

Digging for Treasure

Part Two

Regeneration Precedes Faith

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In the previous episode, I spoke with you about the biblical view of grace. I told you grace is not only necessary, but also sufficient. By this I mean grace accomplishes the saving work that God intends, *apart from any works of righteousness on our part*. This means there is no need to add anything to the grace of God in order to secure our acceptance with God. The merit necessary for your acceptance with God was gained by the life and finished work of Christ at the cross, and was confirmed by the Father when He raised Jesus from the dead. It is a complete work. We dare not attempt to add anything to it. This may seem to be elementary to Christian teaching, but I find most professing Christians still believe that they must add something to the work of Christ in order to be saved. And this is true, not only within Catholic or Orthodox teaching, but also within many Protestant circles as well — though it is much more subtle.

The devil seldom launches a frontal attack on the gospel. Instead, he comes as an angel of light and whispers his subtle lies from the left and from the right. This is because the devil is less concerned about producing a wholesale denial of the gospel, as much as he is in perverting the gospel by creating a subtle twist to the truth. The devil is the great counterfeiter. The effect is “another gospel” which is no gospel at all — although it appears to be (Galatians 1:6-10). One such subtle twist is found in within evangelical circles in the popular teaching that faith is our personal contribution to the salvation equation. The thought is that Jesus did His necessary work, but now we must add our faith to make Christ’s work sufficient; as if Christ’s work was lacking

in some fashion. This subtle lie presupposes that faith originates from within ourselves, and produces the devilish effect of making faith a work we perform. So, I began this series by explaining that grace is not only necessary, but also sufficient, and that saving faith itself is a work of grace, and does *not* come from ourselves. For while it is true, we must respond in faith to the gospel, the truth is the saving faith one exercises when one receives Christ is itself, a work of saving grace (Ephesians 2:8). This means the prayer of faith and baptism are not in themselves saving actions, but responses to a salvation long ago purchased and secured on our behalf, by Christ.

What I want to drive home in this series is that there is no grace *plus* works formula taught within the Bible. Even where works is declared necessary, as in James 2:14-26, the apostle is speaking of the character of a saving faith which produces justification *as evidenced* by good works, and not good works as standing *in addition* to faith. Big difference.

I know this may seem like I am arguing too fine a point, but I am not. There is a world of difference between responding to the gospel in a faith due to a prior work of grace upon our mind and will, and responding to the gospel in a faith manufactured by our own initiative, and then thinking we caused the Holy Spirit to respond to us! No, to know life and peace, it is critical to understand that salvation is a work of the Lord, from start to finish. Let me say it this way, grace does not bring us so far, and then require our action to complete salvation; rather, grace is at work initiating, and bringing to pass the faith and the perseverance necessary to be saved. From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord.

The Source of Saving Faith

In this episode, I want to elaborate further by talking with you about how the regenerating work of the Spirit *precedes* saving faith.

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by regeneration. When we speak of regeneration, we mean the necessary prior work of God upon the spiritually dead sinner, whereby new life is imparted resulting in a new creation. Jesus spoke of the coming regeneration, meaning the new heaven and earth in which the redemptive story is consummated and salvation is fully realized (Matthew 19:28). Regeneration in the present, therefore, is a present-day application of an event yet to be fully realized. Yet, those in Christ are of that new creation, in the now (II Corinthians 5:17), and as such, living witnesses to a new creation which is yet to come in its fulness (Revelation 21-22). In the present day, the Holy Spirit brings regeneration into new life in accord with that eternal life which is yet to come, and inherent in this life is saving faith in Christ.

If you are in Christ, your salvation represents a present-day foretaste of that new creation which is yet to come. Saving faith, therefore, is *not* something which originates from this age, nor can it be produced by the flesh; rather, saving faith is something God grants the regenerate sinner, by the Spirit, in order to impart new life, and by that faith, applies the justification purchased by Christ's blood. In short, saving faith in Christ is something we exercise, but it is not something we produce from within us. The essential principle here, therefore, is that *regeneration precedes saving faith*. This is the precious gospel treasure I am uncovering in this episode. Let's dig further.

Let's begin by looking at the promise of human regeneration given in Jeremiah 31:31-34, and Ezekiel 36:24-27. Here both Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of the new covenant as a sovereign

work of God upon His chosen people, which we now understand to include Jews and Gentiles as one new humanity, in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22; Galatians 3:28-29). In both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, we note in the repeated words, the Lord declares, “I will;” this conveys the sovereign nature of this work by the repeated emphasis upon what God will do, with the stark *absence* of any command for the reader to perform. There is no “I will,” and then “you must” and “the result will be.” Rather, here we read how God acts and the divine will accomplishes the work apart *from any participation* of the recipient.

Now note particularly, Ezekiel 36:25: “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.”

And then turn to John’s Gospel, chapter three. Here John records the familiar encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus. And I want to show you the connection between Ezekiel and John. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, the Lord told this teacher of Israel, no doubt a fine, moral man of strong religious conviction and scruples, “You must be born again.” And Nicodemus is astonished by this. So again, Jesus tells him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v.5-6). What I want you to note here is that our Lord’s words, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit” is not a reference to baptism, as many teach, but instead it is a direct reference to Ezekiel 36:25, where we read, “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.”

What Jesus was telling Nicodemus was that the regenerating work of the Spirit promised in Ezekiel 36: 24-27 was now at work *in this present age*, and absolutely necessary in order to enter the kingdom of God. If you were a first-century Jew, you anticipated the kingdom of God

coming at the end of the age, and for which, you should prepare. But Jesus told Nicodemus it was *already* occurring, and what was occurring was a work of the Spirit in keeping with the new-covenant promised in the prophets. What further shocked Nicodemus was that this work was not something for which he could prepare, or evoke, or earn. The new birth is a sovereign work of the Spirit in accord with grace alone, and not works. And while the hearing of the gospel is the *means* by which saving faith is imparted (Romans 10:17; Galatians 3:1-3), it is nonetheless the regenerating work of the Spirit which *precedes* that gift of saving faith. Faith is NOT something you originate within yourself and then contribute to your salvation; rather, saving faith is the result of a prior work of the Spirit.

Is this something you understand?

Jesus told Nicodemus he should have understood this basic truth (v.7-10). But, like so many today, Nicodemus was blinded by his religious tradition and works-based righteousness. And, the tragic fact is that few Christians today have a biblical understanding of the new-covenant and its promises. They, like Nicodemus, are steeped in religious tradition and theological systems which blind them to the true source of saving faith.

And I want better for you.

So, Jesus told Nicodemus: 1) You must be born of the Spirit, the religious works of the flesh will not bring you into the kingdom; 2) The birthing of the Spirit (regeneration) is a sovereign work of the Spirit and cannot be controlled, manipulated, or earned, for the Spirit moves where He wills; and 3) this is basic teaching that Nicodemus, as a teacher of Israel, should have understood. Instead, Nicodemus was stunned by Jesus' words. In essence, Jesus told Nicodemus that regeneration *must* precede saving faith. This principle is a treasure to be guarded

and preserved, so that believers may know the comfort it offers, and that sinners may know the wonders of salvation offered them.

If you are now in Christ, you may have not known that the faith you once exercised when you came to Christ was the result of a prior work of effectual grace, but it was. And there is great comfort for you now in knowing that God was and remains so involved in bringing about your salvation. For this means the desire for salvation in Christ was not a good idea you had, but the work of God in you which He will also bring to pass. If you are not yet in Christ, it is even more critical that you understand that you cannot produce your own salvation. On the other hand, if you feel drawn to Christ, take heart, for this is not something you can manufacture in yourself. And Christ has promised: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37). Come to Christ! For nothing I am saying about God’s prior action is meant to discourage anyone from pursuing Christ; on the contrary, it is designed to bring you the comfort of knowing the extent of God’s initiating love for you, and that it is He who pursues you.

We will discover more of the initiating love of God in the next episode. **AMEN.**

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