

## Grace Rules



Gary Wilkerson September 29, 2014

I am convinced there is a hunger throughout the world for the uncompromised grace of Christ. Scripture attests to this hunger. Luke writes that when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, crowds of thousands “had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those troubled by evil spirits were healed” (Luke 6:18, NLT). These masses came because they had heard a rumor about a man of grace who would heal them.

“There were people from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and from as far north as the seacoasts of Tyre and Sidon” (6:17). The hurting masses didn’t travel those distances because they wanted to hear a preacher urge them to try harder. They were already worn down by discouragement, disease and despair over their efforts to remain godly. And this wasn’t just a gathering of “good” people. Many were probably on the fringes of life, people who were shoved aside by their broken condition. Whatever the case, observing the law had not brought them life.

To these hungry sojourners, Jesus’ reputation for grace turned out to be true. He not only preached grace but demonstrated it by healing them all: “Healing power went out from him, and he healed *everyone*” (6:19, my emphasis). Imagine it: Of all those thousands, no one went home unhealed. There wasn’t a sickness left. Not one broken life was left untouched. Incredibly, not a single soul present was unaffected by the powerful grace of Jesus Christ.

Many of us ignore Christ’s healing grace in the Sermon on the Mount and emphasize his beatitudes.

According to Luke’s account, Jesus proceeded straight from those healings to present the beatitudes: “Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, ‘God blesses you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours.

God blesses you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied. God blesses you who weep now, for in due time you will laugh’” (Luke 6:20-21). Other gospel accounts include additional blessings: to the humble (they will inherit the earth), to the pure of heart (they will see God) and to the merciful (they will be shown mercy).

As a boy, I measured my walk with Christ by how well I demonstrated humility, purity and mercy. If I caught myself being aggressive, I thought, “I need to be more humble and meek.” Or, if I had sexual thoughts, I wondered, “How will I ever be able to keep a pure heart?” Like many before me, I turned God’s gracious promise of blessing into laws I tried to keep. If I “lived” the beatitudes well enough, then maybe God would say, “Gary, you’re blessed.”

No! That is completely backward — and utterly contrary to Christ’s gospel. When Jesus looked on that crowd of people, he saw them already poor in spirit, on their knees in humility, harangued by sickness, exhausted by their efforts to live a good life. So what did he do? He spoke blessings upon them! Just as the Lord spoke creation into a void of utter darkness, Jesus spoke divine blessings onto ravaged sinners, people beaten down by life. He assured them, “You came here in mourning, but I say you are blessed in the eyes of God—blessed in your marriage, blessed in your labors, blessed in the depths of your soul.”

This was a radical message to their ears. These people only knew the terms of the old covenant. They thought they deserved to hear, “You’re cursed! You didn’t keep the law according to Deuteronomy; otherwise, your lives would be blessed. Because you’ve broken the law, you’ve brought down a curse on yourself.” Jesus told them the opposite: “Before you’ve done anything for me — before you’ve prayed, worshiped or confessed — I have already

blessed you!"

Despite Jesus' clear message of grace, many of us insist on living by legal scales.

Many Christians today envision their lives like the scales of justice. On one side sit all their godly deeds and on the other is a growing pile of sins and failures. If they feel their life tips too much toward failure, they're compelled to pray more, study their Bible more, go to church more. Yet no amount of additional good works can even out their self-made scale of righteousness.

I recently watched a video clip involving a scene at a fast-food drive-through. When the driver gave his order, the voice on the other end asked, "And then?" Feeling guilty, the driver added fries to his order. Again the voice came back, "And then?" Bewildered, the driver added a dessert. Again the voice asked, "And then?" This went on and on until finally the driver shouted, "No, no, no! No 'And then!'"

That's a picture of us, when we try to attain God's righteousness. The more self-effort we put forth, the closer we come to the moment when we're finally forced to shout, "No more 'And then!'" It explains why so many Christians feel exhausted at the very thought of serving God. Paul calls their self-efforts "dead works" for a reason: Their approach will never produce righteousness or joy but only weariness and misery. There is no life in it — only death — because it isn't Christ's gospel.

Paul writes, "The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many" (Romans 5:17). If death rules your walk — if you carry the weight of constant accusations of sin, if nothing you do is ever good enough—then you're listening to the old voice of the Adamic nature. From that old nature springs every fleshly attempt to appease God, which is contrary to your identity in Christ.

Paul then adds this: "Even greater [than Adam's sin] is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness" (5:17). How do we attain this righteousness? Paul tells us in the next phrase: "All who *receive* it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ" (5:17, my emphasis). We are destined to triumph over every sin — not through our own efforts, but through one man, Jesus. And so Christ urges us, "Why don't you take that scale of your own making and lay it down at the foot of the cross? I never called you to appease me. I have called you to do one thing: receive my blessing of grace."

By his great gift, Christ causes grace — rather than our sin nature — to rule over our lives.

Many Christians won't admit it, but they still want to hang onto their scales. Why? Deep down they believe God's grace is too good to be true. They think it buys them too much freedom — so much that they may slack off in their godly service and start sinning. They hold onto their sense of works because they're convinced it's the only thing that will keep them on a righteous path.

Paul anticipates this thinking, which ends in dead works. He responds, "Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you" (Romans 6:15-17).

What is the teaching Paul refers to here? It is that we are now owned by the grace of Jesus Christ! Thus, we no longer continue sinning as we did before, because that is no longer our identity: "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Finally, Paul says, "My dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God" (Romans 7:4).

The new life we have been given — the life of Christ himself — resurrects us to serve him in freedom, peace and joy. Unshackled from exhausting works of obligation, we now can shout with David, "Lord, I delight to do your will!" And we can't help but witness about Jesus to a world that's hungry, desperate, starved for his grace. In a word: Grace produces results!

Friend, you can't wring life out of something that's dead. Only Jesus has the power to resurrect our old, dead man into new life. That kind of grace is incomprehensible, so far beyond our understanding that we'll never fully grasp it

in this life. Likewise, we'll never be able to attain it on our own. As Paul writes, "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Note that last phrase: You are known completely by the Lord — even amid your messed-up life of mourning and brokenness — and he says you are blessed. You see, the new life you have isn't the result of attaining but of receiving. So, will you lay down your scales and walk in the new life Jesus has graced you with? You have nothing to bring to him because he has already spoken his blessing over you. Receive it — and enter every good work he has prepared for you by grace!

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