

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Grace vs. Holiness

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22; Romans 2:4

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One of the great dangers facing the church in these postmodern days is that professing believers will substitute the God of the Bible for a lesser deity of their own design—one that reflects their values, their morality, and their priorities. It's a subtle shift, as men and women who claim to know and love God de-emphasize aspects of His nature and attributes that don't sit well with them, or adhere to their worldview.

Even those who truly love God can venture onto that slippery slope, as they stress the more attractive features of God's character and sidestep those that offend and convict. As we saw last time, many believers have lost all sense of the fear of God, and instead imagine Him in more casual, friendly terms. If we're to truly worship the Lord, we need to eliminate such theological imbalance.

God's Grace Does Not Cancel His Holiness

Perhaps we have lost the fear of God because we take His grace for granted. At the very beginning, God said to Adam and Eve, "The day that you eat from [the forbidden tree] you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). They ate from it, but they were not struck dead on the spot. Their physical lives did not end that very day; in fact, they lived for hundreds of years. God showed them grace.

Throughout the Bible we see that God is gracious. The law called for death for adulterers, blasphemers, and even rebellious children. But many in the Old Testament violated God's laws without suffering the death penalty the law prescribed. David committed adultery, but God didn't take his life. God's grace is greater than all our sin.

And He continues to be gracious. You and I are alive only because God is merciful. Instead of punishing every sin instantly with the penalty we deserve, God extends grace and goodness. That kindness *ought* to provoke us to repentance: "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4).

But our hearts are so desperately wicked and corrupt that rather than receiving God's mercy with thankfulness and fearful contrition over our sins, instead, we begin to take His grace for granted. Consequently, when God does punish sin, we think He's unjust.

People look at the Old Testament and question the goodness of God. Some have even suggested that we shouldn't teach the Bible to children because the God it speaks of is too violent. Why, they ask, would God command the Israelites to destroy all the people living in Canaan? What kind of God would snuff out the life of a man simply for touching the Ark of the Covenant? How could a kind and

loving God cause a bear to destroy a group of children for making fun of a prophet's baldness? Did God really open the ground and swallow up people for rebelling against Moses' authority? Are we really supposed to believe that God would drown the whole world?

We are so used to mercy and grace that we think God has no right to be angry with sin. Romans 3:18 sums up the world's attitude: "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Do you know why God took the lives of certain people in the Bible? It was not because they were more sinful than anyone else; it was because somewhere along the line in the long process of grace and mercy, God had to set some examples to make men and women fear. He turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, not because she did something worse than anyone else ever did, but because she was to be a monument to the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

First Corinthians 10 cites some Old Testament people who were destroyed, and verse 11 says, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction." The highway of history is paved with God's mercy and grace. But there are billboards all the way along, posted so that sinners may know that God at any moment has a right to take their lives.

God is gracious, but don't confuse His mercy with justice. God is not unjust when He acts in a holy manner against sin. Don't ever get to the place that you are so used to mercy and grace that you abuse it by going on in your sin. Don't question God when He does what He has every right to do—to punish sin. Don't abuse God's grace; He will judge you, too. Remember this: He is holy, and He is to be feared.

The Real Question

The question is not why God so dramatically judges some sinners, but rather why He lets any of us live. God has every right to punish sin, and "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Lamentations 3:22 says, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (KJV).

God's mercy, however, is not His blessing on our sin. Most of us have been guilty of the same kind of sin of hypocrisy as Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Or we have come to the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner like those in Corinth who died for their sin (1 Corinthians 11:30). Or we have acted in a worldly fashion like Lot's wife, who was turned to a pillar of salt. The real question is not why God judged *them* so quickly and harshly, but why He hasn't done the same with us.

As we already noted, one major reason for God's mercy is that He is driving us to repentance. Romans 2:4 says, "The kindness of God leads you to repentance." God, by His mercy and kindness to us, is often actually bringing us to the point where we see His love for us and our need of repentance.

The Chronicles of Narnia, a series of children's books by C. S. Lewis, are a fantasy based in part on biblical truths. Aslan, the golden Lion, represents Christ. And in his description of that fierce and loving lion, Lewis has given evidence of a remarkable understanding of Christ's character.

In one scene, some talking beavers are describing Aslan to Lucy, Susan, and Peter, who are

newcomers to the realm of Narnia. In anticipation of meeting him, they ask questions that reveal their fears.

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” [1] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 75-76.

After the children met Aslan, Lucy observed that his paws were potentially very soft or very terrible. They could be as soft as velvet with his claws drawn in, or sharp as knives with his claws extended.

We in modern Christianity have somehow missed that truth. While we are thankful for the reality of God’s grace, and while we want to enjoy the experience of His love, we have somehow neglected the truth of His holiness. That imbalance is eating at the heart of our worship.

God is a living, eternal, glorious, merciful, holy being. His worshipers must come in the contrition and humility and brokenness of sinners who see ourselves against the backdrop of that holiness. And that should put such thanksgiving and joy in our hearts for the gift of His forgiveness.

We are to live lives of confession, repentance, and turning from our sin so that our worship is that which fully pleases God. We dare not go rushing into His presence in unholiness. We cannot worship God acceptably without sincere reverence and godly fear, and our worship must be arrayed in the beauty of holiness. We must return to the biblical teaching of God’s utter and awesome holiness in order to be filled with the gratitude and humility that characterizes true worship.



(Adapted from [Worship: The Ultimate Priority](#).)

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