

Digging for Treasure

Selected Scriptures

Rick Peterson

While I was in Bible College, my professors taught me not to be content with a surface understanding of the gospel. Instead, I was to learn to dig and sift and separate, just like a miner searching for gold. When it comes to the pursuit of truth, David Mathis reminds us if we rake the ground surface all you will get is leaves, but you have to dig deep to find the gold.¹ Paul refers to his possession of the truth of Christ as “treasure in earthen vessels” (II Corinthians 4:7).² He also told Timothy to “Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (II Timothy 1:14). Holy diligence in the pursuit and preservation of truth is a very important principle in the spiritual life. Nowhere does Scripture encourage a passive approach. Instead, we are told that God is a “rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6, NKJV). And through Jeremiah, God promises, “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). “How blessed” says the Psalmist, “are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart” (Psalm 119:2).

Do you regard the truth of the gospel as treasure to be continually pursued and safeguarded? If not, perhaps it is because you have yet to fully grasp the wonders of grace. It is entirely possible for many in today’s church culture to attend sermons each week and never hear the treasure of the gospel. What I want for you is the joy of knowing the treasure that the gospel truly is to you, and to help you separate from the useless leaves, dirt, and rocks of the teaching of men. In this discourse, I will lay out both the foundational truths of Christ, and do so at a depth which most professing Christians seldom if ever come to understand.

¹ David Mathis, “More than Just Raking” blog article at www.desiringgod.org, November 25, 2013. Available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/more-than-just-raking>

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, by the Lockman Foundation, La Habra, CA.

Grace is necessary and sufficient

Throughout church history, great heresies have brought into the question both the necessity and sufficiency of grace. For instance, a man named Pelagius, a fifth century monk, denied the necessity of grace. Pelagius taught that the fall of Adam did not mean loss of the moral image of God within mankind, but only a bad example, and that Christ in his perfection provided the example needed to return to obedience and acceptance with God. If God chose to provide grace in this recovery process, that was good, but it was not necessary for mankind retained even after the fall the ability to obey God's law apart from grace.

Augustine argued for the biblical truth that the fall was indeed, a loss of the moral ability to please God and that supernatural grace was necessary and sufficient to free from the enslaving nature of sin, and to bring about faith in the saving work of Christ, alone. Pelagius was condemned by the undivided church as a heretic. Not long after this controversy, a man by the name of John Cassian sought to create a middle ground between Pelagius and Augustine by teaching that grace was indeed necessary, though not sufficient. Cassian taught that grace enabled the works of the believer to bring about acceptance with God. This came to be known as Cassianism or Semi-Pelagianism (some call it semi-Augustinianism). This, too, was condemned by the undivided church as heresy.

The undivided church of that time held to the apostolic teaching that grace was not only necessary for salvation, but sufficient, meaning salvation from beginning to end was of the Lord. It was then, and remains, the "good news" of the gospel. It is by grace that we are saved, through faith in the perfect work of Christ. For centuries, the church maintained the apostolic teaching that sin brought about spiritual death, and with it, the loss of the moral ability in desire and will to obey God. It was only in the medieval era that the church fell away from this truth.³ The Reformation recovered the truth of Martin Luther called "The Bondage of the Will." The Reformers recovered the gospel teaching that grace raised the dead sinner (regeneration/born of the Spirit) and imparted saving faith in Christ. Works flowed from this saving faith, but as the natural consequence of the presence of new life in the believer, and were not meritorious. Good works evidence the presence of spiritual life, but have no role in gaining spiritual life. This is a huge distinction. And a distinction for which you must remain absolutely clear.

For while the teachings of Pelagius and Cassian were condemned as heresy, those teachings did not go away. This is because what we call Pelagianism or Cassianism did not originate with either of these two men. To reject God's word and seek one's own terms is as old as the serpent's deception of Eve (see II Corinthians 11:1-4). It was Cain who first offered a sacrifice of his own choosing and then killed Abel to eliminate his righteous contrast. Since then, the teaching of self-salvation has been the default point for the natural man; it is the religion of the flesh, and it stands violently opposed to the work of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 3:1-5).

For instance, liberal theology today is largely Pelagian by definition, and Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy have long embraced the grace plus works teaching of Cassian. But shockingly, many in the Protestant-Evangelical world also hold to this grace plus works heresy. Indeed, the most common view of salvation among modern evangelicals today is the synergism of Cassian. It sounds like this: "Jesus has died for your sins, *but you* must still do (this or that) in order to be saved, and to remain saved." Now, on the surface, this makes sense. But it is only a half-truth, and the devil loves to deal in half-truths. It is true Jesus died for your sins, and it is also true you must respond in order to have His work applied to you. But if you do not understand grace properly, you will assume even your response is something you add to what Christ did on your behalf, and effectively make your response a necessary work. This is not splitting hairs. It is a very important point, for it exposes the subtle and deadly twist the devil puts on the gospel.

So, let's look closer. In the next episode I will talk with you about the biblical principle that regeneration (being born of the Spirit) precedes saving faith. AMEN.

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