

Works Versus Grace: Are You too Nitpicky?

I frequently hear, “You know, you’re just a little too nitpicky about the Gospel.”

[Mind you, I think of ‘nitpicky’ as a relative term. In my experience, it generally means that you are ever so *slightly* more conservative than your accuser.]

At first, it was a surprising accusation to hear because I have always considered myself rather lenient on doctrinal matters. I figure that so long as one understands God’s Gospel, then the Holy Spirit can work on the finer points of doctrine. [As you may have guessed, to me everything after salvation is a ‘finer point of doctrine.’] To borrow from military parlance: there are certain hills you die to hold and the correct Gospel is one of them.

So, let me share three reasons why it is good to be nitpicky about the Gospel. Of course, there may be more reasons, but at my tender young age [If I keep repeating that often enough, I may actually come to believe it.] I have yet to encounter additional reasons.

A. It’s what God taught me when I was saved

As a young man, I had very little need for God. Like most young men (and women), I tended to think of myself as indestructible (which led to a lot of really foolish activities—many of which I am lucky to have survived). Consequently, God was relegated to that dusty shelf of childhood memories. Sure, like everyone else, I took God down and dusted Him off when I visited Grandma or went to a wedding, but other than that, God sat on the shelf like so much bric-a-brac.

Have you ever been in a hotel and gotten a wakeup call from the front desk—you know, where you fumble for the phone and manage something akin to ‘hello’ in a guttural, long lost language while a cheery voice on the other end announces a new day dawning? Well, some day—if He hasn’t already—God is going to give you a wakeup call. [Sort of your own Damascus road.] For me, that day was on a submarine while negotiating an underwater minefield and listening to mine cables scraping along the outside of the hull. [Okay, maybe that ‘one day’ was actually one night—not that it matters on a submarine.]

God used that incident to snap me back to reality and to start seeking God. A fellow crew-member named Jim Martin gave me a Bible and helped me find the Gospel message.¹ Jim was shortly transferred to another duty location and because the boat’s ambiance was not conducive to religion, I was left for the next few years to study on my own.

Now, I have to ask you some questions so that you will understand where I’m coming from.

While I was at sea studying, who taught me the importance of grace? Who taught me to distinguish between grace and works? It either had to be God or Satan, because no one on the boat cared one way or another. Which was it?

¹ Visit <http://www.workmanmin.com> and click on ‘Our History.’

B. It's what God showed me through experience

I used to visit a local prison regularly as an evening volunteer working for the Chaplain. I would walk around cell blocks in the portion of the prison devoted to those in solitary confinement and visit, answer religious questions, pray, or otherwise providing some small amount of spiritual comfort. The cells in this area of the prison were not like holding cells, but were small cells with a solid metal door, a food slot, and a slender, unbreakable window. Each two-story cellblock consisted of 48 cells, 24 to a floor, with a large open area in the middle.

I wasn't the only volunteer, mind you, but I didn't usually see other volunteers as I suspect most of them worked other days and times. In fact, I was only marginally acquainted with them. Most of what I knew came from glancing over materials that they had left behind in our communal office.

Upon arriving one evening, I was confronted with a small group of these volunteers seeking my assistance. They wanted me to visit a particular cell and discern whether (in my estimation) the inmate residing in that cell was possessed by a demon.

Okay, I know what you're thinking and believe me, I was thinking the same thing. Were they actually serious? All I knew about demon possession was what I had read in Scripture. I wasn't even sure how to respond to their request. Yet, I had never had people waiting for me in the office before and they were obviously very serious.

I did the only thing I could think of to do—I asked them *why* they thought he might be possessed. Their answer? The inmate would scream insults and epitaphs and throw food at anyone that carried a Bible and was unfortunate enough to come within earshot or, presumably, the carrying distance of a wad of mashed potatoes flung sideways out of the food slot. I wrote the cell number down and promised to write my conclusion in a memo and leave it in the office when I left that night. Upon that news, they dispersed and I proceeded to the cellblock containing this fellow.

As is usually the case, I entered the cellblock and sat down on the few steps leading down onto the open floor. [I always sat on these steps and filled out paperwork for a minute or two. I could have filled out the paperwork in the office, but I liked the opportunity it gave me to judge the general demeanor of the group before proceeding (and for them to size me up).]

On this evening, however, I was particularly interested in the activities of the first cell on the bottom floor, left—those of our allegedly possessed individual. He was at his door, face to the window, watching me, but saying nothing.

I got up and walked to his cell—about 40 feet away. As soon as he recognized that I was coming to his cell, he retreated to the back of the cell, sat, legs crossed, on his bunk, and faced the wall. I tried to engage him in conversation, but he sat motionless, staring at the bare, back wall and never uttered a peep. After a couple of minutes, I moved on to the other cells and completed my rounds for the evening. Yes, he watched me the whole time, but was as quiet as a church mouse.

What was my assessment? When I returned to the office I wrote a short memo that said that, yes, I did believe that he was possessed, but did not offer any clue as to why I believed that to be the case.

How did I know? If he had been faking the behavior, then he would have treated me in like manner as the other volunteers when I approached with my Bible. He wasn't faking.

Why would he not talk to me? The demon did not want to be found out and likely felt that my suspicion of possession was the lesser evil [Forgive the metaphor.] than my certain knowledge.

Now for the *really* important question. Why did the demon treat me differently than the other volunteers? I told you earlier that I was acquainted with the other volunteers primarily through the literature that they left in the office. *Every single one of the other volunteers presented a Gospel that included works for salvation!* That's right! Every single other volunteer—sincere as they were—was pushing a Gospel that mixed some sort of human effort as a partial payment for sin (that is, as a prerequisite for salvation). Those included: (1) praying the sinner's prayer, (2) inviting Jesus into your heart, (3) making Jesus your Lord and master, and a host of similar errors.

I 'm not sure what the demon saw in me, but what he saw in the other volunteers certainly did not intimidate him.

The lesson is clear: the details matter!

C. The last and most important reason is because the Bible says so.

> The Gospel is the most fundamental doctrine in the Bible. There can be no room for error on this point. It is critical to the health of your church.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Cor. 1:10

> To what should you all agree? You should agree that you can't mix grace with works. It's either solely by grace, or it's a false Gospel.

And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.

Rom. 11:6

[If this is hard to understand, substitute 'sitting' for 'grace' and 'standing' for 'works.']

> Adherence to a false Gospel is a sin that results in loss of fellowship (whether you speak it or not).

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

Gal. 1:6

> In addition, spreading a false Gospel is a perversion. You want to be a pervert?

Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

Gal. 1:7

- > The false evangelist was to be accursed by the congregation. This means that they were to treat the pervert as if he were marked for destruction by God.
But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.
Gal. 1:8
- > This is no joke! Very few admonitions warrant such a repetition. Spreading a false Gospel is *very* bad.
As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.
Gal. 1:9
- > Instead, earnestly guard the Gospel against error.
But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.
Gal. 4:18
- > Why so zealous? Because even a *tiny* bit of error is sufficient to invalidate your entire Gospel.
A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.
Gal. 5:9
- > What should you do when you encounter a false Gospel?
Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge.
Pr. 19:27