



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 8 Issue 4

January 25, 2009

The Impulses of Grace, Pt. 1

The Fight for the Gospel

Over the past 20 to 30 years we have lived in the midst of an ecclesiastical battle that is still being waged today. When I entered seminary in the mid '1980's, the battle lines were just beginning to be drawn up- at least in the Reformed camp. The "war" was over the right use of the pulpit and centered on restoring the gospel to its rightful place.

Now as far back as the '1950's, theologians were sounding the alarm that the gospel was going into eclipse in evangelical and Reformed pulpits. At first few listened. Yet the battle took a decisive turn in the 1970's and 1980's when conservative and orthodox seminaries, denominations, and churches woke up and realized that what was being passed off as preaching at best, was political or social commentaries on the day, or, at worst, moralism.

So different and sundry movements either took shape or began speaking out against the absence of the gospel in the pulpit. You probably know some of them:

- Christians United for Reformation.
- World Harvest Discipleship Ministry.
- The Whitehorse Inn.
- The Association of Confessing Evangelicals.

- The Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.
- Modern Reformation.

These and many, many more movements and men stood in the gap and called the evangelical, if not the Reformed community, back to the gospel.

Now I praise God for my fellow preachers, teachers, and elders who stood up and boldly criticized the evangelical trend. However as with any response and/or attack in an ecclesiastical battle, there remains the possibility of imbalance (think of the German Reformation and Karlstadt and Muntzer). And this is my observation when it comes to this movement today; we are now thirty or more years into the warfare and in many places the pendulum has swung so far in one direction that preaching Christ means preaching nothing more or less than the doctrine of justification. If one exhorts a church body to fulfill an imperative of Scripture in some corners this results in the accusation of teaching moralism. There are some today who suggest that the only use of the law in the context of an ecclesiastical setting is to demonstrate the condemnation of the individual that they might turn once again to Christ. That's it: Condemnation and then Consolation.

Now I hope you see that where justification and justification alone is propounded as the only message of a godly pulpit, there is an imbalance. In the Bible salvation is comprised of no less than ten parts. Accordingly, to preach salvation in Christ is to preach not just 1/10 of that which constitutes salvation (Justification), but the entire message- involving

- Effectual calling through regeneration.
- INDEED faith, repentance, and justification.
- BUT ALSO adoption, definitive sanctification, progressive sanctification, perseverance of the saints, and glorification.

These properly constitute fidelity to the word of God, the cross, the gospel, and grace.

Should not a godly pulpit serve the same end and purpose to which Scripture itself has been given?

2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

=1 Timothy 1:5, "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

This is not simply love for God, but ethical love- love for the body of Christ.¹ Martin Luther, the poster child for many in the ongoing struggle for the pulpit, himself said, "Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works."²

Along these lines the passage at which we are looking reflects what I consider to be a refreshing and freeing message when it comes to the Christian life. As you know Paul is writing this epistle to a Christian slave owner whose runaway servant recently had become a Christian and now was being sent

¹ Compare also 1 John 3:16-17

² Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger, 1961, page 11.

back by the Apostle to face his master who, under Roman Law, had the right to execute him for his crimes. Nevertheless Paul sent him back because, as we have seen, unity in the body of Christ was more important than even one's life.

And yet the apostle did not send back the slave empty handed. Rather, Paul penned this letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus in which Paul appeals to Philemon to forgive what now is his brother in Christ.

Now, we have looked at almost the entirety of this epistle and have been confronted and floored by the Glorious Gospel by which we have been saved. One cannot read Philemon 17-19 and not think that this truly is the message that ascended to God on our behalf as Christ hung on the cross.

Philemon 17-19a, "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account... I will repay it!"

Yet we are not finished. Paul ends this Epistle with a variety of closing remarks, all of which rightly flow from an understanding of grace. Accordingly I want to look with you at what I have called, "The Impulses of Grace."

Expectation for Obedience

Having been saved by the glorious grace of God, what impulse naturally will arise? You will note there are four, the first of which is the expectation for obedience.

Philemon 21, "**Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee**, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say."

Having just discussed the gospel of forgiveness, Paul expected nothing less from Philemon than his full, unconditional obedience. Now if you think about it, this is quite a bold expectation. Of all peoples on the earth, Paul knew his own heart the best. And knowing his heart, he hardly could predict his own obedience; much less anyone else's.

Romans 7:18-24a, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am!"

Paul's own testimony was that of struggle and strife when it came to even the most rudimentary calls for obedience. So how is it that Paul could make such a bold assertion as it related to Philemon? In fact when we consider the following passages, could Paul have a basis for confidence to say a man will obey God? Consider this passage spoken by Eliphaz, I doubt any of us would disagree with him:

Job 5:7, "For man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward."

Jeremiah wrote this:

Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

=John 2:24: "But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men."

Truly, there is no basis whatsoever to have confidence in the obedience of any man. In fact we might say that if there is confidence when it comes to man's obedience, it is in the fact that man will NOT obey.

So how is it that Paul could say in regard to Philemon, "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you...?"

Again while Paul may not have known the heart of Philemon as well as his own, nevertheless the apostle knew God's word and the effect that grace has in the life of a child of God.

What is that effect?

Grace always will evoke a passion for obedient service in the Kingdom of God. Now I want to show you this using four lines of argument. First off, notice the interplay in Scripture between a man's faith in God and the resulted obedience.

John 3:36, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Here faith and obedience are interchangeable. To say that you trust Christ as Savior is to commit yourself to following Him as Lord. Without such a commitment, without such a faith, there is no salvation.

Hebrews 4:2, 6, "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard... [Paralleling this verse, the passage continues in verse 6...] Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because [now we would expect, based on verse 2, that those who failed to enter salvation did so because they lacked faith. Yet that is not what we read here. Rather they failed, because...] of disobedience."

Truly faith and obedience constitute the two sides of one coin. Both are part and parcel of salvation! Never does one exist without the other. Where there is salvation, there is going to be a passion for obedience.³

Now, don't let the following passage trip you up; yet in the same token, let us be sure that we not ignore it. For don't miss it, from this we conclude that grace/salvation always will result in a life of obedient service in the Kingdom of God.

James 2:20-26, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was

³ Compare also 1 John 2:3-6

reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

As we have said, salvation involves much more than justification. It begins with Effectual Calling and ends in the Christian's Glorification. Everything in between, including definitive sanctification, progressive sanctification, and perseverance; can be said to be expectations when it comes to the grace of God working in the life of a child of God.

And that is why faith and obedience are bedfellows. The message of James is simple, "*Man is saved by faith alone... but not by a faith that is alone.*" That's the nature of the salvation we have received in Christ.

This brings us to point two, the man who lives by grace will have a passion and longing to obey God.

2 Corinthians 6:1, 3, "And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited."

To receive God's grace "in vain" is to glory in your justification and yet use it as the basis to excuse inactivity, lawlessness, laziness, sluggardliness, and the like. No! Grace, if it be received, will have a definite ethical impact in the life of the child of God.

Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."

Don't miss this very important truth; the message of grace involves ethical teachings on self denial and living sensibly, righteously and godly. Accordingly we are not surprised to read passages which state the reason for Christ's coming to be that of our moral purity and godliness- that is the natural end of grace.

Titus 2:14, "[Christ] gave Himself for us, that [*hina*] He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

2 Corinthians 5:15, "[Christ] died for all, that [*hina*] they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf."

1 Peter 2:24, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that [*hina*] we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

A very important message that must be heard by the child of God who has been saved by grace is that God's salvation was intended not simply to deliver them from hell, but to redeem them back to God that they might fellowship with Him in a context of moral purity and devotion.⁴ And thus Paul expressed the goal and end of our interaction with the world.

2 Corinthians 10:5, "*We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the

⁴ A. W. Pink wrote in his sermon titled *Present Day Evangelism*, "The very first thing said of Him in the New Testament is, 'You shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people...[not "from the *wrath* to come," but] from their *sins*' (Matthew 1:21). Christ is a Savior for those realizing something of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, who feel the awful burden of it on their conscience, who loathe themselves for it, and who long to be freed from its terrible dominion."

knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”

I hope you see that salvation engenders in the heart of man a longing to obey the word.⁵ The more the child of God comes to know grace, the greater will be his desire for obedience.

In fact; point three, not only will the child of God feel compelled to obey God, but God’s word/law will be their delight.

Psalm 119:97a: “O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day...”

What a beautiful portrait of the child of God. He is one who loves God’s word/law. In fact from this verse we arrive at a conclusion which counters some of the extreme rhetoric which has arisen in some circles in the battle for the gospel. To the one living by grace, the law of God is not a burden. The Law of God is the Christian’s joy, delight, and glory.

Romans 7:22, “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”

Prior to his salvation, Paul considered the word of God to be a burden. In fact he said,

Romans 7:10: “And this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me.”

Yet now that he was saved, the word of God, the law of God, had become his joy! Along these same lines, David expressed the heartbeat of everyone saved by grace.

Psalm 19:9b-11, “...The judgments of the Lord [His law, His word] are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

How is this possible?

According to the Law/Gospel paradigm quite popular today, law is that which condemns. So how is it that a child of God could ever delight in the law of God?

The law in Scripture also is that which illumines the will of the God in whom we take delight. Theologians call this the third use of the law! To the person living by grace, God’s law instructs us in how to give expression to our love. Christ taught it this way.

John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

This isn’t a threat, child of God. This is an observation. Those who have been saved by grace, love God. And that love naturally results in a passion to obey and so serve the Lord as He has revealed Himself to us in His law.⁶

1 John 5:3, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments

⁵ Compare also Philippians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 3:14

⁶ Compare also 1 John 2:5

are not burdensome.”⁷

Listen! If you have been saved by grace and so impelled by love, the law of God; the imperatives of Scripture is NOT a burden, BUT a delight and joy! In fact to the child of God who listens to the word of God and only hears “burden” (which sadly is what many today are being taught by the recent movements which have swept through our land) the Biblical assessment is that you don’t understand grace.

Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*; His praise endures forever.”

The teaching of Law/Gospel says **every** command of God is law and given for the purpose of condemning you that you might be brought to a greater trust in Christ.⁸ And family of God, for the record, Presbyterians do not disagree with this statement. One of the ends to which God brings His law is condemnation that the person might come to greater faith in Christ. Yet the third use of the law which we boldly profess says, “Yes but now that you are saved and so are living by grace, you not only will delight in God’s law, but you will long to do it! And it won’t be a burden!”

Thus, if the law is a burden to you, again we say that it is because you don’t understand grace. Now don’t take this as a criticism. For the truth be known, each and every one in Christ has only been introduced to grace.⁹ Truly, we will spend the rest of eternity growing in our understanding of it.¹⁰

With this we must see that grace does not invalidate the demands of Scripture. Rather it provides the only basis upon which the child of God can take them seriously.

Romans 13:14, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ [that is, “be saved”], and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts.”

It is clear that a positive, ethical demand is being placed upon the people of God in this text, ones who have been saved by grace. Specifically it is expected that the child of God ought to live in a certain way in light of the kingdom of God. Again, grace demands nothing less. Yet according to some of the “grace movements” that have swept through Christianity, the purpose of this text simply is to place the Christian under the law that they might turn more fully to Christ.

I hope you see that this mutes this and many other passages¹¹ and so obviates any and all ethical callings placed upon the child of God in Scripture. Indeed, we must believe in the Christ and so rest solely in Him for God’s good pleasure. And this trust must be renewed “every morning”¹² and every time we approach the word of God.

Yet in the words of James, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). That doesn’t mean that works are required to validate my faith. Rather, it means that grace always will transform the child of God giving him a passion to serve the Lord. If this passion is absent it could mean that the person isn’t saved.

⁷ βαρεῖαι; too heavy to bear; this is the NT equivalent of כבד.”

⁸ Cf. *Formula of Concord*, Epitome, article 6.

⁹ Compare Romans 5:2

¹⁰ Compare John 17:3

¹¹ Cf. also 1 John 3:2-3; 2 Corinthians 7:1.

¹² Compare Lamentations 3:23

But, in today's climate, it most likely means that the person doesn't understand grace.¹³

Now in light of all of this Paul's expectation in this passage is not a surprise. Philemon has come to know richly and deeply the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ which has saved him from the wrath of God. Paul put it this way:

Philemon 5a, "I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus..."

Philemon loved Christ and so lived in reliance upon His cross-work. And because of this, his life was dramatically changed.

Philemon 7, "I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother."

Unlike many in our day who represent the grace of God as having LITTLE if NO ethical effect in the life of the child of God, grace thoroughly transformed Philemon such that he became a servant and so a refresher of the body of Christ in Colossae! Thus when it came to Paul's appeal for Philemon to live according to the grace of Christ such that the slave owner might extend the grace and compassion of Christ to his unworthy servant Onesimus, Paul did not doubt that grace would impel him to that end AND MORE! In fact, look at the text:

Philemon 21, "Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, **knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.**"

Many suggest that behind this was a hinting at the emancipation of Onesimus from his status as a slave. Yet it is hard to be definitive here. Throughout this study while Paul never formally requests Philemon to set Onesimus free, nevertheless the expectation clearly is there. So personally, I don't think Paul is hinting here. Rather he is arriving at the natural place that grace would impel him. Not only would grace lead Philemon to obey the letter of the Law; it would do far more than that! It would transform this church leader into one who went above and beyond what we could imagine when it came to serving the Lord and obeying Him. Truly, grace is that powerful; it was in Paul's day; and you must see that it is in our own!

Listen! As Paul could expect Philemon to excel in grace, so likewise each and every one of us ought to have the same expectation when it comes to ourselves and each other. Do you know what I expect of you and myself as we serve the Lord together here in Broomfield?

- I expect that we will grow in our understanding of the cross of Christ and how it has reconciled us to God, removing our sin and so making us most pleasing to the Lord.
- Yet I also expect, I say this NOT because I know you BUT because I know God, that each and every one of us will grow more in more
 - In our passion to serve the Lord.
 - In our success in serving Him.
 - Not only in our holiness, but also in our holy habits.
 - In our ability to mourn- truly mourn- over our sin.
 - In our longing to be like Jesus.
 - In our conviction on account of our sin.

¹³ Compare also Psalm 111:10

- In our panting for Christ.
- In our longing for His return.

Now don't get me wrong. While we might question our motives, future obedience, and the like (on account of the knowledge of our depravity, Romans 7:14-24), nevertheless when it comes to grace we have all the confidence in the world that the child of God will grow in his obedience. With Paul we can say of each other,

Philippians 1:6, "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

So this morning we see reflected in our passage a glorious message of encouragement and freedom. Prior to salvation, we were unable to obey the Lord. Rather we were bound in our sin and enslaved to Satan. Yet in Christ Jesus, now we have been freed to obey Him- free

- To seek Him.
- To serve Him.
- To submit ourselves to Him in His word.
- To offer ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice.

Truly with Christ, "Our meet is to do the will of Him who sent us" (John 4:34)! And because of the free and unmerited grace of God, we know that when we fail, God will not frown, but continue to look upon us as His beloved children!

Now for some I know it is as if I am speaking a foreign language. The household of God, the Law of God, reeks of slavery to them. The ethical callings of God are not their delight but their condemnation. They have been well-trained by the Law/Gospel advocates.

I want to resurrect a metaphor that I introduced you to the last time we looked at Philemon. Recall Chris and Grace. Both were reared in Christian homes, yet both had completely different experiences.

Chris was reared by loving parents who loved the Lord, and yet were perfectionists who lacked grace. A call to clean the bathroom surely meant failure on the part of Chris and a lecture on how she could have done better. Accordingly, she grew up resenting her parent's and her parent's standards. She did only what was necessary, for to do more meant

- The scowl of her dad.
- The disapproving eye.
- Another lecture.
- Another reminder of how she fell short.

Grace on the other hand was reared by parents who loved the Lord and who also were perfectionists; yet they were able to extend God's grace to her consistently. When she cleaned the bathroom, her efforts were met with, "Great job! Thanks!" In fact, it was as if she couldn't fail, even when she was corrected it was done with an obvious acceptance and approval by her parents.

The result was that Grace frequently looked for opportunities to serve her parents, and so frequently volunteered to

- Mow the lawn.
- Clean out the garage.
- Do the laundry.

Wouldn't you if you knew your efforts would be met with the delight of your parents?

Now both girls grew into adulthood and predictably approached and so viewed God as they had viewed their parents. When Chris heard the law, she heard only condemnation. The law of God was not her delight; rather it aroused fear in her heart. When Grace heard the law, she saw it as another opportunity to serve the Lord and receive those glorious words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21)

Of the two (which I hope you realize are extremes; throughout our Christian walk we will vacillate between the two), which reflects a Biblical approach to God and His word? I hope you see it is Grace.

So what would be the prescription that we might give to Chris?

According to Psalm 111:10, she must come to see that she lacks understanding. In other words, though she thinks she understands grace, her understanding is flawed. Based on 1 John 5:3, she must come to see that to the child of God living by grace, God's law/word is NOT burden, BUT delight. Accordingly she must endeavor to come to understand the full Gospel of the Lord which did not simply justify her, but also freed her for the first time in her life to passionately pursue the ethical demands of the law without fear of condemnation (Romans 8:1).

And to the Graces in the body of Christ, the calling is to give meet to your passion and desire to serve the Lord. Truly there is much more to salvation than justification- there is sanctification and the perseverance of the saints. Without apology therefore continue to

- Memorize Scripture.
- Have quiet times.
- Do good.
- Flee from sin.
- Strive to be holy.
- Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, and peace.

Yet through it all guard your heart lest you forget that it is God's pleasure, love, and grace that must impel you in your service. Never do your righteous acts impress God!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 26, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.