

59 – Grace - Love and Repentance

Does grace mean I can keep doing bad things and still go to heaven? Does God's love mean I don't have to stop? Does repentance mean if I say "I'm sorry" God will let me continue sinning? If asked those questions most of us would quickly answer, "No! Of course not," that is until God told us to stop doing something we really wanted to do. In that case our answer might be less definite. We might start looking for Bible verses that could be interpreted to mean "maybe" or listening for "prophetic words" that say, "In your case it's okay; you're the exception to the rule." What used to be unquestionably right or wrong in our mind gradually becomes debatable. We might even start quoting conflicting opinions on the matter to show how uncertain a definite answer is on that subject.

What's happening is that we've entered into the process of making something that was once forbidden into something that is now possible. Before we can convince others that God will allow us to do what we really want to do we must first convince ourselves. In order to do that we have to start questioning the standards of right and wrong that we have been taught, looking for loopholes. And this temptation to re-interpret God's moral standards is a danger which, sooner or later, will confront us all, because sooner or later each of us will really want to do something God forbids, which is why it is so important for us to understand these three terms: grace, love and repentance. As you might expect, each of these words has been given a wide variety of definitions, so that one person might say the word and mean one thing while another hears them say it and understands something entirely different. Since there's only one proper way of deciding the true meaning of each word, and that's listening to what the Bible says with an unbiased ear, let's ask the Bible to tell us what each word means and then ask ourselves how God wants those words to guide us when we really want to do something that He forbids.

Definitions

Grace (charis): The word "grace" essentially refers to a gift someone gives you because he or she likes/loves you. The gift is unearned and undeserved. It's given only because of the kindness and love found in the giver's heart. Jesus is the perfect expression of God's grace. Through Him God lovingly offers salvation to people who don't deserve it. Listen:

- (Jn 3:16) "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."
- (Ro 3:21-24) "But now apart from the Law (of Moses) the righteousness of God has been manifested, through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

Love (agape): There are several words in Greek which we translate into English as "love," but this special word points to the kind of love that gives selflessly. Again, it exists because of the generous heart of the giver, not because of any deserving quality found in the receiver.

- (Lk 6:32, 35) "If you love (agape) those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them, But love your enemies, and do good, expecting nothing in return; and , you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil [men]."
- (Ro 5:8) "But God demonstrates His own love (agape) toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Repentance (metanoia): This word literally means to change one's mind; to move from one opinion or attitude to another. It means we think differently after we repent. We stop going in one direction and turn around and go in another. The word has nothing to do with emotional feelings of sorrow. It looks to the future, not the past, and charts a new course, with new attitudes and goals. In the Bible the word primarily means to change our attitude toward God: to move from distrust and rebellion to trust and submission.

- (Lk 5:31-32) "And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (metanoia)."
- (Ac 17:30-31) "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all [people] everywhere should repent (metanoia) because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness."

If these words are removed from their biblical contexts they can be turned into philosophical concepts that give a person permission to deliberately rebel against God's moral standards and assume that they will still go to heaven. In other words, these words can be used to justify lawlessness. But if we keep their true biblical definitions in mind, they will empower us to become like Jesus. They will confront and encourage us. They will demand change and assure us that God is patient with us while we learn how to change. Here's a great example:

The Romans 7 man (Ro 7:15-8:1)

I think Paul in this passage is describing a frustrated believer. He's probably describing the struggle that went on inside himself before he learned the truths he teaches in Romans 8. Notice: The Romans 7 man genuinely wants to obey but doesn't know how to control the impulses that come from his flesh. He is helplessly enslaved by the forces within his own body. To that person, who has put his or her faith in Christ, Paul says, "Therefore there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro 8:1).

In other words, God knows you would obey if you could, so until you can there is no condemnation. Grace covers you. But once you learn how to walk free from the control of your flesh and then choose not to obey, you move into a different category. Now you're rebelling, not struggling; you're defiant, not helpless. And grace was never intended to cover that.



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Heart-searcher

You'll notice it all comes down to the intent of the heart. It's not so much what a person does, but why they do it. Two people might be doing the same sin but for two very different reasons: One is ignorant, confused or overwhelmed, while the other has silenced their conscience and charged ahead. Their motives are different, and God deals with them differently. One He patiently covers, while from the other He lifts His presence and confronts.

Without understanding this we can administer the wrong medicine to the wrong disease. The grace of God is the proper antidote for a person who is trying to earn their salvation by works, but the fear of God and a call for repentance is the proper antidote for a person who is lawless. A lawless person tends to hear the grace of God as permission to keep sinning. There are indeed still people in America who are trying to do enough good deeds to go to heaven, but it seems most of America has become lawless. One way or another people have come to the conclusion that God doesn't care what we do. But the greatest problem we face is that many in the church have concluded the same thing, usually based on an inaccurate understanding of grace, love and repentance.

A false notion of sin

Many times I've heard people confidently claim that all sin is the same in God's eyes. One sin, they say, is just as bad as another, and by that same logic some argue that no sin is worse than another. If that were true it would mean that using bad language is equally as wrong in God's eyes as murder or adultery. But that is simply not true. All sins are not equally evil. Some are far more cruel, selfish or addictive than others. And the proof that God views them differently can be seen in the variety of punishments assigned to different sins in the Old Testament. For committing one type of sin a person might have to sacrifice a turtledove or pay back a portion of money; for another, a person could be taken out and stoned. Clearly God views some sins as worse than others, and we see that same attitude toward sin carried into the New Testament. Both Jesus and Paul warn us that there are sins we must stop doing in order to go to heaven. They are not telling us to try to earn our salvation; they are telling us that any person who has truly surrendered to God will not continue to do certain things. Listen:

• (Mt 7:17-23) "Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit, So then, you will know them (false prophets) by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven, Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

Biblical discipline

Biblical discipline has nothing to do with punishment. Punishment is intended to hurt someone because they hurt us, but discipline is meant to rescue, not punish. Sometimes we can cling to things that are destroying us or others, and we refuse to let go until circumstances drive us to do so. In that case God will discipline us directly and/or by means of His people. Here's an example of Paul disciplining a man who called himself a Christian but insisted on committing adultery: 1 Corinthians 5:3-13; 6:9-10.

Did it work? Did the man repent? It appears that he did. Listen: 2 Corinthians 7:8-12.

Notice: The man and the church became sorrowful that they had tolerated the adultery, and that godly sorrow produced true repentance which expressed itself by changed behavior. Paul didn't allow the man to claim to be under grace and continue in that adulterous relationship. Repentance meant he would stop and do everything in his power to repair the damage he had done. Grace didn't mean God didn't care what he did; grace meant God would forgive him when he repented and not until he repented. Otherwise, he remained an adulterer. Which was why Paul was so alarmed at the Corinthian church for being indifferent toward the man's sin. Paul is saying they weren't being kind to him; they were passively watching him perish. Paul is saying there are things we cannot do and still go to heaven.

The price of repentance

Real repentance is complete surrender to God. And the person who truly surrenders to God desires to become like Him and will pay whatever price is necessary to achieve that goal. Self-denial becomes a familiar part of everyday life. Confession and fresh surrender happen quickly when we discover we've sinned, and to that heart, to that "child of God," God gives endless grace.

Our response

So how does a child of God respond when he or she hears the words grace, love and repentance? We don't hear God say He doesn't care if we keep on sinning. We hear Him inviting us to come to Him regardless of how dark our past; we hear Him committing Himself to us regardless of how weak our flesh; we hear Him assuring us of the power of the cross, regardless of how far we've fallen, until we become pure, kind, generous, honest and selfless, just like Jesus. We hear Him committing Himself to walk beside us while we change, not giving us permission to walk away.

Questions

- 1) How would you explain God's grace to a small child? How would you explain repentance?
- 2) Has God ever had to discipline you, press you to let go of something that was damaging you or others? If it's something you are willing to share, tell us what He did and how it changed you.
- 3) How often do you find yourself repenting on an average day? When was the last time you had to repent?