



GOD'S GRACE OVERSHADOWS OUR OBEDIENCE

With all the “fluff” that has flooded the Christian marketplace in recent years, it is so uplifting to read a book that doesn't compromise the unchanging truth of God's Word. In Jerry Bridges' book, *The Discipline of Grace*¹, you will gain clear insight into God's plan for a believer. The blending of “personal discipline” and “sanctifying grace” is explained in a truly liberating manner. The following freely borrows from *The Discipline of Grace*, a welcome addition to any Christian library.

In a lesson from Philippians 3:1-11 (see text at end of article), a teacher concluded with two statements that would not be understood or accepted by those who have a faulty understanding of God's grace. The teacher stated one foundational truth in two sentences, both of which mirror each other:

- A believer should relax in the assurance of being clothed in the righteousness of Christ and should not believe that one's measure of obedience determines one's on-going acceptance with the Lord.
- A believer should rest solely in the finished work of Christ and not fall into the Pharisaical notion that supposed “excellence” in obedience enhances one's standing before God or makes a believer more pleasing in God's sight.

The two sentences state basic Bible doctrine. However, believers with an incomplete understanding of God's grace will have trouble incorporating this doctrinal perspective into their daily lives. As a result, they will often encourage a performance mentality for followers of Christ. For them, the focus of everyday living should be “obedience,” often assuming that a major emphasis on “God's grace” and “one's secure position in Christ” will increase the possibility of sinful behavior. That assumption, however, says more about a misunderstanding of God's grace than it does about potential sins; even though some believers have abused God's grace to try to excuse their sins.

Scripture speaks directly to the possibility of a believer's misunderstanding and misuse of God's grace as an excuse to sin.

Romans 6:1, *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*

Galatians 5:13, *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

Furthermore, Jude tells us that this possibility had already become a reality in some people's lives in the first century.

Jude 4, *For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

Jerry Bridges addresses this subject in *The Discipline of Grace* by saying, “We cannot allow some people's abuse of the truth to deprive us of its value to us, especially when that truth is so necessary to our Christian lives.”

The answer to the question “Why obey the Lord?” needs to be affirmed in the lives of God's people everyday. We obey because of God's grace. The grace of God should be the focus—the foundation—of every aspect of a believer's life. Even the obedience necessary for discipleship is secondary to an emphasis on God's grace.

As Jerry Bridges points out, “Without a continual reminder of the Good News of the Gospel, we can easily fall into one of two errors. The first is to focus on our external performance and become proud like the Pharisee. We may then begin to look down our spiritual noses at others who are not as disciplined, obedient, and committed as we are and in a very subtle way begin to feel spiritually superior to them.”

He continues, “The second error is the exact opposite of the first. It is the feeling of guilt. We have been exposed to the disciplines of the Christian life, to obedience, and to service, and in our hearts we have responded to those challenges. We haven't, however, been as successful as others around us appear to be. We believe God is displeased with us, and we certainly wouldn't expect His blessing on our lives. After all, we don't deserve His favor.”

He concludes, “Because we are focusing on our performance, we forget the meaning of grace, which is God's

unmerited favor to those who deserve only His wrath. Pharisee-type believers think they have earned God's blessing through their behavior. Guilt-laden believers are quite sure they have forfeited God's blessing through their lack of discipline or their disobedience. Both have forgotten the meaning of grace because they have moved away from the Gospel and have slipped into a performance relationship with God."

Honest believers realize that no matter how excellent their obedience to God's Word seems to be, it will always be tainted by some aspect of "self." This should be obvious, since every believer is not perfect and will not become so until seeing Jesus face-to-face. With a believer's chronic imperfection in mind, it is no wonder that even the "best" of a believer's obedience (one's "righteous deeds") are like filthy rags in the Lord's sight (Isaiah. 64:6). This fact of "filthy rag righteousness" results from God's unwavering standard of perfection.

Isaiah 64:6, We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

So, how can a believer's obedience, imperfect as it is, be acceptable to the Lord? How can God accept anything that a believer becomes, does, or accomplishes in this life? What is the basis for God's acceptance of a believer? The answer to all of these questions is ... God's grace.

Surprisingly, the very foundation of a believer's spiritual life, God's grace, is often conspicuously absent when discipleship or obedience is taught or practiced. Grace is invariably emphasized as a necessity for salvation yet overlooked for discipleship.

Borrowing from insight in *Discipline of Grace*, "In Romans 3:24, Paul said we are justified by grace, the day we trusted in Christ. In Romans 5:2, however, Paul spoke of 'this grace in which we now stand.' Here he refers to our day-to-day standing before God as being on the same basis as our justification, that is, on the basis of grace."

Romans 3:23-24, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Romans 5:2, Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

This emphasis on grace as being the initiation and the continuing 'heartbeat' of our entire spiritual life is not an isolated teaching of Scripture. For example:

Titus 2:11-14, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Those four verses in Titus have one subject, since this is one long sentence. The subject is "God's grace" and is described as bringing salvation, instructing us to deny our desires and to live godly as we look forward to the appearing of Jesus. Our spiritual life is birthed, and subsequent maturity in Christ is sustained, by God's grace.

Only when the emphasis of a believer's life is centered on God's grace can one truly be motivated to live for the Lord and not for himself. It is not merely a matter of "obedience because God says to obey" but, instead, our obedience is motivated by the love of Christ on our behalf (God's grace).

To draw again on the scriptural insight provided in *The Discipline of Grace*, "The Apostle Paul wrote that Christ died that we should no longer live for ourselves but for Him (2 Corinthians 5:15). To live no longer for ourselves but for Him is the essence of discipleship. But what is it that will motivate us to live not for ourselves but for Him? Paul said it is the love of Christ: 'For Christ's love compels us' (2 Corinthians 5:14)."

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

In explaining how the love of Christ "compels" or "controls" us, the expanded translation of the New Testament by Kenneth Wuest prints 2 Corinthians 5:14 as, "For the love which Christ has (for me) presses on me from all sides,

holding me to one end and prohibiting me from considering any other, wrapping itself around me in tenderness, giving me an impelling motive.”²

As Jerry Bridges points out, “Notice what compelled or motivated Paul in such a strong manner. It was not a continual challenge to be more disciplined, or more committed, or more holy. Rather it was his constant heartfelt awareness of Christ’s love for him. It was not the thought that ‘I ought to do this or that’ or a feeling of guilt for not doing something that motivated Paul. Rather it was his overwhelming sense of Christ’s love for him that spurred him on. Duty or guilt may motivate us for awhile, but only a sense of Christ’s love for us will motivate us for a lifetime.”

Our prayer for one another should be that we will concentrate more and more on God’s grace each and every day. The more we understand God’s grace, the more we will respond in humble and grateful obedience to the reality of Christ’s love.

While it goes without saying, sometimes the obvious needs reemphasized. **It is God’s grace that leads us to obedience; it is not our obedience that leads us to God’s grace.**

Philippians 3:1-11

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹ *The Discipline of Grace* by Jerry Bridges, Published by NavPress (available through Navpress.com, Amazon.com, Christianbooks.com and other booksellers)

² *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* by Kenneth S. Wuest, Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994 (available through Amazon.com and other booksellers)