

License, Legalism or Grace

2 Corinthians 6:1-7:1

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

Do you think it is possible to overemphasize grace? That's what some of our critics would say of us. We talk too much about grace. It depends upon what you believe about grace and how you view the Christian life. A lot of people believe, and I would say I've believed this for many, many years, that there is this tension between what we call *license* and *legalism*. Imagine a line and at one end of the line is *license* and that's basically *easy-believism*, cheap grace: "Got my ticket to heaven and under the umbrella of grace, then I'm still *free to do as I please*." At the other end is *legalism*, a *life driven by rules and performance* that somehow impresses God. And there's an understanding that the Christian life should be some kind of balance between the two. So you can imagine one at one end and one at the other and trying to stay kind of right in the middle—feeling the tension of both. But if you're going to err, at least err to the side of legalism.

If that's how you understand the Christian life, then I suppose it would be possible to over-emphasize grace, because grace leads to license. There's just one problem and that is it's a very unbiblical view of the Christian life. When you read through the New Testament, you find that the tension isn't between license and legalism. The tension is between the flesh and the Spirit. Imagine again this *line* and one end is the flesh—that which I can do in my own strength, in my own power. All religion flows out of the flesh. At the end of the flesh there are two expressions of that. One is legalism and one is license—both manifestations of the flesh. At the other end is life in the Spirit and life in the Spirit is only made possible by this scandalous thing we call grace. The more you understand grace the more you move away from a performance-based lifestyle and the more you learn to accept and believe what God says is true. The more you understand grace the more it moves you to living life in the Spirit. There is never license or legalism in grace.

If that's true, then why does Paul warn us that it's possible, once we have received grace, to render it void? Well if you have a Bible, turn with me to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 6, and we will see what Paul means by that. This is a theme that actually comes up several places in the New Testament. For example Paul wrote to the Galatians, Chapter 3, and said, "You foolish Galatians, you started on the basis of the Spirit. What makes you think you can finish on the basis of the flesh?" In other words you started on grace but you drifted back to the law.

I've mentioned the last several weeks that this part of Corinthians just has this building effect. Therefore...therefore...therefore...therefore...it's just because this is true...then this is true...then this is true. Now in Chapter 6 there's really a lot of review. He makes a lot of comments that you could go back in the previous chapters and say, "Oh yes, he's referring to this discussion...or this discussion. So if you kind of want to think about this chapter that way, we'll run it all the way through Chapter 7, Verse 1.

And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain— (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 6:1)

When he says **...working together *with Him*...**you'll notice the *with Him* is in italics. That tells you that those words were not in the Greek text. Now there's some discussion whether it's working

together with the Corinthians or working together with Him. You can make the argument both ways but if you connect it to the preceding paragraph, Paul had just talked about the fact that we're ambassadors—that we're God's mouthpiece—and we work together with Him...and on that basis we *beg* you. That's exactly what he says here. The word *urge* is exactly the same as the word *beg* in Verse 20, Chapter 5. So I think the NASB is correct. It's **working together with God...as God's mouthpiece to beg them...not to receive the grace of God in vain**. Now what does he mean by that? The word *vain* means *to render ineffective*. It means to *render it worthless*. Even though they have received Christ, it is possible to not live in light of that truth. Once they have experienced the realities of grace, why would they ever go back to the bondage of the flesh?

Let me see if I can give you an illustration out of my own personal life. When I was growing up—all the way through my high school years—I would say what I was most passionate about, what clearly defined me most as a person, where I found my identity, would have been in the world of athletics. I wasn't a great athlete; I was pretty good. I was good enough that that was the source of my identity. People in high school would have understood me in that way and that certainly bled over into friendships and relationships. They liked me because of what I could do and that also rolled over into whatever dating life I might have had. Well when Patty and I got together, I was living in Chicago; she was living in Montana. And even though she seemed to be—let me say it differently—I seemed to be growing on her (Laughter) and we were making progress, the one thing that she didn't understand was this wonderful world of performance. She didn't really know how good I was! She didn't realize what a catch I was (Laughter) and I couldn't wait for the day when I could show her. Now this next story I should probably have Charlie Williams tell because he tells it better than I do. This is Thursday night; Friday night is the rehearsal; Saturday night is our wedding. Patty is sitting in the bleachers; we are at a softball game. We had a very good softball team; we were very competitive. This was my chance. Now I was more than a little wound up—got up to bat four times—three of the four hit the ball out of the ballpark. I mean I was good! (Laughter) After the game I couldn't wait. Patty said nothing. We strolled to the car—nothing. I think we went somewhere for a coke; I probably hinted around a fair amount—nothing. We went back to her apartment—nothing. Finally I said, "Honey, did you happen to see the game?" (Laughter) "No, not really; I was just talking to these people." (She hadn't even watched the game!) "I mean did you happen to notice I hit three home runs?" "Oh that's nice. Have you bought your socks for the wedding on Saturday?" Oh I can't tell you how frustrated I was. She just wasn't getting it. It took me a fair period of time to finally come to grips with the fact she didn't love me because of how far I could hit a softball. (And that's good because that guy hasn't been around for about 25 years.) (Laughter) She just *loved* me. I'm not sure I really understood that before. Finally I was coming to grips with the fact that my ability to perform didn't impress her. It wasn't the basis of her love for me. She just *loved* me. I understand for the last twenty-eight years that's how she's loved me. She very much respects what I do for a living...but it doesn't impress her. Her feelings for me would not change one bit if I was pastoring a church in the Sandhills with 100 people. It's just not simply the basis of her love for me. Having experienced the reality of that love and understanding I don't have to impress her, I don't have to perform for her. I don't have to *be* something for her; she just *loves* me. I would never go back. I would never go back to a performance-based relationship.

That's the appeal that Paul is making. "Hey, you've received grace—a whole new relationship with God—not on the basis of your performance, but on the basis of His grace. He just loves you. So why would you go back and live a different way again?"

—for He says, “AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU”; behold, now is “THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,” behold, now is “THE DAY OF SALVATION” — (Vs. 2)

Paul is quoting from Isaiah the prophet—at the time Isaiah cried out to God and God delivered him. But the prophets all understood that every deliverance in the Old Testament was merely a picture of the great deliverance to come—that one day the Messiah would come and, once and for all, we would be delivered in a way that they could not even imagine. Paul goes on to say, “*Behold that time is now. Today is the day of salvation.* We live in the reality of everything Isaiah dreamed of.”

All of the Old Testament prophets dreamed of living in a time of grace such as the time in which we live. We live in the fulfillment of what God promised. In the history of the world there’s only been people in the last two thousand years who have entered in and lived in a way that we live—in this wonderful covenant of grace. And Paul says that if you understand that, why won’t you live in that reality? So, going back to Chapter 3 when they had the tension between the old covenant and the new covenant, yes, the old covenant had glory but it was a fading glory that is now faded away and has been replaced by a new covenant that’s far more glorious—so glorious it’s as if the old covenant had no glory at all. Paul again is making the argument that if we now live in the new covenant, why would we go back to the bondage of the old?

Verse 3:

—giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry would not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God...(Vs. 3-4a)

Clearly Paul is talking again about the fact that we have been called to be His ambassadors, as he talked about in the previous passage—that God has saved us; He’s made us a new creation. He has reconciled us and He’s given us a ministry of reconciliation—to take this magnificent message of grace to the streets and to tell people that God has made a way through Christ by which your transgressions are no longer counted against you—and invited you into a relationship with Him. But to do that, the ministry of reconciliation—the ministry of grace—has to have credibility. And so Paul says, “I do everything that I possibly can to not discredit the ministry of reconciliation.” In other words what he is saying is that what should define him is the reality of grace. If he drifts back into legalism, if he drifts back into license, he’s discredited the ministry.

He goes on then to talk about the fact that he is now a servant, a slave of God. He’s died to himself. He no longer lives for himself but for the One who died for him. He’s going back to the Roman Triumphal Entry imagery—that Paul is now a slave who has fallen in line with the general who has conquered him. His life is no longer his own but is now dedicated to the agenda of the One who saved him. Then he goes through and describes a little bit of what that is like.

...in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger...It’s not really necessary to describe those; they’re kind of self obvious there. **...in purity, in knowledge...**In other words based on what he knows to be true.**...in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love...** He said in Chapter 5 that it’s the love of Christ that compels him or motivates him. **...in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left...**The idea of right hand and left hand was typically the sword in one hand, the shield in the other. He just told us in Chapter 5, Verse 21, that “He who made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we

might become the righteousness of God.” It’s the truth of the realities of grace. That’s his sword and his shield; it’s his defense in this battle. **...by glory...** (Vs. 4b-8a)

Probably he’s talking about the glory of the new covenant but he also talked about glory in Chapter 4, starting in Verse 17—talking about “momentary light affliction producing for us an eternal weight of glory.” Now he’s going to start comparing that which is seen to that which is unseen—that which is eternal to that which is temporal—that which are the accusations of his critics versus that which God reveals to be true.

...by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things. (Vs. 8-10)

Paul’s contrasting the way he’s viewed by the world versus what he knows is true in the eyes of God. All this reflects the life of a slave of God—one who is no longer himself but is now dedicated to the One who saved him.

When Paul runs through that list, again it’s very important to understand the backdrop in Corinthians. The backdrop we know from the first letter is that the religious folks—the critics of Paul, the people who were putting pressure on Paul—had already set themselves up as kings. Paul says to them in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 4, “You’re already full. You’re already rich; you’re already kings.” He’s saying it sarcastically, “Man you’re something!” But then he goes on to talk about his life and he goes through all these struggles and sufferings and challenges he’s faced, and he concludes that section in 1 Corinthians 4 by saying, “We have become as the scum of the earth”—understanding the difference between how the world viewed it and how God viewed it.

One of the reasons that Paul continually goes back there is because the belief in the first century was that if God is for you, it translates into everything working out. It translates into you becoming rich and full and kings and powerful—similar to what we would refer today as the Prosperity Gospel. So when Paul went through one imprisonment after another and he was beat up and he was stoned and he was sleepless and he was hungry—all these things—even those who were for Paul were confused by that. In Philippians he has to explain that to them because they’re trying to figure out what’s going on here. If Paul’s message is true, wouldn’t God be for him? So how do you explain this? That was the thinking. Paul’s critics would use that to say, “Surely God isn’t for this man because look at what’s happened to him.” Paul was not a first century celebrity. The first century people did not view Paul the way we view him. We see him as a hero of the faith. We see him as a remarkable missionary. They did not see him that way. As a matter of fact, interestingly enough, even towards the end of Paul’s life he would often say, “I’m all alone. There’s no one left.” Paul was not a celebrity. There were no cheering crowds and a lot of it was because what Paul was experiencing was contrary to religious beliefs. How could God be for him if this is the case?

It’s common today for people and preachers to really take their stand and they say all the right things about being courageous and standing against the culture and standing alone and suffering through Jesus. They maybe say all the right words but if you listen to the tone it sounds like they have taken great pride in their *scumi-ness*. In other words they’ve become very proud of their humility. It’s just another way to perform. It’s another form of legalism. It’s another way to say, “Hey, check me out. Look at me. I’ve given all up for the sake of the call. You need to be

impressed with me because I'm a cut above." That is not Paul's heart. There was no one cheering Paul. There were no books written; there were no autobiographies; there was no one who would say, "Man you're something. Praise Jesus!"

What Paul was saying is that his understanding of grace caused him to die to himself, to dedicate his life to God as a slave in such a way that it was so contrary to the performance-based religious systems of his day that they didn't even have a category for him. But that was consistent with the message of reconciliation. That was consistent with the message he was proclaiming. The message itself was radically different; therefore Paul's life was radically different in a way they struggled to understand.

Verse 11:

Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. The verb tenses there would be they were continually told the truth; they've continually been open to reconcile with the Corinthians. **You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also.** (Vs. 11-13)

Paul wants to reconcile with the Corinthians. He doesn't like this fight; he doesn't like this tension. He loves these people; they're his children. He wants them to come back together. The problem is that the Corinthians are trying to sort out what is true. They have received the grace that was the basis of their conversion, but now there's a lot of pressure to add the law to it. There's a lot of pressure to add some of the pagan religions to it. They're struggling with both legalism and license and, as Paul draws them his direction, they're standing there saying, "We just don't know what we want. We don't know which direction to go." And that's kind of where he finds them at this point.

Verse 14:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers...

Okay, what does that mean? This is a verse that, if you've grown up in the church, you probably heard reference to over and over again. It was used as a basis for what we called *separation*. Separation is a very biblical principal but, if you do not understand it correctly, separation becomes *isolation* and pretty soon we're hiding from the very people God has called us to reach. So it's good that we understand this correctly. The word **bound** is the Greek word that means a *yoke*. "Do not be unequally yoked" is how the King James words it and that's correct. Imagine the imagery in the first century of two animals yoked together, pulling the same direction in order to pull a plow or some other implement. So it was an imagery that had to do with a very intense commitment, where two of you were bound together and needed to pull in the same direction. Two cows grazing in the same pasture are not bound. Two cows drinking from the same water tank are not bound. The idea of being yoked together was a very intense commitment to one another.

So what would it apply to? It's often applied to marriage. Now I don't think that's the primary application here, but it is certainly a legitimate application. The fact of the matter is marriage is a very serious commitment. You are clearly yoked together and if you have different value systems, you have different natures, you have different belief systems, it's going to be a very difficult arrangement. So the encouragement would be to marry someone who has the same nature, the same value system—believers that are pulling in the same direction, living for the things that matter.

Paul addressed that in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 7—that if you’re married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever wants to make it work, then make it work. But it’s going to be hard. It could be applied to a business arrangement but this is by no means black and white.

You have to think about what that arrangement is—what partnership means. There are all kinds of circumstances that need to be thought through. But at the end of the day you have to think through: Is this some sort of a partnership where we are very tightly yoked together and we need to pull the same direction? And can I do that with someone who has different values and different beliefs? Those types of things need to be carefully thought through.

I think what Paul is primarily dealing with here is what he already dealt with earlier in Chapter 3—that is that you cannot yoke together law and grace. You cannot yoke together flesh and Spirit; you cannot yoke together Spirit and license—you just cannot yoke these things together. The Corinthians were trying to draw in from the pagan religions. You remember we dealt with that in 1 Corinthians—that they were still going up and visiting the temple prostitutes and were involved in some of the temple rituals that were offensive to God—trying to kind of mix religions. Paul said, “You can’t do that.” They also were highly influenced by the Judaizers, the religious legalists. Paul dealt with that with the old and new covenants. These were not people that were denying the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. They were people that were saying, “That’s good but let’s mix in a little bit of this; let’s mix in a little bit of that,” and Paul is saying, “You can’t do that. You can’t yoke together the flesh and the Spirit,” and Paul is calling them to make a decision. He gives some examples:

...for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial...(Vs.14b-15a)

Belial is just another name for Satan. It means worthless or treacherous—may have been a name perhaps used up at the temple. **What harmony...**In other words you can’t sing two different songs. You’ve got to both sing the same song.

...what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM; AND WILL WALK AMONG THEM. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. THEREFORE, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,” SAYS THE LORD. “AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters to me,” says the Lord Almighty. (Vs. 15b-18)

He uses just kind of a collection of Old Testament quotes to remind us that God has always wanted a *called out* people, a separate people, and He would be our God and He would dwell in our midst and we would be His sons and daughters. And we would be dedicated to God and we would live a whole different way of life, driven by a whole different value system and living under this scandalous thing called grace. Ultimately biblical separation is separation from the flesh. It’s separation from legalism. It’s separation from license. It’s separated unto this scandalous system called grace, that we would conduct ourselves in a way that is radically different from the rest of the world: That it would no longer be about ourselves; it would be about the One who died for us. That we would clearly give evidence we are a new creation and that we are ambassadors of Christ—with this radical new message—and that we would be different, which would give our message of reconciliation credibility.

Chapter 7, Verse 1:

Therefore, in light of this, having these promises that He would be our God and that He would dwell with us and we would be His sons and daughters, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Spirit—small “s” —In other words, set all of that other stuff aside that comes out **of the flesh and the human spirit, perfecting holiness**...or maturing in holiness. Holiness means *set apart*, continuing to mature, and what it means to live in the realities of grace in the fear of God.

Paul’s call to the Corinthians is to live in the realities of grace. They received grace but they are not living like it. They are trying to mix it in with the pagan religions and with law. Now one of the interesting things that happens in probably every church—I’m sure it happens here—there’s a group of people that are pretty immersed in *legalism* but they don’t see it that way. They tend to point the finger at people that are engaged in *license*, that are kind of using grace as an excuse to do their own thing, and they point their finger at them and they accuse them—and on that basis they justify their legalism. There’s also a group of people who are dialed into license but they don’t see it that way. It’s just the freedom of grace but they point their finger at the legalists and they identify all the legalism and it frustrates them and it makes them so angry and it’s what justifies their license.

At the end of the day you have two groups pointing the finger at one another and neither of them realizing they’re both living out of the flesh. Rather than pointing your finger at someone else to justify your own system, we need to do just what Mike invited us to do. We need to examine our own hearts. Have I justified legalism in my own life? Have I justified license in my own life? Have I tried to pretend that grace means I can do my own thing? Or do I really understand the realities of grace is life in the Spirit, is dying to self, is realizing I’m no longer living for myself but for the One who died for me? I’ve become a new creation in Christ and I’ve been given a message, a ministry of reconciliation. I’ve been called an ambassador, a slave of Christ, and now represent Christ to take this magnificent message into the streets and to tell people who are living in despair—“Hey, God has made a way through Christ by which those transgressions are no longer held to your charge; now you can be reconciled to a holy God”—but to do it in such a way that my life gives credibility to this scandalous thing we call grace.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You love us, that You died for us, that You are chiseling away those things that don’t belong. Lord, people that like their legalism like to point fingers at people engaged in license. And people that have used grace as an excuse to sin and license, point their fingers at the legalists and both groups tend to think they’re okay. Lord, every single one of us here this morning has some of that in us. There’s nobody that doesn’t drift to that end of the line and struggle with the realities of the flesh. Lord, we all do. Lord, help us to understand the realities of grace, of life in the Spirit, of dying to ourselves, of being motivated now to live in a whole new way—a way that gives this ministry of reconciliation, this ministry of a new covenant, this message of hope credibility to a lost and dying world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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2 Corinthians 6:1-7:1

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

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Opening Discussion

1. Do you think it is possible to overemphasize grace? Why or why not? What would be the concern of doing this?
2. What is the difference in viewing the Christian life through a grid that contrasts license and legalism (it's one or the other) versus a contrast between the flesh and the Spirit?

Bible Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 6:1-10. What does it mean to "receive the grace of God in vain?"
2. As a good Ambassador of Christ Paul seeks to give no cause for offense in anything so that the ministry will not be discredited. Rather than an offense Paul commends himself as a servant of God then describes his life as a servant. Contrast Paul's lifestyle with the Corinthian false teachers from 1 Corinthians 4:8. Thinking through what we've learned in 1 and 2 Corinthians so far, what things discredit our ministry as Ambassadors?
3. Could Paul have lived the life of a servant if he still maintained a performance based value system (legalism)? Why or why not?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:1. What does it mean to be "bound together with unbelievers?" Give some practical examples of what is and isn't meant by "bound."
5. What is the difference between separation and isolation? How do you prevent separation from becoming isolation?

6. 2 Corinthians 7:1 opens with “therefore.” In light of this discussion going back to the 1:1 what is meant by “defilement of the flesh” and what is meant by “perfecting holiness?” In other words, what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit?

Application

1. Most legalists point fingers at people modeling license and most people guilty of license point fingers at the legalist. Both do it to justify their own “fleshly” position. Which are you more likely to be guilty of?
2. In very practical terms, what does it mean for you to be a faithful Ambassador of Christ? How must you live to not discredit the ministry of reconciliation?
3. How can your small group work together to help one another orient around grace and not drift back to the flesh?