

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

True Faith and True Grace

Scripture: Matthew 5:3; Matthew 9:13; Matthew 11:28–29; Luke 3:7–8; Luke 14:26–33; Luke 18:13–14; Romans 6:1–2; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Ephesians 2:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Titus 2:12; James 2:19
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Those who teach that repentance is extraneous to saving faith are forced to make a firm but unbiblical distinction between salvation and discipleship. This dichotomy, like that of the carnal/spiritual Christian, sets up two classes of Christians: believers only and true disciples. Most who hold this position discard the evangelistic intent of virtually every recorded invitation of Jesus, saying those apply to discipleship, not to salvation.

But this arbitrary distinction has done so much to undermine the authority of Jesus' message. Are we to believe that when Jesus told the multitudes to deny themselves (Luke 14:26), to take up a cross (Luke 14:27), and to forsake all and follow Him (Luke 14:33), His words had no meaning whatsoever for the unsaved people in the crowd? How could that be true of One who said He came not to call the righteous but sinners? (Matthew 9:13).

James M. Boice, in his book, *Christ's Call to Discipleship*, writes with insight about the salvation/discipleship dichotomy, which he frankly describes as "defective theology":

This theology separates faith from discipleship and grace from obedience. It teaches that Jesus can be received as one's Savior without being received as one's Lord.

This is a common defect in times of prosperity. In days of hardship, particularly persecution, those who are in the process of becoming Christians count the cost of discipleship carefully before taking up the cross of the Nazarene. Preachers do not beguile them with false promises of an easy life or indulgence of sins. But in good times, the cost does not seem so high, and people take the name of Christ without undergoing the radical transformation of life that true conversion implies. (p. 14)

The call to Calvary must be recognized for what it is: a call to discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ. To respond to that call is to become a believer. Anything less is simply unbelief.

Jesus' gospel invitation explicitly and unequivocally rules out any type of superficial belief. To make all of our Lord's difficult demands apply only to a higher class of Christians blunts the force of His entire message. It makes room for a cheap and meaningless faith—a faith that has absolutely no effect on the fleshly life of sin. That is not saving faith.

By Grace Through Faith

Salvation is solely by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). That truth is the biblical watershed for all we teach. But it means nothing if we begin with a misunderstanding of grace or a faulty definition of faith.

God's grace is not a static attribute whereby He passively accepts hardened, unrepentant sinners. Grace does not change a person's standing before God yet leave His character untouched. Real grace does not include, as Chafer claimed, "the Christian's liberty to do precisely as he chooses." True grace, according to Scripture, teaches us "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). Grace is the power of God to fulfill our New Covenant duties (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:19), however inconsistently we obey at times. Clearly, grace does not grant permission to live in the flesh; it supplies power to live in the Spirit (cf. Romans 6:1-2).

Faith, like grace, is not static. Saving faith is more than just understanding the facts and mentally acquiescing. It is inseparable from repentance, surrender, and a supernatural longing to obey. None of those responses can be classified exclusively as a human work, any more than believing itself is solely a human effort.

Misunderstanding on that key point is at the heart of the error of those who reject lordship salvation. They assume that because Scripture contrasts faith and works, faith must be incompatible with works. They set faith in opposition to submission, yieldedness, or turning from sin, and they categorize all the practical fruits of salvation as human works. They stumble over the twin truths that salvation is a gift, yet it costs everything.

Those ideas are paradoxical, but they are not mutually exclusive. The same dissonance is seen in Jesus' own words, "I will give you rest," followed by "take My yoke upon you" (Matthew 11:28-29). The rest we enter into by faith is not a rest of inactivity.

Salvation is a gift, but it is appropriated through a faith that goes beyond merely understanding and assenting to the truth. Demons have that kind of "faith" (James 2:19). True believers are characterized by faith that is as repulsed by the life of sin as it is attracted to the mercy of the Savior. Drawn to Christ, they are drawn away from everything else. Jesus described genuine believers as "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). They are like the repentant tax-gatherer, so broken he could not even look heavenward. He could only beat his breast and plead, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

That man's desperate prayer is one of the clearest pictures of genuine, God-wrought repentance in all of Scripture. His plea was not in any sense a human work or an attempt at earning righteousness. On the contrary, it represented his total abandonment of confidence in religious works. As if to prove it he stood "some distance away" from the praying Pharisee. He understood that the only way he could ever be saved was by God's merciful grace. On that basis, having first come to the end of himself, he received salvation as a gift. Jesus said that man "went down to his house justified" (Luke 18:14).

Our Lord's point in relating that account was to demonstrate that repentance is at the core of saving faith. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, literally means "to think after." It implies a change of mind, and some who oppose lordship salvation have tried to limit its meaning to that. But a definition of repentance cannot be drawn solely from the etymology of the Greek word.

Repentance as Jesus characterized it in this incident involves a recognition of one's utter sinfulness and a turning from self and sin to God (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9). Far from being a human work, it is

the inevitable result of God's work in a human heart. And it always represents the end of any human attempt to earn God's favor. It is much more than a mere change of mind—it involves a complete change of heart, attitude, interest, and direction. It is a conversion in every sense of the word.

The Bible does not recognize "conversion" that lacks this radical change of direction (Luke 3:7-8). A true believer cannot remain rebellious—or even indifferent. Genuine faith will inevitably provoke some degree of obedience. In fact, Scripture often equates faith with obedience (John 3:36; Rom. 1:5; 16:26; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). "By faith Abraham [the father of true faith] . . . obeyed" (Hebrews 11:8). That is the heart of the message of Hebrews 11, the great treatise on faith.

Faith and works are not incompatible. Jesus even calls the act of believing a work (John 6:29)—not merely a human work, but a gracious work of God in us. He brings us to faith, then enables and empowers us to believe unto obedience (cf. Romans 16:26).

We must remember above all that salvation is a sovereign work of God. Biblically it is defined by what it produces, not by what one does to get it. Works are not necessary to earn salvation. But true salvation wrought by God will not fail to produce the good works that are its fruit (cf. Matthew 7:17). No aspect of salvation is merited by human works, but it is all the work of God (Titus 3:5-7). Thus salvation cannot be defective in any dimension. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). As a part of His saving work, God will produce repentance, faith, sanctification, yieldedness, obedience, and ultimately glorification. Since He is not dependent on human effort in producing these elements, an experience that lacks any of them cannot be the saving work of God.

If we are truly born of God, we have a faith that cannot fail to overcome the world (1 John 5:4). We may sin (1 John 2:1)—we will sin—but the process of sanctification can never stall completely. God is at work in us (Philippians 2:13), and He will continue to perfect us until the day of Christ (Romans 8:29-30; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

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