

“Grace Nullified; Grace Magnified”

January 23, 2011

Text: Galatians 2:21

Golf legend Arnold Palmer recalls a mistake he once made due to his pride.

“It was the final hole of the 1961 Masters tournament, and I had a one-stroke lead and had just hit a very satisfying tee shot. I felt I was in pretty good shape. As I approached my ball, I saw an old friend standing at the edge of the gallery. He motioned me over, stuck out his hand and said, ‘Congratulations.’ I took his hand and shook it, but as soon as I did, I knew I had lost my focus. On my next two shots, I hit the ball into a sand trap, then put it over the edge of the green. I missed a putt and lost the Masters. You don't forget a mistake like that; you just learn from it and become determined that you will never do that again. I haven't, in the 30 years since.”

The most destructive kind of pride, is spiritual pride.

It proudly congratulates itself on its success in the spiritual world, without any significance evidence of such success.

It trusts itself to gain acceptance/commendation from God by virtue of its own self-made righteousness.

It loathes the notion of coming to Him hat in hand, seeking mercy which it knows it doesn't deserve, and accepting that mercy like a pauper accepting a charitable handout.

It craves spiritual stardom, and demands to play a leading role in its own salvation.

God refuses salvation to anyone who will not set aside his pride and replace it with humble contrition.

Isa 57:15=> *“Thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the **contrite and lowly of spirit**, In order to revive the spirit of the **lowly** And to revive the heart of the **contrite**.’”*

Because God is the Creator of all things, and because man has rebelled against his Creator, it is out of the question for man to approach God on any terms but humble contrition. And even that requires God’s undeserved grace.

Isa 66:2 (God)=> *“‘My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being,’ declares the LORD. ‘But to this one I will look, To him who is **humble and contrite of spirit**, and who trembles at My word.’”*

Because of God’s amazing graciousness, He not only allows sinful rebels who have become humble/contrite, to approach His presence; He actually comforts/revives—and even saves—they by His grace.

Psa 34:18=> *“The LORD is near to the **brokenhearted**, And saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

In today’s text, we’ll discover 2 proud blasphemies men commit against God’s grace; then in Luke 15 we’ll consider the majesty of His grace.

2 great blasphemies against God’s grace, and then the majesty of God’s grace.

Our text is Galatians 2:21 (Paul)=> “I do not **nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then**

Christ died needlessly.”

With the word “*I*”, Paul has just personalized his letter to the Galatians, saying that he has died to the Mosaic Law, no longer trusting it to save his soul through his own righteous obedience to it.

Instead, he trusts in the death of Jesus X to atone for his sins, adding that he has been crucified with X (i.e., thru faith, he has identified w/ X’s atoning death).

Verse 21 now adds that reliance on his own obedience to the Law for his justification before God, would nullify God’s grace.

That brings us to the 1st great blasphemy=>

*** Nullification of God’s Grace**

Both of these 2 blasphemies which Paul mentions, attack a foundational truth of the Xn faith.

As we’ll see in a few minutes, the second one attacks the truth of X’s death, implying that it wasn’t really necessary for our salvation.

The 1st blasphemy attacks the foundational truth of God’s grace.

Spiritual pride nullifies the grace of God with a variety of false assumptions.

By “*nullify*,” Paul means it rejects God’s grace, sets it aside as valueless/useless, or dismisses it as invalid.

So the belief that man can save his own soul by obedience to Mosaic Law, is actually his pride rejecting the only means of salvation God has provided—His grace.

Pride is at the root of all such false assumptions that disregard/nullify God's offer of salvation as a gift of His grace.

E.g. Assumption #1—I don't need God's grace.

This is the belief that I am basically a good person.

Or at least, that I'm not so bad that anyone would ever really need to die for my sins.

It looks in the mirror and is pleased with what it sees=>

- * Someone who is amiable and basically honest;
- * Someone who never does anything too bad.

Viewing himself in this light, such a person rejects Rom 3:10=>

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE."

He would probably point to some of history's worst criminals, compare himself with them, & come away feeling assured he's actually quite superior, morally.

He feels he doesn't need God's grace; that God's justice will do to prove he's a good man.

He believes that, if God really does know everything, He'll have to admit, this person is a fine specimen of human morality—or at least, well above the average.

Such a person views God's grace as superfluous to his spiritual wellbeing.

He likes the fact that it's available if he should ever need it—like a spare tire, or a lifeboat.

But he's confident that he personally will never need it.

He reads in Rom 6:23 that the wages of sin is death, but sees nothing in his own life to warrant such a severe punishment.

He finds it hard to feel true gratitude for God's grace, because he really doesn't feel he needs it.

Pride has darkened the mind of this person to 2 basic facts=>

1) The absolute/infinite holiness of God.

His imagination has never pondered the flawless character of God, before whom Isaiah cried=> "*Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, & I live among people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts*" (Isa 6:5).

2) His own sinfulness/depravity.

- * He has never looked below the surface of his own actions.
- * He has never weighed the impurity of his own motives.
- * He has never equated his lust with adultery, or considered his own righteousness as filthy rags in God's sight (Isa 64:6).
- * He has never probed into the self-congratulation behind his own good deeds, to discover that his self-righteousness is loathsome/intolerable to God.

Until a person realizes he has no real righteousness at all, with which to lay claim to salvation, he won't sense his need for grace.

Assumption #2—I can earn my own salvation, thanks.

This differs from assumption #1, in that it realizes it isn't acceptable to God by virtue of its own native goodness.

But it believes that it can (in its own power) bring about whatever moral changes are necessary to gain God's favor/acceptance.

This is the person who rejects God's grace, because he thinks he can justify himself, by his own good deeds;

- * Or his own obedience to God's Law;
- * Or by religious activities such as sacraments, fastings, prayers, pilgrimages, penance, and self-denial.
- * Or by whipping up holy feelings, or suffering persecution.

This person not only believes that he can save himself, he expects God to honor him for doing so.

Pride loves itself & demands the credit for its own personal worthiness, its own repentance, or its own moral resolve.

This is why it's so dangerously alluring, that Paul had to stamp it out, by publicly confronting Peter when he aligned himself with the self-righteous legalism of the Judaizers.

This assumption completely ignores the truth of Eph 2:5.

There Paul tells believers=> *“When we were **dead** in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by **grace** you have been saved).”*

Paul doesn't say that we were "sick/wounded in our sins,"
but that we were completely dead—spiritually
lifeless/inert.

Dead people can't do anything for themselves.

Until a person humbly acknowledges that he has no kind of
strength at all with which to save himself, he won't sense
his desperate need for God's grace.

Assumption #3—I don't need *much* of God's grace.

**This assumption is only slightly less cocky than the 2nd
assumption.**

It believes it can go a long way in pursuit of righteousness and
holiness on its own, & will only need God's grace to make
up for whatever it lacks.

It expects to divide both the work-of/glory-for its own salvation
with God, who will only be needed to give the final boost,
putting it over the top of true/pure righteousness.

Rom 11:6 puts the lie to this assumption.

It teaches us that either salvation is a wage earned by hard work,
or it's an undeserved gift of God's grace, but it's not a
mixture or a combination of the two.

*"If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works,
otherwise grace is no longer grace."*

The minute you add the tiniest human effort at
righteousness to God's grace, you completely nullify,
neutralize, and cancel God's grace.

God will never share with anyone His glory for the salvation of a single soul.

If there is anything at all in my salvation for which I can take the credit, my salvation is not from God and it's not real, but counterfeit "salvation" that couldn't save anyone.

He leaves no room whatsoever for pride, saving only those who approach Him with a humble/contrite heart, that is no longer deceiving itself that it can ever deserve His salvation.

Assumption #4—God's grace can't do me any good anyway.

Some people reject God's grace, thinking they're so wicked that even His grace couldn't resolve their sin-problem.

Satan whispers in their ears, "You don't deserve God's grace, so He won't give it to you."

They view God as merely a bigger version of themselves, and think to themselves, "I wouldn't save me if I were God, so I don't expect Him to either. I'm just too far gone."

This mindset nullifies God's grace & sets it aside as invalid, because it proudly trusts its own speculations about God, instead of believing what His Word has revealed about Him.

We might feel sorry for a person like this, but such unbelief is a proud/active/defiant suppression of the truth that God has given to all mankind, through His general revelation.

It's also rejection of what He has revealed about Himself in the special revelation of His Word.

It makes God's grace void, by denying its infinite power.

Mt 12:3—“*Any sin & blasphemy shall be forgiven men.*”

Isa 1:18—“*Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.*”

Assumption #5—If God gives me His grace, it's OK by me.

This attitude denigrates God's grace as cheap/valueless by its casual indifference towards it.

It carelessly overlooks His awesome sacrifice of His own Son's life in order to provide man forgiveness by His grace.

It insults the glory/majesty of God's grace by making it an optional accessory to life=> “Now I not only have my new blackberry, & a cool new hairdo, but also God's grace.”

Such indifference knows nothing of the thrill that comes with the assurance that God's grace has covered my sin, rescued my sin-sick soul, and blocked my entrance to hell.

It doesn't get excited when it reads about God's grace, or hears its splendors preached about.

It certainly doesn't come before God in contrition of heart, broken over its own sin, eyes weeping with gratitude that anyone could love it so much.

So blasphemy #1 was the nullification of God's grace.

* **Depreciation of Christ's Death** (the 2nd great blasphemy)

In the 2nd half of our text, Paul writes=> “for if righteousness

*comes through the Law, then Christ died **needlessly** [gratuitously, w/o having accomplished anything]. ”*

The word “*for*” ties this directly to the 1st half of the verse.

So Paul is saying that God’s grace is “nullified” whenever righteousness-through-Law is proclaimed.

And at the same time, X’s death is degraded/depreciated as needless.

I.e., if people can achieve justification before God through their own obedience to the Law, X didn’t need to die.

Anyone who claims he can justify himself by his works, says in essence to X, “Why did You bother to die for us? It wasn’t necessary, it certainly wasn’t essential, & it wasn’t even important.”

He not only nullifies God’s grace, he nullifies/depreciates X’s death.

Martin Luther=> “He who keeps the Law to be justified by it, rejects grace, denies Christ, despises His sacrifice, and will not be saved.... This man blasphemes and despises the grace of God.”

Just as each of the 5 assumptions we examined earlier blasphemes the grace of God in some unique way, each one also blasphemes X’s death uniquely.

* The 1st assumption, that I don’t need God’s grace because I’m good enough as I am, implies that I don’t need X’s death either.

If my own goodness makes me acceptable to God, I don't need anyone else to die as my substitute.

This makes Jesus' death needless, superfluous.

A person who makes this 1st assumption can never accept God's forgiveness on the basis of Jesus' death because that would mean he'd done something really wrong/wicked and needed X's death, just to be forgiven for it.

He rejects such a premise out of hand.

In the process, he slanders each Person of the Godhead=>

- * The Father, for unnecessarily sending Jesus to earth to die for sins that weren't odious enough to warrant such gruesome punishment.

- * The Son, for lying to people and telling them=>

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn 3:36).

God's wrath? C'mon, He can't be that angry about anything I've ever done!

- * The Spirit for convicting people of sin, because they don't believe in Jesus (Jn 16:9).

Satan appeals to such a person's pride saying he's OK as his is.

And the person himself is glad to accept Satan's assessment of his character and his spiritual staning.

* The 2nd assumption that I can earn my own salvation by my good deeds means I am my own Savior, so I don't need Jesus.

This makes faith in Jesus' death a mere option/alternative.

And since man's pride will always prefer to think he can save himself, he'll never look for someone else to redeem him—esp. as an act of mercy/charity/grace.

This assumption depreciates the glory of X's death by drawing people away from believing in Him, to believing in themselves, gratifying their pride.

* According to the 3rd assumption, I only need enough of God's grace to complete whatever saving-work I can't do for myself.

This is a direct attack on Jesus' statement on the cross regarding His atonement of sin=> *"It is finished."*

If, in order to be saved, I need to add my own good works to whatever He did on the cross, it wasn't finished.

In fact, my pride tells me He actually needs me to give Him a hand in finishing His work for me.

That is rank blasphemy!

We are never to put our own works on a par with the value of Jesus' blood—not our alms, our prayers, our tears, our obedience, our feelings, our ministries, or our gifts to the church.

We are saved by God's grace, because of Jesus' substitutionary, atoning death, and we add nothing of our own to it, whatsoever.

- * The 4th assumption was that I can be so wicked that even God's grace and Jesus' blood can't redeem me.

This would mean that God didn't value X's death highly enough, so that it paid the full price for certain people's sins.

So when Paul told the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:31)=>

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you **shall** be saved,"*
what he should have said was, "you *might* be saved."

That too is blasphemy against the infinite value of Jesus' death to propitiate God's wrath, over any/all sins of those who believe in Him.

- * The final assumption expressed an indifferent attitude towards salvation by God's grace, through faith in X's death.

But 1 Pet 1:18-19 says=> *"You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, / but with **precious blood**, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."*

Peter calls X's blood precious because it's precious to God.

If God considers it precious, no man has any right to an indifferent attitude toward X's blood/death.

Such indifference is simply another expression of pride.

Having examined 2 blasphemies against God's grace, it's now our far happier privilege to consider=>

*** The Majesty of God's Grace**

Throughout our text, we have seen the amazing truth that many people are reluctant to accept salvation on the basis of God's grace and Jesus' atoning death.

Because of that reluctance, they nullify God's grace, and depreciate the value of Jesus' precious/priceless death.

They misconstrue the humble contrition involved in salvation as humiliation.

In part, this may be due to a misconception about God's grace, based on misunderstanding about God Himself (His character).

They may view Him as a tyrant, who wants to rub their noses in their own sin and their need for His mercy.

In Luke 15, we discover just how far from the truth that is.

Luke 15 contains Jesus' beautiful parable of the prodigal son.

I'd been reading a book about that parable entitled *Amazing Love* by a man named John Richard DeWitt, when I started studying our own text for this morning.

It struck me that this is Jesus' own answer to the reluctance some people feel about accepting God's grace.

Quoting DeWitt=> "God's love is *encompassing and embracing*. It is deep, and it is wide."

God's love prevents our receiving His undeserved grace
from becoming a humiliation for the sinner.

The moment in the parable when this becomes most obvious
takes place when the prodigal, having suffered the
consequences of his own foolishness/sin, and now having
repented of it, arrives back home, to be greeted by his
father.

You know the story=>

* A spoiled/selfish/arrogant young man asks his father to give
him his share of the inheritance.

The son has dishonored his father w/ this request, because
it's tantamount to his saying "I wish you were dead."

* The son wastes all his money, & ends up feeding pigs (a Jew!).

* Finally, in desperation, he comes to his senses, repents of his
sins, and decides to swallow his pride & go back home.

He has no right to ask his father to accept him back as a
son, so he will beg to work for him, as a servant.

He's not even sure his father will do that.

But he has no other option but to ask.

Now we come to the critical moment in Lk 15:20=>

*"And he got up and came to his father. But while he was
still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion
for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him."*

When he'd left home, the boy was dressed in beautiful apparel.

Now those fine clothes were in shreds; he was also
shoeless, needing sandals.

He was thin/haggard with hunger, & his health was broken. He undoubtedly came with his head hung low in shame, a much humbler young man than he had been when he left, because the world had stripped away his egotistical pride.

He had wasted ½ of his father's wealth, broken his relationship with his father, & dishonored him before all their neighbors.

The son had left his father's house a defiant, unappreciative, impudent, undeserving rebel, who had hurt his father, & didn't care.

[Lk 15:21]=> *“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”*

To everyone's surprise, Jesus says the father felt compassion for his prodigal son, embraced him, and kissed him.

John Richard DeWitt=> “The lesson is that the salvation which the gospel brings is a great salvation because it is able to embrace even the worst. The love which comes to those who know their ruin and present themselves before the Father in penitence, seeking forgiveness and restoration, has nothing to do with our deserving. It is entirely a matter of **grace**. We have forfeited all claim upon the goodness of God; our sin and our rebellion and our rottenness have extended to every part of our being; and if we are to be rescued, if our sins are to be forgiven, if we are to have the hope of eternal life and the resurrection of the dead, then all that must come from him, not from us.”

The repentance which must precede our receiving God's grace would be humiliating, were it not for God's love.

That love is subtly portrayed in many ways in this parable.

E.g. it is hidden in the words=> *"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him."*

The father saw him far off, because he was looking for him.

The father's love may have driven him out there every day since the boy had left, watching/longing for his son's return.

Best of all, that love is portrayed in the father's tenderness/joy, as he welcomes his prodigal son back home=>

[Lk 15:22-24]=> *"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; / and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; / for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry."*

What a beautiful picture of the love behind God's grace.

But it's not for the proud/haughty who don't value it, don't trust it, or think they don't need it & can earn it on their own.

God's grace is for those who know they're sinners & don't deserve God's grace, but desperately long for it & humbly seek it.

People who can sing with Henry Lyte=>

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring;

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who, like me, his praise should sing?

Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King!