

The Relationship of Grace to Law and Works

There has been regrettable misunderstanding as to our teaching on grace, law, and works, and their inter-relationships. According to Seventh-day Adventist belief, there is, and can be, no salvation through the law, or by human works of the law, but only through the saving grace of God. This principle, to us, is basic. This transcendent provision of the grace of God is emphasized both in the Old and the New Testament, although the truth of God's wondrous grace reaches its fullest unfolding, and most complete manifestation, in the New Testament times and record.

I. Grace Pre-eminent in the New Testament

The word "grace" (Greek, *charis*), occurs some 150 times in the New Testament. Paul made more use of this significant term than did any other New Testament writer, there being some 100 occurrences in his epistles. His close associate, Luke, used the word about 25 times in Luke and Acts, these two men thereby accounting for about five sixths of all the New Testament occurrences. "Grace" was by no means a new word invented by the apostles; the term was widely used in a variety of associated meanings in the LXX and in classical and later Greek literature. However, the New Testament often seems to attach a special significance to "grace" that is not found fully expressed elsewhere.

In the New Testament, grace is set forth as a distinctively divine quality. New Testament writers speak of "the grace of our God" (Jude 4); "the grace of Christ" (Gal. 1:6); and "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:18). Expressions like these constitute the opening and closing salutations in the letters of the apostles. They are found at the beginning of Peter's two letters, as well as in the fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul. They also appear at the close of these letters of spiritual counsel and encouragement.

This divine grace is further described by a remarkably wide range of adjectives and adverbs. It is called the "*true* grace of God" (1 Peter 5:12); *abounding*, or "*abundant*," grace (2 Cor. 4:15); the "*manifold* grace of God" (1 Peter 4:19); the "*sufficient*" grace of God (2 Cor. 12:9); the "*exceeding* grace of God" (2 Cor. 9:14). There is also the expression "grace for grace" (John 1:16); and reference to Christ Jesus our Lord as being "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14; compare verse 17). It is also the "free gift" of God (Rom. 5:15, 18).

II. Bible Definition or Description of Grace

The distinctive meaning attached to the term "grace" in the New Testament, and especially in the writings of Paul, is that of the abundant, saving love of God toward sinners as revealed in Jesus Christ. Obviously, since all men have sinned and are destitute of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), such favor and loving-kindness on God's part are wholly undeserved and unmerited by sinful man. Men have lived in hatred and rebellion against God (Rom. 1:21, 31, 32), have perverted His truth (verses 18, 25), have preferred to worship beasts and reptiles (verse 23), have defiled His image in their own bodies (verses 24-27), have blasphemed His name (Rom. 2:24), and have even despised God for His patience and forbearance (verse 4). Finally, they murdered His Son, sent to save them (Acts 7:52). Yet God has continued to regard man with love and kindness,

that the revelation of His goodness may lead men to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

This is the grace of God in its peculiar New Testament sense. It is God's unlimited, all-inclusive, transforming love toward sinful men and women; and the good news of this grace, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). It is not merely God's mercy and willingness to forgive, but it is an active, energizing, transforming power to save. Thus it may fill a person (John 1:14), it may be given (Rom. 12:3, 6), it is all-sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9; compare Rom. 5:20), it reigns (Rom. 5:21), it teaches (Titus 2:11, 12), it establishes the heart (Heb. 13:9). In some instances "grace" seems almost to be equivalent to "gospel" (Col. 1:6) and to the working of God generally (Acts 11:23; 1 Peter 5:12). Ellen G. White wrote:

Divine grace is the great element of saving power.—*Gospel Workers*, p. 70.

Christ gave His life to make it possible for man to be restored to the image of God. It is the power of His grace that draws men together in obedience to the truth.—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 249.

The "grace of God" has been fittingly called the "love of God"; that is, love, not so much in a general sense as in a specific sense; not so much love merely as love, but love directionally. Grace is the love of God flowing—flowing not upward or outward, but downward. It is that wonderful divine mercy and undeserved favor that flows from the great loving heart of God. And specifically, it is His love that flows downward from heaven to undeserving sinners here on earth. While deserving nothing but the wrath of God, we become, through this marvelous grace, the recipients of this love, this grace, which we do not in the least merit.

III. Ellen G. White on the Sovereignty of Grace

As to the apparently misunderstood teachings of Ellen G. White on the relationship of grace, law, and works, please note the following expression, written in 1905. Her writings are in pronounced harmony with Scripture, as well as sound historical theology.

Grace is an attribute of God exercised toward undeserving human beings. We did not seek for it, but it was sent in search of us. God rejoices to bestow His grace upon us, not because we are worthy, but because we are so utterly unworthy. Our only claim to His mercy is our great need.—*The Ministry of Healing*, p 161.

More than that, the same writer adds that everything we enjoy, in the matchless blessings of salvation comes to us through the grace of God. Thus:

We owe everything to grace, free grace, sovereign grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our adoption to heirship with Christ.—*Testimonies for the Church* (1882), vol. 6, 268.

Recognized theological classics have stated these same truths in this way. Charles Hodge, formerly professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, declares:

The word [*charis*, "grace"] . . . means a favourable disposition, or kind feeling; and especially love as exercised toward the inferior, dependent, or unworthy. This is represented as the crowning attribute of the divine nature. Its manifestation is declared to be the grand end of the whole scheme of redemption. . . . He [God] raises men from spiritual death, "and makes them sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace." (Eph. 2:6, 7.) Therefore it is often asserted that salvation is of grace. The gospel is a system of grace. All its blessings are gratuitously bestowed; all is so ordered that in every step of the progress of redemption and in its consummation, the grace, or undeserved love of God, is conspicuously displayed. Nothing is given or promised on the ground of merit. Everything is an undeserved favour. That salvation was provided at all, is a matter of grace and not of debt.—*Systematic Theology* (1871), vol. 2, p. 654.

With this, Adventists are in complete agreement.

IV. The Fruitage of This Divine Grace

Many and varied are the manifestations of the grace of God. Our heavenly Father is called "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). We may do "despite unto the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29). "We have redemption . . . according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

We are to preach "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24) and "the word of his grace" (Acts 14:3). We are also "chosen by grace" (Rom. 11:5, R.S.V.).

Everything we enjoy in Christian experience comes to us because of this matchless grace of God. We were "called . . . by his grace" (Gal. 1:15). We have "believed" through His grace (Acts 18:27). We were "justified by his grace" (Titus 3:7). Paul could say, "I am what I am" because of "the grace of God" (1 Cor. 15:10). We too are saved by His grace (Eph. 2:5, 8).

The grace of God gives us a unique and secure standing before God. We are to "continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43) and to "grow in the grace . . . of our Lord" (2 Peter 3:18, R.S.V.). As we do this, we shall "stand" in the grace of God (Rom. 5:2).

So it is the grace of Christ alone that can save the soul; this alone can lift the fallen from the depths of degradation and sin. Ellen G. White's witness on this point is both clear and unvarying:

Divine grace is the great element of saving power; without it all human effort is unavailing.—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (1882), p. 538.

Christ delights to take apparently hopeless material, those whom Satan has debased and through whom he has worked, and make them the subjects of His grace.—*Testimonies for the Church* (1882), vol. 6, p. 308.

Further, she writes that it is also the grace of God that keeps us from falling, and enables us to remain steadfast and true to the divine calling.

There is only one power that can either make us steadfast or keep us so,—the grace of God, in truth. He who confides in aught else is already tottering, ready to fall.—*Ibid.* (1902), vol. 7, p. 189.

Again, it is the grace of God, manifested in the lives of the children of God, that is the greatest argument as to the truth and power of the Christian faith.

By power of His grace manifested in the transformation of character the world is to be convinced that God has sent His Son as its Redeemer.—*The Ministry of Healing* (1905), p. 470.

And when at last the redeemed surround the throne of God, it will be by the wonderful grace of God.

If during this life they are loyal to God, they will at last "see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads." Revelation 22:4. And what is the happiness of heaven but to see God? What greater joy could come to the sinner saved by the grace of Christ than to look upon the face of God, and know Him as Father?—*Ibid.*, p. 421.

V. The Relationship of Grace and Works

Salvation is not now, and never has been, by law or works; salvation is only by the grace of Christ. Moreover, there never was a time in the plan of God when salvation was by human works or effort. Nothing men can do, or have done, can in any way merit salvation.

While works are not a *means* of salvation, good works are the inevitable *result* of salvation. However, these good works are possible only for the child of God whose life is inwrought by the Spirit of God. It is to such believers that John writes when he bids them keep the commandments of God (1 John 3:22-24; 5:2, 3). This relationship and sequence is imperative, but is often misunderstood or reversed.

Even in the days of old, men were not justified by works; they were justified by faith. Thus the prophet Habakkuk wrote: "The just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4; compare Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:8, 11; Phil. 3:9; Heb. 10:38). God calls upon man to be righteous; but man is naturally unrighteous. If he is to be prepared for the kingdom of God, he must be made righteous. This is something man cannot do in and of himself. He is unclean and unrighteous. The more he works, and the greater his effort, the more he reveals the unrighteousness of his own heart. Therefore if man is ever to become righteous, it must be by a power entirely outside himself—it must be by the power of God.

There is really no actual valid conflict between grace and the law—the Ten

Commandments; each serves its special purpose in the plan of God. Grace, as such, is not opposed to the law, which is God's standard of righteousness; neither is the law opposed to grace. Each has its specific functions, and neither trespasses on the function of the other.

One thing is certain, man cannot be saved by any effort of his own. We profoundly believe that no works of the law, no deeds of the law, no effort however commendable, and no good works—whether they be many or few, sacrificial or not—can in any way justify the sinner (Titus 3:5; Rom. 3:20). Salvation is wholly of grace; it is the gift of God (Rom. 4:4, 5; Eph. 2:8).

Man in the beginning was made upright (Eccl. 7: 29). There was no taint of sin in him when he came forth from the hand of his Creator. He was made in the image of God, and his character was in harmony with the principles of God's holy law. But man sinned. Now, in and through the gospel, it is the purpose of God to restore in man that lost image of God. He was originally sinless; now he is sinful. But when the gospel of the grace of God does its work in his heart, he will be clothed with the robe of the righteousness of Christ. That righteousness is imputed to him in justification. It is imparted to him in sanctification. And through Christ, and Christ alone, it will be his, and his forever, in glorification.

But there are two dangers against which the children of God need to guard. This too has been forcefully stated by Ellen G. White:

There are two errors against which the children of God—particularly those who have just come to trust in His grace—especially need to guard. The first . . . is that of looking to their own works, trusting to anything they can do, to bring themselves into harmony with God. He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy.

The opposite and no less dangerous error is, that belief in Christ releases men from keeping the law of God; that since by faith alone we become partakers of the grace of Christ, our works have nothing to do with our redemption.

But notice here that obedience is not a mere outward compliance, but the service of love. The law of God is an expression of His very nature; it is an embodiment of the great principle of love, and hence is the foundation of His government in heaven and earth. If our hearts are renewed in the likeness of God, if the divine love is implanted in the soul, will not the law of God be carried out in the life? When the principle of love is implanted in the heart, when man is renewed after the image of Him that created him, the new covenant promise is fulfilled: "I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them." And if the law is written in the heart, will it not shape the life? Obedience—the service and allegiance of love—is the true sign of discipleship.—*Steps to Christ* (1892), pp. 64, 65.

The Lord expects no less of the soul now than He expected of man in Paradise, perfect obedience, unblemished righteousness. The requirement under the covenant of grace is just as broad as the requirement made in Eden,—harmony

with God's law, which is holy, just, and good.—*Christ's Object Lessons* (1900), p. 391.

Ray C. Stedman has impressively set forth the relation of grace and law, and some common misconceptions, in the September, 1953, *Our Hope*, as follows:

If the question, "Is law opposed to grace?" were put to a representative group of evangelical believers today, the answer would be, in many instances, an emphatic "Yes." Even such a selected group as students of conservative Bible institutes and seminaries would probably give a strong affirmative to such a question. And they would be wrong! Despite their wide-eyed amazement at such a statement as this the fact remains that, biblically and theologically, they are dead wrong.

It is easy to understand why otherwise well-taught Christians are confused on this matter. No theological drum is more soundly thumped today than that of law vs. grace. No issue is more clearly drawn than that which separates the camp of the legalists from the adherents of grace. And this, of course, is pre-eminently right. What is commonly overlooked and little understood in this present day conflict between law and grace is that *the issue is not between these two principles, as such, but between the abuse of the law, on the one hand and grace on the other.*

To put the matter another way, it is only when the law is made a *means* of salvation or of restraint of sin that it comes into conflict with the principles of grace. In every other respect the two are complementary and not conflicting. But the law was never designed to save. In its essential principle it is not, and *cannot ever be, opposed to grace*, for the two operate in distinctly separate fields and for widely divergent purposes. *The law is designed to reveal sin; grace is designed to save from sin.* No conflict can possibly exist between these two.

The difference does not lie in the commandments of law versus the commandment-free life of grace, for the fact is that grace has its commandments too! Those who always associate the word "command" with the word "law" have failed to read the Bible accurately. After all, a command is but the expression of a desire on the part of one who has authority. If Christ is Lord of our lives, then He has authority in our lives and His requests become commands to all who love Him. These are the *commandments of grace*. The difference between them and the commandments of law lies in the motive. *Why does one obey the law? For fear! Why does one obey a command of grace? For love!*

There lies the difference. The command may be the same in either case; the motive alone differs. What made the law so irritating was the sense of constraint it engendered. We were being asked to do what we really did not want to do. The same command, in the relationship of grace, elicits a prompt and willing obedience from us because we love the One who asks it of us. The sense of constraint is utterly gone.

What happened, then, when grace superseded law? Did the desire of God for men, as expressed in the law, change? No; it was even intensified and made to be inward rather than merely outward. *What, then, changed? The motive of men's hearts!* Once we strove in vain to obey a just law, lashed on by our fears

of wrath to come. Now, as believers in Christ, we stand before God in the perfect righteousness of Christ and, because we love Him who first loved us, we seek to please Him—something we find great pleasure ourselves in doing—*and thus, unconsciously, fulfill the law.* "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, judged sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3, 4). The last clause is descriptive of what grace makes us do. (Italics supplied.)

This statement of Adventist position may well close with the admonition from Ellen G. White to our church:

Christ is pleading for the church in the heavenly courts above, pleading for those for whom He paid the redemption price of His own lifeblood. Centuries, ages, can never diminish the efficacy of this atoning sacrifice. The message of the gospel of His grace was to be given to the church in clear and distinct lines, that the world should no longer say that Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ.—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 92