



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
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January 2011

The Amazing Grace of God

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*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost,
but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

According to Wikipedia, “**Amazing Grace**” is a Christian hymn written by English poet and clergyman John Newton (1725–1807), published in 1779. With a message that forgiveness and redemption are possible regardless of the sins people commit and that the soul can be delivered from despair through the mercy of God, ‘Amazing Grace’ is one of the most recognizable songs in the English-speaking world.”

For over two hundred years many have been comforted by the singing of Newton’s wonderful song. Each time I sing or hear it my eyes water and a chill goes down my spine.

For over two thousand years the story of God’s grace through Jesus Christ has been told in the New Testament revelation. It is a story of assurance and hope that needs to be preached to lost and despairing sinners as well as to remind those of us saved by it, that, as Paul said, “by the grace of God I am what I am.”

One cannot preach the gospel without preaching the grace of God because it is called “*the gospel of the grace of God.*” (Acts 20:24). Paul expresses surprise that the Galatians had been so quickly removed “from him that called you into the **grace** of Christ unto another **gospel.**” (Gal. 1:6). From this we see that the gospel so emphasizes grace that “grace” and “gospel” are virtually used interchangeably. Grace and the gospel are so interwoven that it is said that “the grace of God” teaches ... (Titus 2:11-12). That which it teaches

is the same as the gospel teaches.

Preachers Charged with Neglecting Grace

So, when preachers are charged with neglecting the grace of God in their preaching, it should be taken seriously. If the accusation is true, it is terrible that such neglect could happen. If it is not true, then it is terrible that such unfounded charges are made against those who are in reality preaching “the gospel of grace of God.” These charges are usually made against preachers among churches of Christ by members of various denominations. This is because preachers among us have so much to say about keeping the commandments of God and living in harmony with God’s law. Since these critics have been taught and believe that salvation is “solely by grace,” we can understand why they would be inclined to make such a charge.

But in recent years more and more young preachers among us who grew up under the preaching of my generation are charging my generations with having left the impression that our salvation is on the basis of works (or as they often say, “law/commandment keeping”) rather than by grace. Thus, leaving most of their generation in fear and without assurance because they are aware of their failure to keep the law/commandments of Christ perfectly. So, it is now the mission of these young men to restore the awareness of the grace, mercy and love of God that was lost to their generation due the alleged neglect of the subject by the previous generation of preachers.

I believe, that for the most part, these younger men are sincere and truly believe the charges they are making. But I also believe they are mistaken about the vast majority of gospel preachers of my generation. We have heard and read great sermons in which the grace of God was taught and even emphasized over the years that I have tried to preach the gospel of the grace of God. It is admitted that in much of our preaching we said more about obeying commands than we specifically did about grace, for the same reason we said more about the *doctrine* of Christ than we did the *deity* of Christ – we did not believe these latter themes to be an issue with most of our audiences. So, we considered it sufficient to simply remind people periodically of these great truths, as Peter said, though they already knew them (Cf. 2 Pet. 1:12) and devote most of our teaching to the parts that our audiences needed more detailed teaching concerning, namely the need to “observe all things whatsoever (He has) commanded (us)” under the dispensation of the grace of God and to know and obey the doctrine of Christ.

These well-meaning and sincere brethren who make these charges may themselves be unwittingly doing the very thing they see my generation to have done. By emphasizing that the basis of salvation is love, mercy and grace and not law or commandment keeping, they are emphasizing grace, love and mercy and unwittingly minimizing strict obedience to God’s law.

Grace and Law Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Grace and faith are not mutually exclusive, neither are grace and law. It is not an “either grace/or” proposition, but an “and” proposition. Those who think so usually quote and misapply two verses: “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17) and “... for you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14 NKJV). Neither of these verses teaches that law keeping is either unimportant or unnecessary under the dispensation of Christ.

The first verse is not teaching there was *no grace or truth* under Moses nor *no law* under Christ. In fact, both the graciousness and mercy of God is taught under the law: “Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful.” (Psa. 116:5). And there is law

under Christ (Rom. 3:27; 8:2; Jas. 1:25; 2:12; 1 Cor. 9:21). John is certainly not saying that there was no truth under the law. The context shows that he is speaking of both truth and grace *in their fulness* being under Christ (v. 16). The second verse (Rom. 6:14) is one of those “not/but” statements that emphasizes the last part without eliminating the first – but both are necessary. It is like “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life (John 6:27 NASB). The first part is not only not forbidden but absolutely necessary, yet with emphasis upon the second part.

The Basis of Our Salvation and Fellowship with God

What then is the basis of our salvation and fellowship with God? It is not faith alone nor is it grace alone, nor is it works alone. All are involved. It is true that we cannot work our way to heaven but it is also true that we cannot depend on the grace of God alone to get us there. Paul says that we have to “work out (our) own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). In this text, the working out is the same as obeying because he says “as you have always obeyed.”

When Paul said that we are saved “by grace ... through faith,” (Eph. 2:8) he is summarizing the basis of our salvation. It is God’s grace combined with man’s faith. Neither is passive but both are active toward its object. It is by God’s active grace toward man and man’s active faith toward God. It includes every act of the grace of God toward us and our every act of faith toward God.

The grace of God is His answer to our sin for “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20-21). Without it we would all be condemned. There is no one so perfect in his obedience that he does not need forgiveness. Forgiveness comes from the grace of God. Yet there are conditions (acts that must be performed) in order to receive forgiveness, like repenting and being baptized (Acts 2:38). This is our salvation from past sins (Mark 16:16). Our eternal salvation yet to come it also conditioned upon obedience (Hebrews 5:8-9). The grace of God comes into play here as well. Our obedience will not be perfect so by the grace of God we are allowed to “confess our sins” with the assurance that “he is faithful

and just to forgive our sins” (1 John 1:9). However, we cannot “go on sinning willfully” without doing “insult(ing) the Spirit of grace” (Hebrews 10:26-29 nasb).

The word of God in the New Testament is called “the perfect *law* of liberty” by James (1:25) that requires our “doing of the *work*” in order to be blessed. It is also the law by which we will be judged (2:12).

But God will not be mocked. He will not allow us to take advantage of his grace by taking a lackadaisical attitude toward strict obedience to God’s word. In contrasting the old and new Testament systems, the Hebrew writer said, “For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him” (Hebrews 2:2-3 KJV).

As recipients of the grace of God, we must extend grace or mercy to others. We are told that we will have judgment without mercy if we show no mercy. (James 2:13). And Jesus quoted Hosea (“I will have mercy, and not sacrifice”) to the Pharisees who criticized his disciples for breaking the Sabbath law – did he not? (Matt. 12:7). From all of this, some have concluded that grace and mercy trumps strict obedience to law.

This assumes that Jesus conceded that his disciples had technically broken the Sabbath law and that he had also in healing on the Sabbath, but with good reason – mercy (or grace) takes precedence over sacrifice (obedience to law). But would he criticize the Pharisees for setting aside the commandment of God, (Mark 7:8-9) in one breath, and allow himself and his disciples to do so in the next breath? He is not even saying that since he is the “Lord of the Sabbath” that he had the right to set it aside in the name of mercy and grace. He is simply saying that, as such, he was in position to know what was lawful and unlawful to do on the Sabbath. He declared that his disciples were “guiltless” in what they did on the Sabbath. While the law forbade harvesting the fields on the Sabbath, it did not forbid eating grain on the Sabbath. That is all the disciples were doing. They were simply eating by reaching an picking the grain off the ear rather than off

the plate or table. Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath was not breaking the Sabbath law against “working” on that day. The Sabbath law allowed acts of mercy and the Pharisees knew it (Luke 13:15; 14:5). Mind you, they did set aside *the Jews’ traditions* about the Sabbath, but not *God’s law* in the name of mercy.

“But, did not Jesus justify David, in Matthew 12, for breaking the Sabbath,” some ask. No, he did not justify him. He specifically said that what David did was not lawful. What he was doing was exposing the Pharisee’s hypocrisy in condemning his disciples who were “guiltless” yet they would not have condemned David who was guilty.

“When one looks at the sinfulness of man it is amazing that God would be willing to sacrifice his only begotten son and provide a way for one, no matter how sinful he is, to be forgiven and enjoy fellowship with him in this life and throughout all eternity if he will only repent and become obedient unto him”

So, God’s grace is truly amazing. When one looks at the sinfulness of man it is amazing that God would be willing to sacrifice his only begotten son and provide a way for one, no matter how sinful he is, to be forgiven and enjoy fellowship with him in this life and throughout all eternity if he will only repent and become obedient unto him. Then even after that, if he returns to sin, he provides a way for him to return by repenting and confessing his sin. But, it is not as amazing as some perceived it to be. It is not amazing enough to overlook sin, but amazing enough to forgive sin when we turn to God in repentance and submit to his other terms of pardon.

Friendship and Fellowship

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“Fellowship” and “friendship” are not synonyms. We have a hard time understanding this. We find it hard to deny the “right hand of fellowship” to friends, regardless of their spiritual condition. A few find it hard to work in true partnership (fellowship) with any other than close friends. When a brother says he can not fellowship a brother, then too many of us automatically assume that he is no longer friendly toward that brother. Such need not be so.

Vine makes an interesting observation on the difference between a fellow (GK: HETAIROS) and a friend (GK: PHILOS). He says, “This (HETAIROS - EOB), as expressing comradeship, is to be

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distinguished from No. 1 (PHILOS - EOB), which is a term of endearment.” Thus, one can maintain friendship (endearment) with one with whom he cannot maintain fellowship (comradeship or partnership); or else a Christian could have no friends outside of Christ. Even one's joining with the local church in withdrawing fellowship from a brother does not mean that he is withdrawing his friendship (2 Thess. 3:15); though the circumstances call for not keeping company with him. (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Thess. 3:14). Neither friendship or fellowship need be the basis for the other.

There are people with whom I maintain a relationship of endearment (by friendship, kinship, etc.) to whom I cannot extend fellowship – either in the sense of congregational fellowship, or becoming partners with them in moral and spiritual efforts (such as ministerial alliances), or extending “the right hand

of fellowship”, or some any other gesture that would signal a general endorsement of them in their work.

I have close friends and dear relatives who are not Christians after the New Testament order. I love them dearly and they me. Either would come to the other's aid in a moment in time of need. Yet, we are not fellows in the Lord's work. I cannot not partake of their sins nor encourage them in their spiritual work. I cannot afford to make any gesture that could be taken by them, or others, that there are no vital differences between us in spiritual matters. Even if one of these close friends or relatives, even a parent, brother or sister in the flesh, comes into this community to spread his doctrine then I must not receive him into my house nor bid him godspeed to avoid being a partaker of his evil (2 John 9- 11). I could not announce his spiritual activities. If he came to the services I would not call on him for prayer. Would that mean that I no longer felt close to him as a friend or relative? Of course not!

Sometimes there are those who, because of various relationships and associations with us, have greatly endeared themselves to us. Its awfully easy to gear our degree of fellowship with them to our degree of friendship with them. They can virtually “get away with murder” In matters vital to the kingdom of God and we still treat them as pillars in the church. Their actions not only causes their faithfulness to the Lord to be suspect, but the openness of their actions places the Lord's cause in a bad light before all. If the same positions and/or practices were embraced by those not so friendly with us we would have long ago quit bidding them godspeed. If a good friend gets into a situation that we cannot in good conscience endorse or encourage, it need not destroy our feeling of friendship toward him because we cannot conscientiously do anything we feel would encourage him In his situation. In fact, good friends do not want the other's endorsement or encouragement against the conscience. Nor should scriptural disciplinary action be taken as an act of animosity.

No, friendship and fellowship are not parallel lines.