

## THE DISCIPLE AND THE PLOW

**"But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).**

Many people mistakenly equate the great cost of being Jesus' disciple with God's gracious gift of justification. J. I. Packer, commenting on what it means for a person to believe in Jesus Christ, makes such an erroneous equation:

"In our own presentation of Christ's gospel, therefore, we need to lay a similar stress on the cost of following Christ, and make sinners face it soberly before we urge them to respond to the message of free forgiveness. In common honesty, we must not conceal the fact that FREE forgiveness in one sense WILL COST EVERYTHING" (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, p. 73; emphasis mine).

Is this double talk? How would you like someone offer an unconditional FREE GIFT, then DEMAND that you sell ALL your possessions so that you may receive it? Or receive a gift from a dear friend, only to learn they demand you give them a gift in return, or they will take theirs back! Does God's UNMERITED FAVOR (grace) depend upon a person's worthiness or what God will "get back"? Absolutely not! For then, it would not be grace.

Believers expend no effort whereby God's GRACE is attained. There are no conditional elements that must be fulfilled. Justification is a PRESENT possession of ALL believers, and NEVER can be forfeited. God's gift of justification NEVER depends upon the FAITHLESSNESS of the recipient, but on the UNMERITED FAVOR and FAITHFULNESS of God (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3).

"It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If WE ARE FAITHLESS, HE REMAINS FAITHFUL, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

J. I. Packer, like so many other biblical commentators, are mixing spiritual oranges with apples.

Tragically, this is the quandary where the Body of Christ finds itself. The simple salvation message (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4) has come under persuasive attack. This attack is not from without, but from within orthodox Christianity, for it has entered as a Trojan Horse. The message being preached, rather than being silenced, is finding a willing audience.

The entire context of Luke 9:62 cries out for discipleship. For example, Jesus says in Luke 9:60, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God" (v. 60). Jesus is speaking of discipleship, not God's gift of justification.

Discipleship is costly and a life-long pilgrimage of faith. Speaking of discipleship, Jesus said, "IF YOU ABIDE in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine" (Jn. 8:31). If we confuse Jesus' condition of a believer remaining in His word for discipleship, and "BELIEVE in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts. 16:31) for receiving God's gift, then we are mixing God's GRACE with believers' REWARDS (works). Justification by God's grace does not recognize believers' best works, for they are worthless (Rom. 4:1-11; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7). However, for discipleship, God recognizes believers' least service and renders reward (Matt. 10:42)!

Many Bible teachers and commentaries today speak of "costly grace." This is their solution to the growing number of people who profess to be Christians but who do not live up to their profession. They solve this problem by demanding sinners pay a price for their justification, which is the price of submission and obedience. Thus they have redefined the terms "free" and "grace."

Though the "costly grace" proponents have no reservations about calling justification costly, they maintain adamantly that it is not of works, but a free gift. The "free but costly" contradiction is explained as a theological "paradox."<sup>1</sup> This is a contradiction only to these theologians, and those who think like them, because they are blurring passages that deal with God's unconditional free gift and believers' conditional rewards by works. Either God's gift is by grace, or it is by works. There can be no mixing of the two, no matter who says to the contrary (Rom. 11:6)! There is no scriptural theological paradox.

However, can a person who has received God's gift of justification and yet fail to obtain reward because of their unfaithfulness? Absolutely! The Apostle Paul said,

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as

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<sup>1</sup>MacArthur writes, "Eternal life is indeed a free gift (Romans 6:23). Salvation cannot be earned with good deeds or purchased with money. It has already been bought by Christ, who paid the ransom with his blood. But that does not mean there is no cost in terms of salvation's impact on the sinner's life. This PARADOX may be difficult but it is nevertheless true: salvation is both free and costly" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 140).

not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be DISQUALIFIED" (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Paul is not concerned about forfeiting God's gracious gift of justification, but being disqualified of winning a prize, which can only speak of a reward according to works. According to Paul, believers are in a race against themselves. There are only two contestants in the race: the person's sinful desires and the person's will (acted upon by God). Which one wins will determine the outcome at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Still, there are many believers who judge whether or not they (or others!) are justified based on their works after justification, rather than God's promise. Paul, speaking to the Corinthian BELIEVERS informed them that "each man's WORK will become evident; for the Day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the QUALITY of each man's WORK" (1 Cor. 3:13).

The outcome of this judgment of believers' works will be one of two possibilities. On the one hand, "If any man's work which he has built upon it [Jesus Christ as the foundation, vv. 10-11] remains, he shall receive a reward." On the other hand, "If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; BUT HE HIMSELF SHALL BE SAVED, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:14-15). If works were the basis for believers' assurance for justification, how then is it some believers will NOT receive any rewards for their works? God's gift of justification life is apart from works, for it is a gift!

Many believers, who begin on their pilgrimage journey of discipleship, will never finish because their walk is not by faith, but by sight. They will not continue to run in the race of endurance for many reasons (Heb. 12:1-11; cf. 10:32-34). When a believer's faith is tried, and then falls away because lack of patient endurance, they will not receive God's promised reward. "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him" (Jas. 1:12). The word of the kingdom causes offense (because it demands obedience, and therefore suffering for righteousness sake), and so many Christians reason that discipleship is not worth the effort or the suffering. Thus they become unfruitful (Matt. 13:18-22) and lose the promise of the inheritance of the kingdom (= reigning with Christ; Heb. 12:15-29; Rev. 2:25-29). However, believers cannot ever lose God's free gift -- NO MATTER WHAT!

Many believers are shortsighted, and indulge into the lusts of the flesh. Paul warning believers, states, "For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph. 5:5). If we equate inheritance of the kingdom with God's gracious gift, then this verse alone would rule out most (if not all) of humankind ever receiving

justification. In the final analysis, God's grace has been compromised by those who confuse God's gift and believers' works.

On the one hand, believers who practice the deeds of the flesh, WILL RECEIVE God's gracious gift of justification. On the other hand, these same believers WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM, and therefore will not rule with Christ and be part of the Bride of Christ (Rev. 2:25-27; Matt. 22:1-14//Rev. 19:7-9).

[Take careful notice that the Lamb's Bride in Revelation 19:7 had MADE HERSELF READY by clothing herself with RIGHTEOUS ACTS. The verb, "made herself ready" in Greek, is in the middle voice, and thus she herself had made prior preparations. It is the "righteous ACTS" (good works) of the saints which are in view, not the righteous ACT of Christ's justification (Rom. 5:18)]

Yes, a homosexual can be a Christian. Yes, a believer, who has fallen away ("backslidden") from pursuing to be Christ's disciple, is still justified. And yes, we who are believers and full of pride and self-righteousness (abominations to God, Prov. 6:16-19) possess God's gift of justification. Believers possess it because it is God's gift bought by the costly price of His Son's substitutionary death on the cross for sins (1 Pet. 1:17-19; 3:18). However, these same believers who are dominated by sin's power, will not inherit the Kingdom.

"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who PRACTICE such things SHALL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (Gal. 5:19-21).

A farmer who is plowing a field focuses on a distant object to ensure that he plows straight. Believers are exhorted to fix their eyes on Jesus to guarantee they run correctly the race of endurance, so that "you may not grow weary and lose heart (Heb. 12:2-3). Those who look away will surely fail by becoming involved with worldly pursuits.

This was the case to those whom the author of Hebrews was exhorting in Hebrews 6:1-6:

"Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, LET US PRESS ON TO MATURITY, . . . and this WE shall do, IF God permits. For in the case of those who have ONCE BEEN [once for all] enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and HAVE BEEN MADE PARTAKERS of the Holy Spirit, and HAVE TASTED THE GOOD WORD OF GOD and the powers of the ages to come, AND THEN FALLEN AWAY, it is IMPOSSIBLE to renew them again to

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repentance [God will not allow it], since they again crucify TO THEMSELVES the Son of God, and put Him to open shame."

In other words, although these believers are justified, in Jesus' words, "NO ONE, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Thus, those who "plow" into discipleship and ultimately decide the hardships which one must patiently endure are not worth to be Jesus' disciple, then they are not "fit [worthy] for the kingdom of God." Speaking of entrance into the kingdom, Paul said, "Through many tribulations WE MUST enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Believers, who patiently endure the cost of being Jesus' disciple, can join with Paul, who wrote the following words shortly before his martyrdom,

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

Are you willing to challenge the flesh, the world, and the domain of darkness solely by God's enablement and never changing promises? If so, then know that "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

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The clear distinction between God's gift of justification and believers' rewards is the subject of the *KINGDOM SERIES*. wdr