

THE GRACE AND LAW CONTROVERSY

(Identified and Clarified)
(by George Battey)

This study will focus on four things:

- *Briefly state why this subject is important and why it should be studied.*
- *Explain why this topic tends to be difficult.*
- *Briefly explain “justified by works” passages and the “not of works” passages.*
- *Give a brief review of Jerry Bridges’ book Transforming Grace.*

WHY THIS SUBJECT?

Q: *Why should grace-faith-works-law be discussed?*

This subject is closely related to **the “Unity-in-Diversity” movement** which plagued God’s people in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Outspoken false teachers who attempted to join the Lord’s church with man-made denominations included:

- *W. Carl Ketcherside*
- *Leroy Garrett*
- *Dallas Burdette*

Part of the reasoning of this movement went like this:

- *No one is perfect.*
- *No one has perfect knowledge of all things.*
- *If perfection is required, no one has a chance of being saved.*

- *Those using instruments of music, individual cups, Bible classes and other man-made innovations have not yet arrived at the knowledge that these things are not authorized in NT scriptures. If they are even sinning at all, they are sinning ignorantly.*
- *Is it not possible – even probable – that everyone does things wrong which they don't even realize?*
- *Since we are all imperfect and have limited knowledge, yet consider ourselves saved, we must allow that others who are imperfect and have limited knowledge are also saved.*
- *Who are we to judge others who are imperfect when we ourselves may well be doing something wrong.*
- *We depend on the grace of God to save us.*
- *His grace will indeed save us – even while we continue to do sinful things in ignorance.*

Hence, a perverted view that grace will save us even while performing sinful acts.

MORE RECENT YEARS

Since this time there seems to be a constant dissatisfaction by some over the subject of *grace-faith-works-law*.

- Ron Willis
- Gary Barrett
- Others

In varying degrees, these men became dissatisfied with the perceived reputation of the church of Christ regarding the *grace-faith-works-law* subject.

- *Those teaching exact obedience are labeled as legalistic and Pharisaic.*
- *Those teaching the church of Christ is the only correct church are considered mean-spirited and dogmatic.*
- *Bible silence is viewed as permissive.*

- *Only things which are explicitly forbidden may be condemned. (I.e. the “explicit-only” doctrine.)*

Our understanding of law and obedience is the crux of a great problem in our brotherhood.

DOES IT MATTER?

Before answering the question of how to understand Bible silence, one must first ask the question: *Does it even matter? Does it even matter whether we obey the law of God in the first place?*

Here are the issues:

- *Are Christians under law in any sense today?*
- *If so, how do we explain passages which say we are “not under law”?*
- *Do we “HAVE TO” obey God’s law to be saved?*

This question is not asking if men “*should*” obey.

Nor is it asking if true Christians will “*want to*” obey.

The question is asking if men “HAVE TO” obey.

WHY SO DIFFICULT?

It seems apparent the average Christian has difficulty understanding the Bible passages which speak of:

- *How salvation is by grace is without works (on the one hand) and yet obedience is required (on the other hand).*
- *How men are “not under law” in some sense but “under law” in another sense.*

- *How obedience relates with grace and faith.*

Two preachers interviewed (Alan Bonifay, Doug Edwards) explained they did not think the topic was difficult to understand, but they admitted later they had been studying the subject off and on for about thirty years!

(No wonder it isn't difficult any more.)

Another preacher interviewed (Greg Cardoso) explained he did not think the topic was difficult, but admitted he never had to discuss or argue the subject with an opponent.

Finally, a fourth preacher (Mike Criswell) simply admitted flat-out the subject is simply difficult.

What makes the subject of *grace-faith-works-law* seem so difficult to so many? There are at least eight factors which contribute to the difficulty:

1) Lack of teaching.

- When one looks thru the pages of the religious journals, there are not that many articles written by members of the Lord's church on *grace-faith-works-law*.
- It is difficult to find a good book at a bookstore giving a critical examination of the subject.
- We are not having debates with denominational people over salvation like previous generations of the restoration movement. We are not seeing Calvinism exposed for what it is – like previous generations did.
- On the other hand, there are many articles and sermons written about the use of “one cup” in the communion.

Our people are well educated on the communion, but no so educated on the subject of *grace-faith-works-law*.

As one brother put it in a personal interview with me: “*We have preached on obedience a lot, but not on the place of grace.*” (Mike Criswell)

2) Paradoxical passages of scripture.

“paradox” – “a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true” ([American Heritage](#), electronic version)

Example #1: Consider two passages about “works” which seem to contradict each other:

Romans 4:1-5 (NKJV)

1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

2 For **if Abraham was justified by works**, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

5 But to **him who does not work** but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, **his faith is accounted for righteousness**,

This passage seems to contradict the following:

James 2:21-24 (NKJV)

21 **Was not Abraham our father justified by works** when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.

24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Example #2: Consider another set of passages which seem to contradict each other – this time about “law”

Romans 6:14 (NKJV)

14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for **you are not under law** but under grace.

This passage seems to contradict the following: ⇓

1 Corinthians 9:21 (NKJV)

21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but **under law toward Christ**), that I might win those who are without law;

We believe all Bible passages are inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are all true, but how to explain these passages, so that they harmonize with one another, becomes a difficult task.

- 3) **Long-held false beliefs which are taken as axiomatic.** These beliefs go unproven because they are believed to be self-evident.

Assumption #1: The OT was a “*law system*” given to show mankind that salvation by law and works was impossible.

Calvin:

“By the Law, I understand not only the Ten Commandments which contain a complete rule of life, but the whole system of religion delivered by the hand of Moses ... In the precepts of the Law, God is seen as the rewarder only of perfect righteousness (a righteousness of which all are destitute) ... **The law was given, in order to convert a great into a little man - to show that you have no power of your own for righteousness; and might thus, poor, needy, and destitute, flee to grace.**” (Institutes, II, vii, 1, 8, 9).

K. C. Moser:

Under the law, man was shut up to the principle of works. He had no sacrifice that could take away sins. For good reasons God placed man upon his own responsibility. It was do or be damned. (Way of Salvation, 35).

It was **impossible** to be sons of Abraham through the law, because the law was of works, not of faith. (*ibid.*, 49)

David Lipscomb:

The old covenant consisted in a law requiring works of obedience without faith as the prompting feeling or love as the guiding principle. (Salvation From Sin, 202)

These statements are mere assumptions. They need to be proven.

Assumption #2: If conditions are required under the gospel age, we would then be under a “law-works system” of justification.

K. C. Moser:

To condition justification upon the principle of works is to make grace void. (Way of Salvation, 50)

Livingston Blauvelt:

What is lordship salvation? This is the view that for salvation a person must trust Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin and must also commit himself to Christ as Lord of his life, submitting to His sovereign authority.

This teaching is false because it subtly adds works to the clear and simple condition for salvation set forth in the Word of God. (“Does The Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?”; Bibliotheca Sacra; Jan-Mar 1986, p. 37).

Let that soak in!

This is assumption. It needs proven.

4) **False teachers.**

Max Lucado and *Rubel Shelly* leave the impression that obedience to God is not necessary – though they would probably argue they believe in obedience. Great homiletics makes these men dangerous.

Jack Cottrell (in his commentary on Romans and his book The Faith Once For All) leaves one hanging and wondering about obedience. While he definitely teaches baptism is essential for salvation, he uses an approach which makes exact obedience in many matters unnecessary.

In commenting on the idea that “obedience is included in the definition of faith,” Cottrell writes the following:

The most serious problem with this view, though, is that, if we say that obedience is part of the definition of faith, **there is no way to limit that obedience just to a few acts** (e.g., confession and baptism). **It must also include one’s lifelong obedience** (“faithfulness forever”) **to every relevant commandment.** Thus salvation by “faith alone” becomes salvation by the whole range of Christian good works, a position that seriously compromises grace. (Faith Once For All, 352).

[Again:]

Another approach which, in effect makes faith and works equivalent means for justification, is the view that faith by definition includes obedience ...

In my judgment views such as these contradict the strong biblical teaching that faith, not works, is the means of justification. ... (Faith Once For All, 326).

Other authors who teach the false doctrine that men are saved by “faith only” without works of obedience include:

- John MacArthur – great homiletical abilities makes him dangerous.
- Warren Wiersbe – great homiletical abilities makes him dangerous.
- Jerry Bridges – in his book Transforming Grace.
- Burton Coffman – popular commentary.

5) Sloppy Bible study tactics and non-critical thinking.

FIRST: *Picking and choosing only those passages which speak of God’s part in the salvation process and ignoring passages speaking about man’s obligations.*

(E.g. Luther discounted the entire Book of James as uninspired; denominational people put out no effort whatsoever to harmonize statement of Paul with those of James).

SECOND: *The failure to address how OT saints were even saved.* There seems to be a complete failure on this point alone.

- *If Mosaic Law was a “works-based system” requiring perfect obedience, then how were any OT saints saved? (Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel).*
- *If they were saved, what place did the Mosaic Law itself play in their justification?*
- *Were they saved by grace through faith? If so, was obedience to Mosaic Law required or optional?*
- *Were they saved by the blood of Christ? If so, how could they be saved prior to His blood being shed?*

THIRD: *A failure to distinguish between the “basis” of salvation and “conditions” of salvation.*

FOURTH: *Studying and teaching only on topics and not systematically thru the scriptures – chapter by chapter, verse by verse.*

Topical studies results in people skipping over difficult texts and learning their meaning.

FIFTH: *Careless definition of words.*

- **The word “works” has been defined as “any human activity.”** (One preacher at the 2005 Preachers’ Study).

With this definition, salvation “*apart from works*” (Rom 4:6) means simply salvation apart from any human activity.

- **The word “faith” has been restricted to mean only mental activities** (mental assent, trust, etc.). To be saved “by faith” becomes salvation by mental activity.

The preachers who use such careless definitions do not know what to think about obedience. Does one **“have to”** obey God to be saved?

One preacher says yes ... but his definition of “works” says no. (preacher at the 2005 Preachers’ Study)

Another preacher simply says, “I don’t know.” (Zebulun, GA)

6) **A lack of historical knowledge.**

FIRST: *Many do not have a clear knowledge of Bible history especially regarding the Pharisees.*

The Pharisees are considered by all as the epitome of legalism. But what were the Pharisees doing that earned them this reputation? Some assume the Pharisees were “legalistic” because:

- *They supposedly insisted on keeping all the law.*
- *They supposedly insisted on strict, exact, minute obedience.*

None of these things made the Pharisees legalists. The problem with the Pharisees was:

- *They did not obey the law. (Mt 23:1-4).*
- *They elevated human traditions to the status of divine law. (Mt 15:9).*
- *They trusted in themselves that they were righteous without Christ. (Lk 18:9-14).*

A simple, fair study of the Pharisees would solve many of the false conclusions made regarding works and law.

SECOND: *Many do not have a clear understanding of how the Reformation movement began.*

The Reformers (e.g. Luther) were opposed to the Catholic Church's teachings on meritorious works.

- *Baptismal regeneration*
- *Penance*
- *Indulgences*
- *Monkery*
- *Purgatory*

All of these were methods believed to merit salvation. If men could just sacrifice enough, suffer enough and devote themselves enough, they could merit their own salvation – according to Catholic dogma.

Luther rightly opposed this system of works, but eventually Reformers swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme.

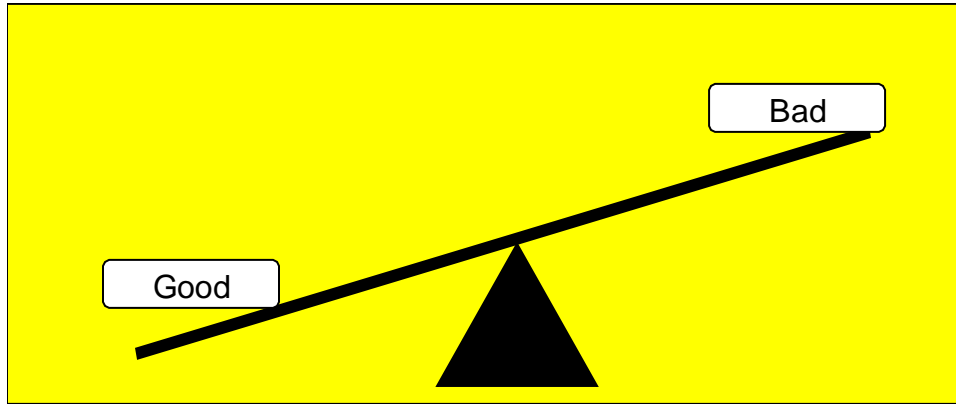
They rightly taught that “*works of merit*” could not earn salvation, but they went so far as to say God does not condition salvation upon obedience. In other words, they viewed conditions to salvation as equivalent to “works of merit.”

Now, men no longer “*have to*” obey what God said to be justified by the blood of Christ.

Here is an important point that must not be missed: Not having a clear understanding of historical “*salvation by works*” as taught by Pharisees and the Catholics has cause many to reach the wrong conclusion about conditions of salvation and obedience to God.

7) Misconceptions concerning the Judgment Day.

The Islam and Jewish religions of today truly believe in “salvation by works.” They believe in a “balance scale” system wherein all the good deeds of a man are placed on one side of the scales and all the bad deeds are placed on the other side.



The idea here is that if the “good” outweighs the “bad,” the person is saved and goes to heaven.

This belief goes beyond the Islam and Jewish religions. Many denominational people unknowingly embrace this same belief.

ILL: When some worthless uncle dies, someone weeps over his casket saying, “*He was a good man. He didn’t go to church, but he had a good heart and would do good things for others.*”

In other words, this uncle “*deserves*” to be saved. His good deeds “*merited*” salvation though he never obeyed God.

8) Lack of uniform teaching.

Not only is the subject of *grace-faith-works-law* rarely written about or preached on by faithful brethren, there is a lack of uniformity when it is preached on.

- **R. L. Whiteside** presented a popular view that “law” in Romans and Galatians refers strictly to Mosaic Law. Hence, Romans and Galatians become little more than an explanation of how we are no longer under OT law, but under NT law instead. **T. W. Brents** took the same position (The Gospel Plan of Salvation, p. 436b-437). **Foy Wallace** took the same position (The Gospel For

Today, p. 189). **Benjamin Franklin** took the same position in his debate on justification with S. M. Merrill (pp. 58b-59, 87).

- **Moses Lard** and **J. W. McGarvey** presented the view that “law” in Romans and Galatians refers to a system of justification based on law; that Mosaic Law is referred to from time to time, but only to illustrate in a concrete way the point being made in regard to how any law works. (cf. **B. W. Johnson**, **Jim McGuiggan** who both took similar positions.)

One brother:

All of those verses that talk about Law are really only talking about the Law of Moses, and general principles can not be drawn from them (Mike Rogers, unpublished manuscript, p. 3)

SUMMARY

We have listed eight contributing factors to the grace-faith-works-law subject being so difficult:

- 1) Lack of teaching.
- 2) Paradoxical passages.
- 3) Long-held false beliefs which are taken as axiomatic.
- 4) False teachers.
- 5) Sloppy Bible study tactics and non-critical thinking.
- 6) Lack of historical knowledge – about the Pharisees and Catholic Church.
- 7) Misconceptions concerning Judgment Day.
- 8) Lack of uniform teaching – the Whiteside vs. McGarvey approaches.

MOSES' LAW

Let's give a brief explanation of the subject of salvation “*by grace, through faith.*”

The Law of Moses was not a “*law-system*” given by God to show mankind how helpless they were.

- 1) Moses' Law was a "typical system" – designed by intention to be temporary – and designed to teach men by types so they would be ready when the Messiah came to save men (Gal 3:24-25).

- 2) The law was *the avenue for faithful men to express their faith in God*.

The NT challenges men to show their faith in God without obedience to God's law. The implied conclusion is: *This cannot be done.*

James 2:18 (NKJV)

18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

At the time the OT was in force, it was the avenue for a faithful Jew to demonstrate his faith in God.

- 3) The Jews *perverted the Law* and turned it into something God never intended.

Romans 9:30-32 (NKJV)

30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith;

31 but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness.

*32 Why? Because **they did not seek it by faith**, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.*

"they did not seek it by faith" – i.e. they did not use the law as an expression of their faith.

"they sought it as by works" – i.e. they imagined they could keep the law well enough to earn salvation.

This is why they "*stumbled at the stumbling stone*" (Jesus) when He came.

They didn't think they needed a Savior because they were doing well enough on their own keeping the law – so they thought.

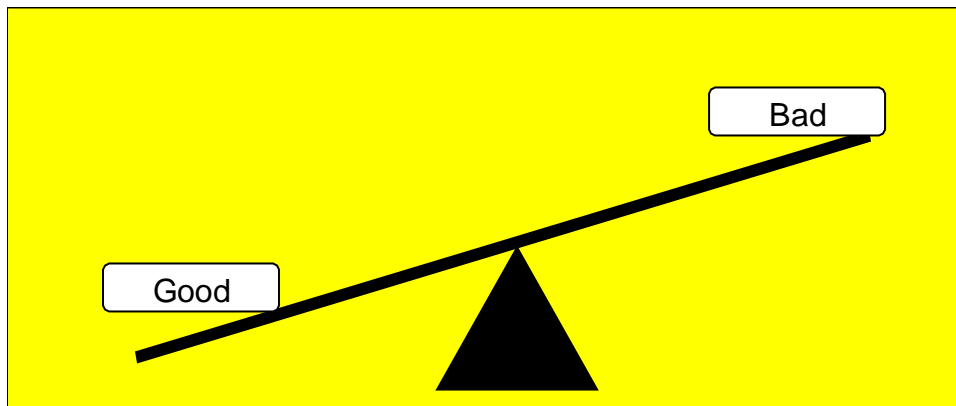
The Book of Romans and the Book of Galatians are an explanation that *if men reject Jesus and seek to be saved on the merits of their good works, they will be lost.*

The only way good works can merit salvation is if those works are flawless works.

THE BALANCE SYSTEM

Rethink the idea of the “*balance system*.”

Many people (Islam, Jews, denominations) believe that on the Judgment Day God will place all a person’s good deeds on one side of some scales and all the bad deeds on the other side:

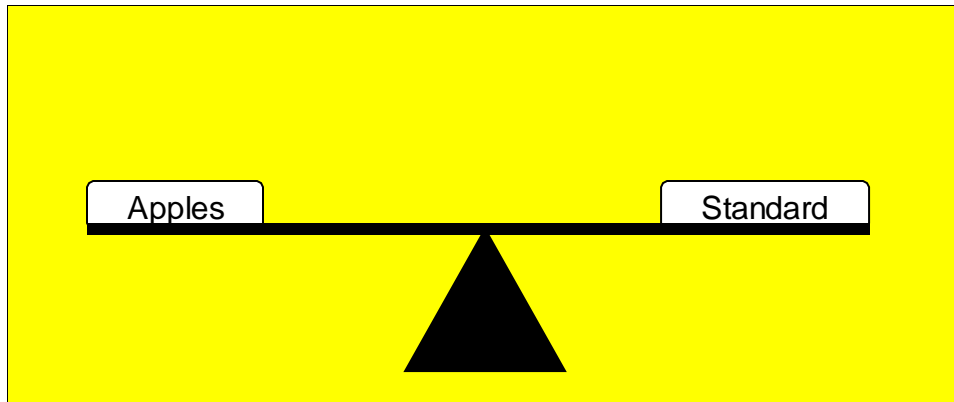


The idea is that if the “*good*” outweighs the “*bad*,” the person is saved and goes to heaven.

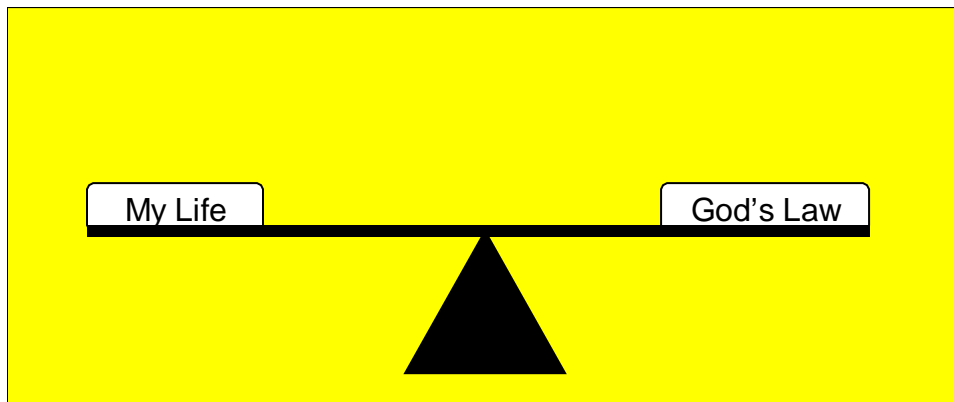
The problem with this idea is that no consideration given for **a standard**.

ILL: When I go to the store to buy apples, I do not get to put something on both sides of the scales.

My apples are put on one side and **a standard**, by which to judge the apples, is put on the other side.



On Judgment Day all our deeds (our whole life) will be placed on one side and the standard of God (law) will be placed on the other side.



The only way these scales can remain balanced in this case is if one does all that the law says all the time. If a person should ever fail a single time, the scales become unbalanced in favor of the law.

Galatians 3:10 (NKJV)

*10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not **continue in all things** which are written in the book of the law, to do them."*

This verse was written to Galatians who were thinking about quitting the church and going into Judaism. This would be rejecting Jesus and attempting now to save oneself without Christ.

- *If one rejects Christ, the only thing remaining is law.*
- *If all one has is law, that person had better be keeping that law flawlessly!*

“LAWFULLY”

1 Timothy 1:8 (NKJV)

8 But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully,

This passage suggests that the law can be used “*unlawfully.*” It can be taken and used in a way God never intended.

This is what the Jews did with the Law of Moses:

- *They were using Moses’ Law unlawfully (Rom 9:30-33).*
- *They were rejecting Jesus and thinking they could save themselves based on law alone.*

If this were actually possible, it would mean Jesus died in vain:

Galatians 2:21 (NKJV)

21 I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

SUMMARY

We made reference earlier to passages which seem paradoxical.

- *Rom 4:1-5 says Abraham was not justified by works – else he could boast.*
- *Ja 2:21-24 says Abraham was justified by works.*

Again:

- *Rom 6:14 says we are not under law.*
- *1 Cor 9:21 says we are under law.*

How are we to understand these passages? How can they all be true at the same time?

RULE #1: When a passage speaks negatively about the law of God and about works, that passage is speaking about men using the law unlawfully.

When men reject Jesus and think they can be saved based on their good works alone, they will find themselves “*weighed in the balances and found wanting.*”

It cannot be done.

No man can keep any law of God well enough to earn his own way into heaven without Christ. (e.g. Muslims, Jews, denominational “Christians” who reject what Jesus taught – Lk 6:46)

RULE #2: When a passage speaks about how men are justified by faith, it is always a humble, obedient faith under consideration.

The faith that saves is obedient:

John 3:36 (NASV)

36 “*He who believes* (ὁ πιστεύων) *in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey* (ὁ δὲ ἀπειθῶν) *the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*”

Look carefully at the above passage. “*He who believes*” is placed in direct contrast with “*he who does not obey.*” A “believer,” according to scripture, is someone who not only believes in God’s existence, but also believes what God said. Hence, a true “believer” is one who believes enough to obey.

The faith that saves is humble – trusting in God rather than oneself:

Luke 18:9-10 (NKJV)

9 *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:*

10 *"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ...*

Someone standing at a distance could not tell the difference between these two men who went to the temple:

- *Both went to the temple.*
- *Both prayed.*

What was the difference? **Attitude**. One was trusting in himself, the other in God.

We must do all that God tells us, but humbly trust in Him.

Micah 6:8 (NKJV)
8 He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?

“do justly” – keep God’s law.

“love mercy” – be forgiving and merciful to others (cf. Mt 6:14-15).

“walk humbly” – maintain a humble attitude.

JERRY BRIDGES

Having briefly discussed salvation by grace, consider the book: **Transforming Grace**, by *Jerry Bridges*.

This book has been a very popular book among brethren, especially brethren in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area.

(I have written a full review of the book, but will give only a brief review here.)

After reading the book one wonders why Bridges bothered to write it at all. He is a Calvinist.

- 1) **Bridges teaches: Men are saved unconditionally *without any consideration of their works in any sense.***

We don't have to start all over again and try to keep the slate clean. There is no more slate. ... God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance. The score has already been permanently settled by Christ. (Bridges, p. 21)

When God uses this metaphorical expression describing the extent of His forgiveness of our sins, He is saying His forgiveness is total, complete, and unconditional. (p. 39)

To live by grace means we understand that God's blessing on our lives is not conditioned by our obedience or disobedience but by the perfect obedience of Christ. (p. 99)

This is simply Calvinistic "*unconditional election*."

By way of contrast, the Bible teaches election:

- *Is corporate, not individual (Eph 5:23; 1:22-23).*
- *Conditional, not unconditional (Heb 5:8; Rev 2:5).*

2) **Bridges teaches: Once men are saved, the Holy Spirit directly guides and aids them separate and apart from written scripture.**

The sacred writers constantly recognize the fact that the freest and most spontaneous acts of men, their inward states and the outward manifestations of those states, when good, are due to the secret influence of the Spirit of God, which eludes our consciousness. (Bridges, p. 166)

God did not leave [the Macedonians] to the resources of their own human nature – which is not naturally generous – but intervened in their hearts by the power of His Spirit to create this amazing generosity. (p. 167)

Apparently God worked directly in Titus's heart. (ibid.)

Opposed to this Calvinistic approach, the Bible teaches the Holy Spirit operates upon men, both saint and sinner, only thru the medium of His inspired word (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:3-4; Eph 6:17).

3) **Bridges teaches: The saved will always be saved.**

Do you begin to get the picture? Are you realizing that God's forgiveness is complete and irreversible? (Bridges, p. 40)

When you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, God removes your record from the file. He doesn't keep it there or daily add the long list of sins you continue to commit even as a Christian. (p. 41)

Second, not only has the debt been fully paid, *there is no possibility of going into debt again*. Jesus paid the debt of *all* our sins: past, present, and future. ... We don't have to start all over again and try to keep the slate clean. There is no more slate. ... God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance. The score has already been permanently settled by Christ. (p. 21)

Contrary to this, the Bible teaches Christians can sin in such a way as to lose their salvation (2 Pet 2:18-22; Heb 6:4-6). Because this is a real possibility, Christians are exhorted to "make your call and election sure" (2 Pet 1:10) and to "take heed lest you fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

CONCLUSION

Many years ago brother Ron Courter gave some good advice:

"If you're studying the subject of grace and faith and you reach the conclusion that obedience is not necessary, you need to go back and rethink the issue."

That is very good advice.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (KJV)

13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is the whole duty of man.

THE GRACE AND LAW CONTROVERSY

(Identified and Clarified)

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What does the “*Unity-In-Diversity*” controversy have to do with the grace-faith-works-law issue?
- 2) What two assumptions are considered axiomatic in the grace-law issue which should be challenged?
- 3) What is the danger with studying the Bible topically?
- 4) Were the Pharisees legalistic because they insisted on exact, precise obedience to every law of God?
- 5) In what way did faithful men use Moses’ Law during the OT dispensation?
- 6) When buying apples in the market, what goes on either end of the scales?
- 7) What two rules should be kept in mind when reading paradoxical passages about works and faith?
- 8) Why did Jerry Bridges write his book, Transforming Grace?