

On the Getting of Grace

BY DAVID POSEY

“You haven’t got it *right!*” says the exasperated piano teacher. Junior is holding his hands the way he’s been told. His fingering is unexceptionable. He has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart’s not in it, only his fingers. What he’s playing is a sort of music but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping. He has succeeded in boring everybody to death including himself.

Fred Buechner, Wishful Thinking

Getting what scripture says about grace squared up with the demands for righteousness and obedience is always a challenge for preachers and teachers who desire to teach God’s word faithfully. It’s not that it’s hard to find out what the Bible says; it’s pretty easy, actually:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”
Ephesians 2:8

While this text has often been abused, in context the meaning is clear: we can do nothing to earn salvation, it is a gift (it is *salvation*, not faith, that is “the gift of God”). Listen to this description of grace by N. H. Snaith, from the *Theological Word Book of the Bible*:

“The Bible is the story of the saving work of God, that is, of the grace of God. Without grace, there would never have been any chosen people, any story to tell at all.”

But grace isn’t just lathered on to everyone indiscriminately; it has to be received. Look at Ephesians 2:8 again: “...by grace you have been saved *through faith*.” Grace is only effective if we receive it by faith and continue to live by faith.

Yet grace is often romanticized as just another word for God’s love and mercy, and God’s love is often depicted as syrupy sweet sentimentality. That’s a far cry from the way the Bible describes grace. Grace, in fact, is meaningless if removed from the landscape of seriously bad news. The bad news is that all people need grace because all have sinned. That means they have violated the law of God — and that’s the worst news the world has ever heard. And it’s personal. It’s everyone’s personal 9-11.

The word “grace,” as used most often in scripture, cannot be understood apart from law and sin. It all starts with law — from the one law given to Adam and Eve in the garden to the thick book of law given to the Israelites; it all starts with law. Law is our heavenly Father’s communication with people on the earth. “This is my will: do it,” says the Lord. Our souls are put at risk at the moment we fail to do all the will of God. That failure is not a mistake or an error or a disease or a weakness: *it is sin against God*. Speaking of the law, Paul said,

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. *Romans 7:13*

The only remedy for mankind's failure to keep the law is grace, the gift of God. But the grace that saves is not a warm feeling arising out of God's love for man; it is the gift of his Son — his beaten, bloodied, sacrificed-on-the-cross Son. Unless you're talking about speaking with grace (Colossians 4:6) or extending grace (mercy) to others, then you must see the blood-stained cross of Christ every time you see or utter the word. And knowing that the power of the cross is your only source of salvation from sin, you grab hold of grace, through faith.

God will not save anyone apart from faith (see Hebrews 11:6, "without faith it is impossible to please him..."; see also Romans 5:1-2). But what is "faith"?

There's the rub. Many of those who admit that faith is necessary to acquire grace seem to think that faith requires nothing more than mental assent to some propositions. Is that true? if we think that faith is mere belief in a set of Bible statements, we may be doing many "right" things, but we will not be "right." Assent to propositions is essential, but without more, it can produce a lifeless, robotic "faith" that can be exercised without love. Even "the demons believe and tremble," James 2:19 tells us.

If we're going to get a grip on grace we have to examine ourselves to see if we are truly *faithful*. Faith requires a fresh compulsion to do all of God's bidding, regardless of the consequences. Faith is the outworking of our love for God, whom we are supposed to love with all our heart, soul and mind. Without love, we are no closer to God than the demons that James mentions.

But if we love God with all our being, then our aim in life will be to imitate him, to replicate, albeit imperfectly, the life of Christ while we live on earth. We'll be obsessed with that goal.

This is what the story at the beginning is trying to illustrate. We can do all things "right," but not be justified. We can say all the right things, believe all the right things, even *do* all the right things. But if our heart is not in it, it's all for nothing. We may be playing the right notes but there will be no music in our souls. Others may not see it, but God sees it.

When we get off-balance on the "doing" side, we minimize grace and begin to believe that we are working our way to heaven. This can be subtle because we sing about working for the Lord, and talk often, rightly, about being righteous and holy and just. But if we forget that we are saved, ultimately, by grace, we will be *self-righteous* (thinking we have gained our righteousness through our works). This leads to becoming self-righteous, and we'll either fade into complacency about our own spiritual health or we'll judge others using ourselves as the standard of righteousness. Or both.

On the flip side is another dangerous product of this kind of thinking. We may think we are never good enough. Perfectionists suffer mightily with this kind of thinking. All of it can be traced back to a misunderstanding of the power of grace of God and that can lead to anxiety and depression in some cases.

Another problem arises if we emphasize grace to the exclusion of a *working* faith. That faulty thinking can lead to, at the very least, a “sloppiness” in our view of holiness and, at worst, “licentiousness.” Jude warned against this in Jude 4,

For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (NASB)

I’ve heard “grace” used on social media to justify all sorts of activities — watching certain movies/TV programs, dressing immodestly, using bad language. Some have reported hearing friends use “grace” to cover watching pornography. If that’s not turning grace into licentiousness, I don’t know what is. And the attitude which some display in proclaiming their “liberty” is really quite shocking.

No, we’re not perfect and we all will be saved by grace, if we’re saved. But if we use grace as a cloak for unholy conduct, we are making something cheap that is very precious. Our sins, for which Christ had to die, should make us sick, not “proud.”

Grace *is* the most precious gift we’ve ever received. We don’t deserve it and we better not abuse it. Actually, we can’t abuse it, because if we treat it lightly, or fail to give it the power it should have, we won’t have the gift for long. It’ll be taken from us (Gal. 5:4).

But let’s live our lives, not like the boy who played the piano robotically, but as those who have been saved by the gracious act of God in Christ. *Make sure your heart is in it!*