

Biblical Cults 1 The Cult of Grace **Rabbi Adam J. Bernay**

Readings

Torah: Genesis 4:1-15, 6:6-8

Haftarah: Jeremiah 31:27-34

Apostolic: Romans 3:19-31; Galatians 2:16 – 3:29; Titus 3:1-11

This is part one of a four-part series called “Biblical Cults.” The idea is that there are certain cultic behaviors that have developed among Believers based on latching on to specific verses in the Bible and taking them out of context. Now, many of us might be familiar with groups that we might identify that way, say the snake-handlers, or the prosperity gospel, or constant use of tongues. But that’s not what I’m looking at here. We’re going a little more basic. The four “Biblical Cults” I’m going to be looking at over the next four weeks are what I call The Cult of Grace, The Cult of Law, The Cult of Tradition, and The Cult of Karaism or The Cult of Anti-Tradition.

First, let’s define what we mean by “cult.” Merriam-Webster gives the following definitions of cult that have to do with religions:

- 1: formal religious veneration: worship
- 2: a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also: its body of adherents
- 3: a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also: its body of adherents

The word itself comes from the Latin *cultus* care, adoration, from *colere* to cultivate. In other words, a cult is a formal religious group with identifiable followers that seeks to cultivate a specific set of beliefs that might be considered not quite kosher.

By that definition, we’re a cult, and we’re identified as such by some people. And that’s something to keep in mind: what defines a cult – in a negative sense – can be a matter of opinion. We could apply the definition to, say the Baptist denomination... but very few people would agree. (I’m not saying the Baptists are a cult; that was just an example.)

So, what do I mean by The Cult of Grace? The Cult of Grace is made up of people for whom Grace is the sole message of the Bible and the whole issue involved. People for whom nothing you do matters, all that matters is God’s grace through the Messiah, as contrasted by The Law. I think we’ve all encountered these people. They don’t see how the commandments in the Bible could possibly apply to them. Let me give you a look at their perspective, as outlined on the Acts 17-11 website:

Acts 17:25 (NIV) "And he [God] is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself *gives* all men life and breath and everything else."

Approaching God

Grace is getting what we don't deserve, or more formally "unmerited favor".

God has revealed His salvation for mankind through Jesus Christ, who gave Himself to die in our place so that we might be at peace with God. It is by grace we are *put right* with God, such cannot be earned or "merited" in any way. Peace with God is a gift from Him, not something we can ever achieve in our own resources. We must, then, forever approach God by way of the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and not with the idea that we can present our *own fruit* as Cain attempted. We read in Genesis 4:4-7:

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. 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."

Consider that Cain was *trying to please* God--was he not?--even though he came before the Lord in error. From this mistake in approach, when Cain refused to receive corrective instruction he indeed found "sin crouching at his door" of an unimaginable sort, just as he had been warned. For if we are not of the grace of God, then we are *on our own* and sin "desires to have us" in ways that will lead to various sorts of death. This is the ultimate drama of history, and the choice before us all. It is grace or the law; God's promise or our efforts; life or death.

Grace Versus The Law

We read in Galatians 4:23-29:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a

promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants... At that time the son born *in the ordinary way* persecuted the son born *by the power of the Spirit*. It is the same now.

This focus on error of approach--of thinking we can earn God's approval by what we do--might seem like a fine distinction, but Scripture could not be more clear or strident. We *cannot* earn salvation, no one will have bragging rights in heaven, nor will God accept any "works" or "fruit" that come from self-generated do-good intentions. Human religious energy is NOT something God has any interest in.

Are We Under The Law?

We read in Romans 3:21-28:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Yeshua the Messiah for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Messiah Yeshua; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Yeshua. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

The law puts forth what God wants done--it is the definition of "good works". But the law cannot produce these good works in us; it's just the standard. In fact, the law's very presence tends to make sin more appealing, and this is a very serious problem indeed.

For if we choose to be "under the law", then we will find "sin crouching at our door", just like Cain did.

God was not kidding about the law; it is just that by focusing on *it* we get nowhere. Only by grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit can we *do* what God requires. And we get grace NOT by looking to the law, but by believing through faith in Christ.

Conceptually, in Scripture, law and grace are pitted against each other as irreconcilable approaches to being *put right* (justified) with God. The law seeks to restrain, in the main, the passions of the carnal nature. "Don't do this and that", etc. The gospel of grace seeks to *put to death* all that is carnal in us, so that a *new* and *eternal life* can be born in us. What the law could never do, the Holy Spirit by resurrection grace can.

The New Way of The Spirit

Titus 3:4-7

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Yeshua the Messiah our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Romans 8:2-4

Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. The Law never succeeded in producing righteousness--the failure was always the weakness of human nature. But God... condemned that sinful nature.

2 Corinthians 3:6

It is He also who has made us competent to serve Him in... a new Covenant, which is not a written code but a Spirit; for the written code inflicts death, but the Spirit gives Life.

I think we have some mistaken ideas about what grace is and how it works in our lives. The late Rabbi Dr. David Hargis (of blessed memory) wrote the following about "true grace":

Grace is *chen* in Hebrew and *charis* in Greek. In both languages it may be translated as *favor*. However, in relation to G-d, grace is not passive favor, such as "to receive favor," rather it is active favor, such as "to be favored with a gift." This active form is the way grace is to be understood in Scripture. In fact, *charis* is translated as *gift* many times in the New Covenant writings in connection with the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4). In this context it clearly means an endowment or enablement. G-d's grace is His willingness to provide us with His enablement. When "Noah found grace in the eyes of the L-RD" (Genesis 6:8), it says in the Hebrew "*Noach matsa chen b'ayini YHVH.*" This may also be translated, "By the vision of the L-RD Noah came forth enabled," or even "Noah was gifted through the insight of YHVH." Grace does not mean that G-d accepts us regardless of our actions, but that G-d makes us acceptable. He provides the means whereby we can be accepted by Him.

The belief that grace and mercy are near synonyms, almost interchangeable concepts, is a gross misunderstanding by many. So much of Christianity thinks of grace as a kind of blanket mercy which is constantly forgiving all sin and cancels out the Law of G-d. Many have believed the error that grace allows them to disobey G-d's Law; that since grace abounds, sin may abound without penalty. This is especially taught by those who wish to ignore the eternal Law of G-d, or certain parts of it. Such doctrine is a nearly fatal error, because it waters down G-d's righteousness and calls into question His eternal faithfulness. It also misconstrues His kindness, and many have gone astray and departed from the truth because of this misinformation. Disdain for G-d's Law puts one in mortal danger. Hopefully, this danger can be reduced through a fuller understanding of the Word. Mercy is the forgiveness of G-d

that comes as a result of sincere repentance (changing directions). When we sin, then sincerely repent of that sin by changing our actions and relying on His righteousness, G-d will forgive our sin. *"Sin is transgression of the Law [Torah],"* (1 John 3:4). Therefore, when we know we have transgressed the Law of G-d we are required to repent of our way and return to walking after His Law, which is His light. His mercy allows us to return to Him.

The danger of The Cult of Grace is that by making your focus the “unmerited favor” through Messiah you are discounting the virtue of following God’s Word. Maybe not intentionally, and you may even say – as the Grace vs. Law study said – “The law puts forth what God wants done-it is the definition of "good works". But the law cannot produce these good works in us; it's just the standard.” – but what do people hear, especially when you also say God isn’t interested in our religious energy?

They hear, “Don’t really concern yourself with these rules. Yeah, God would like it if you did these things, but He doesn’t really care, and if you try you put yourself at risk.” Would any of us pay any attention to God’s commandments if that is how they were presented?

The Cult of Grace is not an organized religious group. It is people who take the concept of Grace too far. Grace becomes an obsession, and by focusing on Grace and telling people that trying to observe the commandments is putting yourself “back under the Law” and denying “the sacrifice of Jesus.” They may throw some commandments in people’s faces – the commandments to give the tithe or against homosexuality, for example – but when you get right down to it, they think “the Law” is something bad if you, as a Believer, try to keep it.

There is a serious line that can be crossed here. This attitude is just a step away from open rebellion against God and His Word. As I’ve said before, sometimes the sin isn’t eating pork or gay sex or ignoring the Sabbath, even if that’s what you’re doing. Sometimes, in those cases, the sin is rebellion. “Your commandments on this don’t matter, God!” Even if they don’t actually say that, people with this attitude are adherents to The Cult of Grace.