

"When I say God, I mean the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Gregory Nazianzus

Tuesday, January 21, 2020

Grace and Response: A Matter of Order

Many years ago, when I was a young man in Bible college, one of my theology professors said to the class, "When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is fall out of bed onto my knees and pray that I don't sin!" I remember the discomfort I felt upon hearing this stunning revelation. I knew immediately that I was a wash-out, a spiritual failure, because the first thing I did in the morning was reach for the coffee pot! Still today, I must drink at least two cups of "java" to clear my head before I can vaguely contemplate the sins I am liable to commit before lunch.

Even as a naïve and inexperienced nineteen-year old, I knew there was something fundamentally wrong with my professor's view of God—at least I hoped there was! It seemed that his "God" was more to be feared than loved. Behind his staggering confession lurked a harsh taskmaster who meticulously keeps count of our sins and shortcomings, so that he can finally mete out the just and terrible punishment we deserve. Decades later, after years of study, I realize that the doctrine of God I was taught in "Bible college" described a deity far different from the loving Father that Jesus Christ came to reveal (Matt 11:27).

Purveyors of Legalism

Since that time, I have encountered other preachers and teachers of "religion" who are fond of portraying "God" as a harsh judge, whose primary concern is crime and punishment or sin and guilt. Because of their one-sided emphasis on law, judgment and penalty, they insist that the most important aspect of Christian life is obedience, which often includes strict adherence to humanly-devised codes of dress, diet and lifestyle.

For these messengers of the "bad news" anti-gospel, obedience and discipline take priority over relationship and grace. God is a judge to be feared or a taskmaster to be served rather than a Father to be adored. Where legalism (i.e., "law") takes center stage, discipleship and Christian living are reduced to obedience without faith, service without joy, and worship without gratitude. These important aspects of Christian life become burdensome duties to be performed out of fear of retribution rather than grateful responses to the Father's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

According to the ministers of legalism, grace, forgiveness and justification are *conditional*. Rather than gifts to be gratefully received, these Gospel promises are held out like carrots to spur overburdened believers to obedience. For the purveyors of religion, the Gospel is a *threat* rather than a promise, so that discipleship is reduced to a fearful response rather than a joyful encounter with the Father's love.

The purveyors of law present the Gospel in terms of a "contract": "If the 'party of the first part' (you and me) meets certain conditions, *then* the 'party of the second part' (God) will be gracious." God's love and goodness are not offered as gifts to be received but favours to be earned. Rather than the lavish outpouring of God's innermost heart, divine love is "conditioned" by performance; that is, God will love us only "if" we meet the required standard—and woe to those who fall short, for surely they will be "left behind."

In addition, a persistent fear lingers among the purveyors of religion, who insist that an emphasis on grace will lead to *antinomianism* (i.e., "lawlessness"). They refuse to spare the "rod" of law for fear their

congregation will be spoiled. With furrowed brow and pointed finger, they try to *coerce* repentance and piety with the threat of judgment, hellfire and ever-impending doom. The “submission” coerced by the purveyors of religion, however, does not glorify God. Rather, obedience coerced under threat of punishment is “sin,” for it is not of “faith” (see Rom 14:23). Legalism’s emphasis on adherence to law by the power of the will forces believer’s into a “faithless obedience.”^[1] To be sure, “legalism is obedience without faith.”^[2]

Relationship between Grace and Response

Legalism, with its emphasis on law, judgment and penalty, is founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between grace and law, forgiveness and repentance, and justification and faith. Legalism *reverses* the proper relationship between divine grace and human response portrayed in scripture, so that grace is conditioned by performance and forgiveness is begrudgingly bestowed following repentance. The legalist bellows, “*If you repent, you will be forgiven.*”

Grace is not a wage to be earned, however; it is a gift to be received. The Gospel proclaims, “You have been forgiven in Jesus, the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world; *therefore*, repent and believe the good news!” The Gospel calls us to “change our mind” (i.e., “repent”) about Jesus, repudiate the demands of religion with its “conditional” grace, and embrace the Father’s love that is unconditionally poured out for all in the incarnate Saviour of the world.

In the Book of Exodus, we find the classic model for the proper relationship between grace and response. After he miraculously saved the people from bondage by a series of plagues that devastated Egypt, God led the Hebrew slaves to Mount Sinai, where he “introduced” himself to his people. Speaking through Moses, God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me....” (Ex 20:3ff). Notice the proper order between divine grace and human response that is revealed in this passage. *First*, God introduces himself as the God who *saves*: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the bondage of Egypt.” *Second*, God summons the people to respond to his gracious initiative: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The relationship between grace and law is set in the context of an *indicative* (“I have saved you”) followed by an *imperative* (“You shall have no other gods ...”).^[3] After saving them from bondage, God gives the people the law as an act of grace, so that this stubborn, stiff-necked band of slaves may learn to live in right relationship with God and neighbour. In turn, God graciously provides the ceremonial-sacrificial liturgy so that the people may *respond* to divine revelation in an appropriate and reverent manner (Ex 20-40; Lev 1-27). In regard to the relationship between grace and human response, grace is *prior*, so that law and liturgy is a *response* to grace, not a condition for it! This passage clearly establishes the relationship between divine grace and human response and sets a pattern that runs throughout both the Old and New Testaments: *grace is prior to and unconditioned by human response.*

The relationship between grace and response is clearly evidenced in the New Testament. Jesus said to his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). The priority of grace is glaringly apparent: “As I have loved you [*grace*], so you must love one another [*response*].” Again, Jesus says (John 15:9), “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you [*grace*]. Now remain in my love” [*response*]. Perhaps the clearest indication of the relationship between grace and response is found in 1 John (4:19): “We love *because* he first loved us” (emphasis added).

Grace Before Dinner

Luke (19:1-10) describes an encounter between Jesus and a notorious sinner that perfectly illustrates the proper relationship between divine grace and human response. When Jesus was passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, near the end of his earthly ministry, Zacchaeus, who was short in stature, climbed a sycamore tree so that he might see Jesus pass. Seeing him in the tree, Jesus said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Upon hearing Jesus’ gracious request, Zacchaeus came down from the tree and gladly welcomed Jesus to his home. Immediately the local villagers began to mutter among themselves, for Zacchaeus, like other tax collectors, was regarded

as a swindler and a thief, who unlawfully kept for himself a portion of the taxes he collected. Even worse, everyone regarded Zacchaeus as a traitor, because he collaborated with the oppressive Roman regime. Because he was a “sinner,” Zacchaeus was a social outcast, ostracized by the respectable community. Jesus’ surprising request to dine at his home, therefore, was cause for scandal. At dinner, however, Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

This story perfectly illustrates the relationship between grace and response. In the light of Jesus’ *love* for him, Zacchaeus sees the darkness of his own sin. In *response* to the love and acceptance he encounters in Jesus, Zacchaeus repents! His repentance, however, is not a shame-based response coerced by law and condemnation. It is a joyful, grateful response to the love and acceptance he encounters in Jesus. The grace of God embodied in Jesus is the immediate cause of the tax collector’s repentance. Zacchaeus’ repentance is not a condition for grace. It is a joyful *response* to grace!

Grace is Always Prior

We can better understand the relationship between grace and response by noting the difference between “legal” repentance and “evangelical” repentance. “Legal” repentance is a fearful submission to the threat of law and judgment. “Evangelical” repentance, on the other hand, is a joyous response to God’s love for the entire world revealed in Jesus. Zacchaeus’ grateful response to Jesus is a prime example of “evangelical” repentance. The Scottish Reformer John Knox disdained the words “justification by faith,” noting that this recurring slogan implies that justification depends upon the believer’s faith rather than the grace of God. Knox preferred the fuller phrase, “justification by *grace* through faith” in Jesus, for it accurately represents the proper relationship between grace and justification. Our “right-standing” with God (i.e., “justification”) is freely and unconditionally given us in Jesus, through whom the Father has reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:19, 20). Faith is not the cause of justification. It is the channel through which we *receive* the “right-standing” that is already ours in Jesus.

COMMENT: We are not “made right” with God because of our personal faith. To the contrary, we were “made right” in Jesus long before we had a chance to profess our faith. Personal faith is the channel that allows us to receive the grace that is already ours in Jesus. In other words, we do not believe to make it so, we believe because it is so.

The re-discovery of the God of grace revealed in Jesus Christ enabled Reformers like John Knox to reclaim the New Testament promise that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The Reformers rediscovered the Gospel truth elegantly illustrated in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. In the good news of God’s love for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ, grace is *prior* to human response. Divine love is the *cause*, repentance and faith are the *consequences*.

Preaching and Missions

The proper understanding of the relationship between grace and response has a profound effect on preaching and missions. An emphasis on grace frees believers *from* the burden of legalism (Matt 11:28) in favour of freedom *for* love of God and neighbour empowered by the Holy Spirit. Discipleship as a response to grace brings glory to God, for it is the expression of love rather than duty (see John 14:23; 15:8). Preachers and teachers who wish to promote love for neighbour in their hearers must focus on Jesus’ love for the sinner, the outcast and the marginalized as revealed in the Gospel. Pastors who want to encourage generosity, service and self-giving should remind their hearers of God’s sacrificial love revealed in Jesus, who heard the cry of the needy, healed the sick, fed the hungry, washed his disciples’ feet and gave his life on the cross as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

When the proper relationship between grace and response is clearly understood, God is glorified because love for God and neighbour rather than fear of judgment and penalty becomes the motive for Christian living. When believers fully understand the good news that underlies the proper relationship between

divine grace and human response, the ordinary concerns of Christian life, including worship, Bible study, service and giving, become grateful responses to grace willingly engaged rather than duties grudgingly carried out in order to earn God's favour. When grace is properly related to response, legalistic demands for obedience and conformity—usually accompanied by an unbiblical threat of hellfire and damnation—may be rejected in favour of the Gospel proclamation of the good news of God's love for *all* revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

The proper relation between grace and response has a profound effect on missions and the proclamation of the Gospel. Rather than a "rescue" operation intended to "save" people from hell, missions becomes a joyful and confident *invitation* for all to *receive* the grace and goodness of the loving Father, who "was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Like Jesus, who summoned his hearers to repent and believe the Gospel (Mark 1:15), the messengers of the good news may confidently summon their hearers to repentance, faith and appropriate form of life, not as conditions for divine favour, but as grateful responses to the grace that is already poured out on all humanity by the Father who sent his precious Son, so that he might "lavish" his love upon us in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; 1 John 3:1).

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[1] Deddo, G.W. 2007. The Christian Life and Our Participation in Christ's Continuing Ministry. In G. Dawson, ed. *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour*. London: T & T Clark, p. 157.

[2] Ibid.

[3] I am paraphrasing theologian James B. Torrance, who often said that "the indicatives of grace are *prior* to the imperatives of law."

(From [God for Us!: Grace and Response: A Matter of Order \(martinmdavis.blogspot.com\)](http://martinmdavis.blogspot.com))