

Whose Slave Are You?

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Paul wrote:

“Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Rom. 6:16)

Paul is midway through his explanation of law and grace and is dealing with the role of sin as it interacts with law and grace. He has just asked his hallmark question, “Shall we go on sinning because we are not under law but under grace?” and immediately answers his own question with an emphatic, “Never!” (Rom. 6:15) Paul is contrasting the life that is lived by God’s power (grace) from both the life lived under law and the life lived under sin. Neither law nor sin have any ruling place in the life of the genuine believer in Christ.

Why is this important to know? Currently there is a movement that so stresses the grace of God in salvation that it turns it into what can rightly be called hyper-grace and virtually gives the followers of hyper-grace license to sin in God’s name. One would think that God’s grace, as wonderful, wondrous and magnificent as it is, could not be overly relied upon or magnified beyond its wondrous parameters. But when it becomes the means by which sins are practiced, tolerated or ignored, it has become something other than the saving, life-changing grace of God and has become a treacherous tool in the hands of our enemy, the devil, who seeks to devour and destroy those who are not wary of his schemes and devices. (1 Pet. 5:8, 2 Cor. 2:11)

It should not be imagined that hyper-grace overtly pushes people to sin, especially not toward gross or obvious sins. If such a thing were true, it would not be difficult to expose this error for what it is. That is, if someone were to preach drunkenness, violence and lust because we are under grace, we would easily recognize him as a fraud and counterfeit preacher.

The fundamental error of hyper-grace is to completely dismiss the law of God from our lives. Often these people who adhere to hyper-grace have experienced examples of “Christian” legalism – of which the New Covenant can be wielded as law as readily as the Old Covenant (see 2 Cor. 3:6) – and these have great difficulty understanding the proper use of the law under the New Covenant. Hyper-grace insists that there is absolutely no place *at all* for the law in a believer’s life – Paul however, as part of the New Covenant, tells us, “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.” (1 Tim. 1:8) Paul plainly tells us here that there are at least *some* “proper” uses that can be made of the law and this completely contradicts hyper-grace’s tendency to dismiss outright and completely anything that can be viewed as a “law.”

By dismissing all “law” – the definition of which fluctuates depending on how exposed the person was to legalisms and legalistic “Christianity” – hyper-grace excludes its followers’ ability to know what sin is. Paul wrote, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law.” Then he chooses an example from but one of the hundreds of laws that God gave to Moses: “For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’” (Rom. 7:7) It is interesting to note that the sin of coveting is rampant in hyper-grace circles under the guise of what some call “the prosperity gospel.” To be sure, it is not the kind of coveting that sees what one’s neighbor has and then sets out to steal it from that one’s neighbor. (That’s a whole ‘nother law, by the way!) Rather it’s the kind of covetousness that sees the apparent wealth and comfort of one’s neighbors and associates and seeks to emulate that wealth

by sacrificing whatever time and family responsibilities are necessary to acquire and “enjoy” that wealth. (see 1 Tim. 6:9) At the root of this sin lies the ignorance and neglect of not knowing what covetousness is and that it is wrong. And this is a consistent thread that connects hyper-grace with acquisition of this world’s goods, comforts and luxuries that are contrary to the desires of the Spirit of God. (see 1 Pet. 2:11)

Paul amplifies his thoughts with which we began this article by saying:

“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law [in its proper uses], nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” (Rom. 8:5-8)

Hyper-gracists dismiss the idea of pleasing God by saying that any and all “self-effort” is simply a return to “law.” Yet Paul here says that it is those who are living by the sinful nature, the subtleties of which are exposed by a deeper knowledge of God’s ways (of which the laws He gave is the primary “textbook”), who cannot please God. Paul speaks often of being pleasing to God in various ways (2 Cor. 2:15, 1 Ths. 2:4, etc.) – so indeed there must be some way in which we *actively* participate in this effort that we must exert to be pleasing to God.

The truth is found in the verse we began with. “You *belong* to the power which you choose to obey...” (Rom. 6:16 – Phillips’ translation) Your *choice* of which power you will obey – whether sin or God – is your “self-effort” which you alone are responsible for. The ludicrous nature of the hyper-grace position on “self-effort” is exposed by the idea of obedience. After having given the command to His followers for them to take up their cross and follow Him (Lk. 9:23), is Christ now supposed to bend over, pick up their cross, simultaneously leaning over and lifting first the follower’s right foot and then the left so that His follower can obey Him without exerting any “self-effort”? Foolishness indeed!

Obedience to the *commands* of God is a concept foreign to hyper-grace. Yet Christ came to bring salvation to those who *obey* Him (Heb. 5:9), not to those who use His name to justify and condone their “right” to practice whatever form of sin and disobedience to God’s commands which we might prefer. The latter is the epitome of the apostasy, the falling away that occurs before Christ’s return that is characterized by people who have been given over by God to strong delusion because they preferred some kind of unrighteousness. (2 Ths. 2:3, 11-12)

If we choose to obey the sinful nature, in whatever subtle or overt ways we prefer, the result is death. Relationships with other believers (especially those who recognize the hyper-grace error for what it is) is one of the first things that begin to suffer death for those who place themselves under this deception. Responsibilities to God and family (especially to bring up one’s children in the training and admonition of the Lord –Eph. 6:4) soon drops off and acquiescence to worldly ways sets progressively in. Though the man who comes under the hyper-grace deception may not immediately and physically die – just as Adam did not physically die the day he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17, 5:5) – the process of death is at work in all that he says and does.

“By their fruit you shall know them,” Jesus said. (Mt. 7:20) This is equally true of the life controlled by the sinful nature as contrasted with the life controlled by the Spirit of God. If we live our life by means of the sinful nature – and one can easily be controlled by this nature

and still be a faithful and prominent member, even “pastor,” of one’s “church” or circle of “fellowship” in these days of apostasy – we will bear fruit that reeks of death. Even if we loudly proclaim to be “the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21), those around us will recognize the smell of death that taints and pervades all that we say and do.

Paul concludes his explanation of the interactions of law, sin and grace by saying,

“You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:18-23)

We must examine this explanation more closely:

- Sin, no matter how subtle or religiously or cleverly excused, leads to death. Period. No free passes will be issued on judgment day for those who have practiced their sin in the name of Christ and used His “grace” as their excuse.
- Law only exposes our sin, especially the far-reaching depths of sin in its more subtle forms – and will cause us to always come up short in attaining to righteousness. (Rom. 3:20)
- Righteousness (doing what is right in God’s eyes) and holiness (obedience to His will and purpose) is the result of obeying the Spirit of God. It is not our own personal righteousness or holiness of which we might boast (Rom. 9:16) but rather our progressive participation in the righteousness and holiness of Christ expressed in every day moments and activities within the context of our own lives.
- The Spirit will lead us to fulfill the things found in the law of God through love (for God, one another and mankind in general), not by scrupulous obedience to codes and ordinances and creeds and by-laws, but by the power of God in turn from the desires and lusts of the sinful nature and actually accomplishing the will and purposes of God.

The fundamental error of many with the hyper-grace movement is simply an over-reaction to the legalisms and legalistic expectations previously placed upon them under the guise of “Christianity.” “Law” is equated with “control” in many instances and thus any controls put upon their behavior is “a return to law.” But Paul says here that we are to control our behaviors as slaves are controlled by their masters because we are *by nature* in a condition of slavery. If we do not employ our members in *slavery* to God’s righteousness, then we are employing our

members in *slavery* to sinful behavior – whether that be overt, blatant sin or subtle, religious lawlessness is immaterial (1 Jn. 3:4) – and this constitutes disobedience to God’s Spirit and laws (which the latter no longer have any power over us until we *break* them –1 Tim. 1:9-10 – a list that includes “the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane...and any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine,” a descriptions that would certainly include any self-proclaimed “Christian” who refuses to give up his favorite sins, even when excused by “God’s grace.”)

If we truly obey God, we will occasionally struggle with sin but we will have no difficulty with allowing God’s laws to leads us back to Christ. (Gal. 3:24) We will have no hesitation to repent when some presentation of God’s laws shows us an area where we have failed to submit fully to the Spirit of God – and this is the proper usage of God’s law. Wherever we are truly led by our obedience to the Spirit of God to actively practice God’s righteousness (right ways, right doing), we have no need of law because we are bearing the fruit of God’s Spirit that are not contrary to any law. (Gal. 5:22-23)

Salvation is of grace, that is, the power of God alone. This truth is not in question. But the life that has truly been touched by the real grace (power) of God is one that is empowered to turn away from the sinful nature and genuinely obey and partake of the divine nature of God. Salvation is of God alone – but the life we choose to live is our responsibility for which we will either receive reward or punishment. This *is* the genuine gospel of Christ and God.

We are the slave of whomever we choose to obey – whether sin or God – and this is an inescapable fact. Paul did not see fit, from the depths of his spiritual insights given to him by God, to list any other options. The devil also well knows that these are our only two options. It is his work to so obscure the differences and confuse the issues that we will choose to obey the sinful nature thinking that we are following God. Hyper-grace is simply one more of such tools he has devised to draw followers of Christ away from the real truth and grace of God’s genuine plan of salvation and redemption. Those who rely on hyper-grace to practice some preferred form of subtle sin are those to whom Christ will be required to say, “Depart from Me you who practiced what was right in your own eyes – I never knew you!” (Mt. 7:23) The question we must then consistently put to ourselves – as we spiritually discern our behaviors and honestly evaluate the fruit of our lives that will confirm or refute our initial answer – is “Whose slave are we?”

Let he who has ears hear.

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