

Responsibility, Inability and Grace



Gary Wilkerson July 15, 2013

I've written before about my reputation for always preaching on grace. I've actually toyed with publishing a book titled *Confessions of an Extreme Gracist*. Not an appropriate title, maybe, but it's a tag I wear proudly anyway.

At times some people in my church will hint that I'm overdoing it with the grace message: "Don't you think we need more balance?" That's an odd question when you think about it. How can grace be overdone? Didn't God himself "overdo it" with grace? Isn't that the very nature of grace—something that's so overdone as to be scandalous? Grace isn't something that can be balanced. What could you possibly balance it out with? No grace?

My feeling is that we in the church haven't even begun to scratch the surface of grace. We take a few sips from the cup of grace from time to time in our walk with God, and then we gradually start to rely on our abilities the rest of the way.

Yet I understand why these questions come up. We all want to know what our responsibilities to God are. Living for the gospel has certain requirements. If we look at Jesus' commands—one of which calls for perfection—and then we look at our sinful lives, we're looking at two very different realities. It begs the question, "Why doesn't this add up?"

The problem comes when we try to remedy the problem of these two different realities. Most of us do this by applying the law—by working harder and taking matters into our own hands. Of course, it's good for us to be convicted over having a lukewarm heart. It's good that we're dissatisfied with how we treat our spouse or family. The Holy Spirit is faithful to shine his spotlight on our problem areas—meaning, sin areas—and point out where he wants to transform us. But we can't change ourselves through commitment or willpower. The change that needs to take place in us comes from a place deeper than the law—or our performance—can provide.

We can't pick and choose our areas of obedience.

We're all required to do what the Lord calls us to do. When Jesus says we are to be born again, to have faith, to pray and seek his face, to love our neighbor, to love our wife as Christ loves the church, his every command is yes and amen. Yet some churches prefer certain areas of obedience over others. They emphasize evangelism, or social justice, or political activism, or serving the poor, or prayer. They may not admit it, but they see other churches' emphases as lesser in God's eyes.

No church is pleasing to God when it runs on one cylinder instead of eight. He simply won't allow us to ignore certain of his commands. Read Revelation 3 to get a picture of his displeasure when we do that. Any person or church who isn't obeying God's commands is living in disobedience—no ifs, ands or buts.

Yet perfect obedience isn't possible. It isn't within the realm of our ability. That's why we tend to emphasize certain areas of obedience in our lives—because they're easier to fulfill than others. We may even get rewarded for doing them. But that misses the point completely.

Having a life of joy and victory doesn't hinge on whether we succeed or fail at obeying God's commands. It has everything to do with how we go about obeying God's commands. I learned this as a child in church. I was taught

that I could manifest spiritual changes by my own will. Youth leaders told us, “You can change yourself so that temptations don’t return. You can pull yourself up out of anything.” It doesn’t take long to see how futile this is. As a friend of mine says, “When I was twenty-five I wanted to change the world. Now that I’m forty-five, I can’t even change myself.”

The point is not to make changes in ourselves. The point is to allow God’s grace to empower us to transformation—in ourselves and in our world.

Consider the commands Jesus gives us.

Let’s look first at Jesus’ command to be born again. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Most of us picture Jesus playing a violin as droves of hurting people throng to him. But Jesus isn’t just offering an invitation. He’s telling us—commanding us—to come to him because he alone supplies the rest that our souls need.

Yet is it even possible for us to “come to him”? According to Jesus, it’s impossible: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Why would Christ command us to do something we can’t do?

We’re being given an important lesson here—one that’s critical to the Christian life. That is, when we’re given a command, it’s not enough to charge ourselves up and say, “I’m your man, Lord!” If we do this, we’re in trouble before we’ve even begun. The fact is, when we’re given a command in the gospels, it exposes our inability. God does this on purpose. Even as he reveals to us his will and commands, he also shows us our inability to achieve them on our own.

That’s why Jesus follows every impossible command with a promise. First he says, “No one can come to me unless the Father draws him.” Then immediately he says, “And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44, my emphasis). God not only will draw us to himself but will raise us up into new, resurrection life. His power enables us to walk in a new covenant with him.

We don’t have the ability to have new life on our own. It comes only through him. Likewise, the same power that saves us by grace also keeps us by grace. “Whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (John 3:21, my emphasis).

I love how the King James Version translates this phrase: “That his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.” The meaning is, “worked out in God.” God is fashioning the work in us. That’s why he follows every command with a promise. As soon as he reveals our inability, he reveals his ability and willingness to accomplish it all in us.

Now consider God’s commands regarding prayer.

First we are told, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near” (Isaiah 55:6). Then the Bible says, “No one understands; no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). In Scripture it’s a given that we won’t seek the Lord as we should.

Again and again we’re shown God’s standard of perfection—and our inability to reach it. Why? It’s so we can avoid the fate of the Pharisees. They got up early in the morning and prayed long prayers. They constructed rules to keep a holy appearance of behavior. But Jesus points out that while they appeared clean on the outside, their hearts were dark and rotten.

God is after a deeper work in us—deeper than we could ever accomplish on our own. Paul sums it all up in one brief passage: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:1-3).

When our obedient works aren’t fashioned by the grace of God, we feel it. On the surface we may feel proud of what we seem to achieve. But when we fail, we feel discouraged to the point of giving up, thinking, “This is too heavy a burden. I can’t take it anymore.”

Exactly! That's the point: It is too heavy a burden. It's why Jesus tells us, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus is speaking here of works that are wrought in God, not in our own ability.

Without his grace to empower us, we can pray for hours a day, we can read the Bible through the evening, we can evangelize all weekend and, yes, even win souls. But a believer with an ungraced heart will not move the world or himself one inch closer to God.

Please don't misunderstand me. There is a place for discipline in our walk with Christ. But the remedy isn't to place more of a fleshly burden on ourselves. Think about it: You feel guilty because you can't pray for thirty minutes a day, so you commit to pray for an hour. How do you think that's going to work out?

We know God's commands are good— that they are pure, true and unyielding in their call for us to lead a godly life. Yet when our lives don't align with his commands, more effort is not the remedy. Gritting our teeth doesn't fulfill any responsibility to God.

Let's face it: Most of us, including me, tend to start off in grace and slowly default to our own ability. We live as if walking with God is like owning a home: We ask our parents for help with a down payment but then we work to meet the mortgage payments on our own. No! Jesus' shed blood isn't a down payment for anything – it is everything!

Our life in Christ begins in grace, it continues in grace, and it will end in grace.

Once we grasp this, our lives will be marked by freedom, not bondage; by joy, not weariness; by delight, not dread. Then it will no longer seem like a duty to spend time in God's presence, but a joyous gift. After all, Jesus says, we are no longer his servants but his friends.

None of this negates our responsibility. Inevitably, some readers will say, "The way you're preaching, nobody will ever pray again. No one will discipline himself to the task. You yourself just quoted the verse, 'No one seeks God, not one.' We don't have it in us. If we follow what you're suggesting, nobody will ever know God the way he wants us to."

Of course there is a time to set the alarm clock to rise and pray. But don't dare do it without the oil of God's grace. And don't dare read your Bible without grace, or you'll come away condemned and fearful rather than enlightened and empowered. Why? It is God's work of grace to show us our inability. That's the only way we will ever acknowledge his ability.

No, don't give up on your accountability group. Don't give up on your dedicated prayer time. Don't give up on your Bible study group. Don't give up on any of these wonderful disciplines—unless they're getting in the way of God's grace working fully in your life.

Grace rains down on us from the Lord's throne; it doesn't rise upward from us to him. That's what will draw the world to our lives and testimonies. When people see real grace raining down on us, they'll see the wonders that it works in us. And they'll know our hearts have been won not by our work but by God's. May it be so in your life today.

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