

CHAPTER 8

Reigning Grace AND THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS

PRESCRIPTIVE
CAUSATION



DESCRIPTIVE
CONSEQUENCE

Patrick J. Griffiths @ 2009

Waukesha Bible Church is a family of families seeking to live in the Storyline of the Bible. She is determined by design to have a God-centered, Christ-exalting worship; a Word-centered teaching focused on personal discipleship through intentional and systematic instruction; a Global-impacting mission that resolves to be a church planting church; and a Grace-based fellowship where disciples are invited to live under a reigning grace characterized by a Gospel-driven sanctification that celebrates a divine monergism to the Christian life.

CHAPTER 8

REIGNING GRACE AND THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 "**For My yoke is easy and My burden is light**" (Matt. 11:28-30)

1 "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and **His commandments are not burdensome**" (1 John 5:1-3)

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REVIEW

Prior to our salvation "experience" we were weighed down by a burden impossible to bear. There was nothing we could possibly do to undo what was done. Our **in Adam** condition damned us forever. God, however, stepped in and through His gracious act sent His Son to be our Savior. In grace He saved His people from their sin. Unfortunately, many immediately are placed under another burden, the burden of a performance driven acceptance. All salvation becomes is a transferring of burdens. Once I worked for my justification, now I work for my sanctification. Both are wrong and both are bondage forming. This study seeks to free once more the freed. It is to Christ and His work that we are called and invited to partake.



INTRODUCTION

I find it necessary to add a personal note at the inception of this short reading. Prior to January 1997, I had come up against the teaching of what I have come to call "grace living." After over a

decade of formal theological training I found myself still not seeing Christ. It was in January of 1997 that the Lord brought everything to a head and He allowed me to slowly connect certain biblical truths. The biggest change was in not separating my daily life from the glorious and delicious truth of being in Christ. What I am sharing with you has taken me several *years* to lay hold of and articulate. My wife and I have spent countless hours in theological discussion and fellowship trying to express this truth in the clearest way possible. Because we all have certain theological presuppositions, words are never devoid of meaning. This is why we try to be careful in how we describe the Christian life and the biblical foundation for its expression.

In light of what we considered in our previous study concerning Progressive Sanctification it is necessary to continue putting the various pieces together. This present study is a vital part of “connecting the dots.”

The area of the New Testament Imperative is of great concern for all New Testament believers. The Old Testament said, “Do this, and live.” Yet we must ask ourselves the question as to whether or not this is true for us.

In considering this idea of the New Testament Imperative I have thought about and have been asked the following questions.

- What is the New Testament Imperative?
- How are we to view the New Testament Imperative?
- Is not the New Testament Imperative something I am expected to do?
- Am I not obligated to keep the New Testament Imperative?
- What happens if I do not keep the New Testament Imperative?
- Is it possible for me never to keep the New Testament Imperative?
- Are we not negating the force of the New Testament Imperative when we see it as a fruit of the Spirit and something He is working in us and through us?
- What role does the New Testament Imperative play in progressive sanctification?
- What role does it play in the outworking of man’s volition?

These questions and perhaps many more might surface when discussing the New Testament Imperative.

Michael Wells sets a positive tone in his work, *Sidetracked in the Wilderness*:

Reigning Grace and the New Testament Commands

Abundant life is not something to work for, but rather is something given to be worked from. My acceptance is not based on what I do but rather on what I am. Abundant life does not require that I imitate Jesus, but rather that I participate in His life; it does not require that I work to believe, but that I work because I believe. Be assured of this: If the abundant Christian life requires great determination, self-will, intellect, talent, and ability, then we are all too weak, blind, and stupid ever to arrive. God's answer for abundant life will always be unbelievably simple: The Christian must learn to believe and receive its simplicity.¹

I invite your questions concerning this area. It is an area that cannot be glossed over, avoided or neglected. It is the essence of the Christian life. I realize that many of you have questions. Do not despair in the journey. It is a wonderful process of seeing the Lord work in your mind to bring you to the point of deliverance and rest. In light of this I have chosen to write this short study on "Reigning Grace and the New Testament Imperative." Hopefully this will shed more light than heat. Without further delay let us begin.

I ask that you read all of the verses listed. Ultimately, it will not matter what you or I say, only what God has said. I have highlighted certain sections of the verses to assist in the assimilation process.



THE PROBLEM

Many people who are sincerely seeking to please the Lord find themselves in a mental dilemma and spiritual depression when it comes to the imperatives of the New Testament. Those who are honest with themselves find their complete inability to measure up to the New Testament ideal. Their obedience falls far short of the mark and thus they will develop one of three reactions to the New Testament imperative.

- **First**, they will try to keep the imperative, note their terrible failure, and live with despair and defeat.
- **Second**, they will simply give up, and like the proverbial ostrich, live with their head in the sand and simply deny the imperative.
- **Finally**, there is the group that has convinced themselves that they are keeping the imperatives and live in pharisaical self-deception.



In looking at the New Testament imperative, it is necessary to lay out certain foundational truths. We cannot afford to study truth in isolation. If you have not understood what Jesus Christ is for you in His substitutionary and sacrificial death, then it is of utmost importance to study these areas first. In our current study, the focus is not for us to keep the imperative as a sign of our own perseverance. For too long we have placed ourselves in the center of personal perseverance. Such cannot be the case. The Christian walk is not about you, but about Him. The fulfilled imperative is the pulse of life. If life is present, the imperative is being fulfilled. The focus is on laboring to rest. The struggle is to believe habitually that He is enough in this life and in the life to come. I am not to be pursuing the imperative; I am to be pursuing Him.

God doesn't want us to focus on our service to Him. When grace rules our lives, we focus on Him.²

On the radio, in church, in Christian meetings, we constantly are hammered to be 'obedient' to God and threatened with the consequences if we aren't. But obedience is a natural result of love, not a legalistic obligation.³

Non-perseverance is a lapse of faith. It is the failure to believe. Perseverance is not trying to see how many fulfilled imperatives I can string along. Perseverance is daily believing in the sufficiency and satisfaction of Jesus Christ.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), in his chapter, "Why Saints Persevere," makes the following observation:

This faithfulness of God is the foundation and cornerstone of our hope of final perseverance. The saints will persevere in holiness because God perseveres in grace. He perseveres to bless, and therefore believers persevere in being blessed. He continues to keep His people, and therefore they continue to keep His commandments. This is good solid ground to rest on. It is delightfully consistent with the title of this book, *All of Grace*. Thus, it is free favor and infinite mercy that ring in the dawn of salvation; and the same sweet bells sound melodiously through the whole day of grace.⁴

The whole concept of slavery as we know it is transformed when God becomes the 'Slave Master.' So our new 'Slave Master' does not demand 'work'; He produces fruit. He does

not pay wages for work; he gives gifts in reward for His own fruit. And the gift is eternal life, while the only wage a sinner can earn is death. Beware of a wage relation to God. There is no such thing.⁵

One of the most life transforming truths I encountered is contained in this simple statement. "I do not read the New Testament to see how to live. I read the New Testament to see what He is like." Listen to this same thought from Bob George:

One pastor I know said when he first started studying the Bible, someone told him to place a 'c' next to all the commands, and a 'p' next to all the promises. He said that after a while, he started getting 'c' sick. *If we don't realize that the purpose of the Bible is to point us to Christ, then all we will see are the dos and the don'ts.*⁶

Before we continue any further, let us note a subtle inroad of legalism within the normal Christian life. Jerry Bridges provides some keen insight as to how we view the New Testament imperative:

We are all legalistic by nature; that is, we innately think so much performance by us earns so much blessing from God. Not only are we legalistic by nature, our Christian culture reinforces this attitude in us. We are exhorted to attend church regularly, have a daily quiet time, study our Bibles, pray, memorize Scripture, witness to our neighbors, and give to missions - all of which are important Christian activities. Though no one ever comes right out and says so, somehow the vague impression is created in our minds that we'd better do those things or God will not bless us. Then we turn to the Bible and read that we are to work out our salvation, to pursue holiness, and to be diligent to add to our faith such virtues as goodness, knowledge, self-control, and love. In fact, we find the Bible filled with exhortations to do good works and pursue the disciplines of spiritual growth. Again, because we are legalistic by nature, we assume our performance in these areas earns God's blessings in our lives.⁷

I don't mean to disparage any spiritual discipline, commitment, or sacrifice. These all have their place in the realm of grace. But they are never to be relied on as a meritorious cause for expecting God's blessing or answer to prayer.⁸

Do you see the subtle inroad of legalism within the doctrine of grace? With Jerry's comments fresh in our minds, let us now begin the process of examining the New Testament imperative.



WHAT ARE THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS ANYWAY?

The imperative mood is the mood of *intention*. It is the mood furthest removed from certainty. Ontologically, as one of the potential or oblique moods, the imperative moves in the realm of volition (involving the imposition of one's will upon another) and *possibility*.⁹

Thus according to this definition, with the hundreds of imperatives stated in the Scripture the certainty of their fulfillment lies in the volition of the individual believer. If I were to understand this definition of the imperative in isolation it would be possible for the New Testament believer to live his entire saved life from justification to his glorification in complete rebellion against the New Testament imperative. Or that the imperative's presence in the life of the believer is conditioned solely on his will. Unfortunately the definition is cut off from a theological surrounding and thus sterile of meaning. Happily there are other bedrock truths that must come into play in order for us to make sense in all of this.



WALLACE'S DEFINITION

First, grammatically, the imperative mood stands on unstable ground. It might or might not be fulfilled.

Second, because the imperative is contingent on man's volition, the certainty of fulfillment is removed. If the burden of the imperative is placed on the volition of man, then there is no guarantee that it will happen.

Third, the very nature of the imperative implies the imposition of someone's will over one's own. Thus, you might be "free" to choose between choices, but by the mere fact that you are being called upon to choose is an imposition on your freedom of non-choice.

Fourth, the entire discussion of the imperative found above is in the absence of any outside interaction with other material. It is looking at it stripped of theology. This view of the imperative is very much man-centered. There is nothing of Christ in the above information.

It is also important to keep in mind that not every imperative functions in the same way or at the same level. For our study, we will simply consider the imperative as it is a choice between “two” options.



CERTAIN PRESUPPOSITIONS

First, imperatives are describing what Christ is like. They reveal Him. As such, we are not to see the imperative as a standard to be obtained, but rather as a reflection of Him. When you consider the imperative, you must ask yourself the question, “Why am I being called upon to ‘do’ this?” The answer must be found in every imperative being a reflection of Him.

This is contrary to what we often hear: “That the Bible tells us how to live, that it is a guidebook for life.” This is an unfortunate distraction. We have come to the Bible as if it is a set of guidelines for living instead of as a picture of what He is like. It is in His life that we live. We cannot afford to forget that the Bible is a revelation of Him. From Genesis through Revelation it is all about Him (Luke 24:27). We must not fail to see Him in everything. He is the substance that casts every shadow.

Second, imperatives are describing **something I work from**, not **something I am to work for**. The admonition to be holy is because I am holy. I do not work to be holy; I work because I am holy.

“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, **just as you are in fact unleavened**. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (**just as you actually do walk**), that you excel still more” (1 Thess. 4:1).

“If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for **the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are**” (1 Cor. 3:17).

“By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; **because as He is, so also are we in this world**” (1 John 4:17)

It is only as our earthen vessel is removed that the treasure within manifests Himself (2 Cor. 4:7-12). It is not of us to break the

vessel. This is His work, not ours. The breaking of the vessel is not some '7-step' procedure. He breaks who He wants, when He wants.

Third, imperatives are to be seen as a different way of saying, "Keep, obey, fruit, and good works." If such a grouping is not valid, then each one of the above describes a distinct act.

No listing of the fruit of the Spirit is an exhaustive listing. They are suggestive. The fruit of the Spirit is as diversified as personalities and cultures and as limitless as our infinite God.

The fruit of the Spirit is accenting the source of obedience. By identifying the fruit as of the Spirit, the Scripture tells us who generates such consequences.

"Keeping and obedience" are both "good works." "Keeping and obedience" is what "the fruit of the Spirit" looks like when it is expressed in and through earthen vessels.

Fourth, adherence to the imperative does not make you any more in line with God's approval. Your obedience does not make you more "bless-able." Your obedience does not put a smile on His face (if such language is permissible).

We have defined a lifetime of obedience by individual acts. Nonetheless, such a focus is isolating the pieces from the bigger picture. Life is not defined by the individual pieces but by the larger pattern.

Ephesians 1:3 tells me that I have been blessed with every spiritual blessing that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:17 tells me that I am a joint-heir with Christ. Moreover, **all that He is and has is mine, not because of performance, but because of position.**

Because of our past instruction, our minds think we are always working from a position of deficiency, rather than abundance. We have been conditioned to believe we are defeated and thus are trying to become victorious. Such thinking is unfortunate. We are not defeated in any sense of the word. We are always triumphing in Him (Rom. 8:37). Moreover, **we work from victory, not for victory.**

Fifth, non-conformity to the imperative does not make you any more in line with God's judgment. Your disobedience does not make you more "condemned." Your disobedience does not put a frown on His face.

Whatever divine penalty rested against sin, it was carried out in full at Calvary (Col. 2:13). In a world that rewards hard work and achievement, this is not God's standard of measurement. There is nothing you could do to measure up to His expectations. God's standard is so high that He had to send His Son to work in our behalf. To think you could do anything to fulfill His expectations is based on a faulty view of your ability and His benchmark. In such thinking, man's ability has been raised and God's benchmark has been lowered.

Whether in obedience or in disobedience, our response is to be the same. We are simply to believe that He is enough in this life and in the life to come.



SOME NECESSARY BEDROCK

As with any discussion concerning grace, it cannot be cut from what must be seen as a bedrock truth upon which the building of grace is constructed. We must examine the rule of God and the will of man in order to make sense of the doctrine of grace.

First, the volition or will of man has never been seen to be completely autonomous.

Man's will is always being acted upon by outside influences. In the discussion before us, the will of man does not operate outside of God's control. The following passages strongly teach this conclusion:

"The plans of the heart belong to man, But the answer of the tongue is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:1).

"The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9).

"The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33).

"Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand" (Prov. 19:21).

"Man's steps are ordained by the LORD, How then can man understand his way?" (Prov. 20:24).

"I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23).

“But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt. 10:19-20).

“For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled” (Rev. 17:17).

Being created in the image and likeness of God, man has volition or the power of choice. Theology describes him as a “free moral agent.” He can act without consciously considering outside influences to the will. Thus the choices he makes are considered “free.” Yet somehow based on the passages noted above the free choices he makes are the outworking of God’s eternal purpose. To me this is a great mystery. Yet, it is one I personally embrace.



The Will of Man is . . .

- **Real not imaginary**
The will of man has the power to choose. It is a real will, though under God’s rule. Man’s will is not equal in ability or authority to that of God’s will.
- **Influenced not independent**
The will of man has a necessary connection with its surroundings. Something or someone influences every choice he makes. It is not truly ‘free.’ Only God’s will is free. There is no disconnect between what He wills and what He does.
- **Essential not incidental**
Without his will, man would not be an image-bearer.
- **Intentional not accidental**
In the expression of his will, man is part of an intentional plan. His will is not an accident or random act.

The choices we make are a very real and vital part of the sanctification process, but it is a sure work. It is not something God has left up to us or abandoned.

Although Steve McVey might disagree with me on certain points (of which I am not currently aware of), I do believe the following statement rings true:

In His infinite grace, He allows us to participate in what He is doing by placing His life inside us and then expressing that life through us.¹⁰

What is true concerning our will and salvation are equally true concerning our will and sanctification. I am simply believing that what God has done and is doing is true.

Second, God has a larger purpose that cannot be stopped. That purpose unfolds before our very eyes every day. This assures me that the thin slices of my life are parts of a much larger picture. The various threads and pieces of my life are part of a beautiful and intentional tapestry and mosaic.

“Were He to snatch away, who could restrain Him? Who could say to Him, 'What are You doing?'" (John 9:12).

“But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3).

“Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps. 135:6).

¹⁵ **“Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. ¹⁶ Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. ¹⁷ All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless”** (Isa. 40:15-17).

“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

²⁰ **“On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?”** (Rom. 9:20, 21).

Romans 8:29 and 30 tells me that what God begins He finishes. This same truth is echoed in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and 24 and in

Philippians 1:6.

¹⁶ “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, ¹⁷ **comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.**” (1 Thess. 2:16,17).

¹ “Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; ² and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. ³ **But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one**” (2 Thess. 3:1-3).

¹⁶ “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ **The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom;** to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:16-18).

²⁰ “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, ²¹ **equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight,** through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20, 21).

⁹ “But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. ¹⁰ After you have suffered for a little while, **the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.** ¹¹ To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Pet. 5:9-11).

²⁴ “Now to Him, **who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,** ²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24, 25).

In every one of the preceding verses there is an element of communicated uncertainty. Yet two things are true. God is always

faithful to complete that which He alone began. In addition, His own shall never be abandoned by Him. There is nothing you can do to thwart Him from completing His work in you and through you . . . nothing. The uncertainty of the imperative's fulfillment lies in whether or not the individual is saved and what God wants to do in him and through him.

Third, because you are in Christ you are an overcomer by default. As you read through the list of verses cited ask yourself the question, "What is the alternative to being an overcomer?" An overcomer is not some "super saint" or an individual that has worked hard at keeping the commands of Christ. How did an overcomer attain that status? An overcomer is such because of the blood of Christ.

"I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have **overcome** the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13).

"I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abided in you, and ye have **overcome** the wicked one" (1 John 2:14).

"Ye are of God, little children, and have **overcome** them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

"For whatsoever is born of God **overcomes** the world: and this is the victory that **overcomes** the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

"Who is he that **overcomes** the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:5).

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that **overcomes** will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7).

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that **overcomes** shall not be hurt of the second death" (Rev. 2:11).

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that **overcomes** will I give to eat of the hidden

manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knows saving he that receives it” (Rev. 2:17).

“And he that **overcomes**, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations” (Rev. 2:26).

“He that **overcomes**, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels” (Rev. 3:5).

“Him that **overcomes** will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name” (Rev. 3:12).

“To him that **overcomes** will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also **overcame**, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Rev. 3:21).

“And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (Rev. 5:5).

“And they **overcame** him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:11).

“He that **overcomes** shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (Rev. 21:7).

Revelation 21:7 is revealing. Galatians 3:26 and 29 tell me I am a son and an inheritor. Revelation 21:7 affirms this truth. If I somehow because of my inability to measure up or perpetual failure never attain overcomer status, then I will not inherit all things, He will not be my God nor would I be His son. What a pathetic prospect for future joy. How dreary life would be. If to be an overcomer was based on my ability to perform and thus performance based, we would never know if enough was done. How unsettling. Yet what joy is ours by simply resting in the truth of His word that is declaring the sufficiency of His work in our behalf. There are not degrees of obedience or of being an overcomer. You either are or are not an overcomer. If you are saved, then you are an overcomer.

Fourth, obedience, good works and keeping His commandments must be seen as a working of the Spirit or what Galatians 5:22 calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” I believe we would be in error if we thought of obedience, good works, keeping His commandments, and fruit bearing as being different activities. Such a view would allow someone to be a fruit-bearer without potentially being a commandment keeper. Such thinking would be silly. I think we would all concur that whatever good comes from us is His work in us and through us. I believe Philippians 2:13 and 14 address this area. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that “we are His workmanship.” This is not saying we are co-laborers, but it is saying we are the product of His hands.

Good works are held by Protestants to be necessary, not as means and conditions, but as results and evidences, of justification.¹¹

Because I speak of us not being co-laborers with God, I must note 1 Corinthians 3:9, “For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.”

I will simply cite three Commentaries as they concern 1 Corinthians 3:9:

It would perhaps be more correct to translate **Theou gar esmen sunergai**, we are fellow laborers of God; for, as the preposition sun may express the joint labor of the teachers one with another, and not with God, I had rather, with Bishop Pearce, translate as above: i.e. we labor together in the work of God.¹²

The main design and scope of this whole passage is to show that God is all--that the apostles are nothing; to represent the apostles not as joint-workers with God, but as working by themselves, and God as alone giving efficiency to all that was done. The idea is that of depressing or humbling the apostles, and of exalting God; and this idea would not be consistent with the interpretation that they were joint-laborers with him. While, therefore; the Greek would bear the interpretation conveyed in our translation, the sense may perhaps be, that the apostles were joint-laborers with each other in God's service; that they were united in their work, and that God was all in all; that they were like servants employed in the service of a master, without saying that the master participated with them in their work. This idea is

conveyed in the translation of Doddridge, "We are the fellow-laborers of God."¹³

For we are laborers together with God. The Revision gives the true meaning: "For we are God's fellow-workers." They, he and Apollos, were fellow-laborers belonging to God (of God, not with God). They were fellow-laborers with each other, of God.¹⁴

Also consider the following comment by Jerry Bridges in Transforming Grace:

So progressive sanctification very much involves our activity. But it is an activity that must be carried out in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is not a partnership with the Spirit in the sense that we each - the believer and the Holy Spirit - do our respective tasks. Rather, we work as He enables us to work. His work lies behind all our work and makes our work possible.

The Holy Spirit can and does work within us apart from any conscious response on our part. We have seen this in the initial act of sanctification when He creates within us a new heart and gives us an entirely new disposition toward God and His will. He is not dependent on us to do His work.¹⁵

We must learn to rest in His power to work, not in our power to will. Based on the preceding study God's work in us and through us is inevitable, but not automatic. It will happen and unfold before us as He works His will in us and through us. The outworking of His obedience is a delight to behold. When we are resting in this glorious truth we will find His yoke easy, light and rest giving (Matt. 11:28-30). We will come to see that His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

Finally, where does this leave us? Grace living is not lazy living or loose living. Grace living is obedient living that manifests itself in acts of kindness and goodwill. Such living is Christ-exalting, Word-centered, Global-impacting and Grace-based. Grace living produces within the believer an unquenchable thirst for Christ. It creates a hunger for Him that cannot be satisfied until it sees Him face to face (1 John 3:1-3).

Listen carefully to the following quote by John Owen as he seeks to explain the role of duty in Christian obedience:

We are not able of ourselves, without the especial aid, assistance, and operation of the Spirit of God, in any measure or degree to free ourselves from this *pollution*, neither that which is *natural* and *habitual* nor that which is *actual*. It is true, it is frequently prescribed unto us as our duty, - we are commanded to 'wash ourselves,' to 'cleanse ourselves from sin,' to 'purge ourselves' from all our iniquities, and the like, frequently; but to suppose that whatever God requireth of us that we have power of ourselves to do, is to make the cross and grace of Jesus Christ of none effect. **Our duty is our duty, constituted unalterably by the law of God, whether we have power to perform it or no, seeing we had so at our first obligation by and unto the law, which God is not obliged to bend unto a conformity to our warpings, nor to suit unto our sinful weaknesses. Whatever, therefore, God worketh in us in a way of grace, he prescribeth unto us in a way of duty, and that because although he do it in us, yet he also doth it by us, so as that the same work is an act of his Spirit and of our wills as acted thereby. Of ourselves, therefore, we are not able, by any endeavours of our own, nor ways of our own finding out, to cleanse ourselves from the defilement of sin.**¹⁶

What do I do with an imperative? I never separate the imperative from positional truth. The one flows from the other. The imperative is a consequence of God's unconditional grace acts. It is never a cause for His goodness to me. I thank God that He will do His sure work in me. I rest in the fact that He will work such fruit in me and through me to those around me. I thank Him for this revelation of Himself to me. I cherish the imperative because it is a revelation of Himself through me, this jar of clay. I see the imperative every day being lived out in the lives of His people. Every day I see Jesus Christ.



FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

How do I mesh God's reign with my daily obedience? There is an element of the discussion that I have wrestled with for years and still wrestle with. Some things I do not know and perhaps will never know. I am content to reach that point and to surrender under the majesty of God's incomprehensibility.

- **First**, I believe all true believers will inevitably bear fruit (Mark 4:14-20).

It is impossible to be a fruitless Christian. To be sure there can be a time or period of resisting, but never can the resisting be long term. The work of God in and through the believer will most assuredly be victorious; that which God has begun He will finish (Rom. 8:30; 1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

I do not always know what that fruit will look like but I am confident it is there (even when I do not see it or appreciate it).

- **Second**, the fruit or good work produced in and through the believer is generated by the Holy Spirit.

This is why it is called the *fruit of the Spirit* (Gal. 5:22). It is clear imitation fruit can be produced by the flesh (Matt. 7:24f). Such fruit is just that imitation. It is not Spirit generated. Note the following seven ideas as they relate to the *fruit of the Spirit* and the commands of Scripture.

- The commands of Scripture are consequences not causes in our relationship with Jesus Christ.
- The commands of Scripture are not works of the flesh. Although we might think the unbeliever can “Do” the commands, what they “Do” and what we “Do” are two different things (Gal. 5:19ff). The unbeliever can do all the commands of the New Testament as an expression of His old nature and you can do all the commands of the New Testament as an expression of your old nature. In fact, the old nature loves being religious.
- The commands of the Scripture are the fruit of the Spirit. Because of our union with Christ, the Holy Spirit works in us and through us His fruit. The question is how or when do I know that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is His and not mine? Consider the idea in Galatians 2:20, 5:22, Colossians 3:3, 4, and John 15:5.
- The fruit of the Holy Spirit is the outworking of being in Christ (Phil. 2:12, 13).
- The commands of the New Testament are a picture of who Jesus is, what He has done, and who we now are in Him. Do you want to know what Jesus looks like? Then read the New Testament imperatives. Notice Matthew 11:28-30 and 1 John 5:3. His yoke is easy and His burden is light. His commandments are not burdensome.
- Although the command addresses the will of man, to think you

are now capable of doing what God commands would be unfortunate. You and I do what He commands because He works and wills according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13).

- The commands of the New Testament are not my focus, Jesus is my focus and as I focus on Him I look like the commands fulfilled.
- **Third**, in any act of obedience it must be understood that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 3:1-4 appear clear on this point. Christ is our life. Without Him we could do nothing that is pleasing to the Father. It is unfortunate but we often view our works as a means of meriting favor or of gaining approval. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Christ forms for us the basis of our acceptance before the Father. It is in and with Him that the Father is well pleased.

My obedience is a testimony of God working in me and through me. For the true believer obedience should not be the issue. Unfortunately we often try to push people into our own expectations of what they should be like, but this is not our role and it wrong.

Listen to the words of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) in the chapter, "Deliverance from Sinning."

I cannot make this change," says someone. Who said you could? The Scripture that we have quoted [Titus 2:12] does not speak of what man will do, but of what God will do. It is God's promise, and it is for Him to fulfill His own commitments. Trust in Him to fulfill His Word to you, and it will be done. 'But how is it to be done?' What business is that of yours? Must the Lord explain His methods before you will believe Him? The Lord's working in this matter is a great mystery; the Holy Spirit performs it. He who made the promise has the responsibility of keeping the promise; and He is equal to the occasion. God, who promises this marvelous change, will assuredly carry it out in all who receive Jesus. To all of them He gives 'power to become the sons of God' (John 1:12).¹⁷

What about disobedience? Disobedience like obedience is inevitable as long as I occupy this body of flesh. Any act of disobedience must be viewed as something I am. . .

- to put off (Eph. 4:22),
- make no provision for (Rom. 13:14),
- abstain from (1 Pet. 2:11),
- confess (1 John 1:9) and
- mortify (Col. 3:5).

John is equally clear however when he notes how those born of God do not live in continual sin. When a professing believer lives in continual sin there are larger issues at stake (['are they actually saved?']1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Rev. 22:15).

I would strongly argue that a day of accounting is to take place for the believer (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). This day is yet future. In that day, God will show Himself mighty in our behalf. It will be seen in that day that He has finished the work He Himself begun. Obedience is a glorious truth. As one sees Christ more clearly obedience moves from being a duty to being a delicious activity.

To see God as having absolute control allows me the liberty to rest in Him. I can live with confidence knowing that He is in control. Nothing will befall me that He has not planned. All things that cross my path in life are there by divine design. There is comfort in a God whose rule is absolute.

The actions of individuals that seem in direct opposition to His declared or revealed will are a necessary part of His intentional plan. God is never surprised or caught off guard (Gen. 50:20; Prov. 16:4).

It is against this backdrop that human responsibility must be seen, understood, and embraced. God, having fashioned man in His image, invented him with the power of choice. He did not grant man complete nor even partial autonomy. The volitional acts of individuals can never be removed from a fuller understanding of Divine Sovereignty. Man's revelation is neither equal with nor superior to that of God's sovereignty. It is rather an expression of His rule. God is sovereign and such sovereignty as His is revealed in the choices we make. To argue against such an understanding because it eliminates responsibility is to misunderstand the relationship that does exist between divine sovereignty, human volition, accountability, and responsibility. The Scripture clearly teaches all four elements. Yet each element flows from that which precedes it.

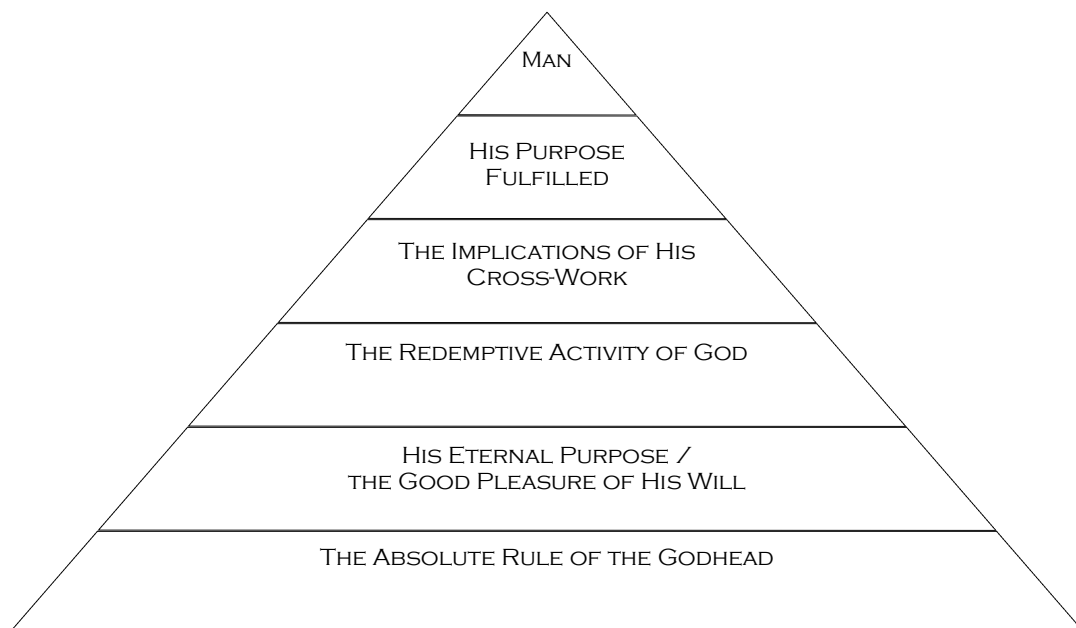


“THE PYRAMID OF TRUTH”

Consider the idea inside of what I have come to call “The Pyramid of Truth.”

- All truth is qualitatively equal. If it is true, there is no fluctuation as to its integrity. Truth does not contain error.
- Yet not all truth is equally authoritative or binding to the individual.
- Not all truth operates on the same level of weight.
- There are planes or a pyramid of truth. For instance, the issue of man’s will versus God’s will. Both are equally true, but each one carries as different weight as to precedence and priority. The one (man’s will) is under or inside of the other (God’s will).

As it relates to the image bearing aspects of the individual (i.e. intellect, volition, emotion) there is a hierarchy or pyramid of truth. Whatever and however these elements work inside of the individual, they function on a distinct plane of truth that sets them apart from other planes of truth. No truth is any less true, but not all truth carries the same weight. For instance, the truth about God carries more weight than the truth about man. Or the truth about the God’s activity carries more weight than the doctrine of angels and although both are planes of truth they do not function at the same level or carry the same weight.



So in studying the doctrine of reigning grace it is important to understand and remember that as we look at various implications of the cross work in the life of His people, not all of the truth we are considering operates on the same plane of truth or carries the same weight. There is progressiveness to the study where the weightier truth is laid out up front and the implications of this truth are played out. The later truths are equally true, but do not carry the same weight as the initial truths.

The success of obedience is dependent on God. There is liberation in knowing that God has already won and you because of grace are able to participate in His victory.

By way of a summary statement, what can we note?



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSEQUENCES

First, in the pulpit ministry, calling upon people to change their behavior is to place “the cart before the horse.” It is of little spiritual value to draw people’s attention to the fruit and branch, when it should be placed on the vine. Behavioral modification happens only through mind renewal.

Second, there are plenty of people whose behavior is exceptional, but who are hell-bound. Noteworthy behavior is often seen among cultic groups. Someone’s behavior is not the issue. Inappropriate behavior is not something we sweep “under the rug.” Nonetheless, change will only happen when perspective is altered and an altered perspective only happens through mind renewal and mind renewal only happens through the application of God’s Word by the Holy Spirit of God who is increasing the image of the Son on the canvas of their lives.

Third, in discipleship or counseling, our goal is not behavioral modification, but mind renewal. We are not trying to change their manners, but their mind. Moreover, if the truth were known, we are not even trying to change anything. Change is not our business. Change is His business.

Fourth, I do not believe a profession of faith can be separated from a practice of faith. The two are inseparably linked. What one believes does express itself in how one behaves. “Faith without works is [a] dead [faith]” (James 2:14-26). Unlike Lordship salvation, I do not believe *you must now work* to bear fruit. I believe you will bear fruit, but the focus should not be on your obedience, but on Him.

McVey's insight is interesting. . .

Grace causes our motivation toward obedience to be love and desire. Legalists, by contrast, aren't free to serve the Lord, they obligate themselves to. 'Ought to' is the ammunition for the legalist's gun. It will kill your joy every time it hits you.¹⁸

Fifth, I am equally convinced that every good tree does bear good fruit (Matt. 7:17, 18). I believe good soil *always* produces fruit (Mark 4:8). I believe it is impossible for it to be otherwise. This does not mean that fruit or obedience will always be expressed in the same way and in the same "amount." I do believe, however, that God is always working in His people. When we are not bearing fruit or are disobedient, we have a tendency to assume that God is not working. Just the opposite is probably true. In these moments of despair, God is working deeply. I base this on 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24, and Philippians 1:6.

Sixth, I believe obedience / good works is the natural outworking of one's pursuit of Christ. When I make the statement, "I do not focus on my obedience," I finish it by saying, "I focus on Him." Thus, my attention and energy is on Him, not on my obedience (Heb. 12:1, 2).

Think of a passage like Matthew 5:48, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Is Jesus Christ wanting His people to be one of the actions descriptive of fruit in the preceding verses as opposed to Himself? Is not the point of the exhortation to be like the Father? Instead of focusing on various expressions of fruit, why not focus on the vine?

Could not this same idea be found in any number of imperatival verses? Think of Hebrews 12:14, "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." What if we pursue peace, but nothing else, are we then to conclude we are "safe?" Maybe it is "sanctification" we are to pursue. Is any one fruit or cluster of fruit to take the place of Him?

Instead of the word holiness, let us put the word "Christ." Instead of the words or ideas of obedience or good works or fruit bearing, let us put the word Christ. I pursue Christ.

To get a holiness of our own, and then have Christ reward us for it, is not His teaching. Christ Himself is our holiness.¹⁹

In the passionate blood earnest pursuit of Christ, holiness is painted on the canvas of my life. In the desire for Him, the treasure breaks through the earthen vessel. I am convinced that in my pursuit of Him, I will display His holiness. What is holiness, if not Him? In my pursuit of Him, I will live an obedient life. I believe that by focusing on individual fruit production, I am misunderstanding the central message of the New Testament.

Seventh, by saying, “I do not focus on my obedience,” it should not be assumed that I thus focus on (1) disobedience, or (2) spiritual apathy or “couch potato” lethargy. No one in pursuit of Christ lives in habitual hypocrisy or spiritual apathy. There are plenty of people who pursue good works, but have absolutely no appetite for Him. Most of these people are lost.

Eighth, I do not believe we should stress an imperative without first stressing the above. Any imperative done in the absence of His work is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19). In the desire to be obedient, it is possible to have a pseudo-spirituality (Matt. 7:21-23).

The same idea is captured in the following statement:

The more one works to be transformed in the power of flesh, the worse things will get. For example, a man drinking because he is in control of his own life (living independently of God, whether a believer or unbeliever) is in the flesh. If this same man takes charge and stops drinking, he is still in the flesh. ²⁰

I believe I will to work only as He wills to work according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13).

Ninth, I believe we should be in “dead earnest” as it relates to personal sin (Rom. 13:14; 1 Pet. 2:11; Col. 3:5, etc.). I do not, however, believe I will have the right opinion toward sin unless He gives it to me. I can wish to hate sin, but I will not hate it as He does unless He gives me that passion.

Tenth, With regard to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, I do see a parallel thought in Colossians 3:5 where Paul exhorts us to “mortify the deeds of the flesh.” I likewise note the similarity of thought with Romans 6:13 and 14. I do not see the Corinthian passage in the absence of these others passages and the like.

I prepare the horse for battle knowing that the victory I might enjoy is of the Lord (Prov. 21:31). If I should find myself in a position of

“defeat”, I take comfort knowing that His grace is sufficient.

May it please the Lord to give us the liberty and rest we crave. May He become to us everything. May we hold the things of this world lightly and may our grip of Him be firm.

¹ Michael Wells, *Sidetracked in the Wilderness*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 14, 15.

² Steve McVey, *Grace Rules*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 13.

³ Bob George, *Faith That Pleases God*, (Harvest House Publishers:Eugene, 2001), 141.

⁴ Spurgeon, *All of Grace*, (Springdale PA:Whitaker House, 1983), 160, 161.

⁵ John Piper, *A Godward Life*, (Multnomah Pub, 1997), 161.

⁶ Emphasis added, Bob George, *Faith that Pleases God*, 47.

⁷ Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, (NavPress:Colorado Springs, 1991), 17-18.

⁸ Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 72

⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 485.

¹⁰ McVey, *Grace Rules*, 14.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids:Baker Book House, 1993), 1:206.

¹² *Adam Clarke's Commentary on First Corinthians 3:9.*

¹³ *Albert Barnes on First Corinthians 3:9*

¹⁴ *People's New Testament Commentary on First Corinthians 3:9*

¹⁵ Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 115

¹⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 3:433

¹⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *All of Grace*, 52, 53.

¹⁸ McVey, *Grace Rules*, 96, 97.

¹⁹ A.B. Simpson, *The Christ Life*, (Harrisburg, PA:Christian Publications, 1980), 41.

²⁰ Michael Wells *Sidetracked In The Wilderness*, 103.