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## **GRACE PERSPECTIVE**

Romans 5: 1-2 Luke 18:9-14 1 Corinthians 15: 10

Spiritual growth should do something to our self-image. It did something to Paul's. When he wrote to the Corinthians in about AD 59, Paul called himself "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9). Four years later, he had grown to the point that he saw himself as "the least of the saints" (Eph. 3:8). A few years-and many tribulations--later, writing his last letters to the young- pastor Timothy, Paul declared himself to be the worst sinner in the world (1 Tim. 1:15).

As he matured and his intimacy with Jesus Christ deepened, Paul saw both God and himself more clearly. Instead of causing him to feel better about himself, growth opened Paul's eyes to the fact that his sin nature was worse than he had ever imagined; it was incorrigible. He saw with greater clarity every day the depth of his need for grace from God. And that was the secret of his greatness.

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand. (Rom. 5:1-2)

We stand in grace or we do not stand at all. Grace is all that God is free to do for mankind on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ. It is a resource that can never be earned or deserved, but only received as a gift. We are saved by grace through faith; we grow in the Christian life by grace through faith.

Because grace can be initiated and sustained only by God, anything we try to do other than respond is worthless. Anything we try to do on our own takes us out of the sphere of grace and puts us into the sphere of "works" or "law." Paul explained this to the Romans when he said, "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom.

No one can work his way to God or earn God's approval through human effort. Paul, the former Pharisee who had been found "blameless" by the strictest standard of righteousness that had ever been devised (Phil. 3:4-7), knew about trying to work his way to God. He understood how the legalistic mind sets itself against grace, refusing to accept the fact that in man there dwells no good thing (Rom. 7:18).

Most people can see that sin is a violation of the righteousness of God, so they understand why it had to be judged on the cross. But not very many people are reconciled to the fact that the good things man does on his own are abhorrent and are absolutely unacceptable to God.

In the Hebrew, Isaiah 64:6 is graphic in its description of the good that man can produce. " All our righteousness," it says, "is as the rag of a monstrous woman." Why would the Holy Spirit inspire Isaiah to use this particular analogy? Because the flow of blood in the menstrual cycle is evidence that there has been no conception. No conception means there will be no birth, and no birth means no life. Isaiah is saying that all human good is dead in God's sight.

That is exactly why human good is referred to as "dead works" in Hebrews 6:1-2. The author is not talking about sins here. Sins are never called "dead works" in the Bible. "Dead works" is a reference to man's attempts to work his way to God, to earn His approval. But he cannot do it. All our good is relative good; all our righteousness is relative righteousness. Compared to other men, we may appear good, righteous. But compared to the absolute goodness and righteousness of God we are less than nothing.

At every moment we have two choices: we can trust in ourselves--relying on our intellect and our strength and our goodness--or we can take a realistic look at ourselves and see that our only hope is to trust in God and rely on the riches of His grace. In Luke 18, the Lord has a story to tell about two men and who they chose to trust.

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt ... (Luke 18:9)

The most natural thing in the world is for men to use one standard to measure themselves and another to judge everyone else. The men to whom Jesus directs this parable look at them selves from the stand point of all their virtues. They are preoccupied with all the wonderful things they do. But when they look at others, they minimize anything that might be worthwhile and magnify the flaws they see. They measure themselves by comparing their strengths to other men's weaknesses. Of course, by this kind of comparison they tower above others. So of course they look at others with contempt.

Exoutheneo means "to make of no account, to despise utterly." This is the mental attitude sin of scornfulness--the basis of hatred, hostility, enmity. The word translated "others" is loipos. It means "the rest." As far as these men were concerned, everyone who was outside of their little sect was not worth spitting on.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. (Luke 18:10)

The Pharisees were pillars of the community. They were respected and honored. The name "Pharisee" means "the separated ones." The Pharisees were, first of all, separatists. They stood apart, aloof. They wore special clothing to make sure that everyone would be properly impressed with who they were. They were legalists, preoccupied with keeping not just the Mosaic Law but the thousands of regulations that had been added to it through the years. Especially they liked to concern themselves with the externals like tithing and ritual purity. The Pharisees thought they could meet God's standards by keeping all the outward rules. Like all legalists, they were very proud-of themselves, of their association, of their own righteousness. They expected to be looked up to. Tax-collectors, on the other hand, expected nothing but contempt. They did, after all, work for the hated Roman conquerors. The Romans did not pay the tax collectors, but gave them total freedom in collecting taxes from their fellow Jews. Everything they could weasel out of people above what was owed to the Romans was theirs. So they became very adept at chiseling people out of their money. It was a lucrative business. They were considered traitors and were despised by almost everyone. Especially did the Pharisees look down on these "sinners," classing them with harlots and Gentiles.

The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." (Luke 18:11-12)

Notice that Jesus says that the Pharisee was praying to himself. It is no wonder, because in his mind he really was god. He was convinced that God was made in his image; he was convinced God held his standard.

The Pharisee said "thank you," but there was no thanksgiving here. He was thankful that he was not like other people, which of course was a bold-faced lie. He was exactly like other people.

He made no request of God. Why would he ask God for anything when he was unconscious of any need? He did not feel that he needed anything; he was very content with himself.

He had no praise for God. In the place of praise was self-exaltation. He congratulated himself first for all the things he did not do and for being such a fine individual. As he prayed, he looked around, because he had to look around at other people to remind himself of how wonderful he was. As his eyes fell on the tax-collector, he reminded himself how much better he was than all the others. Of course, he measured himself and others by the human standard of relative righteousness. He built himself up by beating others down. By zeroing in on the failures of others, he could make himself look pretty good. But not to God. Relative righteousness is despicable in God's sight.

Finally he began to list his good deeds, and everything he had to say was an expression of law and of the externals. Jesus cuts the account of the Pharisee's prayer at this point, but you can bet that his prayer went on and on and on, into all the details of how many good things he did and how wonderful he was.

This man had a system based on two things: what he did and what he did not do. But nowhere was there a place in his system for what he was. Everything he was concerned with was external; there was nothing inside--no relationship with God, no fellowship, no faith.

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13)

The tax-gatherer--hated, rejected, an outcast in his own nation--stood in the temple and uttered seven words. The fact that he felt he must stand apart from God, as well as from the Pharisee, indicates that he knew he was an outcast. He did not have any inflated ideas about being good enough for God.

The Pharisee acted as if he and God were old buddies; the publican had a reverent fear of God. It shows in his posture and in his refusal even to look up.

Beating his breast, he cried for mercy. Everything about this man said that he was defeated, ashamed, grieved. He saw how great his need was, and he knew that nothing but God's mercy could sustain him.

Whereas the Pharisee chose to magnify his good points, this man focused on his flaws. The Pharisee saw himself as better than everyone else. The tax-gatherer saw himself as worse than everyone else. He was so concerned about his sinfulness that he did not even have time to think about the Pharisee's flaws. He considered himself the sinner of sinners, the worst of all, and all he asked for was mercy.

God's mercy withholds from us what we deserve. Because God judged Jesus Christ on the cross for all our sins, He can offer us mercy. He can also offer us grace. God's grace gives us what we do not deserve--the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the riches of His glory, inheritance, power, and much more. But the only people who can lay hold of grace are those who realize a their need for mercy.

What was Jesus' evaluation of these two men and their prayers?

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be exalted. (Luke 18:14)

The word "justified" from *dikaioo*, means "declared righteous." No matter how proud and righteous the Pharisee felt when he walked out of that temple, he was not justified before God. "The sacrifices of God," David wrote in Psalm 51:17, "are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." We are not told how the tax collector fell when he left the temple, we only know how God saw him. A part of maturity is being able to see ourselves as God sees us--knowing absolutely when we are out of fellowship and displeasing to Him and just as absolutely when we are functioning in His grace and causing Him pleasure.

But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. (1 Cor. 15:10)

Grace is a resource that we choose whether or not to use. Every believer stands in the sphere of grace, in an encapsulated environment where all the riches of God are available to us. The same power, the same wisdom, the same historical impact, that was available to Paul is available to each of us.

Why then do some believers seem to be blessed and prospered while others are not? Maybe it is because some work harder. Paul took the resources of God's grace and he worked and sweat and did without sleep and went without all kinds of comforts so he could accomplish the plan of God for his life. He labored past physical and mental exhaustion, because he knew that he would never understand divine power until he had pushed past Paul's strengths and abilities. God honored that, and it was all grace, because on Paul's part it was all faith.

A German proverb says, "God gave us nuts, but He didn't crack them." O.A. Baptiste said, "God gave us wheat, but we must bake the bread. He gives us cotton, but we must make the clothes; He gives us trees, but we must make our homes. He provides raw materials, we must make the finished product." This is the principle of grace at work.

Lesson 4-2: Perception-Discernment Romans 12:21 Hebrews 5: 13-14 Philippians 1:9-11

Most of the pain in our lives is self-induced. Every day we bypass wonderful things that God wants to give us for our pleasure and for our good. Every day we take hold of horrible things that Satan wants to give us for our pain and for our destruction. The main reason we make stupid decisions to spurn what God offers and to grab what Satan offers is that we lack discernment.

The enemy is a master of illusion; he knows how to make evil things look beautiful. We fall for his enticements because we have not cultivated the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Without discernment--the ability to make wise distinctions and decisions--our spiritual defeat is inevitable.

Do not be overcome by evil ... (Rom. 12:21)

"Do not be overcome" is a present passive imperative of the verb *nikao* with the negative *me*. In Greek, when a negative is used with a present imperative, it is a command to stop doing something that you are doing. These believers in Rome were being conquered by evil.

The preposition *hupo*, translated here "by," means "under the control of." There are several words for "evil," but the word used here, *kakos*, refers to something rotten to the core, harmful, malignant, but something which may look very, very good. The Romans were being deceived by appearances. They were thinking of some evil things as good. But Paul orders them by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop being conquered by this rotten cancer.

The prophet Isaiah issued an even harsher injunction to the people of his day: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight!" (Isa. 5:20-21).

Perhaps the greatest test in our lives as believers is the test of evil, and yet most believers do not even know what evil is. Evil is the policy of Satan. As such, it is anything that opposes God's creative intent. The essence of evil is independence of God. Anything that man does on his own is evil, because man was never intended to function independently of God.

Christianity is weak today because most Christians think that evil is simply sin, and because they think that, they are waging a war that has already been won and totally ignoring the war that is still in progress. Sin is only one manifestation of evil. The war against sin was won at the cross, where judgment for every sin that had ever been or would ever be committed was poured out on Jesus Christ. No one will ever be judged for sins.

But evil has other manifestations, the most often ignored of which is human good. The human good produced by believers is the wood, hay, and stubble that will be burned up at the Judgement Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). The human good produced by unbelievers is the deeds judged at the Great White Throne. Apart from faith in Christ, no one will measure up to the righteousness of God, and therefore their deeds will condemn them (Jude 14-15; Rev. 20:11-15)... but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:21)

Paul had a solution for the evil in these defeated believers' lives. Instead of being conquered, Paul says, "overcome." He uses *alla*, the strongest conjunction of contrast in the Greek language, with the present active imperative of *nikao*. He is saying, "In total and complete contrast to your being conquered, you choose to stand up and keep on conquering evil."

How are they going to do that? There is only one way evil can ever be conquered--with good. The phrase translated "with good" is *en to agatho*, "in the good" or "in the sphere of good." *Agathos* is one of two Greek words for "good;" it means absolute good, intrinsic good. Paul is talking about divine good, that which can be produced only by God.

Divine good is produced through believers by the working of the Spirit of God together with the Word of God. The Spirit works through us only when He is in control, when we have no unconfessed sins in our lives and so are filled with the Spirit. But if we do not have truth stored in our souls, we have made the Holy Spirit a workman without tools. The work He wants to do in and through us He will do only with the Word. That is why we feed on the Word every day. The more we store in our souls, the more the Holy Spirit has to work with and the more He will accomplish through our lives.

Active discernment is a product of this balance of the Word and the Spirit in our souls. Wisdom, which comes only from the Word, is insight into the true nature of things and the ability to know what action to take. But knowing what to do is never enough--we need courage, and the kind of courage we need comes only from the Holy Spirit, the *Paraklete*, the Encourager

For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Heb. 5:13-14)

The word "partakes" here is the present active participle of *metecho*. It refers to someone who is constantly feeding only on "the milk" of the Word, the basic doctrines. The author calls that person

"unskilled". Apeivos is a Greek word that was used for an unskilled workman, someone lacking in experience, someone who was unable to make practical application of a certain tool or a certain amount of information.

He who partakes of milk is unskilled--he lacks experience--in the Word of righteousness. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show ourselves approved unto God. The only way we can be approved is through our study and application of the Word, but if we are lacking, unskilled, unable to apply the Word, then we are what the author here calls "babes, nepios.

Nepios does not refer to physical infants. Homer used the word to describe grown men who were childish and infantile in their thinking--heroes who came home from battle and then could not handle life. The nepios in Homer's writings were military heroes who had the inspirational courage to stand firm on the field of battle, but who lacked the moral courage to stand in the day-to-day grind of normal life. The author is saying here that the believer who has had time to get to spiritual maturity, yet who is still feeding on milk, is childish, infantile, lacking in the perseverance that is the hallmark of moral courage.

In contrast to the nepios and the teleios, the people who have arrived at the goal or objective, in this case spiritual maturity. The solid food of the Word, the advanced doctrine, is for the mature. These people have discernment, but not by accident--they have sweat it out in the gymnasium of the soul.

"Practice" is the Greek hexis, which means "a habit resulting from consistent, Perpetual discipline" Discipline produces habits. Good habits are just as easy to establish as bad habits. They come the same way; they come through repetition of decisions. Bad decisions, repeated over and over, lead to bad practice. Bad practice leads to bad habits. Bad habits lead to bad character.

But the mature have practiced making good decisions; they have established a pattern of personal self-discipline. They have their senses--their perceptive faculties--"trained". This is the Greek gymnasium, from which we get "gymnasium". Mature Christians have good habits because they live their lives in the gym. Every day they work with the Word; every day they function in the energy of the Spirit- Every day they strive for higher achievement in the spiritual realm. And because they work out in the Word, every single day they have their senses trained, they have learned discernment. "Discern" is diakrino. Krino means "to judge;" dia means "between." They have the ability to judge between good and evil.

And this I pray, that Your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment ... (Phil. 1:9)

Paul's prayer for the Philippian believers begins with hina, "that," which introduces a purpose clause. His prayer has a purpose, "that your love may abound." The love here is agape, the unconditional love that can be produced by no one but God. Every reference to agape in the Scriptures is a reference to the Power, the dynamic, of the Spirit of God.

Agape is not human love. Human love cannot begin to match the love produced by the Spirit of God (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:22). Agape is the foundation of the Christian's orientation to reality. If we want to orient to the way that God sees things in this world, we have to start with love. There are two paths we can take in life: the path of love, light, and truth or the path of hate, darkness, and deception.

Agape in Scripture always has a two-fold connotation for man. In Matthew 22:37-39, we are given two commandments: to love God and to love others as ourselves. Our love for God is personal love, love based on the virtue of the one loved. God is worthy of our love. Love for others is impersonal love, based on the virtue of the one loving. The highest expression of the love of God operating in our lives is when

we love those who are absolutely unlovable. But it is impossible to love others if we do not love God and if we have not learned to love and accept ourselves based on God's love for us.

This love, Paul tells the Philippians, is to abound, to overflow. The "real knowledge" he wants them to have is epignosis, experiential knowledge. "Discernment" is from aisthesis, a word that means "insight, perception, skillful application." It was originally used of common sense and the ability to make distinctions. Paul's prayer is that their love will overflow in two areas: practical application of the Word to life and the ability to make common-sense distinctions in life. This is the beginning of discernment.

... so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:10-11)

When the ability to make common-sense distinctions leads to making common-sense decisions, we have "approved," dokimazo, to prove by putting to the test. We have put something to the test with a view toward approval. We need to develop through experiential knowledge and discernment, the ability to put things to the test. Discernment is proof by testing.

"Things that are excellent" refers to things that are of value, worthwhile, as opposed to things that are worthless. We put things to the test, we identify the things that are excellent in order to be "sincere and blameless." "Sincere" is from eilikrines and means "to be judged by the sun, to be open to the light, to be unmingled with darkness." Aprosokos, "blameless," means "without stumbling." When we approve the things that are proper, excellent, and fitting in God's plan, we can stand in the light because we have nothing to hide and we can walk in the light without stumbling. Paul wants these believers to be open to the light and without stumbling until the "the day of Christ," a technical New Testament term for the Rapture of the Church.

"The fruit of righteousness" in verse 11 is a reference back to the love of God. "Having been filled" comes from the Greek verb pleroo, a word with four shades of meaning: to fill a deficiency, to fill with quality, to fully influence, and to fully possess.

We all have deficiencies in our lives. But they are filled when we allow the Word of God, in the function of the love of the Holy Spirit, to become practical and experiential, to work in our lives. Only then do we begin to orient to God's reality instead of our subjective emotions. We begin to understand where we stand with God, that we are forever accepted in the Beloved.

Once we really understand what that means, we are able to take the rejection of other people and to do what no one is able to do apart from the Spirit of God--to love unconditionally, impersonally, to love others not because of anything attractive in them, but because God loves us and pours that love through us. Unconditional love is a wonderful thing to be able to give. When we can love unconditionally, we have been filled with the fruit of righteousness.

That love gives us the ability to have discernment and to make good decisions. It gives us the ability to adjust to whatever conditions we face in life. Because we are filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, God receives the glory and the praise.