

Grace



There are a number of stories, both ancient and modern, about a monkey who puts his hand into a jar and grabs a handful of cookies or nuts or fruit, then cannot get his hand out of the jar because his full hand is too big to be pulled back through the opening. And the monkey then loses his freedom or his life because he is too greedy and foolish to let go of most of the stuff he is hanging onto.



These stories are about the foolishness of being greedy, which is a good message. But they also make a point that I want to focus on now. Sometimes, in order to get what you really want or to be able to go where you really want to go, you need to let go of stuff that is holding you back.

I'm going to make two statements now about salvation that probably not every Christian leader or theologian will fully agree with, but I believe them with all my heart, because I believe they are what the Bible teaches.

1. **Salvation is a gift of God's grace, paid for by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and freely available to every human being. It does not have to be earned; in fact it cannot be earned by doing good works, no matter what kind or how many.**
2. **Though you cannot earn it, you have to receive it — or you will not get it.**

Statement 1 does not need a lot of explanation. The Apostle Paul made this point very clearly and succinctly in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus:

By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And again in his letter to the Roman Christians:

... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:23-25)

Also this:

[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)

There's more, of course — read the whole fifth chapter of Romans, for example.

So Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells his fellow Christians exactly what Statement 1 says: Salvation is a free gift by grace, not a reward for good works.

Now I'll elaborate on Statement 2 — that you have to receive salvation in order to have it. What's that about?

When Jesus taught His disciples and followers how to pray, He said,

"Pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' (Matthew 6:9-13)

Very familiar words, which we know as "The Lord's Prayer." But look at what Jesus said next:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15)

Later on, to emphasize the absolute importance of forgiveness, Jesus told a parable of an unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). This is how He ended that story:

"And in anger [the servant's] master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:34-35)

Jesus is not pussyfooting here. Every hurt that has ever been done to you, every insult, even the dumb actions or decisions you yourself did in the past — they all must be forgiven. No ifs, ands, or buts.

I have heard people say, “I don’t get mad, I get even.” Uh-uh. Wrong. Very bad idea!

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19)

You might say, “But I have a right to be pissed!” But even if that’s true, you have to let it go. Forgive. Give up any thought of getting even, of settling the score. Leave that to God.

There are also very practical reasons for letting go of anger, forgiving, moving on. First, long-term, angry unforgiveness is literally poisonous to your mental and physical health. It can actually make you sick. Secondly, and more important maybe, is what it does to a relationship. You can’t be a good brother or sister, child, friend, lover, or even associate of another person if there is ongoing resentment between you.

The Apostle Paul had good advice about this. “As far as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone,” and “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

Letting go of resentment may be difficult for you, but be confident that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you can do it. And, as Jesus said, you must. And you will, when you come to understand that salvation — eternal life with Jesus and the Father in heaven — is worth infinitely more than any satisfaction you might ever have by hanging on to your anger and resentment.

There’s more, of course. Jesus and Paul both tell us that we need to give up not only anger and resentment, we need to give up selfishness, self-indulgence, self-importance; also self-pity, self-blame, self-this and self-that — everything that makes you and me think of yourself and myself, and our own needs and desires, as more important than God’s will and intention for our lives.

Jesus put it this way:

Calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

Deny himself. That simply means to be more dedicated to pleasing God, doing His will, obeying His commandments, than in pleasing ourselves.

“Easier said than done,” you might say, and that would be true. But it’s really a matter of attitude and of deciding what’s most important, and then working toward that.

Deny himself. Take up the cross of that self-denial, and follow Jesus in doing the Father’s will, in loving others, forgiving, being a blessing.

Right away fear comes into play. “But what if God wants me to do something that I really don’t want to do? Go off to Africa and be a missionary, or something?”

That fear is perhaps the first hurdle to get past in denying oneself. I have two things to say about this that work for me — maybe they’ll work for you as well.

First, the problem here is basically a matter of trust. You can’t begin to deny yourself and place your whole life in God’s hands unless you trust Him to do right by you. So you have a decision to make: Can I trust God, or can’t I? But you can have a lot of help in making that decision. If you study the Bible; if you look at the life of Jesus and come to understand and appreciate what He has done for you; if you hang out and discuss spiritual matters with other believers, then you will grow confident that yes, God can be trusted with your life. He gave you life, He loves you unconditionally, and He knows perfectly (much better than you!) the best way to manage your life.



The second thing is that denying yourself is not a one-and-done sort of thing, it’s a process. You start from where you are, and you act in ways that are consistent with that ongoing process for the long haul. And you don’t do it in your own strength; you seek and accept God’s help, because you need it.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

John the Baptist, talking about Jesus, said a very meaningful thing: “**He must increase, but I must decrease.**” (John 3:30) Lord, give each of us grace to say the same thing.

So here’s the bottom line: Salvation is eternal life with God, which He offers as a gift. Sin (selfishness) keeps us separated from God. In order to receive His gift of Salvation, we are going to need to let go of all of the self-stuff that we hang onto so tenaciously.

When serving and obeying God becomes more important in your life or my life than satisfying our own desires or even meeting our own needs, then we will have arrived at a good place, very close to the gate of Heaven. I’m a work in progress. How about you?

Peace and all blessings in Jesus —

Brother Roland

Apples

(Author Unknown)

A few years ago a group of salesmen went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They had assured their wives that they would be home in plenty of time for Friday night's dinner. In their rush to catch the plane home and with tickets and briefcases, one of these salesmen inadvertently kicked over a table which held a display of apples. Apples flew everywhere. Without stopping or looking back, they all managed to reach the plane in time for their nearly-missed boarding ...

ALL BUT ONE!!! He paused, took a deep breath, got in touch with his feelings and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had been overturned.

He told his buddies to go on without him, waved good-bye, asked one of them to call his wife when they arrived at their home destination and explain his taking a later flight. Then he returned to the place in the terminal where the apples were all over the terminal floor.

He was glad he did. The 16-year-old girl was totally blind! She was softly crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration, and at the same time helplessly groping for her spilled produce as the crowd swirled about her; no one stopping and no one to care for her plight.

The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that many of them had become battered and bruised; these he set aside in another basket.

When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this \$50 for the damage we did. Are you okay?" She nodded through her tears. He continued on with, "I hope we didn't spoil your day too badly."

As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him, "Mister...?" He paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes. She continued, "Are you Jesus?"

He stopped in mid-stride ... and he thought for a moment ... He gently went back and said, "No, I am nothing like Jesus - He is good, kind, caring, loving, and would never have bumped into your display in the first place."

The girl gently nodded: "I only asked because I prayed for Jesus to help me gather the apples. He sent you to help me, Thank you for hearing Jesus, Mister."

As he slowly he made his way to catch the later flight with that question burning and bouncing about in his soul: "Are you Jesus?"

Do people mistake you for Jesus?

That's our destiny, is it not? To be so much like Jesus that people cannot tell the difference as we live and interact with a world that is blind to His love, life and grace.

If we claim to know Him, we should live, walk and act as He would. Knowing Him is more than simply quoting Scripture and going to church. It's actually living the Word as life unfolds day to day. You are the apple of His eye even though you, too, have been bruised by a fall.

He stopped what He was doing and picked you and me up on a hill called Calvary, and paid in full for our damaged fruit.

Eternal life is His gift to us. Let's let go of everything else, and receive the gift!

Heaven Will Be Wonderful

It's not a place—it's being with Jesus and the Father where they are, and experiencing the surpassing joy of that relationship forever. In comparison, nothing else is that important. So be there!

Puzzle:

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Words:

ALPHA AND OMEGA
ANGELS
APOSTLES
BANQUET
BLESSEDNESS
BOOK OF LIFE
BRIDEGROOM
CROWNS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
CRYSTAL RIVER
FELLOWSHIP
GATES OF PEARL
GLORY
GOD THE FATHER
HOLY CITY
HOLY MARTYRS
HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL

JESUS CHRIST
JEWEL FOUNDATIONS
LAMB OF GOD
LIFE ETERNAL
LOVE
NEW JERUSALEM
NO EVIL
NO MORE PAIN
NO MORE SADNESS
NO NIGHT THERE
NO SELFISHNESS
NO SHAME
NO MORE SORROW
NO TEMPLE
NO MORE TROUBLES
NOTHING UNCLEAR

PEACE
PRAISE
REWARDS
SAINTS
SEA OF GLASS
SERVANTS OF THE LORD
SHINING ROBES
STREETS OF GOLD
THANKSGIVING
THRONE OF GOD
TREE OF LIFE
UNENDING JOY
WALL OF JASPER
WATER OF LIFE
WEDDING SUPPER
WORSHIP