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Do I Believe Jesus or Paul?

In my article last month (see http://www.shepherdserve.org/e_teachings/2005_02.htm), I tried to show how God's grace is frequently presented in such a manner that it nullifies the numerous scriptures that clearly speak of the absolute necessity of holiness if one is to ultimately gain entrance into heaven. Those scriptures are too often ignored in favor of those that emphasize that eternal life is a gift or that salvation is by grace. We would be wise, however, not to ignore anything God has said, especially in so weighty a matter as salvation. If our interpretation of one verse plainly contradicts many other verses, something is wrong with our interpretation. We should, therefore, be diligent to find an understanding of salvation that harmonizes with every scripture on the subject.

I recently received correspondence from someone who noticed an apparent contradiction between Jesus and Paul regarding this very issue. Jesus seemingly emphasized that only obedient people will inherit eternal life, whereas Paul seemed to emphasize that salvation was by grace through faith. Who should be trusted? this person asked.

The answer is that both should be trusted, as their teaching was really no different. Their emphasis may have been slightly different, but that was primarily because of the potential misconceptions of their particular audiences. Let's first consider Jesus' teaching and then take a look at Paul's.

Interestingly, there is no record in the four Gospels of Jesus ever once using the word "grace," although He certainly exemplified grace every day as He graciously forgave and healed people. Additionally, only once, in John 4:10, did Jesus refer to salvation as a gift, another somewhat astonishing fact. Yet He consistently and repeatedly emphasized the absolute necessity of obedience if one was to inherit God's kingdom. That was the entire theme of His Sermon on the Mount, where He (1) enumerated the character traits of those who would inherit His kingdom (Matt. 5:3-16), (2) warned that we would not enter

heaven if our righteousness does not exceed that of the very religious scribes and Pharisees (5:20), (3) warned the hateful, the irreconcilable, the lustful and sexually immoral, the unforgiving, those who lay up earthly treasures, and all those who don't bear good fruit that hell is their destiny (Matt. 5:21-30; 6:14-15, 19-24; 7:19), (4) declared that only those who do His Father's will enter heaven (Matt. 7:21), and (5) warned that those who hear His words and don't obey them will be destroyed like a house built on sand during a flood (Matt. 7:24-27).

Jesus also warned that those who don't feed the hungry and clothe the naked, the "least of His brothers," would be cast into hell (see Matt. 25:31-46). Additionally, He publicly declared that His true brothers and sisters are those who do His Father's will (Matt. 12:50). He told people who asked what they should do to inherit eternal life to keep the commandments (see Matt. 19:16-17; Luke 10:25-28). In one of those cases, He told a rich man he had to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to charity, and then as that rich man walked sadly away, Jesus exclaimed that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:21-24).

This is just a small sampling of the many examples of Jesus' statements that would lead any honest person to conclude that only the holy inherit eternal life. This article does not allow space to consider them all.

Yet in spite of all this, Jesus also plainly taught that salvation is gained by *faith* (see Mark 11:15; 16:16; Luke 8:12; John 3:15-18; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47; 8:24; 11:25-26; 20:31).

So the problem is not only *How do we reconcile Jesus with Paul?* but *How do we reconcile Jesus with Jesus?* How can it be that only the holy inherit eternal life *and* that salvation is gained by faith?

There is only one way to reconcile these two truths. Salvation must be gained by a faith that results in ongoing obedience. That is, of course, what Scripture consistently teaches. Faith without works is dead, useless, and cannot save, wrote James (see Jas. 2:14-26). Faith and obedience are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually inclusive: "He who *believes* in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not *obey* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36, emphasis added).

People who believe in Jesus obey Jesus, because they believe He is the Son of God. People who don't obey Him don't really believe in Him, even if they think they do. They actually believe in an imaginary Jesus who isn't Lord, which amounts to idolatry.

Interestingly, Jesus not only consistently emphasized that only those whose faith produces obedience are heaven-bound, but He also once warned against those who mistakenly thought that eternal life was something to be earned. Did He contradict Himself? Let's read what He said:

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were

righteous, and viewed others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:9-14).

This parable is sometimes abused by those who are pushing a twisted concept of God’s grace. But let’s consider it honestly. Notice that the primary difference between the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer was this: The tax-gatherer realized he was a sinner who needed God’s grace to be saved, while the Pharisee saw no such need. That is what a *true* legalist is—*someone who is blind to his own sinfulness and his need for God’s grace to be saved*. He sees salvation as something purely to be earned, and usually by means of his own pathetic standards of righteousness. In this case, the Pharisee actually believed that his weekly fasts and scrupulous tithing, along with a few other virtues, made him righteous in God’s eyes. Jesus taught, however, that tithing is a very minor commandment in comparison to what God considers important (see Luke 11:42). Neither was fasting high on Jesus’ list (see Matt. 9:14-15). The truth is, those who truly believe in Jesus are born again (in reality and not just in theory) and are radically transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit (another evidence of God’s grace in salvation), and their righteousness so far exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees that there is no comparison.

In spite of what some folks try to tell us, as Jesus related the attitude of the Pharisee in this parable, He was not thinking of sincere believers who have realized their sinfulness and their need for God’s grace, who have believed in Him and repented, and who are now “working out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) as they “strive to enter the narrow gate” (Luke 13:24) as He commanded them! Rather, Jesus was thinking of the proud scribes and Pharisees who were blind to their sin, who saw no need for God’s grace if they were to be saved (and consequently saw no need for a Savior who would die for their sins), who didn’t come close to attaining God’s standards of righteousness, and who, on top of all this, “viewed others with contempt” (a direct quote from Jesus’ preface to the parable). And let us not add more to the parable than what was said. Let us not imagine that Jesus wanted us to think that the tax-gatherer left the temple to return to his greedy and dishonest lifestyle on his sure way to heaven!

Keeping all of this in mind, we are better prepared to understand Paul’s teaching, which as we will see, harmonizes perfectly with Jesus’ teaching. Paul’s entire goal in ministry was to, as he himself declared, “bring about the *obedience of faith* among all the Gentiles” (Rom. 1:5, 16:26, emphasis added). This quotation from his letter to the Romans reveals two important facts.

First, Paul did not believe that salvation by grace through faith nullifies obedience. Rather, he believed that genuine faith produces obedience, the “obedience of faith,” as he

called it.

Second, this quotation reveals that Paul's primary target audience was Gentiles rather than Jews. Yet Scripture also reveals that Jewish teachers were Paul's chief antagonists as he worked to bring about the "obedience of faith among all the Gentiles." Those Jewish teachers sought to undermine his God-given gospel to Gentiles with a message that reflected the same attitude of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. Their teaching about salvation was blind to their sinfulness, proud, graceless, legalistic, Christ-less, and based on a pathetic standard of righteousness, most often circumcision and keeping some ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law (see Gal. 4:10-11; 5:2-3, 6, 11, 6:12-15).

Paul fought their teaching tooth and nail in many of his letters. He also differentiated between the works that the Jewish legalists were so much emphasizing and true holiness. For example, he wrote to the Corinthian Christians:

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God (1 Cor. 7:19).

This single verse speaks volumes about the true nature of Paul's battle with legalists. Yet by many contemporary definitions of legalism, this one verse would make Paul a legalist himself!

Understanding this background, we can better grasp why Paul wrote statements such as those found in Ephesians 2:8-9, addressed primarily to *Gentile* believers (see Eph. 2:11-3:6):

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Did Paul write those words because he was concerned that the Ephesian believers were becoming overly-zealous about obeying Christ's commandments? No, he wrote them because he didn't want them to be deceived by Jewish legalists who were trying to convince his Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised and keep other ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law to be saved.

Moreover, did Paul mean that because salvation is by grace and not a result of works, that one can gain heaven without holiness? As we read a little bit further in that same letter, the answer is plain:

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph. 5:5-6).

These two sentences from the same letter prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that Paul did not mean in 2:8-9 that, because salvation is gift of grace not based on works, holiness

is of no consequence. And there are other similar scriptures in Paul's writings that affirm this (for example 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21). Clearly, Paul believed that no one who is immoral, impure or covetous (which are all forms of idolatry according to Paul) will inherit God's kingdom, exactly what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. Paul believed that although salvation is not the result of works, works (good works, that is) are the result of salvation. In fact, had we only read one verse beyond 2:8-9, we would have immediately realized that fact:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

The gracious salvation that God offers provides more than forgiveness. It also provides transformation. When immoral, impure or covetous people repent and experience true salvation, they become moral, pure and generous. This does not mean they become holy robots, but that sin's power is broken over them and their persevering faith continues to motivate them to yield to the Spirit rather than the flesh, as well as ask forgiveness when they fall short.

Finally, what are the differences between the "works" of a legalist and the "works" of a true believer in Jesus? There are many.

The works of a legalist fall far, far short of God's righteous standards. They are an outward façade, and the inward motivation is often the love of people's approval. The works of the legalist are more likely to be religious and ceremonial than moral and self-denying (see Mark 12:33), things such as church attendance and tithing. They produce pride. The works of the legalist are an insult to God, because they nullify His grace and Christ's sacrifice (see Gal. 2:21). Legalists in essence say to God, "I can save myself...I don't need Jesus or His sacrifice." Legalists don't understand their own sinfulness or the righteousness of God. They are comparable to people who think they should be granted the Nobel Prize because they let their dog sleep inside.

In contrast, the works of a truly born-again believer are of a much higher standard. They stem from a pure and thankful heart that loves God and wants to please Him. They have their origin in Christ Himself who lives within the believer by the Holy Spirit, and as Jesus said, they are "wrought in God" (John 3:21). The works of the born-again believer are more likely to be moral and self-denying than religious and ceremonial. True believers who were formerly religious have repented of their "dead works" (see Heb. 6:1), the works of the legalist.

This is a short study that could be significantly lengthened by looking at many other scriptures that all affirm the truths considered. Jesus and Paul can both be trusted, and their gospels harmonize perfectly. Praise God that His gracious offer of salvation is extended to everyone who will repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The result of believing in Him is "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5), so that obedient believers in Christ are ready to stand before God to be judged and repaid "according to their deeds," just as Scripture promises (see Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; Rev. 20:12-13).