



GOOD OLD GRACE • Bruce Narramore & Bill Counts

Frustration was written across Carl's face. "I just can't get it all together," he said. "I read the Bible every day, I've helped several of my friends come to know Christ, and I don't have any gross faults. But something isn't right. No matter how hard I try, I'm never satisfied. I feel I haven't done enough, and I just don't have the joy I used to feel."

A psychologist would quickly recognize Carl's tendencies toward perfectionism and his need for constant activity to feel worthwhile. He would probably give him some psychological label like "neurotic" and start helping him understand how childhood experiences programmed him for his frustrating life-style. The psychologist would probably be correct since an insatiable need to perform, and a general lack of personal fulfillment, both have their roots in early childhood.

But this is only the psychological side of Carl's problem. There is also a theological side. In adulthood these same attitudes are transferred onto God so that Carl always feels a little dissatisfaction in his Christian life. In fact, if the Apostle Paul had talked with Carl, he might have said, "Carl, you're feeling the same frustration so many feel today. You feel you have to do something to please God. But let me tell you something. No matter how hard you work or what you do, you'll never feel you've done enough! You're trying to relate to God by living under law. You don't understand the difference between 'law' and 'grace.'" Paul would be putting his finger on one of the central issues in the Christian life. Do we approach God on the basis of law and effort, or by grace and love?

All we have said so far about freedom from guilt is built on a proper understanding of God's grace. Guilt's only lasting solution is found in the grace of God. To firmly cement in our minds the foundations for guilt-free living, this chapter will look at the biblical teachings on law and grace. This is fundamental to overcoming guilt and building a positive self-image.

Two Ways

According to the Bible, law and grace are opposite ways of approaching God. To make certain we understand the differences between the two, the New Testament devotes one entire book (Galatians) and half of another (Romans), plus many other passages, to this issue. We can summarize the differences by looking at their answers to these four questions: (1) How do we become acceptable to God? (2) How do we get daily blessings from God? (3) How does God motivate us?, and (4) Where do we get the power to live as God wants us to?

Celestial Brownie Points

The most basic difference between law and grace is how we get God's acceptance. Law says, "Perform so you will be accepted." Grace says, "You are accepted; now you can perform." The law lists numerous specific requirements we must meet to merit either eternal salvation or daily fellowship. Under grace, we are accepted first because Christ died for us, then we naturally tend to perform as God wants. We perform not to earn acceptance, but because we are accepted. Paul says, "And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32, NASB). Note the order of grace: first acceptance, then performance. After we are accepted and forgiven, we are encouraged to forgive others.



The Big If

The second difference between law and grace involves daily blessings or rewards. The nation of Israel had to work to earn rewards from God. Listen to the words of Moses:

If you fully obey all of these commandments of the Lord your God, the laws I am declaring to you today, God will transform you into the greatest nation in the world. These are the blessings that will come upon you: blessings in the city, blessings in the field; many children, ample crops, large flocks and herds; blessings of fruit and bread; blessings when you come in, blessings when you go out. (Deuteronomy 28:1-6, TLB)

Notice the big “if.” If Israel fully obeyed or performed they would get all these rewards. If they didn’t, however, listen to what would happen:

“If you won’t listen to the Lord your God and won’t obey these laws I am giving you today, then all of these curses shall come upon you: curses in the city; curses in the fields; curses on your fruit and bread; the curse of barren wombs; curses upon your crops; curses upon the fertility of your cattle and flocks; curses when you come in; curses when you go out. For the Lord himself will send his personal curse upon you” (Deuteronomy 28:15-20a, TLB).

Under law, we earn blessings. Under grace, God blesses us unconditionally; then we are encouraged to obey him. Consider these two passages:

“How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every blessing in heaven because we belong to Christ” (Ephesians 1:3 TLB).

“Since you have been chosen by God who has given you this new kind of life, and because of His deep love and concern for you, you should practice tender hearted mercy and kindness to others. Don’t worry about making a good impression on them but be ready to suffer quietly and patiently” (Colossians 3:1-2 TLB).

Here we see that spiritual rewards come because of Christ’s work, not ours. Under law the formula is, “If you will do good, I will bless you.” Under grace it’s, “I have blessed you; now do good.”

Fear and Love

Just as law and grace have two different bases of acceptance and blessing, they operate under different motivations. The law operates in large measure out of a fear motive. Impending judgment was hanging over Israel if they disobeyed. If an individual disobeyed certain laws, he would face execution. If the nation disobeyed, it could be punished by a foreign army. Listen to how the people responded to God’s initial giving of the law:

For there was an awesome trumpet blast and a voice with a message so terrible that the people begged God to stop speaking. They staggered back under God’s command that if even an animal touched the mountain it must die. Moses himself was so frightened at the sight that he shook with terrible fear. (Hebrews 12: 19-21, TLB)

In great contrast, grace removes fearful anxiety, and replaces it with a love motive. The writer to the Hebrews makes this crystal clear.

“You have not had to stand face to face with terror, flaming fire, gloom, darkness, and a terrible storm . . . But you have come right up into Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the gathering of countless happy angels; and to the Church, composed of all those registered in heaven; and to God who is Judge of all; and to the spirits of the redeemed in heaven, already made perfect; and to Jesus himself, who has brought us his wonderful new agreement; and to the sprinkled blood which graciously forgives instead of crying out for vengeance as the blood of Abel did” (Hebrews 12:18a; 22-24, TLB).



John sums this up when he says: “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NASB). God first extends His love to us, then we respond with loving obedience.

Going It Alone

Our resources under law and grace are also different. Under the law, the results are all up to us. Moses said, “If you fully obey.” Under grace, we have more than our own resources. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and helps our renewed ego function properly. This is the fourth distinction between law and grace. Paul says, “When the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience . . . self-control” (Galatians 5:22,23,TLB).

The Two Will Never Mix

One hot summer day I opened our refrigerator in search of a cold drink. Spotting what looked like fruit juice, I poured myself a glass. After one swallow I spit it out. I discovered that my young daughter had mixed some tomato juice with grape juice. The tomato juice was fine by itself, and the grape juice was all right, too. But together they tasted horrible! Law and grace are much the same. Each has a distinct purpose, and serves that purpose well. The law frightens, condemns, and shows us we are moral failures. This prepares us for God’s grace. Grace then steps in and rescues, heals, and forgives.

The New Testament tells us law and grace cannot mix any better than tomato and grape juice. It warns us that now that we are under grace, we should never again get entangled with the law. Peter told those who tried to mix law and grace: “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10, NASB). In his Galatian letter, Paul was just as firm: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1, NASB). The reason law and grace can’t mix is because their principles are antithetical.

It’s impossible to earn acceptance and blessings if God has already given them to us. It’s impossible to rely on the Holy Spirit if we are trying to go it alone. In addition to this, it’s impossible to have salvation if we are under condemnation. We can summarize the conflicts of law and grace by looking at the following chart.

	Law	Grace
Eternal acceptance	Earned by our works	Given because of Christ’s work
Daily blessings	Repeatedly earned by our works	Given because of Christ’s work, and as a natural consequence of following biblical teachings
Motivation	Heavily based on fear	Based on love
Source of power	Our own efforts	The Holy Spirit enlightening and strengthening our renewed selves
Result	Condemnation	Salvation

Lapsing Back Under Law

The New Testament and many theologians clearly teach we are under God’s grace. This was the great affirmation of Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders. Yet human nature is such that Christians tend to slip back under subtle forms of law.

When God Seems Far Away

Take the feeling of acceptance, for example. Don’t we all have times when we feel especially close to God? On these occasions we usually feel an extra measure of acceptance, a kind of divine pat on the back. By contrast, when we have been rebellious or unresponsive we begin to feel God is starting to reject us. This is living “under law.” When we aren’t performing well we don’t feel as much acceptance.



All Those Rules

Because we have such a strong desire to feel accepted, we fool ourselves into thinking that specific performances will gain it. We often come up with extra-biblical standards of behavior. We forget we are acceptable through Christ and that we can't do one thing to earn more acceptance. Instead, we start looking around for highly visible ways of improving our standing before God. We begin to focus on specific lists of rules and start to judge ourselves and others by these lists.

Some churches, for example, habitually attack practices like drinking, smoking, and dancing. Others rule out movies or certain forms of dress. In past years, some churches forbade people of the opposite sex to swim together and considered makeup and seamless hose as "instruments of the devil." At least one religious sect still refuses to use the "horseless carriage" and other modern inventions.

Students who attend church colleges are sometimes required to promise to refrain from certain activities such as drinking and smoking. They are told that this is part of setting a Christian example to weaker Christians and the outside world, and that some of the activities, while not mentioned in the Bible, are clearly wrong.

At first this sounds sensible. Some activities are harmful. Many movies now present raw sex in living color, alcoholism takes a fierce toll, and smoking can be damaging to health. But setting prohibitions won't really resolve these issues. In fact, it can compound the problem. A heavy emphasis on external rules represents a lapse back under law. When we focus excessively on specific, visible, keepable rules of behavior, we begin to use them as a basis of determining how good we are. We want to perform to get acceptance. If we keep the rules, we feel a bit more "righteous" or "spiritual." Those who fail to keep them are "sinful."

In this way, rules tend to create a rash of contradictions and hypocrisy. They cater to our craving for acceptance by our own efforts. They focus our attention on a few externals instead of the great biblical issues like love, justice, and humility. And they may lead to a form of pride and a tendency to judge others . . .

Those Cancer Sticks

Smoking is another example. Medical evidence shows that smoking is linked to cancer and heart disease. Since the Bible says our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, it seems best not to smoke. Yet why single out smoking as a special spiritual or moral issue to the exclusion of other equally harmful habits?

Overeating is just as bad. It endangers health, sets a bad example, and represents lack of discipline. But how many churches or schools have rules against being overweight? The great evangelist, D.L. Moody, weighed close to three hundred pounds. His friend, the famous English preacher Charles Spurgeon, smoked cigars at one period in his ministry. An anecdote has it that Moody once rebuked his cigar-smoking friend about his bad habit, but for obvious reasons had little success! When we vigorously oppose one practice and are tolerant of another just as hurtful, we are trapped in a hypocritical mentality, not to mention the fact that we look ridiculous to the outside world.

Ashtrays in the Parish House

Some churches have never had special rules concerning drinking, dancing, or smoking. In fact, they may serve beer at church picnics and have ash trays in their parish houses! But they may have very stringent rules concerning church membership, baptism, and communion.

A woman once complained to me that though she was unquestionably a Christian, she had to take two years of catechism classes before the church would allow her to participate in communion. Where do we find such a requirement in the Bible? This again is setting up an external human code to judge performance when no such code exists in the Bible.



Turning Off the Foreigner

The results of this religious externalism have been disastrous in some foreign countries. As Western missionaries have carried Christianity to Africa and the Orient, they have often added rules from their own religious subculture. Coupled with elements of Western culture like architecture, clothing, and music, they presented the whole package as “Christianity.” The result is that Christianity appears as a “Western” religion, and the church fails to send deep and strong roots into the local culture.

Turning Off the Youth

Our own country recently witnessed a similar phenomenon. During the sixties a “youth culture” grew up, with long hair, rock music, new clothing styles, and rebellion against “the establishment.” Some churches and groups, though not condoning drugs, immorality, or headstrong rebellion, sought to reach these youth without demanding a return to the musical tastes and clothing fashions of the 1950’s. The result was an enthusiastic response. Former addicts and dropouts who turned to spreading the Christian message got national press coverage.

But other churches and groups seemed to think these youth were unacceptable to the church (and for all practical purposes, to God) unless they maintained a certain style of dress, clean-shaven faces, and the musical tastes of their parents. Sometimes they refused to allow them in their church unless they were “properly attired.” These churches, of course, reached few, if any, segments of the secular youth culture. In fact, they lost many of their own to other Christian groups or to the drug world. In their religious externalism, these churches confused personal tastes and preferences with biblical morality and missed a golden opportunity to reach needy youth for Christ.

“Harvey, If You Get Right With God, You’ll Make Millions”

Another relapse to law comes when we try to perform well so God will reward us for our efforts. I once counseled an area manager for a well-known life insurance company—we’ll call him Harvey. He had a lovely home, a fine family, and was active in his church. From all appearances he was successful. Unfortunately, his insurance region was doing poorly. He had difficulty recruiting qualified salesmen and his area was near the bottom in sales production. He came to me discouraged, feeling his region’s poor performance reflected a spiritual weakness in him. He thought God wasn’t “blessing.” Over a period of several weeks, we got well acquainted and I began to help him understand his tendency to blame himself when things didn’t go right.

I explained that God has a very different view of success than we do. While God obviously wants us to do our best in our vocational endeavors, He doesn’t intend for all Christian businessmen to be the most successful in their fields. Then we discussed how we often confuse God’s spiritual blessings with business success, financial prosperity, and physical health. The New Testament doesn’t promise us health, prestige, or financial prosperity as a result of Christian living. We should do our best and be grateful for health, safety, and financial progress. But we shouldn’t count these as direct rewards from God earned through good behavior. All of the Christian’s direct rewards will come in heaven. While we’re here on earth, we will reap good and bad consequences for our actions, but these are not rewards or curses like Israel received under God’s rule of law. They are the natural consequences of our actions.

Over the space of a few weeks, Harvey’s depression began to lift. He began to realize God wasn’t punishing him for hidden faults by withholding sales. Then he went to a regional insurance meeting. One of the first men he met was a fellow Christian who said, “Harvey, I just straightened out my life with God last year, and you wouldn’t believe how great sales have been since then. The Lord is really blessing.” Immediately Harvey hit bottom again. All of our efforts to understand his spiritual life and professional work were derailed and we had to start over.

This experience is not uncommon. We usually choose the star athlete, the beauty queen, or the wealthy businessman as our “Christian heroes.” The subtle implication (and sometimes not so subtle) is that if we were spiritually committed we, too, might become star athletes, beauty queens, or successful businessmen. When we don’t, we are left feeling like second-class citizens who somehow just never had what it takes to earn God’s highest blessings.



Grace Is Pie In the Sky

Another lapse back under law comes when we see grace primarily as God's way to get us to heaven, but de-emphasize it as His way of dealing with us here and now. The reasoning goes like this: "Through Christ alone we are forgiven and accepted by God for the future, but for now we must do certain things to merit His favor, earn His blessings, and avoid His anger."

By relegating much of God's grace to the future, we may think we are faithful to the teachings of the Bible. But we have made a fatal mixture of law and grace. What we fail to recognize is that God does not say we are under grace in the future—but that we are under it now. Paul writes, "You are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14, NASB). Earning acceptance, fearful anxiety, and punishment are all a part of the law, not of grace.

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