



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

ROMANS 7

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The Psychology of Grace

Someone has said that we have not truly believed truth until it affects our muscles. That is another way of affirming that theoretical truth is not transforming.

Only when we have so embraced truth that it determines what we think, affects how we feel, and influences how we choose can we be called believers. There are many who know the grand story of the gospel but have never entered the story. It is still external to them. It is another story and maybe even the best story, but it has not been adopted as their own story.

The reality of grace is talked about and admired by those who identify with Jesus, but too often it has not gotten down into the muscles. The continuing controversy surrounding grace provides evidence of this. Some are afraid a full-on embrace of grace will lead Christians to loose living. They want to balance grace with law as if it were just one of many attributes of God. Actually, grace is the essential nature of God. God is love, and

love is expressed in grace. Controversy is understandable because grace is the way God thinks, and his thoughts are so much higher than human thoughts, that we can never even imagine it. It has to be revealed to us by his graciousness. Our thoughts seem to hover around our need to do something to gain favor with God. The default human religion is based on this belief: Since disobeying God's command is what caused the human problem, obeying his command is what will fix it. But that is not enough. The sin of Adam and the resulting sin of all his descendants have alienated us from God. Sin has incurred a penalty we cannot pay. Sin has enslaved our wills to the point that we cannot muster enough will to be good. Apart from sovereign grace we are without hope.

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God has always been and always is the God of grace. He doesn't just love as one of his activities. He is love in all his affections and actions. We see the picture of his love in Eden. God provided multiple trees with fruit to match all the desires of the human heart. He commanded the man and the woman to eat and enjoy. He even offered them a dessert. If they would trust him explicitly and refuse to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would find the ultimate satisfaction. Don't miss the point. He provided for their joy. He commanded them to enjoy. He didn't wait for humans to ask or negotiate for blessings.

Faith is what people do when someone who is **trustworthy** makes a promise.

Later, after the terrible fall into sin, God initiated a covenant with Abram. As far as we know, Abram was not looking to make a deal. He did not appeal to God. God found him and made an outlandish promise to him. "I will bless you . . . you will be a blessing." There is not contractual negotiation. But what is the normal implication of such a declaration? Abram trusts him. Faith is what people do when someone who is trustworthy makes a promise.

Even later, God initiated the deliverance

for Abraham's descendants. They had been in Egypt for 400 years. They cried out in pain, but they had nothing to bargain with. God delivered them by his own sovereign grace and then initiated a covenant with Moses, their leader. Again, we see the grace of God demonstrated, and the expected implication follows. "I am the God who delivered you from the hand of Pharaoh and the land of Egypt . . . there shall be no other gods before me." Of course! If God demonstrated that no other power on earth can thwart him, why wouldn't you reject all other gods and be loyal to him? God gave them the stipulations of the covenant that made sense based on his grace. "This is how you live in my world. This is how you handle worship, relationships, possessions, and your own heart." The Law described what the normal response should be to God's grace. It was his graciousness that warned them of refusing his ways. It also promised them great blessings when they responded to his grace properly. The big problem was, however, they had been infected by the blindness of Eden's sin. Just as Adam and Eve had viewed the tree as prohibiting their freedom, Abraham's children saw the Law in negative terms. They fixated on the negative and discovered they didn't have the internal strength to resist the power of evil. When they saw a boundary, they defined it as suppression rather than protection.

In my book *Grace Works*, I tell of a time when I was on a diet and eating breakfast. As I remember, it was grapefruit and dry toast. The prospects for lunch were not much better: cottage cheese and tuna.

Like a **tuning fork in our heart**, we **resonate with the sound of the truth** wherever we hear it.

I picked up the diet instructions and looked at the “foods to avoid” section. My eyes fell on asparagus with cheese. To my knowledge I had never wanted asparagus with cheese, but now I had a craving. Every cloud looked like whipped cheddar cheese, and every tree was a giant asparagus stem. The law is like that. It exposes what lies beneath the surface of learned good behavior. Willpower can win for a few days but will wear down. New promises to reform will alleviate some guilt, but in the end, we succumb.

When Israel was in Babylonian captivity because they did not live by the covenant made with Moses, Jeremiah was called to be a prophet to this hard-hearted people. They would not listen, and he was often weary. But God spoke through him of a day when there would be another covenant. This one would be different because God would be responsible for keeping both parts. Of course this is the new covenant

made between God the Father and Jesus the Son. It was not made with us, but with our stand-in. Jesus came as us and lived a faithful life. He died in our stead. He was raised as us to sit on the throne of God's rule. He has done it! It was not a negotiated deal by us. He didn't even ask if we wanted it. He acted in grace to provide for us what was necessary for our inclusion in his inheritance. The act is done. The declaration has been made. The implications are many.

Since we have been forgiven by his sacrifice, we can confess our sins and enjoy a life free from guilt and shame. Our forgiveness is not based on our confession or sincerity, but on the sufficiency of his blood. We turn from the prison of sin because now we can. We are eternally forgiven. It must get down into our muscles, or we will continue to bear our guilt and shame—wondering if we have repented enough or confessed thoroughly enough.

Since God has made himself known to us, we can enjoy fellowship with him. We have been given his very Spirit who recognizes the same Spirit in others and created a supernatural unity that astounds the world. Like a tuning fork in our heart, we resonate with the sound of the truth wherever we hear it. We don't need a cult leader brainwashing us according to truths that only he/she has discovered. We already know. That doesn't mean we don't appreciate those who teach us by

striking that tuning fork and refreshing the sound in our hearts.

Since God has claimed us as his people and declared himself as our God, we can live secure. Who is going to snatch us away? Who is going to debate him? Who is going to indict us? We have a new identity and an eternally secure future.

Since **God has chosen to put his law in our minds and hearts**, we can trust his guidance and **enjoy walking in his ways**.

Since God has chosen to put his law in our minds and hearts, we can trust his guidance and enjoy walking in his ways. Our apprehensions and affections have been charged with his life. The timeline of our lives has intersected with the timeline of Jesus' life. When that happens we have a new past, a new present, and a new future. We no longer carry the baggage of our dysfunctional and abusive past. His past is ours. His story is so much better. Why would we insist on identifying ourselves by our tortured story when we have a new one?

If we really believed such a declaration, how would we act? I think we would be joyful. Maybe that is why Paul tells us to rejoice always. I think we would be

grateful. Maybe that is why he reminds us that this is the natural implication for those living in the new covenant. I think we would be humble. It is the normal thing to do when you know who God is. I think we would live to fulfill the mission of Jesus. It is just what we do when we believe and it gets all the way down to our muscles.

Watch out! The ghost of a dead husband sometimes returns. Paul reminds us in Romans 7 that we are all married to the law. The only way of getting out of this condemning and negative marriage is death, but the law can't die. So, we die by entering into the lifeline of Jesus who died. Being freed from our marriage to the law, we marry Jesus who has already done for us everything the former husband demanded. What freedom! What joy! What purpose! But sometimes the ghost appears and begins to demand our submission. At that moment, we must believe the gospel all the way down to the muscles.



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