

Guilt, Grace and Gratitude

Thanksgiving 2021

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Introduction

I'm not given to alliterations (a series of words with similar sounds or first letters-e.g., Peter Piper Picked a Peck or Greedy Greg Grabbed the Green Grapes). Certainly, alliterations help us remember the lesson. But there is a temptation to allow the alliteration to take control of a passage or message. More than once, I've seen the alliteration, Believing, Becoming, Belonging carved out of a passage that may contain that type of message, but, as least as far as I saw, wasn't a primary theme.

Having that out of the way, there is an alliteration that I have seldom used, but often pondered, which captures a very appropriate sense of the Christian faith. It is *Guilt, Grace, Gratitude*. To summarize:

Guilt: a necessary prerequisite to Christianity is the recognition of our guilt before God.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

Jesus did not come for the righteous (which, of course there are none, except in our own eyes). He came for guilty sinners (Luke 5:31, 32). It is a wonderful gift from God when our eyes are opened to our sin and guilt. It is a sort of phase one. It's as if the doctor has given us a diagnosis of a horrible disease. But it is not a disease without a cure. We need to know the disease in order to recognize our need for the cure. Without guilt, we would not recognize our need for grace.

Grace: Grace may be the apex of the message of the Christian faith. Little wonder that half the churches in our denomination are named Grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Assailing the notion of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone may be the prime directive of the world, the flesh and the devil. Sadly, it is not merely in the world, but continually bangs at the door of the church. One of the beauties of weekly communion is its dedicated reminder to us that it is the broken body and shed blood of Christ which brings us redemption.

It would require a particularly degenerative, committed act of rebellion to seek to place our own blood in the cup with Christ. It is after we meditate upon, and enjoy, that grace, that we can respond in good works. Our good works are not an effort to win God's favor, but a response of gratitude for having been gifted God's favor through the work of another.

Gratitude: Praise and good works from a sense of gratitude completes our alliteration. We don't obey God's commandments in hopes of being set free from the slavery of sin. We obey because we've already been set free. We're not trying to earn love. We're responding to love. The Ten Commandments don't begin with a command. They begin with a reminder.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

We don't enter into praise with the hopes of somehow connecting with God (a very common, even stated, quest in contemporary worship). We praise and worship God because He has connected with us through Christ.

Yet our gratitude can be so twisted and inept. Part of this is because we have a twisted and inept understanding of the Guilt and Grace. If we

really understood the guilt and really understood the grace, our gratitude (and attending behavior) would be quite different.

Fragile Gratitude

Our culture celebrates Thanksgiving. Declarations of gratitude flood the airwaves. But our gratitude is very fragile when it is not built upon the rock of guilt and grace. Jesus taught of a very dangerous type of gratitude. His audience in this lesson was comprised of those **“who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9)**. A clear picture of their guilt and need for grace was something they rejected. Therefore, we see this type of prayer:

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get (Luke 18:11, 12).

Later in this lesson, Jesus teaches that this man did not go down to his house justified. This man, according to Jesus did not have favor with God. He was not acquitted of his sins.

Partial gratitude toward God is the mortar which builds the stairwell to hell and, as we see in the account in Luke, is accompanied by **“contempt”** (*exouthenountas*-despise or think low of) for others. Do our works of praise and gratitude vaporize when we are confronted with the discomforts of life, things, people? Perhaps it is due to the truth that, like the Pharisee, we are partially thankful to God. Partially thankful for the blessings by which we are surrounded and even partially thankful for whatever good we may see in ourselves.

Matthew Henry

Matthew Henry, a 17th century theologian, tells a story of having been robbed. After returning home he uttered a prayer to this effect: “Thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I was not hurt; and thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I didn’t have much to steal; and

thank you Lord that even though I was robbed I was able to make it safely to my home; but most of all I thank you Lord that I was the one robbed and not the robber.”

Do we truly have any idea what we are capable of apart from the grace of God? We tend to have this “I’d never do that” mentality when it comes to certain levels of evil. But the Bible indicates that apart from the grace of God (in a world which rejected the preaching of Noah) every single person is morally reduced to a condition where **“every intent of the thoughts of (man’s) heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5)**. A sobering thought! We may utter, “There, but for the grace of God go I.” But do we really mean it?

Friends, we may consider thanking God for things outside of ourselves, but we ought also to God for any good which is within us? Again, Moses wrote of the entire human race (except Noah’s family) that **“Every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually!”** This is not a general description sin nature or total depravity. It has been said that this was an iniquity which had **“reached its highest point...a prodigious wickedness (extraordinary, abnormal, monstrous).”**¹

Why do you and I not fall into this category? Don’t misunderstand, I’m not near perfect, neither are you, but my every intention and every thought are not continuously evil. I could be a lot worse than I am. I am not as evil as I can be. There are moments when I seek after God. Even Paul when he was expressing his despair at his own sin admitted that there was within him a desire to do good (Rom. 7:18). The only answer to this is, “there but for the grace of God go I.”

It is so easy for us to be frustrated with other people. We watch the news and look in disgust at gang members, or dishonest politicians, terrorist or people who refuse to work or obey the law. Again, please don’t misunderstand me, these behaviors are wrong and there are due consequences, whether that means being confronted, arrested or convicted. What I am teaching here should in no way be construed as lessening human culpability.

What I want to put before us is a proper understanding that apart from God’s grace in our lives, we would be in the same condition as those

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Genesis* (electronic ed., Ge 6:5).

who we find most reprehensible. Let us be challenged this Thanksgiving (truly, at all times) not to glory in our own character but to thank God for any good we might see in ourselves and for His restraining hand in keeping us from where we would, by our own natures inevitably arrive, which is a thankless and futile darkness.

Our Natural Condition

As our first passage taught us, a lack of thanksgiving is a primal foundational sin.

...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

The context here is Paul's presentation of biblical anthropology/epistemology which teaches that all men know God. This is not a saving knowledge of God, but still a sure knowledge which had been revealed to them. In reference to man's knowledge of God, Hodge explains that it...

...does not mean merely that they had the opportunity of knowing him, but that in the constitution of their own nature, and in the works of creation, they actually possessed an intelligible revelation of the Divine existence and perfections.²

Now the appropriate response to God's revelation of Himself would have been worship. What might not be quite so obvious in terms of a response to God's general revelation is thankfulness. The things for which we should be thankful are beyond number. But certainly, included in the list is the very revelation of which Paul currently writes.

We should be thankful to God for all that we have and all that we are, that is, our very existence. What we might not think to add in our

² Hodge, Charles. Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans. P.38

thank you note is God's willingness to reveal Himself to us and in us – something generally taken for granted. Calvin remarks:

Nor is it without reason that he adds, *that they were not thankful, for there is no one who is not indebted to him for numberless benefits: yea, even on this account alone, because he has been pleased to reveal himself to us, he has abundantly made us indebted to him.*³

Our guilt and God's grace should ever lead us to gratitude or thankfulness. It is a thankfulness which produces worship and obedience. That God made Himself known to us, Calvin offers, has abundantly made us indebted to Him. The true debt is one we can never pay. We have been ransomed by Christ. When a dear and godly friend was dying, I reached out to him to offer whatever I could. His words were such an encouragement though to me. He simply wrote, "The debt has been paid."

That the debt has been paid in terms of our redemption, does not mean we have no response. No, the Apostle Paul, in light of his own guilt and God's grace, viewed himself as a "**debtor**" to all (Romans 1:14). It is woven into the heart of man to live as if we are owed. But the truly, godly, thankful person will live as if we owe.

³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.