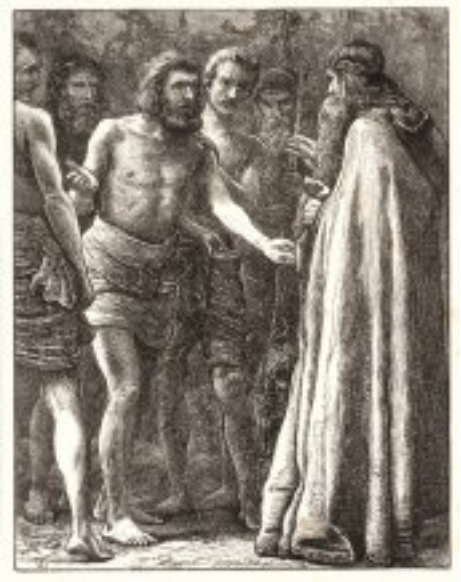
Jesus and Grace **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 10 December 2012 - 07:46



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Recently we remembered Reformation Day: the day when Martin Luther sparked the protestant reformation by nailing his objections to the corruptions within the Roman Catholic Church to the church door in Wittenberg. Okay, it may not have been very recently, but time slips by rather quickly, and I am sure that you can still what you did on Halloween. Remembering Reformation Day, together with some questions which I have been hearing, got me thinking about the issue of grace. The issue of grace lies at the very heart of the reformation: that God's will (apart from anything that we do) is enough for our sins to be forgiven. This is possible because the punishment which was due to us for all our wrongs (past, present and future) have already been paid for by Jesus on the cross.

The doctrine of grace (*sola gratia*) says that God's grace is sufficient for Him to forgive our sins without us having to earn it[1]. This means that anyone can come to saving faith in Jesus, despite their own weaknesses and failings. No past sin, or even future sin, can separate the believer from God, provided that the believer continues believing in Jesus. They also need to find sin abhorrent and seek to avoid it. Otherwise, if sin is not found to be distasteful, then why ask God for forgiveness at all? Anyone who sees a "Christian" willingly and happily continue in sin (without showing signs of improvement) should call into question whether that person actually and fundamentally believes in the faith which they profess.

The issue of grace divides many people: even Christians. People resist because it does not feel right or natural to have debt just written off. It hurts one's pride. But it is a core belief of the Christian faith. It distinguishes Christianity from every other religion in the world. If someone wants to reject the doctrine of grace, they might as well "hedge their bet" with their good deeds in Judaism, Mormonism, or Islam: all of these religions promise that God will judge you by your deeds and if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, then you can go to heaven.

This teaching about grace is most explicitly stated in Paul's letter to the Romans. But some people argue that Paul made this up, and that what he taught was contrary to what Jesus said. They argue that Jesus taught that we will only be saved by what we do, just like every other religion in the world. To strengthen their argument, they cite passages such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7, which actually teaches about the need for justification by faith, as well as sanctification which follows it) and the book of James (which actually is complimentary to Paul's teaching, not contradictory). So I was interested to look at what Jesus Himself had to say about grace. I came up with a non-exhaustive list of things which He had to say about grace. Jesus said that grace is:

- Necessary, because God's standard is too high for us. (Matthew 5:17–48)
- God's work, not ours. (Luke 15:1–10)
- Not reserved for the "special" or the "meritorious". (Matthew 15:21–28, Luke 14:15–24)
- Merited by faith, not by "great" works. (Matthew 8:5–13, Mark 2:1–12, Luke 21:1–4)
- Not withheld from anyone because they are too wicked. (Luke 15:11–32)
- Sufficient. (Luke 18:9–14)
- To be shown by those who received it. (Matthew 18:21–35)
- Will be given to the poor, not the proud. (Matthew 22:1–14)
- Unfair[2]. (Matthew 20:1–16)
- Life changing. (Matthew 13:44–46)

It seems clear, therefore, that Jesus taught much regarding being justified by faith alone. A careful reading of the writings of Paul and the book of James also reveals that they are not in tension with one another, but are in agreement. Consider for example Paul's letter to the Colossians. He speaks about good works which flow from (not to) a saving faith in Jesus, while condemning the following of useless rules. Similarly James speaks against people who profess to be Christian, but does not have any sanctification which points to being saved in the first place.

How amazing is God's grace! It seemed good to Him not give us our just punishment, but to take it upon Himself in Jesus. How can we ever say "no" or "no thank you" to that? Why would we want to try to earn what has already been given to us? And how can we not accept it joyfully, being completely transformed by it?

- [1.] We are eligible to receive this free forgiveness if we believe in Jesus as having the power to forgive our sins, that He has done so by paying our debt on the cross, and that His example and leadership is just and necessary for us to come to know God's will for our lives.
- [2.] The fact that grace is "unfair" by human standards makes the doctrine distasteful (or perhaps only incomprehensible) to many people.

Categories:

- Encouragements [2]

Tags:

- grace [3]
- faith [4]
- salvation [5]
- justification [6]
- sanctification [7]
- reformation [8]

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Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/184
[2] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/34
[3] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/107
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/108
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/93
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/109
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/110

[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/111