

Some troubling passages with respect to Radical Grace

A great controversy

Now we come to a great controversy. Not everyone is in agreement as to the Biblical teaching on radical grace. The reason for differing understandings of God's grace come not from a lack of exposure to the Bible. Many of those who are debating the nature of law and grace are serious students of the Bible.

The great Christian philosopher/theologian, Jonathan Edwards said, "There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ."

Nearly everyone who reads the Old Testament and New Testament is made aware of the tension within Scripture between the law of God demanding performance from man with appropriate rewards and punishment following, and the grace of God which rewards and accepts the believer unconditionally. This tension is most often sensed in the relationship between the Old Testament (and Gospels) and the epistles of the New Testament.

The statements of Paul on the subject of law often appear to be contradictory or at least confusing. For example, consider the following issues.

- Have Christians died to the law and are they free from it (Rom.6:14, 7:1-6, Gal.2:19, 5:1) or do they uphold the law and fulfill it (Rom.3:31, 8:4, 13:8-10, Gal.5:14)?
- Is the law in contrast to faith and Christ (Rom.2-4, 2 Cor.3, Gal.3-4) or is it of faith (Rom.3:27) or of Christ (1 Cor.9:21, Gal.6:2)?
- Is justification apart from works of the law (Rom.3:20, Gal.2:16, 5:4) or is it by works (Rom.2:1-16, 2 Cor.5:10, Gal.6:4-8)?
- When circumcision is one of the commandments of God in the Old Testament, how can Paul tell the Corinthians that it does not matter if they are not circumcised so long as they keep the commandments of God (1 Cor.7:19)?
- If the law is the "holy law of God" (Rom.7:10-14, 9:4) how could Paul regard it as responsible for sin, curses, and death (Rom.7:5, 2 Cor.3:6-9, Gal.3:10-13)?

The confusion and crisis within the early church over the relationship of the Gentile believers to the Jewish church as expressed in Acts 15 is another example of the tension between law and grace, a tension, we might add, that affected the early church as well as the modern church.

The epistle of James and the letters of Paul (especially Galatians and Romans) have left many people confused. Do Paul and James really belong in the same theological family? Luther for one felt that James was an outsider to orthodoxy. We see this tension expressed most dramatically in Jas.2:14-26 when compared to Rom.4:1-25, Gal.3:1-14.

We might summarize the issue by referring to Romans 10:4, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes," where the Greek word "end" can be understood as either 1) termination or 2) goal (a fulfillment). Which of these equally possible understandings is correct? Did Jesus perfectly illustrate or exemplify the Law of Moses or did He terminate it as a force, standard, or covenant by which people would be judged?

The practical implications of this issue are widespread and deep. Does "grace" mean that I am truly acceptable apart from my performance or is the "fine print" legalistic? How am I as a Christian to apply the Old Testament law's - ceremonial, dietary, and Sabbath demands? How am I to interpret the Old Testament's relationship to the New Testament (this is perhaps the single most

important hermeneutical issue facing the church)? Is it proper to use Old Covenant worship structures (alter, priest, temple, sacrifice, confession of sins, etc.) in a New Covenant context?

Biblical scholars have tried to resolve these tensions in many ways. One solution comes from a radical historical critical approach to the Biblical text. Those who take this position have concluded that the Biblical material is **inconsistent** and self-contradictory. Those who take this perspective usually assume that the Biblical text and message evolved over time and were primarily the product of historical, cultural, and political forces that we will never fully understand. This is not really a solution but rather a cynical resignation from any kind of serious rational attempt at a solution. Those who hold this view would insist that any “harmonization” of law and grace could not be based upon a careful study of Paul’s writings for such a study is hopelessly enmeshed in psychological, cultural, and political impulses that are beyond our reach.

Some have emphasized the **continuity** between the Old Covenant and New Covenant, the Law and the work of the Holy Spirit under grace. (Matt.5:17-19, Mk.7:1-23, Rom.7:12,14,22, 1 Tim.1:8.) This usually involves toning down the harshness of Paul’s criticism of “the law.” Those who do this have generally assumed that there is a distinction in Scripture (especially within Paul’s letters) between the Law as the revelation of God’s abiding will (which is eternal), and legalism--the law misused by man to establish his own merit. The context must dictate whether the text is referring to legitimate law or legalism. For example “the works of the Law” were perhaps, in Paul’s mind, restricted to the signs of identification with the covenant -- circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and ceremonial cleansing. In the Calvinist tradition there is an unhistorical impulse, which leads finally to the extreme of relating Old and New Testaments in the fashion of two concentric circles. The New Covenant is seen as an “upgraded” version of the Old. Many who take this approach have also suggested that there is a distinction between the moral Law of Moses (which abides for today) and the ceremonial Law of Moses (which was terminated in Christ). They refer to passages like Matt.23:23 and 1 Sam.15:22. This position usually involves a balancing of law and grace with an emphasis on the grace of the Old Covenant and the law of the New Covenant. This is the position held by many in the Reformed tradition.

Another proposed solution emphasizes the **discontinuity** between the Old Testament and New Testament, the law (especially of Moses) and the grace of Christ as in Rom.6:14-15, 10:4, 2 Cor.3:3,6-18, Phil.3:7-9. This often involves an emphasis upon the New Testament over/against (or superseding) the Old Testament dispensation. This position will be explained more fully in the chapters that follow in this section. This is the position most often associated with Lutheran and Dispensation traditions and is the position that I defend in this book.

The grace of God as expressed through “the righteousness of faith” liberates the soul and the whole life to a measure of freedom and joy that can only be described as revolutionary. This breastplate of armor (Eph. 6:14) protects us, on the one hand, from pride of personal merit, and on the other, from despair of moral condemnation. Before this armor can be securely put in place, however, we must face some perplexing questions raised from the Scripture itself. Satan loves to draw our attention to those texts of Scripture, which seem to undermine the force of the imputed righteousness of Christ. The effect is one of creating serious doubts about the nature of our position in Christ, or at least a good bit of confusion about God’s grace. How are these troubling passages to be understood? In this appendix we will examine a number of the texts that raise questions in our minds about the truthfulness of God’s radical grace.

If we work under the assumption that the Scriptures are internally consistent — that is, they do not teach contradictory or mutually exclusive doctrines — then we need to seek harmony in our understanding of texts. Any such harmonization requires cautious, humble, and often tedious work. We note that in Satan’s attack upon Christ (Matthew 4:1-11), he used Scripture in a casual way that, on the surface, seemed to make his point. After Christ’s critique in response, however, the force of

Satan's argument evaporates. We too must compare Scripture with Scripture and seek to answer apparent contradictions in the texts of the Bible.

A problem passage is one that seems to contradict an accepted truth. A theme like "faith righteousness" when accepted as true, will leave a number of texts in need of clarification. Those who understand righteousness in terms of human performance will face a different set of problem passages. Each doctrinal position, however, will require that careful attention be given to its unique problem passages. No matter what our convictions on this issue, we will have to address problem passages.

It is by no means apparent how each difficult passage is to be interpreted. One's theological assumptions will influence interpretation, especially when the historical, literary, and grammatical contexts are inconclusive, which is sometimes the case.

It is my observation that many of the passages that are troublesome to the doctrines of "faith and righteousness" are troublesome for any concept of grace salvation, and therefore are difficult for every school of orthodox Protestantism. It seems that those who reject the teaching of "faith righteousness" on the basis of one or any number of the below-mentioned problem passages, often would be unwilling to live with the logical conclusions of their own exegesis. Most of the passages under consideration, on the surface, suggest that the faithfulness not the faith of the individual is the issue in justification. "*Without sanctification no man will see God*" (Hebrews 12:14) does not seem to call for a partial or sincere effort at righteousness, but rather demands a perfect righteousness. The conclusion would be - no one but Christ will see God for only he can meet such a standard.

I do not intend to suggest that my explanation of the following texts is the only or even the best way to view them. My intention is to offer an explanation that is plausible and in harmony with the doctrine of "faith righteousness" which I believe is so well established that it cannot be denied without a serious digression from orthodox Christianity. I am concentrating upon the New Testament material because of its more direct relevance to the meaning of the new covenant of grace in Christ. The Old Testament material, for the most part, is best interpreted in the context of the Old Covenant of Law. It also must be recognized that my treatment will not be as detailed or exhaustive on each text as it could be. My aim is to remove much of the confusion arising from what appears to be blatant contradictions of the doctrine of imputed righteousness.

No matter how heated the debate may be over this issue of righteousness, we must strive to work together as a body of sincere disciples in our struggle for true understanding of God and His Kingdom. Many sincere and godly Disciples of Christ have strong feelings on differing sides of this issue. Let us all try to listen patiently, sympathetically, and critically, with a motivation to grow in our knowledge of Christ and not just defend "our position." Let us realize that what we may see "dimly" in this life will be made abundantly clear at Christ's revelation.

Matthew 5-7

"The Sermon on the Mount"

Anyone who reads these powerful chapters cannot but stand in awe of their penetrating demands for a righteousness that is superhuman. Furthermore, the righteousness called for is not to be outside the reader's experience. Jesus calls for practical, experiential holiness — the kind of holiness demanded by the Law (5:17,20). The last verse in chapter 5 summarizes this sermon: "*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" The fact that entrance into heaven and security in one's relationship with God are at stake cannot be sidestepped as we read verses 21-23 of chapter 7: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and*

perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’”

How can such teaching be harmonized with the righteousness of faith?

1. This sermon reflects, throughout, the orthodox teaching of the covenant that God made with Moses — a Covenant of Law, not grace (John 1:17 “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”). You will look in vain for the doctrine of grace in the Sermon on the Mount. The teaching in these chapters is clearly conditional in nature. *“whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire.”* (5:22). *“But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”* (6:15). *“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* (7:19).

2. When we understand Paul’s explanation of the role of the Law as a tutor (Gal. 3:23-26) preparing us to appreciate Christ’s work, we begin to see what Jesus is doing before His Jewish audience. Jesus is expounding the heart of the Mosaic covenant (the Law) in such a way that it puts everyone at a moral deficit. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had tamed the Law so that its “demands” could be met in the flesh. The Pharisee had postured himself to look good and feel good before the Law and thus had become hard hearted and without ears to hear the coming message of Messiah’s Passion and substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus reinstated the cutting edge of the Law so that it would leave everyone hungering and thirsting for righteousness, having been “shut up under sin.” *“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven”* (5:20). Although the ethical teachings in this sermon are valid and applicable to the church today, their intent is to bring all of us to our knees in despair. For not one of us has ever met the demands of the Law, as expressed by Christ; that is, no one but Christ Jesus.

3. In chapter 5:17-18, when Jesus says, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished,”* he is not suggesting that we will eventually meet the demands of the law, but rather that *He* will meet those demands. He will complete the Law, He will accomplish all — even to the smallest stroke so that at his death He might say *“It is finished.”* This is why Paul could say that the Old Covenant (of Law) was abolished or completed with Christ’s death (Eph. 2:15-16). He satisfied its demands completely. For any one of us to abolish the demands of the law (before they are satisfied) and put them aside as irrelevant, would be to undermine the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

4. To read this sermon outside its historical and theological context brings with it seemingly insurmountable obstacles in practical application. The conspicuous absence of grace and faith righteousness in this sermon should cause us to beware. I believe that many of the “difficult” passages in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are best understood when seen in this pre-cross and pre-New Covenant light.

So how are Christians to use the Sermon on the Mount? First, we must recognize that this teaching is an exposition of the very nature of God’s Spirit within His people. As we yield our lives to the control of the Spirit we will be motivated to obey the high calling of Jesus in this sermon. Will we do so perfectly? Probably not! The Spirit wars against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit so that we do not always do what we please (Gal.5:17). Second, we must expect the Sermon on the Mount to have the same effect that the Law was to have. All who are finding their security in their own moral discipline should be convicted to audit their moral behavior more carefully.

Matthew 7:15-23

“He who does the will of My Father”

In verses 21-23, Jesus seems to suggest that our acceptance before God is based not upon our confession, but our obedience to the law. *“Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (vs. 21).

We should note first of all that Jesus’ concern in this context is to distinguish between true and false prophets in Israel (vs. 15). More specifically, the authenticity of Jesus himself may be in view for we are not to judge one another (7:1) but we are to test the spirits (1 John 4:1) to see if they confess Christ as come in the flesh. Jesus’ argument is centered upon the nature of the prophet’s fruits. Those who speak for God are also going to follow after God. A person who fashions himself a spokes person for God, but is living independently of God’s Spirit, is not to be recognized as a true prophet. In applying the general principle to ourselves - anyone who claims to be of God and then practices lawlessness has no reason to feel secure. Anyone who confesses Christ and yet does not accept or abide within the covenant of grace through His blood is not to be received as a true child of God. Romans 8:1-2, Hebrews 7:12, and 1 Corinthians 9:21.

Matthew 12:22-37

“The tree is known by its fruit”

In this text, Jesus seems to suggest that we will be justified or condemned not on the basis of our heart’s faith in Christ, but rather on the basis of our works. But recognize that the fruit (confession and direction) of our lives reveals the nature of our identity. In the sense that we reject the Spirit of the living God and refuse to see Him in Christ, we stand outside the church. Recognition and confession are closely associated, as are faith and baptism (see Matt. 10:32-33; 12:36-37; Luke 12:8-10; Romans 10:1-11a). The point of this passage is not that our confession in general will be the measure of our salvation, but rather that our confession of Christ as God will be the fruit of true faith. If the “fruit” in this passage refers to the moral conduct of a person’s life we must ask, how ethically pure must a person be to be identified as a good tree? Was Peter who denied Christ a good tree? Was Paul, the chief of sinners, a good tree?

Matthew 16:27

“recompense every man according to his deeds”

This passage should be understood to refer to those who are followers of Christ. It is about discipleship (not justification). At the second coming of Messiah there will be a judgment of the believer’s works. This should not be understood to mean that our eternal destiny is conditioned upon our performance in this life (Eph.2:8-10). It is possible that the judgment in this passage is to be linked to the judgment mentioned in I Cor.3:10-15 where the believer’s motives and actions will be disclosed but he will not be condemned.

Matthew 18:21-35

“So shall My heavenly Father also do to you”

In Jesus’ story of the unmerciful slave, He suggests that our faithfulness in forgiving others is a condition upon which our own forgiveness before God is based (see also Matt. 6:14). If this is so, how are we to understand its relationship to the righteousness of faith?

As we seek to understand the significance of this story, we immediately recognize two difficulties (in addition to the apparent inconsistency mentioned above). First, there is the apparent

difference between the extreme forbearance called forth from the disciples (vs. 21-22) and the lack of forbearance demonstrated by the King (God?) (vs. 32-35). Is Jesus actually suggesting that we should be more forgiving than God? Such an interpretation must certainly be reassessed. The second difficulty comes as we try to draw a parallel between the extracting of payment through torture (vs. 34) and our paying God in some way for our debt of sin to Him (vs. 35). It most certainly is not true that we can pay God off for our offenses. What then is the connection and, more generally, the meaning of this whole story?

Jesus wants to make one powerful point. In light of the greatness of God's forgiveness, we should be more than willing to forgive one another. The problem comes with verses 34-35. Because this teaching fits historically in the context of the Old Covenant (before Pentecost), it might be viewed as an example of Law in action (as opposed to observing the contrast with grace — Eph. 4:32); but I sense that another explanation is needed. It is obvious to me that the story is not intended to provide a detailed parallel with our experience, but rather to make a more general point. The torturers who await the unforgiving slave need not be understood as instruments of God's condemnation of the unmerciful believer. It is more likely God's allowing the natural sickness (the verb form of the Greek word translated "*torturers*" is used to describe illness — Matt. 4:24; 8:6), or spiritual anguish of life (that results from bitterness) to extract its toll on the individual. In other words, if we who are forgiven refuse to forgive, we can expect the discipline of God and the natural consequences of bitterness to extract its due in our lives.

Matthew 25:31-46

“The sheep and the goats”

In this passage, Jesus is describing the nature of the final judgment of the Gentiles (nations). Again, the emphasis is upon how they behaved toward "*his people*." Those who were merciful, kind, and loving (righteousness) to the Son of man through his people would be rewarded with eternal life, and those who were delinquent would receive eternal punishment.

If this passage is taken at face value, it seems to contradict the whole gospel message of grace so well established in Paul's epistles. Indeed, it destroys any "good news" in the gospel at all, for it implies that only those who love will be loved, only those who save others will be saved from eternal punishment themselves. Many interpreters suggest that the judgment described is the general final judgment, and the criteria is the fruit of faith, not just the merit of the person apart from active trust in God. Some suggest that the judgment refers only to Gentile nations during "the great tribulation" and has to do with their treatment of Israel determining whether or not they enter the millennial kingdom. There is another way of looking at this text that I believe makes more sense and avoids the dilemma of justification by works. The references to feeding, welcoming, clothing, and visiting are best understood as representative acts of sharing in the community of God's family where others are accepted as kin (in the Spirit). The point of the passage seems to be that the reception of Christ and His Church is an inseparable act of saving faith. To receive Christ means that we must also receive His people, His Body, His Church. If we can't receive His people, we probably haven't received Him. The focus of attention is not upon what is done, but rather to whom it is done. The nature of the judgment then is centered upon the reception or rejection of Christ and His Body, the Church. This truth is repeated elsewhere in Jesus' teaching (see Matthew 10:40-42; 18:3-6; Luke 10:16; John 13:20; Galatians 4:14).

John 5:28-29

“Good deeds and life”

How can the doctrine of justification by faith be reconciled with this text, which links the resurrection of life with good deeds? The options seem to be as follows:

1. The believers (like the non-believers) will face eternal life or condemnation based upon their deeds in this life. The believers will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, be expected to live a righteous life and thus inherit the blessing. The problems with this interpretation are numerous:

- a. How righteous does a person have to be in their deeds before they are counted worthy of life?
- b. How many Christians are righteous enough (even with the help of the Holy Spirit) to be confident of eternal life?
- c. Would it not be fair to assume that some non-believers would have better or at least as good deeds as some believers?
- d. How can a “gospel” be good news with this seemingly impossible challenge looming before the believer?
- e. How does this interpretation differ from the legal system where a person’s performance was emphasized over the righteousness of faith?
- f. How does this view differ from the doctrine of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day? Did they not believe that it was God’s enabling grace that gave them power to obey?

2. The believer’s faith will be evident in his deeds so that at the resurrection and judgment the good deeds reflect faith. In other words, we have here a faith that is validated by works. I have questions about this view as well:

- a. If faith is the issue, why doesn’t Jesus mention it as the issue?
- b. It seems to me that as soon as we insist that experiential holiness be a signal of positional holiness, we are right back under Law. The only addition is a new power source to help us be more successful in keeping the Law.

3. This is an unsolvable enigma that we cannot understand until the revelation of Christ. If this is the case, then where am I to find any security and peace in this life? Should I not do everything I can to try to live a perfect life with the outside chances that Jesus will at least reward my efforts? Is this good news? Not to most of us.

4. There is another way of understanding these views that may be preferable to the above options. Note what Jesus said earlier in this context (vs. 24)— *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”* This verse seems to clearly say that faith in God automatically grants eternal life. There is no hint that faith leads to good deeds that, in turn, qualify a person for life. Note this emphasis in other parts of John’s writings — 1:12-13; 3:18; 20:31; 1 John 5:13. Note what John says later in chapter 6:28-29 — *“Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’”* (See also 1 John 3:23). In John’s gospel, “doing the good” and “committing the evil” (5:29) may be a direct (not an indirect) reference to faith in Christ. He may be talking specifically about faith in these verses, but not about deeds that issue from faith.

John 15:1-6

“The fruitful branches”

In this portion of Jesus’ teachings, we are led to believe that the status of a believer (branch) with respect to Christ (the vine) is dependent upon the believer’s *“fruitfulness”* (vs. 2,5-6), not his position or faith. The key to this passage rests with our understanding of the meaning of *“in Me”*

(vs. 2). Does Jesus use this phrase to designate a person who is “*in Christ*” in the same way that Paul uses it in his epistles (Eph. 1)? If so, then we must conclude that John 15 is speaking of two kinds of Christians — fruitful and secure, alongside the unfruitful and insecure. If, however, Jesus uses this phrase in a more general way to describe His twelve disciples (including Judas), we have a different context. A context in which Jesus may be explaining to His disciples the significance of what will happen to Judas Iscariot, the one who proves to be fruitless and is cast away. We must note that even though Judas was chosen as a disciple and therefore a “branch in Me,” he was not truly “*of us*” or “*in Christ*” in the Pauline sense of that phrase (see John 6:64,71). The fruitfulness consists of all that issues forth from abiding in Christ. Those who have such a relationship are disciplined (“*pruned,*” vs. 2) while those who do not have such a relationship will be excluded (“*burned,*” vs. 6). We must resist the temptation to read Paul’s teaching of “in Christ” through the baptism with the Spirit with Jesus’ words which came before the Spirit was given (Jn.7:39, Acts 4:33).

Acts 3:26

“turn from their wicked ways”

The blessing of Christ will come only as the people “turn from their wicked ways.” What does this mean? There are two ways of looking at verse 26. 1) The blessings come only as we bring our lives under successful management so that we no longer sin in any way. Those who hold this view usually modify it to refer to “intentional sins.” This view creates some difficult scenarios. For example, it suggests that we are not saved by grace but by empowerment to keep the Law. 2) The “wicked ways” in question are the sins mentioned in verses 13-15. The sins in view here, are 1) refusing to identify with Christ as “our savior” and 2) participating in his execution. This is the preferred interpretation in my view. If Christ has taken away our sins, then the issue standing between God and us is Christ, not our lack of moral power to keep the Law.

Acts 5:1-11

“Ananias and Sapphira”

This passage is troubling in that the offense of Ananias and Sapphira (to lie to the Spirit) seems to be met with instant and severe judgment (they fall dead). The grace shown Peter and even Judas by Jesus along with the message of forgiveness preached by Peter would suggest that at least an opportunity to repent was in order. The nearly universal assumption among commentators is that the deaths are the result of God’s judgment. But is this really clear? Nowhere is the reason for or source of the deaths explained. The text indicates that those who heard of this were afraid but it does not indicate that they were afraid of God. Is it possible that the social shame or some other personal response is the cause of the death? The text simply does not give us the details. Every card that sin deals says “death” on it. To play in the card game of sin is to invite one’s own death. The more one sins, the closer his or her death approaches (and the more miserable his or her present experience becomes). Being eternally secure does not exempt believers from the death-dealing consequences of sin. It is possible to read this text as a dramatic and uncommon form of God’s discipline. It is obvious that not every instance of this kind of offense was met with the same experience.

Acts 5:32

“Those who obey”

Peter’s words here suggest that the reception of the Holy Spirit (the mark of every Christian) is dependent upon the person’s obedience. When we ask the question — What kind of obedience? —

we might note the following texts: Acts 6:7 “*obedient to the faith,*” John 3:36 “*believing*” is parallel to “*obey,*” John 6:29 “*this is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.*” It is not obedience to the Law that Peter is concerned about here, but rather the obedience of faith. Note Galatians 3:2 “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”

Romans 2:1-16

“Rendering to every man according to his deeds”

In these verses, Paul clearly suggests that the basis of our acceptance by God is our “deeds” (vs. 6-10). It is not the “*hearer of the Law*” that is just before God, but the “*doer of the Law*” (vs. 13). In order to appreciate Paul’s argument, we must look at the broader context of his letter to the Romans. In verses 16-17 of chapter one, he reveals the thesis of his letter, which centers upon the righteousness of faith. In order to develop his thesis, he first must demonstrate the need on the part of mankind for such righteousness. He does this in chapters 1-3 by showing how everyone (Jew or Gentile) is guilty before a God who evaluates people on the basis of their performance and motives. The point of 2:1-16 is summarized in chapter 3:9-20 — “*both Jews and Greeks are all under sin*” and “*through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*” Some of the Jews took pride in their discernment of God’s will (they were hearers of the Law) but this did not bring them closer to God. God does not justify man on the basis of what he knows (his keen discernment of right and wrong) but rather on what he does. A person could conceivably (in the minds of some of his readers) be justified before God by living a perfect life (keeping the Law of Moses or conscience), but no one has or will ever be able to do that. This is why there is a need for redemption and substitution. This is why the righteousness of faith is so vital to life. Chapter 2:1-16 is a tongue-in-cheek invitation to stand before a holy God and see how we look. The results will prepare us to listen to Paul’s thesis - *The righteousness of faith is needed by all.* In summary, this text is presenting a hypothetically logical picture of what man can expect in facing a holy God on his own without the hope of the Gospel. Without the righteousness of faith we are clothed only in our own righteousness and will stand or fall on the basis of our deeds.

Romans 4:10

“The judgment-seat of God”

This text, together with the following texts — **2 Cor.5:10; 1 Cor.3:11-15; 4:5** — refers to the “Bema” or judgment seat of God (or Christ). These passages refer to a special judgment of true believers; not to determine their spiritual life or death, but rather to assign their rewards (praise or crowns) or lack of rewards in heaven. It is a judgment of “disclosure” not “damnation.” It is the place where we who believe will see in our fruitfulness the hand of God’s Spirit and in our folly the covering of God’s grace. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 is the most helpful text in outlining the nature of this special judgment. Note that verse 15 suggests that it is possible to fare poorly in this judgment and yet not lose salvation. The nature of the judgment seems to center on the quality of one’s ministry — was it built with and upon the eternal and imperishable word of God or upon something else?

Romans 8:4

“The requirements of the law fulfilled in us”

To many readers, this text suggests that although one cannot expect to be holy (perfectly obey the law of God) in the power of the flesh, once the Spirit has come, such holiness is expected as

one lives in the power of the Spirit. Again, the obligation to live a sinless life is implied for all who are indwelt by God's Spirit. For the vast majority of God's people, this is not so easy or comforting since they find themselves more familiar with the experience described in Romans 7:14-25 (even after knowing the Spirit's presence) than the experience implied in Romans 8:4.

The key to understanding this text is found in the broader context of Romans 7-8. Paul's argument seems to develop as follows:

1. As long as I am in this human "fallen" state, I will be unable to live a life of obedience that will perfectly satisfy the demands of God's holy Law. Because I can aspire to perfection in my mind but not attain to it in my body, I am miserable — restless, anxious, and self-condemning (Romans 7:14-25). This is exactly what the "Law of God" was designed to do — show me my hopeless, helpless, fallen state and leave me so miserable I would long for and respond to the message of God's grace in Christ (see Gal. 3:24; Rom. 3:19-20).

2. I am "let off the hook" by being "set free" from the obligation to keep the law of God for salvation when I am "in Christ." I am now under a New Covenant based on Christ's perfect performance, not my own (Rom.8:1-3, 7:1-13).

3. Romans 8:5-15 seems to be saying that we must set our minds within the New Covenant context and not the Old if we are to have life and peace within ourselves before God. If we are "in the flesh," that is, seeing ourselves in the context of the Old Covenant (delinquent before the Law of God as we are in our human frailty), we die or stand condemned, having no peace of mind. Walking according to the flesh or the Spirit is, in this context, not our actual performance so much as a "mindset" or perspective on our view of self apart from Christ or "in Christ."

Now we come again to verse 4. Paul indicates that to have peace, all that the law required of our performance is fulfilled not "by me" but "in me" through the New Covenant principle of "Christ in me the hope of Glory" and Christ having lived the perfect life for me. This is the mindset of peace. Faith becomes a source of peace in my life as I set my mind on the Christ of the New Covenant, not the flesh. The passive verb "be fulfilled" supports the idea that it is not "my doing" that is in view here. The preceding verses (vs.1-3) are focused upon the substitutionary work of Christ further suggesting that it is Christ's work "for me" that is in view in verse four.

Romans 8:13

"living according to the flesh, . . . you must die"

"putting to death the deeds of the body . . . shall live"

This verse is a summary of Romans chapter 6 where we are taught that the only way to escape Adam is through death — either our death in the judgment or our union with Christ's death in baptism. To live according to the flesh, for a Christian, does not mean the potential loss of eternal life (heaven) but rather the need to reaffirm the truths of water baptism as expressed in Romans six.

The second part of the verse sounds as though eternal life is only possible for those who have conquered the deeds of the body. If this is true, then the arguments of Romans 1-7 is violated. What Paul has in view here is "life in the Spirit" which cannot be experienced unless the deeds of the body are being put to death. If we are to experience "spiritual vitality" in this present life we must cooperate with the leading of the Spirit and not the flesh.

1 Corinthians 5:5

"that his spirit may be saved"

The salvation of the spirit in the day of the Lord Jesus is a parallel to 1:8, “*who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The “*blameless*” here was probably a reference to the confirmation of the Corinthian’s faith. Their conduct certainly was not blameless. The phrase “*that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*” suggests that the person in question who is a “*so called brother*” (vs. 11) might be an unregenerate hypocrite in need of saving faith which, given his conduct, he appears not to have. A Christian who acts this way is expected to have shame.

This would suggest to us that the purpose of the disciplining of the immoral person in 6:5 was to bring him to true faith. In Matt.18:17 we are told that a brother who does not respond to discipline should be treated as a non believer.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

“unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom”

This passage suggests that people who are unrighteous (fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers) will not go to heaven. Paul indicates that some of the Corinthians “were” like this but not any more. The immediate context (vs.1-8) talks about the “unrighteous” judges in the world who are outside the faith. This is no doubt the “unrighteous” Paul has in mind as a point of reference. He is not suggesting that the Corinthians were perfectly free (in their walk) of all the sins mentioned. What Paul does understand is that “in Christ” we are free from sin because His righteousness is imputed to us. He has already established the fact that the Corinthians were “saints in Christ” (1:2) but were living as sinners (3:1-3). The implication is – Strive to live up to your new life in Christ not to be qualified for eternal life but because this is the new nature that Christ has given you. For further reference to seeing oneself as a new person in Christ look at Matt.6:22-23; 2 Cor.5:16-17; Eph.2:1-10.

1 Corinthians 9:27

“Disqualified”

In 1 Cor.9:27, Paul expresses his fear of being disqualified if he does not bring his body into subjection. The important question is — from what would he be disqualified? - eternal life, rewards for faithful service, integrity or ministry? The answer is found in the context of the passage (both before and after). In Chapter 9:19-23, he is concerned with the laying aside of his personal taste and culture for the sake of those to whom he is ministering. He must be selfless and become all things to all men (vs. 22). He sees this sacrifice as a legitimate part of “partaking” in the gospel. He is to illustrate the truth of grace as well as proclaim it. In Chapter 9:24-26, he speaks of his life as a race being run with a goal for a prize, that goal being the “winning” or “saving” of some (vs. 22). He disciplines himself (vs. 27) so that he will not be a hypocrite but a true example of what he preaches. The Greek word translated “*disqualified*” has the idea of “disapproved” or “illegitimate.” Paul is concerned not about losing his eternal life but about losing his authenticity as an ambassador for Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:1-21

“Perish”

The children of Israel who were redeemed by blood from bondage in Egypt were tempted and fell into idolatry. They switched religions and worshiped a golden calf (Ex.32:1-10). They committed immorality (marrying foreign women and their gods) (Num.25:1-2). In chapter eight Paul

had warned those who were strong in faith to be careful lest they cause those weak in faith to be misled and “perish” or “be ruined” (1 Cor.8:11). This is the same term used in John 3:16 and 1 Cor.1:18 where it is linked to exclusion from eternal life.

Paul is not suggesting that the Corinthians can lose their salvation by failing to live a sinless life but he is suggesting that if they turn from faith in Christ they will not have eternal life. It was possible for a weak believer to be misled and return to the pagan temple gods in Corinth.

Our security is not tied to our moral conduct but it is tied to our faith confession. Israel’s failure was its turning from YHWH to the golden calf, which was pictured in its craving evil, immoral worship, trying God, grumbling, etc.

1 Corinthians 11:32

“Judged along with the world”

The Corinthian Christians were exhorted to judge themselves lest they be disciplined by God so as to not be “condemned along with the world.” This suggests that a believer could lose salvation grace as a result of not responding to discipline and correcting sinful conduct. When we look at a parallel text in 1 Cor.5:8 where the “cleaning out of the old leaven” is a part of proper observance of the Lord’s table we get some idea of what kind of behavior is in view. The judgment of God in 1 Cor.5:5 suggests that the body (flesh) may be taken lest the soul be lost. In other words, a person’s physical life will be cut short before apostasy would take place. The reference in 1 Cor.11: 30 to “sick, weak, and sleep (death)” seems to parallel 1 Cor.5:5.

1 Corinthians 15:2

“unless you believed in vain”

This passage suggests that one could have faith (really believe) and yet not derive any benefit from that faith because it lacked something (good works perhaps). The context of Paul’s argument in chapter fifteen is that one could not deny the resurrection and still have a rational hope in eternal life. Faith was no better than its object. In this case the resurrected Christ (vs.14,17). It was not “good works” that kept faith from being vain but the dead body of Jesus that would render one’s faith vain.

2 Corinthians 6:17-18

“come out from among them . . . and I will be a father to you”

In this paraphrase of the general teaching of the Old Covenant Paul suggests that in separating oneself from evil, God will become a father to His people. In what sense does separation from evil become a prerequisite to a relationship with God? First, it is clear from other parts of this letter that Paul connects reconciliation to God with the finished work of Christ, not our personal moral merit (2 Cor.5:17-21). We must assume that Paul is consistent in his theology of reconciliation, which suggests that the present text (6:17-18) is consistent with the rest of his letter. Second, the exhortation to separation from the world’s defilement, while referring to external issues under the Old Covenant, is best directed to internal attitudes under the New Covenant Matt.15:11,18; 1 Cor.5:9-11). In coming to faith in Christ, believers are asked to come out of the world. This is reflected in Paul’s reminder that fellowship with God is connected to repentance (separation from the world “by faith in Christ”). Paul’s concern in this context is expressed in (6:14) “Do not be

bound together with unbelievers.” He is not talking about justification but rather certain social relationships. Examples may be seen in 1 Cor.6:1-6; 7:12-16,39.

Galatians 6:6-10

“Sowing and reaping”

Paul warns us that to sow to the flesh means corruption, while to sow to the Spirit will mean a harvest of eternal life (vs. 8). Is he suggesting that the way we live our lives will determine our security before God? Look at the context of these verses. He is addressing himself to the relationship between those who teach the Word and those who receive the teaching (vs. 6). In summary, he is saying “If the student is selfish and unwilling to share his resources with the teacher (sowing to the Spirit), then he will reap accordingly.” This same idea of sowing money for God’s work is contained in 2 Cor.9:6, “*Now this I say, he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully.*” The reference to “*eternal life*” in verse eight has to do with the blessings that come from sowing to the Spirit in the sense of supporting the proclamation of the Word. When a person supports the teaching of the Word of God and receives that instruction they will reap a harvest of eternal life, which is the result of the Word’s work in a person. The passage is not suggesting that if a person sins they disqualify themselves from eternal life.

Philippians 2:12

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling . . .”

These are words suggest to many readers that our salvation is conditioned upon our faithfulness in action and not upon faith alone. It appears more probable that Paul’s concern here is not with our individual destiny so much as our corporate responsibility. Paul exhorts the Philippians in verses 1-11 to follow Christ’s example of selfless humility in serving one another, thus displaying an outworking of their relationship to God. They are to be in awe (fear and trembling) of the simple fact that God is at work in their lives (vs.13). As a body of believers they are to live out their faith in their relationships with one another in awe of God’s imminence.

Becoming a Christian and becoming a good Christian do not happen at the same time, but it takes time and practice to become a good Christian. Being a good Christian takes work. For this reason, God said, ‘Work out your salvation’. We do not work so as to obtain or keep our salvation, which is a free gift through faith. But we do have need to see our salvation work its way into all areas of life. In this sense we are in the process of seeing our salvation produce the fruits of salvation in relationships through space and time, here and now.

Colossians 3:5-6

“These things bring wrath”

This text and others like it (1 Cor.6:9; Eph.5:6; Gal.5:21; 2 Peter 3:11) argue that Christians (who are God’s children) should not live like those who will experience God’s wrath. There is not necessarily a direct link between the Christian who practices sin and the wrath of God in these texts. The inconsistency of being children of God and then living like God’s enemies (who will be punished for their rebellion) is the point of these passages. An ambassador from another country is immune from prosecution in American courts for minor traffic violations. He or she should be warned however that it is important to obey the traffic laws, which bring a fine to others who break them.

1 Timothy 4:16

“as you do this you will insure salvation”

In this text, we have a parallel to Phil.2:12 *“work out your faith with fear and trembling.”* The assurance of faith is related to the fruitfulness that it inspires. How do we know that we have faith? We know (in part) by the fact that we follow Christ. Faith that is no more than a shallow confession without energy to obey can hardly be recognized as faith. Not all true believers are obedient disciples but to the extent that they are obedient they have a witness to the authenticity of their faith confession. Without works faith is unseen. See James 2:14-26 below.

1 Timothy 5:8

“Worse than an unbeliever”

In this text, we have a good example of how a failure to recognize the spirit of a passage can lead us to rather fantastic conclusions. Some might, for example, try to suggest that unless a person provides for his family financially, he is not only a non-believer (denying the faith) but actually worse off than those who have never believed. Isn't it much more likely that Paul is saying — “If we are Christians and yet don't carry out the natural responsibilities of life (caring for our families), we are behaving worse than the heathen and are refusing to accept the obvious implications of our faith.”

Hebrews 3:7-19

“Falling away from the living God”

In this passage, we find a number of warnings that can be very unsettling for the one who is not living a life of perfect obedience and holiness (see vs. 10-12). If we are to correctly understand this passage, we must note that the clear Old Testament parallel of the Israelites in the wilderness is a model given to us as a warning (vs. 7-11,16-19). But how is our spiritual experience parallel to theirs? What is the meaning of “rest” for us? Is it heaven, the victorious life here on earth, or something else? Were those Israelites who left Egypt, but failed to enter Palestine, representing true believers with a weak faith or were they apostates?

Without taking the time to present a detailed exposition, let me offer an explanation that seems to fit the historical and literary contexts. The salvation of God has many aspects. It is something we have (complete) in Christ and yet it is something we are (growing) in (Phil.2:12) and do not yet have in its completed form (1 Thess.5:9, 1 Peter 1:5). It can be compared to physical adoption into a new family. Even though the adoption may be legally complete, there is much to learn and “grow into” with respect to living like a son or daughter with new privileges and responsibilities.

Part of our problem with Hebrews three stems from our tendency to view salvation as a completed act (only) and see everything subsequent to our initial commitment to Christ as relatively insignificant or secondary. The New Testament portrait, however, is more holistic and emphasizes the outworking of salvation as a vital part of the initial response to Christ.

The best understanding of the spiritual state of the Israelites in the wilderness sees them as true believers (covered by Passover blood) who have not followed through in their faith to experience all that God had for them. This rebellion brought God's discipline just as it did in 1 Cor.11:27-34 (see also Hebrews 12). In the same way, we today can fall short of entering into all that God has for us when we become hardened by sin, fall away from vibrant trust in God, and force

Him to discipline us as a father would a wayward child. Heaven and hell are not the issues here. The passage is dealing with spiritual growth and retardation, feast and famine.

Hebrews 5:9

“All who obey”

This text links eternal salvation with obedience; suggesting that works, not faith, is the real issue. The real question has to do with the meaning of obedience in this context. Is it obedience to every command of Christ or is it the obedience of faith? If the former is correct, then not one of us has eternal life. If the latter is correct, then we have no contradiction with justification by faith. The text says nothing about partial obedience or trying to obey. The text either teaches “works salvation” or refers to the obedience of faith.

Hebrews 6:4-12

“falling away”

The section from 5:11-6:2 is an exhortation to genuine Christians who are spiritually immature to go beyond initial Christian experience and “press on to maturity.” The phrase “elementary teaching” is literally “word of the beginning.” A Christian who thinks he or she needs to initiate salvation all over again every time they sin will never grow.

The “foundation” (6:1-2) is a description of the initiation to true Christian experience. We are speaking of genuine Christians (6:3-5) who sin “falling away” (6:6). The verb for “fallen away” has the meaning of “a misdeed or trespass” in its noun form. Upon falling into a sin, these Christians mistakenly thought they had to go back to the starting line of the race and start all over again. Note how often the expression “again” is found – “not laying *again* a foundation” (6:1); “renew them *again* unto repentance, crucifying *again*” (6:6). A major theme of the next several chapters is the “once-for-all” nature of Christ’s work and our initiation into a secure relationship with him – 7:25-27; 9:11-12, 24-28; 10:1-4, 10-14. The point of the passage is that it is logically impossible to go through the initial steps of coming to Christ again every time one sins. Repentance in this passage is the initial strategic repentance of coming to faith in Christ not the tactical repeated repentance of daily life.

These Hebrew believers came out of an Old Covenant background in which every time they sinned they had to bring a new sacrifice. It was insulting to the Cross of Christ to demand that he be crucified over and over again.

The term “impossible” in verse six creates a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to most traditional interpretations in that it precludes the possibility of a change of heart. This seems to defy all that we know of the Biblical portrayal of man and all that we observe about man from our experience. It is far more likely that the “impossible” has to do with the logic of the issue, not the will of the person. This is why I interpret the text in the way I have outlined above.

The verses that follow (6:7-12) suggest that nothing good can come from failing to make progress through constantly returning to renew our initiation into the Kingdom of God.

Hebrews 10:26-31

“Sinning willfully”

Hebrews 6 and 10 can be addressed together because, in my estimation, they refer to the same basic issue — we cannot and need not be reconverted every time we sin.

The Old Covenant prescribed repeated sacrifices for sins (as sins were committed). Some Jewish believers may have asked, “Do we need to retrace our steps in converting to faith in Christ, every time we sin?” The writer of Hebrews instructs his readers that with the New Covenant of grace in Christ, the old covenant was terminated. The Old Covenant no longer is available as a means of handling guilt. “There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (vs. 26). If you go on willfully sinning and do not cling in faith to the finished work of the Christ of the New Covenant but try to make atonement via the relics of the Old Covenants repeated sacrifices, you are living in a fantasy world (see vs. 29). The Old Covenant provision has been terminated and replaced by the New Covenant provision — faith in Christ who is a “once for all time” sacrifice for sins. Without that faith, one is left to face the righteous judgment of God (vs. 29-31) with no hope.

Hebrews 12:14

“Sanctification and seeing God”

This text is troublesome because it suggests that the believers to whom it is addressed are to pursue holiness in order to “see the Lord.” The “sanctification” mentioned here is often used to describe the “holiness” that every true believer possesses by virtue of his or her sharing in Christ. In this sense it has nothing to do with our experiential faithfulness before the Law, but is rather a description of imputed righteousness. But in what way can this text have this sense when it exhorts believers to “pursue” sanctification as though it were something they did not yet possess?

First we must note that if we wish to understand “sanctification” (used here) as experiential (not imputed) holiness, then we are to (a) declare that “seeing the Lord” is the result of our moral performance and not grace/faith, and (b) also conclude that no person will ever see God, for no one will ever achieve that “experiential sanctification” in this life (see 1 John 1:8).

A perfectly natural interpretation that avoids the above problems would be the following:

1. “Seeing the Lord” depends upon perfect sanctification, which is granted to us (positionally) through faith in Christ and experientially at glorification or the resurrection of the believer. 2. Since this is our ultimate destination (holiness, perfection), let us pursue that state in this life. The issue in this life is the pursuit of holiness not the achievement of it, which awaits our glorification.

The phrase “without which no one will see the Lord” refers to “the sanctification” (which is assured in the believer) not the “pursuit” (which is not an assured response). We might paraphrase the verse this way: “Since you know that God has destined you to complete holiness, which is necessary for full fellowship with God, pursue it in this life as disciples of Christ. If you do not pursue holiness, God will need to correct you” (see vs. 12-13).

James 2:12-13

“judgment will be merciless”

James indicates “judgment will be merciless for those who show no mercy.” The question that must be asked is – In which sphere of one’s existence does this apply? Does it refer to the final judgment of one’s soul before God or does it refer to the social dynamic of this life. The last phrase in verse 13 “mercy triumphs over judgment” makes most sense if the social sphere is in view. James is saying, those who show no mercy or grace to others will tend to be treated the same way by other people. “What goes around, comes around.”

If the reference is to final judgment, we must ask – Does **any** lack of graciousness on the part of a believer render them outcasts from eternal life? How many saints live lives of perfect grace?

There is no indication that “relative” mercy is in view. Those who expect forgiveness must fully forgive, show complete mercy, and hold no bitterness if eternal judgment is in view.

James 2:14-26 **“Faith that works”**

This passage is no doubt the classic Biblical text cited to challenge the doctrine of imputed righteousness. The 24th verse seems devastatingly clear — “. . . a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” There have been many attempted explanations and even expulsions of this text in an effort to harmonize it with Paul’s teaching of justification by faith apart from the works of the Law.

My explanation takes its cue from verse 14, 16 and the phrase, **“what use is it?”** as well as the phrase **“show me”** in verse 18. This passage is addressing the usefulness and visibility of faith, especially in the affairs of this life (vs. 15-16). This is in keeping with the strong earthly and practical focus of James’ epistle. You and I verify our confession before one another through our conduct. Faith that does not result in action helps no one, and is unseen by man.

It is entirely possible that the “justification” that James has in mind is not the Pauline concept of man’s relationship before God, but rather man’s relationship before man. Just as the justification of Abraham by faith (Genesis 15) is separated in time from his justification by works (much later in Genesis 22), so Paul’s use of the word and James’ use of the word need to be distinguished. Abraham’s experience provides a good example of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith before God (Romans 4:3) and also justification by works before man (James 2:21). James indicates that the Scripture, which spoke of Abraham’s faith, which rendered him just before God, was fulfilled or displayed by his offering of Isaac. Abraham was justified before he offered Isaac but in offering Isaac, he showed the world that he had faith.

Faith that does not result in obedience is a faith that does not bear fruit or is not perfected (vs.20). It may be possible to have faith that justifies before God but does not always bear fruit in human relationships. Note the N.T. epistles (especially 1 Corinthians), which were written to believers who were justified and yet needed to perfect their faith by making it useful and seen by man (vs.18 “show me”). At the end of verse 17 we read that fruitless faith is “by itself” suggesting that it may be genuine yet not perfected in that it is useless in social relationships, fruitless in its God intended practical purpose, and unseen by others. It is clear that genuine faith is expected to produce faithfulness as it (the faith) is perfected. This does not mean that faith fails to justify before God (Paul’s teaching) until it is perfected in obedience.

In Matthew 5:16 Jesus tells his disciples to let their light shine “before men” so that men may see their good works and glorify God. He does not suggest that “their light” did not exist before others see it but rather that it is of little practical value in this life until it is seen. James makes the same point with respect to faith.

1 Peter 1:14-19 **“Judging according to each man’s work”**

This text can be read so as to suggest that God will (at the final judgment) weigh every person’s work in the flesh and give acceptance only to those who are as holy as God is holy. Such a reading would further force us to conclude that (1) only Christ would escape condemnation because all others (including sincere believers) have sinned and do continue to fall short of God’s perfect holy standard, and (2) Peter contradicts Paul and is even inconsistent within his present letter, for he affirms salvation on the basis of faith in Christ (1 Peter 1:3-5,8-9; 3:18,21).

A better understanding of this text would see the “important judgment” of God as only an indication of His assessment of sin as sin, and not a reference to the condemnation or verdict that will be pronounced at the final “day of judgment.” In other words, Peter is saying, “God will always see sin as sin, no matter who commits it.” This is not to say that all will experience the same consequences. The sinning believer will be clothed in the blood of Christ and thus not be condemned along with the world on the great day of final judgment. The believer will, however, be disciplined as a son (see Hebrews 12:7-13). Peter’s argument is that “you (as a child of God) should recognize the sinfulness of sin because of the nature of the sacrifice required to atone for it” (vs. 18-19). He is warning his Christian readers to live so as to reflect their new family roots, and not to conclude that sin is no longer sin for them just because they are in Christ. The trials of life that befall Christians are the result of God’s judgment on a fallen world. Christians do not escape this judgment but they do have hope that is unique to them in the midst of the suffering.

1 John 2:3-6

“Knowing God and keeping His commandments”

“Knowing God” is a process. To the extent that we know Him, we love Him and obey Him. This text is not a statement about our salvation relationship to God in Christ by faith, but rather a reference to our relative knowledge of Him. The context clearly indicates that we do and will sin (1:8-2:2). In chapter 3:2, we are given the hope that when we one day see Him clearly and know Him fully, we will be sinless as He is. But until then, we are in process. The test of our growth in knowledge of Him is our life (our behavior).

1 John 3:3-10; 5:18

“No one born of God sins”

This section suggests (at first glance) that a true believer will never sin (vs. 6,9) and if he sins he is “of the devil” (vs. 8,10). Upon closer examination, however, we note two important contextual observations: (1) John assumes that true believers will sin (1:8-2:2); (2) John also recognizes that our perfection in life awaits our perfect vision of Him, which is yet future (3:2). To the extent that we “abide in Him,” “see Him,” or “know Him” (3:6), we will not sin. To the extent that we are “born of God,” having “His seed abiding in us” we cannot sin, because in Him there is no sin (vs. 5). These statements (i.e., “begotten of God,” “having His seed abiding in us,” “knowing God,” etc.) are describing something that is in “process.” John seems to use these terms in both a completed and on going sense. We are abiding in Him and do know Him (2:12-14), yet we need to be exhorted to do so (2:28, 3:18, 4:7). Chapter 3:1-3 combines both present state (vs. 1) and future hope (vs. 2-3). A key word in John’s writing is “abide.” It is an active verb that can be relative in our experience; that is to say we can be at various stages of abiding just as we can be at various stages of knowing, seeing, believing, and loving. Thus, we will be at various stages of sinless perfection. This text is not addressing the issue of justification but rather the issue of growth. In 1 John 5:18 Jesus is described with these words, “He who was born of God”. In the same verse, believer’s are said to be “born of God” and in that state do not sin. The degree to which Christ’s Spirit is expressed in us, is the same degree to which it can be said, we do not sin. The Spirit of Christ cannot sin but the believer who is yet to be fully born of God in the sense that the Spirit of Christ is formed in him can and often does sin.

Scriptures that suggest that water baptism is required in addition to faith for salvation.

Matthew 28:19 *“Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”*

It is suggested by some that this text teaches us that water baptism IS THE ISSUE in making disciples. In this passage, the initiation into the process of discipleship is our union with Christ. Water baptism (the symbol of that union) is an appropriate and common metaphor in this context (note Col.2:11-12 where baptism is likened to circumcision). The focal issue in this passage is the NAME into which a person was baptized not baptism as the MEANS of salvation.

Mark 16:16 *“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”*

This text is understood by some to teach that faith PLUS baptism is necessary for salvation. I would respond by saying that baptism is here a description of the kind of faith (or the extent of the faith) that saves - it is an open faith (not a private faith). The real issue however is faith, as the last clause indicates. This would mean that if a person professed faith and was UNWILLING to be baptized he or she would be indicating that their faith was not saving faith but something short of it.

John 3:5 *“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’”*

Does the “water” in this text refer to Christian baptism? The water here, more likely refers to the baptizing ministry of John the Baptist (not a Christian baptism - see above), which marked those who were penitent and looking for the Christ. The Jews who participated in John’s baptism and were recipients of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost would make up the early church (enter the kingdom). It is also possible that John is thinking of Ezek.36:25-27 where “cleansing” & “renewal” are linked. *“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”*

Acts 2:38 *“And Peter said to them, ‘Repent (plural), {and let each of you be baptized (singular) in the name of Jesus Christ} for the forgiveness of your (plural) sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”*

This is one of the primary proof texts, where the Church of Christ would insist that the forgiveness of sins is directly tied to baptism. It should be noted however that the clause *“and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”* is best understood as parenthetical because of the harmony between Greek tenses indicated above. This suggests that we have here, a reiteration of Matt.28:19. The relationship between REPENTANCE and forgiveness is the key. Luke’s writing (Lk.24:47; Acts 3:19, 5:31, 8:22, 11:18, 26:18-20) is clearly in support of this connection. Only in 2:38, & 22:16 is baptism even mentioned, and in these texts the link with forgiveness is not compelling.

Acts 22:16 *“And now why do you delay? {Arise (participle), and be baptized (imperative)} {and wash away (imperative) your sins, calling (participle) on His name.}”*

This verse is thought to link “baptized” with “wash away your sins”. The verse, however, can be divided into two clauses that point to a different connection. The baptism can just as well be linked to “Arise” as “wash away your sins”. Baptism is however, a picture of God’s inner work of washing away sin (1 Cor. 6:11 *“And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.”*). “Calling on His name” is the key (not baptism) to the removal of sin as Rom.10:9-14, Acts 2:21, & Joel 2:32 indicate.

Galatians 3:27 *“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”*

Some have suggested that “*baptized*” here is a reference to water baptism and that it is the act of clothing oneself with Christ. While it may be said that water baptism does picture our union with Christ it is not clear that water baptism is in view here. This is more likely the “baptism of or in the Holy Spirit” which according to Paul, unites all believers to Christ & His church (1 Cor.12:12-13 “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks,*”. See also Titus 3:5 with Ezek.36:25-27). This is the baptism referred to in Rom.6:3-4 “*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*”

Ephesians 5:26 “*that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.*”

Does the “*washing of water*” here refer to Christian baptism? In this passage the metaphor of “*washing of water*” pictures the purification ritual of the Old Covenant (Ezek.36:25-27 above) which is accomplished here by the effectual (faith quickening) preaching of the word. In other texts it is attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Look at Titus 3:5 “*He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,*” Heb.10:22 “*let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*” The references to O.T. CEREMONIAL CLEANSING (sprinkled, pure water) in this text are hard to escape.

Colossians 2:11-12 “*--- and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*”

This text is used by the Church of Christ to teach that AT THE MOMENT of water baptism the believer is united with Christ’s death and resurrection. It is my sense that baptism pictures our union with Christ's death and resurrection just as circumcision pictures an Israelite's union with the covenant community. In Rom.4:9-13 & Gal.5:1-6, Paul makes it very clear that Abraham was saved BEFORE he was circumcised. So it is, I conclude with those who are baptized.

1 Peter 3:21 “*And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”

This text, we are told, clearly teaches that baptism saves. I would respond by noting that two things are said about baptism in this passage: (1) Baptism corresponds to the salvation (separation) of Noah from his sinful generation via the flood - vs.20. The salvation in view here is not from sin or condemnation but from a wicked age or environment. (2) Baptism is an appeal, by 1st century believers, to God for a good conscience. That is to say, it saves them (separating them, and giving them confidence through their union with Christ which baptism pictures) from their sinful generation.

The following points need to be considered in answering questions relating baptism and salvation.

1. The great emphasis in the apostle’s teaching is that salvation is of repentance and faith.

REPENTANCE: “*Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away,*” Acts 3:19. See also Lk.24:47 “*and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations,*”; Acts 5:31 “*to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*”;

Acts 11:18 *“repentance that leads to life”*; Acts 26:18-20 *“so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins---”*

FAITH: *“If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”* (to baptize) Acts 11:17. See also Jn.1:12 *“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”*; Jn.3:14-16 *“that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.”*; Jn.7:37-40 *“that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life;”*; Acts 10:43 *“that through His name every one who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins.”*; Acts 13:38-39 *“through Him every one who believes is freed”*; Acts 15:9 *“cleansing their hearts by faith.”*; Rom.3:21-4:8 *“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”*; Rom.9:33 *“and he who believes in Him shall not be disappointed.”*; Rom.10:10 *“for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses resulting in salvation.”*; 1 Cor.1:21 *“to save those who believe”*; Gal.2:16 *“a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus”*; Gal.3:2 *“Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”*; Gal.3:26 *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”*; Eph.1:13 *“having also believed, you were sealed in Him”*; Eph.2:8-10 *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God”*; 1 Tim.1:16 *“for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”*; 1 Jn.5:1 *“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”*; 1 Jn.5:13 *“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life.”*

NOTE: In not one of the above texts is baptism mentioned as instrumental to salvation while the repeated and clear reference is to “repentance” and “faith” as the key issue. If water baptism was essential to salvation it is inconceivable that it would not be mentioned.

2. The testimony of Paul’s ministry in 1 Cor.1:14-16 where, in preaching the gospel, he demphasized baptism is significant. *“I thank God that I baptized none of you, --- For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”* If baptism was the point at which sins were removed, Paul seems to have left a lot of people in their sins. Is this plausible?
3. The experience of Cornelius in Acts 10:43-47, 11:13-18 where believers were baptized AFTER receiving the Spirit is significant. This would be impossible if baptism were necessary to bring salvation.
4. The obedience of faith: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”* Jn.6:29. Outward acts of obedience do not satisfy the demand of the gospel while inner faith does. See also Jn.3:36; Acts 6:7; Rom.10:16, 16:26; 2 Thess.1:8; 1 Pet.1:22, 2:7-8, 4:17.
5. The testimony of Jesus against the Pharisees in Matthew 15:11 is significant. *“Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth.”* The Pharisee insisted that the outward form of faith (in this case the washing of hands) be the mark of a person’s “right standing” with God while Jesus drew attention to the inner heart as the real issue.
6. The testimony of Paul concerning circumcision and faith in Rom.4:9-13 is significant. In this passage Paul argues that circumcision came after saving faith and that Abraham was justified by faith BEFORE he outwardly obeyed the law. NOTE ALSO Gal.5:1-6, 6:15. These passages are so clear and fundamental to Paul's teaching about God's grace that it is hard to imagine how anyone could miss the point - INNER FAITH NOT OUTER CEREMONY OR CONFORMITY TO THE LAW BRINGS SALVATION.

The Point

While there are many passages that seem to contradict the graciousness of God, they can be understood in such a way that they lose their force.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

Problem passages can be understood in different ways.

Heart

I am to believe that:

God's radical grace is a Biblical doctrine.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Study problem texts with patience and prayer.