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Grace-Motivated Holiness

by David Dunlap

The Scriptures tell us to be holy for God is holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). Many of us gloss over this text, thinking that such holiness is impossible for the ordinary Christian. Does God really expect us to be as holy as He is? He is infinitely pure. We are imperfect persons prone to sin. We wonder, “Does this standard ignore my sin nature?” Since this command is His will, we must make sense of it in order to be conformed to the image of His Son.

How does God enable us to meet His requirements for holiness? Much of the answer is exemplified in the travelers’ journey in John Bunyan’s famous book *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Late in their travels, Bunyan’s pilgrims discovered a wonderful mirror. Bunyan’s pilgrim Mercy says:

“There is a looking glass that hangs in the dining room, off which I cannot take my mind. Now the glass was one in a thousand. It would present a man, one way, with his own features exactly; but turn it around and it would show the very face and similitude of the Prince...they will see the very crown of thorns, and nails in His hands and His feet.”¹

There was nothing unusual about the front of the reflective glass; however, on the back appeared an image of the crucified Lord Jesus. Everyone who looked in the mirror’s face saw an ordinary reflection, including the blemishes and scars that always accompany humanity. Yet those who observed themselves from the reverse side of the mirror saw only the glory of the Son of God.

The Way of Holiness

This amazing glass from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* illustrates the answer to how we can be holy in this life. Our holiness is not so much a matter of what we achieve as it is a matter of the grace of God in our lives. God can certainly see our faults and frailties reflected in the mirrors of our lives. Still, He chooses to look at us through the lens of the Lord Jesus Christ’s

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C. H. Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

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**Timothy J.
Keller**

holiness. As a result, He loves and treasures us as if we had never sinned.

Many years ago, the preacher Phillip Brooks explained the acronym G-R-A-C-E as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense,” which beautifully expresses how the blessings of God are mercifully passed on to us as a result of His suffering for our sins. When we trust that Christ’s work saves us, not our own efforts, then God mercifully grants us the riches of His salvation. God sees us as though we were as holy as His own Son and treats us as lovingly as He treats His Son, despite our many imperfections. According to Timothy J. Keller, respected author and former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City:

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”²

God’s Viewpoint and Our Standing in Grace

Christians cherish the truth that God looks upon them through the lens of Christ’s complete redemption. Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and when we trust in Christ’s death, we are declared right with God—justified. Just as objects look red when viewed through a red lens or green through a green lens, God sees us as infinitely righteous when He looks at us through Jesus. This standing in grace should be our greatest joy; however, a misunderstanding of how God views us after we are justified robs many believers of their joy.

Running the Race with Grace Motivation

We run the race with the knowledge that His grace does not cease just because we have faltered. Grace becomes not just a means whereby God once justified us; it is also the means by which we are continually encouraged and enabled to serve and worship Him.

Since grace is the means by which we find the joy that gives us strength, it is vital that we refine our vision of how God views us. Whether our lives will be typified by joy or by despondency depends largely on our perspective of His grace, the cross, and our complete redemption. Will earth’s or heaven’s perspective dominate our vision?

We must see heaven’s view so clearly that we will never stop seeing ourselves as God sees us. If we cannot lift our eyes from an earthly perspective, then we will so focus on our weaknesses and stumblings that the race to please God will be misery. But if we remember that God is the “lifter of our heads” (Psalms 3:3), then we will raise our eyes to see God’s love for His own. When we see that His regard for us does not waver, then His grace will stir our hearts to walk even more faithfully.

The Misunderstanding of Grace and Legalism

After initially trusting Christ, many Christians embark on an endless pursuit of trying to satisfy God with good works. Such Christians believe that they are saved by God's grace but are kept in His care by their personal efforts. This belief makes the Christian life a perpetual treadmill that futilely strives for God's affection.

Indeed, we run the race that God has set out for us; however, we do not run to gain God's affection. Rather, we run with the assurance that He never withdraws His grace. God's grace in our lives is not based upon our zeal, our service, or our commitment; it rests on His infinite, matchless character. God continually encourages and enables us to live for Him with all that we have and all that we are. When we realize that His love for us does not waver, then His grace will energize our walk, strengthen our hearts, and delight our souls.

The Matchless Love of God and Obedience

Nevertheless, we must take care that we do not speak too much about God's love when promoting godliness. For if all we do is keep assuring believers that God loves them, what then, is to keep them from taking advantage of grace and doing whatever they want? Although God does not love us because we obey Him, we cannot know the blessings of His love without obedience. Thus, any perspective of grace that undermines Christ's demand for obedience denies us intimacy with Him. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Grace should not make obedience optional. When God removes good works as a condition for our acceptance, He does not remove righteousness as a requirement. The standards of Scripture glorify God and protect His people from spiritual harm.

We cannot undermine the legitimate standards of the Bible without grave consequences. Grace that uses God's unconditional love as an excuse for selfish indulgence is not true grace at all. We must be wary of those who claim the motto: "God will love you no matter what you do." Legalism makes believers think that God accepts them on the basis of what they do. But licentiousness makes believers think that God does not care what they do. Both errors have grave spiritual consequences. Such self-centered living ultimately burdens us with guilt and discouragement.

The Joy and Power in Running the Race

While Legalists are convinced that they are on the right path, they soon find that this road is strewn with spiritual dangers. Instead of joy in their Christian walks, they find frustration; instead of power in service, they experience anguish and despondency. They sense there is something wrong.

“Legalism will lead us to measure standing before God by our own progress in personal holiness, our efforts, our services, our doings, our ways, our feelings, our frames, our something or another. All this produces is spiritual darkness, and gloomy uncertainty...”

C. H. Macintosh
(1820-1906)



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With careful insight, author C. H. Macintosh warns:

*"Legalism will lead us to measure standing before God by our own progress in personal holiness, our efforts, our services, our doings, our ways, our feelings, our frames, our something or another. All this produces spiritual darkness, gloomy uncertainty, mental bondage, intense soul torture, depression, irritability, and sourness of temper...the harp is hung on the willow. The hymn of joyous praise can only be occasionally sung. The Lord's supper is abandoned or, if not abandoned, is gone through...without freshness, unction, power, elevation, or depth of spiritual tone."*³

God hates legalism because it does not deal with the condition of our sinful hearts; He loves grace because it transforms sinners into saints who love God and love others.

Conclusion

Through grace-motivated obedience, our lives become more Christlike. Concern for God's glory and for others increasingly replaces self-centeredness. Our obedience becomes a gracious response to God's grace rather than an attempt to bribe God for blessings. Nothing but grace can so humble a man and yet at the same time make him glad. (Titus 2:11-14). Grace overwhelms us with God's love, and as a result, our hearts respond to His desires. His purposes become our purposes. Our souls delight in service for Him, and we long to honor Him. True grace produces joy and promotes holiness.

Endnotes

1. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, (New York: Cogwell Publishers, 1935), p. 384
2. Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (New York, NY: Penguin 2013), p.17
3. C. H. Macintosh, *Short Papers, Vol. 1*, (Sunbury, PA:Believers Bookshelf,1975), p. 177