

Grasping the True Grace of God

The apostle Paul wrote that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Sin separates mankind from a holy, righteous God (Isaiah 59:2). Many people hope that their good deeds can somehow earn the Lord’s forgiveness and end this separation, but to Him “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

So if even our efforts to live righteously are contaminated by sin, how can anyone be forgiven? The only antidote is God’s grace—His *undeserved* favor: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). But what is the believer’s relationship with God like *after* salvation? There are two extreme views that Scripture does *not* support:

- ❖ One extreme says that we must demonstrate our devotion to God by obeying His special Old Covenant commandments to Israel. The Book of Galatians was written to correct people who taught this, and the apostle Paul answered them in part by explaining that “the righteous will live by faith...Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:10, 13).
- ❖ The opposite extreme says that God isn’t concerned about the Christian’s moral obedience after he or she is saved. (In contrast, the Bible teaches that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”—Ephesians 2:10.) **As you will see below, this second extreme view—sometimes called “hyper-grace”—is based on a number of misunderstandings and false arguments.**

“Born-Again People Cannot Sin”

FALSE TEACHING: A truly born-again follower of Jesus cannot sin, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin” (1 John 3:9, KJV).

BIBLICAL TEACHING: According to the context in 1 John 3:9, “sin” is referring to a lifestyle characterized by habitual sin (see 3:4, 6 and 8). This is why modern translations render 3:9 “No one who is born of God will continue to sin” (NIV) or “No one who is born of God practices sin” (NASB). Hence, if a person truly is born of God, they will not engage in a continual lifestyle of sinful behavior.

Earlier in 1 John, the apostle John assures us that real Christians still do sin. He explains that “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins...” (1 John 1:8–9). John isn’t talking about sins committed *before* a person is born again. Instead, if the born-again person confesses his or her current sins, God forgives. John repeats this two verses later: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1). It is clear from the context throughout the letter that John is writing to *believers*.

“God Will Not Remember Sin”

FALSE TEACHING: After a person becomes a Christian, God promises to not remember his or her sins anymore (Hebrews 8:12). Therefore He doesn’t care if a Christian sins, because He won’t remember it.

BIBLICAL TEACHING: In its context Hebrews 8:12 is talking about the New Covenant (see v. 13). The Old Covenant required personal righteousness before God. “Sin” rendered a person unclean and therefore unworthy of eternal life. The New Covenant offers forgiveness through God’s grace. Hebrews 8:12 does not imply that the sin of each person will actually be erased from God’s memory, but that their sins would not be held against them in regards to eternal life. This is what the apostle Paul means when he writes: “blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account” (Romans 4:8).

“Jesus Fulfilled the Law”

FALSE TEACHING: Jesus says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). Since Jesus fulfilled the law for us, we are no longer sinners and are free to disobey any previous commandment.

BIBLICAL TEACHING: This reasoning is not true, because 1 John 2:3–4 says that “we know that we have come to know Him if we keep His commands. Whoever says, ‘I know Him,’ but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.” In Luke 6:46, Jesus asks His hearers: “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” Even though we’re not under the Old Covenant of works, obedience still matters to God.

So are Christians still under the Old Covenant as the Israelites were, needing to obey God's law in order to earn eternal life? If we were, Christ's sacrifice couldn't help us! We would still have to be righteous through our efforts to be saved. And as we have seen above, we have no righteousness to offer. Instead, we are no longer under a covenant that will cause us to miss out on eternal life when we fail to live up to God's righteousness.

“The Spirit Is Saved, but the Flesh Is Not” (or “You Are a Spirit”)

FALSE TEACHING: Since humans are created in God's image, and because God is spirit (John 4:24), then people are basically spirits, too. Our physical bodies are just a temporary, earthly shell. Since Christ's atonement purified the believer's spirit, any sinful disobedience is merely the fruit of the flesh and cannot affect the spirit. Since “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50), then any sins committed by the child of God is inconsequential. The spirit is redeemed; the body can do as it pleases.

BIBLICAL TEACHING: First, our physical bodies aren't just a temporary part of our human nature. In the future, all people will be resurrected, living forever with glorified physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35–44). So, just as Jesus was resurrected with His physical body, so we too will be resurrected.

Second, Scripture doesn't support the claim that sin is only committed by one's physical body and therefore doesn't matter to God. Paul tells us that our physical bodies are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 6:15, 19). He warns Christians that “you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” Because of God's wonderful promises of eternal life, His Word urges us to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

What Now?

The testimony of God's Word is clear: Jesus perfectly obeyed God's commands *for* us. Jesus fully paid the penalty for *our* disobedience. And Jesus' followers are commanded to pursue holiness as they live their lives for Him. The pursuit of holiness through obedience does not discount grace. When we fail to be holy, God's grace always forgives. “...I wrote this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming. **As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;** for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’ **Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.** For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God.” (1 Peter 1:13–21)

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. **It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is godly.**” (Titus 2:11–14)

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; **without holiness no one will see the Lord.**” (Hebrews 12:14)

“If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. **If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love,** just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in his love.” (John 15:6–10)



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