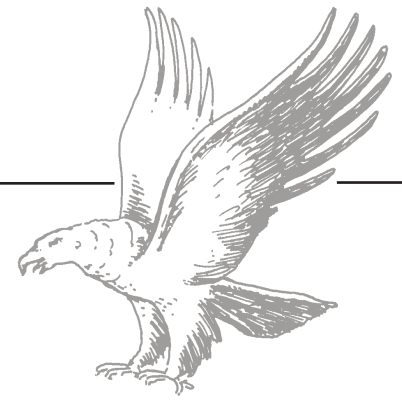


Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



June 19, 2016

Are Grace and Law Mutually Exclusive?

Treating grace and law as incompatible opposites is simplistic, and even dangerous.

We need to take the time to understand how these two concepts interact with each other.

"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17).

"For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).



The language in these passages leads some to conclude that grace and law are mutually exclusive in the process of salvation. We are saved *either* by grace, or by law, but under no circumstances can both play a role. Is that what these verses are teaching?

Our first task is to define the terms. "Grace" is unmerited favor. A closely related word in the New Testament is translated "gift," which gets us closer to the root idea. Grace bestows a gift that the recipient does not deserve.

"Law" is any codified body of instructions designed to regulate behaviors. Throughout the Bible, the word often has reference to the Law of Moses, but the word is not limited to that specific legal code. Elsewhere in Romans Paul describes the Gentiles as having a law "in their hearts," wholly unrelated to

Moses, by which they will be judged (Rom. 2:14-16).

So with those definitions in hand, how should we interpret these verses?

The popular approach is to assume that the two words represent polar opposites, and that since we are now saved by grace, we are no longer subject to *any* law. But that approach pits Paul against himself. Elsewhere he affirms that he was "not without law toward God, but under law toward Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; see also Gal. 6:2). In like manner, grace is not exclusively a New Testament concept. God showed grace to people in the Old Testament, too (Gen. 6:8; Ex. 33:13). If both law and grace have a role to play in both dispensations, then we must look for another explanation.

Some argue that "law" refers to the Law of Moses while "grace" is a synonym for the Law of Christ. That is, a law steeped in ritualism and ceremony has been replaced by a law geared to more practical lifestyle requirements. That distinction is a valid one, but it does not adequately account for the concepts inherent in the two words. By def-

inition, salvation by "law" is predicated on performance, with no allowance for error, while "grace" presupposes a failure to meet the demands of the law perfectly. Merely replacing one law with another law leaves us in the same predicament. We either "do all" or perish (Gal. 3:10-12).

The preferred approach is to view the two words as describing different *foundations* underlying our salvation. Salvation based on "law" puts the burden on the subject to perform well, and thereby earn his reward. Salvation based on "grace" acknowledges a role for law (how can we have sins to forgive if there is no law?)—but accepts that no one will ever perform well enough to deserve God's reward. The only recourse, then, is for the offended party (God) to extend His unmerited favor to His fallen creatures on terms of His choosing. And those terms are quite magnanimous.

We are saved, not because we are so good, but because God is so generous. His grace is extended to those whose hearts are set on obeying God's law, even if they don't execute it perfectly.

– David King