

Grace Versus Karma

Billions of people in the world follow religious systems that teach the law of karma (for example, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism). Even many Christians reflect a popularized concept of karma in their thinking. How does karma compare to the biblical concept of grace?

What is karma?

The word *karma* means *action* or *performance*. In its most basic concept, karma is the belief that our actions bring corresponding reactions. In more popular terms, we get what we deserve or “what goes around comes around.” Some see karma as a natural universal law, whereas others allow for a deity to control or dispense the effects of karma. The consequences of one’s karma may be experienced in this life or in a future life (as in reincarnation, the belief that we return to live again in another form).

Similarity with biblical truth

There are some similarities between karma and truths we find in the Bible. For example, the Bible teaches that God is just both in the sense that He punishes evil and rewards good. The book of Proverbs gives many principles that show good or bad actions bring good or bad consequences. Some point to Galatians 6:7 which says, “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*” (see the discussion below).

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that these consequences for our actions can be experienced in this life or in the next. In this life, bad actions can have negative consequences like hindering our fellowship with God and people, poverty physical illness, death, etc. Good behavior has the contrasting good consequences. Though the Bible does not teach reincarnation, it does teach that believers have a future life in the kingdom of God. Good or bad actions in this life can diminish or enhance that experience in the kingdom (Matt.25:14-30; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 22:12).

Dissimilarity with biblical truth

Though some may think that the Bible approves the concept of karma, the dissimilarities are great. The Bible’s teaching is vastly superior to the concept of karma.

The Bible does not teach that the universe is locked into karma or any universal law. Yes, God did design the universe to operate by some basic principles of justice and retribution, many of which are mentioned throughout the Bible. But God can alter the laws He has created and is not a slave to those principles. Though He is just, He is also loving, and His love for us can supersede His justice toward us. When it comes to our salvation, “*He made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin, to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2 Cor. 5:21). God fulfilled His justice by exacting payment for our sins, but He did it through His Son dying in our place. That is contrary to what karma expects.

Because God loves us, and because His innocent Son satisfied His justice, God can give us His eternal life, His righteousness, and His forgiveness for all of our sins. By His grace through faith in His Son we are given what we do not deserve. While karma locks a person into a cycle of retributive justice, God breaks that cycle with His grace. While karma guarantees that a person gets what he deserves,

grace guarantees that a person can get what he does not deserve. By definition grace is a free gift that is not deserved.

The Bible teaches that God's grace can break into the cycle of sin with blessing. For example Psalm 103:10 says,

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.*

And Rom. 5:8 says,

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Conversely, God also allows bad things to happen to very good people. In the Old Testament Job is called the most righteous man on earth, yet he suffered horribly. In the New Testament God's perfect Son was unfairly condemned and crucified. God is free to act outside of His normal design. This upends the rigid dictates of karma.

Unlike reincarnation, which teaches that a person gets another life to improve his or her karma, the Bible does not teach that anyone gets a "do over" after this life. This removes any excuse to live irresponsibly now and postpone doing good things to another life. All people will be held accountable to a judgment that comes after they die (Heb. 9:27) or when the Lord Jesus comes (John 5:28-29). For those who have not believed in Jesus Christ this is a judgment of their unbelief and evil deeds that earns them eternal damnation in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15). For those who have believed in Jesus Christ this is an evaluation of their works at the Judgment Seat of Christ to see whether they are worthy of eternal rewards (Rom. 14:10-1; 2 Cor. 5:10).

A closer look at Galatians 6:7

This passage clearly teaches that we reap what we sow. But several things should be noted. First, though it is stated as a divine principle, God has the freedom to override His own principles of retribution and reward. If He did not, no sinner could be saved.

Also, to be faithful to the context of Galatians 6, this verse is not discussing the condition for eternal salvation (that was discussed earlier in chapter 3), but the consequences for Christians who live either according to the Spirit or the flesh (Gal. 5:21-26). The emphasis in the context is admonishment for Christians to do good works as they live under grace instead of law. If Christians live by the Spirit (not the flesh), they will have a richer experience of God's eternal life in the future (6:8-9). This is not karma, but divine motivation and reward for personal responsibility.

Conclusion

Grace trumps karma. In karma there is no hope apart from what we can do for ourselves by our own effort. The Bible teaches and experience shows that we are sinful by nature and left to ourselves we will do evil, and thus deserve punishment. Grace, however, does what we cannot do. It gives us eternal life that we do not deserve and gives us God's Spirit to help us do good things. Anyone who is hoping in karma for a good life now or in the future should flee to Jesus Christ for His gift of grace.