed as an army drill sergeant who demands perfect performance from you as a recruit or you will be rejected in humiliation and disgrace. What it means to be "*under grace*" may be illustrated as follows: the Lord Jesus has condescended to become a "fellow recruit" and He now carries you on His back as He turns in the perfect performance that the law demands. Let us not reject the grace of God and go back to attempting to render the perfect performance that the law demands, but of which we in our selves are incapable of delivering—rather, let us ever thank God for our Lord Jesus Christ and trust and rest in Him alone.

III. Don't Reject the Grace of God, by Forgetting How You Received God's Blessing (3:1-5)

In verse two of chapter three the Apostle Paul asks the Galatians to reflect on the question, How did you receive the Holy Spirit?

In verse 4 he refers to the many things the Galatians have experienced. Note: The Greek term (πάσχω) normally translated, "to suffer," also has the more basic meaning, "to experience;" the latter rendering is preferable in this present context. The apostle is here referring to the many spiritual blessings conveyed to the Galatians by the Holy Spirit, foremost of which include access to God: "*through [Christ] we ... have access to the Father by one Spirit*" (Eph. 2:18.) Another blessing bestowed by the Holy Spirit is communion with God.

According to Ephesians 2:22, the whole body of believers is being built together in order to be a dwelling place for God in which we will have communion with Him by means of the Holy Spirit: *“you ... are being built together ... to become the place where God dwells by the Spirit.”*

The apostle inquires, Did you receive the Holy Spirit *“by your observance of the law, or by believing [the message] you heard?”* (Gal. 3:2.) That is to say, did you receive the Holy Spirit and His blessings as a reward for your personal works of merit that you performed? Or was it the result of hearing the gospel and responding to it in faith? Paul is seeking to refresh the Galatians’ memory, so that they might reflect upon the fact that it was *“by believing [the message] you heard;”* (i.e.; by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel) that they received the Holy Spirit and the manifestations of His blessing.

Let us not reject the grace of God, by forgetting how it is that we receive God’s blessing. The heavenly Father bestows upon us His Holy Spirit and His spiritual blessings, not as the reward for meritorious conduct, but for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior, as Paul will testify: *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—¹⁴... so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith”* (Gal. 3:13-14.) At Pentecost, Peter testified: *“Exalted to the right hand of God, [Jesus] has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear”* (Acts 2:33.)

Conclusion

Just as that British miner would never reject the elevator as the means of ascending out of the mine shaft in favor of the futile effort of trying to climb up out of that shaft by his own efforts; so, too, we must never reject the grace of God as the means of our salvation in favor of relying upon our own efforts and supposed merit to gain the favor and acceptance of God. This is the message both the Galatians and we need to remember: Don’t reject the grace of God, because there is no other means by which we can be saved.