

Grace

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8,9)

That’s the gospel, the good news. It’s taken a long time for me to just begin to understand this good news. It still hasn’t sunk in to the point that it stays with me as a constant. That’s why I need the Lord’s Supper every week – to remind me that I’m clean, pure, holy and forgiven. The Lord’s Supper is truly a celebration event for me. But that’s a different topic (I have already shared my thoughts about this topic in another little essay).

One of the reasons it has taken me awhile to begin to grasp the concept of grace has to do with being raised in a church environment that had a tendency to emphasize works more than grace. In fact, I’m not really sure I heard the concept of grace really explained until I was a student in college. The Christian tradition in which I grew up seemed to focus on keeping the rules correctly. Image was extremely important and a great amount of effort went into maintaining the image of righteousness. Doctrinal perfection was preached and if you stepped out of line someone would be sure to let you know. In fact, it became the rule to watch not only those in your own congregation but to watch those in other congregations as well. And then, it was the duty of the watchdogs to publish the “misdeeds” and “wrong-headed beliefs” of others – often, these well-meaning watchdogs had never even met or spoken to those they were criticizing. All this “perfectionism” led to numerous church splits and division.

Jesus is the Grace of God

So here are my thoughts about grace at this point in my life. Grace is another way of talking about the love and forgiveness that God has for us. It seems to me that we have made the topic more mysterious and complicated than it needs to be. I’d say the most mysterious part of grace is how God could continue to love and forgive me after I have failed him (and will continue to fail him) so many times. Paul tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We also learn from various scriptures that sin brings death and separation from God. So we all need a savior to help us or we are lost. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves – “not by works” – right? That’s where grace steps in.

God had a plan from the very beginning as to how he would cleanse us from our sin so we would not have to be separated from him forever. He illustrated this plan through the system of animal sacrifice. Sounds kind of weird, doesn’t it? Animal sacrifice? Nowadays, we would tend to associate sacrificing animals with some kind of Satanism! It’s seems a bit barbaric for our western sensitivities. Nevertheless, we read in the Old Testament how God used this to teach the people (and us) a lesson.

One sacrifice, in particular, has special significance for us when it comes to understanding grace. It was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) sacrifice. Take a look at Leviticus 16 (I’m not going to take time to re-type the chapter here so you’re just going to have to read it. Go ahead, I’ll wait). God selected Aaron

to be the high priest. The high priest had the duty of going behind the curtain into the Most Holy Place once a year for this special sacrifice and ceremony. As you may recall, God had directed his people to build a special tent (kind of a portable church building) to carry along with them as they wandered in the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. We call it the Tabernacle or the Tent of Meeting. This tent had two main compartments: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The priests carried out their duties daily in the Holy Place but there was a curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Only the High Priest could go behind the curtain and enter the Most Holy Place and only once per year on the Day of Atonement.

The Ark of the Covenant was in the Most Holy Place. It represented the presence of God. God would meet with the High Priest behind this curtain. If anyone else walked behind the curtain into the presence of God, they would die. That makes God sound a little harsh, doesn't it? It actually has to do with the holiness of God. Holiness – this is a concept that is difficult for me to fully grasp. Our God is a Holy God. That means, among other things, that he is unapproachable. He is absolutely pure. He cannot be connected with sin. It reminds me of an operating room. When the doctor is operating on the patient, nothing unclean can enter the sterile field. If the doctor or his instruments become contaminated then he won't do the patient much good. In a similar way, God cannot be contaminated either. He cannot permit anything unclean to enter the "sterile field."

In Leviticus we see a loving God who wants to be in the midst of his people. The Tent of Meeting (with the Most Holy Place) was actually pitched right in the middle of the Israelites. Each tribe had a specific location to pitch their tents around the Tent of Meeting. God was literally in their midst, but he still remained unapproachable except by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The curtain separated God from the people. God did not want the curtain to be there. He wanted to be approachable. He wanted to be completely united with his children. The bad news is that their (and our) sin would not permit it to happen.

God used the animal sacrifices as an illustration of just how serious this situation was. Sin separates us from God. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Who sinned? The people (and you and me). Who must die? The people (and you and me). But God loves his children and didn't want them to have to die from their sin so he arranged a substitute. He allowed an animal to take their place. The death of the animal demonstrates the seriousness of sin.

The animal could be used as a substitute because it was sinless. But the blood of an animal could never really do away with sin. Why was the animal innocent? Because an animal doesn't sin. Is an animal equal to a human? No. So even though the animal was innocent it couldn't really be an adequate "scapegoat." Another human dying for a human wouldn't work either because we are all guilty of sin. If I can't even pay my own debt then how can I pay yours? Who is the only one who is holy enough to pay the debt of sin? God. Who is the only one who is infinite and can pay for the sin of every single human who has ever lived or will ever live? God. So then God could take our place and die for us – right? Wrong. God is a spirit (John 4:24) and it seems that spirits don't die. If only God could become human

Okay. So you see where I'm going here. God took on human form in the person of Jesus. Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus was without sin. As a human, Jesus (God) could – and did – die for us. It's interesting to read what happened at the moment of Jesus' death:

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment **the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom**” (Matthew 27:50,51).

Remember that infamous curtain from Leviticus? It separated people from God. At the death of Jesus that curtain was done away with forever. “**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus**, by a new and living way **opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body**, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

According to Hebrews, the curtain represented the body of Christ. The curtain also represents sin – that which separates us from God. Paul tells us that “God made him who had no sin **to be sin** for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus was God in the flesh but when he went to the cross he became sin in the flesh – sin incarnate – because he took on himself all the sin of all who ever lived and who will ever live. Remember how God and sin can't be together? Remember, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” John tells us that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. Remember how the earth grew dark when Jesus was on the cross?

All of our sin was transferred to Jesus before we were ever born. In fact, John tells us that “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, **and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world**” (1 John 2:2). This is not something that has to be repeated. “**It is finished.**” Remember those animal sacrifices? “Those sacrifices are [were] an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:3). But now, “**we have been made holy** through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**” (Hebrews 10:10). Our sins have been forgiven, “and where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (Hebrews 10:18).

When Jesus died, was buried and then rose from the dead, he saved the whole world. Let me say that again with a slightly different emphasis: **Everyone** in the world is saved – everyone. We were saved around 2000 years ago. That means Osama Bin Laden was saved. That means Adolf Hitler was saved. That means that pedophile, that murderer, that rapist and, yes, even that relative or next-door-neighbor you can't stand – are saved. It means that God loves that rapist just as much as he loves you. It means that God doesn't love you any more than he loves the pedophile. It means that you're not one whit better than that relative you can't stand. We are all guilty of sin. We all deserve death. We are all loved equally by God. “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” And we are all saved by his grace – amazing grace. In fact, it's so amazing it's hard to believe and that's why we need constant reminders (like the Lord's Supper!).

That's God's gracious gift to us. But here is the tragedy. Not everyone has accepted their gift of grace.

Accepting God's Grace

Have you ever been given a gift that you didn't open? Have you ever been written a check that you didn't cash? When Jesus died on the cross, in a sense, he wrote a check for everyone to pay our debt. What did we do to deserve that? Nothing. What can we do to earn God's grace/forgiveness/love? Nothing. He has already forgiven us. God will never love you more than he does at this moment because he already loves you to the full extent of his love. The gift has been given. The check has been written. That's grace.

However, you don't have to accept the gift. You don't have to cash the check. It's your choice. The consequences of not accepting God's grace are as devastating as they are eternal. Nevertheless, a love that is forced is not much love at all and so you have been given free will to choose. Who wouldn't want to choose life? Who wouldn't want to choose love? Who wouldn't want to choose blessing? It sounds crazy, but most people will end up returning their gift – throwing their check in the trash.

Now it's important to understand that cashing the check does not in any way imply that you are working for your salvation or earning your gift. It is a free gift, but you still must accept it. If God had not made his free gift available through Jesus, then you could go to church all you want and get baptized every day of the week and twice on Sundays and still have no hope. None of the things we do **cause** our salvation – they reflect it. Our works stem from our gratitude and are a good demonstration of whether or not we understand what God has done for us.

So how do we cash the check of God's grace that he has left lying on the table for us? Well, first you have to believe he is good for it. You have to have faith that the check is real.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son” (John 3:16-18). Makes sense, doesn't it? You have to believe the check is real or you won't cash it.

You also must make a conscious decision to try to align your life to the will of God. That means giving up some things and adopting some others. None of these things save you. You could make these changes and you would still be lost if it weren't for the grace of God. We call this change in alignment, repentance. “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24). Basically, now that you know better, try to live better. We'll talk about what happens if you don't a little later.

So you believe, you make a commitment to change for the better (that's kind of like endorsing the check if we stay with that analogy) and then you seal the deal with the Holy Spirit (that's taking it to the bank).

How do you take it to the bank? Paul says, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death [baptized], we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (Romans 6:4,5).

Here’s another way of putting it: “When the kindness and love of God appeared [Jesus], he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth [baptism] and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3: 4-7).

Peter says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Another way of saying it would be, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26, 27).

When a person is baptized into Christ, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). That’s how you make use of the gift. That’s how you cash the check at the bank. When you receive the Holy Spirit then you have accepted the gift of holiness. Remember, that God is a holy God so the only way you can be with him forever if is you are holy yourself. When you receive God’s Holy Spirit then you become holy. When God looks at you, it’s kind of like looking into a mirror. He sees his Holy Spirit in you.

Remember 2 Corinthians 5:21? “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so **that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” If we are “in him” (see Galatians 3:26,27), then we are as righteous as who? It’s okay, lightning won’t strike you – you are as righteous as God himself. In fact, if you aren’t, then you have no hope. But you are as righteous as God because he made you that way. Amazing grace (that song means a lot more to me now than it used to).

Hang on to That Gift

Have you ever given a gift back? Have you ever taken a gift back to the store or exchanged it for something else? You can do the same thing with God’s gift. You can always throw it away. But you’ll need to be pretty deliberate about it. Do you still sin after you have received God’s gift? Absolutely. John says, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins . . .” (1 John 2:1,2). We are standing in grace and God knows that we aren’t going to be sinless on our own so he continues to cleanse us through the blood of Christ. Amazing grace!

That doesn’t mean, however, that we can’t throw the gift away. “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received a knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left . . .” (Hebrews 10:26ff). I think the key here, is sincerity. Paul speaks of weak Christians. Paul laments over his own continued imperfections. John says that if we claim to be without sin then we are lying (and that’s a sin!). We have

examples of Christians in the New Testament who sin and yet are still considered Christians. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1,2). If our attitude toward sin doesn’t change then we’ve never really been “converted,” have we? It’s not as much about the deeds as it is about the heart. The deeds (or lack thereof) spring from the heart.

I think you have to be fairly deliberate in throwing the gift away (or pretty apathetic). For example, if you revert to being a thief – and you don’t care about changing or even trying to live for Christ, then that would probably be tossing the gift away. We have an example of a Christian in Corinth who was living a persistently immoral life with no regret or intention of changing. Paul tells the Corinthians to withdraw fellowship from him to demonstrate the fact he is no longer in fellowship with God. He had to be shocked into realizing his position. Evidently he was still attending the gatherings and still saw himself as in fellowship with God but had no intention of changing what was in clear opposition to the way of God.

In Revelation, we see some churches warned about being apathetic. The heart was no longer there. It seems this is another way to forfeit the gift. The church in Sardis is told their deeds are not complete and they need to wake up or there will be consequences. James tells us that deeds spring from true faith. So obviously, the deeds problem was merely a symptom of a deeper heart problem. Conversely, we all know that you can be deed perfect and still have a big heart problem.

Paying It Forward

I believe there are more subtle ways that a believer may invalidate his gift even though he continues to participate and gather with or even be a leader in the church. I’d like to address just one thing in particular for the purpose of this little essay. It has to do with forgiveness.

Are you familiar with the concept of “paying it forward?” It means that when you have received something good, you should pass on something good to someone else. It’s a particular irony that forgiveness is one of those things that does not always get paid forward. We’ve already talked about the incredible gift of grace we have received from God – and this grace was demonstrated while we were still sinners. Unfortunately, I know those who have tasted the grace of God but who have ***deliberately decided to withhold that same grace from others***. I believe that may put them in danger of forfeiting their own gift.

Jesus, himself, tells us, in a section where he is talking about hypocrites who were primarily concerned about how they looked – their image of righteousness and orthodoxy – that “if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But **if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins**” (Matthew 6:14). In verse 12 he essentially says that we should pray for the same kind of forgiveness for ourselves that we offer to others. You can see why this is such a grievous heart problem. To have been the recipient of grace we did not deserve only to withhold that

same grace from someone else because we think we are better than they are – it really doesn't get much worse than this. Take a moment right now and read Matthew 18: 21-35. Please read it.

Ask the same question of God right now: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?" He might answer you with another question of his own: "How many times have I forgiven you?" According to this passage in Matthew, we have thrown away our gift if we deliberately withhold forgiveness. It strikes at the very heart of who God is and what he has done. It's an excellent gauge of whether or not we "get it." "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you **unless you forgive your brother from your heart.**"

Take a look at one more passage for me – Luke 7:36-50. The Pharisee was disturbed that Jesus would give this "sinner" woman the time of day. "If he only knew what she was really like," he thought. He was not only experiencing contempt for the sinner, but for the one who was open to receiving her – to Jesus, himself. The Pharisee had a heart problem. He thought he was better than this woman. He failed to understand his own need for forgiveness. The woman came seeking and needy. She was poor in spirit. The church leader – I mean, Pharisee – came to the table seeing himself superior in righteousness and in need of nothing, and he very well could have been "flawless" from a ritualistic/legalistic point of view. But he was in desperate need of a heart transplant and, as is common with heart disease, he didn't even have a clue.

So let me close by encouraging you to accept your gift of grace and "pay it forward."

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him" (1 John 2: 9-11).

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1).

"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him" (1 John 3:14,15).

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God . . . whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love . . . Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another . . . if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:7-12).