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Hyper-Grace and the Gospel (1) **Titus 2:11-14**

Given the frequency with which I quote him in my messages, you undoubtedly know by now that one of my favorite authors is J. I. Packer, author of dozens of books and hundreds of articles. One of Packer's more intriguing books is one that he titled, *Hot Tub Religion*. I won't go into any explanation as to why he chose that title, but there is something he says in the opening pages of this book that I have often found extremely helpful.

Packer defines a theologian as one "who in some sense specializes in the study of God's truth" (12). He specifically has in mind what we might call a "*pastor-theologian*." I would happily, and I hope not presumptuously, take that title for myself. *So what is the task of the pastor-theologian?* Here is how Packer describes it:

"Think of [pastor-] theologians as *the church's sewage specialists*. Their role is to detect and eliminate intellectual pollution, and to ensure, so far as man can, that God's life-giving truth flows pure and unpoisoned into Christian hearts. Their calling obliges them to act as the church's water engineers, seeking by their preaching, teaching, and biblical exposition to make the flow of truth strong and steady; but it is particularly as disposers of spiritual sewage that I want to portray them. They are to test the water and filter out anything they find that confuses minds, corrupts judgments, and distorts the way that Christians view their own lives. If they see Christians astray, they must haul them back on track; if they see them dithering, they must give them certainty; if they find them confused, they must straighten them out" (13).

So let me come straight to the point. I don't often do this, but today and next week I'm going to take up the task of serving as Bridgeway's "sewage specialist." Simply put, I want to address what I perceive to be a serious error that is present in our city, to some degree in our church, and certainly pervasive in many sectors of Christianity worldwide. When I was in England in late February I asked a number of pastors if this particular teaching was present in the U.K. They all responded by saying it was rampant everywhere.

And I must tell you that it is also rampant here in America. And today and next week I want to address it. I'm talking about what its proponents have called "The Grace Revolution" or the "Grace Awakening" or "Pure Grace" or some such label. Others, such as myself, would speak of it in slightly less glowing terms. We call it the error of "Hyper-Grace."

Now before I explain what hyper-grace is, I want to say something about the majority of those who push this theological agenda.

First, there is much in what they say that is good and helpful. It is good to focus on God's grace and to be reminded of the finality and sufficiency of what God has done in Christ and that we can contribute nothing to our salvation in the way of works. Our salvation is all of grace. Praise God. I thank God that these people make this clear.

Second, although I will have some harsh things to say about what some of these people believe, I am not saying that those who preach/teach hyper-grace are not Christians. I have no doubt that they are truly born-again believers who love Christ sincerely.

Third, I am not saying that those who preach/teach hyper-grace are telling Christians that they can freely and flippantly sin, or that grace encourages us to live however we may please. I do believe, however, that *their teaching on grace unconsciously, unintentionally, or inadvertently diminishes a person's vigilance and determination to pursue holiness of life.*

Fourth, I am not saying that no one has benefited from the ministries of those who teach/preach hyper-grace. Many who were under the burden of legalism and oppressive expressions of religion have found great freedom and joy when they've heard of the glorious grace of Jesus Christ.

So what is hyper grace and where did it come from? It is primarily a reaction against *religion and legalism*. By “religion” I mean an approach to Christianity that focuses on outward image and empty ritual. The focus of religion is to impress others with one’s devotion and piety. Religion is all about performance, whether or not there is an inner spiritual reality from which it arises. Religion is all about following rules and thinking that one’s relationship with God is good because of one’s obedience, rather than looking to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation for all of life.

People often equate religion with legalism. The legalist comes to us and says: “God’s grace is good and wonderful and we are thankful for it, but it doesn’t go far enough. We need to add to what God has done in Jesus Christ in order to make certain that we are acceptable in his sight. So we’ve come up with some new laws and taboos and prohibitions and commandments that aren’t in Scripture but which we believe are essential for you to live in a way that is pleasing to God and will retain his favor.”

Hyper-grace is therefore a somewhat understandable reaction to those who in their religious and legalistic teaching have led many to lose the assurance of their salvation. Many have been taught that God will only love them so long as they continue to toe the line, spiritually speaking. “Do this, and God will love you. Avoid that, or he will withdraw his favor from your life.” The result of this way of thinking is to fill people with fear and anxiety about their salvation. Hyper-grace advocates come along and say: “Listen people. Stop looking to yourself or to anything you do or don’t do as the basis for your confidence about your relationship with God. Look solely to Christ and the finished work of the cross. Stop being obsessed with your behavior. Stop focusing on obedience to biblical laws and commands. Instead, focus on the behavior and obedience of Jesus that he rendered to God on your behalf.”

That, of course, is a commendable response to religion and legalism. But sadly, in responding this way, teachers of hyper-grace have ended up undermining the very real urgency that all of us should feel when it comes to obeying God and paying attention to the commandments of Scripture. So, the advocates of hyper-grace have come to those who were enslaved and oppressed by religion and legalism and have said: “Look only to the finality and sufficiency of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.” And that is good. ***But this focus on “grace” becomes “hyper” or goes too far when people then conclude that any attention to personal holiness is legalistic, or that any concern about one’s behavior is religious, or that any effort to “please” God with our lives is an abandonment of grace and a denial of the finished work of Christ.***

This is why we refer to it as “hyper” grace. It begins with a good and necessary emphasis on grace but then exceeds what the Bible says and takes grace to a place where it serves to undermine the importance of personal holiness and obedience to biblical commands. Thus, hyper-grace is an understandable reaction to that distortion of Christianity that comes with religion and legalism. But in its reaction to religion and legalism, the advocates of hyper-grace have themselves gone too far in the other direction. They say:

“God’s grace is so indescribably good and wonderful that there is absolutely nothing else that God expects from you and me. Stop trying to please him with your obedience. Stop asking God to forgive you of your sins. He’s already done that once and for all when you became a Christian. Stop constantly repenting. God has already done away with the guilt of your sin. If you choose to focus on personal holiness and obedience you will end up undermining the sufficiency and finality of God’s grace. Simply look to Jesus and what he has already accomplished for you.”

There is another factor that helps account for the emergence of the hyper-grace message. For many, they have been awakened to the glory of saving grace, to the marvel of God’s mercy in Christ, to the breathtaking truth that everything necessary for sinners to be reconciled to God forever has been accomplished once and for all through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And that’s good. But sadly it’s bad that such an awakening and appreciation for grace has driven some of them beyond the boundaries of Scripture.

What do Advocates of “Hyper-Grace” actually Say?

I initially intended to name names. After all, the advocates of hyper-grace that I have in mind are all published authors. Once an individual has gone public with their teaching they must give an account for its impact on the body of Christ.

I would never object to anyone calling me out by name for what I have written in my books. I stand accountable for what I have published.

But I've decided against mentioning them by name. Many of you will probably know who I'm talking about because you've read their books. If I were to name them publicly some of you might take offense because you know these individuals personally and have benefited greatly from their ministry. As I said earlier, please don't think that I'm suggesting these people aren't true born-again Christians. I'm fully convinced they are. And much of their ministry and writings have accomplished great things for the kingdom of God and have been a blessing to many people. But I think it will be enough for us that I simply quote them directly without naming the books or their authors.

So let me mention six things in particular that are found in the teaching of most hyper-grace authors.

(1) ***God requires nothing of his adopted children other than that they receive and rely upon his grace.*** In other words, there is nothing to be gained by Christians from obeying God's commandments and nothing to be lost by disobeying them. To suggest that we *must* obey God's commands to enjoy certain blessings is regarded as legalism by hyper-grace teachers. "Jesus," says one author, "did not die to modify your behavior!"

(2) Since our salvation is all of grace, there is nothing that Christians can do that *displeases* the Lord. ***God is always pleased with us because of who Christ is and what he has done. We can never disappoint the Lord except by failing to receive and rely upon his grace.*** Hyper-grace teachers insist that *there is nothing we can do as Christians either to "please" God with our behavior or "displease" him or "disappoint" him by our moral disobedience.* Says one hyper-grace author:

"My bad works don't move God any more than my good works move Him. He simply isn't moved by 'works' of any kind. If you are motivated to do a great work for God, good luck!"

Again, he writes:

"Do good, God is glad; do bad, God is mad" is the M.O. of legalistic Christianity. I curry favor with God by good works and incur His displeasure by sinning. . . . It is utterly heathenish and deadly wrong."

Well, when put like that I would agree. But the fact of the matter is that God *is* glad when we, by his grace, do good. And God *is* displeased when we sin. Consider these few texts:

"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to *please* him" (2 Cor. 5:9).

"and try to discern what is *pleasing* to the Lord" (Eph. 5:10).

"so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully *pleasing* to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10)

"Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to *please* God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1).

(3) ***There is no sense in which the Christian should experience conviction from the Holy Spirit for sins committed.*** This next statement comes from yet another hyper-grace author:

"The Holy Spirit never convicts (Christians) of your sins. He never comes to point out your faults. . . . It does not take a revelation from the Holy Spirit to see that you have failed. However, when you know that you've failed what you do need is for the Holy Spirit to convict you of your righteousness."

This man points to Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 where the apostle tells us that Scripture has for one of its purposes our "training in righteousness." This he says "is believing that you have been justified or made righteous by faith in our Lord Jesus." ***The only way God "corrects" us is by reminding us that we are already righteous in Christ.*** To be trained in righteousness, he contends, is to learn how to look backwards at your justification by faith in Christ. But Paul clearly is describing something that is yet future in our lives. We are instructed by God's Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit to learn how to live righteous lives day in and day out. We are trained to say no to the passions of the flesh and yes to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the commands of the NT.

Again, he says:

“The bottom line is that the Holy Spirit never convicts you of your sins. He NEVER comes to point out your faults. I challenge you to find a scripture in the Bible that the Holy Spirit comes to convict you of your sins.”

Both of these men whom I’ve just quoted argue that the only verse where the Spirit is said to “convict” someone of sins refers to non-believers (John 16:8).

The reason they give for this is that God has already fully and finally forgiven us of all our sins, so why would the Holy Spirit continue to remind us of them or bring to our hearts a sense of guilt for having committed them. But **conviction is not condemnation**. The purpose of conviction is to awaken us to where we have strayed and to restore us to vibrancy and joy in our walk with Christ.

Are these individuals correct? Does the NT teach that the Holy Spirit never convicts a Christian of his/her sins? The word “convict” is *elencho* and is used in 2 Timothy 4:2 and Titus 1:13 to describe the work of bringing “conviction” to the hearts of people or “rebuking” or “reproving” them for their sin. See also Titus 2:15; Hebrews 12:5; and James 2:9 where *elencho* is also used. Revelation 3:19 speaks of Jesus “convicting” or “reproving” his people of their sins.

It is, of course, quite true that the Holy Spirit never “condemns” a Christian for his/her sins. That condemnation has been endured and exhausted by Jesus. As Paul says in Romans 8:1, there is therefore now “no condemnation” for those in Christ Jesus. Praise God for that. But the Holy Spirit most assuredly does “convict” us or bring to our minds and hearts the realization of the ways in which we have disobeyed and fallen short of God’s revealed will.

(4) ***The only sense in which a Christian is required to repent is to change his/her mind or to rethink regarding sin and our relationship with God.*** Here is how one man thinks *we* think about repentance. In other words, this is how *he* believes *we* believe:

“Ongoing repentance is necessary to keep an angry God happy enough with you to be willing to bless you and use you. Your standing with God must be maintained by ongoing good behavior, and the only way to accomplish this behavior standard is through frequent sessions with God where you confess all known sins, ask for forgiveness, and repent or turn away from those sins.”

“Repentance is viewed as a necessary but onerous requirement in dealing with sin and staying in God’s good graces. It is a tool to be used to keep us in line and to prevent us from acting like the heathens we once were. If behavior modification is the goal, and it is with all legalists, then repentance is viewed as the primary method of accomplishing it.”

He argues that repentance simply means “to change your mind” about something. Rethink it. See the truth and believe it. Here is how he sums it up:

“The Holy Spirit convicts . . . or convinces me that I have believed a lie. I confess . . . or agree with the Spirit of Truth (no sense of condemnation). I then repent . . . or change my mind in light of truth.”

Michael Brown, who has written the most comprehensive response to hyper-grace, provides us with an illustration of how bad a definition of repentance this is. Envision yourself driving north when you’re supposed to be driving south. The person sitting next to you in the car points this out to you and you say, “Huh, you are correct. I’ve changed my mind about whether or not we are driving in the right direction.” And then you proceed to continue driving north. ***Changing of one’s mind is useless if it isn’t accompanied by a change of direction, a change of life and action.***

The crucial importance of repentance in the life of the Christian can be demonstrated from numerous texts, but those in Revelation 2-3 will suffice:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).

Notice here that the repentance to which Jesus calls the church involves stopping one kind of behavior and embracing another kind of behavior. Stop abandoning your first love and “do the works you did at first.” That is genuine repentance.

To the church in Pergamum Jesus declared: “Therefore repent” (Rev. 2:16a). And to the church in Sardis he said: “Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent” (Rev. 3:2). And to the church in Laodicea: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

(5) *Aside from the moment when one first comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ, there is no sense in which the Christian should ever ask God to forgive his/her sins.*

Confession of sin is only when we first trust Christ for salvation. According to every hyper-grace teacher I’ve come across, ***1 John 1:9 is for unbelievers, telling them how to be saved, not for Christians.*** There John said: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). I don’t have time today to unpack 1 John 1:9. I hope to do that next week. But I assure you that it is quite clear from the surrounding context as well as the entire book of 1 John that he is addressing Christians.

Not so, says one advocate of hyper-grace: “The threat of God withholding fellowship while remaining in relationship is another non-biblical concept. It is a lie.” God never “disciplines me for sin by withdrawing His fellowship.” As we’ll see in a moment, at the heart of this misunderstanding is the failure of hyper-grace teachers to recognize the difference between our eternal union with God and our experiential communion with him.

(6) *Finally, according to many hyper-grace advocates, the Bible nowhere teaches that God can discipline his children because of their unrepentant sin, perhaps using physical weakness and sickness to call them to repentance and restoration.* They also deny that God might inflict physical death on his redeemed children as the final step in this process of discipline. But see 1 Corinthians 11; Acts 5; Revelation 2-3; and possibly James 5:19-20.

Eternal Union and Experiential Communion

The most important principle that will help you understand not only the nature of this debate but also the glory of our salvation is the distinction between our ***eternal union*** with God and our ***experiential communion*** with him. Let me explain.

When I refer to our ***“eternal union” with God*** I’m talking about our standing in relation to our Creator. I’m talking about what is true of every born-again, Christ-trusting child of God. If you have truly been born of the Spirit and have repented of your sins and look to Christ alone for your salvation, the following is true of you:

You are now and forever will be in spiritual, loving, unbreakable union with God: you are in him and he is in you.

All your sins have been forgiven. That is to say, the guilt that is incurred from your sins, past, present, and future has been forever and finally wiped clean. This is why Paul says there is “no condemnation” for those who are in Christ Jesus by faith (Rom. 8:1; see also Eph. 1:7).

You are now and forever will be an adopted child of God.

You are now and forever will be redeemed or ransomed from the condemning power of sin and guilt.

You are now and forever will be justified in God’s sight, which is to say that through faith in Christ God has imputed or reckoned to you the righteousness of Jesus and declared you to be perfectly acceptable in his sight, not because of what you have done but because of what Christ has done in living a sinless life and dying a substitutionary death for you.

You are now and forever will be in spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Or, to use the words of the apostle Paul, you are by faith “in Christ”.

You are now and forever will be reconciled to God.

You are now and forever will be delivered or saved from the wrath of God. You will never face the threat of divine wrath, as Jesus has faced it, endured it, and exhausted it in himself on the cross.

You are now and forever will be seated together with Christ in heavenly places.

This is what I mean when I speak of your “eternal union” with God. It is your position as a saved, redeemed, forgiven, justified, adopted child of God. **It is “eternal” in the sense that it lasts forever.** Nothing can change it or undo it or reverse it. But these are also *non-experiential* realities. In other words, you don’t “feel” justification. You may feel an emotion of joy and gratitude because you are justified, but justification is not something that you experience in your body or your hormones or even in your emotions or affections. **Nothing that happens in this life can affect your eternal union.** Your obedience doesn’t add to it and your disobedience doesn’t detract from it. It is perfect and complete and final.

So, our “eternal union” with God is our standing, our position, our eternal and unchanging relationship with our great Triune God.

But our **“experiential communion”** is something different. Note first of all **the contrast between “eternal” and “experiential”**. The word “experiential” refers to what happens to us and in us now, in time, as each day passes. We *experience* the blessings of the indwelling Spirit. We *experience* the joy of knowing God loves us. We *experience* the intimacy of walking in close relationship with Christ day in and day out. We *experience* the power of the Spirit operating through us in spiritual gifts.

Now, I hope you see the difference between what is “eternal” and what is “experiential.” **Now note the difference between the words “union” and “communion”**. The word “union” points to what is true of us in our relationship to God because of his grace. I am *united* with Christ through faith. I will always be in “union” with him. Christ’s life is my life. His righteousness is my righteousness. I don’t feel or experience this “union” but I know it to be true because God says it is true.

But the word “communion” refers to what I can feel and sense and enjoy and experience today and every day thereafter. **Whereas my “union” with God never changes, my “communion” with him does.** Whereas God is now and always will be my Father, my experience of that truth can go up and go down. One day I might enjoy his fatherly affection, but on another day I may have lived in such a way that this enjoyment diminishes. **My sonship didn’t diminish. My status as God’s child is unchanged. But my capacity to enjoy and feel the glory of being a child of God can be undermined by unrepentant sin.**

The advocates of Hyper Grace, in my opinion, have failed to properly differentiate between these two realities. They don’t fully grasp the distinction between what is “eternal” and what is “experiential,” and they don’t carefully differentiate between what is true of my “union” with God and my “communion” with God.

I sense that what has happened is that they so emphasize the “eternal union” of the child of God that they think any reference to or stress or emphasis on the “experiential” dynamics of our relationship with God is contrary to grace. Or worse still, it borders on legalism. To their way of thinking, to say that I “should” obey God, and that if I don’t and remain unrepentant in sin I will not “experience” the sense of joy and peace that comes with being his child, is legalism. It is a failure to celebrate grace.

No, not at all. Now, is it possible for people to live as though the daily experiential disobedience of the Christian can undermine or overturn his/her eternal union? Yes. But it can’t. That’s the glory of grace. **But it is equally wrong to think that our daily, experiential disobedience has no effect on our ability to enjoy God’s presence and power. It most assuredly can, and does.**

If you will keep clearly in your mind this difference between your “eternal union” with God and your “experiential communion” with him, you’ll be able to make sense of the dispute that is occurring.

So let me sum up. The condemnation that comes with my sin and guilt has been forever removed because Christ took it upon himself. When it comes to my *eternal union with God*, I have been fully and finally forgiven of all my sins, past, present, and future. I need never again ask for forgiveness for sins when it comes to my *salvation* or my eternal union with God. But when it comes to my *sanctification* or my daily *experiential communion with God*, I need to confess and receive forgiveness in order that I might fully enjoy and delight in and be satisfied with all that God has done for me in Christ.

Conclusion

So, let's briefly revisit each of the six points of hyper-grace teaching and see how a distinction between eternal union and experiential communion helps make better sense of these ideas.

(1) Is there anything to be gained by the Christian through obedience or anything to be lost through disobedience? In terms of our eternal union with Christ, No. But in terms of our experiential communion with him, yes, by all means. By obedience we stand to gain increased joy and power and blessing and even a greater outpouring of God's grace, as is made clear in such texts as James 4:6.

(2) Are we always pleasing to God? When it comes to our standing before God, our eternal union with him, yes, we are always pleasing to him. But when it comes to our daily experiential communion with Christ we can displease him by our disobedience and should strive to please him by our obedience.

(3) Does the Holy Spirit ever cause us to feel condemned for the guilt of our sin? No. Because of our eternal union with Christ there is therefore now no condemnation. But the Holy Spirit most assuredly does awaken us and bring experiential conviction of our sinful rebellion precisely in order to renew and refresh our experiential communion with the Lord.

(4) Should a Christian be quick to repent when he/she sins? Yes. But not because our eternal union has been threatened, far less destroyed, but only that we might enjoy more intimate and vibrant experiential communion with Christ in daily life.

(5) Should a Christian continue to ask God for the forgiveness of sins so that our eternal union might be established? No. Once you trust Christ, all your sins are finally and forever forgiven. But we most definitely should ask for forgiveness for our daily sins so that our experiential communion with Christ and our enjoyment of his presence and power might be enhanced.

(6) Does God judge his people for their sin in the sense that they may yet suffer eternal separation from him in hell? No. I believe God's people are eternally secure in their salvation or in their eternal covenant union with Christ. But God most assuredly does discipline us for our unrepentant sin, as Hebrews 12 and numerous other biblical texts clearly teach.