

Blessings and Curses and the Gospel of Grace

Introduction:

A very common teaching among Christian pastors and denominations is the Old Covenant concept of blessings and curses. Although this teaching is in the Old Covenant, it is only a shadow that is fulfilled in the completed work of Christ on the Cross. Jesus became a curse for us on the Cross and as result, there are no blessings apart from Him and no curses that come upon us from him. Because there is much misunderstanding of this teaching, the following is to clarify this Biblical truth.

Obey, Obedience

Behind the idea of curses and blessing is the issue of obedience and disobedience. In the OT “obey” is very close to the word “to hear.” To obey is the correct response to the voice, the call or the word of God. In the OT the idea that you can casually hear God’s voice or his word and not obey is unimaginable. When God speaks- you are expected to “hear” or obey. This explains why the word for obey in the Greek NT is literally, “super-hearing.” Thus to hear God’s word is to obey God’s word. Also, in the OT there is no word for disobey, but rather words like “rebel” or “revolt,” are used.

Trust and obey

In the OT obedience is intimately connected to our humble agreement with and our unconditional trust in God’s commands. This trust and obey connection began in the Garden of Eden. There we see Adam living in perfect trust in God to provide all his needs. Adam lived in harmony with his Father/God, trusting God, loving God. We see him humbly enjoying God. Adam and Eve experienced the highest level of peace by trusting God’s character, his love and concern. This perfect trust was reflected in their obedience to all God asked of them. This pre-fall relationship of trust and obey was a perfect pattern for human existence.

This is a lesson for all of us. Distrust is the open door to disobedience. When the serpent came to Eve his goal was to create distrust in God’s character. His weapon was doubt. He wants us to doubt and distrust who God is. Satan always wants us to either distrust God’s sovereignty, God’s compassion or his interest in us. Think about it- when the enemy can get you to distrust the Father’s sovereignty you will be tempted to distrust and disobey. Why? Because if God is not all powerful, then he cannot always be in control. He cannot change the mess our lives are in. Satan will often try to get you to distrust God’s care for you. If you distrust his compassion, you begin to manipulate him to gain his favor. Finally Satan will tempt us to doubt God’s interest in us. The enemy tells us the Father is detached, totally removed from human affairs. He has no interest or purpose for us. When we begin to believe this lie we no longer trust God to order our lives. All this leaves us with is the need to manipulate God by using our obedience as a weapon to control him in some way.

Faith and Obedience

In the scriptures the idea of trusting God is synonymous with “believing” God. Faith and

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obedience are closely related ideas. The best example of belief that produces obedience is that of Abraham in Genesis 15. Abraham is 99 years old and his wife Sarah is barren. God tells Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. When Abraham hears God’s pronouncement, the scripture says, “*and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*” (**Gen. 15:6**) Paul quotes this verse in **Romans 4:3** to demonstrate that believing God is evidenced by obedience. Paul’s point is that Abraham’s obedience came out of his faith (trust) in God.

When we read carefully the book of James we understand that real trust/faith in God produces good works. These faith/works are the obedience of faith, see **James 2:26**. Faith in God brings about a pure kind of obedience.

Obedience without faith

What we learn from this is that any obedience we offer to God that does not come from our trusting God is potentially evil. It is tainted with self-will, self-pride, and the need to control. Sadly, many Christians continue to offer God a false obedience that comes from a religious spirit that dishonors our Heavenly Father. In point of fact, obedience that comes from distrust actually has created much of the world’s religion. Being obedient to impress God, to get something favorable from God, or to manipulate God will never produce fellowship with God.

Distrust and faulty obedience

1. Fear as motive:

There is much obeying God that comes from the fear of God. It sees God as a tyrant who is eager to punish and slow to forgive. Those who obey out of the fear of hell or other judgments have never seen the face of God in the face of Jesus our suffering servant lord. When we serve out of fear of punishment, it reveals a fundamental distrust in the cross of Christ to make us “right” in God’s eyes.

2. Duty as motive:

The apostle John described folks who think God’s commands are a burden to keep. In **1st John 5:3**, he says Christ’s commandments are not “grievous” or burdensome. All legalistic religions that keep score on your good days and bad days think obedience is a duty or burden we must bear. John says because we have experienced God’s love in Christ, his commandments are not a load to bear but rather an opportunity to express our joy in serving him. Only obedience that has delight in it, is truly NT obedience.

3. Guilt & Shame as motive:

Guilt and shame are twin sisters. Both are ugly! Guilt over failure produces shame. Shame is guilt gone toxic. There are many, many toxic Christ-followers whose obedience is guilt motivated because they distrust God’s love & mercy. Their obedience is reluctant, casual, and filled with regret. They just know that curses from God are right around the corner-about to catch up with them.

4. Manipulation as motive:

Few believers would readily admit to trying to manipulate God, but thousands do it- and often. Their distrust goes like a game played out this way- “God, if I do this, then you are honor bound to do that.” I can get God to serve me and my wishes by obeying certain rules he has laid out. For example; manipulators use **Luke 6:38** as an excuse for a “give to get” theology. They actually think they can treat God like a casino slot-machine that is rigged in their favor. They give (obeying) expecting to get more than they gave- even a hundred fold. Those who try this manipulation game totally ignore the context of Luke 6:38 which is to love your enemies, pray for them, and do to others as you want them to do to you (**Luke 6:31**)

Better than Sacrifice

For example, God says to King Saul after he disobeyed by offering his religious sacrifices as a substitute for obeying God’s voice, *“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion*

is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.” **1st Samuel 15:22-23.**

Religious people daily offer God a kind of obedience that comes from shame, guilt, duty, fear, or manipulation. Modern day radical Islam is a prime example. Their interpretation of Islamic law (sharia) tells them that through Jihad they can manipulate Allah to give them blessings of virgins in paradise. The jihadist foolishly believes God can be bought and controlled by human efforts.

Many Christians do much the same thing when we think that by tithing we can get blessings from God. The so-called “prosperity gospel” tells millions that God delights in our sacrifices (obeying without trusting). It says by giving money you can bribe God to give you more money. You can give in order to get. The other side of this false teaching is that if you do not give or “plant your seed money,” then the devourer (curses) will come to your house. Thus obedience is manipulation to get blessings and to avoid curses.

Blessings and Curses

You may be wanting to remind me that the OT teaches us to believe in blessings and curses. We often site **Genesis 12:3**, *“I will bless them that bless you, and I will dishonor them that curse you,”* to teach that God will bless those of us who bless modern day Israel, and God will also put a curse on those who do not bless modern day Israel. Another OT passage commonly used to teach that blessings and curses are in the church today is **Malach1 3:10, 11**. We are told (by some) that tithing will bring us God’s blessing and that refusing to tithe will bring the devourer (curses) upon our prosperity (crops). Are we to believe this is still God’s word to us today? I do not think so.

Progressive Revelation

All of those who teach that curses come upon those who disobey, get their theology from the Old Covenant, not the New Covenant. Their mistake is in a failure to understand the proper relationship between the OT and the NT. Mature bible students understand the concept of progressive revelation in the scriptures. This means that Moses knew more of God’s character, purposes, and will than his predecessor Abraham. Abraham did not have the Law, Moses did. Then later, the Prophets of Israel are given more revelation of God’s purpose for Israel than

Moses knew. They speak repeatedly of God's desire to send a Messiah to redeem mankind. They knew more than Moses. God was progressively revealing himself to us. Even so, Jesus knows more of God than Moses because he is greater than Moses. He is greater than the prophets because he fulfilled the Law & the prophets. Jesus the Christ is the full and final revelation of God. In Him is the fullness of God.

Curses in the Old Covenant

This helps us understand why blessings and curses are taught throughout the OT, but not in the NT.

In the OT narrative God is working out his purpose to redeem and restore what was lost in the Garden of Eden. The curse comes upon fallen mankind with Adam's rebellion. Disobedience brings God's wrath often called a "curse." When God makes Covenant with Abraham he again stresses obedience, but warns of curses (disfavor) on those who disobey. Then God gives Moses his Law and the standard is raised even higher. Israel's standard to measure obedience is the Law. The law is full of promises to bless those who obey, and also curses upon those who do not. This blessings and curses principle is true for those OT peoples living in that era of history-under the Law.

Curses in the New Covenant

The Apostle Paul receives even more revelation as he interprets what happened at the crucifixion of

Jesus- God's Messiah. Jesus is God's chosen lamb who through his death and shed blood has taken away the sin of the world (**Ephesians 1:7**). In writing to the Galatian Church, Paul says in **Galatians 3:1-13** that we, the new people of God, are no longer under the Law and its condemnation. He calls us the true sons of Abraham because we are saved by faith in Christ's sacrifice and not saved by our deeds of the law (**Gal. 3:7**). We are blessed along with Abraham the believer (**Gal. 3:9**). He then boldly declares we are free from all the curses of the Law:

"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "the righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us-for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.-so that in Christ Jesus the blessings of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

What a joyous declaration "*Christ became the curse for us.*" Notice that the curse is removed for those who believe in Christ's saving work. Because we are "in Christ" our curses, disobedience and sins were on the cross with Jesus, we are freed from living under the laws condemnation and curses. There is no more curse for the believer, only blessings.

Not keeping score

What this means to the believer in Christ is that God is no longer keeping "score." The "score" (debt) was put on Jesus shoulders and carried to the cross. The score card is full, then paid in full.

Now think on this- it is impossible to make “points” with someone who is not keeping score! Therefore, any obedience I offer God that comes from a motive to impress him, get something from him, or to make him love me more is foolish and useless. Any obedience that is based on distrust in Christ’s all sufficient sacrifice, will ultimately create a religious spirit that can never create fellowship with God.

In Christ, or under Law

So then, we are free to choose, we can be free in Christ or under bondage to the law. The choice is ours. Those Christians who live in guilt, shame, or bondage have not “believed” in the obedience that comes from faith in the completed work of Christ. They are living like OT Israel- condemned by the law.

Galatians tells us if we offer God any kind of obedience that has any motive to gain God’s favor, then that obedience nullifies Grace.

Think of it this way- all OT law keeping was based in distrust in God’s character, love and mercy. That’s evidenced by Israel’s first and greatest commandment in **Deuteronomy 6:4, 5** “*Hear, O’ Israel: The lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” Here is proper motive to obey God. We obey him because we love him, trust him, and want to please him.

Which do you choose- Law or Grace? Christ or Moses? Blessing or curse? You cannot have it both ways.

Transformed people

The only thing that ever changes people is a transforming look at the Cross of Christ. Facing the Ten Commandments does not change people; it may tame them for a while, but it can never change them.

God’s love when revealed and received is what changes a man. When we are captured by the amazing grace of Christ, then and only then can begin to serve and obey out of faith and trust.

How then does God bless us?

Since there are no curses for those in Christ, how about the blessings side of obedience? Since I cannot obey to get more blessings- how do they come to us? Think of it this way- since God only blesses perfect obedience, none of us is that righteous. (**Romans 3:10**) All we can ever offer the Father is our partial obedience. That can only disappoint any child of God who desires to please God. God only has one Son who has offered him perfect obedience and that of course in his only begotten Son-Jesus. He gave God perfect obedience by always pleasing the Father (**John 8:29**).

The only pure grace filled living that can satisfy the human spirit is the obedience that comes from faith. It is born out of trusting the Father. Only Christ in us can live out obedience thru us.

What God demands he supplies

For the believer, who wants to please God, he must know and trust the fact that what God commands us to do, he beforehand supplies the power to do for us, in us and thru us.

It is recorded in Matthew 12 that Jesus was in the synagogue and he sees a man with a crippled hand. He commands the man to “*stretch out your hand!*” (**Matt. 12:13**) Jesus was asking the

man to do something that was impossible for him to do. However, the man trusted the word of Christ and stretched out his arm and was immediately healed. What God commands, he also supplies the power to do.

Again, the scriptures tell a man to love his wife as Christ loved the church. This is another of those impossible commands to obey. No man can love his wife like Jesus can love her. That is why we are indwelt with the love of Jesus which is spread aboard in our hearts by His Holy Spirit (**Romans 5:5**). What God demands, he also supplies by his grace. God will never ask us to do something he is not eager to supply the power to do.

He is the blessing

Finally, a mature believer has come to realize that Christ himself is better than all his gifts, blessings or favors. He is better for me than what he might do for me. My greatest blessing is that I get to live in fellowship with my heavenly Father and to experience his pleasure in my being his partner to bring in the kingdom of his dear Son.