

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: May 25, 2008

Law, Grace and the Stumbling Block of the Cross

by Dan Trygg

“...a person is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus”

Gal. 2:16

“For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, being slaves of various passions and pleasures, spending our lives in unsoundness and jealousy, hateful, detesting one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and love for humankind appeared from God our Savior, ⁵ He saved us-- not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, by means of the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ in order that being justified by His grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life.”

Titus 3:3-7

“Israel, pursuing a law for righteousness, has not achieved the law. ³² Why is that? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. ³³ As it is written: Look! I am putting a stone in Zion to stumble over, and a rock to trip over, yet the one who believes on Him will not be put to shame.”

Romans 9:31-33

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Eph. 2:8-10

There are a lot of misconceptions regarding the nature of finding life in the Spirit, and walking out one's faith as a Christian. This is not a new problem. The apostles had to deal with this issue in their day. The Jews thought they could save themselves by trying to be good, while Greeks thought that they could be saved through secret knowledge. Paul is very clear, “A person is not justified by works of the Law.” In other words, you can't ever be good enough to be acceptable to God on your own performance. Furthermore, Jesus said that **it is not what you know, or what you do, that will save you. Rather, it all comes down to who you know, and whether you choose to trust Him and serve Him** (Matt. 7:21-23; Jn. 5:24; 12:25,26). Salvation does not come through going to church, or through doing good deeds. It does not come through volunteer work, or being a nice person. It does not come through studying spiritual classics, or reading widely about the various religions of the world. God is not impressed or pleased by anyone's mosaic of religious ideas, no matter how creative, or classic, they may be. He has placed around us external indicators of His existence, through the order and wonders of the created world (Rom. 1:18-20; Psa. 19:1-4), as well as a longing in our hearts for Him (Ecc. 3:11), but these are not sufficient to save us. They are only able to prompt us to think about whether there is more, and to possibly motivate us to search Him out (Acts 17:24-29). **To the humble, honest-hearted, diligent seeker, God will reveal Himself** (I Chron. 28:9; Deut. 4:29; Jer. 29:11-14). **He will reveal to us our need to repent**, to abandon our own ideas of Him and what life is all about, **and to acknowledge Jesus as the one, true Savior sent by Him**, as well as the one to whom we will one day answer (Acts 17:30,31).

So, how does this work? God knows that all of us have messed up. We have all made mistakes, and even willingly chosen to do things that are against His will for our lives. Unfortunately, these choices have sown the seeds of destruction and death in our lives. **There is absolutely nothing we can do, or discover, that can save us from the dire consequences of sin.** Even our best efforts fall short. We were hopelessly broken, hopelessly unable to fix our dilemma. Even though His wrath and judgment *must* be poured out against sin, **God loved us so much that He Himself came to make a way for us to be saved.** Instead of dealing with us in judgment, He had mercy and grace toward us. **He offers His righteousness to cover our unrighteousness.** He says that our righteousness, even our *best* efforts, are to Him like filthy, polluted rags, ...unclean, smelly, dirty and torn (Isa. 64:6). It doesn't matter how good you *think* you are, your best behavior and appearances are woefully inadequate to be acceptable to God. Your good deeds will do nothing to undo the stench of death and decay that comes from your life. Think of it this way, it doesn't matter how nice your clothes are, if you have dirtied yourself in your underwear, or if you had not showered for days. You might look good, but anyone who gets near you will be immediately repulsed by the smell. As Paul wrote to Titus, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy...” **This comes entirely as a gift to those who will take it for themselves.** Coming to Jesus is only possible because God offers His grace to us, and it only comes to those who accept it by trusting in His offer. A gift is not really of any practical value until it is received by the one it is offered to, is opened and put to use. The same is true for God's offer of grace. **It is of no practical value to us unless we take it for ourselves, and choose to live our lives by His grace.**

Notice what He offers, “...by the *washing of rebirth and renewal* of the Holy Spirit”. God washes away the stench. **More than just dealing with the outside, however, God changes us on the inside. He gives us a new**

birth, a new spiritual-genetic make-up, one that produces righteousness. The word, renewal, implies a complete change, a replacement of the old with something entirely new and of a superior quality. Paul speaks of how “if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creature. Old things have passed away, behold, new things have come” (II Cor. 5:17). He is referring to that new person which came into being when we trusted in Christ, that person who was “born from above” (Jn. 3:3-5), begotten from the very seed (Gk. – *sperma*) of God Himself, . . .unable to sin, and being created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (I Jn. 3:9; Eph. 4:24). God has put within us all that is needed to live a radically different life, a life that is as righteous, exemplary and loving as Jesus’ own character. **What we need to learn is to disengage from living in our old ways, begin to understand how life in the Spirit works, and develop the ability to walk in step with His leading** (Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 12:2; Gal. 5:13-26).

It is interesting that **the same misperceptions regarding how we obtain salvation arise once again as methods for becoming mature in Christ.** Just as there were legalists who said that we had to work hard to become good enough to be accepted by God, such **legalistic thinking pervades much of the teaching regarding growing in maturity.** The emphasis of such thinking is that now that we are God’s, we really ought to work hard at trying to be good Christians. The problem with such teaching, however, is that God is unwilling to share His glory with anyone. **If we try in our own strength to live the Christian life, then we will get the same results that we had before we knew Christ. Why? Because we are depending on our own resources. We are not depending on the Holy Spirit.** We are not abiding in Jesus, looking to Him as our Source. We are not waiting for Him to rise up within us and enable us to live in a new manner.

The same is true if we think that we just need new understanding, new information. It doesn’t matter how clearly we understand our options for healthier living, or how much better we understand the teaching of the scriptures. **We remain as incapable of living out the truth as we were before.** There is more to our problem than lack of information, as helpful as understanding may be. The problem is with the *heart*, not just the intellect. The issue is with our self-centered orientation. **That is why God saw that it was necessary to give us a new heart and a new spirit. Without such drastic inner change, we remain incapable of wanting to do the right thing, even when we know what that is.**

Life in the Spirit is all about getting ourselves to be in tune with His desires, His leadings. When we perceive them, then we can give ourselves to express them. We become His hands, His feet, His mouth. **He works in us to desire to do His will, and then also provides the ability to carry it out** (Phil. 2:13). Just as He was the gracious initiator in our salvation, and we had to accept and utilize His gift to make it real in our lives, in the same way **He initiates new desires, leadings and directions in our lives, but we must choose to give expression to them in order to see the reality of His inner life come to fruition in our experience.** We must “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is He who is at work in us” (Phil. 2:12). Without His inner workings, we would have no more going for us than we did before we knew Christ. If we don’t respond to them, and give expression to them, those inner workings will not ever be seen. We will limit what God could do with us, and people will only see a quality of life little different from their own. **When we are tuned in and responsive to God, however, the character and power of Jesus can become visible through us. People will notice, because there will be something at work in us that is different than what they can explain.**

There is a stumbling-block associated with God’s grace which some people trip over. Grace is free, but it isn’t fair. That is what people stumble over. Those who have been *relatively* good and religious are offended that people who have not been trying to be good should be freely accepted by God *as a gift*. Jesus was criticized for keeping company with some of the most notorious of sinners. To those who were offended by this, He said, “It is not those who are well who need of a Physician, but those who are sick” (Lk. 5:31). In a similar way, **religious people can sometimes be offended that grace would continue to be shown to those who struggle with sin,** or they get impatient with the seemingly slow growth of certain people who have obvious sin issues they have not given up or had victory in. If it really *is* true that we are morally bankrupt without God, then we shouldn’t be surprised that some would have ongoing struggles in areas. **The question is, “Will more of the law help? Would it be valuable to rebuke them, or should we be helping them find the grace of God which is available for them to experience victory?** Isn’t that what the writer to the Hebrews says, “See to it that no one falls short (lit., *is lacking*, or, *is in need of*) of the grace of God” (12:15)? Victory will come by abiding in Christ, not by threats or punishments. **Sure, there is a need for correction and rebuke, at times. But the general message of the NT is to abide in Christ, learn to walk by the Spirit, and the fruit of a transformed life will follow.**