

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the Christian doctrine of grace and I know that so many people were personally blessed by it. Rightly so, for it is the most encouraging, restoring, appealing and inspiring doctrine in the entire Bible – The Grace of God. The Gospel is the ‘Gospel of the Grace of God’ **Act 20:24**. The unique contribution of Jesus **John 1:17. Acts 20:24** However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. The issue of Grace is what makes Christianity unique amongst world religions. Religion generally has to do with man reaching up to God, obeying God, trying to be good enough to be accepted by God and saved. But the Christian faith is exactly the opposite. It's God taking the initiative. God being the prime mover. Him taking the first steps. We love him because he first loved us. I love the vv in Ex:

Exodus 3:7-8 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey

That about sums up what God did through Christ. We were in trouble. We were in sin. We were the wrongdoers. We were worthy of punishment. We were children of wrath and justly condemned to death and hell. But He took the initiative. He saw our plight, the mess we were in. He came down to earth. He chose to come. And He paid the price for my sins and yours. He was condemned and we got set free. Someone rightly said:

He paid a debt He did not owe because I owed a debt I could not pay."

This is pure, unadulterated, free and priceless grace.

When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award—yet receives such a gift anyway—that is a picture of God's unmerited favour. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God.

Definition: Grace is God's lavish love, undeserved and freely given, to man despite his sin and guilt. It is God's favour through Christ to people who deserve His wrath. By His grace, we do not receive the wrath we deserve. Instead we receive the favour we don't deserve.

This means that any good or any kind acts or anything praiseworthy you will ever do will never improve on, or add to, God's lavish love for you! He loves you in the extreme, to the 'n'th' degree. His love for you is magnificent, superlative, comprehensive and unchanging.

It also means, astonishingly, that that anything bad or sinful you are guilty of does not lessen or diminish or tone down God's love for you. Imagine! God loves you with Cross-love – all the time.

And this is the basis of God's dealings with us - the basis of His grace not our righteousness/or unrts.

But the problem is that we all have a daily tendency towards reverting to the law, to acts of righteousness and obedience. We try to earn forgiveness from God, justification before God and acceptance by God through our obedience to God. **We call this legalism.** I used to think that this issue of Grace v Legalism in the Bible – in Rom, Gal and other places – was because it was a Jewish issue – but have come to realise that its there to highlight a perennial problem that all Christians have.

Many Christians are like the plate spinning act. You know the story. The plate spinner is on stage and has these flexible sticks – remember Ali! – and he starts at one side of the stage and gets a few going and you think its OK. Then he moves across the stage and gets 10, 15 then 20 plates spinning on sticks. Now you are interested. Then, while the first ones are looking decidedly wobbly he continues to put up another 5, then 10 and more – until as the first ones are about to crash to the floor, he rushes back to the beginning and gives the imminent catastrophes a whirl and the act is saved – only to find more are flagging and he proceeds to rush up and down at lightening speed whirling into safety the ready-to-crash plates. The audience is now part of the act, shouting out which ones are about to fall and directing him to the possible

casualties. And he keeps this up for several minutes, concluding with pulling out each stick, catching the plates without one dropping to the floor!

How are Christians like this? Well they go to church in January and hear a message on 'read you Bible in a year' and then they promptly start in Genesis or wherever. Then they hear a message on a new method of prayer – on Mondays: church, Tuesdays: leaders, Wednesdays: outreach, & unsaved Thursdays missions and so on. Then they hear a message on servanthood and try to fit this into their already stretched timetable. Then comes more impossible demands, personal commitments & goals, add the expectations of others They begin to run up and down the stage of life trying to keep each spiritual plate spinning until one happens to crash to the floor and then others crash – and each crash is a crash of condemnation, and guilt and spells failure for the beleaguered believer. Soon their experience of forgiveness from God, justification before God and acceptance by God begins to wane and a sense of disapproval and failure sets in. Often, as the years go by cynicism and scepticism take over. They live secret lives of unbelief and failure and they don't share it with anyone.

And many, if not most Christians actually live in this pressure all the time – continually making their efforts a means of merit before God.

Now I'm not saying that activity for God, godly Christian service and spiritual disciplines are wrong – but they are supposed to be results of grace not requirements of grace. They are supposed to be motivated by God's favour not a means of merit to earn God's forgiveness, justification and acceptance.

I could be wrong, but it seems to me that many Christians regulate their joy, and security and sense of acceptance with God on the basis of their emotions. So if one day you read your Bible and pray and avoid sin, have a degree of self-control, you feel accepted by God. But if you miss your quiet time, have an argument with someone at home or submit to temptation in the day, you feel that you are unworthy and its very hard to approach God and feel that He is for you.

So why is it like this? What's the problem here? Well, I think the problem is two-fold:

There is a lack of understanding of what we call 'justifying grace.'

There is a common confusion between justification and sanctification.

I do apologise at using these two technical terms – but they are terms you need to become familiar with if you are have any success living a victorious Christian life – or, as the Bible says that you might 'reign in life.' Romans 5:17,21.

Lets look at justification.

Now you may not have a handle on this Biblical word. That's OK. "If the average evangelical pastor would be held captive by terrorists and would need to give an adequate definition of justification to escape alive, well, we'd have a lot of dead pastors." (Albert Mohler)

But it is a Biblical word, a major theme in the NT and a foundation of Christian truth and Christian living that we all need. Believe me: you do need to understand this most fundamental truth. It is a primary issue because all saving benefits you will ever receive depend on justification by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone. If you don't understand justification by grace you can't understand anything!. Grasping justification positions us to fully appreciate everything else. It's the first step of the ladder, the first page of the book and the ground on which all else depends.

Paul's great book, Romans, deals with two main themes of salvation in chapters 1-8. In 1:1-5:11 he deals with justification, and from 5:12-end of Rom 8 he deals with Sanctification. In the first part that deals with justification it has to do with how we are made right with God, the sole basis on which we can receive anything from God. It raises the issue of our 'sins,' that's actual, specific acts of unrighteousness that we have personally committed that exclude us from God's blessings. Paul makes it clear that all have sinned Rom 3:23, and that no-one is righteous 3:10-12. He also says that the law doesn't help because of our basic inability, rather it merely shows us how sinful we are 3:20.

It's a pretty bleak picture! Because we are connected to Adam, indeed we were in Adam, when he fell we fell with Him. We are unrighteous by nature and we can't pull ourselves out of this mess we're in! But then it **Read 3:21-25**. He remained just – true to his justice but was gracious in providing a sacrifice.

Read 5:1-2, 6-9

So there was this incredible exchange that we spoke of last time. It's quite incredible! Jesus Christ paid the price for the punishment of our sins. Hebrews says in ch's 8-9 that Christ entered into the heavenly Holiest of Holies and presented His blood – and that God was satisfied with the sacrifice. We know because God raised him from the dead! It was accepted. The price was paid. When He said 'It is finished' he meant just that. We were redeemed, we were forgiven, we were accepted, we were justified because of the Blood. 'When I see the blood I will Passover you.' Ex 12:13. The moment we put our faith in Christ this God-given righteousness was credited to our account.

Once we were in Adam now we are in Christ. In Adam we were condemned, but in Christ we are made alive, forgiven and accepted, justified before a holy and loving God. PTL!

I know it doesn't feel like it, but its something that has happened and you just have to accept it.

We are totally, utterly and completely acquitted by God. That's what justification means. It's as if we have never committed a sin before God. As far as the east is from the west – so far...Gone, gone gone, gone, yes my sins are gone!

You are not unclean. You are not unworthy. You are not in the dock. You are not in God's bad books. Your case has been tried and someone has stood in for you, in your place and has taken the full punishment for your offences and you can't be tried for the same offence twice! You will never be more justified than when you received Christ. No one is more justified than you are at right now – in scripture nor history! The weakest believer and the strongest saint are equally justified – there are no degrees – you are either wholly justified or wholly condemned!

The Chinese illustration.

Sinclair Ferguson said "The practical importance of (justification) cannot be exaggerated. The glory of the gospel is that God has declared Christians to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin. But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for that justification. But Paul's teaching is that nothing we do ever contributes to our justification."

Several years ago, after I had spoken at a conference, a lovely woman came and spoke to me. She was beautiful, she was godly, and she was tortured. She told me her story. She said that she and her fiancé, many years ago, had been the leaders of a youth group at her church. And they had a tremendous ministry. They were to get married in June and somewhere in that year they began to have sex. Then she discovered she was pregnant. She said she felt bad enough that the very thing that she was trying to counsel others not to do she was doing, but to find out that she was pregnant was much worse. She said that she knew the church could never handle her failure. (That is a tragic statement - A hospital can't handle the patients?) And so she said they decided to have an abortion.

"My wedding day," she went on, "was the worst day of my life. Becky, I love my husband. We've had many children, but I am tortured. I do not know where to go with my guilt because I believe I have murdered an innocent life. I am haunted by the question, What have I destroyed? I know that God loves and forgives but I cannot be released from this thought, How could I have ever murdered an innocent life?"

A thought came to me; but I was afraid to say it because she was so distraught, and I realized that if this thought wasn't from God, I could destroy her. But she kept saying, "How could I have done this? How could I have murdered an innocent life?"

I took a deep breath and said, "I don't know why you're so surprised. Because this isn't your first murder; it's your second." Then I continued, "My dear friend, all of us are crucifiers when we look at the cross. You seem to feel more guilt over killing your own child than killing God's child. All of us, religious or irreligious, good or bad, aborters or nonaborters, all of us show up as crucifiers when we look at Jesus. Jesus died for all of our sin, past, present and future. Luther says

we carry his very nails in our pockets. This isn't your first murder of an innocent. It's your second. And I'm just surprised that you're so surprised that you could do it."

She looked at me in amazement and stopped crying. And she said "You're right it's true. I have done something even worse than killing my own child. It doesn't matter that Jesus died 2,000 years ago; he died for all of our sins. And I have never felt the same remorse over killing God's son as in killing my son. But, Becky, what you're really telling me is that I've done something even worse than the worst thing that I could ever imagine." I nodded. "Becky, if the cross shows me as even worse than I thought, the cross also shows me that my evil has been absorbed and forgiven. Oh, Becky, talk about amazing grace." And I saw a woman literally transformed by a proper understanding of the cross. (Becky Pippert story found at http://www.urbana.org/_articles.cfm?RecordId=570)

Justification is the opposite to condemnation. It is the act of God, by which he pardons all the sins of those who believe in Christ, and accounts, accepts, and treats them as righteous in the eye of the law as if they had conformed to all its demands. In addition to the pardon of sin, justification declares that all the claims of the law are satisfied in respect of the justified. The law is not relaxed or set aside, but is declared to be fulfilled in the strictest sense; and so the person justified is declared to be entitled to all the advantages and rewards arising from perfect obedience to the law. In justification God acquits the sinner, forgives him and credits to him the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which, forever, satisfies the law.

Doesn't that make you feel good?

Justification is being declared righteous. Next week Sanctification - is being made righteous.
Justification is our position before God – Next week Sanctification - is our practice before God.
Justification is objective – His work for us immediate and complete upon conversion
Next week Sanctification - is subjective - His work in us and it's a process!

SUGGESTED HOME GROUP DISCUSSION STARTERS

For week beginning Sunday 9th March 2008

This week we looked at Romans 5:12-19 and after an introduction related to the grace of God we turned to the issue of what the Bible calls 'Justification.'

It was said that many Christian's lives bore a remarkable resemblance to an entertaining plate-spinner, trying to please the Lord by an endless series of efforts and activities. But this only ever results in failure, defeat and cynicism. The real problem was that most of us rely on our feelings which are generated by our successes or failures. When we perform pretty well, we feel OK with God and are able to receive his love, assurance and acceptance. But when we fail to maintain our good works of, say, prayer, Bible reading and witnessing, or fall into occasional or recurrent sin, we feel unloved, as if God doesn't want to fellowship with us and unaccepted as children of God.

Tony said he felt that there were two problems with this common experience (which can be described as a tendency to legalism).

1. There is a lack of understanding of what we call 'justifying grace.'
2. There is confusion between justification and sanctification.

We then majored on the meaning of 'Justification' as recorded in the early chapters of Romans. What a great subject! Justification is the opposite to condemnation. It is the act of God, by which he pardons all the sins of those who believe in Christ, and accounts, accepts, and treats them as righteous in the eye of the law as if they had met all its demands. In justification God acquits the sinner, forgives him and credits to him the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which, forever, satisfies the law.

This is the fundamental basis on which deals with his children. We are justified. We are acquitted. We are forgiven. We are accepted and we possess the righteousness of Jesus Christ as if it were our own. How cool is that?

Discussion starters:

1. How did God speak to you through this message?

2. Do you relate to the 'plate-spinner' comparison? ie do you feel God isn't with you when you do bad or is more with you when you are behaving yourself? Do you ever feel 'in the dog-house' with God? Is there perhaps a smidgeon of 'legalism' in your life? Do you try to 'smuggle character' into his work of grace. Or feel you only remain justified so long as there are grounds in your character for that justification? Discuss.

3. What can we do to live in the good of 'justification' more than we do? How can we maintain our confidence in our position as having received Christ's righteousness?