

GRACE VERSUS WORKS

Luke 18:14, Daniel 9:18

By Raymond White

One of the great tensions of the Bible is God's demand for righteousness verses his mercy when we fail — the ongoing theological battle of grace verses works.

The notion of good works (righteousness) as the means to salvation has two problems: First, we never get it right. Whenever we do some right thing, there seems to be something flawed about it. Our pride, our greed, our subliminal intentions always mar our best "works" with ulterior motive. And second, when we *do* do something great and noble, we worry that we are sinning because we feel that we did something great and noble. So the really insidious catch-22 is that while God calls us to goodness, he also bans us from ever feeling that we've achieved any of the goodness that he demands. And so we are always chasing our tails and are damned from the get-go. You must do this but you must never know that you are doing it.

And so we turn to grace, and pray something like, "Forgive us for the sins that we have committed, or *may* have committed, or may *not* have committed."

This prayer is ludicrous. It is also a display of false humility, and worse, it is a pretext to commit real sin. Because when we put the "sin" of, for example, a too short hem line on a par with dismembering babies in abortion clinics, we will fixate on the trivial sin because we can handle *that* level of guilt while completely ignoring the real sin of murdering babies.

The truth is, we are willing to feel guilt for inconsequential sins because that allows us to ignore really hideous sins. It's just as Jesus said: we swallow the camel and gag at the gnat. Feeling guilty makes us feel righteous and that mitigates our true guilt.

But there is another problem with grace, and that is our inclination to abuse it. It's like welfare. If you are unemployed and broke, the government feels sorry for you and gives you welfare. Which, while well-intended, becomes enabling to the chronic unemployed who realize, "Hey, if someone else is supporting me, I don't have to work. Woopee!" So welfare, which is good and noble, has a dark side. And so does God's grace in that grace becomes its own temptation to sin.

One might argue, "But we don't have to yield to that temptation of abusing God's grace." True. But we don't have to yield to any other temptation either, do we? That we do is evidenced by the need for grace, which we then abuse.

And so in politics we have the tension of generous welfare and abusing it. And in religion we have the tension of generous grace and abusing it.

This wouldn't be so bad if it merely drew us into philosophical conversation. The problem is, this theological tension draws us into heated theological debate, pitting Christian against Christian to the point of literal warfare, and that's really bad. It is also unnecessary if we would allow ourselves to realize that the argument, both sides of it, is all over the Bible. Once we allow that — that the conflict itself and not merely either side of it — is Biblical, then we can be at peace with each other.

Here are some Bible verses that show God's demand for righteousness and God's mercy side-by-side, interweaving each other like a two-strand rope.

Ezekiel 13:22 [the false prophets] *strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life.*

This verse warns us to be weary of cheap salvation. Words are cheap. Anybody can say anything. “I’m okay, you’re okay, grace and faith will take care of everything,” is easy to say, but saying it doesn’t make it so.

Daniel 9:4 ...mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments.

Here we have both sides in one verse. If we keep the commandments, why do we need mercy? The point is: we do.

Proper Christians understand that they have to keep the commandments. That is not an option, that is a requirement. But then those Christians are accused by other Christians of being “works oriented,” saved by works and not by grace, which is not true.

Let’s read this verse again. Mercy comes to those who obey! That sounds like a contradiction (if you keep the commandments, why do you need mercy), but it’s not. It is the reality that true Christians must subscribe to. Living the commandments does not mean living they flawlessly. If it meant that, then there would be no commandment keepers. You must be a commandment keeper in order to receive the mercy for failing to live up to the demands of the commandments. Confusing, isn’t it?

Daniel 9:18 ...*we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.*

It is a mistake to pray, “God, save me because I’m so good. Much better is, “God, save me because you’re so merciful.” We are commandment keepers. That doesn’t make us righteous, only God’s mercies can make us righteous.

Daniel 12:10 *Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand.*

This verse pushes our grace theology in both directions at the same time. There are two kinds of people: righteous and wicked. Both are sinners. But the righteous must be purified and made white; in other words, we are not pure already or on our own.

For works people: If you think sinless perfection is the necessary goal, understand that you have an unobtainable goal. You have to be purified.

For grace people: If you think that “saved” people can do whatever they want and still be “saved” on their faith alone, this verse says not so. You have to be purified.

This verse is like a two edged sword, it cuts both ways.

Hosea 8:13 *They sacrifice flesh for the sacrifices of mine offerings, and eat it; but the LORD accepteth them not; now will he remember their iniquity, and visit their sins: they shall return to Egypt.*

Because of your sins, God rejects your religion. For Catholics and Mormons that means God rejects your sacraments and ordinances. For Evangelicals that means God rejects your supposed faith. Whatever you are doing that you think will get you into heaven, it won't work unless it is coupled with righteousness.

***Jonah 2:8** They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. **:9** But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.*

This is a great verse. God wants to reach you with his grace and mercy. What keeps us from it is our own lying vanities: that we can do it (reach heaven, be saved, be righteous, be strong, be successful, whatever) on our own. We can't. Once you arrive at that reality, you can find grace. In other words, my salvation is not my own doing.

***Luke 18:14** I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*

At what point should a righteous man feel confident that he has finally achieved righteousness? The answer is: never. We are working towards an unachievable goal.

Why then should we work towards righteousness? Because God says we must. But how, then, are we ever to be saved? Not by our righteousness. That's where the grace comes in. You work towards righteousness as God demands. But then you give up hoping that you will ever achieve it or that it will save you. Then you allow God to save you by his good grace. But if you don't struggle with it, he won't save you. That seems to be the message of grace, as I understand it.