

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
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THE DANGER OF MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE

INTRODUCTION: Grace! What a glorious word! We sing *Amazing Grace* and *Marvelous Grace*, but like so many words in our Christian vocabulary, it can become meaningless and therefore must be zealously protected. Otherwise, it will be emptied of its true significance, and impregnated with that which will distort its Biblical meaning. An example of this type of subterfuge is seen in Keith A. Fournier's book *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Winning Alliance for the 21st Century* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994). Mr. Fournier describes himself as an "Evangelical Roman Catholic" (which is an oxymoron. The term *evangelical* was used historically as a synonym for Protestant. Catholics have only in the last few years sought to appropriate the word for themselves by redefining its meaning.) His book is an attempt to convince genuine Evangelicals that the gospel according to Rome is also a gospel of pure grace. But how is grace understood by Mr. Fournier? Does he differ in any way with traditional Roman Catholic dogma? NO, not in the least. He simply repackages it, but nothing is changed. He begins by denying what the Reformers taught concerning man's total depravity (p. 211). Fallen man is not that sinful. He still possesses the power and ability to cooperate with God in the work of salvation (p. 214). In order to continue in a state of salvation, good works *must* be done (p. 216). These works *merit* grace (p. 217). "Merits are the good works we perform by God's grace through the virtues of faith, hope, and love" (p. 218). In other words, grace is that which God gives in response to what we do, but in order not to give the wrong impression, Fournier, in double-speak fashion, says God produces the works which merit His grace! Christ alone does not save. Individuals must cooperate with the grace of God (through the sacraments) in order to merit salvation. This is **not** the gospel. If our salvation depends in the least degree upon our performance, all is lost.

I. MAKING VOID THE GRACE OF GOD. The NIV renders this: "I do not set aside the grace of God." "Set aside" *ATHETEŌ*, to make ineffective. This is a very strong word and has a legal overtone (nullify).¹ The "grace of God" here refers to the salvation message. Paul's opponents *also* used the word *grace*. The implication is that Paul is denying the charge that the Judaizers were making. They were telling the Galatians, "Paul's gospel denies the true grace of God by removing the law which God gave!" The Judaizers were attempting to add to the finished work of Christ the merit of their own obedience to the law, which they claimed was really the result of God's grace!

A. ***How is this done?*** You will note that making void or nullifying the grace of God is done *doctrinally*. There are doctrines that *darken* the gospel of God's grace. There are doctrines that *mix* the gospel of God's grace with error. There are doctrines that *blaspheme* the gospel of God's grace. Paul's specific point here is that *any* attempt to make ourselves acceptable to God by something we do (or don't do) sets aside the grace of God.²

II. MAKING THE CROSS MEANINGLESS

If it were possible for righteousness to be obtained in *any* shape, form or fashion by human merit, then “Christ died for nothing.” The word in the NIV translated “died for nothing” is DÖREAN APETHANEN. The adverb DÖREAN basically means “freely, for nothing” (cf. John 15:25; Romans 3:24). Here it has the meaning “to no purpose.” The Judaizers did NOT think they were nullifying the cross of Christ and would probably protest and claim otherwise. But as Luther declared, “For whosoever seeketh righteousness apart from faith in Christ, whether by works, by satisfaction or afflictions, or by the law, rejecteth the grace of God and despiseth the death of Christ, whatsoever he protesteth with his mouth to the contrary.”³

CONCLUSION: “This verse,” argues Machen, “is the key verse of the Epistle to the Galatians; it expresses the central thought of the Epistle. The Judaizers attempted to supplement the saving work of Christ by merit of their own obedience to the law. *That, says Paul, is impossible; Christ will do everything or nothing: earn your salvation if your obedience to the law is perfect, or else trust wholly to Christ’s completed work; you cannot do both; you cannot combine merit and grace; if justification even in slightest measure is through human merit, then Christ died in vain*”⁴ This is Paul’s assessment of those who would *redefine* “grace” to make room for “merit” – it renders Christ’s death null and void. Think about it – all of His suffering and agony of soul is made meaningless if we seek in any way to add something to it. By so doing we obtain *nothing*. We only empty the gospel of its real meaning, and instead of *amazing grace* we are left with *appalling disgrace*. I close with this critical observation by R. Scott Clark: “Christians are in *no sense* under the covenant of works for our standing with God or for our salvation. Our justification *and* our sanctification are by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*). It is *not* as some seem to be suggesting that our salvation is *begun* by grace but is ultimately *completed* by works. This is a false gospel that Paul himself repudiated in Galatians 3:1-6: ‘O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith – just as Abraham *believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?*’ (ESV)

If any part of our salvation (justification, sanctification, glorification) is by works, then it is not by grace (Rom 11:6). These are two inimical principles in salvation. The very idea of a “two-stage” salvation (by grace now, by works then) is a flat repudiation of Paul’s explicit teaching in Galatians 3. When he says ‘Spirit’ in v. 3, he is saying ‘grace.’ None of us was regenerated (brought to spiritual life) by works. We were regenerated by grace alone. In regeneration the Spirit also gave us faith and through faith justified us, adopted us, and united us to Christ. It cannot be that what the Spirit began (by unconditional sovereign grace) we are to complete by works. In the apostolic period Paul applied this principle to the existence of supernatural gifts. They were not by works but by grace. Our entire Christian life is not by works but by grace.

It is only *because* we have been saved by grace alone that we can be sanctified. Our conformity to Christ is by grace alone, through faith alone. It produces good works as the necessary fruit of our salvation (see Belgic Confession art. 24). Grace produces a desire to obey God’s holy law. Grace produces a desire to be conformed to Christ. That is why Paul says, ‘May it never be!’ The idea that a believer might turn around and say, ‘Since where sin abounded, grace abounded more, let us sin that grace may abound’ is unthinkable. We were not saved in order that we might sin. We were saved that we might be sanctified.

Certainly we still struggle with sin. That is the story of Romans 7, but the decisive blow has been struck. ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:1). If we were somehow back under the covenant of works Paul could not have made this glorious declaration, but he did because we are in a covenant of grace for our salvation.”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹In ancient Greece, this word was used of loans which were repaid and cancelled. It was also used for rejection of certain officials who were described as inefficient and incapable of doing their jobs. It was likewise used of grain that had been rejected because of spoilage. Cf. J. H. Moulton & G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 12.

²“Grace always shines most brightly where man appears least; every thing that tends to advance the power and efficacy of man’s working always hinders the shining forth of the glory of the grace of God; but in this way of justifying us through the righteousness of Christ, grace shines forth most gloriously, because it is all of God: we do nothing for it.” *The Works of Robert Traill IV* (rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 164.

³Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (rpt. London: James Clark, 1972), p. 185.

⁴*Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, ed. J. Skilton (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 161.

⁵*The Heidelblog*, “Believer, You are Being Graciously Sanctified” (Tuesday June 20, 2017).