

Are You Properly Motivated?

One of the greatest struggles that Christians have is in not truly understanding and embracing the biblical teaching of salvation by free grace alone. Salvation by free grace teaches us that we are accepted by God, not on the basis of our own righteousness, but because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. In the New Testament epistle of Titus, the apostle Paul writes, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...” (Titus 3:4-5). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9). As Christians, you and I are loved and accepted by God through the merit of Jesus. Nothing that we ever do—or fail to do—will cause God to love us any more or less! His love is not based on our performance.

Let’s suppose for a moment that we believe that our salvation is based on the perfect, finished work of Jesus Christ alone. But there is another problem that Christians often struggle with; we can live as if we’re saved by grace but sanctified (made progressively holy) by our works. This is a form of ‘legalism’ because we can live as if we’ll only remain in a right standing with God by performing satisfactorily. When we do this, the motivation for what we do is twisted. We’re ‘performing’ as it were, out of fear rather than faith. Rather than living and resting in grace, we are living in a fear-based moralism because we think that we can earn or bargain for God’s favor by our actions.

The following story may help to illustrate my point. There was once a gardener who grew an enormous carrot in his garden. He took it to his king and said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I have ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and as the man turned to go the king said, “Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all.” The gardener was amazed by the king’s generous and undeserved gift and went home rejoicing.

Now, there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard all this. And he said to himself, ‘If that is what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better?’ The next day the nobleman came before the king leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever had or ever will have. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you,” But the wise

king discerned the man's heart; he said thank you, took the horse and merely dismissed the man. The nobleman was upset and didn't understand. So the king said, "Let me explain." That gardener was giving me the carrot but you were giving yourself the horse."

When we wrongly believe that our 'gifts' earn the King's favor, like the nobleman in that story, we are merely giving our gifts to ourselves. May God help his people to rest in and be properly motivated in our obedience to our King by free and undeserved grace.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Ill.