

Grace and Pride

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James and Peter both relied on the Scripture (what we call the Old Testament) when they wrote, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (Jas. 4:6, 1 Pet. 5:5, Prov. 3:34) There are many ideas floating around today about grace (in part because every ear-scratching teacher has to be an expert on all things spiritual and religious or else he’ll lose his best-paying customers and his most ardent fans and followers) but there may have been no greater disservice to the truth about grace than to render “grace” (Greek, *charis*) as only “God’s unmerited favor.”

If there were absolutely no merits involved, the above Scripture would read, “God gives grace to the proud and the humble alike.” The Scripture does not so read and this alone renders the “unmerited favor” notion incomplete and inaccurate. This is not to say there is no truth whatsoever in the notion for anyone who thinks they have a right to demand God’s favor because they’ve somehow earned it is arrogant, pompous and proud – the very kind who *will not* receive God’s grace!

What does it mean to be “humble”? It is certainly not some work of the flesh that we can work up and then present it to God and demand our portion of His grace. No, that would just be more pride. God best described the qualities He will reward when He said through the prophet Isaiah: “This is the one I esteem [highly regard, look on with favor]: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at My word.” (Isa. 66:2) Humility can be understood as a simple, emotionally detached, realistic view of one’s self, particularly in comparison with the nature of God. The truly humble man does not have to work up a contrite spirit and force himself to reverence God’s words. No, he *is* humble, he *is* contrite and he *is* reverent because these are the almost necessary responses an honest man has who sees his own nature in contrast to the nature of God.

The contrast between pride and humility is seen throughout the Bible. The “king of Tyre” (almost all conclude that this is a passage referring to Lucifer, the arch-angel who fell and became Satan, the enemy and accuser of the brethren of Christ) was “the model of perfection” and “perfect in beauty.” (Ezek. 28:12) Even Lucifer found it easy to esteem and admire himself! And it is precisely here that we can see the profound difference between God and Satan: Satan exalts beauty for its own sake – he “loves” the beautiful, the lovable, the strong, anything that “can stand on its own two feet” apart from God – that is, he “loves” (favors, “helps,” etc.) them so long as he can use them for his own purposes and plans! God, on the other hand, reserves His greatest favor (His own Son!) for the undeserving, helpless, needy, poor, ugly and weak – and these know they have absolutely nothing that they can add to God! God made Lucifer to show how beautiful wealth and power can be but He made humans to show that His mercy and grace to the humble is even more beautiful. This is His “glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One He loves” (Eph. 1:6), that One whose “appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness.” (Isa. 52:14) Satan’s greatest act of hatred and malevolence only served to bring forth God’s greatest act of love, mercy and grace to fallen mankind and demonstrates to all who can see that beauty is much more than skin deep!

Just as beauty is not just mere outward appearances, God’s grace is not just His favor. In our time of need, we are to approach God’s “throne of grace” to receive mercy and find grace to help us. (Heb. 4:16) We are saved from sin and death by His grace. (Eph. 2:8) Paul attributed all his work as an apostle to the grace of God. (1 Cor. 15:10) And these are but a few examples from the New Testament. These are transactions of *power*, not just favor and goodwill toward

men. There is this aspect of God's grace, His power to change lives that cannot, indeed must not, be put into the hands of proud and arrogant men to use as they think best – though most men in positions of “Christian” leadership presume that that's exactly what God has done, especially in their case! God still opposes the proud, those who exalt themselves and exert their own strength or beauty or wealth or power or “spiritual expertise” on behalf of themselves and He still gives His favor and power to those who recognize their own innate ability to overcome their spiritual enemies, the lure of this world and the desires of their fallen nature.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector stands out as the clearest contrast between the proud and the humble, a parable Jesus gave “to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.” (Lk. 18:9) The Pharisee, the people most zealous for the law and the things of God that Israel was producing at the time, was proud that he was better (in his own opinion) than other men and could not see his own sin and need for mercy and grace. The tax collector, the worst kind of traitor to the nation that Israel was producing at the time, was humbly and contritely and even acutely aware of his sin and his need for mercy and grace. The tax collector went away justified but the Pharisee did not. (Lk. 18:10-14)

As Jesus said to the Pharisees elsewhere, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” (Jn. 9:41) Any light we possess which does not cause us to see our need for the mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus is a false light because it causes us to see ourselves as better or superior or sufficient in ourselves. This is a proud and exalted view and not an honest, humble and contrite view and disqualifies us from being counted worthy to receive God's grace. In truth, there is nothing in our flesh that was not in Judas Iscariot – if we are offended at this truth, our flesh is not as dead as our “faith” believes it to be and we do not yet know as we ought to know.

There is no question whether we are worthy to receive God's grace – of course, we are not worthy. The beauty of God's grace is that He never asked or expects us to be worthy – He knows that we cannot ever attain to those heights and any carnal attempt to attain to those heights defeats our very intentions! He only says, “Pray that you *be counted* worthy...” To those who will humbly obey this command and seek His mercy, He gives His grace – His favor and His power to overcome and live the abundant life characterized by genuine godliness (and not just unsupported claims to somehow be “the righteousness of God.”) And to those who remain insistent on going on in their own strength, doing what is right in their own eyes and believing the lie that they are somehow stronger or better than the others around them, He has nothing to give but opposition and rejection which, for those who have been exposed to the gospel of salvation but have not embraced and submitted to the gospel of the kingdom where the Savior becomes in truth and reality the King and Lord of all of one's life, will culminate in Him saying, “Depart from Me – I never knew you.” (Mt. 7:23) The choice to walk in our own strength or to rest in His is ours to make and it is the demonstration of genuine humility that entitles us to become recipients of God's grace so that we might overcome *all* aspects of sin, pride, self, Satan and this world. Anything less than this all-out war is simply a false “gospel” designed to lure the unwary away from the One who freely gives us all things by His grace.

Let he who has ears hear.

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