

Grace and Responsibility



Gary Wilkerson June 3, 2013

I have a default system at work in me. It's a reflex that springs into motion whenever I fall short in my walk with the Lord. I'm talking about my tendency to turn to works rather than to God's incredible grace to reestablish my standing with him.

I believe most of us have this default system at work in us. It's why Paul emphasizes God's grace again and again throughout the New Testament. In letter after letter, he hammers home the sufficiency of grace for our right relationship with the Lord.

Yet this default system — the urge to turn to works to make up for our shortcomings — is constantly at work in us. It's what moves me to preach grace so often; I preach it because I need it. At times my church thinks I'm overdoing it, because people keep saying to me, "I know I'm under grace. But what is my responsibility?" It's a good question. In a covenant of grace — one in which God has done everything required for our salvation — what part do we play?

For many of us, the concept of grace holds no power in our daily walk. We know God has bestowed on us precious, costly gifts in his Son and the Holy Spirit; therefore, we think we shouldn't fail or fall short. So when we do, we're surprised. It doesn't compute that we could still be awful sinners after all God has done for us. We picture him shaking his head in regret.

And so we convince ourselves we can do better. We re-double our efforts at prayer, at Bible reading, at getting involved in ministry. We pledge to ourselves we'll make up for the ways we've fallen short. Here's the crazy thing about this default system: We do this knowing full well our works do nothing to gain right standing with God. Do we really think more works are what God wants from us? Two hours of prayer instead of one? Does he really want us busier?

Only two things result from these efforts to save ourselves. First, we avoid facing up to our sinfulness. Second — and much worse — we rob ourselves of drinking from God's deep well of grace. Paul faced this dilemma early on in the church. When the Christians in Galatia tried to please God through works of the law, Paul confronted them: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:1-2). Paul was asking, "Do you really think you can improve on the cross?"

It's easy to get confused over our responsibility to God because of two conflicting realities in our lives. The first reality is Jesus' words to us: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

When I think of the perfect Christian life, my thoughts turn to the book of Acts. According to this amazing biblical record, our faith can move God to work miracles. Our testimony can lead the lost to a transformed life. Who among us doesn't aspire to this? That brings up the second reality of our lives: We are imperfect. We continually, consistently, seriously fail God. What a contrast.

I listen to sermons by certain Christian leaders because I admire the ways they live for the gospel. Their stories stir me and I think, "I want to do what they're doing." But after the sermon is over I realize, "This stirring in me feels

familiar. What does it remind me of?"

The answer is: my childhood. The church I grew up in regularly hosted preachers, evangelists and missionaries. These were heroes to me because they accomplished amazing things in God's name. They usually ended their message by saying, "If you truly want to please God, you'll give everything you have to go and serve him."

Talk about exciting. I would race to the altar and pray, "Lord, make me a missionary like this person." Later I would open my parents' National Geographic magazine and see how people actually lived in Africa. Gradually, my prayer changed to, "Lord, don't send me!"

Next I would hear a healing evangelist testify of the miracles she had seen God perform for suffering people. But when I prayed for my sick friends, I only caught what they had.

I'm not making light of these things. We all have a responsibility to bring hope and healing to a lost and hurting world. But when we don't see the same results in our lives that others have, it's easy to get discouraged. How do we reconcile these conflicting realities?

Any work that God calls us to has to be empowered by his grace.

God's grace has to cover whatever he calls us to do. See if these words describe your walk with the Lord: Burdened. Stressed. Heavy laden. Mentally drained. Physically fatigued. These are the outcomes whenever we re-double our fleshly efforts to please God. They're clear signs that the law, not God's grace, is in operation. Now consider these words: Obligated. Dutiful. Indebted. Guilty. Ashamed. Condemned. Do these words describe someone who has been set free?

The freedom Christ won for us on the cross isn't just good news for the lost. It's good news for every believer. Yet many continue to live under a cloud thinking they're not a quality son or daughter to God. They think he loves them because he has to, not because he likes them.

The gospels tell us differently. Jesus called all twelve of the sinful, flawed, imperfect disciples to him because he wanted their friendship: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

Jesus chose to share the deep desires of the Father's heart with these friends. He has also done that with you when you chose to follow him. So when you go to him in prayer or walk into church, his attitude isn't, "Not you again." The opposite is true! He wants to be with you, to sit beside you, to be your friend, because he is actually pleased with you.

You may think, "How could that be? Nothing I see in my life could possibly be pleasing to the Lord." That's why Scripture tells us, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). It's impossible for anyone to live according to the law for very long. We may keep telling ourselves, "I'll get it right tomorrow. I just have to reenergize myself" — but we can't maintain it. Eventually we're overcome by an impossible burden, and we come to the end of ourselves.

As the "end" of the law, Christ is its very fulfillment — meaning he has made right all that the law would correct. And Jesus is the one waiting for us at the end of all our self-efforts. Only in him do we find true freedom — not in any "works" we seek to accomplish.

Now let me ask you: Do the following words appeal to you? Life. Joy. Delight. Boldness. Liberty. Unselfconsciousness. Can you imagine having this kind of enjoyment in your service to Christ? How can you obtain such empowering joy?

It doesn't come through works of righteousness. We don't have the power to be righteous on our own. We may do our best, strive our hardest and offer all sincerely to God, but it still amounts to no more than filthy rags. Freedom comes through Christ's righteousness alone. When his righteousness becomes ours, we are set free from striving. And his Spirit is in us, freeing us from the law of sin and guilt and making all things new.

That freedom is everything. It means liberty to carry out the godly responsibilities he calls us to do. Suddenly we are able to witness with abandon. We have a boldness not of our own making. Grace flows through us rather than

a deadly, binding legalism.

There is only one way to walk in the freedom and joy Christ has won for us: by accepting his gift of righteousness. Doing this means embracing grace, not works. It doesn't mean shirking our responsibilities; on the contrary, it's the only way to take on real responsibility — by coming under the covering of his grace. We can't accomplish anything in his name otherwise!

The only true responsibility of the Christian is that which is born of God's grace.

Isaiah prophesied, "They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (Isaiah 61:4). Isaiah's listeners couldn't fathom the kind of freedom and exploits he was describing here. For generations God's people had been crushed under the law, devastated by its burden.

The same was true for the people of Jesus' day. They were hard on themselves, accepting the legalistic burdens placed on them by religious leaders. That's why Christ's words were so revolutionary when he quoted directly from Isaiah to announce his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Isaiah 61:1).

Jesus knew what the gift of grace would do: It would set us free completely. And his message wasn't just for the unsaved. When he spoke of setting captives free, he was speaking to believers: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Today we are just as hard on ourselves as the people of Jesus' day were. We think of grace as being soft, easy, getting a pass. But grace is the mightiest power you will ever see at work in your life. It's also the only power that brings real fruit to your walk with God — your prayer life, your witness, your good deeds in his name. Only as we enter fully into God's grace will his church be stirred and empowered to walk in the glorious works he has set before us.

After reading this, are you still striving to be perfect? There's only one entrance to the path of perfection: through the gate of grace. You are already perfect in God's eyes, through the righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ. Now, here is your responsibility: Stop striving.

Your efforts only send you backward, not forward. They cause you to miss God's grace completely — grace that brings freedom, joy and power to do all that God has called you to do. The fact is, you're going to need grace upon grace as you go forward with Jesus. So now is not the time to re-double your efforts. It is time to trust that Christ has provided all the grace you need — at every step — to walk in the unique calling he has for you.

Jesus has called you to friendship, not to increase your efforts for salvation. It is up to you to walk in the freedom he has provided by his grace. Life, joy, delight, boldness — all of these are yours as you enter the fullness of his amazing work for you on the cross. May his grace reign in your life, for he has made you perfect in him! Amen.

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