



by Greg Albrecht

"I'd rather do it myself"

OBJECTIONS TO GRACE

PART ONE

Grace is the dynamic expression of God's love. God's grace is foreign to our nature, our culture and our experience. Because grace is not earned, accomplished, achieved or purchased we struggle to believe it. Because nothing in our world prepares us for the radical experience of God's amazing grace we often reject it. Therefore, when God's grace is proclaimed, objections are quickly voiced:

- "If grace is what the Bible seems to say it is, then isn't God encouraging us to be slackers, goofing our way through life, because we know we will always be forgiven?"

- "If grace is what the Bible seems to say it is, then isn't God a permissive heavenly Parent, allowing us to sleep in the sun, like the family dog, while he does everything for us?"

- Some voice their objection to grace like this: "If grace is real and if it is actually free, then I'll take ten pounds of it—just in case I need it. But, in the meantime, I'm going to live my life as if my relationship with God depends entirely on me. I will not put all my money on grace."

- Others say something like this about God's freely given favor: "I don't understand exactly why God's love is unconditional, with no strings attached. So even if I don't deserve God's love, I'll take it—but I can't get too excited about others receiving his grace. In my opinion, other peo-

ple should get what they have coming to them. If they don't, what kind of world will we wind up with?"

- Religious professionals are often loathe to plumb the depths of God's grace, because it seems to them that once people fully live in God's grace, then how will religion be able to control them? This objection is often summarized like this: "Without a big club, how can we get people to obey?"

You give someone something, you do something for someone, and in return they respond. That's the way humans work. But...that's not the way God works.

Grace Rocks the World!

God's amazing grace scares us. It rocks our world and it rocks the boat of religion. God's grace upsets religious apple carts and threatens the status quo as to how we believe we can relate to and know God. God's grace turns the values of Christ-less religion upside down. Christ-less religion is deathly afraid of losing control of its followers (or is it slaves?).

The major flaw with our human critique of God's grace is that it comes from our human experience, expectations and perspectives. Humans understand cause and effect. We understand the basic barter system. You give someone something, you do something for someone, and in return

they respond. That's the way humans work.

But according to God's grace, that's not the way God works. We cannot mow God's lawn and then expect him to pay us. We cannot rake the leaves in his backyard, we can't go over to his house and dust or clean or make him a wonderful dinner. Because of the love of God demonstrated in and through Jesus Christ, God's grace demands that God is never obligated to do anything for us, in return for something we do "for" him.

Christ-less religion, on the other hand, bases its beliefs and practices on

the way our world works—rather than the way God's grace works. Christ-less religion essentially teaches that if its followers do things for God (or at least the way they represent and explain God) then he will be happier with them than he would have otherwise been.

Of course, God is happy with us if we do our best not to lie, not to steal and not to gossip. God is happy if we see others in need and do what we

can to help. Those are good things, and God would rather have us involved in such activities than doing the opposite. However, doing and not doing things does not earn us credit or demerits with God. That's where our human reasoning often leaves the track, and we wind up locked into a performance-based relationship with God.

The New Testament teaches this absolute truth, which is the very cornerstone of the gospel of Jesus Christ—God's *relationship with us is not conditional*. He loves us because he is good, not because (or when) we are good. Given that eternal reality, given the gospel of Jesus Christ, given the fact that God loves us in spite of who we are, Christ-centered religious pro-



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professionals will help people understand that, while they should try to be good and do the right things, all of their doing does not alter or modify their relationship with God.

Beyond that, it is absolutely imperative for all who would come to know God to understand that the power and often the motivation to do the right thing comes from Jesus Christ who lives his life within them. Our relationship with God is not predicated on a *quid pro quo* system—whereby his commendation is given in return for our virtuous behavior. Our relationship with God is based on the life of our risen Lord, who lives within us (Galatians 2:20) and produces in our lives the works and deeds that please him (Ephesians 2:10).

Doing the Right Things...

Should we do good things? Of course. Should we exhort and encourage one another to do the right things? Yes.

Should we browbeat one another, and threaten one another about the consequences of not doing the right things, and on the other hand should we imply that doing right things gains us some standing with God that we would have not otherwise enjoyed? No.

Do many in Christendom promise that our reward—our standing with God—God’s opinion of us—will increase if we do more of the right things? Yes.

Should they, according to the gospel? No.

Jesus is both our Savior, and our Lord. What does that mean? It means that he has rescued us from the world we know, giving us eternal life, by God’s grace. Jesus is our Savior and our Lord, and because of his cross, we are given eternal life that we can never earn.

Because Jesus is Lord we obey and follow him. Christians are, by definition, obedient people—but not just obedient to anyone or anything. As Christians we are obedient because of the grace God has given us, not because of the grace we hope to earn.

We are not obedient so that God will love us, we are obedient because he has, he does and he always will. Obedience is a consequence of grace; it is not a causal agent of grace.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

“Well, what about Philippians 2:12?” someone might ask. “We need to ...*work out our salvation*, don’t we?” What does “working out our salvation” mean?

Here’s what Paul says in this passage: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ...that’s the end of verse 12, but the complete sentence does not end there. Verse 12 ends with a comma—the sentence continues in verse 13, which tells us ...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

The fact is that many, in the name of God, most with sincere and good intentions, have wrenched this verse out of its context (the first 11 verses of the chapter are all about Jesus and what he has done for our salvation).

Many make this passage the basis of a works-based theology, wherein people slave away thinking that at any moment they can lose their salvation.

The term “work out” is used in this passage—and it’s a key. We are to “work out” what God has already “worked in.”

If God has not already saved us, if he has not already “worked in” our salvation, there is nothing inside us to be “worked out.” We have no innate ability to “work out” our salvation.

Others might object to God’s grace by seeming to accept God’s grace with one hand but taking it away with the other. Some who are addict-

ed to performance-based religion seem to reluctantly admit that we may initially receive God’s grace without any strings attached, but they categorically insist that God expects us to “do something”—to “perfect” our salvation.

Let’s pause and consider how in the world flawed and imperfect humans might ever “perfect” any facet of their relationship with God? How could we ever, being given the treasure of salvation, the indwelling of our risen Lord, as “jars of clay” (see 2 Corinthians 4:7) be expected to perfect the eternal riches we have been given? How can we, the perishable and imperfect and sinful, perfect the imperishable, perfect and holy? We don’t perfect what is already perfect.

We have been made perfect by Jesus, by the atoning work on the cross of the Lamb of God—he has perfected us, if we accept his sacrifice, completely, without reservation. Hebrews 10:14 says that “by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” Ephesians 4:12-13 tells us that Jesus did what he did “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Who perfects who? How do we become perfect? *By Jesus, through Jesus, because of Jesus.*

But Aren’t We Supposed to Contribute to our Salvation?

Here’s another popular objection to God’s grace—some state this objection something like this: “We can never earn our own salvation which is why he has given it to us. Neither can we lose salvation (be made unrighteous) through works. But shouldn’t we be careful not to grieve God with our actions? The Lord will be happier if we produce good works. Shouldn’t we exhort one another to do good works so that we do not grieve our Lord? Don’t we enable ourselves to enjoy the gifts he has intended for us by living our lives in accordance to his will?”

Galatians 5 and many other New Testament passages tell us to yield to the Spirit. When do we first yield to the Spirit? By accepting the cross of Christ, the new covenant in his

blood. What does that mean? It means that we accept, completely and without reservation, that Jesus is sufficient for our salvation. It means that we surrender to Jesus, we surrender any and all notions that we can somehow earn or contribute to our salvation.

Why don't more people accept God's amazing grace? For one thing, they just can't completely yield to the idea that there is nothing that they can do to gain or contribute to their salvation! Why do people get sucked into religious stuff that has nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Because humans like the idea of being in control of their own destiny—we like the idea that God needs at least a little bit of what we can do, and we disdain handouts from anyone. Even from God. Therefore, we are easily conned into thinking that we can help God and Jesus, in terms of our salvation. Christ-less religion comes along, and we are easy marks for its unbiblical and un-Christlike contrivances.

Yes, we must yield, absolutely, without qualifications. Completely. That happens once when we are spiritually transformed/spiritually reborn. That decision is our choice, and that is something we must DO for salvation. God will not force us to accept his love.

The Bible does indicate, however, that since the human heart is opposed to God that the very act of repentance is an unhuman act and that it is therefore a miraculous gift of God. So, even our repentance and acceptance of Jesus is not something we can say we did, on our own, without any help.

Do we continue to yield to God in our Christian lives—once we have been transformed from the kingdom of this world, and its religions, to a relationship with God? Of course we do. How do we do that? How much of our yieldedness can we claim as a work we accomplish on our own, apart from the indwelling of the Spirit? I would say that the Spirit leads us to humility. Yielding to God is a product of Christ living in us. Yielding to God flows out of living a Spirit-filled life, which is a fruit of God's grace.

How Good Deeds Can Grieve God

Having received God's grace are we not conscious of wanting to please

him? Yes, we are. Christians, by definition, are obedient to God, all the while we are still in the flesh, and therefore imperfect. There are times when we sin and are disobedient (1 John 1:8). Having received God's grace, we are aware of the fact of God's enormous love, and the fact of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for us. May we never be so audacious or presumptuous to suggest that our good deeds, produced solely by our own strength, should ingratiate us to God.

God is grieved when we receive his grace and then later decide (probably because of some bogus, unbiblical religious teaching) that we are still not good enough for God. God is grieved when we fall for the idea that Jesus needs our help maintaining a relationship with God on the basis of our deeds.

There is no question that as Christians we need to proclaim the high standards of the life of Christ and that we should speak of the high calling we have been given, which involves wanting to do the right and the good.

But at the same time, while we proclaim and encourage and admonish doing the right and choosing the good, we must insist that people understand what they do is of no consequence to their salvation. Failing to proclaim God's grace can further open the door for the debilitating and toxic work of the virus of religious legalism.

Religious legalism exists in all of us, in all churches and ministries. In many spiritual addresses it may be latent, perhaps because God's grace is proclaimed without qualification, so that the virus doesn't have a chance to thrive. Sometimes the virus exists only within individuals, but not within the corporate, institutional teaching or culture (and of course the reverse is just as true). We are all impacted by legalism, whether we realize it or not.

God's grace is astounding and amazing because it is a miracle—it suspends the natural order of the way our world works. Once grace is not only preached, but fully accepted, then Jesus lives in us and produces his new life in us. New life in Christ overcomes the virus of legalistic religion. We become his handiwork (Ephesians 2:10) and he produces Christian behaviors in us



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once we accept and submit to him. *Humanly produced morality does not produce Jesus. But Jesus produces morality.*

But Doesn't Grace Diminish God's Law?

Works-based righteousness fires another salvo at grace by saying that the end product of God's grace is a permissive easy-believism. Here's yet another popular objection to God's grace—it's often stated something like this: "It is true that grace is free. But beware of the old message of cheap grace that lowers the standards of God's laws or casts scorn on the value of divine law. Cheap grace tells us that respecting and obeying God's law is legalism, and that obeying God leads to judgment and condemnation—all the while claiming that God's grace is all about love and mercy. Any message that overtly or subtly reduces the requirements of God's laws cheapens grace."

Those who object to grace using this rationale continue, asking, "What if there was a judge who de-

cided to show mercy—always and in every case? Soon every rapist, serial killer, child molester and professional gangster would be lining up outside the judge’s courtroom. No one would be punished. No one would be compelled to change, and all would go free. Is that God’s kind of mercy, or is it simply injustice?”

I am not surprised at sermons, articles and books that attempt to paint grace as “permissive” or “idyllic.” I am not surprised to hear good “church-going” folks talk about how we must “balance” grace with law, “lest people get the wrong ideas.”

No doubt about it—the fullness and reality of God’s grace places performance-based religion on the de-

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fensive. God’s grace, once it is fully embraced and practiced, spells the end of the business of religion.

People who are devoted to (or ensnared by) Christ-less religion find the full and final significance of God’s grace extremely disturbing. They cannot accept that their relationship with God may be achieved by any other way than by their human efforts (though many will somewhat grudgingly admit that they need a little initial help, a little jump start from Jesus). Religion is a system which diminishes Jesus and exalts rules, wherein human performance is more important than trust in God.

One of the oft-used charges brought against God’s grace is the pejorative term “easy believism.” This idea, which devalues authentic grace by calling it “cheap” proposes that real, dedicated Christians will take the high, moral ground.

But the truth is that the gospel is already on the highest moral ground possible—higher ground than any spiritual elevation to which humanly produced morals might rise. The morals that God wants to see in our lives are the products of his grace—our morals do not produce his grace! *Jesus produces morality, morality cannot produce Jesus.*

Cheap and Expensive Grace

For the purpose of this argument, let’s discuss the term “cheap” grace.

What is expensive grace, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Expensive grace, based on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, doesn’t just lower the standards of a law-based economy and relationship with God, it obliterates it! The example of an ineffective and naïve human judge who would always extend mercy is an apples and oranges comparison in terms of our heavenly Father.

Religious legalism insists that without the threat of spiritual punishment (in many cases, a fabricated eternal torture in hell) no one would be compelled to change. But *the New Testament says that fear is not the motiva-*

tion by which we relate to God—love is, and love casts out fear.

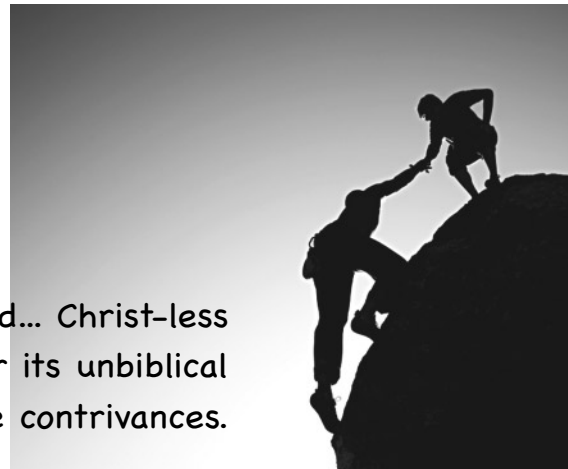
Those who battle against freedom in Christ, vainly trying to protect the so-called sanctity of Christ-less religion, propose a forensic view of a God of wrath whose honor has been offended by our sins and who must be vindicated. They believe that if God’s wrath is not “satisfied” by those responsible, then it must be satisfied by the Son, who will “take the hit” so that the Father can be satisfied. This view is corrupt, without biblical basis, and owes its popularity to performance-based religion.

God is not subject to laws—his own or anyone else’s. He doesn’t “do” something because it’s the right thing to do. *God is God—what he does is moral. He is not subject to morality.* God’s love defines the kingdom of heaven. It is a huge mistake—a travesty—when some say that without laws and church accountability and control Christians would be “out of control.”

The New Testament clearly specifies what a child of God, transformed by God’s love and grace, who is in Christ and in whom Christ lives, looks like, in terms of behavior. Read, for example, Titus 2:11-12.

Any message or teaching that places a requirement of law, whether the law is attributed directly to God or not, on grace, not only cheapens grace, but it pollutes it! God wants a relationship

with us based on his love, mercy and grace. The only true, eternal relationship humans can have with God is one in which God is the giver of his favor, and we are the ones who receive his favor. May we not blasphemously suggest, as it appears the elder son in the Prodigal Son parable does, that God’s grace is immoral.



Religious outrage against God’s grace is just so much human striving—it means nothing in the end. The idea that God’s grace leads to easy believism and diminished, cheap grace is just another religious attempt to tame and control God’s grace. It’s “another objection to God’s grace”—a modern *Galatianism*, that attempts to sidestep the spiritual cow pies into which the original Galatianizers stepped.

A theological pig wallowing around in the mud of human performance, even though it may be dressed up in fancy clothing, with all kinds of cosmetic enhancements, is still, at the end of the day, a pig wallowing in works-righteousness.

Jesus is not one and the same as the Jesus proclaimed by performance-based religion which masquerades as Christianity. Jesus alone transforms us, not laws. Jesus alone is the focus of real Christianity—that’s it!

Without an absolute, radical, uncompromising focus on Jesus, Christianity devolves into just another religion. Without Jesus, Christendom quickly becomes a performance-based religion.

In our second installment we’ll present “Objections to Grace: Part 2,” as we continue to explore resistance and even hostility to God’s amazing grace voiced by those who are unwittingly in bondage to legalism. □