

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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The Abuse of Grace

by Dan Trygg

“Working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says, ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, *now* is the favorable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation. ³ We put no cause for stumbling in anyone's way, in order that the ministry might not be discredited, ⁴ rather showing ourselves as servants of God in everything...”

II Corinthians 6:1-4

“But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹ for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. ²¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as *there will also be false teachers among you*, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned... For while they speak great, swelling, bombastic words (of emptiness), they attract by fleshly desires and lack of moral restraint those who are just barely escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹ *They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption, ...for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.*”

2 Peter 1:20 - 2:2,18-19

“But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who was teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

Revelation 2:14-15

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ *Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*”

Matthew 5:17-19

When Paul met with the Ephesian elders for the last time, he warned them against false teachers (Acts 20:29,30). The elders were to watch carefully over the group, like shepherds watching over a flock. The apostle had plenty of life experiences to inform his concerns. Everywhere he had preached the gospel, the enemy was quick to either muster up direct opposition to his preaching, or to mislead the disciples by some twisted distortion of the message. So, he tells these overseers at Ephesus to **be on the lookout, because the enemy will predictably make some kind of move to attempt to shut down, nullify or disqualify the ministry**, if he can. As he originally did in the garden of Eden, his stock in trade is to subtly tweak the message so that it *sounds very much like* the words of God, but **he introduces enough error and confusion to lead people down the wrong path**. He sends people who may *look like* servants of righteousness, and *appear* to preach about Jesus, about the gospel and *seem* to talk about the Spirit, but their message is perverted enough that Paul says that the Jesus they preach is *not the same* as the Jesus he preached, and the gospel they preach is *entirely different*. Furthermore, the spirit they are directing people toward is not the Holy Spirit at all, but some false religious demonic spirit (II Cor. 11:1-15). This is a serious business. **If Satan can't keep us from Jesus, he will be more than happy to misdirect and confuse us enough to keep us in a religious system that doesn't work**. Paul warned that false teachers will *come from the outside* of our group, or they will *rise up from within* our own members (Acts 20:29,30). In either case, **misguided teachers will lead people away from the truth, luring them to follow their own brand of spirituality**.

The most common deception Paul had to deal with was religious legalism. These were people who came behind Paul and tried to convince his new converts that it wasn't enough to believe that Jesus died for their sins. They needed to get circumcised and keep the Jewish law. Paul confronted this quite strongly. No one can ever be acceptable to God on the basis of good works. **We can't be saved through good works, ...nor can we grow to spiritual maturity by doing good works**, by observing religious activities or ceremonies, or by self-discipline. **Our salvation and our spiritual vitality come from Jesus as our only source, mediated to us through the Holy Spirit**. It is His work on the cross that can cleanse us and make us acceptable to God. And it is His working within us now, through the Holy Spirit, that enables us to live in the power, victory and righteousness of God. Christ in us is the hope of a glory-filled life, filled to overflowing with the love and goodness of God. Walking in and with the Spirit produces the fruit of Christlike character. **The subtle distinction that the false teachers were in error about was that they were emphasizing trying to produce the fruit, the righteous behavior, by self-effort**. That never worked *before* we knew Jesus, and it won't work *now*, either. Why? Because *we* are trying to be in charge, *we* are attempting to live by our own understanding and live our lives on our own terms. **Even if we intend to do this for God, we are not letting God direct our lives. We are contributing portions of our lives to Him, instead of abandoning our entire lives to His discretion. Instead of living in the communion and life-flow of relationship with God, looking for and responding to Him, we are living our lives as best we can, and push God out of our moment-by-moment experience**. It doesn't take long for the emptiness to become evident, and we fall into old ways of dealing with life, which produces the old sinful behaviors. Like the branch that is separated from the Vine, our lives begin to wilt, and everyone can see the droop. Apart from Him we can do nothing.

An even more extreme example of this taught that we need to dominate and destroy our flesh by engaging in fasting and severe treatment of our bodies. Some have gone so far as to beat, whip or punish their bodies with painful disciplines. Others promoted very strict controls over dress and social interactions between men and women, as attempts to control promiscuity. Some also promote celibacy as an attempt to keep their fleshly appetites under control, and secure a more complete devotion to God. These things may *seem* to have the appearance of wisdom in self-construed religion, but *they are really of no value* against fleshly indulgence (Col. 2:20-23). **Again, the problem is that we are in control.** We are trying, by our own resources, to be righteous. **Since sin is an expression of selfishness, when self is in charge we cannot keep from being enticed into self-ish thinking and behavior.** We are not letting God live through us. We are focused on avoiding sin, not on being filled and directed by Him. The result is a sick, extreme religious veneer over a self-directed life.

On the other extreme were those who emphasized grace way out of proportion. These were called antinomians, which means that they were opposed to the Law. They didn't think sin was a big deal, since grace covered it. **They minimized the importance of the Law, often saying that it was irrelevant to them as Christians.** They were not "under the Law", so it had no application to them, at all. Since they were sinners, **they believed God did not really expect that they could have victory over their sin.** They either had no hope to change, and simply settled for mediocrity, or **some even went so far as to say, "sin doesn't matter" and freely applied themselves to pursuing pleasure.**

This certainly does not square with the Scriptures. Jesus said that the Law was not at all irrelevant. Anyone who would minimize or annul its commandments would be considered least in the kingdom of heaven. Those who keep and teach these commandments will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. **The moral and spiritual teachings of the Law remains the minimal standard of God's revealed will.** The *agapē* love of God, produced by the Holy Spirit inside of us, will motivate us to do good, not evil, to one another. In this way, love is the fulfillment of the Law. The Spirit in us will not fulfill the selfish desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16,17). **Paul said that the Law is good, if one uses it rightly** (I Tim. 1:8). **It is not for a righteous person to live by, but it exposes those behaviors which are "contrary to sound teaching".** "Sound" or "healthy" teaching will not produce, or excuse, such behaviors. Jesus told us that we would recognize the false prophets by their fruits. **The Law provided the standard of righteousness by which to measure unhealthy prophets and teachers.** The Nicolaitans, and the false prophets in II Peter, were quickly recognizable as "unhealthy" by virtue of their sensuality, lack of moral restraint, and immoral sexual behavior (fornication). They promised their followers freedom, but they themselves were in bondage to their own sin. Bottom line, they were deceived, and were spreading their sickness along with their teaching. **The bad fruit of their lives was evident to all, and because of this the "way of truth was maligned". Even the unbelievers recognize the bad fruit!** Because these unhealthy people are associating themselves with the church, and claiming to be following Christ, their bad behaviors reflect poorly on Jesus. Their immorality and hypocrisy are a detriment to the gospel. People turn away from Jesus because of them. **The sad thing is that many of these people are convinced they are doing right, in their own minds.** Those in Matthew 7 are quick to tell Jesus of their religious activities, spiritual experiences and active service, but the Lord rejects them, saying, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (7:23). The Law exposes the inconsistency in their lives, and points to the real problem, their relationship with Jesus. This is the Law's purpose: to expose sin and drive us to the Savior (Gal. 3:24). **These are religious people, actively serving God in the name of Jesus, seeing powerful things happen, but the fruit of their lives is not from the good tree. It shows that they don't really have a healthy relationship with Jesus.**

Grace is not a license or excuse for sin. Grace, when correctly understood, will train us to put aside ungodliness and worldly lusts (Tit. 2:11,12). If *that* is not happening, then we are not really experiencing God's grace, or are abusing it, ...that is, we are misusing it. We see in Paul's exhortation from II Cor. 6 that **it is possible to misapply grace so that it does not truly benefit us. Grace is given to walk out of condemnation and bondage into repentance (a change of perspective) and freedom from sin. To ongoingly choose to remain in sin is to make grace of no effect.** It is a mockery of grace. People can confuse remorse (feeling bad over our sin) with godly grief (a true conviction of the Spirit). Paul discusses this in II Cor. 7:8-11. Godly grief produces repentance (a change of mind and direction in life). To remain in a sinful pattern, without making attempts to change, or to make things right, is *not* a motivation from the Holy Spirit. God gives grace (the power to change) to help us in time of need (Heb. 4:16). **There must be a partnership with God. He offers to help us live differently, but we must apply the grace and strength He provides.** The apostle wrote, "Working together with Him, we beg you not to take the grace of God in vain." We do it *together*. **We must work out in our choices what God works within us through His Spirit** (Phil. 2:12,13). Paul had no time for those who abused grace. He asks, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:1,2) The thought was *abhorrent* to him. **Paul made sure his life was a healthy response to grace, not a scandal.** He understood that God wanted to transform him, and he put all else aside so that he could have Christ, His power, and the opportunity to live out what God wanted for his life. **He made every effort to put no stumbling block before others, so that the ministry not be discredited. Our walk will talk louder than our preaching. Grace transforms, not transgresses.**