

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Pergamos: Potential Blessings

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh 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 knoweth saving he that receiveth it. (Revelation 2:17, KJV 1900)

We often read or hear theologians talk about God's eternal blessings being "Unconditional" and His temporal blessings being "Conditional." The intent is clear, but the single word fails to capture the truth of Scripture's teachings. To reflect Biblical accuracy, we need to enlarge the term; "Unconditional on our part" and "Conditional on our part." On the eternal question, God didn't merely decide to ignore the moral implications of our sins and forgive us because He wanted to do so. Our sin and its guilt before our righteous God and His righteous Law must be resolved. Scripture overflows with teachings that remind us of all the conditions that God required—and then Himself performed—to release His chosen people from the legal and righteous debt our sins laid to our charge. The enlarged term rightly emphasizes that God met all those conditions and requirements Himself. He has not left us with a single condition that we must perform to gain acceptance to His eternal blessings. Far more "Conditions" than we can imagine were required for our eternal deliverance, but He met them all, and none are left for us to complete; thus the term "Unconditional" acceptably applies to our role in our eternal salvation. Likewise, Scripture consistently teaches that the Holy Spirit teaches, convicts, and guides His regenerate people to follow Him and to honor Him in their lives, so our discipleship indeed requires that we perform certain "Conditions."

Folks who sincerely think they believe that eternal salvation is not of human works, often believe that a sinner must in some way exercise faith in Christ to gain full and complete acceptance with God. No act of faith in this system of belief means no salvation. When challenged with the idea that they have actually embraced a form of salvation by works, they will protest that faith is not a work. They fail to grasp the clear point that Jesus made on this question.

Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. (John 6:28-29 KJV)

The question is unmistakably clear. These people were asking what they could do, what works they

could perform, to be acceptable to God. Jesus answered their question with equal clarity. *This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.* Jesus Himself categorically defined the premier act of faith, believing in Jesus, as a "Work." Thus, when someone says that faith is not a work, so his requiring the sinner to exercise faith in Christ is not technically a "Work," his belief quite clearly contradicts Jesus' own words. Other belief systems in our day veil their belief in salvation by works with less cover, as in the controversial MacArthur "Lordship Salvation" controversy, truly a belief in "Backdoor salvation by works." Neither the common view that contradicts Jesus' own words—faith is the work that we should perform to "...work the works of God"—or the MacArthur view can harmonize with the point that Jesus makes in this lesson and avoid the logical conclusion that they believe in a form of salvation by works. They may claim to believe in "Unconditional" eternal salvation, but they in fact believe that the sinner must perform at least one "work"—Jesus identified it as a work—to complete the salvation process.

Most of these systems of belief confuse and intermingle the new birth and gospel conversion, so they attribute to one—in this case to the new birth—what Scripture attributes to conversion, the act—the work—of believing in Jesus. Often, rather than clearly dealing with the obvious problem of their belief in light of what Jesus taught in these verses, advocates of this view will attempt to shift the spotlight away from their errant belief by the false accusation that anyone who rejects the idea that the unsaved sinner must have faith in Jesus to be born again is "Antinomian." "Antinomian" historically and rightly refers to someone who claims to be a Christian, but who believes that God loves us so much that He never commands us to do anything; supposedly we can live in sin as fully as we desire and think we haven't offended God since "We are not under the law, but under grace." The false accusation is in fact a false—and redefined—use of the word. The Scriptures teach that the Lord saves His people, wholly "Unconditional" on their part. However, Scripture also teaches that the elect are commanded to "...glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." (1 Corinthians 6:20) Godly people who believe in the new birth by the immediate and unassisted work of the Holy Spirit

are not in any way “Antinomian.” Most of the people I’ve known, who hold to this belief, are also highly motivated, godly Christians. They despise true “Antinomianism.” These false accusers wholly reject Jesus’ words, and they further devalue the Biblical principle of grace. God’s grace never appears in Scripture as being morally neutral. Consider one passage as a clear example of grace’s moral impact.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. (Titus 2:11-14 KJV)

The same grace of God that saves also teaches those who are thus saved how to live. Scripture does not reveal how much each regenerated elect person may learn and practice from grace’s teachings, but it clearly affirms the point that grace does so teach. If believing in Jesus is a requirement for the new birth, what do advocates of this view do with the man who “...cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” (Mark 9:24 KJV) He believes, yet he struggles with unbelief, so is this man really saved or unsaved? Jesus didn’t tell this man that having doubts raises a question as to whether he is really born again or not, so he needs to start over and do something more. Hmmm, this doesn’t sound like salvation all by grace does it, if the man must yet do something more. And who among us can be wholly honest and say that he or she is any different from this man? We all struggle with both strong belief and with seasons or areas of unbelief. Rather than question the man’s salvation, Jesus immediately responded with blessings and the granting of his plea. He didn’t so much as consider the confused modern preacher’s “Well, if you have any doubts, you are probably not saved at all, so you need to start at the beginning and get it right this time.”

True Bible grace doesn’t offer salvation to the lost if the lost will perform a condition that Scripture teaches is impossible for him to perform. (Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14) Notice that Paul did not write to Titus that the grace of God “Offers” salvation to anyone; he wrote that God’s grace “...bringeth...” salvation. The balanced and correct Biblical view holds to both God’s exclusive and all-encompassing role in our eternal salvation, and a united labor in discipleship that involves both grace’s teaching and our willing learning and practice of grace.

As we shift our thoughts from the perspective of “Unconditional-on-our-part” eternal salvation to discipleship, conversion, and our present life, the

dynamic of Scripture sets a world of rich blessings before us, but Scripture also clearly imposes conditions on us for our enjoyment of those blessings. The fatalistic notion that God is just as active in our discipleship—and we are just as passive—as in our regeneration is as contradictory to Scripture as the idea that God saves His people without any legal resolution of their sins. You can hardly read a single page of Scripture where you do not encounter this principle. Our present study verses emphasize this point quite clearly.

To him that overcometh will I give.... For the people in the Pergamos Church or for us, there is no hidden manna and no white stone apart from a willing, conscious decision, and logical behaviors that accompany the decision to engage sin in a lifelong battle—and to strive to overcome it. While Scripture teaches that our eternal salvation is not of works, not of ourselves, and not by works of righteousness which we have done, based on Jesus’ own words, including our believing in Him (Titus 3:5 and context), Scripture also teaches that our faithful discipleship involves a cooperative life of willingly and joyfully obeying and following Him.

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (2 Corinthians 6:1 KJV)

He leads and convicts us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. He promises His accompanying, enabling grace. But He also commands us to take up our cross and engage in godly labors. The Biblical perspective of the godly life is not the image of our “Doing Christianity” apart from Him and His kind grace. Nor is the Biblical perspective of discipleship that of a cosmic robot who pulls the strings and moves us across the stage apart from our willing, conscious, and active engagement in the faith-walk that He commands. The Holy Spirit promised rich blessings that the Pergamos Church could not have imagined, much less expected, given their mixed behaviors, but He promised those blessings on the “Condition” of their obedience, their overcoming.

A few years ago I had an interesting conversation with a pastor of an independent Baptist church in this area. He said he believed strongly in the doctrines of grace and occasionally preached them to his church. However, he then told an experience in which, for some time he saw fewer conversions than he wanted, so he returned to preaching the mixed message gospel that requires the sinner to do something to complete the eternal salvation process. He was gratified that his admittedly errant preaching gained results. This experience exemplifies the error of motive. Our believing in Jesus and obeying the gospel should never be motivated by what we gain, but by a grateful heart full of loving adoration for the glorious Savior. Omit that truth, and you lose the heartbeat of the gospel of grace.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor