

Beginning to End: A Gospel of Grace, Not Merit

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. (1Ti 1:12-16)

Having established his authority, his commission to Timothy, and his obvious awareness of the problems at Ephesus, Paul is now ready to teach the doctrine and behavioral model of the gospel to the Ephesians through Timothy. Whether speaking of our salvation or of our blessings and ministry now, divine mercy and grace, not personal merit, are primary to God's operations. Paul humbly acknowledged that the Lord counted him "faithful" in anointing him to the office of apostle, but he did not include merit in the divine prerequisites. His position was to be viewed as a matter of divine appointment, not of personal superiority.

For Christ to count Paul "faithful" is equivalent to viewing him as trustworthy. The Lord doesn't appoint men to leadership or ministry temporarily. Desertion of one's ministry disgraces his calling and should be viewed with gravity beyond our typical perspective. God appoints men whom He expects to live the rest of their lives in faithfulness to Him and to the ministry to which He has assigned them. I will not sit in arrogant judgment against all people outside the fellowship where I serve. I must honor the path by which God has blessed me with the knowledge that I have of His truth and the gracious experiences that I have of His mercy. He is not imprisoned in a denominational box with my name on it—or any other name. He works outside our human limitations and boxes according to His sovereign purpose and loving providence. Whatever God intends with my future, He has lead me to this point of life by the path that I have traveled. I cannot predict my future, but neither can I deny my past. Our primary assignment in ministry should be to serve where God has placed us with faithfulness. If He chooses to relocate my ministry, I am no less obligated to serve faithfully there than where I serve today. Regardless of our location or assignment, God put us into ministry with the reasonable expectation that we serve faithfully where He assigns us. My fellowship of churches includes a clause in its ordination credentials that prays for God's blessings upon the man being ordained, "where ever God in His providence may direct his ministry." We must not diminish this question of active faithfulness in our assignment.

When Paul identifies himself as "chief" of sinners, does he intend to communicate that he is currently as involved in sin as when he persecuted the church? No, he specifically puts all the adjectives that describe his former state in the past tense. He no longer practices those habits. The word "chief" is translated from the Greek root for our English word "proto," as in "prototype". Paul is the kind of sinner that models future sinners whom Christ will also save. His Damascus road experience may not be cloned in all subsequent acts of salvation, but the grace and mercy of God that intervened at the peak of Paul's sin are prototypes of God's saving mercy in sinners yet to be saved. It seems obvious that Paul urgently wants to move the focus away from the whole array of errors in Ephesus into the heart of the gospel. It also seems clear that Paul consciously intends to avoid any appearance of superiority. He cannot save the Ephesians from their errors by an arrogant attitude of moral superiority. By noting that he himself is the chief, prototype, of undeserving sinners saved, not meritorious saints, he takes away

the long preachy finger from his message. Not only is he using his letter to Timothy to communicate to the Ephesian church directly, but he also models a gracious gospel for Timothy. As we review past efforts to confront and recover those in error against this gracious model in Paul, we wonder. Will we ever learn? Claiming moralistic high ground in an arrogant, “I’m better than you,” attitude will never regain an errant believer. It will serve more to harden them in their sin than to cause them to reflect and reconsider their course of action. The only truly successful effort to recover an erring brother or sister builds on this gracious model. Efforts to recover one from error must grow out of this basic attitude. “I am a sinner saved by grace; so are you. As one sinner saved by grace, I care for you and would like to help.”

As Paul sets himself forth, a prototype of undeserving sinners saved by a merciful God, he also sets himself forth as a model of future believers, “*for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.*” Often great controversies regarding Biblical interpretation revolve around small simple words. Is Paul teaching that belief causes our eternal life, a common enough teaching, but an obvious contradiction to 1Jo 5:1 as well as Joh 5:24? The word translated “to” is the Greek word “*eis.*” It may at times define means or agency, but most often in Scripture it seems to take us in a different direction.

“For’ (as used in Ac 2:38 “for the forgiveness...”) could have two meanings. If you saw a poster saying, “Jesse James wanted for robbery”, “for” could mean Jesse is wanted so he can commit a robbery, or is wanted because he has committed a robbery. The later sense is the correct one. So too in this passage, the word “for” signifies an action in the past. Otherwise, it would violate the entire tenor of the NT teaching on salvation by grace and not by works.”⁴[1]

To interpret this verse so as to mean that belief, rather than the death and work of Christ, causes our salvation is the equivalent to the first option in the above citation, that “Jesse James wanted for robbery” means that someone wants Jesse James to commit a robbery. To interpret the word according to the second option, I believe, takes us to the truth of Paul’s instruction here. We believe on Jesus Christ “with reference to,” life everlasting, something that God has already given to us. This interpretation harmonizes Paul’s teaching with the two citations from John (the Gospel and 1 John) that belief indicates a prior bestowal of eternal life. It also strengthens Paul’s parallel example. Both in his salvation and in his faith, he serves as a model for future people whom God will save and future people who will encounter the risen Christ and believe in Him as the cause of their eternal life. Authentic belief in Christ points to possessed eternal life; it does not cause our eternal life. In other words faith in Christ is evidentiary, not causative.

Paul’s position as an apostle occurred due to God’s enabling, not to Paul’s choice or decision. In my youth I frequently heard old preachers describe their ministry and others’ as God “calling and qualifying” men for the ministry. They did not intend to suggest that a man should not strive to live up to his office’s qualifications. Rather they intended to teach that a man’s calling comes from God. Then the man whom God calls He also leads to abilities beyond his human ability and experience in order to make these men a blessing to His children. A preacher who feels no burden to live up to his office’s qualifications will certainly fail those requirements. However, and more to the point of this passage, a man who considers himself to have earned his office will equally fail it.

This humble and compelling spirit in Paul distinctly separates this letter from Peter’s second letter. Rather than seeking to recover them, Peter rejects the false teachers as hopelessly enmeshed in profound error and possessed of such an evil disposition that they have no desire to change. It seems clear that, through Timothy, Paul is reaching out to believers whom he knows and loves dearly despite their present error. Throughout this letter Paul’s urgent and passionate spirit take us down this pathway. Could it be that some of the elders now involved in error were among the men who heard his warnings four or five years earlier (Ac 20:30)? He did not doubt their being children of God, but he gave no

encouragement to their present course of devastating error. For any man who invests his life and energy into ministry, the greatest pain of his labor will come from the senseless departure of those whom he has taught and with whom he has enjoyed sweet and intimate spiritual fellowship.

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