

November 2, 2009

Acts 2:29-47 / I Corinthians 15:3-11 / Titus 2:6-14

What Do We Do Once We Have Become Friends of God?

Last week we considered how it is (biblically speaking) that we become friends of God. And we did so by looking at Abraham, the one man who more than any other person in Scripture, was called "the friend of God."

And what we saw was that we become God's friends (that is, we are justified or reconciled to God) in the same way Abraham was (way back in Genesis 15:4) — simply by believing the promises of God. Or as Paul puts it throughout the book of Romans, by faith in the Gospel message about Jesus and NOT (as is so often suggested) by doing various religious, moral or spiritual things, as most people think.

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In fact, the older I get the more I discover how deeply rooted in the human psyche is the belief that we must somehow (or in some way) earn God's acceptance, forgiveness and love. Even in churches where the Gospel has been preached for two millennium, and thus should have erased such a warped and unchristian notion long ago, it is still very much alive.

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I could give you countless examples, but in my first few years in my church in Westport, Massachusetts I preached a message about God's acceptance of us being by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not by good works.

And after the service was over one particular lady (in her 50's) came up to me with a very perplexed look on her face, obviously struggling with something I'd said. So to make sure she had heard me correctly, she asked: "In your sermon you said that God doesn't save us on the basis of the good things that we do. Right?"

"Yes," I responded, "That is what I said." / And then, in total seriousness she asked me: "Then why do I spend all that time helping out with all the church suppers and bazaars?"

In other words: "If it's not going to gain me anything, or save me, or earn me God's acceptance, or more of God's acceptance, or more of His love, or give me a better chance of going to heaven when I die, then why should I do it?"

And can I say, that's a good question! In fact, that's the gist of my message for this morning. Not simply "What Should I Do Once I Have Become God's friend," but "Why should I do it?"

In all fairness to that lady, I need to tell you she was raised in New England all her life, where the Unitarianism coming out of Harvard and Yale has long reigned supreme.

And the basic salvific scheme or premise of Unitarianism is: "Salvation by character." ("Character" being defined primarily as open-mindedness, inclusiveness and an unqualified acceptance of every one and every thing.)

And not only that, she was also raised all her life in a particular denominational setting where the official position still held is that salvation is by faith plus works. A belief that actually makes sense to most people, because it resonates with the FOUR basic things humanity in general appeals to in order to motivate people to obey, perform, achieve or conform to societal standards — FEAR and PRIDE and GUILT, SELF-SERVING SELF-INTEREST.

In fact, those three things (or a variation of them) are so ingrained in the human psyche by nature and nurture, that the Church has often used them to motivate people, rather than "the message of God's grace once and forever delivered to the saints."

You see, in our society it's nearly INCONCEIVABLE for us to believe that you can motivate someone to perform better, or push themselves to greater heights of achievement, if you remove FEAR, GUILT, BLAME, an appeal to PRIDE, or the carrot of SELF-SERVING SELF-INTEREST from the equation.

That's why so many pastors refuse to preach the Gospel of God's free grace in Jesus (as I did last week). Because they're afraid that grace will actually function as a de-motivator! Telling people God saves them by grace, and forgives and accepts them on the basis of faith in Jesus, apart from good works, they feel, will take away people's incentive to work hard!

I even had one evangelical minister from Cape Cod (who had been a pastor for 20+ years) tell me over the lunch table at a pastors gathering that the reason he would not preach grace was because he believed it made people spiritually lazy!

"You have to keep them wondering," he said. "There has to be some degree of doubt or fear or concern that they could possibly lose their salvation, or else they'll simply do whatever they want and use grace as an excuse to sin or just plain be lazy."

You don't know (or maybe you do!) how common that attitude is in the Church at large —even in evangelical circles where the Gospel is supposed to be primary!

Pastors will say:

I know the Gospel teaches we're saved by grace, through faith and not by works / That we can't merit the favor of God and that once God lays hold of us by His grace, He will never let us be snatched from His hand — "nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I know that! But I fear that if I preach it too often people will lose their motivation to turn from sin, and resist temptation, and put great effort into pursuing godliness, or doing good deeds, or helping the poor, or tithing to the church, or even coming to church or getting involved at all!

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I hear it all the time! *Grace leads people to be spiritually lazy and comfortable in their sin. / Grace deprives people of the fear, guilt, pride or concern for self-gain that they need to have in order to motivate them to do what they ought to do! / People who actually believe that the message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone does the Christian cause more harm than good!*

I even had one of my parishioners in Honduras hand me a best-selling book called "God's Generals." And in it (lifted up as one of the hero's of the faith or one of God's Generals because his efforts got significant results) was a man who started out in the ministry preaching the Gospel of God's grace, only to change midstream because the message of salvation by grace wasn't getting him the results he wanted.

So he changed his message and began preaching salvation by works, and the crowds came, and their giving to his ministry increased as well!

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You see, I've said it before and I'll say it again: *"If you want people to do ANYTHING (and I don't care what it is!) all you have to do is make their justification, salvation or acceptance with God dependent upon that thing and you'll have them doing it all the time!"*

You want people without exception to **TITHE**? Then tell them their salvation is dependent upon tithing, and you'll have everyone doing it. If its results you want, all you have to do is tie it into their justification!

You want people **SITTING IN CHURCH EVERY SUNDAY** and Sunday Evening and Wednesday Night? Make it a work that earns them God's favor and they'll be lined up outside the door waiting to get in every time the doors open!

You want people to do EVANGELISM or MISSIONS or go into the PASTORATE? Simply imply that God loves evangelists, missionaries and pastors MORE than He loves “regular Christians” and you’ll have many more evangelists, missionaries and pastors!

You name it! If you want people to do ANYTHING, simply tell them that doing that particular thing will earn them God’s love, or more of His love, or secure His acceptance or merit His blessings and you’ll have them doing it.

And please don’t hear me wrong! I would love to see everyone tithe. / And yes, it would warm my heart to see everyone at church every week or every time the doors open! / It would be an inspiration beyond words to see everyone doing evangelism or supporting missions or doing ministry, or devotions and prayer and Bible memorization and pursuing holiness. They would do wonders for the life of any church!

Yet as much as I’d LOVE to see people doing all those things (because in and of themselves they are all good and helpful things) the Gospel forbids me from trying to get anyone to do them by making their salvation or justification or acceptance with God dependent upon them – even though I know doing so WOULD get me the results I desire.

Under grace I cannot revert to using fear and guilt and pride and unabashed selfish self-interest to motivate people to do the things they need to do! We’re not to be pragmatists who simply use whatever works or gets the results we want! We’re Christians under grace, who are limited in our methods by the message God has entrusted to us!

Which brings me to the FIRST point I want to make today. That in the Bible it’s not simply the action or the outward act of obedience or the spiritual habit formed or the discipline established that matters to GOD! It’s also (and maybe even more importantly) the reason that lies behind why we do what we do.

Paul makes that undeniably clear when he says in 1 Corinthians 13: *“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but have not love... If I have the gift of prophecy or a faith that can move mountains... If I give all I have to the poor and surrender my body to the flames (and he means in martyrdom — being willing to die for the faith) but have not love, I gain nothing.”*

You see, with God, the reason we do things is as important, if not more important, than the fact that we do them! We often focus on the activity, but God, as we are told, focuses on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).

There are many proven ways to motivate people. (Let me save you \$250!) Stroke their pride / prick their fears / or promise them health, wealth and prosperity / Give them guarantees success or warn them of failure / Promise increased self-esteem / more joy and energy / a place in history / protection from all calamity / or a better quality of life!

They all work (every single one)! Yet they do so (in every single case) by appealing to fear, or pride, or self-serving self-interest, and thus produce activity fueled by wrong motives!

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You see, we don't tend to care why people do the things they do as long as they do them! Not so with God! Because what is the right thing done for the wrong motive? It's SIN! It misses the mark. It falls short of the glory of God. It's not what God wants! It's nothing but a "splendid sin," as Augustine rightly pointed out!

In fact, John Piper's excellent illustration where he comes home from work on the evening of his anniversary, with a huge bouquet of long stemmed roses for his wife, speaks directly to this issue of the right thing done for the wrong reason and how it makes that right thing wrong!

He knocks on the door holding a beautiful bouquet in his hands, and his wife Noel seeing the flowers says: "O Johnny, they're beautiful, thank you," and gives him a big hug. And then with a matter-of-fact tone he looks at her and says: "Don't mention it, it was my duty." Some men might add, "I had to do it because I knew you'd get mad at me if I didn't."

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The point is clear, is it not? Just as any wife wants her husband to give her flowers because he loves her and appreciates her and wants to bring great joy to her heart by giving them (and is thus more interested in why he gives them than the act of giving), so to with God.

He doesn't simply want us to do and serve and obey, He wants us to do and serve and obey for the RIGHT REASONS! And the only thing that produces right reasons for doing and serving and obeying God is the grace of God!

To use the example of the flowers, if I'm giving my wife flowers just to keep her from getting mad at me (because I know she expects them on our anniversary), or if I'm giving them to her to get favors from her later that night, then who are the flowers actually for? They're for ME!

The same is true of the person who gives to God in order to get something from God. They're not really giving to God but to themselves! Yet when I give under grace I can actually give! Because under grace I know my giving is not purchasing or securing anything for me! It's given out of gratitude for what I already have and cannot lose!

Under grace I understand that Christ already secured for me everything I need! So my giving is taken out of the realm of being a purchase, or a down-payment, or something akin to a Wall Street investment where greed prompts me to give so that I can get that hundredfold return on my gift that the Tele-evangelist promised me! Grace removes it from all those mercenary categories and makes it a true gift!

The same is true of loving people. If I'm loving people in order to earn favor with God, then I'm not really loving them, I'm loving me and using them as the means by which I get something for myself! The same can be said if I'm doing things to be seen or admired or thought well of as with the Pharisees, whose works, for that very reason, were repugnant to God.

You see, under grace I already possess everything I need, and know I couldn't purchase anything by what I do anyway, since in the economy of grace, deeds have no merit anyway!

Which means that under grace I don't do them to get something, but because He's given me something! He's changed my heart by His grace, and saved me in spite of the fact that I don't deserve it. I do it for the One who has been so unspeakably kind and merciful to me, not to get Him to be kind and merciful to me!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** point I need to make. That correctly understood grace does not de-motivate, it simply frees people from wrong and unhealthy forms of motivation. I've seen and read about Christian people who have literally burned themselves out, and drove themselves into the ground, and destroyed their marriages, and made themselves of no use to anyone, because they were being pushed by an inner compulsive need to succeed or impress God or somehow make themselves worthy or prove to God that they (like Peter in the Gospel) wouldn't let Him down like all the others.

One pastor I knew in New Hampshire had a nervous breakdown doing just that. He ran himself ragged and engaged in incessant activity and couldn't bring himself to slow down, because to do so was to risk disappointing God or being a failure in God's eyes.

And thus to the average on-looker, who only measures spiritual zeal by ceaseless activity and busyness, it is true that grace sometimes appears to de-motivate people – especially in cases where the Gospel liberates them from attempting to gain God's (or people's) approval by their efforts. (Matt C.)

Grace does enable driven people to slow down, take a deep breath, be still and rest in the merits of Jesus — which some people interpret as de-motivation.

Yet from a Gospel standpoint they needed to be de-motivated. Because what was driving them to their incessant activity was an attempt to curry favor with God or atone for past sins or simply try to gain the approval of God and people by what they did. Grace should do that!

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[Video clip from "The Mission."](#) His struggle to carry the heavy burden and atone for his past is symbolic of so many Christians in churches today. In the clip Liam Neeson would represent God who neither wants or asks him to carry the load as a strenuous act of self-atoning penance.

He desires to free us from such guilt, pride, blame and self-serving efforts to attain or regain God's forgiveness, acceptance, affirmation and love.

Yet to the average onlooker, it did indeed seem like Robert DeNiro was "working harder" when he was trying to pay the price for his own sins — something the Gospel was intended to relieve him and us of doing!

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Which brings us to our **LAST** point. We are to serve God. And we are to obey Him. We are to do many or all those things I've mentioned, and do them with reverence, earnestness and zeal. Yet hear me well: We are not to do them to get God's acceptance, but because we already have God's acceptance! Not to earn God's favor but because He's already graced us with it! Not to gain His love (or more of it) but because in Jesus we already have all the love of God its possible to get! Which means we don't work **FOR** God's love or acceptance we work **FROM** it!

Paul shows us that in the Book of Romans. The book is 16 chapters long, and the last 4 chapters are filled with instructions or commands on what they are to do.

But before he tells them all the things they are to do in those last 4 chapters, he spends 11 full chapters (the vast majority of the book) speaking of the grace they've already received in Jesus! And before he even gives them the first one, he says: *"Therefore, I urge you brothers, in light of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices to God."*

In other words, they are to do all these things because they've already received God's mercy, and not to get it! Their obedience is a response to grace and not an attempt to get grace!

Likewise, Paul says in 1 Cor. 15: *"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. Yet by the grace of God I am what I am (and listen — this is the key to it all) His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than them all — yet not I but the grace of God that was with me."*

Now after reading that, tell me: Did Paul think of grace as a de-motivator? Did he use grace as an excuse to be lazy? **NO!**

**Why not?!** Because he rightly understood that grace is the effectual power of God given to us to enable us to do what God calls us to do! It doesn't de-motivate, it inspires! And it doesn't simply inspire, it empowers! Paul received strength and energy and inspiration and passion and zeal to serve God from the grace he received!

He didn't work FOR God's grace, God's grace (if I may put it this way) worked IN him and FOR him! It not only made him who he was, and motivated him to do what he did, but empowered him to work harder than all the others! That's what grace is meant to do!

Yet here's the problem. When grace is seen (as it often is in Christian circles) as little more than divine permissiveness / If it's seen as God's promise to turn a blind eye to our sin, or simply let us get away with things others will be held accountable for, then it will lead to all sorts of foolishness! Not only can it de-motivate in regard to godly efforts, it can motivate us to sin! But that's not really grace, because true grace (biblical grace as opposed to the cultural understanding of grace) has nothing to do with permissiveness!

The reception of grace, as Paul points out in Romans 8, actually makes us more responsible! Because it gives us the power to resist things we couldn't resist before we received it! That's why Paul (after speaking of the grace we receive) can say: ***"Therefore brothers, we have an obligation..."*** Because the believer now has the Spirit, he can put to death the misdeeds of the body that he couldn't put to death before he received the gracious gift of the Spirit!

What did Paul say in our passage from Titus 2:11? ***"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and live self-controlled, upright lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."***

And not only does it teach us to say no to ungodliness, it gives us the strength to live godly lives in this world until Christ returns for us. Grace, according to Paul is both powerful and instructive! It is false grace, as Jude 4 makes clear, that dis-empowers and de-motivates!

Speaking of false teachers that have slipped in among them Jude says: ***"They are godless men who CHANGE the grace of God into a license to sin or a license for immorality..."***

True grace can never be used to do that! You have to CHANGE grace into something it is not, something other than grace, to be able to use it to excuse laziness or justify sinning.

Which means that whenever you hear someone say: "I don't need to go to church, or read my Bible, or pray or do any of that stuff, because I'm under grace..." / Or hear them say, "I know I shouldn't do this sin, but I'm going to anyway because saved by grace," then you know your talking with a person who is not speaking about grace, but has CHANGED the grace of God into something its not—into an unholy permissiveness or an ungodly excuse to sin!

So, what do you do once you become a friend of God? You do all the things God commands you to do! All the things you should do. Yet the difference is this — you don't do them to get God's favor, you do them because it's already yours! You don't work FOR God's acceptance or love, you work FROM it!

An unloved child works frantically to get what it does not have — its parents love and approval. Many super-achievers fall into that category.

And a loved child also works hard, though less frantically, because his soul is at rest in what he already possesses even while he works! He works knowing he already has their approval not for that approval – and there's a BIG difference between the two!

Grace doesn't free us from the need to do things, it simply liberates us from doing them for the wrong reasons!

And it should never make us lazy, or give us an excuse to sin, for grace is the power to resist sin and serve God, often helping us, like Paul, work harder than the rest!