

How the Need for Repentance is Compatible with Grace

God as the Conquering King

Peter Ditzel

Many of us are familiar with such passages as Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." And it is most certainly true that our salvation is entirely gracious. God gives it to us as a free gift. We cannot earn it; God never owes it to us.

Yet, there are Scriptures that can be troubling because they seem to contradict the freeness of salvation. Matthew 16:24 comes to mind: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Even Scriptures that tell us to repent can seem to be telling us to do something to earn our salvation (see, for example, Matthew 4:17). There are a number of ways that I might go about teaching how these Scriptures do not contradict the freeness of salvation. But I think the simplest way to explain this is with the following illustration.

Suppose all of the citizens of a certain city in a certain kingdom wickedly rebel against their king. The king then brings his forces to reestablish his kingdom in the city, lays siege to the city, and conquers it. The conquering king sends his herald to announce his terms of peace to the citizens of the city. The herald tells them that, without exception, every one of the citizens of the city deserve death for rebelling against the king. But he also has good news. Any citizen who repents of his rebellion, submits to the king, and pledges his allegiance to him will receive the king's free and undeserved pardon.

Be clear on this point. Any citizen who repents, submits to the king, and pledges his allegiance to him still deserves death for rebellion. The law does not take repentance into account. Only a free and undeserved pardon from the king will save. Several citizens grasp the grace that the king has offered, and they repent, submit to the king, and pledge their allegiance to him. Their repentance, submission, and pledge of allegiance do not buy them the king's pardon as it cannot be bought. The punishment for rebellion is death, and the law does not take into account repentance, submission, and a pledge of allegiance. Turning from wrong and doing what is right, and submitting and showing allegiance to the king are merely what is expected of all citizens. It is what they should have been doing all along. By doing these things, they do not obligate the king. By doing these things,

Copyright © 2010 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact.

they have not paid for their pardon. By doing these things, they have not fulfilled a condition that legally results in their pardon. They could very well do these things and still be executed. The king would legally be in the right if he still executed them. The king's pardon is completely free and undeserved.

This is very similar to the situation between God and humanity. Humanity is in wicked rebellion against God. Everyone deserves eternal death. Through His Son, Jesus Christ, God has conquered the world (the Greek word translated "overcome" in John 16:33 means "subdued" or "conquered"). God has sent His heralds into the world to announce His terms of peace. These terms are: Everyone deserves eternal death for rebellion. But those who turn from their wickedness, believe on Jesus as their Savior, and submit to Him as their Lord, He will freely pardon. Nothing they do can make them deserve this pardon. They should have been doing these things all along. The law makes no provision for repentance, belief, and submission to reverse a sentence of death. These things are not conditions of the law that, if met, will earn pardon. Nevertheless, those who repent, believe, and submit will receive the free and unmerited pardon of God.

But, you may ask, if God will only pardon those who repent, believe, and submit, isn't that really a works salvation? No, it is not because the law makes no provision for these works to merit anything. They count for nothing. Besides, God gives repentance, belief, and submission as a gift to us. I say "a gift" because repentance, belief, and submission are really just aspects of the same thing. When we believe or trust in Jesus as our Savior, we are turning from our rebellious ways and submitting to Him. The Bible usually calls it faith, belief, or trust (all the same Greek word), but sometimes breaks it down finer into repentance, belief, and submission to Jesus as Lord. So, God gives us this gift which merits nothing with Him but through which we receive His pardon or salvation and which, by the way, also identifies to us who we are—His elect.

I hope this makes clearer that there is really no contradiction between being saved totally by grace through faith and needing to repent and submit to Jesus as our Lord.