

GRACE

The God/Man Relationship

Good evening and welcome to the Midweek Bible Class from Southeastern Church of Christ. I am Gerry Sturgeon and I will be hosting this class for the month of July. Our theme this month is GRACE: The God/Man Relationship. Tonight's lesson is "Man."

Before we launch into tonight's lesson, please join me in prayer.

Man

What Must I Do to be Saved

In the movie No Reservations, Kate's orphaned niece, Zoe, comes to live with her. Zoe slowly warms up to Kate and begins to trust her. Then on one hectic day Kate forgets to pick up Zoe from school. Zoe is hurt and angry, but mostly hurt. Kate apologizes profusely but Zoe is having none of it. In desperation Kate says, "Zoe, I'm sorry. I totally blew it. I know I'm doing everything wrong. But I'm doing my best, okay? Why don't you think of something I can do to make it up to you?" Zoe: "You mean like a wish?" Kate: "Yeah, you wish for something and I try to make it happen. And in return, you forgive me."

In human relationships we often find ourselves trying to bargain with someone to try to gain their trust or favor. It is often in the form of I'll do something for you if you will do something for me. In the movie No Reservations, Kate was trying to bargain for Zoe's forgiveness. It isn't clear from the quote above, but when it came time for Zoe to collect on the bargain, it was Zoe who set the terms for granting forgiveness. The injured party got to set the terms. Kate's only decision was whether or not she was going to honor her promise.

Who hasn't said, "Lord get me out of this and I'll stop ... being angry, yelling at the kids, gossiping, drinking, smoking, staying home from church ...?" You fill in the blank. The problem is we often don't follow through on our part of the bargain.

A rich man was on an airplane during a thunderstorm. Suddenly the plane went into a nosedive and the man was sure he was about to die. He yelled out, "Oh Lord please save me, and I will give half of my money to the poor." Suddenly the plane leveled off and in no time was safely on the ground. As he was getting off of the plane another man approached the rich man and said, "Mister I am a preacher and I hear what you promised the Lord, and I know you want to start right now giving that money to the poor." The rich man replied, "No preacher I made a better deal. I told the Lord if I ever get on another airplane, he can have it all."

Unfortunately, I believe there is more truth to this story than fiction. It seems that man is always wanting to renegotiate God's terms. In Genesis 4 starting in verse 2 we read about Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

"Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard." (Genesis 4:2-5a)

Hebrews 11:4 tells us about Abel's offering. "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous." Next week we will study more about faith, but for now we will just say that it has to do with a person's response to God. Abel made his offering to God out of faith. The implication is that Cain did not.

We may also see a clue in Cain's response to his offering being rejected. In the second half of verse 5 we read, "So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell."

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." (Genesis 4:6&7)

God did not question the type of offering that Cain presented, rather he questioned Cain's attitude, his motivation, God questioned Cain's heart. Cain had not done well. Cain was close to sinning, and God told Cain that he must overcome sin. Sadly, sin overcame Cain, and Cain murdered his brother Abel.

In Genesis 4:10-16 we read about Cain's punishment for murdering his brother Abel.

"The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." But the LORD said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden." (Genesis 4:10-16 NIV)

Cain protested that his punishment is too severe. Cain deserved death for his crime, but God showed Cain mercy. Cain deserved to have others avenge Abel's murder, but God gave Cain grace, a gift he did not deserve. God put a hedge of protection around Cain. Cain did not deserve mercy or grace. They were free gifts from a loving God.

We see that God's gifts are free, but there is an expectation placed upon the recipient of God's gifts. God's gifts are free to those who keep his covenants. In a covenant relationship man promises to obey God's rules and God promises to give man blessings. In the Garden of Eden there was just one rule. Don't eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That was it. God made a covenant with man. For obeying that one rule Adam and Eve would have been cared for and provided for in Paradise for eternity. They were driven from the garden because they lacked one thing. They lacked obedience to God's one rule. They exercised their freedom of choice. They broke God's covenant.

In Mark 10:17-22 we read about a rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

"And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." (Mark 10:17-22 ESV)

You can just see the young man's face brighten up when he realized he was already doing the things he needed to do. You might say his countenance was lifted up. And just as quickly his countenance fell when Jesus told him he needed to give up all his worldly possessions and commit himself to following Jesus. The young man needed to choose his master. Would it be Jesus or his possessions. The young man went away sorrowful because he considered the price of following Jesus to be too great of a price to pay.

In both the case of Cain and the rich young man, they were not able to save themselves, but they were unwilling to accept God's terms.

Under the Law of Moses, God made a covenant with the Children of Israel. In Deuteronomy 7 verses 12 through 14 we read, "And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples." (Deuteronomy 7:12-14)

God's gifts are free to those who keep his covenants.

While on the road up to Jerusalem, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." Being

totally committed to following Jesus is essential to salvation. This is a non-negotiable. God has given man the gift of salvation, but there are terms placed on who is able to claim that gift.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter." You see, God was the injured party at the fall of man. It was God's creation that had been wrecked. God gets to set the terms of reconciliation.

Man is incapable of saving himself, he is totally dependent on the grace of God. Paul quotes the psalmist in Romans 3:10-12 when he says, "As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." In John 2:23-25 we read that Jesus knew the heart of man. "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man."

Many people ran after Jesus but for all the wrong reasons. In chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, we read what Jesus had to say to these people.

Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal." Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (John 6:26-29)

They wanted to do works. Jesus told them that the work they should do is believe, have faith in him. We will talk more about faith and works next week.

Here's the bottom line. We cannot save ourselves. There are no works we can do to recommend ourselves to God. We cannot be good enough and we cannot earn or purchase our own salvation. We can only be saved by God's grace and on God's terms. One last story before we end tonight's class.

On the day of Pentecost following the crucifixion of Christ Jesus, Peter preached the first Gospel message. At the end of his sermon, the following happened.

"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." And with many other words he solemnly

testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:37-43 NASB)

Three thousand people responded to that first Gospel message. They had heard that Jesus was the Son of God. They believed that Jesus was the Son of God. We know they believed Peter's message because, "they were pierced in the heart," and they asked, "Brethren, what shall we do." They were told, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." These were God's terms for salvation. Three thousand people gladly did exactly what they were told to do to be saved. They then began living Christ centered lives by "continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

On that day 3000 people, all incapable of saving themselves, accepted God's free gift of redemption on God's terms. They didn't try to renegotiate the terms. They didn't try to pick and choose what they would and would not do. In faith they believed and obeyed God's commands. God had made good on his promise. Satan had been crushed and eternal life was once again available to all who accepted God's free unmerited gift.