

# Forrest D. Moyer: You Can't Afford to be a Sinner

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## Repentance is Gospel

As John came preaching in the wilderness, he was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). When some of the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to be baptized, he told them to “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8). He told the people, “I baptize you with water for repentance...” (Matt 3:11). This was all in pointing to Jesus.

Yet when Jesus came on the scene, he came “proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:14-15). Repentance was part of the gospel message from the beginning, and the disciples continued preaching it. For example, when Jesus sent out the twelve on a limited commission, He indicated that there would be those who would not listen to them. The text then says, “So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent...” (Mark 6:12). Repentance is gospel.

Preaching repentance is not political. It is spiritual and moral. It is not a right/left, democrat/republican, liberal/conservative issue, for all need to repent. It is not about aligning ourselves with parties and factions, and those who do such must repent of that; it is about being reconciled first to God and aligning ourselves with His will. It is about a mindset that continually seeks renewal, forgiveness, and correction—which is why we need Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17).

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent...” (Acts 17:30).

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9).

Anytime we cast repentance in the shade of “it’s the other guy who needs it not me,” we are

essentially nullifying the gospel insofar as we are concerned. We have become what we loathe: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). In the context of that statement, Jesus was directly pointing at Pharisees who were good at calling others sinners yet not thinking that they themselves needed to repent. If we don’t think we need repentance, then we won’t see the need for Jesus. If that is so, we are truly lost.

Let us not, then, call only one side of modern battles to repent, for we may soon find ourselves thinking that it’s all on “the other side” and we don’t need the Great Physician. If all took an attitude of repentance, then reconciliation will be fruitful. Self-reflection is critical: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor 13:5)

### **Repentance is Gospel?**

We could reproduce many passages on repentance, but how is repentance to be considered gospel? Isn’t “gospel” good news? Is it good news that we must repent? After all, a call to repent means that we have sinned, and sin is not good news.

Sin is not good, but the answer to sin is the good news! It is good news that we must repent because it is an indicator that God is offering something greater than what sin does to us. If God is telling us to repent, then it shows that He is willing to forgive and that there is a solution to the problem. Think about it in the context of Peter’s sermon in Acts 3.

Peter addresses those who were there when Jesus died. “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:13-15). Peter said he knew they acted in ignorance, but God was also fulfilling what was promised through the prophets. Then Peter says,

“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.” (Acts 3:19-21)

God did what He said. He sent Jesus to die for our sins. If we wish to partake of the blessings of these “times of refreshing,” then we need to repent. Is that not good news? Let’s understand how important repentance is. We must continually be making course corrections, turning back to God and seeking His will and grace. Thank God He has given us such opportunity!

## Trust and Submission

Trust and submission are two related issues that we sometimes have a difficult time putting into practice. They are also two of the most significant aspects of what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ, so understanding and practicing them are vital.

Christians are to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). Biblical faith is not just believing something gullibly in spite of evidence. The evidence is there (cf. John 20:29-31). Faith is not just merely believing something, though it does involve belief. Biblical faith is trust. A fuller definition of this can be seen in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith stands under our hope. It is an essential trust and demonstration in the reality of what we cannot see. This highlights the temporary nature of what can be seen over against the eternal nature of what we cannot see (2 Cor 4:17-18).

We trust that God is at work even when we do not see exactly what He is doing. In fact, trust is most vital when we do not fully understand something. If we think we have to "see" or have to have everything figured out before we can exercise faith, then we do not really have faith. Faith can be built on evidence, as God has shown in Scripture, but faith stretches into areas unknown to our experience. Like a child who trusts parents, especially when the child does not understand, so we learn to trust God, knowing that there is far more going on than what we will know or grasp. Trust says, "That's okay. God has it figured out, and I'm glad to be in His hands." When we don't understand what is happening or why, trust God. When we don't understand why God is doing something a particular way, or why we are asked to do something His way, trust Him. He has it figured out when we do not.

Submission is a related, though not identical, idea. Due to modern concepts, and like the term *faith*, submission is a subject that is sorely misunderstood. Many seem to associate the term with the idea of forced subjugation. Since submission equates to being forced or humiliated to do something, and since Christians believe in submission, then Christians essentially accept this unfair and immoral viewpoint. No one should have to submit to another! However, this is not what submission to Christ or others looks like in Scripture. It does mean that one is putting oneself under another, but the idea here is that we voluntarily submit first to God through obedience to His expressed will and then to others as we seek to put them first and do what is in their best interests.

When we submit, we are first yielding to God. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas 4:7). God knows what is best for us, and we trust Him. Because we trust Him, we submit to Him. Herein trust and submission work hand in hand. If I am unwilling to yield my will to God's will, then I do not really trust Him.

When we submit to others, we yield our will to their needs and put them before ourselves. All Christians are to submit to one another (Eph 5:21). Our first concern is not to be about ourselves. Rather, we are to be like Christ, emptying ourselves, doing nothing from selfishness or conceit, and looking out for the interests of others (Phil 2:1-8). Parents do this all the time for their children. They gladly, lovingly, willingly submit themselves to the needs of their children in order to serve the best interests of those children. In fact, we would consider parents who refuse to do this to be bad parents.

We can also see how this works in a marriage that is designed after God's plan. Like any other relationship, husbands and wives should submit to one another (Eph 5:21). The wife is, indeed, told to submit to her husband (husbands are not told to put their wives in subjection). She voluntarily puts herself under his headship. At the same time, he is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. This is a great act of submission on his part to her as he is to be willing to give himself up completely for her and her needs. As they learn to trust one another, they submit to one another.

The interesting thing about submission is that it is most meaningful when something is disagreeable to us. Christ submitted to the Father's will by voluntarily going to the cross, though despising its shame (Heb 12:1-3). We might even disagree with others about something, yet yield to their judgment (cf. Heb 13:17). We are showing a level of trust. Unless we are selfishly demanding that everyone kowtow to our will, we must submit ourselves to others for the greater benefit.

When we trust God, we will submit to Him even when we might not understand (like a child). When we love others, we will submit to them, even when we might prefer another course of action.

Trust God. Love others. Deny self. Submit to one another. These are staples of biblical Christianity.

Doy Moyer

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# The Context of Grace

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. Grace is meaningful because the One who offers that grace reigns. Only one with the power to heal can offer to heal.

We typically think of grace as “unmerited favor,” but we should think of more than this. Think of grace, not just as unmerited favor, but as unmerited service. When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet (John 13), He served them. Peter tried to refuse it but was quickly rebuked for it. “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me,” Jesus told him (v. 8).

If we will not let Jesus serve us by cleansing us, then we have no part with Him. If we refuse the grace of His service, we are unclean. We remain in our sins. We cannot reject His service and accept His grace. They go together, and we deserve neither. The nature of salvation is that we are relinquish ourselves to God by having Him cleanse us. This is His service. This is His grace. Think of grace, then, as service. We don’t deserve to be cleansed, but refusing to let Him wash us is the height of our arrogance and the depth of our downfall.

Grace also needs to be seen against the backdrop of the ancient world. In the ancient world, relationships were often built on the ideas of patronage and friendship. The wealthy were often known as “benefactors” (e.g., Luke 22:25, “And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.”). David deSilva points out that this was a culture in which...

“there was a clearly articulated code that guided the noble exchange of graces. It was within this world that Jesus’ message took shape and throughout this world that the good news of God’s favor was proclaimed. Not all relationships fell under this heading of ‘grace relationships,’ since there were many ‘contractual’ relationships (e.g., between tenants and landlord, merchants, and the like) in which the return for goods, services or privileges was spelled out in advance and not left to goodwill.” (deSilva, David A.. Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity. InterVarsity Press, p. 121.)

The significance of this in that time was that when grace was given, the recipient was under obligation to respond graciously as much as is possible; it would be shameful not to respond gratefully to the offer of a grace by a benefactor. Grace required reciprocation, not in order to earn the grace, but in order to show gratefulness. It was only proper to be thankful and respond appropriately. It would have been a great shame to think that one could receive a gift by grace and not respond in kind to the best of one’s abilities. In that culture, then, we find the concept of God’s grace toward sinners.

By virtue of the fact that God has given us life, breath, and all things (Acts 14:17; 17:24-28), we are under obligation to God. Refusing to respond gratefully to God is the height of insult and shame. This is why we read in passages like Romans 1:20-21 that failing to give God thanks leads to futile thinking and darkened understanding. We have spurned God's grace in this world, and this can only lead to terrible consequences.

Even so, God has, once again, offered grace through Christ. But this is not offered only to those who are decent people. This is offered to His enemies (Rom 5:6-11). This is offered not just to ingrates, but to those who have actively pursued hostility toward God. "God's selection of his enemies as beneficiaries of his most costly gift is one area in which God's favor truly stands out" (deSilva, 129).

The generosity and grace of God exceeds all known limits. The offer of Christ for our sins is really beyond our ability to fully grasp. What this means is that the only proper response is our trust in Him and submission to His will. Grace is much more than unmerited favor. It is favor offered when we were enemies. How can we turn our backs to this?

I believe in grace because I believe in God. If there is no God, then grace is an illusion trumped up by accidental minds. Grace would be devoid of meaning; it would have no part in our existence. We would be what we are (if at all) due to brute material determinism, happenstance, and dumb luck. This is all we would have, and whatever we have would not be a matter of fairness or unfairness; it wouldn't be a matter of what we deserve or don't deserve. We would merely be subjects of an unthinking, non-intelligent natural order that cares nothing for justice, mercy, compassion, fairness, love, or any other virtue. It would just be what it is by the brute force of matter. What makes grace and mercy tenable is the existence of God. And I believe in grace because I believe in God.

What shall we do about the grace God offers us?

Doy Moyer

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## A Reminder for Christians about Baptism

We often use passages about baptism to show unbelievers the need to be baptized into Christ.

Certainly, baptism was taught to those who had not yet done it. The various occasions in the book of Acts demonstrate this. Peter taught the need to be baptized in Acts 2. Those in Samaria heard it and were baptized in Acts 8. That it was taught is the only way to make sense of why the eunuch from Ethiopia, as they were traveling along, asked Philip, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36) The eunuch did not just pull that up out of the blue on his own. Philip had taught it to him as they were riding along. Paul was taught to do it in Acts 9 (cf. Acts 22:16). Cornelius and his household were told to be baptized in Acts 10. The Philippian jailor obviously heard from Paul in Acts 16. On we can go. Baptism was an integral part of the conversion process, and Acts is clear about that. If we are teaching the truth about Jesus, the Kingdom, and salvation, baptism will be a part of this teaching.

Yet there is something else to consider. When we look into the rest of the New Testament to read about baptism, we need to recognize that these writings, these epistles, were written to those who had already been baptized into Christ. So, for example, in Romans 6, Paul is not making an argument to tell the Romans that they need to be baptized, but is reminding them about the importance of the fact that they were, already, baptized. Read this in the context of one who has already done it and what does it show us?

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." (Rom 6:3-6)

Or read Galatians 3 to see what it tells the readers:

"But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:26-27).

Several other passages like Colossians 2:11-14, 1 Corinthians 12:13, 1 Peter 3:21, and so on can be added to the list. These are passages written to those who had already submitted themselves to the Lord. Why is this so important?

These passages are not singling out some of the Christians who were baptized and separating them from others who were not baptized. These passages assume that they were all baptized. The fact that there is so much written to Christians about their own baptism is itself evidence that baptism is both necessary and stands at the beginning of their walk with the Lord.

Paul is not making an argument to tell the Romans that they need to be baptized, but is reminding

them about the importance of the fact that they were, already, baptized.

Why is this important? Because while we want to teach non-Christians to be baptized into Christ, as in Acts, it is just as important that we be reminded of why we were baptized in the first place, as in the epistles. We need to be reminded of the commitment we made and what baptism meant to us. We put on Christ. We appealed to God for a good conscience. We were united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. We were baptized into one body. We put our faith in the working of God. All of these points (and more) serve to remind us continually why we submitted to the Lord in the first place, and they ought to be continually before us as we grow.

These passages also show us that we have a point in time to look back to so that we are reminded of the significance of what we did. Our baptism serves as a foundational grounding for us that we can think about no matter how mature we become in Christ. Sometimes it is quite important to go back to the beginning and remember why we did what we did.

The next time you read the epistles and come across these passages about baptism, don't just think about what the non-Christian needs to do. Think about what you did and why you did it. This will help keep you grounded in the Lord. You will always have that anchor to go back to so that you can continue to move forward.

Doy Moyer

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## Receiving the Kingdom

Receiving the kingdom of God is not always an easy task. Even those who always get what they want may actually find themselves missing out on the benefits of God's ultimate blessings because of how they approached it. A couple of episodes in Mark's gospel illustrate the point.

Children were being brought to Jesus that He might touch them, "but the disciples rebuked them." Jesus, however, was indignant at this and told the disciples, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it" (Mark 10:14-15). The disciples were rebuking what Jesus was blessing. I wonder if we ever do anything like that.

In what way do children exemplify the attitude sought by Jesus? We know that children can be selfish, but we also know that a two year old's selfishness is not to be equated with twenty year old's selfishness who has been around long enough to know better. We often think of children of



having not a care in the world. We think of them as having an innocent, trusting nature as they desire a sense of belonging and fellowship with those whom they trust.

The Lord wants us to trust Him. Like children, we don't always understand why things are the way they are. We don't always see the big picture. We don't always know what's best. And especially as it touches our salvation, we must learn to trust the One whose grace reaches out for us. As children, we must go Jesus that He might bless us.

Contrast the way the children went to Jesus with the rich young man who came to Jesus asking about eternal life (Mark 10:17-27). This man also wanted to receive the kingdom, but unlike the children who were willing to receive the kingdom on the Lord's terms, this man wanted to gain the benefits of the kingdom on his own terms.

First, the man saw Jesus merely as a "good teacher." His address of Jesus as "good teacher" is essentially calling Him a good rabbi, probably one of many. Yet if all we see Jesus as is a good teacher, will we really be willing to do what He says if we find that His will differs from ours? A "good book" might have good advice, but we also feel free to disregard if we don't like what it says. But Jesus is not merely a good teacher; He is God, who alone is truly good in the absolute sense.

Second, the man was asking the right question from the right person. This much was commendable. If we want to know about eternal life, we must go to the One who alone has the right to grant it. But notice that asking the right question and getting the right answer does not in itself mean that people will have motivation to do what is necessary. This man had everything he needed at his fingertips. But his reception of this news about receiving the kingdom was not like that of the children before him. The children simply and innocently trusted and were blessed. This man brings with him the baggage of great wealth, which he was not willing to give up. The cost of serving the Lord was too expensive. Little did he realize that the cost of not serving the Lord would be even greater.

Third, we need to notice that the answer Jesus gave was not based upon some desire to be mean to the man, but it was out of love. "Jesus felt a love for him and said..." (vs. 21). When Jesus says those hard things, He does it because He loves us. God isn't looking to restrict our fun and make things difficult. But we make things difficult on ourselves through our over-attachment to this world. The Lord loves us enough to tell us what we need to hear, even if it isn't what we want to hear.

"How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God." The children don't really care about wealth. They don't care that much about how expensive something is (which is why they play in the box instead of playing with the present that was in the box). They just know that someone loves them and blesses them, and they are happy to trust such a person. The

wealthy man had been tainted by his own greed, and now, when called to give it up, wouldn't.

The disciples told Jesus that they had given everything up to follow Him, and indeed they did. What we gain in Christ is far more valuable (10:28-31). The question is, how will we receive the kingdom? Receiving it on His terms is the only way.

Doy Moyer

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## On Sharing the Faith

This is a simple reminder of what we all know is our privilege and responsibility as Christians. We need to teach others about Christ so that they may hear the good news of salvation and have the opportunity to submit to the Lord and have their sins forgiven. It is just recognizing that we need to find the motivation to do what we know is right in helping others come to Christ.

There comes a time when Christians should be in a position to be able to teach others. The writer of Hebrews reminded his readers of this very point:

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb 5:12-14).

This time-frame is not spelled out, and perhaps it may differ somewhat from person to person, but one thing is certain: no Christian should ever be stagnant when it comes to growth, and none should be satisfied with keeping the gospel private. All Christians ought to be striving to reach a point where they can influence and teach others to trust the Lord. If this is not where you are, I want to encourage you to make that a serious goal for your spiritual growth.

God intends us for us to share our faith. The only way that we will grow in teaching and evangelism is if we intend to do it. Is it possible that we may not be teaching others as much as we ought to simply because we don't purpose to do it? Like anything else, we must see a need and a purpose, then commit to the action necessary to make it happen. Once I recognize God's intention, God's desire, that none should perish and all should come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9), then the question is whether or not I will make His intention my intention. If

we are passive about it, or just think that others will do it, then no one will.

This doesn't mean that everyone will stand in front of crowds in order to preach. It doesn't mean that everyone becomes a formal Bible teacher. We aren't even really talking so much about formal teaching settings. Rather, Christians should see a need and purpose to reach out to others in whatever capacity and avenue available to them. The opportunities may come subtly. They might come through a brief interaction at the store or through a conversation with a neighbor while on a walk. We never know exactly when the opportunities may arise, but when they do, will we be ready to engage? Are we preparing ourselves for these occasions?

The only way that we will grow in teaching and evangelism is if we intend to do it. Is it possible that we may not be teaching others as much as we ought to simply because we don't purpose to do it? Whether older to younger, experienced to novice, mature to immature, God has a purpose in our teaching others. Remember that the spiritually mature will be interested in the growth and knowledge of God for all people. If we love God with all our heart, we will earnestly desire that others learn of God. In love, we will want to reach out to share the news of God's grace and kingdom.

We have a vital message to share. Until we see the importance of it, we might not be so quick to want to share it. See the need to share based on the urgency of the message! Let's all intend to do it, and we will. There is no more important message that we can tell anyone.

Of course, sharing the faith also requires a working knowledge of it, as well as learning to understand where people are coming from and communicating the message with grace — in other words, to learn how we might answer each one. This must be done prayerfully:

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Col 4:2-6).

Let God be glorified! We don't strive to share our faith because we think it makes us great. We are simply sharing the good news that saved us from our sins and has the ability to save everyone. The message comes from God, and we are serving God through teaching the message.

Doy Moyer

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# Pride

Sin is described in Scripture, not only as a transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4), but also as a falling short of God's glory (Rom 3:23). This fact is critical to understanding why the problem of sin is so serious. When Adam and Eve sinned in Genesis 3, their sin was not just about eating a piece of fruit, but about violating the very nature and glory of God. They were setting themselves up on their own throne, dethroning God in their hearts, and deciding that they could essentially be their own gods. At the root of their sin—at the root of all sin—is pride, and that pride manifests itself in various ways. God hates “haughty eyes” (Prov 6:16-17), so being proud of what is sinful is no virtue. The “boastful pride of life” is set alongside the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes, and is of the world (1 John 2:15-17). It proceeds from within the heart and defiles the person (Mark 7:22-23). How does it manifest itself and why is it so destructive?

## **Self-Exaltation**

Pride is the sin of setting ourselves up over others, deciding that we are more important than others, and thus able to decide for ourselves what is right or wrong (cf. Gen 3:5). In relation to God, pride is the setting up of self over God's will, putting our own will and desires above His. This is why pride is at the core of all sin, for all sin puts self above God and His will.

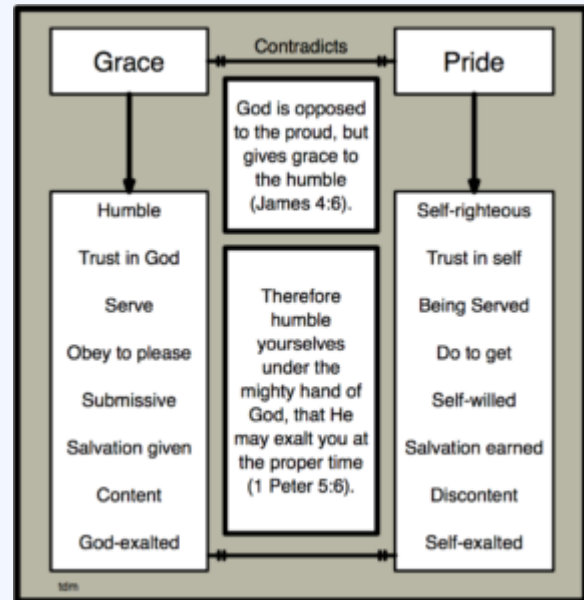
This mentality is seen in the contrasts made in Scripture with humility, showing that pride is a form of self-exaltation. This same principle is expressed a number of times in a variety of contexts: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matt 23:12). “A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor” (Prov 29:23). “The proud look of man will be abased and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day” (Isa. 2:11). Passages like these show that pride and humility are at opposite ends of the spectrum, and God will have the final say as to who is humbled and who is exalted.

Pride is the exalting of self, and this is at the heart of self-righteousness. Self-exaltation will result in looking at God and others with a sense of contempt. This is seen in the parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-18). The Pharisee exemplified those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt” (v. 9). The pride of the Pharisee set over against the humility of the tax-collector is evident as the parable ends with the same familiar statement: “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Self-righteousness is a form of arrogance, and anyone who doesn't measure up to one's personal, exalted standard will be held in contempt. Humility, on the other hand, recognizes God's righteous standard, personal failure to measure up against that standard, and a desire for mercy and grace. This is why the tax collector went home justified. He begged for God's mercy instead of boasting in personal accomplishments.

### Contradictory to Grace

Grace is for the humble who submit to God, not the proud who are self-righteous. Peter writes, "all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet 5:5-7).



James, also, makes the same point: "But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you (James 4:6-10).

It takes humility to submit to God, to resist the devil, to draw near to God. It is here, in that humility, where grace will be found. Pride is contradictory to grace. It puts one in a position of resisting God rather than the devil. The proud cannot draw near to God, for He will only know them from afar: "For though the Lord is exalted, yet He regards the lowly, but the haughty He knows from afar" (Psalm 138:6).

When Stephen faced the self-righteous council, he called them "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" because they "always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). This concept of being "stiff-necked" or "hard-hearted" is another way of speaking of pride. It is an attitude that leaves one with a futile mind, a darkened understanding, ignorant, and excluded from the life of God (cf. Eph 4:17-19).

Scripture elsewhere testifies, "When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom" (Prov 11:2). Wisdom will recognize the inherent danger that attends pride: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling. It is better to be humble in spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Prov 16:18-19).

The only way to grace is through humility, and humility does not happen accidentally. We must decide actively to humble ourselves in God's presence. Pride is the enemy that will consume and destroy us because pride will deny grace.

### **What Does God Really Want?**

The proud will have great difficulty understanding what God really wants. Micah dealt with an obstinate people who wondered if what God wanted was more sacrificing or sacrifices that were more costly. His response was both simple and profound: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Walking humbly with God means that we will seek to do His will over ours. Cold ritual will never suffice. David, in his deep grief over his own sins, understood this: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." (Psalm 51:17). It's not that God didn't want sacrifices at all—He did command them—but that what must come first is humility, being poor in spirit (cf. Matt. 5:3). Only then will we be able to seek God properly.

What God wants from us is to take on the mind of Christ:

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus..." (Phil 2:3-5).

Deny self (Luke 9:23). The old man with all the pride is dead and needs to be kept down (Col 3:5-10). The new man is characterized by humility, according to the image of Him who created us. Through humility let us draw near to God and receive His grace.

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# Baptism and Circumcision: An Important Distinction

Two passages are often conflated when thinking about the subjects of circumcision and baptism. Read these (and the greater contexts) first:

## **Colossians 2:11-13:**

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...”

## **Romans 4:9-12:**

“Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

The argument is made that since baptism is the New Testament version of circumcision (Col 2), and since Abraham was justified prior to circumcision (Rom 4), then this proves that one is saved prior to baptism, thus showing that baptism is not necessary (just like circumcision). Sounds pretty solid, right?

Not really. The problem here is that these two texts are speaking to two different contexts. A mistake is made when we try to take an analogy too far, forcing a one-to-one correlation on every

aspect of it. Neither of these texts do that.

*Look at Romans 4.* The point being made has to do with the Jew and Gentile situation. Jews might take pride in the fact that they had the covenant of circumcision, but they were missing one major fact: Abraham was justified by faith before the command to be circumcised was even given. Because Abraham was “the father of us all,” the Jews could not bind circumcision on the Gentiles. We should note, though, that Abraham obeyed the command to be circumcised as soon as it was given. What if he had refused to do it at that point? Note also that nowhere in the text of Romans 4 is there any equation to baptism. That wasn’t the point being made.

*Now look at Colossians 2.* Here baptism and circumcision are explicitly compared in one particular, and one particular only: they both involve the “putting off” of something. Just as in circumcision there was a cutting off of the flesh, so in baptism there is a “putting off the body of the flesh.” The only comparison being made here is in the concept of cutting away something, which, again, was not the point Paul was making about Abraham in Romans 4.

In Colossians, Paul continues to say that baptism, which is a putting off the body of flesh (i.e., sin), entails being “buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.” Notice that in baptism one is submitting to the working of God, rather than it being one’s own work. This is important because many will argue against baptism on the grounds it is a work, and since we are not saved by works, then it cannot be necessary. But that misses the point: submitting to baptism is trusting in the working of God; it is something done to you. Is it necessary for us to trust God’s work or not?

Paul also writes that “you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...” The equation here is that one is dead in uncircumcision, then, through being buried with Christ in baptism and raised through faith in the powerful working of God, God makes this one alive by forgiveness. This aspect of baptism corresponds, not to Romans 4, but to Romans 6:1-5.

To take the narrow point about baptism correlating to one aspect of circumcision in Colossians 2, then squeezing that into what is said about circumcision in Romans 4, is to change the points being made. They aren’t the same.

Again, what if Abraham refused to be circumcised after the command was given? We know that would have been a problem because it would have shown a lack of faith (trust) on Abraham’s part. He did it right away, and that’s the kind of faith we are to imitate. When we know God wants something, we are not to wait.

When it comes to baptism, the command is already given. It’s not like the situation with Abraham and circumcision wherein the command was yet to be given. We already have it. What, then, if we



refuse or put it off because it is not convenient for us? This will earn us nothing, for it is always by God's grace that salvation is given.

If you want to demonstrate faith (trust) in God's working, how long will you wait to be baptized?

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## Causation and Correlation in Salvation

I realize that causation and correlation are terms typically used in mathematics and statistics. There might be a correlation between two variables, but a change in those variables does not imply that the change in one variable is what caused the change in other. Here I am simply adapting the language to talk about something related to salvation.

There are various fallacies that occur in discussions about biblical salvation. One of them is the charge that those who believe that faith requires action also believe that they are earning salvation by works. If we say that we have to do anything, then we are claiming the glory for ourselves and not glorifying God. This is wrong on at least two counts: 1) it is a misapplication of faith (trust), and 2) it commits the fallacy of equating correlation with causation. That is, again, if two things occur together, then one must be the cause of the other. However, correlation does not imply causation. Just because one believes that X occurs in correlation with Y does not mean that one is teaching that Y occurs because of X.

For example, if one believes that repentance and baptism is "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), then one may be charged with believing that baptism is the cause of salvation rather than God. That misses the point. Baptism correlates with salvation, but it does not cause salvation (as if it is an independent work apart from anything God does). God is always the cause of salvation. Always. "He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3).

It is a false dichotomy to suggest that because God causes salvation (as He does), then this means a person need not do anything at all as if that act of obedience takes glory from God. To the contrary, any time we obey God in faith, we do so to His glory (cf. 1 Cor 10:31). If God correlates particular actions with the salvation that He gives, then He must have His reasons for doing so, even if we did not understand. Who are we to deny or question His authority on the matter? Do we tell God, "We know you said to do this, but since works do not save, then we do not believe it is

necessary right now. We can set it up to do it later"? Are we essentially going to tell God that we'll just obey later and we expect Him to save us anyway?

To see this further, note Colossians 2:11-13:

"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses..."

If God correlates particular actions with the salvation that He gives, then He must have His reasons for doing so, even if we did not understand. Who are we to deny or question His authority on the matter? First, the context of baptism compares with the context of circumcision in one particular sense: there is a "putting off" of something. In this case, sins are cut away. Read Colossians 2 again. This is *not* the same aspect of circumcision being discussed in Romans 4 relative to Abraham, which speaks in terms of Abraham being justified by faith prior to circumcision (circumcision had not yet been commanded, but as soon as he received the command, he did it).

Second, baptism is specifically referred to as a burial, "in which you were also raised with him..." (compare this with Romans 6:3-5). The text teaches that one is dead in trespasses and the "uncircumcision" of the flesh, but then one is "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands ... by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism..." Dare we say that baptism is unrelated to salvation here? It's not even that baptism itself is the circumcision. Rather God performs the circumcision without hands by cutting away sins (forgiveness). This happens in His mind since He is the cause of it. Baptism is the submission to what God correlates with that. Will God still perform that operation if we refuse to get on the operating table? Are we willing to take that chance of disobeying God while still expecting Him to perform the operation?

Third, notice in the text the *cause* of salvation. This is the "circumcision of Christ." One who is baptized is buried and raised with Christ "through faith in the powerful working of God." Then, "God made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." God is the cause. Our faith is in His "powerful working," not in our actions. God is the One who makes us alive and cuts away our sins. It is His work that makes forgiveness happen.

What we have here is this: God is the cause and active agent in saving us. Baptism is the correlation given by God (we didn't make it up; it is from God's mind). Ours is, by faith, to submit to this and trust His powerful working. Real faith is about trusting God, taking Him at His word, believing that what He says and commands will be exactly as He has promised (cf. Acts 27:25). Faith will not separate the promises from what God correlates those promises, for that would be a

manifest show of distrust and self-will on our part. That would not be faith (cf. Heb 3:18-19 where unbelief and disobedience go hand in hand). Refusing baptism because one thinks it is a meritorious work not only misunderstands baptism (it is in no way meritorious), but also fails to demonstrate faith in God's powerful working (baptism is an act of submission to what God has expressed in His will). There's the irony of one who dismisses baptism as an unnecessary work, for it fails to demonstrate trust.

Colossians 2 shows that there is correlation between baptism and forgiveness, but the cause of the forgiveness is God Himself. One who is baptized by faith is not claiming merit in any way; rather faith is being demonstrated by trusting God and His promises in such a way that we will submit to what He tells us. This does not equate to "baptismal regeneration," as some claim, but rather submission to God's expressed will in view of His promise of forgiveness. God regenerates. There is nothing magical about the water. Baptism's correlation with salvation is not because we get physically clean. Rather, we "appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). God is the One who cleanses the conscience by the blood of Christ (Heb 9:14). Yet how can we legitimately claim to have a conscience cleansed by God before we have actually appealed to Him for that good conscience? How can we rightly deny the baptism that God correlates with this appeal?

Compare this with just about any event in biblical history that involves salvation and judgment. Joshua and the children of Israel did not cause the walls of Jericho to fall (Josh 6). People can march around a city and shout all they want to, but God caused those walls to fall. However, what if the people refused to march and shout? Did they earn anything by trusting God and doing what He said? What if they had thought, we'll wait until after God makes the walls fall down, then we'll march around and shout as a show of our faith?

Did Noah cause his family to be saved by building the ark? Were it not for God's grace (cf. Gen 6:8), Noah and his family would have been just as lost as everyone else. Yet Noah trusted God and built the ark. Did he earn anything by it, or does all the glory go to God? What if Noah refused to build the ark? What if he had thought, we'll wait until after God saves us from the flood, then we'll build the ark as a show of faith and obedience?

Receiving the grace of God is not what causes the grace to happen. God is the giver of grace, and ours is to accept that grace on His terms, not ours. If God commands baptism in conjunction with this, then who are we to kick against the goads of His authority and sovereignty on the matter? "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). If we do not obey the Lord, we cannot see life. We cannot claim the promises of God when we refuse His terms, and no theological system that is superimposed over Scripture can change that.

All of this means that while human action occurs in correlation with salvation, those actions are

not the cause of salvation any more than was Noah's building of the ark or the Israelites marching around Jericho. This is God's will, and only God can cause salvation. If a man is drowning, and another throws out the lifesaver, the action of accepting the lifesaver is not what caused the saving event. The response is an acceptance of the offer to be pulled out of what will kill that person. On his own, the one drowning could not save himself. No amount of flailing in the water would have accomplished his salvation. Without God as the cause of our salvation, we have nothing. With God as the cause, who are we to deny the need to do what He told us to do? That is pride on our part, not humble faith.

"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 2:37-38)

They were not being told they could earn anything or be the cause of their own salvation. Their salvation was still caused by God, but their repentance and baptism was their response to what God told them to do in correlation with His offer. Our actions depend on His actions and demonstrate that we agree with (i.e., confess) and accept what He causes to happen (forgiveness). Let's not confuse the causation with correlation. Yet let's be clear: if we refuse to act upon God's offer, we stand condemned in our sins. Again, "whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life." Disobedience always brings condemnation. As Peter asks, if God's own people are tested, "what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet 4:17)

God is the One who commands; God is the One who saves. Ours is not to negate something that God orders, and we do not have the power to make His expressed will obsolete because we think it ought to be another way. In God's wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and authority, He correlates baptism with salvation.

We also want to make it clear that correlation, in this case, is not like it would be in a bi-lateral covenant relationship. We are not in the business of negotiating our salvation with God as if He needs something from us or depends on us. We accept His terms or we lose out on the offer. There is no bypassing Jesus on this (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Correlation, in this case, is a matter of submission. We bring no demands to this table; we have no treasure to offer. Rather, we surrender ourselves to His will and in this covenant, He provides salvation on His terms, His will, His way. We cannot provide additional terms as if we have the power to do so, nor can we deny His original terms as if we can nullify His expressed will. All glory is God's! None belongs to us.

Praise God for His powerful working and for giving us the opportunity to be enfolded in His saving grace!

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