

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
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THE DANGER OF MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE

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. Willing Alliance for the 21st Century* (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. Mormons likewise speak of the importance of grace – but what do they mean? To begin with, Mormons are Pelagians – explicitly so. Hear the words of Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: "Little children are innocent when they are born into this world, and there is no taint of any kind upon them."¹ From the official Mormon Church website: "It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, made possible by his atoning sacrifice, that mankind will be raised in immortality, every person receiving his body from the grace in a condition of everlasting life. It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts."² In other words, as Ron Rhodes explains, "What role does grace play in the salvation process? In Mormon theology, grace is simply God's *enabling power* that allows people to *lay hold on eternal life and exaltation*

after they have expended their own best efforts. Grace aids people as they seek (by personal effort) to attain perfection. It is important to recognize that in Mormon theology, God's grace alone does not save. Spencer W. Kimball said that *one of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation.* There is a great necessity, we are told, for personal striving and putting forth your *best efforts*.³

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). 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.⁴

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 *dōrean apethanen*. The adverb *dōrean* 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."⁵ Luther went on to declare that the enemy of your soul always goes about to distort the person and work of Christ: "So far as the words are concerned, we know all this very well and can discourse on it. But in the struggle, when the devil tries to mar the image of Christ and to snatch the Word from our hearts, we discover that we do not know them as well as we should. Whoever could define Christ accurately then, exalting Him and looking to Him as his sweet Savior and High Priest and not as a stern Judge, would have overcome all evils and would already be in the kingdom of heaven. But to do this in the midst of struggle is the hardest thing there is. I am speaking from experience, for I am acquainted with the devil's craftiness. Not only does he try to frighten us by inflating the Law and making many logs out of one speck (Matt. 7:3-5), for he is very skillful both at aggravating sin and at inflating the conscience in good works, but he also makes a practice of frightening us by transforming himself into the Person of the Mediator Himself. He cites some passage of Scripture or some saying of Christ and thus strikes our hearts and gives the impression of being Christ Himself. So strong is this impression that our conscience would be ready to swear that this is the same Christ whose saying he has cited. So crafty is this enemy

that he does not present the entire Christ to us; he presents only a part of Him, namely, that He is the Son of God and Man, born of the Virgin. Eventually he attaches something else to this, some saying in which Christ terrifies sinners, like Luke 13:3: *Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*. By adulterating the genuine definition of Christ with his poison he produces this effect, that although we believe that Christ is the Mediator, in fact our troubled conscience feels and judges that He is a tyrant and a tormentor. So Satan deceives us, and we easily lose the pleasant sight of Christ, our High Priest and Mediator. Once this happens, we avoid Christ as though He were Satan.”⁶

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.*”⁷ 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*.

ENDNOTES

¹ J. F. Smith, *Answers To Gospel Questions: The Classic Collection in One Volume* (Deseret Book Company, 1995), p. 176. Thomas Goodwin, one of the great Puritans, wisely said that the serious error of Pelagius is inherent in the human heart, “Christians also are obnoxious to the same mistake. What Pelagius did boldly and plainly in his doctrine utter, that in application do the most of Christian professors secretly rest upon for their own salvation, even what goodness is found to be in nature. We have all *fibra Pelagiana* in us, we are naturally all Pelagians, and the great deceit of men’s hearts is, that what opinions they doctrinally condemn in their speculative judgments, those they practically approve in their secret transactions with God for their salvation.” *The Works of Thomas Goodwin VI* (rpt. Tanski Publications, 1996), p. 248.

² As cited in Lynn K. Wilder, *Unveiling Grace: The Story of How We Found Our Way Out of The Mormon Church* (Zondervan, 2013), p. 356.

³ R. Rhodes & M. Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scripture with The Mormons* (Harvest House, 1995), p. 366.

⁴ In 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. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 12.

⁵ Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (rpt. James Clark, 1972), p. 185.

⁶ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 38-39.

⁷ *Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, ed. J. Skilton (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 161.