

“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor 15:10)

✠ Lecture IV: Grace in The Orthodox Perspective ✠

Is a person saved by his works or by the grace of God? Many went far in defending both and were mistaken. As a general rule, the Orthodox view concerning any issue of debate is the moderate approach between two extremes. The controversy reached its peak in the sixteenth century when medieval Roman Catholicism was stressing the importance of good works to please God; as a result, people were living in uncertainty and terror. It was this vision of Catholicism that helped inspire the Protestant leadership to rebel and to define grace and justification in other terms.

The foundation for the Protestant teachings was provided by St. Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings and the misinterpretation of St. Paul’s writings to the Romans and the Galatians. Indeed, the epistles of St. Paul contain “things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:16).

✠ Grace as a Gift:

By definition, grace is a gift but St. Paul pleaded with the Corinthians “not to receive the grace [gift] of God in vain” (2 Cor 6:1). He said concerning himself, “His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all [the rest of the apostles]” (1 Cor 15:10)

→ Therefore, even though grace is a gift, we shouldn’t receive it in vain. St. Paul exhorted St. Timothy saying, “**Do not neglect the gift that is in you**” (1 Tim 4:14). In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35), notice that this servant lost the free gift of his master due to his evil deeds!

✠ Example (1):

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave His disciples **the gift** of having power and authority over unclean spirits. He said, “Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Lk 10:19). Moreover, when the disciple said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (Lk 10:17), He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk 10:18). Obviously, the weak human nature of the disciples has no power over demons but through the grace of God they were able to have authority over them.

On another occasion, the disciples failed to cast out a demon from an epileptic boy and they asked the Lord privately, “Why could we not cast him out?” (Mt 17:19). Lord Jesus replied, “**This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting**” (Mt 17:21). Now should the authority over demons be considered a free gift from God or a reward for human work (praying and fasting)? It is definitely a gift from God, but this gift should not be received in vain (2 Cor 6:1)

It is written, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and **the communion of the Holy Spirit** be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). It is a communion between the two working together, the Holy Spirit and man, as St. Paul said, “We are God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor 3:9). God will not save you unless your human free will responds to His grace, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb 3:8). Also, good works alone will not save a person. Therefore the Church teaches us to pray in the midnight prayer saying, “In my works (apart from grace) I shall have no salvation.”

The Holy Spirit is able to save and redeem you, but **He will not do it alone**. He wants you to participate with Him in managing your life. This is the communion of the Holy Spirit. Given the universal saving will of God and the rejection of the heresy of predestination, if the Holy Spirit (grace) worked alone, then why are there righteous people and evil ones? If the matter were truly confined to grace alone, there would not exist a single sinner on earth. The mere existence of just a single sinner not willing to repent is irrefutable evidence that **grace alone doesn’t save anybody**.

✚ Example (2):

Did the people defeat Amalek due to the fighting of Joshua's army or due to the prayer of Moses? Joshua was leading the army in the war while Moses stood on the top of the hill holding up his hands in prayer (**Ex 17:11**). Focusing on one of them and neglecting the other would be a mistake; Joshua alone, regardless of how hard he fought, without the prayers of Moses (God's help) would never have defeated Amalek. Nevertheless, Moses' prayer did not mean that the army would slacken before the enemy. Fighting (human work) and prayer (God's grace) went together, side by side, they are inseparable.

✚ Example (3):

How did David defeat Goliath? David depended on God and said to Goliath, "I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts ... for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands" (**1Sam 17:45-47**). Yet David chose for himself five stones from the brook and he hastened and ran toward the army to meet Goliath. He put the stone into the sling and struck skillfully, he then had to draw Goliath's sword from its sheath and kill him. All these steps are works. Nevertheless, we ascribe victory to God and not to the skill of David. There must be striving and labor, but at the end, success is ascribed to God.

✚ Grace & Free Will:

Free will is a gift from God and salvation is also a gift from God. **God's gifts do not contradict or cancel each other**. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit within us does not abolish our free will; we can respond to His work, participate in it with Him and be led by Him, we can also stop and refuse His work within us. St. Stephen said to the Jews, "You always **resist** the Holy Spirit" (**Acts 7:51**)

→ St. Paul tells us:

- "Do not quench the Spirit." (**1 Thess 5:19**)
- "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." (**Eph 4:30**)

Grace offers us help and we have the option to accept or refuse it. If we participate with the Holy Spirit in action, we will, by the grace of God, attain perfect holiness according to the extent of our response and submission. But if we refuse, grace would never force us to do well. The great divine physician is ready and willing to heal but He is asking you, "**Do you want to be made well?**" (**Jn 5:6**)

✚ Grace & Spiritual Warfare:

In (**Eph 6:10-18**) we find wrestling, spiritual fight and striving using the whole armor of God. God's weapons have their power, but if you don't use them, you will be defeated. We notice also that among such spiritual weapons are righteousness, prayer, supplication and being watchful, which are all works! St. Peter said, "resist him (the devil), steadfast in the faith" (**1 Pet 5:9**). Resist the devil, strive, be firm and brave but do not depend on your human abilities; you ought rather to resist him steadfast in the faith. This verse combines both sides: striving in resisting the devil and faith upon which the one who strives depends.

It is a striving but not a personal one separate from God's work. It is rather a combination of both as St. Paul describes his preaching, "To this end I labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (**Col 1:29**). It is this striving that he called for while rebuking the Hebrews, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin" (**Heb 12:4**) and in his advise to St. Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith" (**1 Tim 6:12**). H.H. Pope Shenouda III once said, "In the spiritual warfare, you conquer with your weakness not your strength". God said to St. Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (**2 Cor 12:9**), King Solomon said, "God gives grace to the humble" (**Prov 3:34**). Therefore, resist the devil with all your power but "**do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing**" (**Mt 6:3**). In other words do not take credit for any victory but attribute all success to God.

✚ **Example (4):**

There is a beautiful story in the Holy Book of Judges that illustrates the last concept very nicely. Gideon was preparing to fight the Midianites and he gathered a huge army of thousands of soldiers but the Lord said, “The people who are with you are **too many for Me** to give the Midianites into their hands, **lest Israel claim glory for itself** against Me, saying, my own hands has saved me” (**Judges 7:2**). So God decreased the number of the soldiers until it reached 300 and He said, “By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you” (**Judges 7:7**). The same happened with St. Paul due to the abundance of revelations, lest he be exalted above measure, God gave him a thorn in the flesh (**2 Cor 12:7**). When St. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from him, the Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (**2 Cor 12:9**)

→ Indeed, “we have this treasure (grace) in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (**2 Cor 4:7**)

Q. St. Paul said, “It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:16). Does this verse mean that human will and striving (running) do not play a role in salvation?

A. This can never be the meaning; it is impossible to say that St. Paul meant this by these words. He who said, “*not of him who runs*” said about himself “*I have finished the race*” (**2 Tim 4:7**). The same person who said “*not of him who runs*” said about himself. “*I press toward the goal*” (**Phil 3:14**). Moreover, St. Paul said to us, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? **Run in such a way that you may obtain it**” (**1 Cor 9:24**), “**Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**” (**Heb 12:1**), St. Paul continues to say about himself, “Therefore **I run** thus: not with uncertainty” (**1 Cor 9:26**)

St. Paul still ran and pressed onward though he was filled with the Holy Spirit and grace worked in him more than anyone. Yet he was in need to run, to press on, to finish the race and to fight the good fight. Indeed, as he said, “His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all” (**1 Cor 15:10**). Nevertheless, St. Paul doesn’t give himself credit for his work and says, “Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (**1 Cor 15:10**).

It is true that it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but God who shows mercy. **But toward whom does God show mercy?** It is to them who will and who run.

Consider these words of St. Paul, “**Neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase**” (**1 Cor 3:7**). True indeed, it is God who gives the increase, but to what? It is to the plant, which is planted and watered. Therefore, we must not abstain from planting and watering saying that neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, and wait **foolishly** for God to give the increase! As King Solomon said, “He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap” (**Eccl 11:4**). The right thing is to plant and water, yet attribute the increase to God.

Likewise, we must run and strive yet attribute our success to the mercy and grace of God, saying with St. Paul, “It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (**Rom 9:16**).

* This Lecture is adapted from ‘*Salvation in The Orthodox Concept*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.