

Biblical Grace Under Assault

God's grace does not give us the freedom to do what we like and get away with it. It releases the power of God's Word and Spirit to become individuals conformed to Christ.

Over the last few years a number of ministries have embraced a perception of grace that, Biblically speaking, is demonically distorted. True God given grace does not give us the freedom to do what we would like and get away with it. Rather, it releases to us the power of God's Word and Spirit to become individuals conformed to Christ Jesus. Two passages found in Romans- 8.29 & 12.2 both address the conformity God is after in our lives. Perhaps more directly to the point, however, is Peter's writing found in 1 Peter 1.14-16, which reads:

"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

1) The assault of Old New Age Gnosticism

There are three primary sources feeding the current perversion of grace. First is a resurgence of Gnosticism. This, in essence, as with much of ancient Gnosticism, is a false separation between what is spiritual and what is physical. In ancient Gnosticism there was the teaching that the two were completely unrelated. In effect the belief was that what one believed and nourished in the spiritual realm was unrelated and untouched by one's actions within the physical realm.

The emerging Gnosticism in the contemporary church is not so much due to a deliberate teaching as it is from a growing ignorance and ignoring of the Word of God. In some church circles where things like prophecy, healing, and impartations of the Holy Spirit are valued there is also, unfortunately, a devaluation of the written word of God. This vacuum of ignorance has sucked many into a spiritual climate with a lack of regard for the holiness of God. That holiness is what we were born again to experientially walk in. To reference Peter a second time, 2nd Peter 2.20-22 warns that those who have come to know Christ Jesus but return to practicing former sins are like 'dogs who return to their own vomit'.

To some degree the current hunger for spirituality and spiritual experiences devoid of an appetite for the Person and ways of God is witchcraft. This witchcraft manifests in two essential ways: 1) a hunger for spiritual experiences aside from the Lordship of Christ, and 2) a prevailing of anti authority attitudes. Witches love to move in spiritual dimensions but also despise authority, which is in keeping with the demonic realm. As well, as was with Jezebel, there is usually a fascination with perverse sexuality. To sum up modern day Gnostic traits emerging in the church there is a hunger for spirituality while there is a de-emphasizing of the Lordship of Christ governing one's attitudes and actions. The false application of grace provides the loophole to continue in doing what one feels like doing and still praying the prayer "bless me, Lord"!

What has also, in a huge way, fed into current Gnosticism is a de-emphasizing of the Biblical mandate to make disciples. In many churches today the gospel is reduced to the two things: 1) free fire insurance, to escape the flames of hell, and 2) consistent teaching from the pulpits that God simply wants to give us formulas for success regardless of our lifestyles. Of course, God does want to bless people, but not apart from our embracing God's principal of dying to self and living for Christ by embracing Christ's ways. Galatians

6.7 reads: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."

If we sow to carnality that is exactly what we will reap- bondage and death, on many differing levels. The growing mantra today is "it's okay to do what you like. God will forgive you." Forgiveness is the result of repentance. Repentance, essentially, means to see things from a higher perspective (God's vantage point) and to change one's behavior accordingly. The remedy is church leaders must return to preaching the gospel of 'the kingdom' that Jesus preached and seek 'its righteousness' not merely its blessings. Otherwise, when a so-called Christian is continually grieving the Holy Spirit it is the spirit of this age that rules them, not the Spirit of the living God!

2) The Assault of the Fear

As much as the church growth movement has been a help to many leaders for the last several decades, I believe, it has also proven to be a curse for some. It has mandated the wrong measuring stick. God measures the success of leadership by things like obedience, fruitfulness, and the making of disciples. Strictly using the 'nickels, noise, and numbers formula' to qualify/quantify one's ministry is like trying to assess heaven by earth's standards. By many church standards today Jesus would have to be labeled as a poor leader due to His message of 'eating His body, and drinking His blood'. Because of that message He went from the multitudes following Him to barely the twelve. It would be a contemporary pastor's worst nightmare. Jesus, however, measured success by obedience to the Father, not the accolades of man or the size of the crowd!

Proverbs 25.29 states "the fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted." Due to success being primarily measured purely by numbers there has come about a great fear of offending church attendees by saying the wrong thing from the pulpit. That 'wrong thing' too often means anything that might cause that attendee to stop attending. Without necessarily intending to we can inadvertently become pleasers of men rather than of God. We must constantly remind ourselves that the gospel message itself (if Biblically preached) is offensive. It is offensive simply because God calls people to die to themselves and change their behavior. Less than a changed lifestyle is less than Biblical Christianity.

When the incomplete message of "it's okay, God loves you just the way you are" prevails there will be very little room for the Spirit's conviction for change. The other half of that message is begging to be preached: "He also loves you too much to leave you the way you are"! Yes, by all means let's be as welcoming and as friendly as the good news itself to all. But a physician who won't warn a patient about a growing cancer tumor out of fear of depressing or offending that patient is a lethal care giver! There is after all a sorrow the Spirit can release that leads one to repentance. (2nd Corinthians 7.10)

We need to learn to discern between religious condemnation and the Holy Spirit's conviction. The former wraps people up in the legalism of religion, while the latter opens people up to the potential of healing and abundant life in Christ!

The current statistics of 50% percent of all Bible believing, church going Christian men and 20% of the same group of women being addicted to pornography tell us that something is seriously out of order in the church today. As if that is not enough of a problem there is almost the same percentage of divorce in the church as there is among non-church goers. If the ancient boundaries that God has established for healthy living are moved then we

have managed to learn to graze in the camp of the enemy without fear of consequences! If the foundations are destroyed, or at least obscured, what can the righteous do?

We can begin by proclaiming and praying for a return to God's standards of 'grace based holiness'. If judgment starts first with the household of God, then it is probably a safe bet that judgment will start first with the gatekeepers of the church- leaders. We can either fear man, or fear God, but not both at the same time.

3) The Assault of Unsanctified Compassion

Due to past movements, which practiced a focus on the control of individual Christians, the word 'accountability' has almost been thrown out the window. Accountability, Biblically speaking, is not so much a thing of control, but rather of encouragement and strength. The truth is all healthy relationships demand some sort of accountability in order to function well. A relationship where there is a fear, or pride, based resistance to honesty is doomed to fail to reach it's potential.

Out of fear of treading on people rights, or offending people in one's church, accountability has become neglected. So when problems arise due to ongoing destructive behavior (sin) there is too often the tendency to issue blessings based on 'unsanctified compassion'. Many church attendees and members want prayers of blessing and breakthrough despite the fact that the hurtful condition they are in may be due to reaping what they've sown. To continually bless some one who will not truly repent (change) from destructive behavior is comparable to giving throat lozenges to some one dying of throat cancer and thinking that because the pain is temporarily gone all is well.

In contrast to unsanctified compassion Paul and Jesus were seemingly harsh. Paul wrote, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" regarding the distribution of charity to poorer church members. There was absolutely no sense of unearned entitlement with Paul! Obviously, he was not speaking of those who simply could not work. When it comes to those who refuse to stop coarse sinning Jesus said to treat them as sinners, not as redeemed members of a congregation. (Matthew 18.17) Jesus also, categorically, without any ambiguity what so ever, stated that a man who leaves his wife to marry another woman is to be treated as an adulterer- a flagrant practicing sinner. (Matthew 19.9) Of course, this is excepting when his wife first committed adultery. Today there is a veritable plague of men and women in church leadership abandoning the 'wife (or spouse) of their youth' for a younger version! Truths regarding marriage, such as oneness and covenant, which God emphasizes have been treated as obsolete by many current ministry leaders. God simply sees this as sin on a grand scale. Yet the church has learned to sweep adultery, financial impropriety, substance abuse, and many other sins under a heavy carpet incorrectly labeled 'grace'.

The love of Christ does not negate accountability. Rather, it gives a context for which healthy accountability can function.

There are those who claim that it is incorrect to call Christians into account for sin due to a very lopsided view of the grace of the cross. Please note: I am not speaking of those in the process of coming to Christ, but those who claim to be Christians and desire good standing within a congregation, or a ministry.

The grace of the cross is simply not available aside from truth. The apostle John tells us that not merely mercy was realized through the cross but 'grace AND truth were realized

through Jesus'. (John 1.17) Psalm 85.10 tells us "loving kindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other." This is a prophetic picture of the grace of Christ. To claim forgiveness, as in one's sins being washed away without truth (repentance) renders transformation impossibility.

Should we have compassion for victims of sexual and substance addiction? Totally! But Biblical compassion is far more than feeling sympathy for the victim. It is to be moved by God in such a way that we lovingly call the victim into a sense of responsibility for their choices and assist them in reaching out to the power of God's compassion. It must be stated, however, that God will not violate one's free will. One must make the decision to reach out to God and trust in His power to change. That power through the Word and in the Holy Spirit cannot be experienced aside from repentance. We must take repentance out of the dusty church closet of shame and condemnation and view it as a great gift that God has given us to move towards wholeness & holiness.

Pseudo Restoration

Due to the onslaught of adultery taking place among church leaders today there has arisen a common scenario of what I call 'pseudo restoration'. Pseudo restoration is a less than real healing process that in many ways is simply waiting until the dust settles and then reinstating the still fallen leader back into their ministry position. Pseudo restoration has more to do with spinning the message than it does true accountability of the messenger.

Just because an individual takes a short break from ministry does not necessarily mean the root issues have been dealt with! It takes real time to realize God's convicting truth in one's innermost being. Merely feeling sorry for being caught and the damage one may have caused by one's sins is less than knowing truth on a deep, deep level.

Partially the syndrome of quick fix restoration is due to the church not always grasping the importance of Christ like character being the foundation for one's ministry. But, mainly, it is due to unsanctified compassion. We say 'look at the high calling' and 'well, there under so much stress due to ministry'. Both are an affront to God. How can one claim to be a servant of Jesus and refuse to honor the ways of Jesus? Jesus after all stated that if we truly love Him we will obey His commandments- the Word of God!

True restoration takes time.

As stated it takes time to allow God's truth to filter past layers of guilt, shame, and bring about deep down change at the root level. It takes time to rebuild equity and trust between a leader and his/her followers and supporters. It takes time to close the doors to condemnation so that the enemy can no longer manipulate one through the memories of sin. It takes time simply to rebuild trust in one's own self towards one's own will. When we see patterns over several years of sexual sin, or financial impropriety, or substance abuse some of the blame lies at the church which places greater value on that stumbling leader's ministry than on the leader as a person in need of true, not false, compassion.

"If the foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do?"

(Psalm 11.3) Edmond Burke is credited to have written "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." I believe that God is calling church leaders today to rise up and begin to champion grace based holiness. Grace based holiness is teaching the truth in love, without condemnation! While the foundation of Christianity can

never be destroyed we can quench the Holy Spirit to the degree that we render the church impotent in moving in the fullness of the grace and power He has for us. He is after all 'the Holy Spirit'. I believe that God is calling the contemporary church to essentially four responses in regards to the plague of misperceived grace, which is afflicting many ministries and congregations.

1) Pray for a revelation of God's heart and power to walk, model, and champion grace based holiness especially for leaders. Let's cry out for a revelation that would cause us to echo the cry heard around God's throne- 'holy, holy, holy'. Isaiah 6.3 & Revelation 4.8

2) Begin to boldly, yet, with love & humility, educate and encourage the church in what the Bible has to say regarding healthy behavior to the point of hating sin! It is possible to hate sin, and yet love sinners- after all Jesus did it.

3) Become intentional about taking to heart Paul's admonishment to "not grieve" (offend) the Holy Spirit- the very presence of God in our lives and midst! After all we no longer belong to ourselves. He is the one who is in us to do His will & good pleasure.

4) When serious sins do emerge in the life of a leader, let's learn to value them as a person, more than their ministry. Let's take the time to deal with the source of the issues rather than simply putting on the band-aid of 'time out'.

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