

God's Grace ~ Part 14

"Perhaps there is no word in the Bible more precious than Grace."

~ Rick Countryman, Senior Pastor, Big Valley Grace Community Church
Modesto, Ca.

"The Proof of Our Love for God ~ Part A"

In my last two posts, we looked at how we are compelled to live in God's Grace by love. Now let's turn to the topic of the proof of our love for God. How do you love God? Is your answer similar to one or more of these? Daily reading the Bible; constantly in prayer; faithfully attending church and tithing – not to mention giving up your favorite sins.

Amazingly, one answer that you may not have given was Yeshua's own response to the question of how to love God. In fact, few things in the Bible are clearer than Yeshua's precise answer: obey His commands. In just the short space of nine verses, Yeshua reiterates this thought three times: **"If you love me, you will keep my commands."** **"Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me."** **"If someone loves me, he will keep my word."** (Yochanan 14:15, 21, 23) In his first letter to the saints, Yochanan writes: **"For loving God means obeying his commands. Moreover, his commands are not burdensome."** (1 John 5:3)

One issue Believers frequently struggle with is the relationship between living by grace and obedience to God's commands. I stated in a previous post that nothing you do will ever make God love or bless you anymore than He already does. God accepts us strictly by His grace through the merit of Yeshua alone. Such an unqualified statement about the love of God sounds exceedingly dangerous, leaving me open to the charge of saying in effect that God doesn't care whether you sin or not.

Are we to conclude, then, that since we are saved by grace and accepted by God continuously by grace, He does not care whether we sin or not? To use Sha'ul's strong exclamation in Romans 6:2, **"Heaven forbid!"** Such a conclusion flies in the face of all the ethical commands of the Brit Hadashah. Such a conclusion also ignores the very clear relationship that Yeshua insisted on between love for Him and obedience to His commands.

Our love for God, expressed through obedience to Him, is to be a response to His love, not a means of trying to earn it. Again, Yochanan said, **"We ourselves love now because he loved us first."** (1 John 4:19). Yeshua said that love for God and for one another essentially sum up all His commands (see Matthew 22:36-40).

So one clear evidence that we are living by grace is a loving obedience to the commands of God.

Now a command suggests two things. First, it gives clear direction. We are told what to do or not to do. We are not left in doubt as to how we are to live. The commands in the Bible provide a clear set of moral standards. Secondly, God's commands provide us with this objective standard and, when obeyed, keep us from falling into situational ethics.

For this reason, Sha'ul told us, **"don't be foolish, but try to understand what the will of the Lord is."** (Ephesians 5:17) His will as used here is not His particular will for us in some specific issue of personal guidance; rather, it is His moral will as used, for example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: **"What God wants is that you be holy, that you keep away from sexual immorality."** It has been said, **"The Bible was not given just to increase your knowledge, but to guide your conduct."**

A command, however, is more than a set of directions. The word *command* [mitzvot in Hebrew] carries the idea of authority. The most basic meaning of the word is "to direct with authority." A command does not just give guidance that one may accept or reject; a command implies that the one giving it has the authority to require obedience and the intention of doing so. This is true of the commands of God. As the Sovereign God of the universe, He has the authority to require obedience and He insists that we obey Him.

Law and Grace

This brings us to a core issue in understanding the relationship of the law of God to the Grace of God. (In this post I am using the term "Law" to refer to the written summation of God's moral commands.) Under the reign of God's Grace, is the moral will of God - considered as a whole - a request or a command? This question is not a theoretical exercise in

semantics. The word "*request*" connotes desire; whereas the word "*command*" connotes authority to require. Response to a desire is optional; response to a command is not.

So when Yeshua said we love Him by obeying His commands, was He using the word "*command*" as we ordinarily understand it, or was He using it as an expression of God's desire? In the realm of God's Grace, does the moral will of God express the *desire* of God as to how He would *like* us to live, or does it express the requirement of God as to how we are to live?

Some people believe that, under God's Grace, His law no longer has the meaning of requirement but is an expression of His desire. They would readily say God *desires* that we be holy, but God does not *require* that we be holy. They maintain that we have been freed, not only from the curse and condemnation resulting from breaking the law, but also from the requirements of the law as a rule of life. They believe that to insist on obedience as a requirement for a Believer is to teach legalism instead of grace. In other words, to assign the concept of requirement to the will of God is legalism, but to assign the concept of desire to it is grace.

I believe such a view is a misunderstanding of grace. God's Grace does not change the fundamental character of God's moral law. Rather, the Grace of God provides for the forgiveness and acceptance of those who have broken the law. The Besorah is that God has removed the guilt we incur by breaking His law and has bestowed on us the righteousness of Yeshua, who perfectly kept His law. Legalism does not consist in yielding obedience to the law. Rather, it is to seek justification and good standing with God through the merit of works done in obedience to the law - instead of by faith in Yeshua.

We need to always keep in mind that God is not only our Savior and heavenly Father through Yeshua, but He is also still God, the supreme Ruler and moral Governor of His creation. So we as God's children are subject to the laws of His realm. Out of a response to His grace, we should obey in a loving and grateful way. We'll see in a future post that because God has written His law on our hearts, we will, as a rule, be in agreement with His law written in His Word. But we are still to regard God's Law as commands to be obeyed, not merely as expressions of His desires.

Let me use a secular analogy. Along the highways in the United States we have white speed limit signs and yellow speed advisory signs. The speed limit signs declare the law of the state. The speed advisory signs caution you to slow down, perhaps because an upcoming curve is too tight to be navigated at the legal speed limit. You can be fined for exceeding the posted speed limit because you have broken the law of the state. You will not be fined for exceeding the advisory speed because you have not broken any law.

The law of God is like the white speed limit sign. It is the declared law of the realm. We have broken that law many times, but Yeshua has paid our "fine" (which is death) for us. But His paying our "fine" did not abolish the law. Yeshua's death did not, so to speak, change a speed limit sign to a speed advisory sign. God's Law has not become optional because of His grace, merely advisory to keep us from getting hurt as we go through life.

So the fundamental character of God's Law has not changed. What has changed is our *reason* for obedience, our *motive* as we discussed previously. Under a sense of legalism, obedience is done with a view to meriting salvation or God's blessing on our lives. Under grace, obedience is a loving response to salvation already provided in Yeshua, and the assurance that, having provided salvation, God will also through Yeshua provide all else that we need.

There is no question that obedience to God's commands prompted by fear or merit-seeking is not true obedience. The only obedience acceptable to God is constrained and impelled by love, because "*love is the fullness of Torah.*" (Romans 13:10). God's Law as revealed in His Word prescribes our duty, but love provides the correct motive for obedience. We obey God's Law, not to be loved, but because we are loved in Yeshua.

Ironically, the Law of God, viewed as commands to be obeyed, should actually promote living by grace. When we view God's commands as optional - or think that as God's children we are no longer under the law as a moral requirement - we subtly slip into a works mentality. If obedience to God's Law is optional, then in our minds we begin to accumulate merit or extra points. "*After all, we didn't have to obey, so we must gain some merit by voluntary obedience.*"

Here's the bottom line: God's Law, as a rule of life, is not opposed to grace. Rather, used in the right sense, it is the handmaid of grace. Or, to use an analogy, it is like a sheepdog that keeps driving us back into the fold of grace, when we stray out into the wilderness of works.

In my next post, we will continue explore the dichotomy between the Law and God's Grace.