

True Grace Gospel
Galatians 2:15-21
September 9

Augustine, the great leader of the early church, contrasted two cities in human history through a contrast between two spiritual cities. The inhabitants of the "City of Man" exalt self. In contrast, the inhabitants of the "City of God" humble themselves before God. Self-exaltation is the oldest religious alternative to the gospel of the grace of God. The religion of self-exaltation manifests itself in various ways, including humanity's attempt to claim a right standing before God based upon deeds. The Christian affirmation of grace manifests itself in humiliations before God, repentance from the attitude of works-based salvation, and a faith-commitment to the grace message of Jesus' substitutionary death. The gospel of Jesus Christ indeed becomes good news to an individual that understands two truths. First, God is right(eous). Second, humans are not right(eous).

Acts 15 provides a vital historical context to understand Paul's discussion in Galatians 2. Some unknown men traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch and taught the recent gentile converts: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved (Acts 15.1). The Jerusalem church hosted a meeting to deal with the issue of Gentile salvation and inclusion within the people of God. Peter testified to God's grace in the salvation of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10-11) apart from circumcision. Peter concluded, "On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are (Acts 15.11). Paul and Barnabas testified to the signs and wonders God performed in the salvation of the Gentiles apart from circumcision (Acts 15. 12). James, the brother of Jesus, supported the grace mission to the Gentiles apart from circumcision based on prophecy from Amos (Acts 15.13-19). Sadly, the issue did not die. Paul may have sent his letter to the churches of Galatians approximately ten years after the Jerusalem conference to deal with the same problem. Peter's actions of withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles due to the arrival of some men that claimed to be messengers of James threatened the gospel of grace by giving credibility to the expectation that Gentile believers needed to be circumcised for salvation and inclusion within God's people.

What is the true grace of the gospel? Paul carefully unpacked the meaning of the gospel in light of false teachers that attempted to influence the Galatians to accept a false gospel that proclaimed a message of Christ plus human works.

First, a true grace gospel is needed because of the sinfulness of humanity (Gal. 2.15-16). The greatest divide between humans in the first century was the divide between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews regarded the Gentiles as "sinners," yet the Old Testament instructed the Jews that all people, including the Jews, turned away from God (Isa. 53:6a). Many Jews of Paul's day attempted to achieve a relationship with God by means of "works of the law" – a key term Paul repeated three times. "Works of the law" refers to acts performed in obedience to the law of God to achieve a proper standing with God. The Old Testament clearly affirmed the

impossibility of self-achieved righteous standing. In the last phrase of Galatians 2:16, Paul quoted Psalm 143:2 to demonstrate universal need, "For no one alive is righteous in your sight."

Second, the true grace gospel highlights the gracious nature of salvation (Gal. 2:15-16).

Rather than sinners justifying themselves through the law, God justifies sinners. The gospel of salvation is God's act. Justification means a holy, righteous Judge declares sinful, ungodly, unrighteous people as "not guilty." Individuals formerly condemned by God receive a verdict that the requirements of the law. God does not treat the subject of justification as an imaginary story. No, the righteousness of God demanded the death of His son – "if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal. 2:21). Christ met the righteous demands of God's holy law. God imputes or credits His righteousness to us.

Third, the true grace gospel explains the means to receive the act of God (Gal. 2:15-16). Paul repeats the thought in rapid succession: "by faith," "we believed." Paul clearly proclaims that faith is not a "work." God does not justify or save an individual on the basis or grounds of faith. Faith is the means by which an individual appropriates the work of Christ. Paul powerfully expressed this, "We have believed into Christ Jesus." The preposition "into" defines believe or faith as personal trust, the opposite attitude of self-righteousness through personal achievement. A work of faith does not save an individual; instead, the object of our faith, Christ Jesus, justifies us.

Fourth, the true grace gospel entails an obedient lifestyle (Gal. 2:17-21). Some accuse the gospel of justification by faith as promoting cheap grace. Perhaps the false teachers claimed that by setting aside the law as a means of securing a relationship with God, Paul encouraged moral weakness. Paul points out the absurdity of such a proposition employing two essential truths. First, faith in Christ means "union with" Christ. Through faith, a new believer unites with Christ in a co-crucifixion and co-resurrection. The death of a believer includes death to sin. By union with Christ in death and resurrection, a believer experiences a new source of life. A believer, then, does not live the Christian life through his or her strength. Second, Paul underscored the substitutionary death of Jesus; He gave Himself on our behalf. Out of gratitude for His sacrifice, believers obey.