

Man's Aversion to Grace

To those who have been profoundly changed by a clear understanding of God's grace it is often puzzling why more people, unsaved or saved, do not accept that message. After all, if grace gives us salvation and all its benefits absolutely free, why do so many unbelievers reject it and why do so many believers try to compromise it with conditions? It will help to see the biblical and historical pattern of this aversion to grace and then offer an explanation.

A Pattern of Rejecting Grace

The biblical history of God's chosen nation, the Jews, shows that they consistently rejected His provision for their spiritual needs. In Acts Stephen told how the Jews rejected Moses and the Promised Land and wanted to return to captivity in Egypt and worship a golden calf instead. About the calf idol Stephen said they "*rejoiced in the works of their own hands*" (Acts 7:39-41). Later, the Apostle Paul explained why the Jews rejected the gospel of grace: "*For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God*" (Rom. 10:3). The common denominator in Stephen and Paul's assessments is that the Jews rejected God's grace in favor of their own merits.

The New Testament amplifies the same pattern of rejecting grace. Jesus was bitterly opposed and persecuted by the self-righteous Pharisees who insisted on stringent law-keeping for righteousness. Paul was opposed by legalists wherever he preached the grace message. Sometimes the Christians strayed shortly after Paul departed from them, as in Galatia (Gal. 1:6). Paul warned that enemies of the gospel would corrupt the believers from without and within (Acts 20:29-31), that is why he commended them "*to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" (Acts 20:32). Countering legalism (defined here as the keeping of laws and rules to exalt self) was a common theme in Paul's epistles to the churches.

Church history since the New Testament shows that the free grace of God was corrupted before the church got out of its first century. Many early church fathers taught the necessity of baptism and a holy life in order to be or stay saved. For many centuries after the early fathers the dominate Orthodox and Catholic religions both taught the necessity of baptism, penance, and other sacraments for salvation. It was not until the Reformation in the early 1500's that Christianity reclaimed the free grace of God—though those Christians who did so were violently persecuted.

Even Calvin, a leader of the Reformation who taught that grace was free and faith in God's promise assures us of salvation, was shortly afterward reinterpreted to make works indispensable to one's assurance and salvation. By the time of the Westminster Confession (1647) works were solidly embedded into faith and the gospel, not on the front end (in order to be saved), but on the back side (to prove you were saved). Today a resurgence of this brand of Calvinism has swept through the Christian world with the same intrusion of works and merit into assurance and salvation.

A Natural Response to Grace

Why hasn't the wonderfully liberating grace message swept the world? We can only suggest why so many people reject or pervert the free grace of God.

Conditioning. We live in a world of un-grace that has always taught us we must earn our own way. We are promised rewards for potty training, good grades for studying hard, and a paycheck for working. Apart from biblical Christianity, every world religion offers salvation only through performance. Grace, which promises us salvation free and secure, sounds too good to be true. When Jesus told some curious Jews that eternal life was a gift, their natural response was *“What shall we do, that we may work the works of God.”* Jesus did not concede to their inclination to work for salvation, but in a play of words responded *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent”* (John 6:27-29). Ask an average person today how one can have eternal life and the prevailing answer will include something that must be done. Salvation that is truly free is difficult to comprehend or accept.

Pride. Doing something to contribute to or prove our salvation appeals to the natural impulse of our pride. The gospel of free grace separates works entirely from the offer of salvation. We are saved by grace through faith *“not of works, lest anyone should boast”* (Eph. 2:8-9). Pride appeals to our sinful flesh. The flesh likes to exalt self and boast of what has been done, but the gospel of grace points only to the cross as the means of obtaining and keeping salvation. Paul said, *“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Gal. 5:14). Grace humbles our pride.

Insecurity. Doubtless there are some who are not comfortable with the freedom grace brings. The controversy in Acts 15 was caused by Jews who demanded observable performance-based criteria from the Gentiles who had been saved by grace. This reflects a desire to depend on a system of black and white laws or behavioral measurements that would make these legalists feel secure in their spirituality and reserves them the right to declare certain others unsaved. The insecurity of uncertainty about others can lead to a fear of ambiguity, which in turn can breed a desire to control. Control leads to the assertion of laws or measurements that make some feel comfortable. On the other hand, grace looks to faith in the Word of God, submission to the control of the Holy Spirit, and the compulsion to love God and others as that which determines one’s spirituality. Grace is risky because freedom is always risky.

Conclusion

Man has a natural aversion to grace. A persistent turning away from grace is demonstrated biblically and historically. Even so, God has always preserved a remnant that fully embraces grace. The unconditional free grace of God that brings us to the cross of Christ for all and any merit before God keeps us humble, which allows us to experience more grace: *“But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’”* (James 4:6). The slave woman of legalism and her son will always persecute the free woman of grace and her son (Gal. 4:29). The two cannot co-exist or mix. Paul’s advice is to throw out the slave woman and her son (Gal. 4:30). Watch carefully for the natural drift away from grace. Don’t try to compromise with legalism or anything that threatens the absolute free nature of grace. Rather, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”* (Gal. 5:1).