



by Greg Albrecht

"I'd rather do it myself"

OBJECTIONS TO GRACE

PART TWO

In our last installment we considered the resistance we naturally have to God's amazing grace. In this second part of our safari into the kingdom of God's grace, we continue to critically examine the defensive strategies and arguments used to diminish and marginalize the reality of grace.

Some object to grace by characterizing it as weak and insipid, as contrasted with the "strong and robust" demands of authoritarian religion. They see too much emphasis on God's grace and on Jesus as dangerous, and some even say that grace is a weak and ineffective spiritual diet.

Believers and practitioners of performance-based religion often equate works-based righteousness as "strong meat" and Jesus as "milk." Such objections characterize God's grace as baby food while obedience to laws is understood as spiritual nourishment for "grown ups." But introducing food as a metaphor works against critics of grace. It is performance-based legalism that is the true junk food which should carry a spiritual warning on its slick and attractive packages.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is clear—all that we do, both evil and good, is worthless, in God's sight. The only eternal good in us is produced by God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, the message of the gospel is a call to true and deep spiritual repentance. Kick your religion to the curb! Repent of thinking you can please God on the basis of your deeds!

Surrender to God's grace, relinquish the mirage of control that you think you have, and trust in God—implicitly, without reservation. That is the biblical call to repentance! That is our life in Christ. Yield to him. Trust him—and he will continually transform us into the men and women he wants us to be. We are powerless to become men and women of God, but in Christ, we can do all things.

Jesus is our all in all. Jesus is the true host of our communion with and in God. Jesus is the Bread of life—he is the main entree which causes performance-based religion to gag and choke.

Christians grow when they are served a strong, hearty, Christ-centered and grace-based spiritual diet. When Peter spoke of spiritual

the kingdom—the way it works—is grace. The spiritual diet that enables Christ-followers to grow is all about Jesus.

If a spiritual diet is not all about Jesus, if a ministry or church does not always, consistently, serve up a strong and powerful message of Jesus, if a ministry or church waters down God's grace, then what people are digesting is religious mush.

Grace is a Basic Core Teaching—But Shouldn't We Go Beyond It?

Some misunderstand Hebrews 6:1-2: "Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about

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growth, he admonished us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). What do people with "itching ears" want to hear and read? They want programs filled with action steps and specific behaviors. They want instructions to help them manage their sin.

The cry is "fix me!" Thus, we read and hear religious messages such as seven ways to build your marriage, 10 principles of witnessing to others, 40

cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment." They conclude that this passage is telling us that "elementary teachings about Christ" are just that, and we should move beyond them to the strong meat of Christ-less religion (though they would not characterize the focus of their faith and practice in such a way, obviously).

It's a common objection and deserves to be explained, for it seems

days of purpose, etc. While there may be redeeming value with such messages, they are not a substitute for the gospel.

There's nothing inherently wrong with watching a football game or *Dancing With the Stars* on TV, but those activities, games or programs should not be confused with the gospel. There's nothing inherently wrong with self-help programs either, but let's not confuse them with the gospel! The gospel is the kingdom of heaven, and the King of the kingdom is Jesus. The economy of

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that this passage may be endorsing legalism over grace. Hebrews 6:1-2, as any other passage, should be seen within the light of its context. The book of Hebrews was written to help Jewish Christians understand the superiority of Christ over Judaism—or any religious methodology, for that matter. The book was helping newly minted Jewish Christians (thus, the title of the book, "Hebrews") prepare people who still looked more to the temple in Jerusalem than they did to the cross and the empty tomb. The book was probably written in the early AD 60s—and the Romans destroyed the temple a few years later, in AD 69-70.

In the book of Hebrews, everything the author stresses is a contrast between the old covenant and the new—and virtually everything comes from a Jewish-Christian perspective. In chapter 5, for example, the author chides his readers for their lack of understanding of the most elementary truths about God's Word—about Jesus—about how he has replaced the old covenant with its religious rules and rituals—about how they were a

foreshadowing of him. These truths, says the author, are the milk—the baby food of the Christian faith. As such, they are necessary to help prepare for the maturity in Christ that comes later.

When the author notes his audience should have been ready to go on to "solid food" (Hebrews 5:14), he was saying that a deeper and more mature understanding of Christ is not possible until one understands the basics—who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

Peter expresses a similar thought about Christian growth and maturation: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Christian growth is in Christ. If we begin in Christ, if he is our foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11) then our spiritual house is constructed on the Rock (Matthew 7:24-25). If we are not spiritually transformed in Christ—if we are not born from above (John 3:3)—if our spiritual house is built on sand (Matthew 7:26-27)—if Jesus is not the chief cornerstone of our spiritual house (Ephesians 2:20)—then our spiritual house may appear to have beautiful chandeliers, marble floors and expensive art hanging on its walls, but it will fail when the winds blow, because it is built on sand.

The context of the book of Hebrews shows that the original readers had not laid a foundation in Jesus Christ. The focus of such religion with all of its theologies, drives us away from God's grace into the quicksand of legalistic religion.

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Are We Ever Truly Free of Works?

Here's another objection to grace I received: "I have read and listened with interest to your teaching on the subject of salvation and eternal assurance. I have a few comments and a few questions.

"You often emphasize that our salvation is based on God's grace and not on our own works—yet it seems to me that the word 'works' carries too much baggage—I prefer the word effort. Here's an analogy. I meet my wife for the first time. We get serious and make the decision to tie the knot. According to everything you seem to say, as soon as I say 'I do,' I cannot and must not put any more effort into our relationship, as that will be seen as work. I do not have to speak to her, or even live with her, and at the end of our lives our relationship will be sound and healthy. Since marriage is a metaphor of our relationship with Jesus, am I not sup-



posed to put any effort into the relationship?

"It seems that you are saying that my relationship with God is assured, so I could, in theory, commit heinous crimes, and my salvation would still be assured. But if I were to do such things then I would have lost accountability for my actions. I suppose some would argue in that case that I never truly accepted Christ in my life—but that seems like an easy out.

"Then, thinking of a car, I like the idea of 'being saved' as being more like a lifetime warranty against nicks and scratches (sin) versus a life insurance policy against a single act (our death).

"It seems to me that our understanding of what it means to accept Christ is critical to how we live out the rest of our lives. If we see accepting Christ as a life insurance policy only usable at the end of our lives, we would not be overly concerned about the journey, and may not actually make it to the destination. If we see Jesus as the warranty, the map and the car, then the entire journey is covered. We would not be able to drive the car if Jesus were not the car. We would have no direction without Jesus as the map. And we would have a pretty beat up car at the end of the journey if Jesus wasn't the warranty.

"This makes the idea of 'being saved' a living, breathing entity and commitment, rather than a sign-and-file-away policy. It comes down to our understanding of what we are signing up for at the beginning, that drives our spiritual journey. What do you think?"

Here's how I responded: *You better believe the word "works" has baggage. The inner peace that God gives does not depend on human work, effort or actions. Our relationship with God is not predicated on the imperfections and failures that characterize the life of every human being. Our relationship with God does not depend on how well we drive the car, or indeed if we drive the car into a ditch (to use your metaphor of a car).*

There is no doubt a Christ-centered life means that a man or woman will be vigilant, enthusiastic, positive, upbeat, working—yes, expending effort.

Let me offer this analogy. I am a huge sports fan. I have several teams for which I cheer. I can get incredibly involved about my teams!



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I yell and scream if I am in attendance. I bemoan what I think are horrible mistakes team members and management make when it doesn't seem they are doing well. But, at the end of the day, I am a fan. Teams need fans, but the end result is not up to the fan. One could posit that teams would not exist apart from the fan interest and revenue. But at the end of the day, as I sit in the stands, listen on the radio or watch on television, I can't influence the final result. The end result is up to the team that takes the court or field of play.

Now, all analogies break down. One could say that we are actually on the field of play, when it comes to our relationship with God. And, again, that's why analogies break down—we could go that way with this analogy. But for my purposes in responding to you here, we won't. In terms of salvation, the "game" was over at the cross of Christ. Over.

Our salvation was won. Our team—the Captain of our salvation being

Jesus—is so far ahead that there is no way that the other team will ever catch up. We are screaming in the grandstands. We can't wait for the clock to wind down (I'm thinking of a time-based game like basketball, football, soccer or hockey). We know that the victory is ours.

It is in this way that the New Testament speaks of our victory in Christ. It is assured. Because of that, our team is so far "ahead"—even if we make horrible mistakes—as long as we continue to be a part of the game—our salvation is assured. We cannot lose, because the final outcome at this point is not up to us—it has already been determined.

There is no doubt that we, as loyal fans, followers and disciples of Jesus will wear the uniform, fly the flag, talk about our team, follow our team's progress—and that we will do everything we can do to assure the success of our team.

Titus 2:11-14 tells us what grace accomplishes in the lives of those who believe in and accept the Lord Jesus Christ. We are—because of his divine presence, because of the fact that he is perfecting us—upright in our walk with God and mankind. As the passage says, grace teaches us to say no to worldly passions—grace teaches us to live self-controlled lives.

In response to the metaphor you introduce regarding marriage, grace will teach us to be loving, giving, sensitive and caring husbands and wives. We can be moral people on our own strength, of course—many Muslims are, and many atheists are. Or we can be moral people because the life of the risen Lord lives in us. We will not, by definition, live an immoral lifestyle, habitually, if we are in Christ. It's a contradiction of terms. If we are his follower, we will wear his uniform and fly his flag.

Your example of marriage is helpful to a point—but we should not assume that our relationship with the holy, perfect, uncreated, eternal God is one and the same as that between two imperfect persons who make a commitment to each other, only to see that time and time again each one of them fail to keep that commitment.

As for God, he is always perfect, always loving, always merciful, always faithful—and we, well, our response to God is often far from perfect, isn't it? The book of Hosea explains, in the context of marriage, that while humans are

unfaithful to God, he is always faithful to us. God loves us and brings us into eternal relationship with himself, not on the basis of our work, in the flesh, at overcoming a particular character flaw, but on the basis of Jesus' perfect, atoning work on the cross on our behalf.

Many people frame this discussion of salvation not as life insurance, as you posited—but fire insurance. They see being saved as being saved from hell.

But, salvation is more than being spared some religiously contrived eternal torture. Salvation is being saved from ourselves—our sins—over against the divine relationship God offers to each and every one of us.

Will we have it his way or our way? Will we insist on trying to “do it ourselves” or will we accept, believe in and trust in his grace? It's our choice.

We are being spiritually renewed day by day—even as our flesh wastes away. At the end of the day, says Revelation, anything that our day-to-day work accomplishes, no matter how grand and wonderful and moral it may have been, will pass away. The only thing that will live forever is of God. Our accomplishments will not (thank God!) live forever—but God will, out of his love, produce in us something that he can use eternally—and it is in that dimension, the spiritual, that he is renewing us, daily. He is accomplishing this spiritual transforma-

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tion—not us!

This whole issue is all about who gets the credit, as I see it. We do not get any credit for our salvation. If we could, or if we did, we would boast (Ephesians 2:9). Our salvation is all about Jesus.

You have probably heard the story—I have told it many times—to illustrate this dynamic. A young 4-year-old boy is “helping” his father mow the yard. The boy's feet can't touch the ground, he is hanging off the handles of the mower, making the job much harder for his father—but his father, because he wants to involve the son in his life, because he loves his son, because of the relationship he is building with his son, allows and invites his son to “help.” That's the way we “help” God with our salvation. Of course, we are not sitting on the porch

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watching. We're not inside watching television. We are “working” in the “fields” or in the “front yard” of our Father—by his invitation.

What exactly does our work accomplish, at the end of the day? That's not the issue. That's not why God wants us to “help.” He is not looking for anything we can supply—because we are incapable of doing anything that will contribute to our salvation. God is looking for relationship—and out of his grace and love he condescends to allow us to “help” him. Let us always give all praise and glory to God.

You speak of a road trip—with Jesus being the map, the car, the engine, the warranty—but we are the driver. Well, I don't think that we are actually driving the car either. It's more like Jesus who is the power, the dynamo (to use

the idea that comes out of the Greek in the New Testament), and we are riding in a trailer behind him. He is the horse, and we are on the cart which he is pulling. May we never think that we arrive at any place spiritually because we had a significant role.

Of course we must willingly get on the cart—we must accept the invitation to get in the car to use your analogy—and we could decline, of course. And we can make the journey more enjoyable—we can make little contributions to the trip—but with us or without us the car/cart/train (whatever the vehicle may be) is, as the old African-American spirituals say, “bound for glory.”

God's Grace Gives Us a New Identity!

As we conclude this second article in



response to human objections to God's grace, we need to remember that the intimate relationship that God the Father gives to us is a new spiritual identity. God is one, but he exists eternally as three separate, co-equal divine Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We become one with God as we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and trust in him to do, in and through us, all that we are incapable of doing (i.e., earning our own salvation). We are “born again” (or more accurately, “born from above”). We become new men and women in Christ. Christ lives his life in us (Galatians 2:20) and the life we lead as a Christian is not the “old” man or woman, but the new, reborn child of God.

We are still, of course, human. We still have our bodies; we still have our sinful human nature. So, there is a tension, and at times a war that goes on. Paul talks about this war between the spirit and the flesh in Romans 7. We are very much still imperfect human beings, and we are very much still capable of sin. In fact, we will sin, for that is what flesh does. We do not become impervious or immune from sin and mortality until our physical bodies die, and our bodies are made immortal, living eternally with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As Jesus tells us, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die “ (John 11:25-26). □