

Perils of the “Hyper-Grace” Movement

In giving a stern warning to watch out for false prophets, Jesus spoke plainly to His disciples: “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. . . . Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:17-20 NIV). What distinguishes a “good” tree from a “bad” one is the kind of fruit it bears; further, the eventual fate of a tree that does not bear good fruit is to be thrown into the fire. Jesus’ admonition underscores the truth that our identification with God is essentially intertwined with practicing righteous and holy living. The Lukan parallel passage finds Jesus rebuking: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (6:46). Coming to Jesus would have no value unless one’s actions bear witness to a transformed life. “Fruit-bearing” is not an option, but an essential part of what it means to be identified with Christ.

In recent years, however, the so-called “Hyper-Grace” Movement has propagated a message that diminishes the necessity of righteous and holy living in the life of a believer. Grounded in a revisionist understanding of the Protestant principle on grace, i.e. *sola gratia* (i.e. grace alone), the proponents of this movement claim that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ has addressed all sins both preemptively and irrevocably—whether they are of the past, the present, or the future. They also argue that law in all forms or shape is “antithetical” to grace and is therefore inconsequential to Christians. Their dismissal of the law intends to reject any value or acknowledgment given to human agency, including the promotion of righteous and holy living in the way of salvation. They erroneously conclude that any talk of human agency runs the risk of espousing a “mixed-grace” gospel that ultimately dilutes the “unmerited” favor of God’s grace and advocates “work-righteousness.”

Is it then scripturally correct to say that God's grace renders obsolete any and all expressions of human agency in the life of salvation? Is repentance superfluous in the life of a believer since God has already forgiven us of all sins—past, present, and future—in Jesus Christ? Has the redemptive work of Jesus Christ nullified the law of God entirely and altogether? That is, is there no place for the law of God in the life of a believer? In the next few pages, we will address these questions and, in the process, help unearth perilousness of the hyper-grace message.

1. Law *and* Grace

Let us first examine how the Scriptures speak of the nature of law and grace, as well as the nature of relationship between them. In Romans 5:20, Paul admonishes us that “the law entered that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (NKJV). The word, “hyper-grace,” is traced to the Greek word, *hyper-perisseuo*, used in this verse. The term, *perisseuo*, already carries with it the meaning of “exceeding far more” than what is normally expected. The prefix, *hyper*, then underscores even more profoundly the characteristic of the abundance of God's grace in “covering” our sins. It is true that law unveils our sinfulness while grace covers our sins with “much more” abundance and, as a result, restores the pathway to salvation. Paul's emphasis on the abundant character of God's grace is not, however, intended to rule out the significance of our corresponding response in gratitude. As a matter of fact, inasmuch as one realizes the abundance of God's grace, it is natural to expect this would trigger a fitting response attested in the transformation of the heart's dispositions and life's behaviors. In short, the provision of grace anticipates one's devotion to a life of righteous and holy living; after all, it is God's grace that empowers us to respond in this way.

Speaking further on the law and grace, Paul reminds us that the reconciling work of Jesus Christ effects freedom to those who believe. Since Jesus Christ “has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13), believers are no longer bound by the works of the law but called to the life in freedom (5:13). Our salvation is no longer founded upon doing the works of the law but believing in the redeeming work of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul writes:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (3:23-27 NRSV).

The freedom from the enslaving power of sin originates neither in our inherent abilities nor in the actions we take to satisfy the demands of the law. Such life in freedom flows from believing in the work of another—Jesus Christ. “The one who is righteous will live by faith,” says Paul (3:11, see also Romans 5:1; Habakkuk 2:4).

Does the fact that the infrastructure of our salvation is rooted in the redemptive work of God’s grace in Jesus Christ then warrant a dismissal of the law entirely and altogether in the life of a believer? Should the law be categorically declared as obsolete once you believed on Christ? In answering these questions, we should note the difference between being legalistic about the law and abiding in/by the law. We should note that, in both contextual and theological terms, Paul’s admonitions about the law were particularly leveled against those who were being legalistic in their pursuit of, and reliance on, the works of the law. His warning was against those who were still thinking that they could be justified as righteous by keeping up with the demands of the law. Insisting to follow the law in this way, they glossed over the fact that we were rooted

in sin without inherent power or capacity to do anything good and righteous on our own. Consequently, they had unduly elevated the element of human agency that undermined the redemptive work of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In short, Paul was reminding his audience the absolute necessity of God's prevenient act of grace in Jesus Christ in providing the infrastructure for the life in salvation.

Abiding in/by the law is not, however, the same as being legalistic in keeping up with the demands of the law. It is likened to a home wherein parents lay down the rules of behavior for their children at an early age and lovingly correct and guide them by those rules with a view toward maturing them into responsible adults. Children do not earn or lose parents' love by keeping up with the rules since parents' love is presupposed. As a matter of fact, the love that the parents have for their children is the very foundation upon which those rules are established in the first place. Adherence to the rules provides opportunities to learn how to behave rightly and be responsible. In going through this process, they might also learn the love of their parents that was foundational and intricately woven into those rules. Similarly, the law of God may expose us of our sins, correct our ways, and even rebuke us at times; but, they ultimately unveil God's loving heart toward us. So, as the psalmist David declares, those who seek Him with a pure heart and hunger for righteousness delight in the law:

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.

The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb (Psalm 19:7-10 NIV).

That the law functions differently than grace should not result in its dismissal or making it obsolete. It is certainly true that we are saved by believing in the redemptive work of grace in Jesus Christ, not by following the law. However, once initiated in the way of salvation, should we not pursue it with an ongoing cultivation on the dispositions of heart and behaviors in life? The Scriptures do not teach us simply to revel in the fact that we are saved by grace; instead, it calls us to respond in kind to the grace given. Paul address this when he admonishes the Galatians about how to use the freedom afforded to them through Jesus Christ. By nature, Paul says, such freedom is not meant to be used as “an opportunity for self-indulgence” but rather as the vehicle for doing the works of love (Galatians 5:13 NRSV). Paul then declares that, “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). This is certainly reminiscent of what Jesus told His disciples: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). If the whole law is ultimately purposed to lead us in loving one another, and loving one another marks us as the disciples of Christ, the law is certainly not antithetical to grace; it is rather complementary and responsive to the ultimate purpose for which grace is given. Instead of having to choose *either* law *or* grace, the Scriptures encourage us to affirm both the law *and* grace, acknowledging the functional difference of each in the life of a believer.

Another particular peril with the Hyper-Grace Movement has to do with its limited understanding of the nature and the function of grace. For the most part, they believe the important function of grace is remedying sin at the initial moment of believing on Christ. The Scripture, however, reminds us that grace is not only given *initially* at the moment of conversion, but it also works *throughout* the life of a believer so that the believer may know the love of

Christ and “be filled up with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). Grace is the power of God that enables us to do good works (see Ephesians 2:10) and helps us grow as a mature believer in Christ “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (4:13 NASB). In all instances of its provision, grace then testifies truths about *who God is* and *how God relates with us*. Whether initially or thereafter, grace unveils the loving heart of God toward humanity that was constant and consistent since the foundation of the world. God did not begin to love Adam and Eve at the moment of their failure. Grace extended to them at the Fall was not *an afterthought* with God. Instead, it is *an eternal quality* in Him. So, grace was not extended accidentally to remedy the situation, but it was rather a natural manifestation of *who God is* and *how God relates with us*. In other words, grace as an eternal quality in God has been consistently made evident in both the creation and the redemption narratives. Creation was an act of God’s grace. Without any coercion or necessity, God creates the universe and allows creatures to exist alongside Him. Moreover, God willed to have relationship with them. In particular, when God created human beings, He created them in His own image and established the covenant of life with them (see Genesis 1:26-27). So, the psalmist David marvels at God’s mindfulness, particularly with humanity:

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
 The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
 What is man that You are mindful of him,
 And the son of man that You visit him? (Psalm 8:3-4 NKJV).

Grace did not *initially* appear as a remedy to the fractured relationship at the first moment of human failure; rather, it would be more accurate to say that the grace of God *continued* regardless of the fracture caused by human disobedience. To illustrate the continual nature of the unfolding of God’s grace, we should note that, even as He justifiably punished Adam and Eve

(see Genesis 3:17-19) and banished them from the Garden of Eden (see 3:23-24), God continued to be gracious toward them and made a provision for them. He took a life of another to provide “garments of skin” to cover them (3:21 NIV). This was the foreshadowing of God’s final redemption in Jesus Christ wherein the shedding of innocent blood covered the sins of many (see Hebrews 9:28). The redemptive narrative of Jesus Christ was then not an isolated or separate event from all other gracious actions of God; it was, rather, their ultimate fulfillment. It testified decisively and finally of God’s loving heart toward humanity which He had consistently demonstrated since the beginning of time.

2. Repentance in the Life of a Believer

The proponents of the Hyper-Grace Movement also reject both the necessity and the importance of repentance in the life of a believer. They argue that repentance (i.e. confessing of sins) should take place only at the initial moment of conversion. Since the conversion, being now placed under the new covenant, a believer has no more need to repent of her or his sins. They argue that the blood of Jesus Christ has not only cleansed sins of our past, but also keeps on cleansing our sins at the very moment we commit them. Following this line of thinking, they even argue that our future sins are already dealt with and preemptively forgiven by God’s grace. Hence, for believers, there is no need to confess our sins or ask for forgiveness in repentance. To believe anything otherwise, they say, is to pursue the path of “works-righteousness.” For the proponents of the Hyper-Grace Movement, believers need not repent, but only believe that God’s grace has already forgiven them of all sins, including the sins they may commit in the future.

First, Scripture teaches us that repentance is a work of God’s grace, affecting the *whole person*. It represents a complete reversal, involving the person’s mind, heart, and will. The

penitent person becomes conscious of the offense caused by sin, experiences a profound sense of remorse and even the hatred over sins (see 2 Corinthians 7:10-11), and wills to change life's behaviors. The person's life should no longer be enslaved to sin which leads to death; instead, he ought to pursue the life of obedience unto righteousness (see Romans 6:16). However, insofar as repentance represents a directional change involving all dimensions of what constitutes the person, it is not just an event or experience that is complete in and of itself. It serves as the vehicle through which a new way of living is opened up. Repentance places the individual on a completely different and new path in life with the anticipation that the individual will follow through with the process of being acclimated to the new way of living. So, Paul urges:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2 NRSV).

Second, repentance is more than what happens to the individual. It prompts a *change in relationship* with God. Having made a radical turnaround at the initial repentance, the individual enters into a restored relationship with God. As is the case with any relationship, the change becomes effectual only if the individual involved will actually live up to it. For the believer, this has to do with living in accordance with the Spirit who indwells him. So, Paul warns: "We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:12-13). Intending to live in accordance with the Spirit, the believer is expected to examine the dispositions of his heart, as well as life's behaviors in an ongoing manner. Thinking in this way, repentance or living a penitential life needs not be identified with a sign of perpetual struggle over sin, but rather a demonstration of spiritual hunger for a pure heart. So, we should join with the psalmist David who prayed:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

Contrary to the hyper-grace message, penitential life marks the individual as a believer. By living a penitential life, a believer enters into an lifelong journey of cultivating the renewed relationship with God and, consequently, aspires to fulfill God's call to holiness. So, Gause rightly points out, "The commitments made upon our first turning to the Lord must be followed through and become the manner in which one lives in covenant with God and the rest of the body of Christ."¹

3. The Way of Salvation

Another peril with the Hyper-Grace Movement is that its proponents tend to view salvation from the standpoint of eternal security advocating an extremist view of the "once-for-all finished work" of Jesus Christ. Salvation so understood results in the undermining of the ongoing work of the Spirit as inconsequential. Furthermore, salvation is narrowly defined as a single event, rather than a lifelong journey we take in the way of salvation, and the operation of God's grace to effect salvation is understood as the irresistible and unilateral move of God that renders useless any of our responsive participation in the way of salvation. For hyper-grace proponents, what Jesus has accomplished at the cross was the "finished, perfected, and purifying" act of grace that has not

¹ R. Hollis Gause, *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), 27.

only redeemed us but, in reality, also made us “perfect” at the same time.² In short, nothing more is needed except having the initial faith in what God has already done in Jesus Christ.

The view of salvation propagated by the Hyper-Grace Movement presents a number of problems. For the hyper-grace proponents, grace is understood exclusively as *what God does for us*. Furthermore, they seem to construe grace solely on the basis of God’s sovereign power. The upshot of this is that salvation is what God determines for us out of His sovereign power and has no regard to human response or participation in the process. This is contrary to the salvation narratives articulated in the Scriptures. There is certainly no question that God’s grace provides the infrastructure for our salvation. Without God’s grace, sinful humanity is without the capacity to redeem ourselves; to this extent, the view of “works-righteousness” should be rejected. However, if the redemptive story of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our salvation, it speaks of salvation in terms of God’s love toward us, rather than what God has chosen to do out of God’s sovereign power. As we know, love, by nature, is relational. Love does not overpower but is always inviting of the other to respond in kind. Thinking in this way, rooted in love, God’s grace does *not coerce, but enables us to respond* to the invitation of salvation. In this, God’s grace goes before human response and enables us so that we can respond to the invitation of God’s salvation. With the prevenient grace of God, we are enabled, not coerced, to respond positively to the relationship of love God extends at the moment of our salvation. We should, therefore, hold the two truths in a vital tension: “Without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our participation, God’s grace *will not save*”.³ God’s grace is the very foundation that makes human salvation possible; however, God does not coerce His way to save us, but enables us by

² Trevor Grizzle, “The Hyper-Grace Gospel,” *The Truth about Grace: Spirit-Empowered Perspective*, Vinson Synan, ed. (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2018), 39.

³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 19.

His grace (i.e., prevenient grace). The salvation of God that the Scripture teaches us is essentially rooted in God's love toward humanity; as such, it is *relational* in nature. It is not a story of power or coercion, but that of love and response.

The once-for-all finished view of salvation, propagated by the Hyper-Grace Movement, also regards salvation as a matter of "transfer" from one location to another. Thinking in this direction, they conflate sanctification with justification. This view rejects the doctrine of subsequence that regards sanctification as the work of God's enabling grace distinguished from the initial salvation (i.e. justification, adoption, and regeneration). The Church of God Declaration of Faith, however, states that "We believe . . . in sanctification *subsequent* to the new birth, through faith in the blood of Christ; through the Word, and by the Holy Ghost" (see Romans 5:2-5; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:12).

By conflating sanctification with the initial salvation, the proponents of the Hyper-Grace Movement make sanctification neither distinct nor essential in the life of a believer. To some extent, it becomes a simple matter of getting used to the idea of having been justified. Do the scriptural narratives support this idea? Let's take the Exodus story, for example. When the people of Israel were led by Moses and crossed the Red Sea, God did not take them immediately to the Promised Land. Instead, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. As Stephen recounts the salvation history of Israel, although they were out of the land of Egypt, "in their hearts they turned back to Egypt" (Acts 7:39). The forty years of wandering in the wilderness were instrumental for them so that they might learn what it meant to become the covenanted people of God.

The Exodus story is likened to the journey of salvation. That we have been delivered from the life of sin and death does not automatically and, at the same time, make us perfect before

God. As John reminds us, having fellowship with God who is light, we become liars unless we actually do what is true by *walking in the light* (see 1 John 1:5-7). In a similar thought, Paul also encourages us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (see Philippians 2:12) and testifies:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Bretheren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:12-14 NKJV).

Salvation is a journey we take with Christ, just as the Israelites journeyed with God in the wilderness for forty years. Journey is an indispensable part of what it means to be saved. Along the way, we become strengthened by God's grace which visits us in the power of His Spirit. This is how the Israelites experienced the God of salvation who was ever faithful and, at the end, took them into the Promised Land. In a similar way, God strengthens us by the power of the Spirit as we journey with Him in salvation. It is through this journey that we experience God as a wonderful mystery and are made perfect in His love. Being justified by God's grace should not be the end, in and of itself, but we should anticipate transformative results thereafter. Being justified by faith places us at the starting line to journey with Christ, with a new direction and aspiration to live our lives in response to the grace given. So, being justified by faith (see Romans 5:1), we ought to stand firmly on the grace of Jesus Christ and join with Paul who testifies:

We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's

love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (5:2-5).

Concluding Thoughts

It is troubling to learn that the Hyper-Grace Movement is gaining popularity among pastors and lay leaders. The hyper-grace message is neither rooted in a sound biblical exegesis nor does it provide a coherent theological understanding regarding the nature of God's grace and its operation in human salvation. Hence, it certainly behooves us to take seriously the doctrinal errors of the hyper-grace message and consider its perilous effects that deteriorate our Christian faith and make obsolete core spiritual practices.

As noted earlier, the proponents of the Hyper-Grace Movement misconstrue the nature and function of freedom in the life of a believer. It is true that believers have been freed from the life of sin and death by the reconciling work of Jesus Christ; however, this power of freedom is given with a purpose. That is, the power of freedom is to enable believers to pursue the life of holiness. Being no longer bound by the power of sin and death but given freedom from it, we are to exercise the freedom and work out our salvation by walking in the light. So, we are told in 1 John 1:6-7: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (NKJV).

The freedom that God's redeeming grace provides is not a license to sin. We take for granted God's amazing grace if we say that we are saved by His grace but yet do not respond to, and act positively with, such grace that results in effecting changes in our hearts and lives. Believers are to work in collaboration with the continuous operation of God's grace that the Spirit leads in transforming them. For this reason, as noted earlier, Paul commands us to strive toward attaining

“the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). This includes, as the psalmist reminds us, delighting in the law and meditating on it day and night (see Psalm 1:2), because the law is written by none other than the very finger of God—the Holy Spirit (see Exodus 31:18). Being now rooted in Christ, the law no longer condemns us, but propels us to pursue a holy and righteous living with godly fear and trembling. Since the Day of Pentecost, the law of God is no longer carved in stone tablets but in the hearts of believers as the Spirit is being poured out upon them. The outpouring of the Spirit then leads believers to be empowered to love God with a wholehearted surrender of hearts and lives.

We should note further that salvation is not a mere event, but a journey we take in and with Jesus Christ. Being initiated into the way of salvation by the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ, believers are encouraged and empowered to do good works which result in deepening our love relationship with God. Our ability to do good works is not rooted in any inherent power within us but provided by God’s grace; it is God’s grace that empowers us to do that which is good in God’s sight. As we respond positively to God’s enabling grace, our love relationship with Jesus Christ gets deepened beyond the initial moment of our faith. Insofar as love is relational, and love defines who God is and how God relates with us (see 1 John 4:7-13), the salvation of God *cannot be deterministic but must be dynamic* in nature. In other words, God does not force His way into our lives, but patiently awaits and invites us to a relationship of love. God loved us by His Son, Jesus Christ, by whom He reconciled and redeemed us from the life of sin. The provision of God’s grace in this way has enabled us to respond favorably to the wonder and mystery of His love toward us. Furthermore, as believers, we now testify of the ongoing operation of God’s grace throughout the life journey of a believer as we acknowledge and respond in gratitude to the workings of the Holy Spirit of God who admonishes, examines,

instructs, and inspires believers. It is in our *grace-enabled* striving to “be filled up to all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19 NASB) that we are led to know the *truly* wondrous mystery of God’s salvation.