

# Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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## Working Together-With Grace

by Dan Trygg

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not come to be empty. On the contrary, *I worked harder than any of them, yet not I, rather the grace of God together-with me.*” 1Corinthians 15:10

“For we are God's *co-laborers*... According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder *I laid a foundation...*” 1Corinthians 3:9a,10

“For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and sincerity (judged-in-the-sun), not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we conducted-ourselves in the world, and more abundantly toward you.” 2 Corinthians 1:12

“*Working-together-with Him*, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” 2 Corinthians 6:1

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, <sup>12</sup> *training us* in order that, renouncing ungodliness and worldly lusts, *we might live self-controlled, upright, and godly in the present age*, <sup>13</sup> waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup> who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works. Tit 2:11-14

**People get the wrong impression of how our relationship to God is supposed to work.** They take bits and pieces out of context, emphasizing just one part of the picture and ignoring the rest. They get stuck on one aspect of the truth and disregard other, clearly-stated principles. **The inter-relationship of grace and self-effort is one such area of misunderstanding.**

**Often people have certain “buzz words” or phrases which they use repeatedly** to emphasize their point of view. **They typically also react *against* other words or phrases**, which they have determined as contradictory to life in the Spirit. Because they are only clearly seeing one aspect of the whole, they cannot see how these two ideas may fit together. **They are so defensive of the little bit of truth that they see clearly that they cannot open their minds up to grasp a larger picture.** Sometimes their passion and zeal carries them along, and they unconsciously are doing the very things that others are advocating, though they would never speak of these activities as others do. For example, they may read their Bible and pray out of a natural zeal for God, but they strongly react against someone else advocating these disciplines to people who are *not* naturally doing them. They would cry, “Foul!”, insisting that only the Spirit can prompt believers to read or pray without getting them into religious bondage. **Some think that advocating classical disciplines for spiritual growth amounts to “putting the law on people”.** They equate this with the religious legalism that Paul confronted in the Galatian churches. Any language that puts any responsibility or accountability on the person is abhorrent to them. To advocate any self-effort or initiative on the part of the disciple is seen as promoting “legalism” or “dead works”, instead of as a good-faith investment in one’s spiritual walk. **Some are so guarded against “legalism” or “judging people” that they think it is inappropriate or wrong to confront what is clear sin in the lives of other believers in the Body**, ...in spite of Biblical teachings and examples to the contrary (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 5:1-13). **Some think we are simply to wait for God’s grace to deliver the sinner from his sinful behavior. They do not see that people ever can make a choice to stop sinning.** They see *that* as simply a “work of the flesh”. Therefore it is misguided or even *wrong* to tell people to put off a sinful pattern of behavior!

Of course, **what they are reacting to is an error that people can fall into, one where they try to become righteous on their own.** Certainly, *we cannot earn forgiveness or acceptance by virtue of good works or heroic human self-effort. Neither can we achieve spiritual maturity by virtue of our strivings to “be good”,* or by religious practices alone. There *is* danger in that kind of approach. The Bible is very clear about that. It warns of “trying to keep the Law”, when **the apostle Paul says that we are no longer under the Law** (Rom. 7:1-6). **Christ came to set us free from the Law, so why go back there?** To do so only pulls us back into that system of frustration, defeat and condemnation, because *we do not have the power to change ourselves.* In fact, Paul teaches that when we try to live by outward moral standards, the power of sin, which is still in us, will begin to rebel against that constriction, will deceive us and will cause us to fall. The same could be said of sin. **Christ came to set us free from the power of sin, so why go back there?** When and if we do, it still produces the same results, shame and death (Rom. 6:12-23). **The answer is *not* simply self-discipline. We can agree on that.**

**These people I have mentioned above, however, have over-reacted to an extreme position of passivity, ...of waiting for God to do the changes “to me”.** It is like I have *no* choice, *no* input to contribute toward the process of growth or change. In fact, they would view such talk as “mixture”, as stealing glory from God. “It is either *all grace*, or it is works”, they would say. “To add human effort to the equation is tantamount to saying that Christ’s work on the cross was not complete or sufficient. It is Jesus Christ plus nothing else. Jesus paid it all.”

This all *sounds* well and good, ...and it is accurate as far as it goes..., but it ignores other aspects of what the scripture says. We *were* helpless to save ourselves, and we are equally unable to transform ourselves by *our own* wisdom or self-effort. Nevertheless, **the Bible clearly presents the entire salvation process as a partnership with God.** He *sent Jesus*, we *respond* in faith. He *provides*, we *apply*. He *works salvation into us*, but we are to “*work, express or produce*” *outwardly* what He has put inside of us (Phil. 2:12,13). He *offers*, we *accept* or take. He *invites*, we *come*. He *promises*, we *believe*. If you read Hebrews 11, the hall of faith, you will see that ***faith always results in action on the part of those who believe***. James addresses this passivity by saying that “the faith if ever it might not have works is dead, being by itself” (Jas. 2:17). **We are not to *run ahead of God, trying to save ourselves by self-effort; nor are we to hang back in passivity, expecting God to lift us up and carry us. Instead, we are to walk with God.*** His own words, ...His own inspired description of this relationship..., is that **we are to be *co-laborers with Him, ones who “work-together-with” Him. He is the initiator, but we are to be the responders.*** As we respond, things happen to us and for us. Look again at James 2:22. “You see that the faith works-together-with his works, and out from the works, faith is completed.” In a similar way, **as we *walk-together-with and work-together-with God, we are matured and completed through that partnership.***

Let’s look at some of the passages at the top of this study:

In I Cor. 15:10, **Paul clearly identifies God as the source of the grace that made him who he was, yet at the same time he emphasizes the hard labor he invested in his spiritual walk and ministry.** God’s grace was *not* offered or invested in Paul to no effect. (Can God’s grace be unproductive? Apparently so. If people do not respond to His grace, it does not produce life. If they accept it minimally, but do not apply themselves diligently to pursue God’s will in their lives, it produces little fruit, at least in this life.) What caused grace to be so productive in Paul’s case? It was a combination, a partnership, of Paul’s hard work and God’s outpouring of grace. Paul saw that even behind his energy and focus was the supporting grace of God, yet he also speaks of the amount of intense effort he invested as part of the ingredients for his very fruitful life. The word he used for “labor” means to “work hard, through difficulty and struggle, to the point of weariness and exhaustion”. **Paul was not slacking. He took seriously the purpose of his salvation, the call and opportunity to represent and serve God for His glory, and he diligently applied himself toward that pursuit. Grace and intense effort are not incompatible.** In fact, grace should inspire intense effort, if we really understood how wonderful God’s grace was. It is because we do not truly recognize and honor that grace that we choose to remain in our low estate.

In I Corinthians 3:9,10, **Paul describes himself as a *co-laborer with God.*** The Greek word means “to work on the same project at the same time”. They truly work as a team. **God gave him the gifts and abilities, but Paul worked with God** (cf. I Sam 14:45), by developing skill and putting forth obedient effort to accomplish the will of God.

In 2 Corinthians 1:12 Paul looks back over his life, especially his time at Corinth, and it was his joy that he was able to testify to a single and sincere heart while working among them. **He saw this as a combination of the presence of the grace of God in his life, and of his habitual conduct of living according to that grace.** If God is no respecter of persons, can we not expect that He would be offering grace to us in a similar fashion? Why are we not getting similar results in our lives as Paul? Could it be that we are not consciously walking in agreement with and response to that grace? The word for “simplicity” or “singleness” is the negated form of the word for “multiple”. In other words, **Paul did not allow himself multiple distractions, or a divided heart. He was “single”, focused on accomplishing the will of God by the grace of God.** The word for “sincerity” literally meant “judged in the sun”. You could take an object out into the daylight and examine carefully and you would find no fault or blemish in it. Paul was saying that, **by God’s grace he had pure motives, and he consciously kept his heart that way,** avoiding worldly or fleshly temptations. **It was a choice to stay in the grace, or walk in the flesh.**

Then in chapter six Paul uses a verbal construction, “working-together-with Him” or “co-laboring-with Him” we plead with you not to take the grace of God in vain. **Paul mentions both the possibility of *co-laboring with God as well as the sober warning to not misuse or waste the grace of God*** in the same sentence. He expands on what effective use of the grace of God in his life looked like in the following verses (2-10). By asking what the opposite of those qualities he describes would be, it becomes apparent that one who accepts the grace of God in vain would be someone who would selfishly put a stumbling block in the way of other people, so that fault could be found against the ministry. This would be a person who does *not* show him or herself to be a servant of God in every way, someone who does *not* endure hardship or difficulty for the sake of Christ, who puts forth little or no effort or sacrifice for the cause, a person of mixed motives, impatient, unkind, living in the flesh instead of by the Holy Spirit. Such a person is not using the grace of God well, and is *not* co-laboring with Christ.

According to Titus 2, **the grace of God will train us to put aside worldly lusts and live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.** God redeemed us from lawlessness to purify us to be His special people, zealous to do good in His name. **Note the relationship between grace and choice here. Grace trains us to choose to live differently.**