

Understanding Grace and Works

Original by John Newton	An imagined modern version
<i>“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see.”</i>	<i>“Wonderful works! How sweet it sounds That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; Good works, thou have saved me.”</i>

Which of the above two hymns would you sing with conviction?

With certainty of faith, it is God’s grace that saves me, not because of my works. Hence no pride in me for whatever human praise (if any) of my “good works” shall take away any bit of the glory that is due to God!

Rom. 3:23-24 speaks to me constantly, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

I am grateful to have **G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense – nothing that I deserve on my own.

It is not simply that I am a sinner like anyone else, whereby there is no cause for me to boast with a wagging finger at a brother or sister whom some self-righteous Pharisees might consider as not having done enough of “good works” and judge as not being saved.

Unlike the hypocritical Pharisees, I would only be too willing to confess of “my unrighteousness, save for the fact that I am made righteous in Christ” and to eat with sinners – As it is written: *“There is no one righteous, not even one ...”* (Rom 3:10)

“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” (Rom. 3:20)

It is useful for Lutherans to be familiar with Lutheran doctrine, at least as a base they stand on while prayerfully reckoning all other views that they can agree or agree-to-disagree-with.

Lutherans uphold the spirit of *sola scriptura*, and we can be sure that salvation by the grace of God is unequivocally in the Scripture:

“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. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ

Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2:8-10)

“Hyper-grace” and “Hyperworks”¹

There is much to criticize about so-called Hyper-grace teaching that erroneously accentuates grace to the point of undercutting other Christian imperatives such as repentance and confession of sins; and short-changing the true import of **“good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** (Eph. 2:10)

In misguided acceptance of the faulty Hyper-grace preaching,

- Some Christians lean towards embracing “free grace” as licence for moral abandon.

(Notwithstanding this bad distortion of grace to make it “hyper” with a deviant meaning, we should be aroused to pursue an understanding of proper doctrine of God’s grace in Scripture. As Charles Spurgeon said, *“I have admitted that a few human beings have turned the grace of God into lasciviousness; but I trust no one will ever argue against any doctrine on account of the perverse use made of it by the baser sort. Is there a single doctrine of Scripture which graceless hands have not twisted into mischief?”*²)

While the “Hyper-grace” preachers commit errors, it is not helpful that:

- Some advocates of good works in their attempt to counter the slanted Hyper-grace ideas veer dangerously close to the flawed opposite; i.e., “Hyperworks”; that might send young Christians on a guilt trip to bondage instead of being supported for progress in their walk of faith.
- Some crusaders against the “Hyper-grace” message show signs of confusing the preachers and the preaching whereby their attempts to set right the truth of Scripture concerning the

¹ “Hyper-grace” – A distorted preaching on grace.

“Hyperworks” – A distorted preaching on works for salvation.

² As quoted in the book “HYPER-GRACE – Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message” by Michael L. Brown

preaching comes across as getting personal with name-calling and deprecative contempt directed at the preachers. This is not good Christian testimony.

For an objective appraisal of the “Hyper-grace” message, I would recommend the book by Michael L. Brown, PhD (publisher – Charisma House), from which here is a quote:



[Is grace insufficient?](#)

If Eph. 2:8 is well-quoted in preaching on grace, James is quoted by those who harp the wrong tune that grace is insufficient:

“But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. (James 2:18)

I would consider it presumptuous to think that the grace from our Sovereign God can be insufficient for forgiving sinners in accord with His will.
“Love never fails.” – 1 Cor 13:8

Why would a Father’s love be insufficient for him to effect His grace on His children?

[Listen to James carefully – He did not contradict Paul](#)

It is important that we listen carefully to what James said without giving in to the temptation to flip out of grace to cling onto the impression that *sola gratia* falls short. To be sure, note that James said: “Show me your faith without deeds, and “I will show you my faith by my deeds.”

A proper reading of James should give us the correct notion that where our salvation is concerned, our faith is at the forefront while good works flow out of our faith. It would be completely different if James said instead, “Show me your deeds ...” to focus on good works over faith.

James did not contradict Paul in the statement on salvation by grace through our faith. Neither did Paul discourage Christians doing good works, for he did mention about good works being what God prepared for us to do. (Eph. 2:10)

Let me quote Apostle Paul:

“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” – 1 Cor. 15:9-10

From what Apostle Paul said, I have the following understanding:

- (1) Grace is not without good effect. The grace (that saves) inspires good works. It is not that good works induce (God to extend His grace for) our salvation!

- (2) People with faith in Christ (e.g. Apostle Paul) work harder not because of themselves and therefore it is not to them that credit is due. It is not the doers of good works but the grace of God that is with them that leads the good works.

Good works flow from our faith and attest to God’s grace at work. (*soli Deo Gloria!*) Good works are the produce of our faith which gains us our salvation; good works are not the condition precedent for salvation. Faith is! Worth emphasizing is that Paul and James were in concord with each other by a careful reading of their epistles.

Is grace free, cheap or costly?

Grace is free – not in the sense that it is a free licence to sin, but it is free because Christ paid the price on our behalf.

Christians sometimes quote *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* to say that there is no such thing as cheap grace. I have two ways of looking at this:

- 1) The ordinary meaning of “grace” as you can check it out in all dictionaries would suggest the idea of something given as a good favour, something neither deserved nor earned. To say that grace can be treated by some people as “cheap” implies

that it should be regarded as “not cheap” or “costly”. If there is a price (by good works) attached to grace, then the dictionaries need to be re-written to correct the meaning of the word.

- 2) Indeed, grace is not cheap! It is costly to the Father who had to sacrifice His Son, Jesus Christ, as propitiation for our sin.

However, if Christians say that there is a cost of discipleship attached to grace, I would respectfully disagree. Do not misunderstand me before your read further.

YES, I agree that there is a cost of discipleship – but this is attached to the decision we take to walk with Christ in gratitude for the salvation we have already received (by grace through faith). We are first saved (by grace) before we can aim for the higher aspiration of discipleship. It is illogical to say that one can willingly pay a cost to go for discipleship to gain salvation as the “prize” or “purchase by the price we have paid.” Discipleship is an act out of love for God, just like filial piety is an act out of love for our parents. To me, it is never an act of payback out of some calculations we do on debt. **Cost of discipleship is a different idea from that of the cost regarding God’s grace** that we can never pay enough by any amount of good works.

To say that we must work out an additional “price” to pay (by way of good works) for the grace is an affront to God, because it implies that the blood shed on the cross for the purpose has been insufficient.

The hot question

The hot question is: If good works are not the justification for salvation, then shall Christians go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (Rom. 6:1)

Paul gave his answer to his own question: “By no means!” (Rom. 6:2)

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Can we Christians with our faith in Christ sin with glee and despise the Lord’s instruction against sin?

The answer is the same: “By no means!”

Nevertheless, the sad truth is that as we walk in faith (whether we consider ourselves to be babes with faiths like mustard seeds or strong disciples with

faiths like boulders), we are in an ongoing spiritual battle and we do fall into sins from time to time.

“For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.” (Gal. 5:17)

This is the same as what Paul eloquently affirmed in Rom. 7:15, 19 about our state of conflicts:

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

Anyone not feeling such a conflicted state in your walk of faith, raise your hands!

Let’s admit it – our familiar battle between flesh and spirit is an ongoing one. In spite of that, we have the assurance in Christ that we are not alone in the battle. The Holy Spirit is our supporter and, if we keep our faith and seek to fight on the side of the Lord, we may have our battle wounds and yet gain the final victory!

Prov. 11:25-31 speaks clearly that those who do good will be blessed. Specifically, Prov. 11:27 says, *“Whoever seeks good finds favor, but evil comes to one who searches for it.”* This means that when we do good works, we are blessed in return; when we do evil, we reap the corresponding returns. Christians by their faith are expected to walk by the instructions of Scripture, wherein are also plentiful motivations for good work.

[Are we condemned by our “bad works”?](#)

If good works justify our salvation instead of sola gratia, then should we not begin to feel guilt that our “bad works” aplenty are going to immediately send us to condemnation, if not for God’s grace?

As a real-life illustration, many of us stood out to render our service to God in the huge rebuilding project of JCC. We worked hard in committees and sub-committees. Finally, the project was completed successfully. So, have we all done good works and deserved to boast of our salvation through our good works?

(1) Note this tentative answer: “Maybe yes! Because we are justified by our good works.”

For everything we did right at a personal level, how many failings did we commit in terms of duty derelictions – what we could have done but failed to do well or willingly – cutting corners, passing the bucks, procrastinating, etc.? So, for our failings or “bad works”, we stand condemned?

(2) Note this tentative answer: “Maybe yes! Because we are condemned by our bad works.”

I leave it to individuals to agree or disagree with the tentative answers (1) and (2) above, and stand by their convictions.

If you disagree with the tentative answers, **would you therefore agree that we can never do enough of good works for our salvation?**

In a more positive light, we can say that the efforts (with shortcomings by all sinners) put into the rebuilding project did produce good fruits that testified to God’s glory! Our weakness of efforts (because we could not do better) gave us lots of worries and sleepless nights. Nevertheless, and thankfully, our weakness did not go against us in producing good works to God’s glory – it’s because of grace at work! We were empowered by the Holy Spirit, not by our own strength to boast “our own good works”.

God’s love and grace made us alive in Christ when we were dead in our transgressions (Eph. 2:5) The “good works” we do are the result of our “aliveness” in Christ by the grace that we have been saved through faith. (Eph. 2:5) Our good works in response to God’s holy calling also testify that we have not received the grace in vain. (2 Tim. 1:9; 2 Cor. 6:1)

[Recall Eph. 2:10 – God prepared us for good works](#)

Different individuals have faiths in different degrees. Some have rock-solid faith; others, faith like a mustard seed. To each, God prepares and enables the increase of good works to His glory along with the Christian’s growth in faith, not for anyone to boast but for everyone to remain humble, knowing full well that all are righteous only in Christ. **It is spiritually regressive to compare substances of good works to render association with “chances of salvation”, letting egoistic good works usurp the immeasurable grace in God’s great act of sending His Son to the Cross.**

Christians driven by their faith in Christ will trust in the LORD with all their heart and lean not on their own understanding (Prov. 3:5) – This is true with regards to how the Holy Spirit works in response to our faith whereby doing good works come naturally to us, heartfelt and out of love, and not for ulterior motives (such as to gain human praise or to obtain artificial temporal bene-

fits/privileges) or for the wrong idea (that it will buy us credits for an abode in heaven).

Good works that flow out of our faith with God's grace at work and His miracles glorify Him. "Good works" that flow out of us to feed our boast of Pharisaical superiority over fellow brothers and sisters glorify ourselves.

In my humble opinion, our good works do not earn us our salvation because we are already saved by God's grace through our faith whereby we are spiritually guided to do the good works to His glory!

JUSTIFICATION FOR SALVATION and THE CALLING FOR OUR GOOD WORKS TO SHINE are two different things that ought not be confused with each other.

For good works, here is a strong inspiration to imitate Christ's example of humility:

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." – Philippians 2:1-4

Conclusion

Christians should guard themselves against the false forms of righteousness:

- Righteousness typified by pursuit of "good works" such as through the purchase of indulgence in the Roman Catholic Church prior to The Reformation.
- Righteousness by misplaced zeal in pursuit of the OT law and rejecting the Messiah, such as the example of the Jewish people whom Apostle Paul criticised in Romans 9:30-10:21. It was admirable that the Jews were zealous for God, but "since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." (Rom. 10:3)

When we preach God's Amazing Grace (as distinct from "Hyper-grace") for salvation, we should not denigrate the importance of the calling for our good works to shine as per our Lord's instruction in Matt. 5:16.

When we preach on the Lord's instruction for Christians to shine before men by their good works, we should be cautious that Christians are not driven into a guilt trap (bondage) and misled into chasing good works to earn and boast their "merits".

In brief, the key message of Scripture on salvation is "by God's grace through our faith."

In conclusion, I reproduce the following from our LCS publication (The Lutheran Message Vol. 18, 2018):

What do we as Lutherans preach? While we may not be in danger of preaching indulgences, we are in danger of preaching good works and inadvertently teaching people to trust in them. Do we preach the commandments without the creed? Or do we show people their sin that they may be driven to the Savior who alone delivers the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? In our quest to preach "practical" and "relevant sermons, because that is what our parishioners want, we are often tempted to preach the law without the gospel. But our confessions tell us to preach so that our people may have faith and receive the comfort of Christ, for in the eyes of God, nothing is more practical and relevant than that.

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Saved by grace through faith

