



FEED MY SHEEP

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Issue #204

February 2016

Grace for the Race

Part 3: A "Grace Job" from Beginning to End

Let us continue our study of biblical grace by reiterating the question we closed with last issue: What kind of bankruptcy did we declare? In financial bankruptcy, one can file Chapter 11 or Chapter 7. A business that files Chapter 11 is saying that we still have a viable business, we just need some temporary relief from our creditors so that we can reorganize and after a while, we will be a profitable business again. It's a temporary bankruptcy.

Whereas in a Chapter 7 bankruptcy, it is a complete wipeout. The business has no possibility of success even if it were granted a period of relief from its creditors; even if it were reorganized with a completely new management team. There is virtually nothing to work with and no market for its products, even if it could produce a product. The owners lose everything. It is *permanent* and *terminal* bankruptcy.

If we are led to Christ with a proper understanding of those elementary doctrines such as found in Romans 3:23 (we are all sinners) and Romans 6:23 (the wages of sin is death) and Ephesians 2: 8 & 9 (salvation is a free gift by grace through faith); if we understood those basics, then most of us would agree that we declared Chapter 7 bankruptcy. That is, without Christ, we are permanently spiritually bankrupt; and what's more, our condition is terminal; that is, we have no hope of eternal life.

I think for many of us, however, that once we have been Christians for a time, we begin—even if subconsciously—acting as if we had only declared temporary bankruptcy. After we had been Christians for a while,

we noticed that we had gradually been improving. We no longer committed the more serious or obvious sins that we may have been guilty of before we came to Christ. We started experiencing some real positive changes in our character. We also eagerly complied with what we were told was expected of us as Christians—things like church attendance, prayer groups or Bible study groups, perhaps “witnessing” and going on missions. And without doubt, it would include giving to the Lord's work with tithes and offerings. All in all, we begin to think after a while that we're making pretty good progress and we might even remember to thank God for it. And we come to expect abundant blessings from Him.

But then one day, boom!—We fall into some old sin again that we thought we had conquered and we wonder how that could happen. We thought we were going along so well. Now we realize that our spiritual thermometer has just plunged below zero! And because *very subtly* we have come to think of our relationship with God in a *performance* mindset, we now feel like we have forfeited His blessings for some period of time, until we can gradually prove ourselves worthy of His blessings once again.

In thinking like that, we had in fact really only filed *temporary* bankruptcy to get saved initially, to get in the door to the kingdom, and now we feel that we have to *work* our way through life and *earn* God's blessings and earn positive results to our prayer requests. We were saved by grace but we are living by works.

If you think this is an exaggeration, give yourself this test:

Scenario #1: Imagine that you have been on a spiritual high for a couple of weeks. You have been faithful in church attendance and tithing, faithful in Bible reading, you've even been memorizing Scripture. You've been experiencing true marital bliss. You've been kind and gentle with everyone. You've been a wise parent to your children, etc., and tomorrow morning starts out exactly the same.

In fact, the day brings you to an even more spiritual high. Then you go to the mall in the evening and you run into a non-Christian friend, and suddenly you find yourself having the opportunity to witness to that person. How do you feel in terms of your confidence to share the gospel? (Just answer the question in your own mind for now.)

Now take the same scenario with a slight modification. This will be scenario #2: You've been on the same spiritual upswing for two weeks but then tomorrow you get up late, so you skip Bible reading, and you suddenly feel discouraged about your progress in memorizing Scripture so you say to yourself "the heck with memorizing verses," and then you have car trouble and are late for work, and you get irritated and blow up at the mechanic, and you find yourself in arguments with co-workers all day.

You come home and you and your spouse have a blow-up in front of the kids, and so you go to the mall to "walk it off" and cool down. On the way, you stop in at a bar, which you haven't been to in years, and you have a beer, then another, then a third, and then you head off to the mall. You are not really drunk, but you are beginning to feel really bad about even stopping at the bar.

So there you are meandering about the mall, still fuming about the day's events, and then you meet your non-Christian friend, and again, the door is open to share the gospel with him. Now how do you feel?

I will bet that in scenario #1, most of us would feel that when we open our mouth to share the gospel, that the Holy Spirit is going to give us precisely the right thing to say and we feel very confident that we can lead this friend to the Lord.

I will also surmise that in scenario #2, when you have the opening to share the gospel, you feel like there is no way God is going to help you at this point; after the way you behaved today, He's going to let

you on your own with this one. So you mumble some excuse to your friend that you've got to get going.

Now we can invent other scenarios to fit your life or my life, but if we see ourselves feeling differently in the two scenarios concerning our confidence in God's grace, then we really don't understand grace, and we actually are living under a legalistic mindset with a works-oriented attitude.

We need to understand that Jesus' sacrifice on Golgotha not only bought our free pass into the kingdom of heaven (our justification), but it also paid for *every* blessing and *every* single answer to prayer that we will *ever* receive! We should ask our Father to embed that fact into our consciousness: that the work was all done by the Savior, and that we do not *have* to work anymore.

I think that many of us are secretly afraid to embrace that fact because we are afraid we might slack off and lose our salvation, or at least lose rewards. But deeper than that, it betrays the fact that we really don't believe that we are permanently bankrupt.

But when we understand grace correctly, we won't slack off. Notice I had said, "because Jesus paid it all, we don't have to work." The fact is that if we *truly* understand His grace, we will want to work, not out of a legal obligation, but out of love for what He has already done for us.

As we study further into God's grace, we find a plethora of terms which theologians have attached to grace to describe its various functions and aspects. I will not get into all of them here, but I want to at least mention them and say a word or two about some of them. All of these terms are related to the concept of grace as Paul developed it: grace is the unmerited favor of God.

There is *prevenient* grace and *renewing* grace. There is *habitual* grace and *saving* grace; *sanctifying* grace and *justifying* grace. I've never seen theologians and commentators mention it, but we could also refer to *glorifying* grace.

Then there is *common* grace and *cheap* grace. (It's at 79 cents a gallon, last time I checked...☺...) Of course, there is *efficacious* grace which leads to *irresistible* grace, and finally John Newton, in his great hymn, tells us of Amazing Grace.

How *amazing* is it? Well, to begin with, it is infinite! Moreover, grace is the utmost expression of the divine nature. It is God's crowning achievement. And someone will say: "Oh, well I think that Jesus dying for our sins is God's crowning achievement and utmost expression."

But if we think about it, isn't that saying the same thing? Because God's grace is manifested to His creation by the Father sending His Son to furnish redemption and salvation. So don't think that my statement is taking anything away from our Savior. Grace is God's crowning attribute! And Jesus is the embodiment of that grace! John records that in his gospel:

John 1:17 For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

The preposition *by* is the Greek word *dia* and could also be translated *through* or *in*. So grace came in Jesus or grace came through Jesus Christ. He is the expression of God's grace manifested in human form.

Not only that, but the demonstration of His grace is part of the declared purpose and the magnificent goal of all His work of predestination and redemption. That is what the apostle Paul tells us here in

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly *places* in Christ:

4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children [sons] [*huiosthesia* = *son-placing*] by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,

6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches [fulness, abundance] of his grace;

8 Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;

9 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself:

And what is the mystery of His will? What is the Father's overall purpose? Verse 10 gives the answer.

10 That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things

...Except the Lutherans, of course; or except the Catholics, or except the Buddhists or Moslems, or Jews, or whoever we don't like—No, it says: "all things," The Greek is *ta panta*, "the all;" which in Greek includes masculine nouns, as well as feminine and neuter. So the Father intends and purposes to *ultimately*, not next year, not next century, but in the eons of time; because as it says here "in the dispensation of the fulness of times," the Father will gather all people and all things...

..... in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him:

The way I look at it, if God tells us here that His purpose is to gather all people and things together in Christ, I tend to believe He's going to do it. And if He does do it, then that doesn't leave *anyone* suffering in an eternal hell or exterminated forever.

Of course, now this does not mean that the heathen and the unsaved and the anti-Christians are going to be brought together in Christ as they are now, in their belligerent state. It means that God in His infinite grace will *ultimately* bestow that grace upon the heathen and cause them to come to Christ just as He has brought you and me to the foot of the cross in this dispensation of time.

Early in these studies on grace, we read in Luke 6 about how Jesus used the word *grace* in the ordinary classical Greek meaning of thanks or reward or gratitude. When I came across that, I stumbled on another very enlightening verse which is appropriate to point out at this juncture.

Luke 6:31 And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

32 For if ye love them which love you, what thank [*charis* – "grace," reward, benefit] have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.

33 And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same

I think that is where we stopped reading the first

time, so let's continue now.

Luke 6:34 And if ye lend *to them* of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

35 But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he {who? almighty God} is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

36 Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

The thought occurred to me then that if God is telling us to love *our* enemies, would He do any less? And that's exactly what the rest of verse 35 tells us: that God is merciful and kind even to the evil, in other words, He *loves* His enemies.

Then I thought: Would He be kind and loving to His enemies if He sent them to suffer in a burning hell for all eternity? Especially since He *made* them that way to begin with. And we have shown that fact from Scripture previously. We have dealt with this topic of the reconciliation of all things (also known as the salvation of all, universal reconciliation) at great length in years past, but in reference to the topic of grace now, do we take the credit for coming to Christ? Or was it His great love and boundless grace which saved us? Go back to Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

5 Even when we were dead in sins,

In other words, when we were his enemies!

5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)

6 And hath raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus:

7 That [as soon as you are saved] he might show the exceeding riches of his grace.....oops, doesn't say that, does it? Instead, it says

7 That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in *his* kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

I hope it is becoming crystal clear that in every step along our path to salvation, the grace of God is conspicuously displayed as the causative agent. As I said earlier, it's a "grace job" from beginning to end.

As verse 5 states, at the beginning of our spiritual journey, we are dead in trespasses and sin. Tell me, friends, what can a dead person do? Can a dead person decide to follow Jesus? Can a dead person sense that he is dead? Can a dead person do anything? No, the dead know not any thing! (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Before a person can even *begin* the spiritual journey, he first must be made alive or quickened as it says in verse 5. So by the grace of God, His Holy Spirit made us spiritually alive, He quickened our spirit to the tiniest degree, just enough so that by the grace of God, we could perceive that we are sinners in a lost condition.

This is what is meant by *prevenient* grace. From the Latin *pre-* meaning "before" and the verb *venire*, to "come." This is the grace that comes before anything else. It is the grace that awakens us spiritually so that we are even capable of responding to the next level of grace which will give us an awareness of our lost condition. Prevenient grace comes first.

(To be continued)

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