

13. Grace, Love, and Authority

The announcement of salvation coincides with the message, “Your God reigns” (Isa. 52:7). Christians recognize that salvation comes by the grace of God through faith (Eph 2:8-10). With this comes the recognition of God’s authority to offer grace. An offer of grace from one who has no authority would be worthless. Grace is meaningful because the One who offers that grace reigns. Only one with the power to heal can offer to heal.

We are not under Law but under grace (Rom 6:15). While there are debates over the nature of grace and works, this is more about understanding the relationship between grace and the authority of God. Because salvation to God’s glory is our desire, thinking about grace and its connection to God’s authority is fitting.

Grace and Covenant

God offers a covenant relationship in which He is merciful toward iniquities (Heb. 8:12). The only way that anyone can be in a covenant relationship with God is because of His grace (favor). We don’t deserve mercy or forgiveness. Without His willingness to forgive, no amount of desire or action could earn it. Forgiveness cannot happen on our authority, but only on His, which is why we need to see this integral connection between grace and authority.

By recognizing God’s grace, we confess that He is in charge of the relationship. We are not co-equals with God in a bilateral covenant. We cannot negotiate the terms of the contract (like two kings might do). In this covenant, He alone is King. We either submit ourselves to Him and His grace or we attempt to enthrone ourselves and thereby deny His grace. He is the beneficent King who willingly lavishes His grace upon us (Eph. 1:7-8). As the lesser is blessed by the greater (Heb. 7:7), so the lesser (us) is blessed by the grace of the Greatest of all.

The importance of this for our understanding of authority should be considered. People may think that grace allows freedom to do as we wish, as if grace is divorced from authority. If we are free in Christ because of His grace and mercy, then doesn’t that mean we may do what we want? That is not a biblical view of grace. Rather, by recognizing His grace, we confess His absolute authority and right to command. By submitting to grace, we submit to His authority. Obedience to His expressed will recognizes that He sets the terms of the covenant, not us. Grace has never been a license to sin or to ignore God’s will (see Rom. 6:1-2 and Jude 4).

This does not mean that we are under Law by which we may earn salvation. It does mean that grace is God’s prerogative, and if we are going to be recipients of it, it will be on His terms, not ours. We bring to the table of the King our faith, which is a trusting, obedient submission to His

will. We do not bring our own authority to the relationship, and we can make no demands on God. We might add things that we like and make us feel good, but it is a breach of our role in the covenant of God to extend our authority to the same level as His. Without His will, we have no warrant or right just to do whatever, for then we are working from our own authority, and this is a denial of His grace.

God's grace should keep us from thinking of God as some tyrant who just wants to squeeze people under his thumb. He is authoritative, but He is not tyrannical. We live under a marvelous covenant of grace and mercy. Even so, the Provider of the grace maintains all the power. Only when we keep our proper place under Him can we claim to be under this covenant of grace.

Some might think there is a conflict between grace and authority, like trying to put grace together with some form of meritorious law-keeping and self-righteousness. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no grace unless the One offering that grace has the authority to give it. Since the terms of this covenant are His, by His grace, then we cannot have a proper view of grace without also seeing His authority. Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness, to live soberly and righteously, to look for the Lord's appearing, and to be zealous for the good works He gives for us to do (Titus 2:11-14). This exhortation is followed up with this: "These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority" (vs. 15).

Authority with Grace

The only way God could, in His sovereignty, offer grace is if He has the authority to do so, and He does (Isa. 52:7). Anyone can say, "I'm giving you grace," or "I forgive you of your sins," but without the authority to enact grace, such a claim would be empty. God can extend His offer because He has the inherent authority to do so. Grace and authority are linked together in such a way that there could be no grace without God's absolute authority to offer it. This was one of the lessons of Mark 2:1-12. Jesus forgave the man's sins, then demonstrated His authority to do so. "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Authority and grace (e.g., forgiveness) go together.

One way we can learn to better appreciate God's grace is by continually recognizing His authority in everything. How so? First, recognizing the reliance upon God's grace admits our own failures and need for salvation. If we don't see the horror of sin and its consequences, then we will not see our need to rely upon God for forgiveness. A reliance upon grace is a reliance upon the power of God for that grace. If we rely upon our own authority rather than God's, then we are not living with trust in God's grace. If we don't recognize God's authority, then we will be relying on our own authority, and when we rely on our own authority, we negate grace because we are relying upon a self-appointed version of law.

When we act without God's authority, we are acting on our own (or another's) authority. This

makes the work our own, not God's. Doing our own works and failing to submit to God and His works, we have fallen into our own system of justification. This is spoken against strongly in Scripture. For example, the concept of boasting for our own works is set over against God's grace and what He has done for us. Paul makes this point: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" (1 Cor. 1:27-31)

God's authority is absolute. He did what He did to bring us to Him (1 Pet. 3:18), and His actions negate our ability to boast in our works precisely because we are not in a position to act on our own authority. Grace does not give permission to act outside of God's will (cf. Rom. 6:1-2; Jude 4). The irony is that the more we act on our own authority, the less we are respecting the grace of God. Authority and grace work together. If we respect God's authority, we will appreciate His grace all the more.

Love and Authority

Just as grace is tied to God's authority, so is love. Lack of love is manifested in selfishness. Love does not "seek its own" (1 Cor. 13:5, NASB), does not "insist on its own way" (ESV), is not "self-seeking" (NIV). When people push back against God's authority because they think they have a better way, a more loving way, they are not showing love. There is great irony in this. Culture tells us that we need to love more and to support all love between others. At the heart of this push is an attitude based on selfish ambition and the wisdom of the world. This is the same source where we will find bitterness, disorder, and every vile practice (Jas. 3:13-18). Worldly, cultural wisdom and understanding is not based on love because it seeks its own will and insists on its own way. Likewise, if we push against God's authority as Christians, seeking to run things our own way, putting our own desires and ambitions above others, ignoring what Scripture teaches, then we have failed to love. Putting a stamp of love on our own will only escalates the deception.

Love and authority go hand in hand. If we love God, we will submit to His authority because love does not seek its own will. If love is meaningful to us, so will God's authority be meaningful. We must not fool ourselves into thinking that, for the sake of love, we can compromise God's will. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Seek love, and in seeking love, seek after God's will instead of insisting on our own way.

"Love God" is the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:36-40). In the very context of that command (Deut. 6:4), Israel was told to fear God and keep His commandments. Loving Him and submitting to His will work together. We must show Him the respect He deserves, and to do so His way.

Failure to respect this connection between love and authority results in love becoming a selfish excuse for doing what we want. The greatest command includes respecting everything about who God is, His sovereignty, and His will.

Conclusion

God's grace should humble us and cause us to see that it is only by His power and will that salvation is possible. "Your God reigns" is alongside the announcement of salvation (Isa. 52:7). Our King desires to lavish His grace and love upon us (Eph. 1:7-8), and knowing that He is the only One with that authority should comfort us. In return, let us seek to live by His grace and demonstrate our love for Him (Titus 2:11-14).

Discussion Questions

1. How is "Your God reigns" tied to salvation (Isa. 52:7)?
2. Why is God's authority vital when it comes to forgiveness?
3. How is a recognition of God's grace also a recognition of His authority?
4. How is acting on our own authority actually a denial of God's grace?
5. What does grace teach us to do (Titus 2:11-14)? Why is this so important?
6. How does Mark 2:1-12 show the connection of God's grace to His authority?
7. How do love and authority work together?
8. How should both love and grace keep us in humble submission to God and His will?